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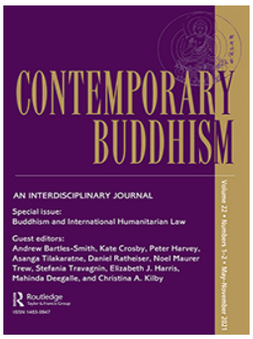

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Explicit Authority and Implicit Dharma: Negotiating Buddhism in Finnish MBSR Teacher Training

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the role of Buddhist teachings and authorities in mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) teacher training. Based on ethnographic data from Finland, it goes beyond the dominant focus on texts, figureheads, and Anglo-American contexts in the study of contemporary mindfulness. The article shows that both the historical Buddha and specific contemporary Buddhist teachers, texts, and communities may hold important positions of authority in MBSR teacher training. Due to the formal status of Buddhist retreat centres in the standard structure of MBSR teacher education, the institutional boundaries between contemporary Buddhism and MBSR training overlap. However, explicit discussions on Buddhist concepts, ontology, and ethics are rare in the ethnographic data, with the notable exception of poetry, which is directly linked to the dharma foundations and existential dimensions of the programme. In negotiations of Buddhism and religion, the modernist discourse of 'scientific Buddhism' is central in constructing MBSR training as non-religious but still true to the teachings of the historical Buddha.

KEYWORDS: Mindfulness-based stress reduction; contemporary mindfulness; MBSR teacher training; Buddhist modernism; scientific Buddhism

Introduction

In a recent article on mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) teacher training, Saki Santorelli looks back on the early days of his work at the Stress Reduction Clinic (SRC) at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. He recalls a discussion with his superior and mentor, Jon Kabat-Zinn:

> Two months into my work at the SRC, Jon and I were conversing about becoming an MBSR teacher. He said, 'The job description is Zen master'. I remember shuddering – one of those internal tremors that erupts when we

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> are awed because we know that we have met what we love and that it will cost us more than we can imagine to surrender to that love. (Santorelli 2019, 253)

Similar expressions have remained in Kabat-Zinn's vocabulary throughout years. They underline the crucial role of the teacher in the implementation of MBSR and related mindfulness-based programmes (MBPs).

During Kabat-Zinn's brief visit to Finland in July 2017, we met over lunch at the invitation of a mutual acquaintance. Later, I conducted a research interview with him in the quiet lobby of a hotel in downtown Helsinki. Here, he described how:

> It's really a delicate dance and something of an art form to teach mindfulness. I like to say, none of us are really capable of doing it, because you'd, in some sense, have to be a Zen master or a Buddha in order to do it. But since the Buddha and the Dalai Lama and various Zen masters are not available and so many people are suffering, we do what we can. (1 July 2017)

Even if metaphorical, these comparisons draw a vivid image of how the early pioneers of the MBSR programme relate to their work. Here, 'a Buddha', 'a Zen master', and 'the Dalai Lama' represent the ideal teachers of mindfulness from which MBSR teachers differ, not necessarily in the essence of the teaching but in the degree of their competency and experience. Such ideals highlight the nature of MBSR training as a potential starting point for a comprehensive 'way of being', which is much influenced by modernist Buddhist teachings (Braun 2017; Husgafvel 2018, 2023).

While some scholars have questioned the secular nature of the MBSR programme due to its perceived Buddhist elements (see Purser 2015; Brown 2016), these concerns have not curbed the increasing demand for MBSR and related MBPs in mainstream contexts. However, the responsibility to embody and transmit the 'dharma dimensions' of mindfulness practice (see Kabat-Zinn 2017, 7), while maintaining a clear distance from Buddhist religiosity, places very specific demands on MBSR teachers. As key figures in the implementation of the programme, how are they trained to walk this narrow path? What role do Buddhist teachings and authorities play in the teacher training? How do MBSR teachers negotiate the significant Buddhist influences and the non-religious identity of the programme? These research questions guide my study. Instead of approaching them through normative texts and manuals, the analysis is based on ethnographic data from an MBSR teacher training course in Finland.

The course I participated in and observed forms only a small part of the full educational curriculum to become a certified MBSR teacher. Still, it provided the participants with the initial licence to teach eight-week MBSR courses. While focusing on a single course in a Nordic country limits the general applicability of the findings, a case study enables a detailed observation of real-life MBSR teacher training. This produces data and findings which would be unattainable through other means. Together with other studies with

similar research designs, the study contributes to a cumulative body of ethnographic data on contemporary mindfulness training in different cultural and geographical contexts. The need for such ethnographies beyond dominant Anglo-American contexts has been emphasised in recent mindfulness research (see, e.g. Stanley and Kortelainen 2020). While MBPs include many globally shared elements, as therapeutic practices they are 'invested with different meanings and constitutions as they travel to and are adopted and practiced within different historical, cultural and geographical contexts' (Salmenniemi et al. 2020, 2).

In my Finnish case study, the cultural predominance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF), alongside notable Orthodox and Evangelical Christian minorities, and the limited familiarity with Buddhist traditions among many Finns, are important local factors likely to shape discussions on Buddhism in MBSR contexts (see Kääriäinen et al. 2009). The sigificant cultural importance of Evangelical Lutheran state churches characterises Nordic countries more broadly (Enstedt and Plank 2023). Furthermore, compared to US and UK – or even its Nordic neighbour Sweden – Finland is still in an earlier phase of the adoption curve for MBPs, though they are gradually becoming established within mainstream healthcare and education (see Lahtinen 2021; Repo et al. 2019; Volanen et al. 2019). Together these contextual factors may contribute to a more pronounced need of creating distance between 'secular' and 'Buddhist' forms of meditation practice in the pursuit of mainstream legitimacy.

Another local characteristic of the Finnish context is the lack of academic institutions offering courses, degrees, and certificates for MBSR (and other MBP) teachers. While some university graduate programmes in medicine, psychology, and related disciplines include optional courses on MBPs, these are typically introductory in nature. To obtain a licence to teach MBSR, one must either study abroad in places, such as the Bangor University (UK), Brown University (US), and University of Massachusetts Medical School (US), or enrol in teacher training programmes offered by local private companies and entrepreneurs, who themselves were trained abroad. While some opt for academic studies outside Finland – the only available path to a full MBSR teacher certification – the majority of Finnish MBP instructors are trained by the handful of local course providers.

These local courses and programmes operate within a lucrative market and under business logics that impact the availability and content of the courses, as well as the selection of participants. The high fees associated with MBP teacher training programmes in Finland render them inaccessible to many. At the same time, the financial ability to invest a significant amount of money in training often outweighs academic and professional qualifications in the application processes. In the marketing and implementation of the courses, commercial interests may contribute to exaggerated claims of

benefits and downplaying of potentially controversial topics, such as the Buddhist origins of allegedly secular practices. These issues of commodification are part of broader global developments in the health and wellbeing markets (Carrette and King 2005; Jain 2020; Wilson 2014). In the Finnish context, however, the absence of academic MBP teacher training institutions amplifies their significance.

The previous research on the Buddhist influences of MBPs has focused strongly on authoritative texts and the views of founding figures. For a long time, the only ethnographic account to discuss Buddhism beyond a passing mention was a short article by Eleanor Rosch (2015) based on participant observation in an eight-week MBSR course. Her main point, however, was to criticise the notion of 'mindfulness' as the only 'active ingredient' of the programme and the difficulty of measuring it. Through recent ethnographies with dedicated discussions on Buddhism, the situation is gradually changing (see Cook 2017; Drage 2018; Rahmani 2020; Stanley and Kortelainen 2020; Wheater 2017). Yet, the majority of these focus on mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) in the UK, with only Matthew Drage's (2018) PhD thesis centred on the MBSR programme. Instead of contemporary teacher training, though, it explores the metaphysics, dharma elements, and transmission of MBSR among the first generation of teachers through interviews and archive materials.[1]

In my ethnographic case study, I explore the role of Buddhist teachings and authorities in Finnish MBSR teacher training. When necessary, the structures of global MBSR teacher education are also analysed. The discussion on authority builds on Weberian concepts as applied in the study of religion. Here, I consider 'tradition', 'scripture', and 'personal charisma' as the basic forms of religious authority, which are constructed in relational processes (Gifford 2011).[2] My analysis focuses on how the MBSR teachers and student teachers accord authority to Buddhist tradition(s), texts, and teachers during the course. In the discussion on Buddhist teachings, I examine both explicit Buddhist concepts (which are rare) and latent Buddhist ideas belonging to the 'dharma foundations' of MBSR (see Husgafvel 2018). Besides providing a way to identify implicit Buddhist notions in the course data, this approach enables valuable comparisons between the authoritative texts and the living traditions of MBSR practice. In the final part of the paper, the notions of 'boundary disputes' (Beckford 2003) and 'scientific Buddhism' (McMahan 2008) inform my analysis of in-group negotiations concerning Buddhism and religion.

Based on my analysis, I argue that both the historical Buddha and specific contemporary Buddhist teachers, texts, and communities hold positions of authority in MBSR teacher training. Due to the authorised role of Buddhist teachers and centres as retreat providers in MBSR teacher education, the institutional boundaries between contemporary Buddhism and MBSR

training overlap. Nevertheless, explicit discussions on Buddhist teachings and ontological or ethical notions are rare in the course data. The 'dharma dimensions' of the MBSR programme are mostly introduced in an implicit manner, particularly through the use of poetry. In negotiations of Buddhism and religion, the modernist discourse of 'scientific Buddhism' is central in reconciling the Buddhist influences of the MBSR programme with its non-religious identity.

Data and Method

The ethnographic data was collected through audio recordings and participant observation in a nine-month MBSR teacher training course in Finland. The course was organised by an established private entrepreneur with a Teacher Certification in MBSR awarded by the Center for Mindfulness (CFM), University of Massachusetts. During the course, another MBSR teacher assisted the organiser.

The course started in 2015 and consisted of eight two-day meetings approximately once a month. The first day of each meeting lasted two-and-a-half hours and followed the structure of the eight-week MBSR course. The second day lasted around seven hours. It was dedicated to mindfulness practice and group discussions on the themes of the previous day and the topics brought up by the participants. In addition to this, there were two days reserved for shared mindfulness training and a retreat day of silent practice, with a duration of seven hours each.

The only text sources in the course were printed handouts related to each meeting. These were based on the *MBSR Curriculum Guide* by Kabat-Zinn and Santorelli (2005) with many excerpts from Kabat-Zinn's books (see Kabat-Zinn [1990] 2005, [1994] 2005, 2005). The handouts provided structure and summarised the key themes of each meeting. Much of their content, though, was left for participants to explore and digest by themselves.

The course had sixteen participants (four males and twelve females, assumed) with various professional and socio-economic backgrounds, all of whom represented the ethnic majority of Finland. To be qualified for the course, each participant had to have successfully completed an earlier nine-month MBSR 'basic course' organised by the same provider. There was also a participation fee of over 2500 euros. No other formal requirements were needed. After successfully completing the course, the student teachers received diplomas as trained MBSR instructors. While some of the participants planned to add MBSR courses to their portfolios as entrepreneurs in the health and well-being markets, others sought mindfulness skills to support their work as teachers, mental health professionals, and social workers. Some had no professional interests at all and only hoped to deepen their personal mindfulness practice in this 'advance' course.

During the course, I participated in, observed, and audio-recorded each meeting and training day in full. This was based on informed consent from all participants. For analysis, the recordings were transcribed, pseudonymised, and translated into English. Together with the handout texts, these transcriptions form the primary data of the study. This body of data was coded and analysed through qualitative thematic analysis (see Braun and Clarke 2006; Boyatzis 1998), which focused on explicit and latent themes related to Buddhist teachings and authorities, as well as discussions on religion.

Due to the structure of the course, the majority of the data comprises group discussions. As both a scholar and a practitioner, I was no outsider to these discussions or a mere 'collector' of them.[3] Instead, I was a node in the social and communicative networks formed during the course and each of its meetings. Thus, the data is influenced by my role as a researcher with a microphone in the room and by my presence, comments, and questions as an MBSR student teacher, among others. This insider status may bring my subjectivity into question as a potential weakness of the study.[4] While I do not believe a complete escape from subjectivity is possible in any form of qualitative research, I have tried to mitigate this issue by critical self-reflection, discussions with academic colleagues, constantly searching for counter-evidence for my arguments, and always prioritising my role as a researcher.

As a whole, I find more pros than cons with my approach to participant observation. The fact that I was a student teacher myself supported the atmosphere of trust essential to both the training and the collection of ethnographic data. As a scholar-practitioner, I had opportunities to ask and discuss research-related questions as part of general group discussions. This had the benefit that the responses to these questions were not produced in artificial interview contexts or pitched, intentionally or unintentionally, solely for the researcher's ears (see, e.g. Mishler 1986). Moreover, I believe that my personal history of mindfulness practice made me less prone to misinterpret the data, as I was 'fluent with the verbal and cultural language of the study group' (Edwards 2008, 144–146). Regarding my inevitable blind spots, I trust that cumulative research discussions will identify and address them where necessary.

Genealogical Narratives

There is a broad consensus that much of the content of the MBSR programme and related MBPs is derived from Buddhist meditation practices. Yet, in more detailed discussions on the sources and extent of Buddhist influences, arguments diverge significantly. For a long time, the dominant scholarly narrative presented modern Theravāda-based vipassanā traditions, mediated via American insight meditation teachers, as the principal or exclusive source of Buddhist influences in the MBSR programme (see Husgafvel 2016).

However, recent studies have questioned this one-sided approach, drawing attention to the direct influences from 'non-dual' Mahāyāna (including Vajrayāna) traditions (Braun 2017; Dunne 2011; Husgafvel 2016, 2018; Watt 2017). In a more detailed genealogy, the differences between American 'East Coast' and 'West Coast' vipassanā are also important. As Ann Gleig (2013) has argued, the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) maintained closer ties with the Burmese Theravāda Buddhist lineages, whereas the Spirit Rock Meditation Center incorporated many non-dual Zen[5] and Tantric Mahāyāna influences in a more immanent approach to 'embodied liberation'. In Kabat-Zinn's vision of MBSR practice, the latter emphasis is evident (see Husgafvel 2018).

In the Finnish MBSR teacher training course, the teachers emphasised that knowing the history of the MBSR programme was an integral part of teacher competence. Genealogical narratives focused on Jon Kabat-Zinn's work, American vipassanā traditions, and the historical Buddha. The first explicit reference to Buddhism occurred on the second day of the course when the teacher explained that, if it were not for Kabat-Zinn's work, the word 'mindfulness' would only be known 'within Buddhist circles' (Meeting 1, day 2). However, it was not until the fifth meeting that the origins of MBSR training were brought up again. This was a practical discussion about the use of mental images and metaphors when guiding sitting meditation. Now, the teacher emphasised that the MBSR approach to meditation

> comes from the vipassanā tradition, in which 'vipassanā' means 'to see things as they are'. That is why, here, the mental image or metaphors are really only in the periphery, so that we really can sense that what is, not what I would want to be. (Meeting 5, day 2)

The explanation captures a core feature of most Buddhist approaches to meditation and Kabat-Zinn's vision of mindfulness practice, that is, 'to see things as they actually are' (Kabat-Zinn 2005, 196; see Husgafvel 2018). This was the first occasion during the course that the word 'vipassanā' was mentioned, but – perhaps surprisingly – there were no questions or further comments on the topic.

During the second half of the course, the organising teacher participated in a vipassanā retreat at the Spirit Rock Meditation Center (Woodacre, California). After this, the historical links between MBSR and modern vipassanā traditions were discussed in more detail. When a participant asked what the retreat was and who organised it, the teacher explained:

> It was Spirit Rock. … The first, let's say, centre founded by Westerners was established on the East Coast around the mid-seventies. It is called Insight Meditation Society, and it was founded by three – Sharon Salzberg, whose book is over there [*on sale on the course premises*], Jack Kornfield, whose books are now being translated into Finnish, and Joseph Goldstein, whose books haven't been translated to Finnish – three Americans who had studied in Asia.

> They were there in monasteries, some were three years, [some] longer, and their teachers said: 'Well, bring this to the West now'. . . . Then some went to the West [Coast] and founded this, like, a sibling centre. Kornfield went to the West, and there was James Baraz and Silvia Borstein. (Meeting 6, day 2)

As the participant asked what a 'centre' means and whether it is for practice, research, or something else, the teacher continued:

> It is a retreat centre. . . . So, it is not for research, just for meditation. A meditation centre . . . which belongs to a particular tradition, exactly this vipassanā. Vipassanā means, it is a Pāli word, and it means 'to see clearly', which we are practicing. . . . This is the meditation in which this is founded, this MBSR . . . so that, you know, MBSR has come from this tradition, because, in those days, they all went there, to this IMS, there on the East Coast, to the Insight Meditation Society. (Meeting 6, day 2)

When describing the retreat experience, the teacher extended this genealogy of the MBSR programme from the IMS vipassanā tradition to the historical Buddha and early Buddhist texts.

> What did I learn? . . . So, every night there were talks . . . always based on the Buddha's texts . . . on how the Buddha examined the mind, how it becomes visible daily in our practice. It made really apparent . . . how clearly it has been taken from there, how it unfolds, this MBSR, how directly, even the exact same words, even if it's never said . . . It was somehow, like: 'Oh, this whole thing is explained here', on one level. . . . It was nice to see that this MBSR is not something, like, detached or made-up, but instead, only structured in a certain way. . . . It all comes there from the texts. I don't know, perhaps it could also be frightening to someone: 'Oh please help, am I in some kind of Buddhist training now?' In a certain way, how the Buddha examined the mind, it is explained [there] in writing. . . . And every time, like, 'See it for yourself' [*in English*]. That's what we do. 'Is it like that?' . . . We examine whether it is so. We don't believe, right? None of us believes that this is so, but instead we investigate whether it is so. (Meeting 6, day 2)

This extract introduces one of the central tensions of the course (and the MBSR programme more broadly). While the teachers draw on the authority of the historical Buddha and Buddhist texts, they are careful to maintain a distance from religiosity by emphasising 'examination' and 'investigation' over (dogmatic) 'belief'. Such phrasing, reminiscent of scientific language, already hints at the resolution of this tension – a topic I will return to later.

At the end of the course, the role of the Buddha and early Buddhist texts were once more emphasised. When a participant asked about possible evening talks in the forthcoming retreat with James Baraz, the teacher explained:

> James will give every night almost an hour-long, this kind of [talk] . . . it relates to practising, but the background is in the Buddha's texts. There you will see that, the understanding will begin to grow that all this, which is taught in the MBSR, it

> all has been written down over two thousand years ago. We are not really bringing anything new to this. (Meeting 8, day 2)

These discussions show two intertwined but qualitatively different narratives of the Buddhist roots of the MBSR programme. In juxtaposing them with current research understanding and historical facts, I am not so much interested in their accuracy but in the way these narratives are used as tools of legitimation. The first describes the links between MBSR training and the IMS vipassanā tradition, which are well known and widely acknowledged. However, due to leaving out the formative Zen and Mahāyāna influences in Kabat-Zinn's work, the narrative is one-sided and resembles outdated scholarly views. It also excludes from the picture all references to Asian Buddhist teachers and Theravāda Buddhism as a distinct religious tradition. Between the Buddha and American vipassanā teachers, there is nothing but unidentified Asian 'monasteries'. This contributes to a degree of 'mystification' (Wilson 2014, 43–74), in which the role of Asian Buddhist religiosity is obscured in the genealogy of modern mindfulness practice.

The second narrative is rhetorical and mythical rather than historical. By claiming that 'all this, which is taught in the MBSR, it all has been written down over two thousand years ago', the teacher effectively extends the origins of the programme back to early Buddhist texts. These are depicted as explaining 'how the Buddha examined the mind'. Through these claims, the narrative locates the origins of MBSR practice in the teachings of the historical Buddha. While there are many elements in the MBSR programme, which may be traced back to canonical Buddhist texts and early commentaries (Anālayo 2016; Husgafvel 2018; Murphy 2016), the narrative as a whole is not supported by historical research.

Instead of following early Buddhist texts without 'bringing anything new' to them, the MBSR programme combines ideas and practices from a wide range of sources and historical eras. Within the history of Buddhism, these include canonical Pāli works, Mahāyāna sūtras, classic Zen texts, modern vipassanā techniques, Korean sŏn teachings, and other non-dual approaches to meditation (Husgafvel 2018). Beyond Buddhism, the writings of American transcendentalists, modern postural yoga, Neo-Advaita teachings, and, of course, modern clinical medicine should be recognised (see Husgafvel 2018; Wilson 2014). Moreover, the discourses of the Buddha were not written down by the Buddha himself but transmitted orally for centuries before being written down and edited in the various collections of canonical texts. There is no scholarly consensus on which portions of these texts represent the views of the (presumed) historical Buddha (see, e.g. Gombrich 1996; Ruegg and Schmithausen 1990). Thus, putting teachings into the mouth of the Buddha always includes elements of faith or conjecture.

As Donald S. Lopez has noted, 'Authority in Buddhism is often a matter of lineage, traced backward in time from student to teacher, ideally ending with the Buddha himself' (Lopez 2008, 14). For this reason, it is practically ubiquitous for the different Buddhist traditions of meditation to consider their teachings and practices to be the 'original', 'true', or 'most efficient' method taught by the Buddha. Even if often lacking in historical validity, these claims serve the important function of legitimating novel ideas through traditional notions of authority. It seems that a similar form of legitimisation, which draws on the authority of the Buddha and the IMS lineage of vipassanā meditation, has migrated from Buddhist contexts to contemporary MBSR training.

Buddhist Sources of Authority

The course data is clear about the position of Jon Kabat-Zinn, Saki Santorelli, and other early pioneers of the SRC as the principal contemporary authorities of MBSR training. References to scientific research are also common, even if specific studies are rarely mentioned (see also Rahmani 2020, 259).[6] Alongside these, the most important sources of authority are closely affiliated with Buddhism.

In the course handouts, there are a handful of references to Buddhist teachers and texts. These include an (alleged) quote from the Buddha in the instructions on loving-kindness meditation (Handout 5); a website and the book *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* (1995) by the American vipassanā teacher Sharon Salzberg (Handout 8); a poem based on the verses of an unspecified Tibetan Rinpoche (Handout 6); and a metaphor of meditation practice as 'cloudy apple juice settling in a glass' by the Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh (Handout 1). The reference to Sharon Salzberg's website also includes 'a comprehensive list of links to Buddhist meditation centres' that are copy-pasted into the handout. A majority of these are American insight meditation centres, such as the IMS and Spirit Rock. Some Tibetan Buddhist communities (Shambhala Mountain Center founded by Chögyam Trungpa and the Pundarika Foundation of Tsoknyi Rinpoche) and Zen centres (Upāya founded by Joan Halifax) are also included.

In the group discussions, contemporary American vipassanā teachers came up frequently. Especially Bob Stahl and James Baraz were mentioned as regular visitors to Finland. The teachers strongly endorsed participation in their retreats, and Baraz's personal charisma to 'really live the joy' was particularly highlighted (Meeting 8, Day 2). While Stahl, Baraz, and some other visiting retreat teachers featured in many real-life anecdotes, most of the vipassanā teachers were referred to only through their publications. The teacher recommended Joseph Goldstein's *Mindfulness*: *A Practical Guide to*

Awakening (Goldstein 2013) as an approachable commentary to canonical Buddhist texts (Meeting 6, day 2). Books by Tara Brach, Bob Stahl, and Jack Kornfield, as well as Goldstein's audio commentary on the canonical Buddhist text *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*[7] were also mentioned in passing during the course.

Besides American vipassanā teachers, some Zen teachers were discussed as respected authorities on mindfulness practice. Melissa Blacker and David Rynick (Boundless Way Zen) had recently led a retreat in Finland. Some characteristic Zen aspects of the retreat (e.g., a certain rigidity in the formal meditation practices) raised questions and comments among the participants (Meeting 7, day 2). At the retreat, Blacker and Rynick had given morning talks 'based on Buddhist texts, but from their own experience', as the teacher explained. This aroused interest among student teachers for similar talks on the approaching retreat with James Baraz (Meeting 8, day 2).

Other references to Zen teachers were based on texts. When introducing the first exercise in the course (eating raisins mindfully), the teacher quoted the opening words of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, the seminal book by Japanese Sōtō Zen teacher Shunryū Suzuki ([1970] 1973):

> I want to remind you of, or say a quote from Suzuki Roshi: 'In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few'. . . . In this exercise, we wake up this beginner's mind. (Meeting 1, day 2; see Suzuki [1970] 1973, 21)

Suzuki's book was a major source of inspiration in the formation of the MBSR programme (Kabat-Zinn 1982, 34; Husgafvel 2018, 305–307). For Suzuki and Kabat-Zinn, the concept of 'beginner's mind' extends beyond mere attitudes of curiosity and open-mindedness and points to the 'true nature' or 'Buddha nature' of all beings. However, such concepts were never discussed in the Finnish teacher training course.

The only time a Tibetan Buddhist teacher appeared in discussions was in a guided sitting meditation session, when the practice ended with a poem by Lama Gendun Rinpoche (Meeting 2, day 2). This poem expressed some characteristic perspectives related to Dzogchen and non-dual approaches to Buddhist meditation, which will soon be examined further.

Finally, canonical Buddhist texts and early commentaries received only sporadic mentions. Not once was a canonical text mentioned by name, and only on two occasions did the teacher refer to an early Buddhist passage. In a discussion on losing someone dear, the teacher paraphrased a famous Buddhist story of *Kisa Gotami and the Mustard Seed* from a paracanonical commentary (Meeting 8, day 2).[8] When emphasising the importance of supportive company, the teacher referred to a dialogue between the Buddha and his attendant Ānanda.[9]

> If you still care to listen, if I cite the Buddha, or are you, like, 'now [they] have gone out of [their] mind, spent a month there and now all these texts come'? . . .

> Buddha's assistant Ānanda asked the Buddha: 'So, do you mean that good friends are half of the holy life?' [*in English*] Like, good friends are half of, like, this path. Then, he says, Buddha says to Ānanda: 'No, I don't mean that, Ānanda. Good friends are', was it, like, 'full of the holy life', [*in English*] or something. So, it's like, the good friends, they are, it is the path. (Meeting 6, day 1)

The self-ironic comment 'If you still care to listen, if I cite the Buddha' refers to the fact that, after returning from the vipassanā retreat at Spirit Rock, the teacher brought up Buddhist perspectives and sources much more frequently in discussions. Even if expressed in a humoristic tone, the comment displays sensitivity to the possibility that some participants might feel unease about direct references to Buddhist texts.

The course discussions and materials show that – besides the historical Buddha – select contemporary Buddhist teachers, texts, and lineages are accorded authority in MBSR teacher training. The fact that these basic modes of authority in Buddhist religiosity (see Gifford 2011) are also found in MBSR training highlights important shared ground between these two contexts that extends far beyond mere meditation techniques. The role of American vipassanā pioneers (from IMS and Spirit Rock) and specific Zen teachers is especially pronounced in the ethnographic data. They provide both practical and theoretical instructions on mindfulness practice through meditation retreats, popular books, and other media. Even if references to canonical Buddhist texts are scarce in the course data, there are many indications that these are further discussed in retreat contexts.

Institutional Overlap between Contemporary Buddhism and MBSR Teacher Training

Making clear-cut distinctions between 'Buddhist' and 'MBSR' teachers is sometimes difficult. In many cases, the same teacher may hold a recognised formal position in both Buddhist and MBSR organisations. In the course data, these overlapping roles are evident in the cases of Bob Stahl and Melissa Blacker. Besides teaching vipassanā at the IMS and Spirit Rock, Stahl works as a senior teacher for the Mindfulness Center at Brown University. Previously, he has worked for the CFM, University of Massachusetts (Mindfulness Center at Brown 2021). Blacker was ordained as a Sōtō Zen priest in 2004 and founded the Boundless Way Zen temple together with David Rynick in 2009. At the same time, she worked until 2012 as a teacher and director at the CFM, University of Massachusetts (Blacker 2020). According to Kabat-Zinn, similar interwoven roles are common beyond Western Buddhist contexts as 'some MBSR teachers or teachers-in-training are currently senior Chan monks and nuns from China and Taiwan' (Kabat-Zinn 2017, 7).

The overlap between contemporary Buddhist and MBSR institutions is not limited to individual teachers. Instead, it extends to the formal structures of

MBSR teacher education through the established role of meditation retreats organised by select Buddhist centres. Since the early years of the SRC, Kabat-Zinn has recommended Buddhist meditation retreats to MBSR teachers for learning the 'dharma dimensions' of the programme and to deepen personal mindfulness practice (Kabat-Zinn 2003, 149). This link between Buddhist retreats and MBSR training has often been brought up, but not studied in detail, by scholars who question the secular nature of the programme (see Purser 2015; Brown 2016).

The data from the Finnish course confirms the important role of meditation retreats in MBSR teacher training. The teachers emphasised retreats, often led by contemporary vipassanā and Zen teachers, as essential in personal mindfulness practice and developing MBSR teacher skills. The student teachers also regularly brought their retreat experiences and plans into discussion. Besides opportunities for extended periods of meditation practice, retreats were commonly described as important forums for learning about the Buddhist texts and teachings related to mindfulness practice.

To better understand the role of Buddhist retreats, I asked the organising teacher whether there was a difference between the Spirit Rock vipassanā retreat and MBSR retreats, or if they were exactly the same.

> **Teacher:** In principle, the exact same. … and actually, retreats that are called 'MBSR retreats' don't even exist, in a way … just that the target audience may be that. … But there was no difference. Because, like I said, MBSR is so close to this vipassanā. … The only difference was … in their Q & A, questions and answers. They had these sessions … there was a big difference … they used Buddhist words all the time. … So, [the questions] were more, like, intellectual, and I thought: 'Hey, come back, come back to the experience'. … There was always talk about 'greed '[*spoken in English*], so like this attachment or greed. 'I want this pleasurable thing'. And then there is this 'aversion' [*in English*], which is like 'I don't want this'. And then 'delusion' [*in English*] is this, let's say, it is these neutral feelings … So, in this way they taught, it came back to 'How is this visible in you?' But not so clearly and straightforwardly like in MBSR. (Meeting 6, day 2)

In the next meeting, I continued the discussion and asked about the criteria by which a specific retreat is targeted and advertised to MBSR practitioners.

> **Teacher:** Well, I think it is more [based on], like, personal contacts, and how I feel good about. … Nowadays there are, like, sort of recommendations that, 'Hey, go over there', which are, like, closer, like these vipassanā retreats, closer to this [MBSR]. … But actually it was, the month over there [at the Spirit Rock], pretty Buddhist. … It was great to understand the teachings of the Buddha. … It was possible to feel like, 'So, this is for me, too. Even if I am not a Buddhist, this is for me, too. This is the way the mind works. This is how I operate'. Then you get back to this, 'Well, so what, that's just how the mind works'. (Meeting 7, day 2)

These discussions show that for the teacher, there appeared no major differences between MBSR training and vipassanā practice as taught at Spirit Rock. Only some 'intellectual' questions and related Buddhist terminology in the Q & A sessions seemed unfamiliar from the MBSR perspective. When describing 'greed', 'hatred', and 'ignorance' – the 'root causes of suffering') widely discussed both in Buddhist teachings and in Kabat-Zinn's publications – the teacher presented these as universal tendencies visible in everyone's experience (see Husgafvel 2018, 280–282). Their relation to cosmology, karma, liberation, or rebirth, which are all familiar aspects of the concepts in traditional Buddhist contexts, was not brought up.

While the retreat at Spirit Rock had a clear Buddhist foundation, the teacher considered its contents to be relevant also to non-Buddhists, due to the universal applicability of the Buddha's teachings in describing the functions of the mind and the characteristics of human experience. Notably, this Buddha is not a teacher of transcendent liberation from the Wheel of Rebirth, or an omniscient being with innumerable numinous powers, as in many traditional Buddhist accounts (see Lopez 2012). Instead, his teachings simply help people to see 'how the mind works'.

After the discussion, one student teacher commented on becoming 'a bit intrigued by Buddhism'. Another said they came to the course for 'good tools', but now noticed 'having a strong urge to go to the library and pick up books on Buddhism' (Meeting 7, day 2). These comments indicate that not all student teachers had previous engagement or familiarity with Buddhism despite their dedication to MBSR training. They also suggest that for some, MBSR training may inspire growing interest towards Buddhist teachings.

Buddhist Retreat Centres in MBSR Teacher Education

The standardisation of MBP teacher training is an on-going process led by senior teachers and the secular institutions of mindfulness research and education (see, e.g. Kenny, Luck, and Koerbel 2020). Among the most significant global institutions are the Mindfulness Center at Brown (Brown University), the Oxford Mindfulness Centre (University of Oxford), and the Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice (Bangor University). As part of their work, these centres have started to organise dedicated MBSR and MBCT retreats. However, select Buddhist communities continue to be recognised retreat providers in the formal structures of MBSR (and MBCT) teacher education.

According to the standards set by the Mindfulness Center at Brown, the MBSR teacher certification requires participation in 'four qualifying teacher-led, silent retreats' (Mindfulness Center at Brown 2020). These retreats may be organised by Brown or by other accepted centres 'whose retreats can be taken to fulfil the retreat pre-requisites for aspiring MBSR teacher trainees'

(Mindfulness Center at Brown 2020). The qualified centres are specified in a separate list, which includes the following: Boundless Way Zen Center (US); Cloud Mountain Retreat Center (US); Dharma Retreats (CA); Gaia House (UK); Karmê Chöling (US); Insight Meditation Society (US); San Francisco Zen Center (US); Shambhala Mountain Center (US); Spirit Fire Retreat Center (US); Spirit Rock (US); True North Insight (US); Zen Center of San Diego (US); and Zen Community of Oregon (US).[10] Many of these (almost exclusively North American) centres appeared also in the Finnish course handout list from Sharon Salzberg's webpage. One of them, the Spirit Fire Retreat Center, offers a variety of retreats related to yoga, meditation, wellness, and spirituality. All others have a distinct Buddhist identity.

Without going into full lineage details, it is useful to look at the three main types of Buddhist affiliations found among these accepted centres. According to their websites, the majority are grounded in 'Early Buddhist' or 'Theravāda' teachings on insight meditation (*vipassanā*) and loving-kindness (*mettā*) practices. At the same time, these centres often emphasise openness to other Buddhist traditions and represent more of a sense of belonging to the 'Vipassanā community' or 'Insight movement' than to any sectarian lineage.

The second main type of affiliation is linked to Zen Buddhism. Each Zen centre on the list has its roots in the Japanese Sōtō Zen tradition.[11] The Boundless Way Zen Center also mentions the 'Soto reform Harada-Yasutani koan curriculum' and the 'Korean Linji tradition' as part of its lineage history (Boundless Way Zen Center 2021).[12]

The third main type includes Karmê Chöling and the Shambhala Mountain Center. These centres belong to the global Shambhala community founded by the controversial Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. The teachings of Shambhala are based on Trungpa's visionary experiences and the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism.

The list of qualified retreat providers shows specific Buddhist centres as recognised authorities in global MBSR teacher education.[13] Hence, the institutional boundaries between contemporary Buddhist practice and MBSR teacher training overlap. Moreover, the lineage affiliations of these centres are in close alignment with the main Buddhist traditions influencing Jon Kabat-Zinn's life and work (see Gilpin 2008; Husgafvel 2016, 2018). In this light, modern American vipassanā lineages, Sōtō Zen traditions, and – to a lesser degree – particular Tibetan Buddhist approaches cannot be regarded only as historical sources of influence in the formation of the MBSR programme. Instead, through formalised positions in MBSR teacher education, they continue to provide Buddhist perspectives to contemporary MBSR training.

Explicit Buddhist Concepts in the Finnish MBSR Teacher Training

Despite the Buddhist sources of authority and the institutional overlap between contemporary Buddhism and MBSR training, explicit discussions on Buddhist concepts were rare and brief in the ethnographic data. Previously, I indicated references to MBSR practice and vipassanā meditation, with both aiming at 'seeing things as they are'. The teacher also referred to the three Buddhist root causes of suffering, i.e. 'greed', 'hatred', and 'delusion', in the discussion on the Spirit Rock retreat. Furthermore, the 'beginner's mind' exercise was framed around a key concept in Shunryū Suzuki's Zen approach, but without any of its ontological implications. In the entire body of data, only a few more explicit references to Buddhist doctrinal concepts can be identified.

In a brief discussion on how to choose accurate words in guided meditations, the teacher mentioned, 'According to Buddhist psychology, mind is the sixth sense, and mind is able … to sense thoughts' (Meeting 5, day 2). The topic was whether it is the 'mind', 'attention', or 'thoughts' which wander away from the primary object of attention. However, the Buddhist perspectives were not explained any further and the topic was never brought up again.

In a lengthy discussion that took place during the seventh meeting, the teacher summarised a Spirit Rock retreat talk on the Buddhist concept of 'karma' and explained:

> A few days before the retreat ended, there was a talk on karma. … I am no expert and I don't want to be, but … what I do know, it has an effect on the future. The past is the past. It has its own history. But what if I bring my attention to the breath now and realize that? Then I, like, do something else and become free from it and I can choose. … And when I make the choice, it has an effect on what happens next. … The karma talk left me with this, that it is really a liberating thing that there is this cause and effect. So, it liberates me to choose, even now, because this also has a cause and effect. … They said that you cannot draw this kind of conclusions from diseases and certain things, because it works in a much more complicated way. So, things like diseases, how the universe is born, and these kinds of big issues, it cannot be applied to these in the same way. But things like, let's say, increasing our well-being and satisfaction, in these it can be applied. … I can always liberate myself from my thought-emotion loops, and then I start to increase that sense of well-being. (Meeting 7, day 2)

This explanation shows an example of terms and concepts flowing from contemporary Buddhist contexts into MBSR training. At the same time, it captures an epitome of a modern 'demythologised' interpretation of a Buddhist doctrinal concept in which all references to ontology and cosmology are omitted (see McMahan 2008). Instead of metaphysics, the emphasis is pragmatic and aligned with the general objectives of MBSR practice, namely,

to bring mindful awareness to any situation by focusing on the breath and choosing a response towards well-being instead of following habitual cognitive-emotional reactivity.

In the course handouts, the Buddhist term 'sangha' is given an equally modernist re-interpretation as the 'community of practice' formed by participants in an eight-week MBSR course (Handout 1). This usage comes directly from Kabat-Zinn, who often expands it to all practitioners, teachers, and researchers of mindfulness (see Kabat-Zinn 2005, 132, 310; 2011, 295–297; 2017, 7).[14] In Buddhist terminology, the Pāli and Sanskrit word for 'society' or 'company' refers to Buddhist practitioners with a particular level of attainment, to a local monastic community, to all monastic practitioners, or to both monastic and lay followers of the Buddha (Harvey 2013, 287; Prebish 1999, 203–205). In contemporary Buddhist contexts, though, 'sangha' is often used in a more extensive fashion, 'referring to almost any community or group loosely associated with Buddhism' (Prebish 1999, 204). The idiosyncratic MBSR usage of the term may be seen as extending further this contemporary Buddhist idiom.

Implicit Buddhist Teachings and References to the Dharma Foundations of MBSR

In the analysis of implicit Buddhist teachings, I focus on references to the 'dharma foundations' of MBSR as described by Jon Kabat-Zinn in his publications (see Husgafvel 2018). This foundation is grounded on the Four Noble Truths and pan-Buddhist teachings, which identify clinging (greed and aversion) and misguided views (delusion) as the root causes of emotional suffering.[15] Besides the psychological mechanism of suffering and well-being, Kabat-Zinn considers particular ontological and ethical views foundational to the MBSR programme. These include notions on the law of impermanence, the illusion of a separate self, emptiness and interconnectedness, and the characteristic nature of awareness. Both psychological and ontological-ethical insights are essential in the twofold aim of mindfulness practice to 'see things as they actually are' and to 'develop a mind that clings to nothing' (Kabat-Zinn [1994] 2005, 119; 2005, 196).

The Nature of Suffering

The Finnish MBSR teacher training course included numerous pragmatic discussions on the role of clinging and psychological misperceptions in the mechanisms of suffering and well-being. However, the underlying Buddhist teachings were not discussed in detail and the use of Buddhist vocabulary was rare. The concepts of 'dharma' or 'Four Noble Truths' were never mentioned by name.

A rare example of characteristic Buddhist terminology can be found in the handout instructions on loving-kindness practice taken from a book by Kabat-Zinn ([1994] 2005), 164–165).

> Invite feelings of peacefulness and acceptance to be present in you. Some people find it valuable to say to themselves from time to time such things as: 'May I be free from ignorance. May I be free from greed and hatred. May I not suffer. May I be happy'. But the words are just meant to evoke feelings of loving kindness. They are a wishing oneself well—consciously formed intentions to be free now, in this moment at least, from the problems we so often make for ourselves or compound for ourselves through our own fear and forgetfulness. (Handout 5)

In traditional Buddhist soteriologies, the wish to 'be free' from the root causes of suffering is directly linked to notions of transcendent liberation (P. *nibbāna*, S. *nirvāṇa*) and the bodhisattva path 'to perfect Buddhahood' (see, e.g. Harvey 2013, 73–74, 151). In Kabat-Zinn's publications, the focus is on human flourishing and finding moments of liberation in everyday life (see Husgafvel 2018). In the ethnographic data, the teacher described the terms 'greed', 'hatred', and 'delusion' only briefly when talking about the Q & A sessions at Spirit Rock. As pointed out earlier, their ontological or ethical underpinnings were not brought up. Due to the lack of further explanations or discussions, each student teacher could interpret the contents of the loving-kindness instructions as they saw personally meaningful. This openness towards a variety of individual interpretations was evident throughout the course.

The Law of Impermanence

Similar to many Buddhist vipassanā approaches, paying attention to the impermanence of sensations, thoughts, and feelings is essential in MBSR practice (Husgafvel 2018, 288–289). During the teacher training course, discussions on impermanence often extended to the ever-changing circumstances of life and, sometimes, to death and dying. In the morning of the last day of the course, a participant told about the heart-rending death of an old friend. Afterwards, the teacher guided a moment of silent meditation and reflected:

> When everything suddenly changes, and in this terribly tragic way, that is the one side. But the other is that, 'Hey, I am here now. I am still breathing this. While at the same time people are dying around me, really important and dear'. And then, 'I have this in-breath now. How do I use just this, this moment?' (Meeting 8, day 2)

While acknowledging the fleeting nature of individual existence, these reflections convey a sense of appreciation towards the present moment experience

of being alive, a common theme in MBSR texts (Husgafvel 2018, 288–289). Unlike Kabat-Zinn's publications and Buddhist sources, however, the discussions never extended to a universal 'law of impermanence' as an ontological constant applying to all conditioned things, from sensations to stars and galaxies.

Emptiness and Interconnectedness

The understanding of the interconnected and non-dual nature of reality is a fundamental insight informing all aspects of MBSR training in the 'root texts' of the programme (Husgafvel 2018). Kabat-Zinn links this view explicitly to the teachings of *The Heart (of the Perfection of Wisdom) Sutra* (S. *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayasūtra*) and the Mahāyāna Buddhist notions of 'emptiness' (S. *śūnyatā*). During the teacher training course, however, these Buddhist teachings and sources were not elaborated. Instead of ontology and ethics, the discussions on interconnectedness focused on human interrelations and the psychosomatic wholeness of the 'body-mind'.[16] Only in the handout materials do we find references to the idea of non-duality and a fully interconnected reality.

The handouts describe the meaning of 'yoga' as 'experiencing the unity or connectedness between the individual and the universe as a whole' (Handout 3; see Kabat-Zinn [1990] 2005, 101). In an (alleged) quote by Albert Einstein, the experience of separateness from the universe is considered an 'optical delusion' of consciousness (Handout 1; see Kabat-Zinn [1990] 2005, 165).[17] In the instructions of loving-kindness practice, the ontology and ethics of interconnectedness are directly linked to the contents of MBSR practice. Here, characteristic Buddhist concepts are also frequent.

> You can extend loving kindness to the planet itself . . . to the environment, the streams and rivers, to the air, the oceans, the forests, to plants and animals, collectively or singly. There is really no natural limit to the practice of loving kindness in meditation or in one's life. It is an ongoing, ever-expanding realization of interconnectedness. It is also its embodiment. . . . Practicing in this way is not trying to change anything or get anywhere, although it might look like it on the surface. What it is really doing is uncovering what is always present. Love and kindness are here all the time, somewhere, in fact, everywhere. Usually our ability to touch them and be touched by them lies buried below our own fears and hurts, below our greed and our hatreds, below our desperate clinging to the illusion that we are truly separate and alone. (Handout 5; see Kabat-Zinn [1994] 2005, 166–67)

The loving-kindness instructions show how mindfulness training may include aspects well beyond stress reduction and pragmatic health benefits. However, during a training day when loving-kindness was discussed and practised, some student teachers hesitated to use Kabat-

Zinn's text above, preferring instead a simpler set of instructions. Others expressed the need to absorb the text before using it in MBSR courses due to the ontological views and ethical ideals it presents, which are not found in other MBSR meditation instructions. The teachers encouraged sensitivity to these sentiments and recommended directing loving-kindness only towards oneself when introducing the practice to beginners (Training day 2). Thus, the ontological and ethical contents of loving-kindness practice in MBSR contexts may vary depending on the group and the preferences of the teacher guiding the practice.

The fact that the contents of MBSR courses are not fixed but shaped by the particular teacher and the group had been elaborated already during the first meeting of the course in a discussion on the 'beginner's mind' exercise. In this famous 'raisin eating' exercise, the instructions in the handouts explicitly encourage MBSR teachers to introduce 'interconnectedness' as a central theme.

> [M]ake a reference to the theme of seeing things as *whole* and *interconnected*. . . . Say, that it is necessary to consider how the mind, body, and behaviour affect each other. Also, the raisin did not come out of nowhere. It was connected to something larger, which nourished its growth. The theme: 'Interbeing' (no need to use the term necessarily).[18] Can you see the sunlight, cloud, rain, the farmer, and the truck driver in the raisin? (Handout 1, italics and brackets in original)

Despite these instructions, the term 'interconnectedness' was not mentioned, nor was any connection to 'something larger' or 'interbeing' made when the organising teacher guided the exercise. This caught my attention and led to a conversation that helps to explain why much of the dharma teachings may remain implicit in MBSR contexts. I asked the teacher whether these themes should be brought up during the exercise or the following discussion, as instructed in the handouts, and they replied:

> **Teacher:** Those themes come, might come up. . . . But I am, like, more of a type that 'less is more'. I only want to put, like, certain things in order to keep the structure, and then there remains space to investigate, and if it doesn't come up there, then it doesn't. . . . The idea of every meeting [of the eight-week course] is that we are not bringing anything to it, which does not arise from the group. . . . So, there is a certain kind of momentum in the group, or energy, whatever you want to call it, and these specific issues arise from that. And I take advantage of that, in a certain way, bringing certain things visible . . .
>
> **Author:** A follow-up question. Here [in the handout], it says 'make a reference', but you are clearly stating that 'it arises', and then one can pick up from that. . . . And if they don't arise, then [what]?

> **Teacher:** [Then] you are not there yet. . . . But if you have, like, a clear intention in the guiding, then almost a hundred percent of it all will arise. If you only stay patient, then suddenly these just arise, and if not, then you just let it go. (Meeting 1, day 2)

This discussion highlights an important characteristic of MBSR teaching, which Crane et al. (2015) call 'disciplined improvisation'. In MBPs, the learning themes are co-constructed by the teachers and participants according to the specific experiences of the group and the conditions of the situation. Here, 'the teacher's skill in being able to dance with the emergence of each moment while steering the learning process is of paramount importance' (Crane et al. 2015, 112). Considering this constructive approach to pedagogics, the degree of ontological and ethical discussions in MBSR courses is not constant. Instead, it depends on the experiences and interactions of the teacher and participants in each particular course.[19] In these interactions, the teacher's personal 'dharma history' and background in meditation are highly significant. As the organising teacher explained later in the course: 'We [MBSR teachers] can only take people to that spring from which we have drank ourselves' (Meeting 6, day 2).

In my case study, the dynamics of the group and the preferences of the teacher consistently directed the focus of the discussions towards the psychological and social aspects of mindfulness practice. The ontological and ethical dimensions were never centre-staged. Only once, in a passing remark, did the teacher use the term 'emptiness', explaining it as 'how everything is woven together in life and how everything has an effect' (Meeting 7, day 2). This remark shows that the teacher was familiar with this Mahāyāna Buddhist concept and Kabat-Zinn's ontological views (where emptiness points to the interconnectedness of all things), even if these were not examined further with the student teachers (see Husgafvel 2018).

The Illusion of a Separate Self

In Kabat-Zinn's texts, the notion of interconnectedness entails that the idea of a separate individual self is fundamentally an illusion. The texts also include many descriptions of non-dual experiences in which the perceived separation between the subject and object of experience disappears (Husgafvel 2018, 284, 289–293). In the ethnographic data from Finland, there are anecdotal references to self-transcendence and non-dual experiences in meditation, but these are not discussed in much detail or considered central to MBSR practice.

In a morning session of the second meeting, the group had a lively discussion on the basic elements of body scan meditation. Here, one student teacher emphasised 'a larger connection to the rest of existence', which 'extends, somehow, outside the body' (Meeting 2, day 2). Another described

how the focus of attention can be 'narrowed down to the kneecap' or expanded to the experience that 'all of us in the world are one wholeness' (Meeting 2, day 2). After these brief remarks, the theme of self-transcendence only came up much later in the course, when a participant recounted experiences of the 'choiceless awareness' practice. This is the formal MBSR meditation technique most closely derived from the non-dual approaches of Buddhist meditation (see Dunne 2015; Husgafvel 2018, 284–285; Watt 2017).

> I noticed that I have got caught in this exercise to … particular experiences which have been quite powerful. During my first sitting meditation practices, there was … that kind of a strong experience of, like, there were not really boundaries in my own body anymore. … So, I have visited some, that kind of pretty powerful experiences, which have been quite long-lasting and different form my everyday ordinary [meditation practices] which I have been doing a lot. … These powerful experiences have been not necessarily anything trance-like, but still considerably different from this kind of normal consciousness, or normal level of consciousness and perception. (Meeting 7, day 2)

In their response, the teacher did not assign any specific value to these 'powerful' meditative experiences. Instead, the focus was on the habit of the thinking mind to always want something else and something nicer than what was happening right now. This response follows the basic tenets of MBSR training, in which specific meditation experiences represent possible objects of clinging and attachment, just like anything else. At the same time, it is a good example of 'disciplined improvisation', in which the MBSR teacher picks up certain aspects of the participants' comments to be examined further and ignores others. Besides 'co-constructing' learning themes, this pedagogical approach often includes elements of monitoring and regulating the group discussions (see also Stanley and Kortelainen 2020, 33–35). Here, the teacher chose not to steer the discussion towards the themes of non-duality and self-transcendence, even if this was an obvious possibility.

The Nature of Awareness

In his books on MBSR and mindfulness, Kabat-Zinn describes awareness as the 'true nature' of sentient beings, which is inherently boundless, wise, and compassionate (see Husgafvel 2018, 293–298). Sometimes the word 'Buddha nature' is also used, emphasising the Mahāyāna Buddhist influences informing Kabat-Zinn's views. During the teacher training course, the nature of awareness was never a topic of discussion, nor was the term 'Buddha nature' ever used. Sometimes, though, ideas about one's intrinsic goodness and wisdom were implied through the use of poetry.

During a guided sitting meditation, the assistant teacher quoted verses of the Indian yogi Swami Kripalvananda, a.k.a. 'Babuji' (1913–1981). Here, the notion of intrinsic goodness represented a key motive.

> Inbreath, outbreath. Could you let your attention remain in the breathing, without demanding anything from it? … I will read you a poem by Master Babuji, which you may have often heard, but if you want, open your ears to hear it today and your heart to understand these words. Then again, if you notice that the poem is not touching you, leave my voice in the background without demanding anything from yourself. … 'My beloved child, break your heart no longer. Each time you judge yourself you break your own heart. You stop feeding on the love which is the wellspring of your vitality. The time has come, your time to live, to celebrate and to see the goodness that you are. Let no one, no thing, no idea or ideal obstruct you. If one comes, even in the name of "Truth", forgive it for its unknowing. Do not fight. Let go. And breathe, into the goodness that you are'. [*Bell rings*.] (Meeting 3, day 2; for the poem, see Brach 2003, 258)

These verses portray goodness and love as one's essential nature. While implying foundational themes in MBSR training, the instructions before the poem suggest that it is up to the practitioner to decide whether the verses are personally meaningful or even worthy of attention. Once again, there is the emphasis on individual choice and agency that ran as a common thread through the course.

In another sitting meditation session, the organising teacher recited verses by the Tibetan Lama Gendun Rinpoche:

> Let your breathing be an anchor to which you can return. Then, open your ears to hear, your body to experience, and your heart to understand where the following words by Lama Gendun Rinpoche point … what meaning they have for you right now: 'Happiness cannot be found through great effort and will-power, but it is already there, in relaxation and letting go. Don't strain yourself, there is nothing to do. Only our search for happiness prevents us from seeing it. Don't believe in the reality of good and bad experiences; they are like rainbows. Wanting to grasp the ungraspable, you exhaust yourself in vain. As soon as you relax this grasping, space is there – open, inviting, and comfortable. So, make use of it. All is yours already. Don't search any further. Nothing to do. Nothing to force, nothing to want – and everything happens by itself. [*Bell rings, followed by a period of silence*.] Maybe the most important thing, also in this poem, is to always notice when we go into trying, when we go into pushing, when we want something to happen in the group, or the group to make progress in a certain way we have decided. (Meeting 2, day 2; for the poem, see Brach 2003, 317)

As usual, the verses of the poem were not explained any further. Instead, the discussion shifted to pedagogical topics, focusing on the significance of embodied presence over conceptual teaching and the risk of projecting personal ideals onto the group when teaching MBSR courses. With this pragmatic focus, the original context and existential implications of the poem remained untouched.

The verses belong to the poem 'Free and Easy: A Spontaneous Vajra Song', which first appeared (in English) in the opening of the book *Natural Great Perfection: Dzogchen Teachings and Vajra Songs* (Nyoshul Khenpo and Surya Das 1995). The excerpt used in the sitting meditation session is taken from the final Chapter 'Realizing Our True Nature' in Tara Brach's book *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha* (2003). Here, the verses are followed by a discussion of characteristic non-dual, Mahāyāna Buddhist views on the nature of awareness and liberation.

> The path of awakening is simply a process of wakeful, profound relaxing. We see what is here right now and we let go into life exactly as it is. … We become more at home in awareness than in any story of a self who is falling short or on our way somewhere else. We are at home because we have seen and experienced firsthand the vast and shining presence that is the very source of our being. … In Mahayana Buddhism, the open, wakeful emptiness of awareness is our absolute nature. Our original nature is changeless, unconditioned, timeless and pure. When we bring this awareness to the relative world of form, love awakens. … Our being resides in both the unmanifest and the manifest, the absolute and the relative. This truth, embodied in the Heart Sutra, is considered the gem of Mahayana teachings. (Brach 2003, 317–318)

These teachings on the nature of awareness closely resemble Kabat-Zinn's texts. They form the underlying framework in which the MBSR principles of 'non-striving' and 'non-doing' are embedded (see Husgafvel 2018, 293–298).[20] In this broader context, the verses of Lama Gendun Rinpoche's poem are much more than pragmatic instructions. They point directly towards liberative insights into the nature of awareness, which are characteristic to specific non-dual approaches to Buddhist meditation and the dharma foundations of the MBSR programme.

Considering the common use of poetry in MBSR training, the topic has been understudied. In her ethnographic account of MBSR, Eleanor Rosch covers poetry with this short paragraph:

> Teachers periodically read poetry of their choice to the participants. The poetry introduced a touch of imagery and feeling beyond rationality into the proceedings, a dimension understandably not present in the training per se—also humor. (Rosch 2015, 279)

In my view, the use of poetry serves a more important and specific function. Through poetry, specific ontological and ethical perspectives, as well as the voices of select poets, philosophers, and spiritual/religious teachers can be subtly integrated into MBSR training in a manner that is non-dogmatic and accessible within secular mainstream contexts. Thus, for those practitioners who are so inclined, the use of poetry creates an opportunity to reflect on, and to be reminded of, the 'dharma foundations' and existential dimensions of MBSR practice. For others, though, it may merely introduce 'a touch of imagery and feeling', as Rosch suggests.

Much of the poetry also carries certain perennialist or 'ecumenical' tones, as it often draws on the authority of 'mystics' from different religious traditions – such as Kabir (1440–1518) and Rumi (1207–1273), alongside Indian Swamis and Tibetan Lamas – to support the guiding principles and aims of the MBSR programme. This may be seen as serving a dual purpose, reinforcing perceptions of both the authenticity and the universal applicability of MBSR practice.

A Remark on Ethics

The ethical dimension of MBSR training and related MBPs is a much discussed and controversial topic in research literature (see, e.g. Hickey 2010; McKay 2019; Monteiro, Musten, and Compson 2015; Stanley 2015; Purser 2015). Previously I have argued that in Kabat-Zinn's texts, MBSR practice is completely embedded in ethical considerations, extending from individual to social-political and ecological domains (Husgafvel 2018, 298–301). Instead of normative rules, however, the ethics of MBSR are founded on the principle of non-harming, the embodied sense of interconnectedness, and the (characteristic Buddhist) virtues of compassion and loving-kindness.

Despite the central position of ethical ideals in Kabat-Zinn's publications, explicit considerations of ethics were rare in the ethnographic data. The instructions on the loving-kindness practice introduced some ethical implications of universal interconnectedness, but the topic was not further discussed in the group. In the handouts, a list of 'important qualities for a mindfulness teacher' included 'moral integrity', but the teacher explained this only in terms of truthfulness and transparency in professional work (Handout 7; Meeting 7, day 2). Ethical guidelines for the private life of MBSR teachers were never brought into the discussion, even if Kabat-Zinn considers it the personal responsibility of the MBSR teacher to 'live an ethical life' (Kabat-Zinn 2011, 295).

The lack of explicit discussion does not mean that the ethical aspects of mindfulness practice were completely absent. Rather, the cognitive-emotional self-regulation skills and the intentional cultivation of kindness and compassion were seen to have a self-evident beneficial impact on others. At the end of course, the teacher suggested this impact as an important motivation to maintain regular practice.

> It is not only that it [retreats, practice, etc.] has an effect on me, but it has an effect on everyone, wherever we are. Sometimes it may be enough [to think] that, 'Well, what if I am not practising for myself, but if it is only for others?' If you have a feeling that 'I don't feel like it now', if you take, like, a larger context, so that, 'When I take the time [to practice], it has an effect on the lives of so many others around me'. (Meeting 8, day 2)

In the eight-week courses, MBSR teachers are advised to let ethical conversations 'arise naturally' and to keep the ethical foundation of mindfulness practice 'more implicit than explicit' (see Kabat-Zinn 2005, 106–107; 2011, 295). Based on this case study, such an implicit approach may guide also MBSR teacher training courses. Given that ethics were never a central topic of discussion, there is likely considerable variation among MBSR teachers and student teachers in their understanding and implementation of the ethical dimensions of mindfulness practice.

Negotiations of Buddhism and Religion

Jon Kabat-Zinn's book *Full Catastrophe Living* (1990) is a comprehensive work on the theory and practice of MBSR. In the preface, Thich Nhat Hanh writes: 'The book can be described as a door opening both on the dharma (from the side of the world) and on the world (from the side of the dharma)' (Kabat-Zinn [1990] 2005, xiii). This captures the unique role of the MBSR programme as a bridge between the Buddhist and mainstream contexts of meditation practice. It also shows why MBSR training presents such a challenge regarding its clear-cut categorisation as 'Buddhist', 'religious', or 'secular' (see also Husgafvel 2023). This challenge gave rise to many negotiations among the Finnish MBSR teachers and student teachers concerning the position of MBSR training in relation to Buddhism and religion. By 'negotiation', I mean 'arguments that occur about the practical meanings attributed to the basic categories of social life' as discussed by James Beckford (2003, 13).

Often, the impetus to reflect on these issues was a result of contestation from the outside. In the third meeting, a critical question from a friend, which had created uncertainty, triggered discussion:

> **Participant 1:** Somehow, in recent weeks, I have encountered a really, kind of like, critical attitude towards mindfulness, and somehow, towards that which I have never much thought about or questioned. For me, it has always been a beneficial practice, but then my friend was like very critical, 'So, is this Buddhism now what you are trying', somehow insidiously, 'to transmit to us?' … I noticed afterwards that in everything I did with my clients, there appeared this, kind of like, uncertainty in it … So I got this need, like, to find out more about it myself, in order to be able to stand behind it. (Meeting 3, day 2)[21]

The assistant teacher briefly commented that everyone needs to find their own way to address this kind of critique. Then, another student teacher, who used to work in an Evangelical Lutheran parish, responded:

> **Participant 2:** Among Christians, there are always some people who are pretty much on guard against mindfulness. Mostly, nowadays, a minority though. …

> Because there are so many things going under 'mindfulness', I have usually tried, with people who are somehow worried, that if you look at, that if you just stay within these contents by Kabat-Zinn, all this, kind of, spiritual has been removed from them. I know Buddhism a bit . . . and if you look at the contents of Buddhist meditation, there is a lot of . . . that which is lacking here. This [MBSR] has, in a certain way, a specific part of it. . . . I think that if you stick with the contents of the course, then you are pretty much on safe grounds. (Meeting 3, day 2)

Sometimes, the critique of MBSR had distinct theological overtones. In a discussion about challenging situations, a student teacher who worked as a therapist recounted that a client of their colleague had refused mindfulness exercises, warning that 'the devil is disguised in this' (Meeting 4, day 2). Furthermore, in a later meeting, the teacher shared a story about a taxi driver who considered mindfulness a 'bad thing', based on a programme on a Christian television channel (Finnish TV7). This led to the following long discussion.

> **Participant 1:** On Facebook, there have been circulating . . . this kind of writing, which compares, like, mindfulness and Christian devotions somehow. . . . In this writing, there were [things] about reincarnation and karma under 'mindfulness', and somehow about, maybe like, that deeper essence . . . which clearly doesn't belong to this MBSR. So, they kind of mix things from time to time. . . . TV7 is the kind of channel where any Christian group can buy broadcasting time, and these are pretty much, like, free churches and others. So, there can be pretty much these critical [views] because of that . . .
>
> **Participant 2:** Yes, for example, in the parish paper there was just recently a story about 'Believe in Jesus, not in Mindfulness'. . . . And this is, notably, a publication of an official Evangelical Lutheran parish. So, somewhere, people are perhaps a bit concerned.
>
> **Participant 3:**Then again, in the retreats of some parishes, there are mindfulness practices . . .
>
> **Teacher:** So, I think that this illustrates that . . . Somehow, I feel that there is exactly this clarity about how [mindfulness practice] entered the mainstream, without denying the history. I think it is important that this is not denied, because without that we wouldn't be [here] . . . if there had not been these practices for millenniums already. . . . But then these, like, get mixed, or more like, this fear arises. . . . If you know what this is about, you don't need to be afraid of this.
>
> **Participant 4:** But it is a bit, like, this [MBSR] may get mixed up, for example, with religion. [**Teacher:** Yes. Exactly like this.] But this is a stress reduction programme.
>
> **Teacher:** Yes. Well, anyway, this is . . . even if it was not . . . For some, stress reduction is too little. Anyway, this is, like, mastery of the mind, which one can practise. (Meeting 8, day 2)

The above extracts show that despite the growing application of mindfulness training in mainstream contexts, its secularity may be disputed in everyday encounters. According to the experiences of Finnish MBSR teachers and practitioners, this critique was often voiced by conservative Christian minorities, whereas the mainstream ELCF appeared more welcoming towards mindfulness practices – though not entirely without exceptions. In fact, recent years have seen a rise in 'Christianised' mindfulness practice in some Finnish parishes with the approval of ELCF's National Church Council, as 'the [Buddhist] origin does not … dictate its subsequent use' (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023, 52; ELCF 2021). Nevertheless, the discussions and experiences of MBSR teachers and student teachers reveal the boundary between the 'religious' and the 'secular' as a contested social construction, which is 'by no means clear, fixed or impermeable' (Beckford 2003, 33). Instead, these basic categories are constantly negotiated, challenged, and reproduced in contemporary social contexts.

Through shared discussion, the group constructed the meaning of religion and Buddhism as something clearly separate from MBSR training. While some expressed uncertainty in this boundary making, for many, it seemed self-evident. However, when a participant described MBSR strictly as 'a stress reduction programme', the teacher pointed out that, for some, it encompasses more than stress reduction. The discussions also made it clear that not all the student teachers were familiar with the extent of the Buddhist influences on the programme and the notion of mindfulness as a comprehensive 'way of being' (see, e.g. Kabat-Zinn 2011, 284).

Selective Use of Vocabulary in Boundary Work

During the MBSR teacher training course, the boundary between MBSR training and Buddhist religiosity was often enforced through a specific use of language. When guiding loving-kindness practice, a student teacher read an (alleged) quote from the Buddha that was included in the meditation instructions:

> According to the Buddha, 'You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection'. (Training day 2; Handout 5; see also Salzberg [1995] 2008, 31)[22]

This passage was the only reference to the Buddha in the handout materials. However, in a discussion after the meditation session, the assistant teacher recommended a change of words.

> Have you been discussing this Buddha [with the organising teacher]? So, to avoid these religious problems, one may say 'according to a wise person'. In this way, avoiding the Buddha there … It takes one, like, into a wrong track. (Training day 2)

Thus, for the assistant teacher, even a passing reference to the Buddha in the instructions was problematic due to its potential associations with religion.

The next day, the topic resurfaced. One student teacher, who had missed the previous discussion, used the same passage again. When another participant raised concerns about it, the assistant teacher reiterated the instructions: 'It's better to leave out the Buddha. … someone may cling to that, [thinking:] "No, I don't want anything Buddhist".' (Retreat day). A similar recommendation was made regarding the Pāli term 'mettā', as it 'easily takes the mind to this kind of Eastern religion', with 'loving-kindness meditation' given as the preferred expression (Retreat day). These recommendations underlined that the issue with the word 'Buddha' and the use of Pāli terminology lies exactly in their potential associations with religion. While the impetus for avoiding these terms came from the teachers, the course participants seemed to share the concern and approved of the adjustments.

It is a debated matter whether avoiding Buddhist terminology is a 'skilful means' to make universal aspects of Buddhist teachings more acceptable in mainstream settings (Cullen 2011; Kabat-Zinn 2011; Monteiro, Musten, and Compson 2015), or unethical 'camouflage tactics' and 'stealth Buddhism' (Brown 2016; Purser 2015; see also discussion in Rahmani 2020, 262–263; Wilson 2014, 89–92). However, these normative debates fall outside the scope of my analysis. Here, I just want to highlight verbal 'impression management' as indicating the contested position of MBSR practice and the boundary-making efforts it causes. Even if the teachers and student teachers viewed MBSR as clearly different from Buddhism and religion, they expressed the need to mitigate possible associations with religiosity through a selective use of vocabulary.

The Discourse of Scientific Buddhism

At first glance, the narratives on the Buddhist roots of the MBSR programme and its perceived separation from religiosity may seem contradictory. How is it possible to maintain that MBSR is a direct heir of Buddhist vipassanā traditions and adds nothing new to the teachings of the historical Buddha, while categorically denying any affiliations with religious practice? The key to resolving this tension lies in the scientific reframing of the Buddha and his teachings, a feature characteristic of MBSR training and contemporary mindfulness practice, yet rooted in modernist Buddhist discourses.

The story of the Buddha (like any historical or mythological figure) may be recounted from a variety of perspectives. While some depictions cover the known historical evidence more accurately or find more support in traditional sources than others, there is always an element of selection in organising the past into a meaningful whole (Ricoeur 1995). In MBSR (and MBCT) contexts, the historical Buddha and his teachings are often portrayed through a specific lens that emphasises the universal and empirical-scientific nature of his methods and discoveries (see Braun 2017; Cook 2017; Husgafvel 2018, 2023; Rahmani 2020; Stanley and Kortelainen 2020; Wilson 2014). Anything related to the numinous powers and miracles of the Buddha and other-worldly aspects of the dharma are effectively filtered out. This selection enables MBSR teachers and practitioners to draw on the authority of the Buddha, while keeping a distance from Buddhism as a religion.

In Kabat-Zinn's texts, Buddha is depicted as 'a great scientist' who used the instrument of 'his own mind' in empirical investigations into the nature of life and human suffering (Kabat-Zinn 2005, 25). The methods and discoveries of these investigations are 'universal' and have nothing to do with 'any isms, ideologies, religiosities, or belief systems' (Kabat-Zinn 2005, 25). Instead, they are 'more akin to medical and scientific understandings, frameworks that can be examined by anybody anywhere' (Kabat-Zinn 2005, 25–26). Even the work of later Buddhist traditions in refining the dharma may be compared to the institutional practices of science extending over generations (Kabat-Zinn 2005, 136–137). Through this framing, Kabat-Zinn seeks to establish a clear difference between Buddhism as a religious tradition and dharma as a description of universally applicable laws governing the human condition. The ethnographic data from Finnish MBSR teacher training shows a similar pattern.

The empirical-scientific framing was already obvious in claims that Buddhist texts (and MBSR practice) are based on 'the way the Buddha examined the mind' and in the constant encouragement to investigate and confirm Buddhist perspectives through personal experience. In a morning session of the seventh meeting, there was a long discussion of the relationship between MBSR and Buddhism that further elaborated these themes. Here, the teacher explained:

> Kabat-Zinn often says . . . that Buddha was not a Buddhist.[23] . . . At least for me, it has taken years to understand what that actually means. . . . Somehow to realise that, 'Yes, he was a human being, too, who just studied how the mind operates and how the mind-heart-body operates, and so intelligently that he could, like, share it, but he was not a Buddhist. I think that this, somehow, opens the kind of [view] free from '–isms', doesn't it? So, he did not create any kind of '–ism'. . . . There is one thing that repeats itself [in Buddhist texts], what my teachers always say, no matter where I visit: 'See it for yourself. See it for yourself'. [*in English*] . . . So, [check] through your own experience that, 'Is this so?' So, that

> nothing is believed, but here is the training palette. 'See it for yourself'. (Meeting 7, day 2)

In this depiction, the (fully human) Buddha is presented as an exceptional empiricist who examined and understood the workings of 'the mind-heart-body', but never founded an ideology or religion. The contents of Buddha's teachings, as described here (and in the course as a whole), do not deal with metaphysics or soteriology but focus on the universals of the human mind. Nothing should be adopted based on faith or external authority. Instead, every view is to be verified through personal experience. While according authority to the historical Buddha, these descriptions carefully demarcate the practice of meditation and mindfulness as distinct from Buddhist religiosity.

The empirical-scientific framing of Buddhist teachings is widespread in MBSR and MBCT contexts, including many academic papers on the programmes (see, e.g. Monteiro, Musten, and Compson 2015; Cullen 2011). Nevertheless, the discourse of 'scientific Buddhism' was not created in the contemporary culture of mindfulness. Instead, it has a long history in modernist Buddhist movements that emerged from the encounters between Asian and Western thought under the cultural and political conditions of colonialism (McMahan 2008, 89–116; see also Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1990; Lopez 2008, 2012; Sharf 1995). These movements were already demythologising and detraditionalising Buddhist teachings while emphasising their compatibility with science. Such modernist Buddhist hermeneutics and rhetorics constitute a significant part of the intellectual and historical foundation on which the MBSR programme and its representations of Buddhism are built (Husgafvel 2023; McMahan 2023).

To the historians of religion, the discourse of scientific Buddhism represents a highly selective and one-sided view of the Buddha and his teachings. But historical or exegetical accuracy is not what is at stake here. On the strength of its permanence and popularity, the discourse clearly fulfils a purpose in the social realities of the late modern world. In MBSR contexts, it serves to distance the practice of mindfulness from religion without diminishing the significant Buddhist elements of the programme. This enables MBSR teachers and authorities to assert, without contradiction, that contemporary mindfulness training is fit for mainstream secular contexts while remaining true to the teachings of the historical Buddha.

Conclusions

This ethnographic case study shows that the Buddhist influences on the MBSR programme are not only a matter of historical genealogy. Instead, select contemporary Buddhist teachers, texts, and lineages continue to provide Buddhist perspectives to MBSR teacher training as important authorities

on mindfulness. In this transmission of ideas, values, and practices, Buddhist meditation retreats play a central role. Due to the formal status of Buddhist retreat centres in the standardised structure of MBSR teacher education, there is a degree of institutional overlap between contemporary Buddhism and MBSR training. Whether this is a permanent feature of MBSR teacher training or a passing phase in the differentiation of Buddhist and mainstream lineages of mindfulness practice remains to be seen.

In comparison to Kabat-Zinn's texts, the Finnish MBSR teacher training case study displays an image of the MBSR programme that is further removed from characteristic Buddhist teachings. In particular, the absence of ontological and ethical discussion was conspicuous. Even if the teachers traced back the roots of MBSR training to Buddhist vipassanā traditions and the historical Buddha, the course discussions and materials rarely made explicit references to Buddhist concepts. When they did, the concepts were demythologised and adapted to fit the objectives of MBSR training. The use of poetry, however, introduced some of the dharma foundations and existential dimensions of MBSR practice in a subtle, non-dogmatic manner, albeit with some perennialist overtones. Scholarly discussion would benefit from greater attention to this aspect of MBSR courses, as the selection and use of poems are directly linked to the underlying ideals and values of the programme.

The discussions on the course showed that the secular nature of MBSR training is not contested only in scholarly debates but also in various everyday encounters. While the Finnish MBSR teachers and student teachers expressed a need to mitigate these concerns with a selective use of vocabulary, they made a clear division between MBSR and Buddhist religiosity. From a constructionist perspective, these various boundary disputes and negotiations represent more than different views on the 'essence' of MBSR practice. Rather, they show how different social groups construct the concepts of 'religion' and 'secular' in varied ways (see also Husgafvel 2023). Similar processes apply to the concept of 'Buddhism'. Here, the discourse of 'scientific Buddhism', inherited from modern Buddhist contexts to the contemporary culture of mindfulness, is central in maintaining without contradiction that MBSR training is non-religious but still true to the teachings of the Buddha.

The modern forms of Buddhism often emphasise personal experience as the paramount form of authority (see, e.g. Sharf 1995; McMahan 2008, 2023). Similar ideas about the internal locus of authority and endorsement of subjectivity are widespread in late modern religion and spirituality more broadly (see, e.g. Broo et al. 2015; Heelas 2012). These notions are pivotal in the contemporary culture of mindfulness and closely linked to views on the 'scientific' nature of Buddhist meditation practice (see Cook 2017). The authority of personal experience was prominent throughout the course data, best captured in the oft-heard invitation to 'see it for yourself'. This is

a common exhortation from canonical Pāli texts that is frequently emphasised in modern Buddhist rhetoric as reflecting the empirical-scientific outlook of the Buddha's teachings (see McMahan 2008). However, the important role of group discussion, textual sources, and retreat talks shows that – despite the authority of personal experience – MBSR practitioners (like any other meditators) do not construct the meaning of their meditative experiences in a vacuum (see also McMahan 2017, 2023). Nonetheless, the pronounced room for individual agency in defining the frames and aims of meditation practice is characteristic of MBSR training and likely to contribute to its wide appeal across cultural contexts and religious affiliations.

Besides helping to understand transnational trends and developments, the findings of this ethnographic study shed light on the specific Finnish context of MBSR teacher training. The course was offered as a commercial product by a private entrepreneur. Compared to similar university courses available in many countries, the content appeared narrower in focus. In particular, similar courses in academic settings typically include a compulsory reading list of scholarly works to support professional development (see Cook 2017). This would give student teachers opportunities to engage more deeply with the scientific evidence base of MBPs and the Buddhist history of mindfulness.

The many discussions on religion in the ethnographic data were also situated within the specific Finnish context, marked by the (gradually waning) cultural prominence of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and vocal conservative Christian minority groups. This context may amplify some concerns about the (real or perceived) connections between MBSR and religious forms of meditation, thus increasing the felt need for boundary work, such as the explicit guidance to avoid Buddhist terminology.

Due to the co-constructive approach to learning inherent in the MBSR programme, the contents of pedagogical discussions are always unique to each training course. In addition to cultural context and group dynamics, these depend on the experience, background, and knowledge base of the particular MBSR teacher. In my case study, some MBSR teachers-to-be were familiar with the Buddhist influences of the programme, but many were not. In the global context, there are MBSR teachers with decades of practice in Buddhist lineages, and a few may even be ordained monastics. Considering this variation, the spectrum on which MBSR teachers understand and embody the dharma foundations of the programme is bound to be very broad. For some, the job description may very literally be that of a 'Zen master', while for others the expression could be meaningless even as a metaphor. This diversity suggests the need for caution with uniform characterisations of MBSR training and underlines the need for situated ethnographies.

Notes

1. Unfortunately, during the writing of this article, Drage's thesis was under embargo and treated as a confidential document (Personal communication, June 10, 2020).
2. This is not to claim that the MBSR programme represents a religious tradition, only that analytical tools from the study of religion may be useful in exploring its authority structures in relation to Buddhism.
3. For a discussion on 'scholar-practitioners' in the study of yoga and meditation, see Singleton and Larios (2020).
4. On the benefits and pitfalls of an insider status in ethnography, see, e.g. Edwards (2008).
5. For simplicity, the Japanese term Zen refers also to the Chinese Chan, Vietnamese Thiền, and Korean Sŏn traditions.
6. In Cook's (2017) ethnography of MBCT therapist training, the role of specific studies and scientific literacy was prominent. Among other factors, the academic setting of the training (Exeter University, UK) is likely to contribute to the more pronounced role of scientific sources and authorities.
7. *Majjhima Nikāya* 10.
8. *Therīgāthā-Aṭṭhakathā* 10.1. Translation in https://www.accesstoinsight.org/noncanon/comy/thiga-10-01-ao0.html.
9. See *Upaḍḍhasutta*, *Samyutta Nikāya* 45:2.
10. The list is no longer available on the Mindfulness Center at Brown website.
11. In the case of the Zen Center of San Diego, the Sōtō roots are explicit only on the webpage of the main organisation, the White Plum Asanga.
12. The 'Korean Linji tradition' refers to the Sŏn lineage of Seung Sahn, in which Jon Kabat-Zinn was, at one point, a dharma teacher in training (see Husgafvel 2018).
13. Similar observations apply to the MBCT training provided by the Oxford Mindfulness Centre. See, e.g. the Oxford Mindfulness Centre blog entry 'The role of retreats for MBCT teachers' (https://www.oxfordmindfulness.org/news/role-retreats-mbct-teachers/).
14. In Kabat-Zinn's vocabulary, traditional Buddhist concepts, such as 'Dharma', 'Sangha', and 'Karma', are spelled with capital letters, while small letters (dharma, sangha, etc.) designate the 'universal character and applicability' of the terms. See Kabat-Zinn (2011), 300, note 1.
15. For the role of the Four Noble Truths in the theoretical foundation of MBCT, see Cook (2017), 116–18.
16. For similar observations in MBCT contexts, see Wheater (2017), 329–30.
17. This quote appears in many publications by Kabat-Zinn. For the full quote and discussion, see Husgafvel (2018), 292.
18. This concept is best known from the works of the Vietnamese Zen (Thiền) teacher Thich Nhat Hanh.
19. The institutional context and material space may also play a part in steering the discussions in MBSR courses (cf. Ammerman 2014, 70–71). Public hospital surroundings are likely to support or curb different topics, compared to a private yoga studio or a Buddhist centre.
20. The similarities are not surprising, since both Brach and Kabat-Zinn strongly draw on similar Buddhist sources and combine modern vipassanā and non-dual Mahāyāna approaches in a manner characteristic

of the ethos of American 'West Coast vipassanā'. For a discussion on Brach, see Gleig (2013), 223.

21. The participant numbers are not fixed, but only refer to different voices in a particular conversation.
22. Despite being widely circulated as the Buddha's words, the passage appears to be a mistranslation of a Pāli text (*Udāna* 5:1). See, e.g. https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.5.01.than.html.
23. See, e.g. Kabat-Zinn (2005), 137.

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