

Article

Contemporary Mindfulness and Transreligious Learning Paths of Mental Health Professionals

Ville Husgafvel *  and Terhi Utriainen

Study of Religions, University of Helsinki, 00014 Helsinki, Finland; terhi.utriainen@helsinki.fi

* Correspondence: ville.husgafvel@helsinki.fi

Abstract: In this article, we apply and assess the concept of transreligiosity in the study of formally educated and licensed psychologists and psychotherapists in Finland who integrate mindfulness practices in their professional toolkit. Our analytical focus complements the discussion on the use of religious and spiritual traditions as therapeutic resources by turning scholarly attention from individual coping tools to the professional skills of therapeutic work and from complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practices to mainstream health care and education. In the field of mindfulness research, we add to the cumulative body of ethnographic approaches by analyzing the mindfulness-related individual learning paths of mental health professionals through qualitative interview data. Based on our analysis, we conclude that the professional skills of using mindfulness practices in secular health care and education can result from transreligious learning trajectories, in which psychologists and psychotherapists supplement science-based academic education with learning in Buddhist communities and training with Buddhist teachers. This role of Buddhist environments and resources points to a blind spot in the current understanding of adult and professional learning, in which the value and position of religious traditions as possible complementary sources of professional knowledge and skills are not sufficiently recognized.

Keywords: transreligiosity; contemporary Buddhism; psychology; psychotherapy; mindfulness practice; adult learning



Citation: Husgafvel, Ville, and Terhi Utriainen. 2023. Contemporary Mindfulness and Transreligious Learning Paths of Mental Health Professionals. *Religions* 14: 807. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060807>

Academic Editors: Eugenia Roussou, Silvia Rivadossi and Anastasios Panagiotopoulos

Received: 29 April 2023

Revised: 9 June 2023

Accepted: 13 June 2023

Published: 19 June 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

What has become clear from recent research in such disciplines as anthropology, the study of religion, and health research and nursing science is that suffering and crises in life often lead people to turn to religious and spiritual resources. Health research and nursing science increasingly approach the spiritual resources of each individual as coping tools (e.g., Kelly 2004; Koenig 2009; Krause and Pargament 2018; Williams 2006). In contemporary societies, many people seek and find tools and therapeutic resources not only from traditional religions but also from the rich field of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practices, which may draw influences from many spiritual traditions (Basu et al. 2017; Bowman 2000; Lüddeckens and Schrimpf 2018; McGuire 1988). In this previous research, both clients and therapeutic service producers have been studied. However, the research on service providers has mainly focused on CAM practices, where the borders between healers and the healed are often shifting and porous (e.g., Kalvig 2012; Sointu and Woodhead 2008; Utriainen 2017).

Buddhist-derived meditation practices occupy many different domains in contemporary culture (Husgafvel 2020). In religious contexts, they continue as soteriological practices that are central to many Buddhist notions of liberation (Gethin [1992] 2001; McMahan and Braun 2017; Vetter 1988). Alongside modern yoga, meditation is often seen as a hallmark of “New Age” or “holistic” spirituality (Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2014). Since the introduction of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), and other therapeutic mindfulness-based programs (MBPs), Buddhist meditation techniques have also become widely used

in mainstream health care, education, and coaching (Husgafvel 2023; Plank 2010; Wilson 2014). This mainstreaming of mindfulness is predominantly founded on the reframing of Buddhist meditation practices through biomedical concepts and on the cumulative body of scientific research on the clinical and instrumental benefits of MBPs. As Helderman (2016, p. 938) argues, “The use of Buddhist teachings and practices in psychotherapy, once described as a new popular trend, should now be considered an established feature of the mental health field”.

In this article, we approach the topic of crisis and the concept of transreligiosity (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022) from the point of view of formally educated and licensed psychologists and psychotherapists in Finland who integrate mindfulness in their professional toolkit. We ask: How do these mental health professionals approach and engage with Buddhist traditions in learning the therapeutic use of mindfulness practice? How does this transreligious learning complement their formal academic education? Since secularity is the starting point—and, indeed, the frame in which our interlocutors work and act—our approach also builds on Fedele and Knibbe (2020), who stress that contemporary spirituality should not be approached only as it relates to religion(s) but also in terms of how it can come to be positioned with regard to secularity.

Our analytical focus complements the discussion on religious and spiritual traditions as therapeutic resources by turning scholarly attention from individual and private coping tools to the professional skills of therapeutic work and from CAM practices to mainstream health care and education. This shifts the focus more toward the social significance of spirituality and religion-derived practices. In the field of mindfulness research, we add to the cumulative body of much-needed ethnographic approaches (e.g., Cook 2017; Husgafvel 2023; Rahmani 2020; Rosch 2015; Stanley and Kortelainen 2020; Wheeler 2017) by analyzing the mindfulness-related individual learning paths of mental health professionals through rich interview data. Based on our analysis, we conclude that the professional use of mindfulness practices in secular health care and education may be based on learning trajectories that we conceptualize as “transreligious”. In these hybrid learning paths, formal academic education is complemented with learning in Buddhist communities and training with Buddhist teachers.

2. Transreligiosity as an Analytical Perspective

The notion of transreligiosity, as formulated by Panagiotopoulos and Roussou (2022), suggests that the borders between religious traditions and between religion and non-religion are fluid and porous. Especially in the contexts of transnational religion, contemporary spirituality, and lived or vernacular religion, drawing on the resources of several traditions and worldviews may be a common point of departure, rather than something that deviates from the norm (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022). As a term and analytic perspective, they propose that transreligiosity is “encompassing and sensitive to the various nuances and contingencies of the transgression of religiosity’s borders” (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 616). How can our case, which is located in the secular culture of mainstream health care and education, be understood from this perspective of transreligiosity?

Contemporary therapeutic mindfulness practice and related learning trajectories overlap with transnational forms of Buddhist modernism, with the multifaceted fields of “holistic” spirituality and modern yoga, with Ivy League academic institutions and related scientific research, and with mainstream biomedicine and public health care (Husgafvel 2018; McMahan and Braun 2017; Wilson 2014). Lately, mindfulness practices have also been adopted in the work of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church and related courses offered in Christian parishes (in addition to secular adult education centers) as tools for either wellbeing or contemplation or both. Thus, contemporary forms of mindfulness transgress and challenge many established boundaries between religious and secular domains of society, as well as between specific religious traditions. In our study, we analyze these transgressions and related boundary work on the individual level of vernacular

mindfulness practice, which may draw and combine influences from a variety of sources and traditions. In this analytical endeavor, we find the concept of transreligiosity to be a promising heuristic tool to apply and assess.

We understand “transreligiosity” as the entanglement and porosity of both religious and secular traditions, worldviews, knowledge, practices, and sentiments. In our case study, the transreligious entanglement is primarily that of secular health care and education and Buddhist traditions. We look at the articulations and negotiations of these entanglements in extensive qualitative interviews with four Finnish psychologists and psychotherapists who use mindfulness practices in their secular work. With the perspective of “transreligious learning”, we suggest that it is possible to capture the combination of formal academic education and non-formal learning in the Buddhist context(s) that has provided these mental health professionals with the skills and knowledge needed to use mindfulness practice as a therapeutic and educational tool. Our understanding of formal and non-formal learning is guided by Rogers’s (2014) work on adult learning and lifelong learning. At the same time, we draw attention to the many “nuances and contingencies” in psychologists’ and psychotherapists’ approaches to Buddhism, that is, the rich variety of individual framings and learning trajectories described by our respondents.

While scholars of religion and Buddhist studies have written much about the dialogue between Buddhism and psychotherapy (e.g., Carrette and King 2005; Cho 2012; McMahan 2008; Metcalf 2002; Wilson 2014), these works often overlook psychotherapists’ and psychologists’ own views about their relationship with Buddhism (for an exception, see Gill et al. 2015). Consequently, “the variety of approaches that clinicians have taken to Buddhist traditions are often lost in the sweep of totalizing interpretations” (Helderman 2019, p. 2). Like Helderman’s (2019) pioneering study, our research aims to show a variety of ways in which mental health professionals may approach Buddhist teachings and practices. For this purpose, we find some of Helderman’s (2019, pp. 79–145) heuristic categories, such as “filtering” and “translating” religion, to be useful in capturing characteristic features and drawing out important distinctions in our interview data.

Boundary Work and Non-discursive Learning

In our study, we make use of the concept of “boundary work”, which denotes various actions and strategies of constructing and regulating symbolic boundaries, social differences, and related individual and group identities (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Yukich 2010). Pia Vuolanto (2013, pp. 14–17) draws on Gieryn’s (1995) understanding of boundary work as power-laden, rhetorical differentiation between diverse cultural fields or territories, such as science, non-science, and religion. This analytical perspective may be fruitfully applied to cases of debate and controversy or to the interfaces between cultural and societal domains. We are interested in the ways in which boundary work—specifically regarding the influential cultural systems of religion, science, and psychology—takes place in relation to personal and professional mindfulness practices in the interview accounts with our respondents. This helps to sensitize our analytical eye for potential tensions or conflicts that our interlocutors find in their particular transgressive entanglements.

Some of these tensions may be rooted in the asymmetric authority and legitimacy of different knowledge claims in contemporary culture. Finnish society is very sensitive about the normative status of science, and the boundary between conventional medicine and CAM or “belief medicine” (*uskomushoito*) is often rigorously defended in public debates (Hiimäe and Utriainen 2021; Vuolanto 2013). While the therapeutic use of mindfulness practice is endorsed in the national Current Care Guidelines, the potential religious-spiritual dimensions of meditation may cause heightened demands and efforts to “purify” mindfulness practice from any perceived “religious” or “Buddhist” elements. As both Panagiotopoulos and Roussou (2022) and Helderman (2019, p. 257) observe, such strict borders may be “inherently unstable” and result in various forms of cultural “hybrids”. Another potential site of tension and negotiation may stem from professional guidelines, which rule out

personal spiritual or religious agendas from psychotherapists' work, even if the clients' own religious views may be important topics of therapeutic discussions (Sievers 2016).

Finally, our study draws from discussions on "embodied" and "somatic" learning (Dansac 2022; Kraus and Wulf 2022; Mellor and Shilling 2010; Utriainen 2019; Winchester and Pagis 2021) and "experiential learning" (Holland 2004; Passarelli and Kolb 2011) as complementary to "discursive" or "conceptual" learning. In our interviews, the somatic aspects of mindfulness training and the idea that the therapeutic use of mindfulness requires experiential knowledge gained through personal meditation practice receive much attention (cf. Pierini 2016, p. 310; see also Crane et al. 2017). These are some of the main areas in which the interviewees saw Buddhist teachings and learning environments as complementing their formal academic education.

3. Materials and Methods

The arguments of this article are based on a set of interviews from a larger data corpus. As a part of the research project Learning from New Religion and Spirituality (LeNeRe),¹ we conducted interviews with nine highly educated professionals who use mindfulness and mediation practices in their secular work. In this study, we focused on four psychologists and psychotherapists who are currently employed or have prior experience in clinical work and consultation. Each has at least a master's degree in psychology, and two are also trained as psychotherapists. In the text, we refer to the interviewees with the pseudonyms Matias, Elisabeth, Stefan, and Jouko. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, we do not provide further personal information or details of their work.

Our data consists of semi-structured thematic interviews with a total length of 16 h and 10 min. We conducted the main interviews face-to-face with each participant and a follow-up on Zoom, with one exception where a follow-up was not considered necessary. In addition, the participants had a possibility to comment on the first draft of the manuscript in an email correspondence. The main themes covered in the interviews include:

- Formal and non-formal learning history;
- Mindfulness and meditation-related learning paths and communities of practice;
- The professional use of mindfulness and meditation;
- The ethics, values, and worldviews related to mindfulness and meditation practice;
- The styles and aims of personal mindfulness and meditation practice;
- The role of mindfulness and meditation in facing personal and global crises.

In this article, we focus primarily on the first four themes, as we analyze the individual learning trajectories that provided the mental health professionals with the necessary skills to use mindfulness practices as part of their secular work. The coding and examination of data were based on the methods and principles of qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

While we find our data to fit well with the study of individual learning trajectories, we also recognize its inherent limitations and constructed nature. The interview narratives are often based on the interviewees' current memories and interpretations of past events and produced in a specific situation and for a specific audience asking specific questions (with a microphone). Thus, through our research methods, we are not simply "mapping" some "pre-existing external reality" but participating in its co-construction and enactment (see Tremlett 2023).

4. Portraits of Learning Paths

In this descriptive part of our examination, we provide a detailed portrait of the Buddhism and meditation-related learning paths of each psychologist. After this, we engage in further analysis by means of the perspectives and concepts discussed in the introduction. Through this structure, the coherence and internal dynamics of each individual learning trajectory may be retained. While the narratives are, of course, our own constructions, we have tried to preserve our respondents' own voices as much as possible, as sometimes a particular choice of words alone may capture an entire underlying interpretative frame.

4.1. Matias—Buddhism through a “Psychological Sieve”

Matias is a psychologist with both clinical and research experience. As a young university student, he became interested in Zen Buddhism through budo sports, and he studied it mainly from popular books by modern Zen teachers. In retrospect, he considers this interest in the “clarity of mind” gained through yoga and meditation as a needed balance to the many social activities of student life. When studying psychology, he encountered Mark Epstein’s (1995) book *Thoughts Without a Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective* and became “really excited” by its combination of Buddhist and psychotherapeutic perspectives.

When already a licensed psychologist, Matias participated in an introductory course offered by a Zen Buddhist community. After this, with other participants in the course, he formed an independent meditation group with loose links to the Zen tradition. Around the same time, Matias first encountered therapeutic mindfulness practice through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn. He considered himself as among the first in Finland to acknowledge and spread the word about this new “serious foundation” for meditation practice. Gradually, meditation became “a kind of an anchor point” in Matias’s life and some form of “spirituality” that was difficult to describe or put into words.

Matias deepened his learning in the therapeutic use of mindfulness through a two-year MBSR teacher-training course. After this, he began integrating mindfulness approaches in his professional work by teaching some MBSR courses and using mindfulness practices in his therapeutic work. As a therapeutic tool, he considers mindfulness practices useful in the treatment of stress, anxiety, and issues of somatic awareness. In discussing the main skills to be learned through meditation and mindfulness, Matias emphasizes the metacognitive ability to withdraw from harmful “rumination” and to see thoughts as “just thoughts”. In an email correspondence after the interview, he adds,

on the other hand, meditation is a bit like psychoanalysis done alone; it allows you to see more clearly and deeply what you are feeling and thinking. But you need to feel safe and comfortable and also have at least some level of skill. In such a state, seeing your own inner landscape is a good thing; it enlivens and enriches your own life . . . It can make the present moment more vivid and brighter and awaken curiosity about what life is. You can compare this perhaps to art—it doesn’t necessarily take away the difficulties, but it makes life more interesting.

Alongside the professional use of mindfulness, Matias continued to study and practice meditation in Buddhist groups. This included monthly meditation sessions in a local Zen group and occasional longer meditation retreats in modernist Zen and vipassanā traditions.² He describes his monthly visits to a Zen group in very pragmatic terms:

not so much that I would be, like, in any way theoretically and doctrinally, like committed or even terribly interested in it, but just the fact that there’s a space where one can sit, and the guy who’s been running it is a nice guy.

Sometimes, the practice in Buddhist contexts, especially in intensive meditation retreats, also included negative experiences that were counterproductive to wellbeing. These were mainly due to excessive striving in meditation practice and a lack of therapeutic support in confronting difficult personal issues.

Despite attending Buddhist groups and retreats, Matias considers an informal group of friends as his “most meaningful learning environment” in meditation practice. The members all have a background in Buddhism but also a shared “secular perspective”, which he describes as an “extremely important and healthy” ability to look at different practices and traditions critically “from the outside”. When reflecting on the benefits of meditation in his own life, Matias emphasizes psychological self-knowledge and the social aspects of meditation but also acquiring useful abilities for professional work.

As a psychologist, Matias sees that his personal meditation practice has developed his attentiveness to the various mental states of both the clients and himself. He also describes meditation as providing an experiential “map”, which helps him to establish

calmness and presence in therapeutic work. Matias stresses that the therapeutic use of mindfulness approaches “must have a connection to one’s personal life”, as one cannot just “pick these up from a shelf and put them into practice”. When asked whether the professional use of mindfulness practices requires some aspects of personal practice to be left outside, Matias replies:

Well, of course you have to reflect on that. But I feel that my, like, idea of this, that what this Buddhism means to me, is pretty close to my professional, like, identity. So there is not very much there that would feel, like, that these would not pass when looked through, like, a psychological sieve . . . they are just exercises aimed at awareness, but maybe dosing them in such a way that it is, like, it is safe [. . .] that it fits specifically into what we are otherwise doing, that it has a clear function [. . .] But I feel that, I haven’t had to reflect on this, like, very much lately.

Matias considers Buddhism “a religion” that guides many of his values, yet he finds identification as “a Buddhist” problematic, as his own perspective to it is “so much more secular”. He describes evaluating and selecting Buddhist teachings based on what is good for him and what makes sense from a psychological perspective. For example, the idea of rebirth is not personally meaningful to him, but reducing selfness or “I-ness” and the values of friendliness, awareness, and acceptance are.

Despite the psychological emphasis in his meditation practice and understanding of Buddhism, some form of “spirituality” continues to be an important part of Matias’s life. In describing what this spirituality means, he brings up a sense of interdependence and connection with people and other living beings. He also sees the Buddhist tradition transmitting important values of altruism and empathy from generation to generation, like the “passing of a torch in the darkness”. As he explains,

I think that spirituality is somehow connected to this, that there is something beautiful about trying to cherish and take forward things like these [altruism and empathy]. And I don’t know if it’s connected to something like “faith in heaven” or some spirituality like that, but maybe to something like this, that transcends oneself [. . .] It transcends one’s own self in some way and there is something beautiful about that.

While Matias’s views display a strong ethical orientation, he is not committed to any set of normative rules. Nevertheless, the practice of meditation has an ethical dimension, as the negative consequences or the “bad feeling” that result from acting against one’s values and “basic principles” become evident through practice.

This brief portrait of Matias shows a personal commitment to Buddhist teachings and values and a sustained engagement with Buddhist communities. However, his approach to Buddhism is strongly filtered through a psychological lens and secular orientation. While Matias describes the aims and benefits of meditation practice in psychological and psychotherapeutic terms, his personal practice also has a certain “spiritual” dimension, which he associates with a sense of interconnectedness and self-transcendence through participation in a transgenerational Buddhist tradition that promotes altruistic values. Due to his psychological understanding of Buddhism, he does not see much conflict or need to negotiate when using his personal meditation practice as a resource and tool in professional mental health work.

4.2. Elisabeth—Buddhism in Academic Mindfulness Studies

Elisabeth is a psychologist and psychotherapist with versatile experience in clinical and counseling work. She describes herself as non-religious but as having had an interest in philosophy, Zen Buddhism, and “Eastern traditions” since she was a teenager. Her personal meditation practice started when already working as a psychologist. This interest in meditation grew first from personal and later from professional needs.

In psychotherapist training, a colleague introduced her to Jon Kabat-Zinn's work on mindfulness. She had also found some self-compassion practices helpful in a stressful work situation. Professionally, Elisabeth felt that the academic education in psychology had not offered enough tools to work with the somatic aspects of wellbeing and mental health work. She explains,

when I started doing that work, I noticed that something was missing, and it was that somatic aspect. And in psychology as such, there is not, well, maybe nowadays there is more, but in the past it was a lot, like, inside the head. And, well, I didn't like that so much. I remember that when at different stages of my work, in rehabilitation or . . . in psychiatry, so I remember that this somatic aspect was really important to me and I didn't have the tools for it.

Personally, Elisabeth believed that mindfulness practice could be beneficial to her relationships and family life. These experiences supported her decision to be trained as a teacher in MBSR and mindful self-compassion (MSC). Through Kabat-Zinn's texts, she was also aware of the Buddhist roots of mindfulness practice. As she explains, "psychology is a very young field of science, so of course if there is wisdom that is much, much older, then of course it can be drawn from".

After many courses and retreats with established therapeutic mindfulness teachers, Elisabeth still felt that a sufficient theoretical understanding of mindfulness was lacking. In order to integrate mindfulness practices in her work, she wanted more knowledge on the scientific foundations of mindfulness and on the suitability of MBPs to different types of clients. This led to further studies in a public university offering a master's program in mindfulness.

In contrast to earlier mindfulness training, learning about the scientific grounds of medical and therapeutic mindfulness practice formed an important part of the master's program. Additionally, Buddhist teachings on mindfulness were studied in depth with the help of Buddhist teachers, such as the Theravāda Buddhist monk and scholar Bhikkhu Anālayo. These studies included a "really careful" reading and historical contextualization of canonical Buddhist texts on mindfulness, such as the *Anapānasatisutta* and *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* (see [Anālayo 2014](#); [Kuan 2008](#)). In addition, meditation retreats with Buddhist teachers were also an important part of the program, as Elisabeth explains:

We also had those retreats, both live and also this remote retreat that was directed by Bhikkhu Anālayo [. . .] he has guided us in, like, two retreats that I've been on [. . .] so during that retreat we had an hour with him every night when it was possible to ask him and so on. He supported, of course, our practice and there was a hall, a virtual hall, where it was possible to go, so sometimes he went there to meditate in silence with us.

According to Elisabeth, all these discussions on Buddhism focused on "what is relevant for mindfulness teachers" and the Buddhist teachers "knew very well that we didn't have, like, a religious motivation". Since she considers her knowledge of Buddhism to be filtered mainly through mindfulness training, Elisabeth describes herself as having "cherry-picked" only selected teachings from the wider tradition. Instead of Buddhist groups, her most important communities of meditation practice comprise colleagues at work and participants from prior mindfulness courses.

In our interview, Elisabeth describes many pragmatic benefits of meditation, such as the ability to deal with difficult or painful feelings and finding joy in little things. However, her personal practice is also deeply linked to her values and includes experiences of connectedness and self-transcendence. When given alternatives to describe her meditation practice, such as "religious", "psychological", "spiritual", or "therapeutic", she felt "spiritual" to be the closest term and explained this in terms of a connection "to something that is greater", which can be vividly experienced in meditation:

maybe it comes through that breathing, some kind of feeling that . . . that there are not so much of these boundaries, that somehow there is a connection . . . there

is timelessness, and connection. And there is a certain kind of serenity [. . .] I'd think that the connection would be to the universe or to something like life. A bit like breathing with the universe [. . .] that you are a part of it, that we breathe in one rhythm, but it is timeless.

In her work, Elisabeth teaches mindfulness courses and applies mindfulness practices in her psychological consulting. Meditation also helps her professionally in maintaining balance and calm in meeting clients and transiting from work to family life. In consultations, she usually adapts small bits of mindfulness practice, without necessarily calling it that, "with a very precise focus", such as paying attention to the somatic aspects of emotions or observing thoughts non-judgmentally. If a client has personal experience in meditation, related practices may gain more weight in the meetings.

When asked about what kinds of knowledge, skills, or perspectives can be learned from mindfulness practice and why it is an important tool in her work, Elisabeth emphasizes new ways of relating to one's body, thoughts, feelings, and oneself as a whole.

It's really important to listen to your own body, because sometimes the expectations can be so high, or the demands, that [the clients] ignore themselves and because of that they can feel a bit lost or not in contact with themselves [. . .] the important skills would be just there, in the fact that there is wisdom in our body [. . .] another would be that thoughts are this kind of, that you can let go of, that they are not true, and then about feelings, that feelings can, even if you feel pain, you can make space for them and listen to them so that they don't linger. So, perhaps, this acceptance and gentleness in the acceptance [. . .] another big area, in my opinion, is just that compassion and kindness towards oneself [. . .] there are so many tools that you can draw from mindfulness and self-compassion.

Elisabeth considers it important to explain something about the Buddhist roots of mindfulness practice to her clients. However, she feels that too many "words that feel foreign" or discussions about Buddhism would stray from the pragmatic focus of her work. While experiences of connectedness and ethical aspects of mindfulness practice are personally meaningful to Elisabeth, she usually does not discuss these when teaching mindfulness in work settings. When reflecting about the possibility of bringing up the topic of connectedness in professional contexts, she expresses the concern that "to someone it may sound perhaps too religious" and "someone could react to the fact that it's not measurable or it's not, like . . . it's not necessarily, like, evidence-based". Additionally, she considers it important to keep her approach grounded in established MBPs and MBCT in specific, the content and safety of which are designed by clinicians and tested in many trials. For these reasons, she leaves the possible ontological and ethical aspects of mindfulness practice for the clients to find and bring into the discussion themselves.

Elisabeth's case shows that learning meditation and mindfulness practices may be seen as complementing academic education in psychology by providing experience and understanding of the somatic aspects of mental health. In pursuing both theoretical knowledge and practical skills in mindfulness practice, Elisabeth found studying with Buddhist teachers to be valuable. She did not need to go to Buddhist communities to find these teachers, as Buddhist teachers and monastics had established teaching positions in the master's degree program of a public university. Here, learning Buddhist teachings was not considered "religious" but as contributing to the professional skills of mindfulness teachers in secular, mainstream settings. Elisabeth draws a clear boundary between the personally meaningful "spiritual" aspects of meditation and the professional use of mindfulness that must be firmly scientific and maintain a clear distance from associations with religion.

4.3. Stefan—Buddhism as a "Roadmap" of Self-Regulation

Stefan is a highly educated psychologist with both clinical and research experience. His interest in yoga and meditation started as a youth and was motivated by personal wellbeing. His sporadic early practice was solely based on books and online sources on

yoga, Zen meditation, and humanistic psychology. In a later stage of his life, through academic studies in psychology and related professional interests, meditation practice became a regular part of his life.

At first, Stefan's personal experiments in meditation did not seem academically relevant but this changed when reading about mindfulness in a course book.

Meditation was a bit like, that I had treated my anxiety with it, and something that I had tried in different ways, but it was not strongly connected to my professional identity. But then, in psychology they started talking about it more and [. . .] we had a course in psychotherapy and in this course book of cognitive therapy, there was a chapter about mindfulness treatments. And then when I read it, I remember, that's when it started to dawn on me that this [meditation] has, like, this name [mindfulness] here, and this is familiar to me from other contexts.

As a psychologist in training, Stefan taught some mindfulness courses with a "fully secular" understanding of meditation. This understanding was grounded in some general introductory courses on therapeutic mindfulness and books on MBSR and MBCT programs. Toward the end of his studies, however, he started feeling like "a charlatan in the world of mindfulness" due to a lack of intensive regular meditation practice and related "experience-based" knowledge. This feeling of incompetence and increasing professional interest in therapeutic mindfulness motivated him to complete an MBSR teacher-training course and other related mindfulness courses and to start daily meditation practice that has remained practically unbroken for years. Still, he felt that his learning of academic psychology and therapeutic MBPs needed to be complemented by a better understanding of Buddhist approaches to meditation and mindfulness.

Stefan first learned about relevant Buddhist teachers from Jon Kabat-Zinn's books, and he read the works of many contemporary Zen and vipassanā teachers that influenced MBSR (see [Husgafvel 2016](#)). At the same time, scholarly works on Buddhism gave him "a map" of the tradition and its subbranches. Later, Stefan attended a Buddhist vipassanā retreat with a visiting teacher from the American Insight Meditation Society (IMS). He describes this "first Buddhist practice experience" as both eye-opening and challenging:

At the retreat I realized that here is a whole language game of its own and that, like, I'm totally out of it. Except that I knew from mindfulness research that other people consider this vipassanā, for example, as a relevant factor in this mindfulness, that mindfulness is not based on just medicine and psychology [. . .] and then I started to feel that I might be an incompetent researcher for this, if I don't, like, make this Buddhist side clearer to me. However, I'm something like [laughs], this is really arrogant of me to say, but I think that I'm something like the embodiment of the scientific method. So, I probably had a really strong aversion toward this direction at that stage [. . .] I mean towards this Buddhist direction [. . .] everything that went beyond medicine and psychology.

Despite criticizing many aspects of Buddhist teachings from scientific and psychological perspectives, Stefan appreciated the possibility of "meditating eight hours a day" at the retreat and felt that he learned useful practical skills. As he remembers noting in his diary:

This [Buddhist retreat] is pretty valid stuff from the point of view, like, the practice of clinical psychology or from the point of view of developing the clinician's self-awareness and self-reflection and metacognition. As a cosmological source of information, this is completely useless.

Stefan remained "intellectually critical" toward Buddhism but continued to participate in Buddhist vipassanā retreats at least once a year and attended weekly meditation sessions in a local Buddhist group. As his main motivations, he names "the parasympathetic state in the body" resulting from intensive meditation practice and social ties to the community. After listening to Joseph Goldstein, one of the founders of IMS (see [Fronsdal 1998](#)), on

Sam Harris's podcast, he learned to also appreciate some theoretical aspects of Buddhist teachings.

What he did differently than the other Buddhist sources that I had encountered earlier . . . was that he analytically articulated what the core teaching of vipassanā is in relation to human experience. That there are these, like, poisons of the mind, and the function of mindfulness is to sharpen the ability to be present in this moment and make wiser choices in relation to these, like, reactive forces, that is, greed and aversiveness and delusion [. . .] and then I began to feel that okay, now I can articulate to others what the idea of vipassanā teaching is.

From Sam Harris, Stefan also learned something about what he calls "secular dzogchen", a specific interpretation of a Tibetan Buddhist approach to meditation practice (see [Van Schaik 2004](#)). In fact, he describes having a profound experience of the "unity of consciousness" when listening to Sam Harris's instructions in a podcast discussion. Stefan considered this "a clear qualitative transformation" in his experience and one that could be repeated at will. However, he did not feel any need to attach Buddhist "stories" to it. Instead, he considered it to be "in complete sync" with his "evolutionary biological, or even physical world view". While Stefan considers this "*anattā*³ experience" potentially beneficial in developing certain metacognitive skills and lessening "narratives about the self", he now describes having "zero interest" in studying it further.

Stefan's (to date) final major learning experience in Buddhist contexts came on a retreat with a Burmese Theravāda Buddhist monastic and meditation teacher. In fact, he now considers that "half" of his current understanding of meditation practice comes from this specific teacher with "a first-person empirical approach" to meditation and a "minimal use of religious concepts". Although having a Buddhist monastic as his most influential teacher in meditation and mindfulness has sometimes felt problematic to Stefan, as "it may seem religious, even when it's not", he now describes being comfortable with this.

Stefan summarized his learning with this Burmese teacher conceptually through the Buddhist notion of "five spiritual faculties",⁴ which he understands in a very pragmatic way: with confidence and persistence in the practice, the monitoring capacity of mindful awareness and the steadiness of mind will develop, and with time, these contribute to experience-based wisdom (i.e., understanding the consequences of different reactions and responses) and "more skillful" choices that support wellbeing. This trajectory also has an inherent ethical component, as "the individual's wellbeing has large multiplicative effects for the benefit of all social contexts in which that individual operates". While acknowledging that some Buddhists may find it offensive, Stefan sees "almost the whole wisdom of Buddhist teachings" (as he understands it) to be condensed in this methodology of maintaining awareness in daily life.

Currently, Stefan considers his "intellectual dive" into Buddhism completed for now and he is not attending Buddhist retreats or meditation groups. Although he adopted specific Buddhist methods and conceptual frameworks, he "rejected ninety percent of the Buddhist tradition" and does not consider himself "a Buddhist in anyway". Nevertheless, Stefan finds his learning in Buddhist contexts useful for both his personal wellbeing and his professional work.

As Stefan sees it, clinical psychology and medicine still have a limited understanding of the "roadmap" that leads people to acquire functional self-regulation skills. Here, the study of meditation and mindfulness may help, as these are all about having the "best version of your personality" available when "facing temptations or anxiety". As he sees it, regular meditation practice supports self-regulation and wellbeing by developing somatic awareness and metacognitive skills. These help in noticing when one gets lost in thoughts or carried away by various detrimental "dopamine and cortisol trains". While MBSR and MBCT form the foundation of Stefan's professional use of mindfulness, he also applies the "common-sensical, secular part" of Buddhist teachings in his work. When teaching meditation as a psychologist, Stefan never uses Pali terms but translates them into "the language of Western psychology and medicine". He sees no issues in discussing

the Buddhist roots of mindfulness or applying Buddhist perspectives as a psychologist, as all the things that he “picks” from Buddhism are “secular and do not include any metaphysical claims”.

For Stefan, the study of Buddhist teachings and practices has been a dedicated effort to extract potentially useful theoretical and practical models from Buddhist traditions for personal and professional use. In this critical scrutiny and selection, he applied his natural scientific, psychological, and medical understandings of the world as a measure. What he learned, primarily, were pragmatic methods of developing self-regulation skills. These he saw as complementing his learning in therapeutic MBPs and exceeding the current methods taught in clinical psychology.

4.4. Jouko—*Buddhism in a Spiritual Search*

Jouko is a psychologist and psychotherapist with several master’s degrees. His initial interest in Asian contemplative practices started as a youth doing budo sports. The actual practice of meditation began later as a young adult when he found instructions from Anthony de Mello’s books that combined Catholic Christianity with Buddhist-type meditation practices. This interest was part of a “spiritual search” to better understand oneself, and the initial experiments in meditation were soon followed by a spontaneous extraordinary experience on an everyday walk.

After I had read Mello and started to do some of the exercises, I actually had a strong experience . . . an experience that I describe as something, like, spiritual or mystical, religious [. . .] I remember how it just started, this kind of, like, bursting joy and happiness and something like that . . . It could’ve been linked to the word “grace” if it had been part of my own vocabulary, but I was never Christian in that way and had no such upbringing [. . .] something like an experience of opening up, that somehow changed my perspective on the world and the way I interpret it . . . I think it could have been, could have well been something like a religious conversion experience, but there was no religion involved, so that it did not, like, emerge from any particular religion [. . .] an experience of something greater than oneself, also a kind of safety, in a way, that you open up to some bigger whole that you are a part of.

The desire to understand this experience had a formative role in Jouko’s motivation to study “Buddhist psychology”, Theosophy, and other religious traditions, and to be trained as a psychologist and psychotherapist.

After an introductory course in Zen Buddhism and discussing his experience with Buddhist teachers, Jouko became formally initiated in a Zen Buddhist lineage and, later, an instructor in a local Zen group with a clear “Buddhist self-identity”. His meditation practice focused on a type of koan practice with elements of concentration and “getting absorbed in a paradox”.⁵ He considered koan introspection a natural choice, “because this spiritual experience [on a walk] was the reason why I even started practicing in the first place”. When practicing in this Zen lineage, Jouko had another extraordinary experience during an intensive meditation retreat.

I sort of looked at the one who looks, experienced the one who experiences . . . in a certain way, this kind of “me” who does these things disappeared . . . there was walking, there was looking, there was being, but there was no active . . . something like a self-center that did it [. . .] there was still awareness, but the awareness was no longer located . . . somehow, like, here in the head, but it was more kind of boundless.

However, Jouko did not feel that he received proper philosophical support to examine this experience in the Zen community. Due to this and other reasons, such as the rigid formality and hierarchical structures of the tradition, Jouko became disenchanted with the Zen lineage and left it after years of practice. While feeling “a strong aversion toward Buddhism and anything related to religion” at this point, he continued practicing meditation

as an open-ended “inquiry” to understand “the workings of one’s own mind” without any formal ties to Buddhism.

Years later, the extraordinary experience from the retreat came back when Jouko was doing a “Daoist standing practice” at home. This renewed his interest in studying and understanding it better. In addition to reading psychological, neuropsychological, and anthroposophical studies, Jouko started attending Buddhist retreats again. On a retreat led by a Zen teacher (of another tradition), he heard a Buddhist sūtra describing his own path and experiences “astonishingly well” and in a way that “required further exploration”. He had noticed “that it’s quite laborious to try to read through all the libraries and build some coherent understanding” of his experiences, and now he thought that, in the Buddhist tradition, “there might be some ready-made understanding” to be found.

This led Jouko to approach various Buddhist teachers through emails, to begin a “dharma teacher training” and, eventually, to be initiated in another Zen Buddhist community. However, Jouko does not view his current identity as “only Buddhist”, as he is also an active member in the Theosophical Society and finds “yoga philosophy” and “Christian mysticism” to be both philosophically interesting and experientially “enriching”. In his interpretation of the mythical and symbolic elements of Buddhism and other religious traditions, Jouko draws much from the Jungian tradition of psychoanalysis. Here,

these Buddhist archetypes there, buddhas, bodhisattvas, buddha-lands, western pure lands of happiness and all that . . . are just that kind of collective unconscious archetypal material that has . . . little by little been brought into these kinds of mythical forms.

Since his days as a student in psychology, Jouko has taught meditation courses for secular professionals in health care, education, and coaching. For this work, he strategically used “mindfulness as the word for it”, because “it just seemed to fit better than if you were talking about Buddhist Zen practice”. In this approach, Jouko considers himself to be following the original example of Kabat-Zinn. In the beginning, he had some hesitation about how to “justify” his teacher position in secular contexts, as he did not have any training in MBSR or other therapeutic MBPs but only practical “apprenticeship-type expertise” in Zen Buddhism. Eventually, however, he felt that his extensive Zen practice and teaching experience could make him, in some ways, even more competent than some therapeutic mindfulness teachers with only a few years of experience in meditation practice. Additionally, for many, his degree as a health care professional seemed to “compensate” for the lack of therapeutic mindfulness training.

In Jouko’s initial Zen community, therapeutic mindfulness was often discussed in a critical light, and at first he also considered Kabat-Zinn’s work to be quite “superficial”. However, after reading more and attending some of Kabat-Zinn’s online teachings, he found Kabat-Zinn to have some “deeper understanding” and real experience-based “insight”. During his master’s studies in psychology, Jouko also learned more about the scientific research conducted on the MBSR program.

In his psychotherapeutic work, Jouko considers mindfulness practices as useful tools, especially in the treatment of anxiety or acute issues of self-regulation, sleep, or burnout. Here, MBSR and related MBPs serve as useful frameworks to distinguish therapeutic meditation from Buddhist practice. When asked whether and how he draws a line between his personal practice and professional use of meditation, Jouko explains:

I draw the line quite a lot. I approach it very pragmatically. So, is there, in this moment, any benefit in practicing some mindfulness exercises? If there is benefit, then you can apply them. And then I use or take the framework from this popular MBSR-type stuff for that. It is, after all, it’s found in the Current Care Guidelines and others, [and] there’s no contradiction in any way there.

In discussing the differences of Zen meditation and secular mindfulness practice, Jouko emphasizes the importance of terminology and context. According to him, the actual practice methods can be very similar in “spiritual”, “therapeutic”, and “wellbeing”

approaches to mindfulness, a typology he finds useful. However, the aims and contexts of practice—whether a Buddhist retreat, a psychotherapy session, or a workplace seminar for employees—make each approach different from the other. As for himself, Jouko finds “professionally the therapeutic [frame to be] important, but personally the spiritual”. Teaching mindfulness and meditation in all these different settings requires maintaining a clear view of the different contexts and the boundaries between them.

So, I don't think about any *buddhadharma* [Buddha's teachings] when I guide someone with an anxiety disorder on how to cope, like, in that acute situation. Nor when I'm leading some practice in a wellbeing afternoon at a workplace. So I don't think that I'm somehow spreading the Buddhist gospel to people here . . . Somehow, I adapt to that context and take the role that suits it.

When reflecting on his current outlook on life, Jouko describes having a “religious worldview” but also “a pretty strong scientific worldview” at the same time. For him, religious and spiritual traditions can provide a sense of “meaningfulness” and “security” that a purely scientific understanding cannot. Instead of any single religion (or even Theosophy), he identifies mostly with a “path of mysticism” found in many religious traditions and providing both practical and philosophical tools for “self-inquiry” and personal “development”. In his vocabulary, “God”, “Brahman”, “Awareness”, or “Buddha nature” may all be valid designators for his own experience of “meaningfulness” and “connection”.

For Jouko, years of meditation, yoga, and other contemplative practices have developed his awareness of the body “considerably” and enabled him to “easily” observe his own mental states in therapeutic discussions. He also links the ability to “change perspectives”, to “question oneself”, and to endure uncertainty to his practice of both meditation and philosophy. For Jouko, meditation has never been particularly about “bringing wellbeing . . . or, like, getting rid of stress”. Instead, he considers “experiences of self-transcendence” and “connection to something greater than oneself” as his main inspirations and motivations to practice. Here, meditation is a way of “attaching oneself to cosmology and things like these, a bit like a ritual”, instead of a “secular, purified, simplified practice”.

Unlike the other psychologists in our study, Jouko is an initiated member of a Buddhist community and considers his personal meditation practice also a “ritual” with religious significance. While Jouko's training as a meditation teacher comes solely from Buddhist and yoga settings, he knows therapeutic MBPs through books, online sources, and studies in psychology and uses them as a frame to distinguish his secular professional use of meditation from Buddhist practice. With experience in teaching mindfulness and meditation both in Buddhist settings and in secular psychotherapy and workplaces, he maintains clear boundaries between these different contexts and adapts his role and approach to meditation to suit each context.

5. On the Characteristics and Varieties of Transreligious Learning

These detailed portraits show a variety of learning paths that provided the mental health professionals in our study with the knowledge and skills to use mindfulness practice as a therapeutic tool. In each one, the role of Buddhist communities and teachers as authorities and resources is significant, yet different. To us, this fluidity, porosity, and “transgressiveness of borders” between academic education in psychology, training in therapeutic MBPs, and Buddhist learning environments may be understood as a form of transreligiosity “wherein what is religious and what is not [. . .] is not faithfully followed to the (purifying) letter” (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 617). What the analytical perspective of transreligiosity offers is a recognition of the movement of people, practices, symbols, and values across the social domains of academic education, conventional health care, and Buddhist practice and across the closely related conceptual boundaries of “secularity” and “religion”. Thus, the notion of transreligious learning highlights the transgressions of both “symbolic and social boundaries” (Lamont and Molnár 2002, p. 169) in the acquisition and cultivation of professional skills.

5.1. Filtering and Translating Buddhist Teachings

The portraits we painted based on our interview data are in no way inclusive of the great variety of psychologists' and psychotherapists' approaches to Buddhism. Nonetheless, they illustrate some common themes and essential distinctions that are important for our understanding of Buddhism and religious traditions as complementing academic education and providing resources for conventional mental health work. One distinct theme in each case is a pronounced sense of individualism and reflexivity, which mirrors a broader theme in contemporary Buddhism, spirituality, and identity formation (see [Giddens 1991](#); [McMahan 2008](#); [Taylor 1989](#); [Pollack 2008](#)). None of the mental health professionals in our data adopted Buddhist teachings and practices as given by a particular tradition; instead, they selected, filtered, interpreted, and rejected elements of Buddhist traditions on the basis of both personal and professional criteria. At the same time, the interviews make it clear that this "individualization" does not exclude the importance of communities of practice ([Wenger 2009](#)), whether these are informal groups of friends and colleagues, established Buddhist groups, or international networks of practitioners, teachers, and mentors (see also [Rocha 2017](#)).

The reflexive processes of "filtering" and "translating" enable Buddhist teachings and practices to cross the border from "religiosity" to psychotherapy and secular health care. Both are common features in psychotherapeutic and psychological approaches to Buddhism and elementary in the development of MBSR, MBCT, and related therapeutic MBPs ([Helderman 2019](#), pp. 79–145). In "filtering religion" approaches, the mental health professionals in our study used the authority of science, medicine, and psychology to extract particular elements of Buddhist teachings and practices as personally and/or professionally relevant while discarding others. Depending on the case, they described applying a "psychological sieve" to evaluate and select Buddhist practices, rejecting all the "unsubstantiated claims" that go beyond psychology and medicine, introducing only those aspects of mindfulness practice that have a firm "evidence-base", or drawing on the authority of the biomedical "Current Care Guide" to legitimate the use of mindfulness in psychotherapeutic contexts.

In "translating religion" approaches, clinicians and therapists rename and reconstruct certain practices "in such a way that strips them of their religiosity" ([Helderman 2019](#), p. 115). In the most casual examples of translation, our interviewees described how they often call mindfulness and meditation practices simply "breathing" or "relaxation" exercises, or translate Pali terms into "the language of Western psychology and medicine" in professional settings. On a more profound level, the whole idea that mindfulness practices may be removed from their Buddhist doctrinal frames and "social fields of meaning making" may be considered a form of "translation" ([Helderman 2019](#), pp. 113–15). None of these translations are merely linguistic; they are also cultural, from Buddhism to psychology and medicine, and from "religion" to the domain of the "secular" (see also [McMahan 2008](#), pp. 16–18). Nor are these translations and related efforts of "purification" ever complete (see [Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022](#); [Latour 1993](#)). Rather, the cultural translations and transformations of mindfulness form diverse hybrids that are open to a variety of individual interpretations as "secular", "spiritual", or "religious" (see [Braun 2017](#); [Frisk 2012](#); [Husgafvel 2023](#); [Wilson 2014](#)). Even if psychotherapists use particular meditation techniques as pragmatic, strictly evidence-based therapeutic tools, the meanings and frames attached by clients always remain beyond their control. The same applies, of course, to Buddhist teachers teaching "soteriological practices" at a meditation retreat.

5.2. Modalities of Buddhist Practice, Embodiment, and Boundary Work

Even if human embodiment and corporeality form the foundation of social and religious life ([Csordas 1990](#); [McGuire 1990](#); [Utraiainen 2000](#)), these aspects of religiosity have often been neglected in the "discursive oriented, essentially cognitive accounts of religion" that emphasize beliefs, scriptures, and universalized notions of the sacred ([Mellor and Shilling 2010](#), p. 28; [Asad 1993](#); [McCutcheon 1997](#); [King 1999](#)). However, the study of

“lived” and “vernacular” religion has shown how the actual experiences, motivations, and actions of individuals may significantly differ from the institutionalized prescriptions of religious institutions (Ammerman 2014; Knibbe and Kupari 2020; McGuire 2008; Utraiainen 2020). When the primary motivation to attend and practice meditation in a Buddhist group is the resulting “parasympathetic state in the body”, as Stefan described, it is obvious that soteriological beliefs and doctrines may sometimes have a peripheral position—or no role at all—in vernacular Buddhist practice.

The role of Buddhist teachers and contexts as providing resources for experiential and embodied learning is a recurring theme in our interview data. Here, academic education was seen to be focused exclusively or primarily “inside the head” (i.e., discursive and theoretical learning), whereas personal meditation and mindfulness practice provided “tools” and “maps” to understand the somatic and experiential aspects of mental health work. This included techniques to support the personal wellbeing and clinical practice of the psychologists themselves, but also adaptation of mindfulness practices to support “somatic awareness” and sensitiveness to the “wisdom of the body” in their clients (see also Holland 2004; Treves et al. 2019; Wheater 2017). Here, attentiveness to bodily sensations was often described as supporting emotional intelligence and self-regulation skills. As a therapeutic tool, somatic awareness practices could also be used in rehabilitation after serious physical injuries.

While most interviewees had studied meditation and mindfulness in the context of MBSR and other therapeutic MBPs, each one considered Buddhist retreats and communities to be valuable learning environments. Yet, they expressed very different motivations and modalities in their engagement with Buddhism. Elisabeth only sat in retreats with Buddhist teachers as part of her master’s program in a public university—a vivid example of the fluidity and transgression of both social and symbolic borders that we conceptualize as transreligious learning. At the other end of the continuum, Jouko never participated in courses in therapeutic MBPs; his experiential understanding of meditation was formed entirely in the “apprenticeship-type expertise” that he accumulated in Zen Buddhism and other contemplative traditions as part of his “spiritual search”. Stefan’s intensive practice in Buddhist retreats and communities, in turn, aimed only to develop professional capacities and better self-regulation skills. By contrast, Matias saw Buddhism and meditation as important “anchor points” in his life and emphasized the altruistic values and the psychotherapeutic elements of Buddhist meditation. These findings show how broad the spectrum of individual motivations, framings, and depth of personal engagements in Buddhist practice among psychologist and contemporary mindfulness teachers may be when approached from a vernacular perspective. At the same time, they highlight that the Buddhist influences on the therapeutic use of mindfulness are not only historical, but Buddhist teachers and communities have an ongoing role as learning resources in the field of therapeutic mindfulness and related mental health work (see also Husgafvel Forthcoming; Wilson 2014, pp. 94–95).

In the context of Buddhist religiosity, meditation techniques are “deeply embedded in a larger world view” as they “put into practice the Buddhist understanding of the world” (Gregory 1986, pp. 5–6). In this sense, they are paradigmatic examples of religious “body pedagogics” that “produce culturally sanctioned *embodied* orientations to self and world, characterized by a *transcendent* configuration of *immanent* social realities” (Mellor and Shilling 2010, p. 28, italics in the original). In regard to possible “transcendent” elements of Buddhist meditation that might connect its practice to Buddhist soteriology and cosmology, our interviewees again showed a variety of individual configurations. Matias had a long-lasting engagement with Buddhist communities, but he filtered Buddhist teachings in a critical and selective way through psychological lenses and a “secular perspective” on the tradition. Nevertheless, his meditation practice had a certain “spiritual” dimension, which he associated with a sense of interconnectedness and self-transcendence through participation in a transgenerational tradition that teaches altruistic values. For Elisabeth, Buddhism was an ancient source of wisdom, even if she had but little direct

engagement with Buddhist communities and considered her knowledge of Buddhism to be filtered mainly through mindfulness teachings. While her personal meditation practice was driven by strong professional interest, she considered some aspects of it to be “spiritual” and described embodied experiences of “connection” with the universe. Stefan, in turn, had practiced intensively in Buddhist vipassanā retreats and communities, even if his interest in Buddhism was purely psychological and “without any metaphysical claims”. He condensed the “wisdom” he learned from Buddhism into pragmatic methods of self-regulation and conceptual models that support those methods. In contrast to the others, Jouko was the only one to describe himself as having “religious” elements in his worldview, considering his meditation practice to have a “ritual” dimension that connected it to Buddhist cosmology and soteriology. While he understood many of these Buddhist elements through Jungian depth psychology, Buddhist teachings and scriptures helped him to understand his experiences of self-transcendence and “connection to something greater”.

In our analysis, we are not interested in the “ideologically weighted language games” of categorizing some approaches to meditation as “religious” and others as “secular” from an etic perspective (see [Fitzgerald 2007](#), p. 11). Nevertheless, the emic descriptions of “spiritual” or “religious” approaches to personal meditation practice and Buddhism are important, as they may imply some forms of boundary work between “science and other knowledge systems”, in which psychologists and psychotherapists guard and regulate their professional use of meditation practice as non-religious and fit for secular contexts ([Vuolanto 2013](#), p. 359; [Helderman 2019](#); [Hiimäe and Utriainen 2021](#)). Due to the scientific evidence base and established position of therapeutic MBPs in mainstream psychology and medicine, none of the interviewees considered it problematic to use Buddhist-derived meditation practices and perspectives in mental health work. However, the processes of “filtering” and “translating” Buddhist teachings may be seen as specific forms of boundary work that guard the therapeutic applications of mindfulness from religious elements or associations. To provide some explicit examples, Elisabeth did not discuss ideas of connectedness in professional contexts as they could “sound too religious” and lacked the hallmarks of science (i.e., measurability and an evidence base). Jouko, in turn, picked the term “mindfulness” strategically to frame his meditation teachings in a secular setting as distinct from Zen Buddhist practice. Additionally, the common renaming of mindfulness practices as “breathing” or “relaxation” exercises may be seen as translations that enforce the boundary line between the religious and secular framings of meditation.

6. Conclusions

Our study shows that the professional skills of using mindfulness practices in secular health care and education can result from transreligious learning trajectories, in which psychologists and psychotherapists complement science-based academic education with learning in Buddhist communities and training with Buddhist teachers. Through these hybrid learning paths that transgress both the social boundaries of academic education and Buddhist practice and the symbolic boundaries of “religion” and “non-religion”, our interviewees acquired the theoretical and experience-based knowledge needed for the use of mindfulness practices as part of conventional mental health work. This role of Buddhist learning environments and resources in complementing formal academic studies in psychology points to a blind spot in current understandings of adult and professional learning, in which the practical value and role of religious traditions as possible sources of professional knowledge and skills are not sufficiently recognized (see also [Utriainen et al. Forthcoming](#)).

We find the notion of “transreligiosity” to be a promising analytical perspective and heuristic tool in the study of religion and contemporary mindfulness research. However, our way of using it gave rise to some reflections that could be elaborated in further discussion. When “transreligiosity” denotes the fluidity and transgressiveness of interreligious borders in transnational religion, lived religion, or contemporary spirituality, describing it a “novel, fluid, transformative, transcending and creative *form of religiosity*” may be unprob-

lematic (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 624, our italics). However, when applying the term to the analysis of fluidity between religious and secular traditions, such as the Buddhist and academic learning environments of mental health professionals, considering it a “form of religiosity” may imply an unintended binary categorization that research subjects who self-identify as non-religious may find problematic. In our analytical use, “transreligious” does not imply any stand on the “religious” or “secular” nature of the learning paths in question or related approaches to meditation practice. Instead of denoting a “form of religiosity”, we understand the notion of “transreligious learning” as pointing to a variety of modalities in the acquiring of new skills and knowledge, in which some form of engagement with religious traditions complements formal secular learning. Whether “transecular learning” would be a more fitting term for this use, and perhaps one that people with non-religious identities could better relate to, remains an open question for further exploration.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, V.H. and T.U.; methodology, V.H.; formal analysis, V.H.; data curation, V.H.; writing—original draft preparation, V.H. and T.U.; writing—review and editing, V.H. and T.U.; project administration, T.U.; funding acquisition, T.U. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the Academy of Finland under the project Learning from New Religion and Spirituality, grant number 357736.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study. The study has been undertaken to comply with TENK’s guidelines. The research involves anonymized records that do not cause significant risks, damage or harm to research participants, communities or other subjects of research. Hence, the ethical review is not required.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments: The authors wish to thank Siiri Virta for her assistance in preparing the bibliography and Albion M. Butters for language revision.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

Notes

- ¹ See <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/lenereproject> (accessed on 9 June 2023).
- ² On modern Buddhist vipassanā meditation, see, e.g., Braun (2013); Fronsdal (1998).
- ³ A Pali word for ‘not-self’ and one of the Buddhist ‘three characteristic marks of existence’ (P. *tilakkhaṇa*). See Gethin (1998, p. 187).
- ⁴ Confidence (P. *saddhā*), strength (P. *virīya*), mindfulness (P. *sati*), concentration (P. *samādhi*), and wisdom (P. *paññā*). See Gethin ([1992] 2001).
- ⁵ On koan practice in Japanese Zen, see, e.g., Heine and Wright (2008).

References

- Ammerman, Nancy T. 2014. *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Anālayo, Bhikkhu. 2014. *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna*. Birmingham: Windhorse Publications.
- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press.
- Basu, Helene, Roland Littlewood, and Arne S. Steinforth, eds. 2017. *Spirit & Mind: Mental Health at the Intersection of Religion & Psychiatry*. Münster: LIT Verlag.
- Bowman, Marion, ed. 2000. *Healing and Religion*. Middesex: Hirsalik Press.
- Braun, Erik. 2013. *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Braun, Erik. 2017. Mindful but Not Religious: Meditation and Enchantment in the Work of Jon Kabat-Zinn. In *Meditation, Buddhism, and Science*. Edited by David L. McMahan and Erik Braun. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 173–97.

- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3: 77–101. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Carrette, Jeremy, and Richard King. 2005. *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*. New York: Routledge.
- Cho, Francisca. 2012. Buddhism and Science: Translating and Re-translating Culture. In *Buddhism in the Modern World*. Edited by David L. McMahan. Oxon: Routledge, pp. 273–89.
- Cook, Joanna. 2017. “Mind the Gap”: Appearance and Reality in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy. In *Meditation, Buddhism, and Science*. Edited by David L. McMahan and Erik Braun. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 114–32.
- Crane, Rebecca, Judson Brewer, Christina Feldman, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Saki Santorelli, Mark G. Williams, and Willem Kuyken. 2017. What Defines Mindfulness-Based Programs? The Warp and the Weft. *Psychological Medicine* 47: 990–99. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
- Csordas, Thomas J. 1990. Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology. *Ethos* 18: 5–47. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Dansac, Yael. 2022. Achieving a Sensing Body: Visualization and Bodily Attention in Alternative Spiritual Practices. *Religions* 13: 714. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Epstein, Mark. 1995. *Thoughts Without a Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective*. New York: Basic Books.
- Fedele, Anna, and Kim E. Knibbe, eds. 2020. *Secular Societies, Spiritual Selves? The Gendered Triangle of Religion, Secularity and Spirituality*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy, ed. 2007. *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations*. London: Equinox.
- Frisk, Liselotte. 2012. The Practice of Mindfulness: From Buddhism to Secular Mainstream in a Post-Secular Society. *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 24: 48–61. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Fronsdal, Gil. 1998. Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. In *The Faces of Buddhism in America*. Edited by Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 163–82.
- Gethin, Rupert. 1998. *The Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gethin, Rupert. 2001. *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications. First published 1992.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gieryn, Thomas F. 1995. Boundaries of Science. In *Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*. Edited by Sheila Jasanoff, Gerald E. Markle, James C. Petersen and Trevor Pinch. Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 393–443.
- Gill, Meghan, Jennifer Waltz, Patrick Suhrbier, and Leela Robert. 2015. Non-duality and the Integration of Mindfulness into Psychotherapy: Qualitative Research with Meditating Therapists. *Mindfulness* 6: 708–22. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Gregory, Peter N. 1986. Introduction. In *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism*. Edited by Peter N. Gregory. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 1–14.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 1996. *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Leiden: Brill.
- Heelas, Paul, and Linda Woodhead. 2005. *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Heine, Steven, and Dale S. Wright, eds. 2008. *Zen Ritual: Studies of Zen Buddhist Theory in Practice*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Helderman, Ira. 2016. Drawing the Boundaries Between “Religion” and “Secular” in Psychotherapists’ Approaches to Buddhist Traditions in the United States. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84: 937–72. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Helderman, Ira. 2019. *Prescribing the Dharma: Psychotherapists, Buddhist Traditions, and Defining Religion*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Hiiemäe, Reet, and Terhi Utriainen. 2021. From “Unbelievable Stupidity” to “Secret Clues for Staying Healthy”: CAM Landscape and Boundary-Work in Estonian and Finnish Mainstream Media in April 2020. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 82: 183–214. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Holland, Daniel. 2004. Integrating Mindfulness Meditation and Somatic Awareness into a Public Educational Setting. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 44: 468–84. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Husgafvel, Ville. 2016. On the Buddhist Roots of Contemporary Non-religious Mindfulness Practice: Moving Beyond Sectarian and Essentialist Approaches. *Temenos—Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 52: 87–126. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Husgafvel, Ville. 2018. The “Universal Dharma Foundation” of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction: Non-duality and Mahāyāna Buddhist Influences in the Work of Jon Kabat-Zinn. *Contemporary Buddhism* 19: 275–326. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Husgafvel, Ville. 2020. Meditation in Contemporary Contexts: Current Discussions. In *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies*. Edited by Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O’Brien-Kop. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 22–36.
- Husgafvel, Ville. 2023. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction as a Post-Buddhist Tradition of Meditation Practice. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland.
- Husgafvel, Ville. Forthcoming. Buddhist Teachings and Authorities in MBSR Teacher Training: A Case Study in Finland. *Contemporary Buddhism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*.
- Kalvig, Anne. 2012. Alternativ folkemedisin? Om røter og nye skot på det sørvestlandske, holistiske helsefeltet. *Tidskrift for kulturforskning* 11: 45–62.
- Kelly, Jacinta. 2004. Spirituality as a Coping Mechanism. *Dimensions of Critical Care Nursing* 23: 162–68. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
- King, Richard. 1999. *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and ‘The Mystic East’*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Knibbe, Kim, and Helena Kupari. 2020. Theorizing Lived Religion: Introduction. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 35: 157–76. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Koenig, Harold G. 2009. Research on Religion, Spirituality, and Mental Health: A Review. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 54: 283–91. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

- Kraus, Anja, and Christoph Wulf, eds. 2022. *The Palgrave Handbook of Embodiment and Learning*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Krause, Neal, and Kenneth I. Pargament. 2018. Reading the Bible, Stressful Life-Events and Hope: Assessing and Overlooked Coping Resource. *Journal of Religion and Health* 57: 1428–39. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kuan, Tse-fu. 2008. *Mindfulness in Early Buddhism: New Approaches through Psychology and Textual Analysis of Pali, Chinese and Sanskrit Sources*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lamont, Michèle, and Virág Molnár. 2002. The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology* 28: 167–95. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lüddeckens, Dorothea, and Monika Schrimpf, eds. 2018. *Medicine—Religion—Spirituality: Global Perspectives on Traditional, Complementary, and Alternative Healing*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- McCutcheon, Russell T. 1997. *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. New York and London: Oxford University Press.
- McGuire, Meredith B. 1988. *Ritual Healing in Suburban America*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press.
- McGuire, Meredith B. 1990. Religion and the Body: Rematerializing the Human Body in the Social Sciences of Religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29: 283–96. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- McGuire, Meredith B. 2008. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McMahan, David L. 2008. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McMahan, David L., and Erik Braun, eds. 2017. *Meditation, Buddhism, and Science*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mellor, Philip A., and Chris Shilling. 2010. Body Pedagogics and the Religious Habitus: A New Direction for the Sociological Study of Religion. *Religion* 40: 27–38. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Metcalf, Franz A. 2002. The Encounter of Buddhism and Psychology. In *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia*. Edited by Charles Prebish and Martin Baumann. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 348–64.
- Panagiotopoulos, Anastasios, and Eugenia Roussou. 2022. We Have Always Been Transreligious: An Introduction to Transreligiosity. *Social Compass* 69: 614–30. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Passarelli, Angela M., and David A. Kolb. 2011. The Learning Way: Learning from Experience as the Path to Lifelong Learning and Development. In *The Oxford Handbook of Lifelong Learning*. Edited by Manuel London. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 70–90.
- Pierini, Emily. 2016. Becoming a Spirit Medium: Initiatory Learning and the Self in the Vale do Amanhecer. *Ethnos* 81: 290–314. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Plank, Katarina. 2010. Mindful Medicine: The Growing Trend of Mindfulness-Based Therapies in the Swedish Health Care System. *Finnish Journal of Ethnicity & Migration* 5: 47–55.
- Pollack, Detlef. 2008. Religious Change in Europe: Theoretical Considerations and Empirical Findings. *Social Compass* 55: 168–86. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Rahmani, Masoumeh. 2020. Secular Discourse as a Legitimizing Strategy for Mindfulness Meditation. In *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies*. Edited by Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O'Brien-Kop. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, pp. 255–69.
- Rocha, Cristina. 2017. *John of God: The Globalization of Brazilian Faith Healing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rogers, Alan. 2014. *The Base of the Iceberg: Informal Learning and Its Impact on Formal and Non-formal Learning*. Opladen, Berlin and Toronto: Barbara Budrich Publishers.
- Rosch, Eleanor. 2015. The Emperor's Clothes: A Look Behind the Western Mindfulness Mystique. In *Handbook of Mindfulness and Self-Regulation*. Edited by Brian D. Ostafin, Michael D. Robinson and Brian P. Meier. New York: Springer, pp. 271–92.
- Sievers, Peppi. 2016. Uskonnollisten ja hengellisten kysymysten käsittely suomalaisissa psykoterapioissa [Encountering Religious and Spiritual Issues in Finnish Psychotherapies]. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, Finland.
- Sointu, Eeva, and Linda Woodhead. 2008. Spirituality, Gender, and Expressive Selfhood. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47: 259–76. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Stanley, Steven, and Ilmari Kortelainen. 2020. Assembling Mindful Bodies: Mindfulness as a Universal 'Laboratory of Practice'. In *Assembling Therapeutics: Cultures, Politics and Materiality*. Edited by Suvi Salmenniemi, Johanna Nurmi, Inna Perheentupa and Harley Bergroth. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 20–42.
- Sutcliffe, Steven J., and Ingvild S. Gilhus, eds. 2014. *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*. Durham: Acumen.
- Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Tremlett, Paul-François. 2023. Transreligiosity and the Messiness of Religious and Social Worlds: Towards a Deleuzian Methodological Imagination for Religious Studies. *Religions* 14: 527. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Treves, Isaac N., Lawrence Y. Tello, Richard J. Davidson, and Simon B. Goldberg. 2019. The Relationship Between Mindfulness and Objective Measures of Body Awareness: A Meta-Analysis. *Scientific Reports* 9: 17386. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Utriainen, Terhi. 2000. Situated Bodies and Others Making Religion: Phenomenology of The Body and the Study of Religion. *Temenos—Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 35–36: 249–70. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Utriainen, Terhi. 2017. Healing Enchantment: How does Angel Healing Work? In *Spirit and Mind: Mental Health at the Intersection of Religion & Psychiatry*. Edited by Helena Basu, Roland Littlewood and Arne S. Steinforth. Münster: LIT Verlag, pp. 253–73.
- Utriainen, Terhi. 2019. Learning Healing Relationality: Dynamics of Religion and Emotion. In *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Emotion*. Edited by Sonya E. Pritzker, Janina Fenigsen and James M. Wilce. New York: Routledge, pp. 390–409.

- Utriainen, Terhi. 2020. Lived Religion Meets Secular Life: The Dynamics of Framing and the Subjunctive Power of Ritual. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 35: 195–212. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Utriainen, Terhi, Helena Kupari, Linda Annunen, and Maija Butters. Forthcoming. Adult Religious Learning: Vernacular and Ethnographic Approaches. In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Education*. Edited by Liam Francis Gearon and Arniika Kuusisto. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Van Schaik, Sam. 2004. *Approaching the Great Perfection: Simultaneous and Gradual Approaches to Dzogchen Practice in Jigme Lingpa's Longchen Nyintig*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Vetter, Tilmann. 1988. *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism*. Leiden: Brill.
- Vuolanto, Pia. 2013. Boundary-Work and the Vulnerability of Academic Status: The Case of Finnish Nursing Science. Ph.D. dissertation, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland.
- Wenger, Etienne. 2009. A Social Theory of Learning. In *Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning Theorists . . . In Their Own Words*. Edited by Knud Illeris. London: Routledge, pp. 209–18.
- Wheater, Kitty. 2017. Once More to the Body: An Ethnography of Mindfulness Practitioners in the United Kingdom. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK.
- Williams, Anna-Leila. 2006. Perspectives on Spirituality at the End of Life: A Meta-summary. *Palliative Support Care* 4: 407–17. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Wilson, Jeff. 2014. *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*. New York and London: Oxford University Press.
- Winchester, Daniel, and Michal Pagis. 2021. Sensing the Sacred: Religious Experience, Somatic Inversions, and the Religious Education of Attention. *Sociology of Religion* 83: 12–35. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Yukich, Grace. 2010. Boundary Work in Inclusive Religious Groups: Constructing Identity at the New York Catholic Worker. *Sociology of Religion* 71: 172–96. [[CrossRef](#)]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.