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Calmer, Kinder, Wiser: A Novel Threefold Categorization for Mindfulness-Based Interventions

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Abstract

Mindfulness is said to be a connecting thread between an ancient philosophy on the one hand and a contemporary psychological practice on the other. However, some contemporary mindfulness practices have arguably become so disconnected from their roots in Buddhist ethics and wisdom principles that the fundamental essence of the practice is no longer recognisable. It appears that when mindfulness is disconnected from its Buddhist ethical and wisdom-based foundations, being applied as a purely concentrative practice, it can yield adverse effects (such as decreased prosocial behaviour, increased self-centredness, and reduced psychological well-being) for individuals with low-trait empathy or narcissistic traits. Consequently, we propose a novel threefold categorization that aims to build bridges between contemporary Western and traditional Buddhist approaches to mindfulness. This categorization, rooted in the traditional "three trainings" or "*triśikṣā*" Buddhist principle, distinguishes between the mindfulness practices incorporated within mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), according to whether they primarily employ concentration-, ethics-, or wisdom-based contemplative techniques. We explicate how this more nuanced categorization provides a greater understanding of how varied mindfulness practices could influence outcomes associated with an individual's prosocial behaviour, social and emotional well-being, and mental health. Additionally, we highlight the potential of greater research into MBIs that are structured around the Mindfulness of Breathing or the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* progression of concentration-based to ethics-based and finally to wisdom-based practices, particularly in terms of their utility to facilitate self-transcendent experiences.

Keywords Mindfulness-based interventions · Buddhism · Meditation · Prosocial behaviour · Social and emotional well-being · Mental health · Self-transcendent experiences

Mindfulness can be understood as a connecting thread between an ancient philosophy on the one hand, and modern-day science and everyday life practice on the other (Krägeloh et al., 2019). But perhaps this thread connecting the wisdom of the past to the worries of the present is on the precipice of breaking. More specifically, some contemporary mindfulness practices have arguably become so disconnected from their Buddhist roots that the fundamental essence of the practice is no longer recognisable. Consequently, perhaps the time has come to strengthen the connection between the traditional philosophical perspective and contemporary psychological practice.

In the contemporary academic literature, divergences and misconceptions have frequently emerged due to the variety of applications of the term "mindfulness," ranging from a practice or skill, to a disposition or habit, to a state or experience (Krägeloh et al., 2019). Consequently, there is a lack of agreement on what mindfulness practice is, or more accurately what mindfulness practices are (Sedlmeier, 2023). Nevertheless, one commonly accepted definition of mindfulness, prevalent in literature pertaining to mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), characterizes it as a form of non-judgemental awareness of experiences in the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Conversely, certain scholars have expressed reservations concerning this interpretation, contending that the concept of non-judgmental awareness does not adequately capture the discerning aspect of mindfulness that helps the meditation practitioner avoid becoming morally indifferent (Shonin et al., 2014). Others have proposed an alternative working definition of mindfulness,

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viewed through the lens of Buddhist philosophy, as a process of gaining insight into an individual's true nature and the adoption of a de-centred perspective (Bishop et al., 2004).

A traditional Buddhist perspective or definition of mindfulness is also difficult to characterize due to the varying constructions of mindfulness between different Buddhist vehicles (i.e., *Theravada*, *Mahayana*, *Vajrayana*) and the more nuanced differences between Buddhist traditions of the same vehicle (Monteiro et al., 2015). However, despite various interpretations and descriptions of mindfulness, there is one that arguably remains consistent across all Buddhist traditions: the inclusion of Right Mindfulness in the Noble Eightfold Path (Van Gordon et al., 2015). Notably, as part of the Noble Eightfold Path, Right Mindfulness was included in addition to and separate from Right Concentration, implying the traditional Buddhist perspective on mindfulness is something distinct from concentrative and stabilizing meditative techniques, and also should importantly be understood as part of a path that leads to the cessation of suffering (Van Gordon et al., 2015).

Although there are alternative definitions of mindfulness, Bunjak et al. (2022) bibliometric review found that the most widely used definition in empirical studies simply classifies it as "the state of being aware and attentive to what is happening in the present" (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 882). It is this emphasis on the role of mindfulness to develop awareness and attention that certain scholars have pushed back against, calling for greater consideration of mindfulness as an essential component of meditative practices that leads to the cultivation of compassion, non-attachment, and insight into non-self and emptiness, in order to target selfishness as a key underlying cause of suffering (Van Gordon & Shonin, 2020a). Others have concluded that the chief function of mindfulness practice in early Buddhist thought was to lead to awakening (Anālayo, 2022), and thus if the modern conceptualization of mindfulness practice is overly concerned with awareness and attention, the full potential of its benefits are likely to be overlooked.

As indicated above, concerns surrounding contemporary mindfulness practice have long been a topic of debate in the field of psychology and context of MBIs (Shonin et al., 2012). There have been warnings raised around mindfulness being incorporated into educational settings as a type of *stealth Buddhism,* introducing an arguably religious practice into a secularized setting (Brown et al., 2018). Conversely, over a decade ago, the term "McMindfulness" (Neale, 2011) emerged in response to the commodification, decontextualization and reduction of mindfulness from its foundation in social ethics and Buddhist philosophy (Safran, 2014). The former position argues that the contemplative practice of mindful awareness and attention, is in essence, still a Buddhist practice and thus should not have a place in secularized settings, whereas the later position proposes that when mindfulness practice is lacking an organic connection to its Buddhist spiritual, philosophical, and psychological roots the benefits of the practice cannot be fully realized (Hyland, 2016).

To some extent, the present authors agree with both perspectives; that indeed some mindfulness practices have become disconnected from their roots in Buddhist ethics and wisdom principles, yet at the same time the practice of mindful awareness and attention is still rooted in Buddhist concentrative meditation techniques. Although, it must be noted, they do not draw the same conclusions that this should be a reason to exclude such practices from educational and/ or secularized settings, as one easy way to overcome such issues is to give participants an informed choice to engage in a given intervention by being transparent about the nature of its meditative practices and techniques.

The reductionist or minimalist approach toward mindfulness practice is particularly evident in the portrayal of mindfulness as a mechanism to combat stress and anxiety, with emphasis on individual self-improvement and self-regulation (Gethin, 2013). From this perspective, it has been asserted that some modern forms of mindfulness have been reshaped into therapeutic and self-help techniques, often geared toward enhancing human efficiency and productivity, rather than a means of tapping into the full liberative and transformative potential of mindfulness (Gopnik, 2016; Purser & Loy, 2013).

Central to these concerns lies the debate around what constitutes authentic mindfulness practice (Sapthiang et al., 2023). On the one hand, it is suggested that authenticity can be brought into mindfulness practices when teachers, practitioners, and academic researchers remain aware of its ethical foundations and roots in Buddhist traditions (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Conversely, it is asserted that authentic mindfulness practice arises when an individual engages in the practice to transcend the ego and cultivate spiritual growth (Van Gordon et al., 2016). This is further supported by Thich Nhat Hanh (1998), a Vietnamese Buddhist monk referred to as the "father of mindfulness" (BBC News, 2022), who suggests that despite the calming effect which can result from practicing mindfulness, its core essence lies in the cultivation of joy and the alleviation of human suffering. Indeed, according to Dalai Lama and Chodron (2019), mindfulness practice differs from *bare attention*—being simply aware of various objects, sensations, and ideas that arise in the mind—but it is related to wisdom. Wisdom cannot arise in a mind that lacks mindfulness, but when mindfulness is present it enables insight into the ultimate cause of suffering—an erroneous attachment to an independent-permanent self—thus empowering the practitioner to acknowledge and release this attachment as a vital part of their path toward spiritual awakening (Dalai Lama & Chodron, 2019). Put simply, one perspective emphasizes authenticity by grounding mindfulness

practices within a Buddhist ethical framework, whilst the other places emphasis on the intention and results of the practice, ensuring their authentic alignment with a complete path of spiritual growth.

Williams and Kabat-Zinn (2011) assert that the debate around the authenticity of mindfulness is less concerned with the potential negative effects of implementing contemporary mindfulness practices but rather is predominantly focussed on the disagreement scholars within the Buddhist tradition may feel by the way contemporary mindfulness practice has arguably been exploited, distorted, and abstracted from its Buddhist foundations. However, considering emerging findings, it appears that when mindfulness is disconnected from its roots in Buddhist ethics and wisdom principles, and applied as a concentrative practice, primarily focusing on attention and awareness, it can yield adverse effects (such as decreased prosocial behaviour, increased self-centredness, and reduced psychological well-being) for individuals with low-trait empathy or narcissistic traits (Feruglio et al., 2022; Winning & Boag, 2015). This is somewhat concerning and demonstrates that rather than the mere misappropriation or misrepresentation of Buddhist practice, the mindfulness authenticity issue extends into the realms of prosocial behaviour and psychological well-being. Yet, emerging studies have indicated that MBIs that incorporate Buddhist ethical awareness (such as no-harm and compassion) and Buddhist wisdom practices (such as contemplation on interdependence) can mitigate against these adverse effects and elicit positive outcomes, such as prosocial behaviour, for similar participant groups (Chen & Jordan, 2020).

From one perspective, the meaning of the term "mindfulness" has expanded in the English language to sometimes refer to *Dharma*—the entirety of Buddhist teaching (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). This proposition is somewhat supported by the considerable array of Buddhist-based meditative practices included within varying MBIs (Dorjee, 2010). For example, mindfulness practices included within MBIs range from practices concerning clear comprehension (*sampajanna*), to heedfulness—remembering what has been learned in the past about which thoughts, choices, and actions lead to happiness and which lead to suffering (*appamada*), and to the qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic-joy, and equanimity (the *brahmaviharas*), which collectively are capable of clear and penetrating insight into the nature of reality (Cullen, 2011). Thus, it has become imperative to distinguish between the diverse applications of mindfulness practice and to further differentiate the interventions employing such practices (Klebanova, 2022). Consequently, the present paper is less concerned with contemporary or traditional definitions of mindfulness but rather more interested in the application of mindfulness practices, particularly with reference to the meditative techniques incorporated within MBIs.

More specifically, the present paper presents an examination of the current conceptualization of mindfulness practices being implemented within MBIs and proposes a novel threefold categorization that aims to build bridges between contemporary Western and traditional Buddhist perspectives of mindfulness. This proposed threefold categorization is rooted in the foundational Buddhist teachings on the Mindfulness of Breathing or *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, and groups-specific mindfulness practices within a given MBI according to whether they primarily employ concentration, ethics, or wisdom contemplative techniques (known in Buddhism as the "three trainings" or "*triśikṣā*" principle). We explicate how an advantage to this more nuanced categorization lies in its potential to provide greater understanding of how varied mindfulness practices could influence outcomes associated with an individual's prosocial behaviour, social and emotional well-being, and mental health. We also discuss how this categorization is well-positioned to contributed to the development and future utilization of MBIs.

Categorization of Mindfulness-Based Interventions

Mindfulness practice, or more specifically the meditation practices that are implemented within MBIs, is varied and has multiple different characterizations (Van Dam et al., 2018). For example, mindfulness practice has been labelled as a type of *vipassana* or insight meditation (Bowen et al., 2006; Chiesa, 2010; Kabat-Zinn, 1982), whilst at other times has been categorized as a type of *samatha* or tranquillity meditation (Rinpoche, 2017; Trungpa, 2004), whilst also being described as a type *samadhi* or concentrative meditation in regards to its sustained and focussed attention (Bishop et al., 2004; Lutz et al., 2008). Therefore, it is apparent that different types of meditative techniques have been characterized under the term "mindfulness practice" and have been implemented within varying MBIs.

The limitations of using the broad categorization of mindfulness practice to refer to varied and distinct meditation techniques within MBIs have been highlighted by evidence suggesting different meditative practices yield differential effects (Sedlmeier, 2023; Singer & Engert, 2019). For instance, the ReSource Project explored different components of meditation and found that the "Presence" module affected attention and interoceptive awareness, the "Affect" module impacted care and emotional regulation, and the "Perspective" module influenced Theory of Mind and attachment to self (Trautwein et al., 2020). Thus, different meditation practices impact different individuals in different ways and categorizing them all under the term "mindfulness practice" hinders exploration of their underlying or influencing factors.

There is a clear need for a greater distinction between different MBIs and the mindfulness practices they entail to better comprehend their benefits and applications for varying participant groups. This is reflected in empirical research and scholarly articles, where various terms have been used in an attempt to provide clarity in this respect, such as Standard Mindfulness Training versus Ethics-Oriented Mindfulness Training (Bayot et al., 2020), Present-Centred Mindfulness versus Field-Centred Mindfulness (Petranker, 2016), Contemporary Mindfulness versus Traditional Mindfulness (Monteiro et al., 2015), and Secular Mindfulness versus Buddhist Mindfulness (Thubten, 2021). Current academic literature broadly categorizes these distinctions as first-generation (FG) and second-generation (SG) MBIs, with the former emphasizing present-centred awareness without the explicit inclusion of ethics, and the latter including ethics as an integral part of the program (Shonin et al., 2014; Van Gordon & Shonin, 2020a).

The classification of MBIs into first-generation and second-generation provides a useful starting point for distinguishing between different types of mindfulness interventions and the practices they include. However, upon closer examination, there exist structural and conceptual differences even between MBIs that fall within either of these categories. For example, the inclusion of ethics within a SG-MBI can encompass different aspects, such as cultivating moral values, promoting compassionate intention or action, developing ethical decision-making skills, fostering a sense of social responsibility, and/or explicitly incorporating Buddhist teachings on ethics (Berry et al., 2020). These ethical components aim to enhance the transformative potential of mindfulness practice by extending its benefits beyond individual well-being to include interpersonal relationships, prosocial action, and moral development. Nevertheless, it is important to note that not all SG-MBIs focus primarily on the inclusion of ethics. Some also make use of Buddhist wisdom principles such as meditations on interconnectedness and nonduality, whilst others may additionally integrate a positive psychological approach of promoting well-being, positive emotions, and resilience (Shonin et al., 2014; Van Gordon et al., 2016; Zheng et al., 2022).

Thus, although the categorization of MBIs into FG-MBIs and SG-MBIs has utility as a high-level system of categorization, it is not suitable for making meaningful comparisons between interventions that include ethics, wisdom, or both ethics and wisdom practices. The ability to accurately make such comparisons is important given that MBIs including both ethical training and wisdom principles have been shown to positively influence prosocial behaviour, whilst those with only ethical components failed to do so, when compared to MBIs including only awareness and attentional practices (Berry et al., 2020; Chen & Jordan, 2020). Therefore, to establish more nuanced and meaningful comparisons

between different types of MBIs, further categorization and distinction between interventions and their meditative practices would be helpful.

One approach to doing this is to draw inspiration from the categories created in the traditional Buddhist principle of the "three trainings" (*triśikṣā*): (1) concentration (*samadhi*), (2) ethics (*sila*), and (3) wisdom (*prajna*). Put simply, the three trainings aim to guide individuals toward living a calmer, kinder, and wiser life. According to the Dalai Lama (2021), the practices of *samadhi*, *sila*, and *prajna* can be useful for everyone, regardless of background or religion, by helping them to reduce suffering, nurture peaceful and prosocial actions, and contribute to a happier world. *Samadhi* involves maintaining focused and undistracted mental states; *sila* relates to ethical awareness and virtue, encompassing the regulation of one's actions and speech; and *prajna* involves perceiving the true nature of the world, including correctly recognizing impermanence, interdependence, and emptiness (Anālayo, 2017). A similar categorization of the three trainings principle can be found in modern groupings of meditative practices, such as Dahl et al. (2015) distinction between the Attentional Family (focussing primarily on attention and awareness, loosely mirroring *samadhi* training), the Constructive Family (including loving-kindness and compassion training, loosely mirroring *sila* training), and the Deconstructive Family (including insight and analytical meditations, loosely mirroring *prajna* training).

Thus, the present authors propose that in addition to the FG-MBI and SG-MBI prefix categorization, it would also be useful to mirror the traditional Buddhist three trainings principle, and modern groupings of meditative practices, by differentiating a given MBI with a suffix according to whether its mindfulness practices are primarily: (1) concentration-based, (2) ethics-based, or (3) wisdom-based (Table 1). A given intervention could be described as, for example, an MBI including concentration-based practices, an MBI including concentration- and ethics-based practices, an MBI including concentration-, ethics-, and wisdom-based practices, or any combination of these three categorizations. We propose this more nuanced and detailed distinction between the practices included within interventions will aid in the comparison between varied MBIs, subsequently providing insight into the underlying mechanisms and influence of mindfulness practices.

Interestingly, this novel threefold conceptualization aligns with the evolution and trajectory of empirical MBI studies conducted thus far. For example, in the 1980s, research primarily focused on present-centred awareness practices (concentration-based), then in the early twenty-first century there was a shift toward exploring socio-emotion practices such as loving-kindness and compassion meditation (ethics-based), and in recent years attention has turned to contemplative practices that delve into the nature of reality,

Table 1 Threefold categorization of mindfulness practices within mindfulness-based interventions

Concentration-based	Ethics-based	Wisdom-based
Primary focus: Attention and interoceptive awareness practices.	Primary focus: Practices that nurture compassion and regulate emotions.	Primary focus: Changing perspective of self, embracing non-attachment and interconnectedness.
Attentional processes.	Socio-affective processes.	Meta-cognitive processes.
Meditation type: Stabilizing.	Meditation type: Purifying.	Meditation type: Investigating and intuiting.
Grouping: Attentional family.	Grouping: Constructive family.	Grouping: Deconstructive family.
Example of MBI including concentration-based practices: • Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).	Example of MBI including concentration- and ethics-based practices: • Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT) (Brito-Pons et al., 2018).	Example of MBI including concentration-, ethics, and wisdom-based practices: • Ethical Mindfulness Intervention (EthicalM) (Chen & Jordan, 2020).

selflessness, and interdependence, such as meditations on non-attachment, non-duality, and emptiness (wisdom-based) (Van Gordon et al., 2019).

In terms of further delineating the meditation practices and subsequent MBIs that pertain to each of the three categories, concentration-based mindfulness practices encompass meditative techniques that involve stabilizing the mind to enable the practitioner to concentrate with a calm and focussed awareness. An MBI that falls into the category of including concentration-based practices is, for example, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). The intervention is an 8-week group-based secularized practice which includes a variety of meditation techniques, ranging from breath awareness and body scans to mindful movement such as mindful walking, mindful yoga, and in some cases Tai Chi (Concentration-Based practices; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Participants of the MBSR intervention typically meet for 3 hr a week for experiential sessions, have a 1-day (7-hr) intensive retreat, and are expected to engage in 30 min of guided home meditation practice a day. The techniques are primarily focused on the practitioner's ability to be attentive and aware of their breath, body, and feelings, ultimately leading to relaxation and stress reduction, with the first 2 weeks specifically focussed on simple awareness and attention (Table 1).

In contrast, ethics-based mindfulness practices include meditation techniques intended to purify the mind from the influence of sensual desires, aversion, tiredness, restlessness, or doubt, such that the practitioner can think clearly and with compassion. An MBI that falls into the category of including concentration- and ethics-based practices is, for example, Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT; Brito-Pons et al., 2018). The CCT intervention is a 9-week group-based, secularized practice which incorporates the Buddhist ethical practices of loving-kindness and compassion into the standardized MBSR format (Brito-Pons et al., 2018). Participants of the CCT intervention meet for 2 hr a week for experiential sessions and are expected to engage in 30 min of guided home meditation practice a day. During the first 2 weeks of the intervention,

practitioners primarily focus on settling and focussing the mind (concentration-based practices); however, from the third week onwards participants focus on sending out loving-kindness and compassion to themselves, to known and to unknown others (Ethics-Based practices; Brito-Pons et al., 2018). Developing the quality of loving-kindness in one's mind can counteract and replace the mental state of aversion with one of love. Similarly, building the foundation of compassion in the mind serves to address the state of tiredness by providing the practitioner with inspiration to reduce others suffering (Wallace, 2010; see Table 1).

Lastly, wisdom-based mindfulness practices comprise meditations centred around investigating and intuiting the nature of existence, in an effort to gain insight into non-duality, so that the practitioner can develop non-attachment to the notion of an independent-permanent self. An example of an MBI that falls into the category of including concentration-, ethics-, and wisdom-based practices is the Ethical Mindfulness Intervention (EthicalM; Chen & Jordan, 2020). The EthicalM intervention is a brief, non-secular 6-day MBI, where participants engage in 10 min of daily individual guided meditation practice. Session 1 of the intervention solely focuses on developing attention in the present moment (concentration-based practice), whereas Session 4 introduces loving-kindness meditation and Session 5 introduces the discernment of wholesome intentions (ethical-based practices), finally Sessions 2, 3, and 6 all introduce practices focussed on insight into the interdependence and interconnectedness of all beings (wisdom-based practices; see Table 1). Other such wisdom-based mindfulness practices include, for example, searching for an inherently existing self in the body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness by contemplating the impermanence and inter-being of all phenomena.

Clearly, the threefold categorization of mindfulness practices within MBIs is not a novel concept as the three trainings categorization is a fundamental longstanding principle of Buddhist practice. However, novelty emerges from the application of the three trainings framework to categorize and differentiate modern MBIs by the mindfulness practices

they employ, which to the best of the authors' knowledge has not been explicitly undertaken before. This combination of a Buddhist philosophical perspective with a Western psychological practice can be perceived as a direct response to the imperative of "building of bridges with an open mind" between traditional and contemporary approaches to mindfulness (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 12).

When viewed from a Buddhist perspective, the three trainings are profoundly interdependent, serving as both cause and condition. Each training might be seen as a supporting side of a triangle which encompasses the entirety of the Buddhist path (Van Gordon et al., 2014) (Fig. 1). When applied to the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path, concentration (*samadhi*) comprises Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration, and Right Effort; ethics (*sila*) includes Right Speech, Right Actions, and Right Livelihood; and wisdom (*prajna*) encompasses Right Thought and Right Understanding (Nhat Hanh, 1998). By combining all three trainings, the scope of the triangle expands, leading to the enhancement

of prosocial behaviour (actions that benefit one or more recipients other than the originator; Pfattheicher et al., 2022), social and emotional well-being (the way one thinks and feels about oneself and others; Mander et al., 2001), and mental health (the ability to think clearly, cope with stress, and make good decisions; World Health Organization: WHO, 2022).

This theorized expansion of the three trainings triangle and the subsequent enhancement of positive outcomes is reflected in academic research investigating the positive relationship between mindfulness practices and prosocial behaviour (Berry et al., 2020; Donald et al., 2019; Feruglio et al., 2022), mindfulness practices and social and emotional well-being (Lomas et al., 2017; Matvienko-Sikar et al., 2016), and mindfulness practices and mental health (Hall et al., 2016; Janssen et al., 2018). More generally, there is a growing understanding of the wider benefits of mindfulness, signifying a shift from the individual-oriented approach to a more holistic perspective that acknowledges
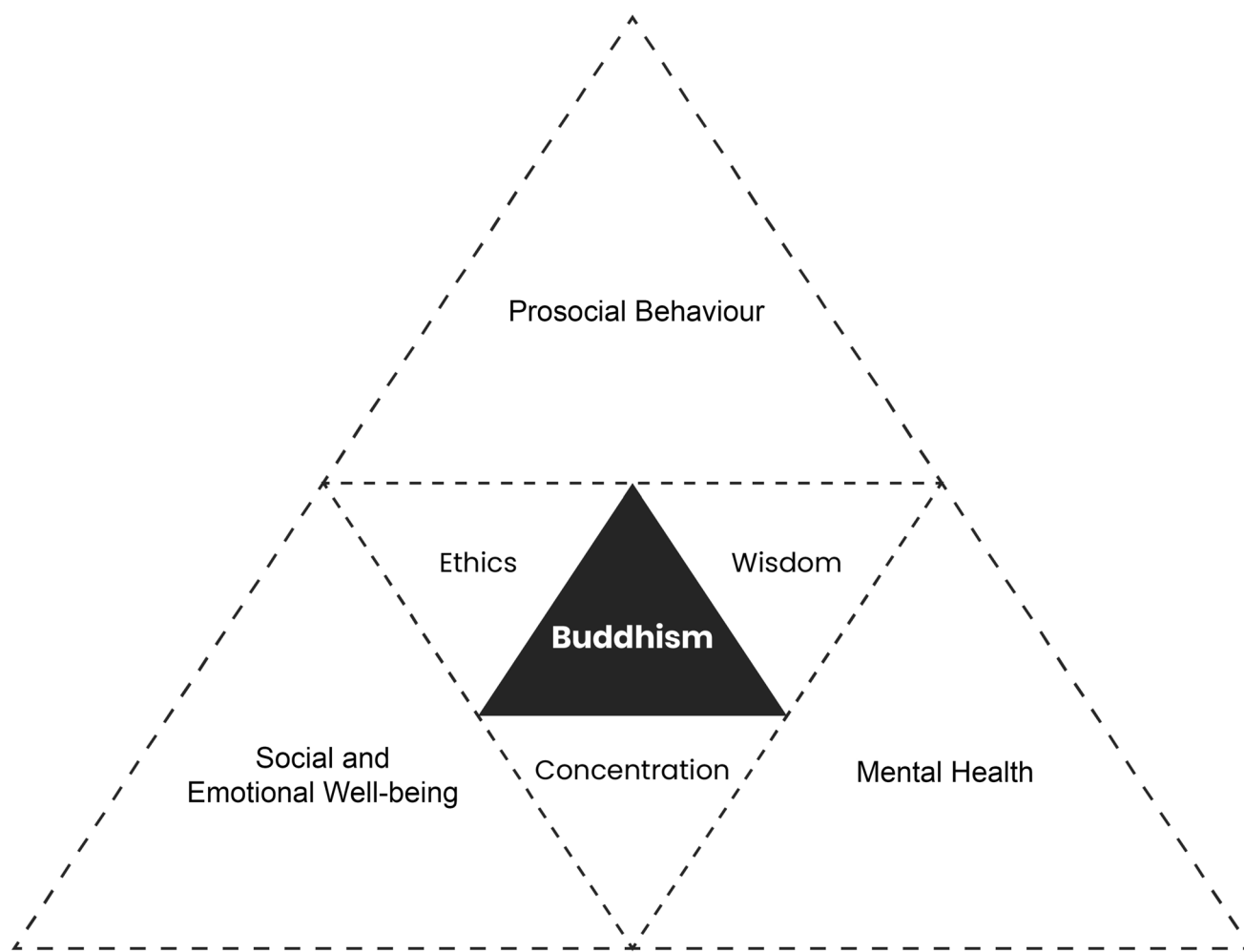
Fig. 1 The "three trainings" and their wider impact

the interconnectedness of personal and social well-being (Feruglio et al., 2022), as well as the interplay of concentration, ethics, and wisdom contemplative techniques (Shonin et al., 2012).

Mindfulness-Based Intervention as a Banyan Tree

Although a given MBI might be regarded as primarily including concentration-, ethics-, or wisdom-based practices, it is also likely that a combination of these practices will be integrated within the intervention. Arguably, every MBI will include concentration-based practices, perhaps because the initial interventions to be categorized as MBIs, such as MBSR and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT; Cullen, 2011), primarily included these practices, thus potentially establishing them as a fundamental component of any MBI. Furthermore, establishing awareness and attention of the breath and/or present moment (a concentration-based practice) is a foundational technique for the majority of Buddhist, and non-Buddhist, meditations (Anālayo, 2019; Buddhadasa, 1997). Due to this, concentration-based practices are usually going to be at the foundation of the meditation practices taking place within any MBI, as can been seen in the previously discussed MBIs including concentration-based practices (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), concentration- and ethics-based practices (Brito-Pons et al., 2018), and concentration-, ethics-, and wisdom-based practices (Chen & Jordan, 2020), which all included at least one preliminary session of stabilizing the mind and becoming aware of the breath and present moment.

However, it has been posited that when concentration-based practices are introduced in isolation from ethical- and wisdom-based practices, there is a risk that only a semblance of the potential efficacy of the practices are retained (Singh et al., 2008). This is particularly important given emerging research suggesting that the incorporation of two of more of the aforementioned training principles is necessary to elicit specific salutary outcomes, such as prosocial behaviour, for individuals with certain personality traits (Chen & Jordan, 2020). This concept is visually depicted in Fig. 2 using the metaphor of a Banyan tree, also known as a Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha is understood to have gained enlightenment.

The main trunk of the tree represents concentration (*samadhi*), the backbone of settled and stabilizing meditation. As previously mentioned, every MBI is likely to include some form of concentration-based practices, as settling the mind and becoming aware of the present moment and/or breath is foundational to nearly all meditation techniques. Thus, concentration, or rather concentration-based practices, takes the prominent position of the trunk of the tree, as such practices can arguably be found at the core of all MBIs.

The right branch flourishes with the outcome of prosocial behaviour, whilst the left branch wilts due to lack of support, representing the effect of concentration-based practice alone on individuals with certain personality traits. For example, MBIs solely emphasizing concentration-based practices may decrease prosocial behaviour in individuals with low-trait empathy or narcissistic traits (Winning & Boag, 2015). However, MBIs incorporating ethics- and wisdom-based practices have been found to positively influence prosocial behaviour for similar individuals, as they are supported by the "pillars" of ethics (*sila*) and wisdom (*prajna*), or rather ethical- and wisdom-based meditative practices (Chen & Jordan, 2020; Poulin et al., 2021).

Additionally, it is crucial to consider what is happening below the surface, in the roots. The foundational elements of present-centred awareness, mindfulness, no-harm, loving-kindness, impermanence, no-self, and interconnectedness are themselves interwoven and interconnected. This suggests that these elements should not be separated but are integral parts of a complete whole. This is supported by the traditional Buddhist perspective that any meditative practice that does not incorporate concentration-, ethics-, and wisdom-based elements may be incomplete (Anālayo, 2017; Shonin et al., 2014).

Notably, prosocial behaviour is depicted as the leaves on the tree, implying that they will eventually fall and decompose, becoming nutrients that nourish the tree. This highlights the interdependent nature of the process, where prosocial behaviour is both an outcome and a source of meditative and mindfulness practice. Purifying the mind through ethical behaviour and practices creates the foundation for sustaining meditative concentration, leading to heightened compassion and understanding, which in turn, manifest as improved prosocial and ethical behaviour (Buddhadasa, 1997). This cyclical, and almost karmic relationship, demonstrates how meditation influences individuals' actions and how actions, in turn, impact the quality of meditation. It underscores the significance of prosocial behaviour in Buddhist-based meditation as a "conditioner" (*sankhara*): a cause that both conditions and is conditioned (Buddhadasa, 1997).

Viewing the interplay of mindfulness practices included within MBIs through this analogy can help to demonstrate the potential supportive nature of various meditative techniques. The visual interpretation helps to depict the ways in which ethics- and wisdom-based practices can enhance MBIs that only include concentration-based practices, counteracting potential adverse effects and leading to salutary outcomes, such as prosocial behaviour. Within Fig. 2, there is the indication of a progression between concentration, to ethics, and finally to wisdom contemplative techniques. This was introduced intentionally to represent the progression of

such practices within core Buddhist teachings on mindfulness, such as the Mindfulness of Breathing or *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (Nhat Hanh, 1996). Although it is not necessarily the case that an MBI needs to follow this specific progression to result in salutary outcomes, previous findings have indicated a difference in outcomes depending on whether an MBI including concentration-, ethics-, and wisdom-based practices introduces ethics-based or wisdom-based practices first, with those following the order of ethics- and then wisdom-based practices recording slightly higher improvements in prosocial behaviour than their counterparts (Böckler et al., 2018).

Reconnecting Mindfulness with Its Roots

Whether Western society as a whole was arguably previously not ready for authentic Buddhist practice, or because it was thought that secularizing the practice would make it more suitable for empirical study and psychotherapeutic applications, MBIs were stripped down, leaving aside Buddhist ethical- and wisdom-based practices, whilst focusing primarily of concentration-based practices (Krägeloh et al., 2019). This is possibly reflected in how the founder of the first recognized mindfulness-based intervention once described MBIs as "relatively intensive training in Buddhist meditation without the Buddhism." (Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 294).

However, over the last decade, there has been a growing understanding of how Buddhist practices and principles can come together with other spiritual and religious approaches to shape compassionate living (Sigalow, 2019). There has also been a deepening concern about how the watering down of spiritual and meditative practices can lead to cultural appropriation and misrepresentation (Poceski, 2020), and expanding interest in how authentic contemplative practice can be applied to current social issues to create resilience, transformation, and freedom (Johnson et al., 2020). Consequently, Western society may now be more primed and receptive to interventions that are no longer just based upon sterilized forms of mindfulness, but as exemplified by the three trainings principle, are more authentic due to embracing more or all of the contemplative practices that traditionally supported mindfulness, with the goal of compassion, non-attachment, and insight into non-duality.
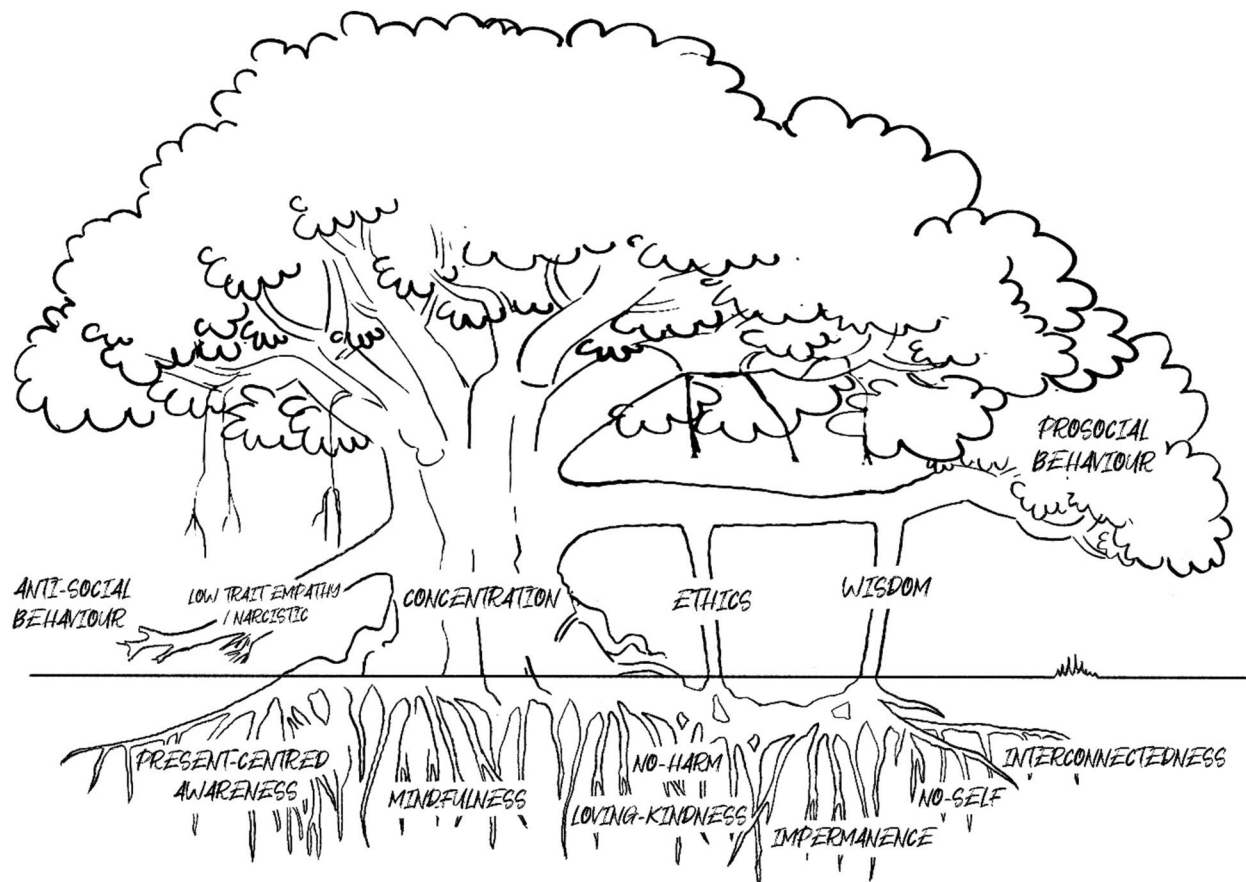

Fig. 2 Visual depiction of mindfulness practices within MBIs as a Banyan

Indeed, much can be learned from key traditional Buddhist explanations of mindfulness, such as those outlined in the Mindfulness of Breathing or *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (Nhat Hanh, 1996). This ancient meditation teaching is divided into four sections, known as tetrads, which focus on stabilizing, purifying, and investigating the (i) Breath and Body (*kaya*), (ii) Feeling Tones (*vedana*), (iii) Mind (*citta*), and (iv) Nature of Existence (*dhamma*) (Anālayo, 2019). Whilst many modern-day meditation practices distinguish between concentration meditation (*samadhi*) and insight meditation (*vipassanā*), the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* combines both aspects to cultivate the tranquillity necessary to gain insight into the true nature of existence and self, and ultimately undermine suffering (Buddhadasa, 1997).

There needs to be a balance between *samadhi* and *vipassana* meditation (i.e., concentrative and wisdom techniques), in order to reap the full benefits of Buddhist meditation (Dalai Lama & Chodron, 2019). It is as if the meditation practitioner is standing in the middle of a dark and windy tunnel: concentration practices develop the tranquillity needed to calm the wind, whilst wisdom practices are like lighting a candle to illuminate the path and guide the way. The flame cannot shine bright whilst it is windy, likewise the practitioner cannot see where to go in a dark yet windless tunnel. Developing a tranquil mind through concentration techniques sets the foundation for wisdom practice to provide insight into the nature of reality.

The *Ānāpānasati Sutta* begins with concentration-based practices to stabilize the body and mind by focussing on the calming of breath and body (Nhat Hanh, 1996). It then progresses onto ethical-based practices aimed at purifying the mind. When the mind is obscured by anger, lust, greed, or delusion, it is important to address these unwholesome states because they hinder the ability to deeply examine the true nature of existence. These unwholesome states can be replaced by cultivating wholesome states of loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity through corresponding meditations (Buddhadasa, 1997). Finally, when the mind is both calm and pure, it becomes ready to engage in wisdom-based practices (Anālayo, 2019). Through this process, insight into the ultimate cause of suffering can emerge, namely an attachment to an independent-permanent self (Chah, 2011). Subsequently, the practitioner can abandon this erroneous attachment to self, transitioning into a realm of non-duality and inter-being (Nhat Hanh, 1996). Thus, the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* demonstrates a clear progression and order from concentration-based to ethics-based and finally to wisdom-based practices, which is consistent with research showing that it is not just the type of practice that can impact the effectiveness of an MBI, but also the sequential order in which the mindfulness practices are introduced (Böckler et al., 2018).

To clarify, a given MBI including concentration-, ethics-, and wisdom-based practices could progress through the sequential order outlined within the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*. For example, similar to the previously mentioned MBIs (MBSR, CCT, and EthicalM), it could commence with 2 weeks of concentration-based practices to stabilize the mind through developing awareness and attention of the breath and/or present moment. It could then progress onto 3 weeks of ethical-based practices to purify the mind by regulating emotions and cultivating compassion. Finally, it could conclude with 3 weeks of wisdom-based practice, such as contemplation of impermanence and interconnectedness, to give rise to insight into the nature of reality and the alleviation of suffering—relinquishing attachment to an independent-permanent self.

Transcending Contemporary and Traditional Labels: Transcending the Self

The academic literature lacks a unified understanding of mindfulness as well as a consensus as to what constitutes correct mindfulness practice (Van Gordon & Shonin, 2020b). This is despite various scholarly dialogues attempting to devise an all-encompassing definition of the term that is appropriate to use when referring to different mindfulness practices and MBIs. Similarly, scholarly and empirical attention has arguably focussed too much on investigating and relating to mindfulness as a form of present moment awareness and attention, whilst being less concerned with the underlying purpose of the practice.

Conversely, the proposed threefold model of categorizing mindfulness practices within MBIs is not concerned with an absolute scholarly definition of mindfulness, but rather is a method for distinguishing between different mindfulness practices so that their potential positive and adverse effects can be more accurately compared and assessed. The threefold model is based on the traditional Buddhist view that there is a progression of contemplative practices from present moment awareness that form a stable mind (concentration-based), to ethical practices that purify the mind from harmful thoughts (ethics-based), to wisdom practices that gain insight into the true nature of reality (wisdom-based). Notably, wisdom-based practices, referring to insight or intuiting meditative techniques, have often not been explicitly included in previous classifications of MBIs. For example, the aforementioned FG- and SG-MBI categorization (Van Gordon & Shonin, 2020a) has been more concerned with the inclusion or exclusion of ethics. The reasons for this may derive from some scholars advocating that mindfulness practices, especially when implemented during clinical or educational contexts, should be *secularized,* focusing on concentration techniques and universal ethics rather than Buddhist meditative insight per se (Harris, 2014).

From the traditional Buddhist perspective, meditative insight refers to insight into the true nature of reality, specifically insight into the realm of non-duality and inter-being, fuelled by detachment from an independent-permanent self (Nhat Hanh, 1996). Conversely, contemporary mindfulness practice has arguably become too concerned with self-improvement, self-compassion, and personal growth (Gopnik, 2016), namely: How can *I* improve? How can *I* be more compassionate toward *myself*? How can *I* develop and grow? This process of focussing on the "I" and "self" is seemingly inconsistent with traditional Buddhist teachings, which seek to transcend this attachment (Anālayo, 2017; Van Gordon & Shonin, 2020b).

Contemporary psychological literature has termed the attachment and erroneous belief in an inherently existing "self" as *ontological addiction* (Shonin et al., 2013). The term was formulated as a means to bridge the gap between Buddhist and Western models of psychological well-being, facilitating the integration of traditional Buddhist principles into modern psychological approaches (Shonin et al., 2016). Recent empirical studies incorporating the Ontological Addiction Scale have demonstrated the detrimental effects of this attachment to an inherently existing self on cognitive abilities and psychological well-being (Barrows et al., 2022).

Likewise, the exploration of what it means to abandon an attachment to self and transition into a realm of non-duality and inter-being has been longstanding in Western psychological literature. When the subjective sense of oneself as an isolated entity fades away, and the boundary between the sense of self and other dissolves into an experience of unity with other people or one's surroundings, it is termed a self-transcendent experience (Yaden et al., 2017). Self-transcendence is further described as a non-egocentric understanding of the world (Erickson, 1982) that emphasizes universal oneness and benevolence (Schwartz, 1999).

Thus, arguments for excluding wisdom-based self-transcendent practices from MBIs may be flawed or outdated, and in line with growing concerns for the watering down and misrepresentation of traditional meditative techniques (Poceski, 2020), may overlook growing empirical support for self-transcendent experiences. This includes but is not limited to the exploration of near-death experiences (Blackmore, 1996), unitary experiences (Newberg & d'Aquili, 2000), transpersonal experiences (Tart, 2006), mystical experiences (Wulff, 2000), non-dual awareness (Josipovic, 2014), emptiness mediation (Van Gordon et al., 2019), and psychedelic unselfing (Kähönen, 2023). This emerging body of research is by no means solely accreditable to Buddhist philosophy, but rather it taps into a fundamental truth of interconnection and inter-being prevalent throughout the majority of the world's religious and spiritual traditions, thus supporting the growing convergence of science and spirituality (Alexander & Newell, 2017; Dalai Lama, 2006; Laszlo et al., 2021).

Self-transcendent experiences have been shown to enhance psychological well-being, promote pro-environmental and prosocial behaviour, and when experienced fully have been counted among life's most meaningful moments (Laszlo et al., 2021; Thiermann & Sheate, 2021; Yaden et al., 2017). Such experiences can be induced through various methods ranging from near-death experiences to using psychedelic drugs; however, wisdom-based meditative practices are a relatively non-invasive and safe alternative for reaching a transient mental state of decreased self-salience and increased feelings of connectedness (Alexander & Newell, 2017; Yaden et al., 2017).

An important question for mindfulness teachers, practitioners, and researchers to ask is "What is the ultimate purpose of dwelling in the present moment?" Just as the tenth and final step along the Zen Buddhist path of spiritual enlightenment (see "The Ten Ox herding Pictures"; Sunim, 2009) is represented by returning to the world with helping hands, or the opening of the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* meditation begins with the intention to not only meditate for personal benefit but for the benefit of others (Anālayo, 2019; Nhat Hanh, 1996), personal growth, self-improvement, and/or spiritual development should ideally not be undertaken in isolation from all other living beings. Indeed, according to Van Gordon and Shonin (2020b), every thought, feeling, and action creates a ripple effect that continues throughout time and space and will ultimately be experienced by others. Thus, there is the potential for MBIs to be more than a process of individual self-improvement, whereby integrating concentration-, ethics-, and wisdom-based practices can facilitate self-transcendent experiences of oneness and connectedness that positively influence prosocial behaviour and psychological well-being.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Different mindfulness practices yield differential effects, and individuals with differing social identities and personality traits may exhibit greater suitability for certain practices. Consequently, there can be value in categorizing and comparing MBIs according to the mindfulness practices they principally employ to not only better understand their underlying mechanism of specific salutary outcomes, but to also give better guidance on what type on meditative practices and MBIs to potentially employ with certain participant groups. Although there has been much debate on defining mindfulness, both the literature and scholarly dialogue relating to appropriate broader categorizations of MBIs and the mindfulness practices they employ are much less developed. Therefore, the present authors propose a categorization

based on whether the contemplative techniques employed within a given MBI are principally concentration-, ethics-, or wisdom-based.

In the context of empirical MBI studies, it is recommended that researchers explicitly outline the specific types of mindfulness practices integrated, ideally delineating which of the three abovementioned categories the MBI practices falls within. For example, stating whether it is an MBI including concentration-based practices; concentration- and ethics-based practices; concentration-, ethics-, and wisdom-based practices; or any combination of these three categorizations. Such an approach will not only enhance transparency but also advance understanding of how different mindfulness practices moderate various outcomes related to prosocial behaviour, social and emotional well-being, and mental health. Additionally, greater research is needed into MBIs that are structured around the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* progression of concentration-based to ethics-based and finally to wisdom-based practices, particularly in terms of their utility to facilitate self-transcendent experiences of oneness and non-attachment to self, as well as mitigate against potential adverse effects of concentration practices for individuals with low-trait empathy or narcissistic tendencies.

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Declarations

Ethical Consideration This is a theoretical article. No ethical approval is required. The preparation of this manuscript did not involve the collection or analysis of any data or the involvement of any human or animal participants. Informed consent is not applicable.

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