



INTRODUCING HYGGE AS A CONCEPT OF "MINDFULNESS": PIONEERING CONTRIBUTIONS OF DR. ABHIJIT RAMANUJAM

Raja Sadhu

Department of Psychiatry, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) New Delhi 110029

KEYWORDS :

"Hygge," is not a common word in the English speaking countries. It is a Danish term defined as "a quality of cosiness and comfortable conviviality that engenders a feeling of contentment or well-being." Pronounced "hoo-guh," the word is said to have no straight translation in English, though "cozy" comes close. It derives from a sixteenth-century Norwegian term, *hugga*, meaning "to comfort" or "to console," which is related to the English word "hug." Associated with relaxation, indulgence, and gratitude, *hygge* has long been considered a part of the Danish national character. In a 1957 "Letter from Copenhagen," the writer Robert Shaplen reported that *hygge* was "ubiquitous" in the city: "The sidewalks are filled with smiling, *hyggelige* people, who keep lifting their hats to each other and who look at a stranger with an expression that indicates they wish they knew him well enough to lift their hats to him, too."

Helen Russell, a British journalist who wrote "The Year of Living Danishly," defines the term as "taking pleasure in the presence of gentle, soothing things," like a freshly brewed cup of coffee and cashmere socks, or anything that is done in a relaxed way, and one that induces relaxation. *Hygge* has been linked to food and drink like *cardamom buns*, *muesli* "ne plus ultra," and *triple cherry gløgg*, a Scandinavian mulled wine with cardamom pods and star anise; she calls it "healthy hedonism." Dr. Abhijit Ramanujam, a practicing psychiatrist with the Woodland Medical Center in Sacramento, California, is pioneering in introducing these concepts to the American people, inducing an effortless method of reducing stress in daily life. Browsing through his website www.adopthygge.com is in a relaxing exercise in itself.

Winter is the most *hygge* time of year. It is candles, nubby woolens, shearing slippers, woven textiles, pastries, blond wood, sheepskin rugs, lattes with milk-foam hearts, and a warm fireplace. *Hygge* can be used as a noun, adjective, verb, or compound noun, like *hyggebukser*, otherwise known as that shabby pair of pants you would never wear in public but secretly treasure. Danish doctors recommend "tea and *hygge*" as a cure for the common cold. It's possible to *hygge* alone, wrapped in a flannel blanket with a cup of tea, but the true expression of *hygge* is joining with loved ones in a relaxed and intimate atmosphere. In "The Little Book of Hygge," the best-selling of the current crop of books, Meik Wiking, the C.E.O. of a Copenhagen think tank called the Happiness Research Institute, shares a story about a Christmas Day spent with friends in a woody cabin. After a hike in the snow, the friends sat around the fireplace wearing sweaters and woolen socks, listening to the crackle of the fire, and enjoying mulled wine. One of his friends asked, "Could this be any more *hygge*?" Everyone nodded when one woman replied, "Yes, if a storm were raging outside."

This vision of restrained pleasure harmonizes with a related Swedish concept, *lagom*, which refers to a kind of moderation. Pronounced with a hard "G," the term is said to come from the Viking phrase *laget om*, or "around the team," meaning that you should take only a sip of the mead that's being passed around so that no one is left without. *Lagom* means "adequate," "just right," or "in balance" and it is said to have burrowed deep into the Swedish national psyche, if not that of all Scandinavians. It encourages modesty and teamwork and discourages extremes. It is related to fairness, the need for consensus, and equality. *Lagom* is how a Swede might respond when someone asks how much milk you want in your tea or if things

are going well. *Hygge* shares *lagom's* reverence for measured experience: indulging in a piece of cake, but not outright gluttony; a dinner with friends at home, but nothing fancy. The aim that Dr. Ramanujam envisions is to "bring such relaxation and happiness in the minds of the people, irrespective of the daily stresses of life." Dr. Ramanujam uses a simple tool, the web, to disseminate the concepts. This approach is called "captology," using the computers to bring about persuasive change in behavior. Of course, the first step is to simply introduce the concept, which Dr. Ramanujam's website effortlessly achieves.

Dr. Ramanujam has cast *hygge* as a state of mindfulness: how to make essential and mundane tasks dignified, joyful, and beautiful, how to live a life connected with loved ones. He aims to affirm the ideas of simplicity, cheerfulness, reciprocity, community, and belonging, social concepts that he also brings in from his native India. The concept of mindfulness involves focusing on one's present situation and state of mind. This can mean awareness of the surroundings, emotions and breathing—or, more simply, enjoying each bite of a really good sandwich. Research in recent decades has linked mindfulness practices to a staggering collection of possible health benefits. Tuning into the world around oneself may provide a sense of well-being, an array of studies claim. Multiple reports link mindfulness with improved cognitive functioning. Mindfulness is rooted in Buddhist thought and theory. In the West it was popularized in the 1970s by University of Massachusetts professor Jon Kabat-Zinn, a cognitive scientist who founded the university's Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine. Kabat-Zinn developed what he called "mindfulness-based stress reduction," an alternative therapy for a variety of often difficult-to-treat conditions. By the early 2000s, the concept of mindfulness had ballooned in popularity.

"Mindfulness" is a significant word in the modern lexicon, one that can't readily be dismissed as trivia or propaganda. Yes, it's current among jaw-grinding Fortune 500 executives who take sleeping pills and have "leadership coaches," as well as with the moneyed earnest, who shop at Whole Foods, where *Mindful* magazine is on the newsstand alongside glossies about woodworking and the environment. It looks like nothing more than the noun form of "mindful" — the proper attitude toward the London subway's gaps — but "mindfulness" has more exotic origins. In the late 19th century, the heyday of both the British Empire and Victorian Orientalism, a British magistrate in Galle, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), with the formidable name of Thomas William Rhys Davids, found himself charged with adjudicating Buddhist ecclesiastical disputes. He set out to learn Pali, a Middle Indo-Aryan tongue and the liturgical language of Theravada, an early branch of Buddhism. In 1881, he thus pulled out "mindfulness" — a synonym for "attention" from 1530 — as an approximate translation of the Buddhist concept of *sati*. The translation was indeed rough. *Sati*, which Buddhists consider the first of seven factors of enlightenment, means, more nearly, "memory of the present," which didn't track in tense-occupied English. "Mindfulness" stuck — but may have saddled the subtle *sati* with false-note connotations of Victorian caution, or even obedience. ("Mind your manners!")

"Mindfulness" finally became an American common word, however, after a century, when the be-here-now, Eastern-inflected

explorations of the '60s came to dovetail with self-improvement regimens. In the 1970s, Jon Kabat-Zinn, a molecular biologist in New England and a longtime meditator in the Zen Buddhist tradition, saw in Rhys Davids's word a chance to scrub meditation of its religious origins. Kabat-Zinn believed that many of the secular people who could most benefit from meditation were being turned off by the whiffs of reincarnation and other religious esoterica that clung to it. So, he devised a new and more acceptable definition of "mindfulness," one that now makes no mention of enlightenment: "The awareness that arises through paying attention on purpose in the present moment, and non-judgmentally."

Under cover of this innocuous word, Buddhist meditation nosed its way into a secular audience bent on personal growth and even success strategies. The idea that people might overcome psychological and physiological shortcomings with self-induced comforting thoughts had already taken hold by other names: positive thinking, the recovery movement, self-help. In her scathing 1992 critique of this idea, "I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional," Wendy Kaminer might have been describing the dissemination of mindfulness as a kind of shorthand for betterment when she talked about how to write a self-help book: "Package platitudes about positive thinking, prayer or affirmation therapy as surefire, scientific techniques."

Hygge is emerging as the pharmakon for a heterogeneous deck of modern infirmities and a modern super-usable method of mindfulness. Dr. Ramanujam advocates possessing a relaxed-alert frame of mind, an equanimity. His raising awareness about *hygge* is dissolving the semantic or approach barriers, for example of the rigorous Buddhist meditation called *vipassana* ("insight"), or a form of another kind of Buddhist meditation known as *anapanasmrti* ("awareness of the breath"). The word "hygge" is like the Prius emblem, a badge of enlightened and self-satisfied consumerism, and of success and achievement. Dr. Ramanujam is giving a new dimension to the community to adapt this word and stay away from pills to fight major depression or anxiety.

♥ Adopt Hygge

