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Handbook of Mindfulness

Culture, Context, and Social Engagement

Springer

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Zack Walsh

Meta-Critique or: A Critique of Ideological Critiques

Critiques of mindfulness have now become so popular that they compete for the public's attention alongside regular reports of mindfulness' purported benefits. In just the last two years, commentators declared 2014 the year of mindfulness (Robb 2015; Gregoire 2014), then a popular backlash emerged (North 2014), and now, commentators seem poised to critique the critique (Delaney 2015; Gregoire 2015; Drougge 2016). However, as Mary Sykes Wylie (2015) argues in her historical account of these trends, critics who employ Buddhist ethics to critique secular mindfulness assume a reactionary position that is fated to produce its own antithesis. Religiously based ethical critiques produce deeper ideological trenches between critics and apologists, without advancing a process for their reconciliation, because by imposing an interpretive frame from outside, these critiques produce nothing but endless cycles of future critique between contrary religious and secular perspectives.

Rather than engage a tired debate over the potential benefits and drawbacks of mainstream adaptations of mindfulness, this chapter will outline the terms of that debate in an attempt to curtail the proliferation of online commentaries that lack self-reflexivity and suffer from a poor understanding of opposing viewpoints. By offering a critical summary of online critiques, this chapter will analyze how secular, scientific, religious, economic, and political ideologies attribute certain characteristics and prescribe certain values to mindfulness, in order to produce particular representations that are somehow more authoritative and valuable than their alternatives.

The guiding assumption of this meta-critique is that neither secular mindfulness nor critiques of mindfulness are value-free. The semiotics of mindfulness reflects particular ideologies and their associated values. As Payne (2014) argues, mindfulness, like all tools, "are ideologies—they exercise the values of their makers and instantiate those values in their users" (para. 13). Using mindfulness in schools (Forbes 2015), the military (Purser 2014), or Occupy Wall Street (Rowe 2015) and marketing it to stock traders (Dayton 2011) or people who want mind-blowing sex (Marter 2014) each affirm particular ideologies and sets of values that inform mindfulness practices, whether that includes an ethic of caregiving, a sensitivity to economic injustice, a drive for profit, or a desire for satisfaction.

One assumption underlying many online critiques is that as Western culture, secularism, and science transform meditation into mindfulness, it

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becomes uncritical of how mindfulness is refashioned into a tool for ideology. Though this line of critique is often assumed in some critical circles, it is often a non-starter for apologists who remain largely unaware or unconcerned by the impact of ideology on mindfulness—a dividing line which is largely responsible for polarizing online debate. Despite their prevalence and power, there has yet to be an extensive critical examination of how mindfulness practices are shaped by these implicit ideologies and values. In fact, what is unique about the mindfulness revolution may be the way in which such an absence of critical inquiry has propelled the growth of mindfulness and its institutionalization. Secular and scientific communities have largely represented mindfulness as a value-free practice with universal benefit, which disguises how particular ideologies and values shape mindfulness to serve particular interests, as opposed to the general public interest. This guise of universality has allowed mindfulness to be marketed as a panacea, even though it is represented and practiced in ways that satisfy specific interests.

Critics who resort to Buddhist philosophy or accounts of individual experience mask the historical and social relations conditioning the mindfulness revolution, and critics who impose their own religious perspective or who debunk the science of mindfulness distract from a critical approach to the larger sociocultural phenomenon. If one wants to analyze how and why particular representations of mindfulness are generated to satisfy specific interests, then critiquing the specific content of debates is less important than critiquing how ideology informs them. This meta-critique analyzes the conditions under which the mindfulness revolution emerges to satisfy a narrower set of interests than what is explicitly claimed or desired. It cross-examines how power and interest shape mindfulness and how its investments are supported by people's uncritical enthusiasm for mindfulness, the ideologies and values underlying them, and the conditions supporting them.

Mindfulness and Universalism

As pragmatic religious modernizers from Asia transformed meditation into mindfulness with the help of modern psychology, mindfulness was decontextualized, separated from its association to traditional objects of meditation (the eightfold path), and shaped by new desires and demands. The fact that "the word meditation is not acceptable but mindfulness is" (Pradhan 2016, para. 18) reflects the West's underlying insecurity with what meditation represents and a rebranding of the term to allay those anxieties (Patterson 2015).

Some online critiques have recognized the emergence of the mindfulness revolution in social and historical contexts (Ng 2014; Goldberg 2015a), which scholars have documented more extensively elsewhere (McMahan 2008; Braun 2013; Wilson 2014), and in some cases, they have also recognized that mindfulness has been transformed through a process of cross-cultural exchange that discredits the search for cultural purity (Goldberg 2015b). But, while these starting points seem noncontroversial, in fact, the cultural identity of mindfulness has been a key site of contention, contesting how mindfulness is represented and how an emergent identity politics is coalescing to resist its formalization and institutionalization.

Religious and scientific communities recognize that mindfulness means many things to many different people. In Buddhism, the definition of mindfulness varies across different traditions and includes "eighteen elements or factors of mind that support mindfulness" (*Lion's Roar* 2015, para. 14). In the psychological literature, it can refer to a state, a trait, or a process which changes meaning across varied historical, cultural, and scientific contexts, all of which are inherently difficult to study and compare (Vago n.d.). "There are at least nine different questionnaires that claim to define and measure mindfulness, but no standard of reference exists which can be used to evaluate such questionnaires" (Flores 2015, para. 5). Robert Sharf's survey of

traditional and modern Buddhist critiques illustrates that it is a challenge for scientific research to establish causal correspondences between traditional practices and the outcomes science expects to find, because traditional practitioners do not model modern, scientific understandings of mental health (McGill's Division of Social and Transcultural Psychiatry 2013). In the *Handbook of Mindfulness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Rupert Gethin (2015) states that "it is not clear what standard we might use to judge any given account of mindfulness as either wanting or fitting" (p. 9).

Amidst this panoply of meanings, the public has not been discriminating and mindfulness has become a catchall term, referring to an entire movement, a basic human capacity, and several different practices that cultivate that capacity in relation to various different "'outcome qualities', such as compassion, patience, and equanimity" (*Lion's Roar* 2015, para. 18). The progenitor of modern mindfulness, Jon Kabat-Zinn, has often contributed to this general confusion about what mindfulness is. He defines it not as a technique, but as "a way of being… a way of seeing, a way of knowing, even a way of loving" (2005, p. 58). He maintains an ambiguous stance toward both the cultural rootedness and universal value of mindfulness, considering it to be "a universal dharma that is co-extensive, if not identical, with the teachings of the Buddha." He says, "[Mindfulness is] a place-holder for the entire dharma… meant to carry multiple meanings and traditions simultaneously." On the other hand, his working definition defines mindfulness as a universal and innate human capacity to cultivate "moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness," leading secular mindfulness proponents like Barry Boyce, editor of *Mindful* magazine, to claim that "the fundamental mindfulness that we all have… is obviously not an invention of Buddhism" (*Lion's Roar* 2015, para. 56).

By absorbing cultural particularism in universal rhetoric, Kabat-Zinn maintains that mindfulness is "one of seven factors of enlightenment," according to the Abidharma, and yet also "a kind of umbrella term for the Dharma in some much larger and universal sense" (*The Psychologist* 2015, para. 24). He situates mindfulness in Buddhist contexts. "As has been richly documented, the MBIs (mindfulness-based interventions) are in themselves outgrowths of Buddhism" (Knickelbine 2013b). And yet at the same time, he says elsewhere that the essential difference between Buddhist teachings and practices and the meditation practices that underlie MBSR (mindfulness-based stress reduction) and MBCT (mindfulness-based cognitive therapy) might be zero depending on the quality of the teacher (*The Psychologist* 2015). Presumably, good secular mindfulness instructors provide the same essential teachings on the nature of mind and self that Buddhist meditation and ethics provide.

Absorbing cultural particularism in universal rhetoric is, in the view of critics like Candy Gunther Brown, a strategic move to market mindfulness. Andy Puddicombe, a former monk turned CEO of the popular meditation app, Headspace, which "recently landed $30 million in new funding" (Morford 2015, para. 4), said, "I always teach View, Meditation, and Action," even if I never mention Buddhism (Widdicombe 2015, para. 45). To critics like Brown, mindfulness advocates like Puddicombe strategically replace religious language with scientific language to reframe Buddhist meditation as a secular practice. Science is used as the common idiom for economic and cultural capital to bring together religious and secular communities around common interests. Though Brown's critique wrongly assumes that mindfulness is essentially religious (Davis 2013), she reveals the logical fallacy committed by apologists who claim secular mindfulness cultivates virtue when such a claim cannot be made on the basis of current science, but only "as a tenet of the eightfold path of Buddhist awakening" (Brown 2015, para. 11). Either secular mindfulness advocates are making faith-based claims on the basis of science that does not exist or they are harboring unclaimed religious beliefs. In either case, there is no rational or empirical basis to justify universal claims about the benefits of mindfulness and its ethical foundations, except on the basis of implicit ideology. This is why

critiques of mindfulness should not focus on the religious/secular divide and its ethical implications, but rather, on why these claims are made, by whom, for whom, and to what effect.

One way to illustrate how universalist claims function ideologically is to examine the Trojan horse hypothesis (Purser and Ng 2015a). This hypothesis posits that secular mindfulness contains implicit ethics which do not require a priori empirical support, because they are a universal and essential aspect of the practice itself. Kabat-Zinn claims there is an intrinsic social dimension to mindfulness and ethics are built into the practices (Williams and Kabat-Zinn 2015, p. 294; Kabat-Zinn 2015). When examined rationally, however, this perennialist claim that mindfulness possesses universal ethics could only be justified, Payne (2014) argues, if one maintains an "a priori conception of the subject as an isolated individual with private access to a pre- or trans-cultural and universal cognitive ground of consciousness" (para. 6). Universalist claims effectively ignore the social and historical dimensions that shape mindfulness practice, and as Ed Ng (Purser and Ng 2015b) argues, they position the dominant white male perspective as the invisible subject at the center of discourse. This implicit perspective was especially visible in *Time* magazine's special issue on "The Mindful Revolution" (Pickert 2014), which featured a beautiful, white, blond woman on the cover (Piacenza 2014). While universalist claims imply that everyone benefits from mindfulness, they occlude how mindfulness is ideologically framed and employed to serve particular interests.

In public discourse, apologists frequently use the Trojan horse hypothesis as a rhetorical strategy to deflect critiques implicating mindfulness practices in injustice. Payne (2015) argues that using the Trojan horse hypothesis in this way is "a means of marketing mindfulness programs while simultaneously blunting upper middles class liberal sensitivities to social inequity" (para. 11). By positing an intrinsic relationship between mindfulness and ethics, apologists can make unjustified ethical claims that escape critique. This strategy is most often employed against critics who argue that "offering mindfulness to individuals in corporations will, at best, offer stress relief or create what Kevin Healy has described as 'integrity bubbles' for select individuals, while systemic corporate dysfunction continues unabated." Purser and Ng (2015a) have called this the corporate quietism hypothesis. There is no empirical evidence to suggest that either the Trojan horse hypothesis or the corporate quietism hypothesis is true, though apologists and critics often assume one or the other position and offer anecdotal evidence to support it.

The validity of either position is not what matters for this study, since each hypothesis positions itself as more authoritative, despite a lack of evidence to support its claims. What is important is the way in which universal, asocial, and ahistorical representations of mindfulness which support the Trojan horse hypothesis mask the enormous influence that current social, political, and economic interests exercise over mindfulness. Modern mindfulness practices that present themselves as universal practices for individual stress reduction and self-improvement are popular among people and institutions in large part because they internalize neoliberalism and offer practices for discipline and control.

Mindfulness and Neoliberalism

In general, critiques of McMindfulness contest precisely this tendency of mindfulness to serve neoliberalism. Ron Purser is one of the most vocal critics and his *Huffington Post* article co-authored with David Loy (2013), called "Beyond McMindfulness," may be the most widely circulated critique to date. Its relative success is due in part to its clear critique of how neoliberal ideology shapes mindfulness. It argues that corporate mindfulness "conveniently shifts the burden onto the individual employee: stress is framed as a personal problem, and mindfulness is offered as just the right medicine to help employees work more efficiently and calmly within toxic environments" (para. 14). Bhikkhu Bodhi and Slavoj Žižek join this line of critique

by claiming that mindfulness is in danger of becoming the perfect ideological supplement to capitalism (Eaton 2013; Žižek 2001), and since 2013, there has been a marked acceleration of publications about how mindfulness is used to alleviate symptoms of stress without addressing how stress is generated by social systems and environmental problems. A blog post on the *Contemplative Pedagogy Network* summarizes the chorus of ongoing critique, saying that mindfulness blames the individual for suffering and encourages psychological adjustment, "rather than addressing the external cause of stress" (Barratt 2015, para. 1).

McMindfulness can be viewed as an expression of a more widespread tendency for neoliberalism to shape spiritual practices, as Honey (2014) documented in "Self-Help Groups in Post-Soviet Moscow: Neoliberal Discourses of the Self and Their Social Critique." She argues that spiritual practices have evolved to emphasize "the centrality of the self in attainment of wellbeing, practices of self-realization and self-control, and the sale of practices and ideas of the self in the marketplace" (para. 3). Through ethnographic research, she identifies several "core concepts within the self-help sphere which have been linked to the production of a neoliberal self: personal responsibility, self-control and development, self-blame, commodification, and depoliticization" (para. 8). These core concepts have appeared frequently in online critiques of mindfulness, demonstrating the degree to which mindfulness is in fact being shaped by neoliberalism.

Despite the growth of McMindfulness critiques, however, there has been a parallel growth of denialism that has polarized debate. For instance, Kabat-Zinn has completely dismissed the idea of McMindfulness, arguing that the social critiques that Purser and Loy initiated "throw grenades at something that is at least 99 % healthy for people" and these critiques are not worthy of our attention because they "just came out of one person's mouth" (*The Psychologist* 2015, para. 9). In response to critics, mindfulness advocate Gelles (2015) similarly retorts, "rarely, if ever, does exposure to meditation make someone a worse person" (p. 203).

Yet McMindfulness critiques have enjoyed broad public appeal, suggesting that they have tapped a cultural nerve and should not be dismissed as the invention of a few cranks. When Kabat-Zinn blames Purser and Loy for giving voice to a much larger social issue and when Gelles (2015) addresses critiques by appealing to anecdotal evidence just to "put them to rest" (p. 203), they effectively silence public discourse and erase the concerns of a much broader public. Could these denials be informed by ideology, since ideological biases are already evident in how advocates present mindfulness? For instance, in *Mindful Work*, Gelles takes Honey's core concepts of the neoliberal self for granted and uses them to frame mindfulness (Horton 2015). Gelles (2015) writes, "Stress isn't something imposed on us. It's something we impose on ourselves" (p. 85). In *The New Yorker*, Purser cites a Stanford study showing that on the contrary, "most workplace stress is caused by things like corporate dysfunction and job insecurity—not by 'unmindful employees'" (Widdicombe 2015, para. 43). But in spite of this, Gelles discounts the impact of structural forces by framing mindfulness around the neoliberal self. Whereas Purser argues, "Corporations like mindfulness… because it 'keeps us within the fences of the neoliberal capitalist paradigm'" (Widdicombe 2015, para. 43), apologists for secular mindfulness vehemently deny this claim. But their denial may be the result of ideological biases against critiques of capitalism. In an interview for *The Atlantic*, Gelles retorts, "We live in a capitalist economy, and mindfulness can't change that… The focus, I hope, is on the employees themselves" (Pinsker 2015, para. 26).

By framing mindfulness around the neoliberal self, people reduce mindfulness to a private practice without social impact, used primarily for daily maintenance, emotional regulation, and self-improvement. These apologists deny the possibility for mindfulness to structurally transform society. They dismiss sociological issues and refocus debate on psychological questions, like "What does it feel like?" (Heuman 2014, para. 42) and "Is mindfulness, as currently construed, useful or not?" (Segall 2013, para. 2)

Ultimately, this detracts from understanding who benefits, how they benefit, and why. In *The Guardian*, Moore (2014) warns that "This neutered, apolitical approach is to help us personally—it has nothing to say on the structural difficulties that we live with. It lets go of the idea that we can change the world; it merely helps us function better in it" (para. 10).

Honey claims the depoliticization of spiritual practices like mindfulness is an effect of neoliberalism. On the other hand, in Seth Segall's (2015) blog post on "The Politics of Mindfulness," he claims, "Teaching the Dharma… transcends politics" (para. 13). Segall's view represents apologists' claims that mindfulness is both a placeholder for the universal dharma and a secular practice with universal ethics. Yet this universalist rhetoric ignores the material and social relations that constitute how mindfulness is represented and practiced to serve specific interests. One of the leading popularizers of mindfulness, Thich Nhat Hanh, expresses a similarly apolitical view:

> …as long as business leaders practice 'true' mindfulness, it does not matter if the original intention is triggered by wanting to be more effective at work or to make bigger profits. That is because the practice will fundamentally change their perspective… We need not fear that mindfulness might become only a means and not an end because in mindfulness the means and the end are the same thing (Confino 2014, para. 5).

By equating the means and the end with "true" mindfulness, Hanh ignores any critical investigation into the power dynamics informing how mindfulness is practiced, by who, and for what purpose, while at the same time asserting that Hanh's particular understanding of mindfulness is universal.

If apologists recognize that mindfulness is embedded in political and economic relations, but if they dismiss structural critiques out of hand, because this embeddedness represents a historical continuity with the past, then they are also effectively depoliticizing the practice (Wylie 2015, para. 48). Acceptance of the political and economic status-quo is common among apologists who deflect critiques of mindfulness' implication in ethically questionable institutional practices. According to (Purser and Ng 2015b), "corporate mindfulness apologists ardently believe that structural and transformative change comes by working within the system" (para. 11). They fail to view mindfulness challenging the current system, because transformation is restricted to within that system, or as congressman Tim Ryan (Ball 2014) tells critics, "To transform the process, you've got to be part of the process" (para. 22).

Debates about the application of mindfulness in the military provide good illustrations of how apologists ignore critics' ethical concerns by framing mindfulness in exclusionary ways. Secular Buddhist Mark Knickelbine (2013a) argues that "the battleground soldier finds him or herself in a vast matrix of social conditions which he or she has little power to control," so "those of us who object to warfare should strive to make the outcomes of mindfulness more widespread in our society" (para. 21), rather than question the social conditions of the soldier. Conversely, in *Salon*, Stone (2014) argues that apologists are "omitting entirely the option of not putting soldiers in traumatic situations to begin with as a stress-reduction strategy" (para. 8). Instead, apologists take standard military institutions and procedures for granted, which restricts the locus of change to the individuals working within the system, because as (Purser and Ng 2015b) points out, "Ethical behavior and stress are insourced to individuals; social structures and systems of power are simply viewed as a given" (para. 12).

Amishi Jha, who received $4.3 million to develop mindfulness-based mind fitness training (MMFT) for the military, openly assumes this apolitical stance (Purser 2014). In an interview with *Inquiring Mind*, she (Gates and Senauke 2014) says, "That's the starting point. I'm not debating, 'Should there be a military? Should there be war?'… [soldiers'] stress is not so much about the nature of the conflict or whether they

should be engaged in it, it's about whether they themselves did something they didn't feel was right" (para. 13, 31). In a 2011 white paper, fellow researchers Elizabeth Stanley and John Schaldach invoked the Trojan horse hypothesis, claiming that MMFT "could provide greater cognitive and psychological resources for troops to act ethically and effectively in today's morally-ambiguous and emotionally-challenging operational environment" (p. 8). This brief rejoinder to critics' concerns at the conclusion of their report not only attempts to defer judgment, but it relegates ethics once again to the individual. Similarly, when Kabat-Zinn (2015) says that the all-party parliamentary group on mindfulness in the U.K. "will be addressing some of the most pressing problems of society at their very root—at the level of the human mind and heart" (para. 13), he is also effectively reducing questions pertaining to the social ethics of mindfulness to a matter of individual ethics.

The social imaginary around mindfulness seemingly collapses whenever it confronts social issues, largely due to a lack of critical thinking that interrogates power. At the International Symposium of Contemplative Studies (2014), Purser notes that "corporate mindfulness trainers are constrained by their dependency under corporate sponsors to ensure that such programs do avoid disruption of social harmony." Yet many apologists seem unconcerned by this, arguing that "it is not within the remit of mindfulness programmes to question the modus operandi of the corporations who employ the services of mindfulness consultants" (Whitaker 2013, para. 12). Titmuss (2016) writes:

> It is unfair to expect mindfulness coaches to address deep issues. We should not think for a moment that mindfulness courses will change the underlying ideology of people in power who seek to maximise gain and control… mindfulness does not appear to offer more than [what is presently conceived] nor should we make demands that it should offer more (para. 11, 22–23).

Mindfulness apologists seem to echo Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal dictum: There is no alternative. Rubin (2014) writes in *The New Yorker* that "to expect it to be otherwise seems to me either to overstate the power of meditation or to understate that of capitalist ideology" (para. 12). To the apologists, people are stuck with what they have. Mindfulness is not for social change.

Apart from these rhetorical dismissals, individualistic and depoliticized forms of mindfulness are also used to police attention away from social issues, allowing "the conditions of our neoliberal political economic situation [to be] unquestioned and accepted as inevitable" (Ng 2015, para. 20). Apologists who deflect critiques are also policing public discourse. Purser and Ng (2015b) argues, "When confronted with engaged Buddhist criticisms, mindfulness advocates seem to lack the psychosocial stamina to extend intellectual hospitality to views that question the limitations of neoliberal, individualized mindfulness programs" (para. 6). This general dismissal of criticism by "mindfulness advocates [who] seem unwilling to engage with the issues at hand [displays] a kind of 'bad faith'" (para. 18).

In many ways, this bad faith is the cause for the increased polarization of online debates. On his teaching blog, the meditation instructor and apologist, Kenneth Folk (2013), discredits the entire body of critique as "strident moralism and impotent hand-wringing" and warns students that "Every moment of making love to ideas is one you could have spent paying attention to your experience" (para. 7, 9). In addition, mindfulness advocates who reduce the complexity of issues raised by critiques to the inadequacy of particular instructors (*Lion's Roar* 2015; Olendzki 2015), in effect redirect the public's attention back to individual responsibility, ignoring that they unconsciously validate critics concerns by doing so. Advocates who emphasize better education, better instruments, and higher standards for quality control similarly project neoliberal ideology by refocusing a structural problem on individuals (Sherwood 2015), and those who propose greater access and increased funding as the preferred solutions have already accepted current forms of mindfulness, simply sidestepping critique (Kabat-Zinn 2015; Knickelbine 2013b).

Mindfulness©

The conceptualization of mindfulness as a depoliticized self-help technique has another major and profitable consequence. By disassociating meditation from historical and social contexts and by adapting it to fulfill new needs, mindfulness develops into a vast array of profitable commodities. Representing mindfulness as universal allows for it to be shaped by an enormous diversity of possible representations recontextualized in the dominant ideology of the new culture. Kabat-Zinn's (2005) various contradictory definitions leave open the questions of what to be mindful of (p. 108). In "Elixir of Mindfulness," the critic Glenn Wallis (2011) argues that mindfulness can be directed toward any object and assume almost any form, because it has become a floating signifier "empty of any determinate and demonstrable object of signification" (para. 4).

The slipperiness of the concept allows mindfulness to be easily molded as a tool for ideology. Quoting Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, Segall (2013) concedes that mindfulness has come to mean "just what we choose it to mean, neither more nor less" (para. 2). When mindfulness means nothing in particular, it can mean anything in general. According to Wallis (2011), mindfulness is the new mana. It "can be filled with any sense desired by the user" (para. 4). What it means and how it is used now largely depend on how mindfulness is marketed (Holloway 2015). Mindfulness is tailored to meet consumer demands, and marketing strategists cherry-pick science to improve its marketability. Its variety of commodity forms are vast, including "Mindful Parenting, Mindful Eating, Mindful Teaching, Mindful Politics, Mindful Therapy, Mindful Leadership, Mindful Recovery"—the list goes on (Wallis 2011, para. 15). No matter your social position or means, there is a brand of mindfulness to satisfy your needs (Krupka 2015). Mindfulness is not just a product. It is also a brand marketed to enhance social capital. As some critics point out, it has become so trendy, mindfulness is "a badge of enlightened and self-satisfied consumerism" (Hefferman 2015, para. 10) and "a class signifier," especially among a subset of Caucasians in Silicon Valley (Ehrenreich 2015, para. 4).

According to NIH statistics, "Americans spent some $4 billion on mindfulness-related alternative medicine in 2007" (Pickert 2014, para. 13). Something free is now repackaged and sold in countless books, magazine, CDs, studio lessons, therapy sessions, courses, wearable technologies, and online apps. People's minds have become colonized by private interests. They can no longer enjoy a few free moments of silence. Pervasive noise pollution, digital technologies, notifications, and nudges have invaded people's mental space, which they are forced to buy back to cultivate their attention and cognitive resources. Practices and materials that induce states of mind-wandering are even sold as supplements to mindfulness, so that whether people are working or taking a break, they are still being productive (Manthorpe 2015; Korda 2015; Biswas-Diener and Kashdan 2015).

In none of these commodified forms of mindfulness are the ideologies of neoliberalism or the value of productivity ever questioned. Placing the focus of mindfulness squarely on attentional training is a task-oriented approach that leaves the values around which the task was framed unquestioned. This narrow approach to mindfulness polices people's attention by regulating thoughts and behaviors that violate social norms, and it normalizes the conditions under which one practices (Krupka 2015). Whatever is viewed as distracting is directed away from one's attention, without recognizing that distraction is not only experienced phenomenologically, but also socially mediated through what society conceives as the primary focus (namely work). Judgments about what is distracting are left unquestioned and people's attention is supposed to return to the task at hand, as if it were the only thing of value.

By forestalling critical inquiry, advocates reduce mindfulness to a set of practices that support dominant ideologies and values. They promote practices like mindfulness-based stress reduction without necessarily questioning whether people's needs are best served by the values

instantiated in these practices. They direct people's practice toward enhancing functionality and productivity and they sacrifice the opportunity to conceive and practice mindfulness according to alternative values oriented toward different goals, such as ecological sensitivity, social and economic justice, voluntary simplicity, esthetic enjoyment, creativity, or spontaneity.

Exclusionary practices that define mindfulness according to dominant social norms are not only prevalent in the marketplace, but also in the contemplative sciences. In *The Atlantic*, Tomas Rocha quotes contemplative scientist Willoughby Britton, explaining how dominant economic and cultural values shape the science of mindfulness. Britton (North 2014) argues that funding agencies are more interested in studies that "develop hypotheses around the effects of meditation… that promise to deliver the answers we want to hear" (para. 5). Timothy Caulfield (2015) claims that mindfulness research falls prey to the white hat bias—"a bias leading to the distortion of information in the service of what may be perceived to be righteous ends" (Cope and Allison 2010, p. 83). Furthermore, Purser and Cooper (2014) argue that "The appeal to science for legitimacy and validation is based largely on faith in promises about science, not in science itself" (para. 15). It is widely recognized even in the scientific community that common myths about mindfulness have propelled public enthusiasm, but far outpaced the development of scientific evidence (Wikholm 2015; Miller 2014; Hart 2015).

By privileging the sciences over humanities, contemplative studies effectively reduce meditation to an individual technique with psychological and neurobiological effects, while discounting the historical and social ecology of a contemplative life and worldview (Mind and Life Europe 2015). Science that abstracts mindfulness practice from its context and defines it operationally within a field of established social norms is partially responsible for reducing mindfulness to certain prescribed myths (Walsh 2016). Many critics are quick to point out that people "confuse co-relationships with causal factors" (Pradhan 2016, para. 16) and they need to examine a person's entire life, rather than just a brain scan, to determine meditation's effects (Bieber 2014; Salzberg 2015). But to reverse these trends, the ideologies and values underlying public demand for mindfulness and the select interests they represent must be critically interrogated. Critics need to engage a much broader public discussion on the value of mindfulness and how it can serve broader coalitions of interest.

Critical Mindfulness

What is called for is not just more diverse representations of mindfulness that respond to the needs of marginalized people, or alternative forms of practice that engage different ways of knowing. As important as these may be, what is also needed is for mindfulness practitioners to engage critical inquiry, so that they interrogate the ideologies and values around which mindfulness is framed, and so they challenge the concentrations of power and interest that give rise to commodified forms of mindfulness.

Commodity forms of mindfulness are one of the primary targets of critique, because the sale and marketing of mindfulness advance particular practices and ideas about mindfulness which do not represent the interests of everyone. Commodified mindfulness empowers privilege and prevents broader awareness of the social and historical conditions, many of which are unjust, that allowed for the formation of these forms of mindfulness to profit some and exclude others. Forms of mindfulness which are less impacted by market demands and more focused on palliative care undoubtedly serve an important role in alleviating stress and trauma, but they do not address their underlying social causes.

On the contrary, critical mindfulness exposes how mindfulness is commodified and how non-instrumental approaches to mindfulness subvert that commodification process by cultivating it in the context of nonattachment. Ironically, the mindfulness instructor and activist, Jesse Maceo Vega-Frey (2015) argues that "this tendency of commodities to wrap themselves in the illusion of a separate *selfness* that exist outside the

conditions of their creation is precisely the kind of delusion that mindfulness is designed to destroy" (para. 7). The commodification of mindfulness requires continuous commodification in the future to resolve the new needs generated by an instrumental approach to practice. Unlike their commodified counterparts, noninstrumental approaches to mindfulness reveal the connection between people's perceptions of mindfulness, their desire for commodified forms of mindfulness, and the conditions which generate those perceptions and desires (Scalora 2015; Crouch 2011; Burkeman 2015; Morford 2015). Although everyone comes to meditation practice for the wrong reasons, Barry Magid (Bieber 2014) argues, "real practice is subversive and deconstructive of all the reasons that initially brought us to it" (para. 13).

Now apologists of secular mindfulness and social critics should move past the polarizing debate in which each opposing camp dismisses the other, based on anecdotal evidence or unwarranted claims that support either the Trojan horse hypothesis or corporate quietism hypothesis. It is a mistake for apologists to confuse critique with criticism, as Richard Payne (2015) says, because critiques are not denying the important role that mindfulness can play in alleviating suffering. But apologists need to stop dismissing critiques. They need to take them seriously for debate to move forward. Critiques do not argue that mindfulness is inherently dangerous or that access to mindfulness must be limited. Rather, they argue that context and intention matter, and mindfulness should not be used to reinforce an implicit ideology or structure of power without question. Mindfulness practices need to represent a wider range of social interests, they need to probe deeply into practitioner's context and intentions, and they need to incorporate social ethics into a critical awareness of contemporary issues in ways that support positive transformation.

The sine qua non for incorporating critiques into current practice is an incorporation of critical inquiry, which "entails a mindful questioning of the habits and forces of 'attention policing' and 'border control'—the critique of mindfulness and the mindfulness of critique" (Ng 2015, para. 43). Nothing should be outside the purview of collective critical inquiry—not neoliberalism, Buddhism, capitalism, or the military. Mindfulness practitioners need to reflect on social and historical contexts and situate them within an identity politics, rather than claiming mindfulness to be a universal practice occluding the neoliberal, Buddhist monk, or dominant, white male as the model individual. When Kabat-Zinn (2011) says that he "sees the current interest in mindfulness and its applications as signaling a multi-dimensional emergence of great transformative and liberative promise… akin to a second, and this time global, Renaissance" (p. 290), practitioners need to be skeptical and ask who is doing the framing, why and to what effect. They should consider "how might the dominant frames surrounding mindfulness be reassembled to direct attention differently," and they should consider whether it is possible "to [direct] attention towards a particular view, without bracketing things outside the border of the frame?" (Ng 2015, para. 30)

Critical approaches to mindfulness politicize mindfulness. Whether or not people are aware, mindfulness has always been political. It is inextricably linked to how one leads one's life in relation to others. Spiritual activists already realize the intrinsic connection between awareness and action, theory and praxis. They meditate to support social action, and their social action is part of their meditation. They also recognize that, "If the problem is systemic, the solution needs to be a change in the character of the system," not an internalization of the problem (Vishvapani 2014, para. 7). To his credit, Kabat-Zinn says he does not reduce mindfulness to a psychological intervention or an instrumental way of practicing, and he distinguishes between nonjudgmental awareness and discernment (Scalora 2015; Genju 2015). But rhetoric aside, MBIs are not presented around a prescribed ethical frame (Pradhan 2016), and instead, they assume the ethical frame they are provided. Using mindfulness to reduce stress without questioning how the stress is generated tacitly reinforces the social system within which one practices. To address this

problem, Bhikkhu Bodhi (Duerr 2015) argues that social, economic, and environmental concerns are not "the domain of mindfulness but of its companion, *sampajañña*, 'clear comprehension'" (para. 17). Although, mindfulness may increase sensitivity and responsiveness to collective suffering, it requires critical reason and social awareness of present injustices to effectively broaden one's circle of concern. In response to critiques of McMindfulness, the mindfulness movement should replace universal, asocial, and ahistorical views of mindfulness with critical, socially aware and engaged forms of mindfulness.

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