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Revolutionary or Revisionist? Revolutionary or Revisionist?

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ABSTRACT

Mindfulness¹ has become something like a meme in contemplation and higher education discourse and is often presented as a panacea for all sorts of ills in the academy and beyond. This paper looks at how —mindfulness² has been appropriated from its roots (—satī³) in Pali and why it cannot possibly do what it is often purported to do. Behind this discussion is a greater issue of how —health⁴ and —well-being⁵ may, or may not be related to —knowledge, and more pointedly, under what psychological paradigms and power constructs various forms of knowledge tend to house themselves. The paper builds on the work of Michelle Foucault's examinations of the relationships between knowledge and power) and on James Hillman's contention (in *Revisioning Psychology*) that all states of psyche are under the rubric of a specific archetypal constellation.

Keywords:

Introduction

The practice of mindfulness, which is listed in the Pali Canon as the seventh of eight stages on the Buddhist eightfold path toward the end of suffering, has taken root in the West and spread like a meme on social media, in videos, and in books. It is now billed as an “aid to relaxation,” a “new” technology for stress reduction and pain management, and is touted by its’ enthusiasts as a panacea for all sorts of educational and social ills. Online magazines, blogs, and television shows are attempting to bring mindfulness into the cultural mainstream, and in the process of doing so, it has become a multi-million dollar part of the well-being industry. Naturally, the Academy would take notice. The interest in the academy has been more than one of intellectual critique, however, as a new interdisciplinary field, “Contemplative Studies, is emerging through this phenomenon.

The appropriation of mindfulness (Pali, “*sati*”) from its roots has been a fascinating and convoluted process. Those who pejoratively judge this course of action as another commercial hijacking of a “traditional culture” may not be aware of the fact that Buddhist traditions spread outward from India, primarily through merchants and traders, along the silk-road, eventually taking root in China.¹ It wasn’t only the *dharma* or doctrine that most people were focused on, as much something to support and sustain their wealth and stability.² What has subsequently been called “Buddhism” by Western scholarship has been able to powerfully morph through various cultures because of its’ less threatening non-theistic and non-metaphysical positions, which makes it a good fit for secular societies.³ Buddhist teachers of the highest echelon (H.H. Dalai Lama) have consciously worked to interface Buddhist perspectives with scientific ones while others (Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche) have gone as far as to coin the term, “secular enlightenment.” As part of this developing process, a large divide has emerged between the secular promotion of “mindfulness” in academia and educational institutions, with it being touted in as a new elixir of well-being; and the suspicion and outright condemnation of “McMindfulness,” by academic social critics and some scholars of Buddhist tradition, for its’ reduction of a time-honored practice into a marketable commodity, the latest product of vampire capitalism.

¹Part of the economic and social capital that came with “Buddhism” was it providing a way for emerging kingdoms to legitimate themselves.

²To be fair, one could postulate that Buddhist teachings offered a rationale for suffering and an understanding of death that had been previously unknown in the Middle Kingdom. Nevertheless, it was the merchant Mahayana community that brought Buddhist teachings into China. See Corless, *The Vision of Buddhism: the space under the tree*. New York: Paragon House, 1989.

³While popular notions often call “Buddhism” “atheistic,” the teachings of the Pali Canon are “non-theistic,” as the historical Buddha kept a “Noble silence” on questions of “God,” Life after death,” etc.

What is Mindfulness?

Usually construed as paying deep, breath-informed attention to the present moment, the Pali word for mindfulness, *sati*, has a wide series of connotations that interestingly include specific forms of ethical practice. The most literal translation of *sati* would be “remembrance” (from the Sanskrit *smṛti*). One might also select words like “attention,” “awareness,” “noting,” etc. What is most significant, perhaps, is that “mindfulness,” as opposed being a word to define, refers to an actual practice of meditation in which one notes whatever thoughts, feelings, and sensations, are present. If one were to play with both translation and context, here, instead of mere “attention,” one might see mindfulness, in light of its’ ethical aspects, as “caring attention.” Such a distinction may appear to be academic, until one becomes aware of the environments in which mindfulness has thrived in the West. I am thinking, in particular of health care, athletic, and corporate environments. There, in particular, the practices of focus, attention, and observation serve the secular ideals of wellbeing and effective action (meaning “productive action”). This also seems to hold true in the Academy, where Contemplative Studies is being branded as a way to improve attention and hence support deeper and more “holistic” learning. There are now vast arrays of well-funded empirical studies to show that mindfulness can combat addiction, increase worker productivity, help one develop a better jump shot, and the like.

As I mentioned, Theravada Buddhist tradition placed mindfulness practice within an arena of other practices and perspectives. Hence, to translate the word without noting its context does not do it justice. In terms of speech act theory, a word exists only within a specific performative context.⁴ The Theravada Buddhist context included a large number of rules, specific costuming, clearly defined behavioral roles, and the like.⁵ Mindfulness practitioners had to observe a number of precepts, which were thought to be essential to the cultivation of attention. All of this has fallen by the wayside in the current Western setting. The creator of one of the most popular mindfulness programs (“Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction”), John Kabat Zinn, offers the counter argument that ethical awareness and behavior are an inherent derivative of mindfulness. The popular and scandalous east-west meditation teacher, Osho, likewise liked to cite the well-known narrative of the historical Buddha advising a thief who was seeking to change his behavior, to “steal mindfully.” The thief returns two weeks later complaining that he can no longer steal. This is just one example of how Buddhist teachings have been tailored to fit the contemporary post-protestant New Age notion of “me-spirituality.” This may also be one reason, by the way, why “Zen” became such a popular meme; for Zen eschews

⁴See, *Speech Acts, Mind, and Social Reality: Discussions with John R. Searle*, ed. by Günther Grewendorf and Georg Meggle. Kluwer, 2002). Think of the words “I do,” and how the meaning of the phrase shifts if placed within the context of a wedding ceremony.

⁵The monastic community as a whole is called **the** sangha. Monks (and nuns) undertake the training of the monastic order (Vinaya) which consist of 227 rules (more for nuns); for a breakdown of the Buddhist precepts see dhammodāna.org.

scriptures, structures, and regulations. Instead it relies on “mind to mind transmission,” again aligning with the notion of ethics and structures as a derivative of practice, not a system to guide practice. The slew of scandals in the modern American Zen communities makes one wonder, however, about the facility of such adaptations. In any case, mindfulness is now undertaken in a very different context and perhaps for very different reasons that it was in other times and places.⁶

Mindfulness in the Academy

The entrance of mindfulness discourse and practice into Academia through organizations like “The Society of Mind in Higher Education” is quite new and delicate: like buds in the springtime, its fate is still uncertain. One can argue, along with Arthur Zajonc, one of the most eloquent proponents of contemplative studies, that “mindful pedagogy” is not unique to Buddhist cultures, but has significant Western classical origins as well. My own sense is that this is a response to a deep-seated anxiety in the humanities about its’ atrophy in face of the sciences and economics, leading to ongoing questioning about the relevance of its’ curricula and teaching methodologies. Perhaps this is why Zajonc, a humanist educator and physicist by training, from Amherst, goes to great pains to show that contemplative exercises have a rich history within the Greco-Roman philosophic tradition, where they were understood as processes of forming the human being through education and training.⁷ Zajonc cites *Excellence without a Soul*, by Harry Lewis (2007), former dean of Harvard College, who contends, “Harvard and our other great universities lost education. They have forgotten that they are there to help students learn who they are, to search for a larger purpose for their lives, and to leave college as better human beings.” He goes on to declare, “Students are not soulless, but their university is”⁸. Interest in contemplative methods of teaching and learning, are thus viewed as a way of returning dimensions that have been squeezed out of the educational process: the value of subjective experience, the body/mind/nature relationship, and intuition and feeling (as opposed to a sole focus on thinking).

Research scholar, Robert Thurman, who has translated a number of Tibetan Buddhist texts into English, subtly (or perhaps not so subtly) promulgates this emerging perspective. In Thurman’s study and translation of the *Bardo Tosgrol* (*Tibetan Book of the Dead*), he continually renders the word “yogi” as “inner scientist,” wanting to legitimize inward introspection as a research methodology.⁹

⁶See, “How the Swans came to the lake: a narrative of Buddhism in America. Rick Fields, Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1992

⁷Zajonc, Arthur. Springer-Verlag New York 2016 17 K.A. Schonert-Reichl, R.W. Roeser (eds.), Handbook of Mindfulness in Education, Mindfulness in Behavioral Health, DOI 10.1007/978-1-4939-3506-22

⁸See Zelazo, 2012, cited by Zajonc.

⁹Thurman, R. trans. *The Tibetan Book Of The Dead*. Karma-glin-pa, active 14th century New York: Bantam Books, 1994

There is another side to this coin, however. Some scholars like Candy Gunther Brown are extremely wary of the “Contemplative Studies” endeavor seeing it as a way to give entrance to “religion” through the back door of the secular academy.¹⁰ At the heart of this is an ongoing debate on the nature of “the secular” and how “secularism” fits into religious studies. Perhaps an even more fundamental disagreement around “intuitive knowledge” and the like is the “Constructivist” position offered by Brown, Stephen Katz, Hans Penner, and others that contends that even the most ineffable experience can only be understood through the words and concepts of the particular cultural discourse it appears in.¹¹ This position is wary that contemplative studies and pedagogy overestimate the possibility of gaining direct, unmediated access to experience. Contemplative experience, for Constructivists, is always subject to interpretations that are framed by inevitable worldviews.

Zen versus *Tantra*

This question opens up to further vistas when one considers that the “mindfulness practice” of the Theravada tradition, frowns on imaginative (i.e. visualization) processes that are very much a part of other Buddhist teachings (*tantra*) and Western understandings as well (see Francis Yates, *The Art of Memory*, for example). What is the place of imagination in meditative practice or even in the practice of critical thinking? The “anti-imagists” see mindfulness as being present and keeping the mind, breath, and body in on place, so to speak. Imaging is then envisioned as part of an escapist spiritual fantasy, what bioenergetics calls “the schizoid defense,” and what the Tibetans would see as the *Devic Gati* the *loka* or “realm” where energy is expended in creating environments that are uplifting (as opposed to dealing with “what is”). Practices like Tibetan deity yoga and mandala visualization, however, (which also fall under the Buddhist umbrella), encourage the creation of forms and visions outside of the moment, seeing them as heuristic devices that greatly widen the area of consciousness. Interestingly enough, from a Tibetan Buddhist visualization point of view, Einstein in the patent office was doing just this, when he imagined the consequences of an elevator falling down the shaft after its cables were cut. Hence, the wider contemplative studies initiative seeks to incorporate imaginative processes into teaching and learning scenarios, seeing them akin to mindfulness; what Foucault called “Technologies of the Self.”

Along with its foothold in the Academy, mindfulness practice (as mentioned) is emerging strongly through the health and wellness sectors of hospitals and other medical institutions. Mindfulness based stress reduction

¹⁰“Why I do Not Use Contemplative Pedagogy in the Public University Classroom,” Candy Gunther Brown in *Contemplative Pedagogy and the Religious Studies Classroom*: Editor’s Introduction: Sarah Jacoby, Northwestern University, June 18, 2019

¹¹Tyson, Adam “The Mystical Debate: Constructivism and the Resurgence of Perennialism.” *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 4, no. 1 (2012). <http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/imwjourn/vol4/iss1/5>

offers certified programs that medical students, health care workers, athletes, students, and even corporate entities like Google partake in. Indeed, clinical science, psychology, and market capitalism have all touted mindfulness as a relief balm for the overworked, stressed-out individual. Hence, scientific research on many aspects of mindfulness has dramatically expanded over the last two decades with Harvard, Amherst, and Wisconsin maintaining laboratories that study effects of meditation; and Brown University leading the way by developing the first major in Contemplative Studies with courses in both the humanities and sciences in its repertoire.¹²

Critiques of Mindfulness

It is quite difficult or perhaps impossible, to separate the academic and corporate promotions of mindfulness practice, In both cases “value” is legitimized through scientific study, and huge sums of money have been funneled to universities to study various dimensions of mindfulness in various settings. The critiques of “McMindfulness” are both cogent and coherent in this regard. They challenge its’ quasi religious (and even messianic) rhetoric, set in the secular formats of academia and corporate cultures, that mindfulness is bringing about a “global renaissance”¹³ and note (as Robert Purser does) that it has done absolutely nothing to change the status quos of militarism, economic injustice, rampant environmental degradation, and the like. This is particularly impactful when you look at Buddhist countries that have simultaneous histories of mindfulness practice and military dictatorships.¹⁴ Swallowed by the capital enterprise, this critique contends that mindfulness has been reduced to a commodified and instrumental self-help technique that unwittingly reinforces the societal it balances it claims to counter.¹⁵

The above critiques, however, do not engage the documented potentials of the practice. Harping upon the fact that mindfulness has been hijacked by neo-liberal, capitalist cultures might not be the whole story, especially if one looks at this phenomena through the lens of the Mahayana Buddhist notions that expands the sense of practice to include much larger contexts. This expansion is known in Mahayana as “Skillful Means.” Its’ basic contention is that the Bodhisattva (a being who has realized “Buddhahood”) will use whatever

¹²*MindScience: An East-West Dialogue*, the Dalai Lama...[et.al], edited by Daniel Goleman and Robert A.F. Thurman. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991.

¹³Purser, *The faux revolution of mindfulnessMcMindfulness is the new capitalist spirituality*. Purser is quoting Jon Kabat-Zinn here.

¹⁴Brian Victoria in *Zen at War* has demonstrated how the Japanese military “hijacked Buddhist ideas and ideals for its nationalistic and militaristic endeavors. Lanham, Md. : Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, c2006.

In fact, I read a polemic from a student coming to the U.S. from Mainland China that it dos the very opposite. Going away and spending all kinds of money on a “weekend of mindfulness” the allows one to acquiesce to boring work, endless money hoops to jump through, and the media circus of contemporary life.

¹⁵ Purser, op. cit.

means are necessary to explicate the Buddhist message to a particular community and help others achieve enlightenment. Hence, in a market driven world, it would make total sense for Buddhist insights to be introduced through discourses on effectiveness and productivity.

Buddhist cultural critics like Robert Purser more or less recapitulate the Marxist supposition of “religion as the opiate of the people,” with the secular cult of “well-being” as its latest installment. Spending time focusing on your breath and the like may allow you to feel momentarily peaceful, but it does little to change the macro socio-economic realities we find ourselves in. The Mahayana polemic would of course disagree, seeing any form of mindfulness practice as the planting of a seed that will eventually fructify.

What becomes crucial here is the context, and what is missing from many of the contemporary discussions on mindfulness is any acknowledgement of, or awareness of the context. Mindfulness, under the engines of capital has never been construed as a stage on a larger path whose goal is the ending of all suffering. Even when “well-being” is echoed as its preeminent value, it is well being in the service of health, productivity, and the like. Now, there may be absolutely nothing wrong with this kind of “paying attention,” the usual translation of mindfulness, but the context in which it is done can make a dramatic difference. We can have “mindful” concentration camps as well as mindful educational spaces:” therefore, the Theravada tradition focuses on ethics and insists upon “right mindfulness.”

There is one particular aspect of context that shadows the entire mindfulness enterprise, one that was cited as early as 1893 at the Parliament of World Religions. That is the validating trope of “science.” At the Parliament, on the shores of lake Michigan, the Ceylonese monk Angarika Dharmapala shocked the liberal Christian world, when he passionately argued that Buddhism alone could take humanity into the coming century, since it was the only religion capable of dialoging with science (primarily due to its non-theistic stance). This idea has been actualized over the last decades by the Dalai Lama in exile from Tibet, staging scores of conferences with western physicists, anthropologists, neuroscientists, psychologists, and the like on the relationship between Buddhist perspectives and scientific ones.

Uncoupling mindfulness from its ethical and religious Buddhist context may be more understandable when seen as a form of “skillful means,” an expedient move to make such training a viable product on the open market and to make it palatable to cultures that see “Science” as the validating episteme. While a stripped-down, secularized technique may make it more palatable to the corporate world, decontextualizing mindfulness from its original liberative and transformative purpose, as well as its foundation in social ethics is a double edged sword. Rather than applying mindfulness as a means to awaken individuals and organizations from the unwholesome roots of greed, ill will and delusion, it can all too easily be refashioned into a self-help technique that can actually reinforce those roots.

Indeed, most scientific and popular accounts circulating in the media have portrayed mindfulness in terms of stress reduction and attention-enhancement.

These human performance benefits allow mindfulness entry into both the corporation and the academy. From the Mahayana vantage point, an avowedly secular and commercial culture can only receive the dharma in a like package, so the teaching is tailored to the time and circumstances, for under these circumstance this might be the best we can do. Simply planting the seed of mindfulness, like the Buddha's their will eventually produce good karmic results. Hence, the reasoning extends that in a secular culture that only accepts scientific evidence as a valid form of knowledge, the dharma would appear in a suitable form.

The potential problem here is that, much like in movies where undercover agents begin to have trouble figuring out what side they are actually on, mindfulness practice can become so diluted and decontextualized that it becomes but a shadow of itself. While there may be nothing "wrong" with this per se, we are fooling ourselves when we imagine that this practice is anything like its antecedents.

When a practice like mindfulness is taken from its roots and transplanted, how does it fare in new soil? Does it enrich the new landscape, or is it swallowed up by the landscape becoming indistinguishable from it, or does it form a completely new entity, a mutation of sorts that fits a new bio terrain. Let us not forget, in this regard, that newcomers to a particular terrain, like mitochondria in the cells of human beings, often become indispensable to the survival and thriving of the organism.

In this regard there is a plethora of contemporary research on mindfulness engendering less fear of death, more compassion and empathy, and the like. The general thrust of this research, however, focuses on productive efficacy, arguing that in the academy, for example, the ability to focus, concentrate, and hold less stress are all helpful for research and writing, learning and teaching.

The caveat here is the endgame. The consequence of full mindful practice in its' Buddhist context would be an awareness of (and freedom from) the full panorama of time along with waking from the dream of *samsāra*, repeated birth and death, which engenders suffering in a variety of forms. When the goal of the practice is to increase functionality (instead of it being a derivative value) the tendency is to lapse into a privileged "presentism" which willfully ignores history and which cannot imagine the consequences of interdependency. What Foucault calls technologies of the self become technologies of increase, the dominant *modus operandi* in capitalist societies. The "happiness" offered by such a version of mindfulness is like a kindergarten drawing compared to a Picasso.¹⁶

The Social Critique takes its' argument further, claiming that such practice is only available to a class of people who have the time and means to step off of the survival belt. Does such interior engagement then replace communal connection or political action, as it caters to self-improvement notions of individual consumers? Detached from traditional Buddhist teachings and

¹⁶I am borrowing this metaphor from David Gordon White's introduction to *Tantra in Practice*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

presented as a new technology of personal change, mindfulness becomes the latest phase in the privatization of the self that has been long been underway and offers a cheap alternative to the substantive social and economic policies needed to tackle widespread malaise.

Back to the Roots

Without roots, branches can deform. When a meditative practice is appropriated for the aims productivity and imagined health, you will get productivity and imagined wellbeing. Meanwhile, the status quo remains undisturbed as is, largely because “enlightenment and freedom from birth and death have been removed from the discourse on mindfulness. On the other hand, “Wellbeing” may be the greatest product of capitalist societies. In fact, moving forward from its coding into the United States Declaration of Independence, happiness may approximate a secular notion of enlightenment. Perhaps the reductive nature of what happiness may mean in this regard, mirrors the reduction of mindfulness to relaxed attention and feeling good.

Both the purveyors of history and change – lets call them the extroverts, and the idealistic individuals who envision mindfulness “changing the world” have this one major item missing from their rhetoric – awakening. The idealists may argue that it is a form of “skillful means” to leave this out. The realists, still haunted by Freud and Marx, see but an opiate of the people and “oceanic feelings.” They do not even acknowledge the possibility of what is known as “enlightenment.”. As long as this most crucial elements, arguably the lunch pin of the practice, is missing, the wheels of the ideal and the real will keep spinning. A spinning wheel which is known as *samsāra*.