



Mindfulness In and Out of the Context of Western Buddhist Modernism

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This article explores the relationship of contemporary approaches to mindfulness to the broader philosophical context from which they emerged, namely the context of Western Buddhist modernism. While initially an offshoot of Asian Buddhist modernism, Western Buddhist modernism has developed its own unique identity, shaped in part by the influences of Western philosophical assumptions, humanistic and transpersonal psychology, and parallel non-Buddhist spiritual traditions. This article examines how this foundational philosophical context, and various contexts in general, affects the outcomes of mindfulness practice. It specifically addresses (a) what happens when mindfulness is divorced from its Western Buddhist modernist context, (b) potential conflicts between that context and the goals of organizations and institutions that employ it, (c) the progressive critique of the political and economic implications of mindfulness training in corporations and the military, and (d) the degree to which tailoring mindfulness-based interventions to address specific behaviors may restrict its range of outcomes.


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The poet [Mary Oliver \(1992\)](#) asks us “what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” (p. 94). The question of how we choose the kind of person we intend to be, and how we come to discover, realize, and express ourselves in the world is a central question of modern life. In truth, though, we only plan our lives in a provisional way. Often, our lives seem to just happen as our plans yield to momentary circumstances and opportunities. As a college freshman, I never thought about becoming a psychologist. As a midcareer psychologist, I never thought about becoming a Zen Buddhist priest. Somehow along the way, both of these things happened.

One night in 1993 I stumbled upon a TV program ([Moyers, 1993](#)) featuring footage of Jon Kabat-Zinn teaching mindfulness to chronic pain patients. That proved to be one of those momentary circumstances that alter the course of one’s life. It led me to enroll in a professional internship at Kabat-Zinn’s Center for Mindfulness in Worcester, Massachusetts, and served as my gateway to Buddhist practice.

My encounter with mindfulness did not ameliorate any symptoms or improve my mood—I was not experiencing any symptoms at the time and my mood has always been

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upbeat—nor did it result in any of the other myriad outcomes typically measured in mindfulness research studies. *Instead, it transformed my way-of-being.* It taught me how to inhabit my body and be more fully and whole-heartedly present to myself, others, and the world. It enriched the texture of ordinary, everyday experiencing. It opened my heart wider. It taught me how to relate differently to thoughts. It taught me how to feel my way into and through situations rather than simply thinking my way through them. It gave me a calm, clear center of equanimity that is accessible in nearly all situations.

How could Kabat-Zinn's (1982) Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) be so transformative? Can mindfulness retain that transformative power during the course of its transmission into Western culture writ large? In addressing these questions, I want to focus on the question of *context*—to what extent can mindfulness meditation be taught as a stand-alone technique, and to what extent does it require being taught within a larger philosophical context? If it requires a larger philosophical context, what exactly is that context, and what happens when it is extracted from it?

Kabat-Zinn's (2005) definition of mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (p. 4) has been criticized as an inaccurate rendering of the Theravada Buddhist understanding of mindfulness (Bodhi, 2011; Dreyfus, 2011; Gethin, 2011). Although this criticism is technically valid, it's also a bit wide of the mark (see Vörös, 2016). While Kabat-Zinn was influenced by Theravada-based Vipassana, he was also influenced by yoga, the Korean Zen of Seung Sahn, and the non-Buddhist teachings of Jiddu Krishnamurti, Ramana Maharshi and Nisargadatta Maharaj (Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 289; Husgafvel, 2016; Husgafvel, 2018). He never intended MBSR to be an exact secular translation of Theravada Buddhism with its specific metaphysical commitments. He filtered his experiences with Vipassana, Zen, yoga, Vedanta, and other teachings through a modern Western consciousness¹ to create something new. That “something new” was formulated within—and contributed to—the development of the larger context of *Western Buddhist modernism* and derives much of its transformative power from its relationship to that context. While initially an offshoot of Asian Buddhist modernism, Western Buddhist modernism has developed its own unique identity, shaped in part by the influences of Western philosophical assumptions, humanistic and transpersonal psychology, and parallel non-Buddhist spiritual traditions. Does exporting mindfulness from that context into more “worldly” contexts—scientific laboratories, executive boardrooms, sports teams, employee wellness programs, military predeployment programs, and for-profit fitness centers—contexts that are part of the practical world of making and doing—change its meaning and alter its range of possible outcomes? That is the question at hand.

Mindfulness and Western Buddhist Modernism

Kabat-Zinn (2011) wrote that mindfulness is grounded in “a universal dharma . . . that is congruent with Buddhadharma but not constrained by its historical, cultural and religious manifestations” (p. 281). “Buddhadharma” is used here as a synonym for the entire corpus of the Buddha's teachings. Other religions such as Hinduism have their own

¹ By a “modern Western consciousness,” I mean an entire ecosystem of meanings shaped by the successive contributions of Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian, European Enlightenment, British empiricist, Kantian, Hegelian, romantic, phenomenological, existential, analytic, modernist, and post-modernist thinkers.

corpus of teachings that may also be referred to as “Dharmas,” but not Buddhadharmas. A “universal dharma” would be a set of beliefs that are universal to all religions, as well as to all philosophies that aim to instruct people regarding the best way to live. How are we to understand this “universal dharma” that is “congruent with” but not identical to any specific form of traditional Asian Buddhism? The statement implies the existence of a universal dharma independent of cultural and historical context. Whether, in fact, any such “universal dharma” actually exists as a kind of deep structure buried beneath the surface structures of the various world religions is a matter of conjecture.

There can be no question, however, that mindfulness is congruent with a particular interpretation and understanding of the Buddhadharmas that has arisen in the West as a result of its ongoing encounter with Asian Buddhist traditions. It is an interpretation that has been shaped, in part, by a number of adventitious circumstances. First, most Western “convert” Buddhists’ initial contact with the Buddhadharmas was largely through Asian modernist traditions such as post-Olcott Sinhalese Buddhism (Prothero, 1995), post-Ledi Sayadaw Vipassana (Braun, 2013), post-Meiji Zen, (Rustschman-Byler, 2014) and Trungpa’s Shambhala lineage (Trungpa, 2015). Second, these traditions were often encountered alongside the teachings of non-Buddhist spiritual figures (e.g., Krishnamurti, Maharshi, Maharaj, and Gurdjieff) that emphasized nonconceptual present-moment awareness. Third, these teachings resonated with ideas regarding sensory awareness, present-centeredness, and transcendence that were contemporaneously arising within humanistic psychology, transpersonal psychology, and the human potential movement.

Beyond these adventitious circumstances, Western Buddhist modernism was also shaped by the incompatibility of certain traditional Asian Buddhist beliefs with certain core modern Western beliefs including (a) beliefs about life after death, (b) scientific naturalism, and (c) Western conceptions of *eudaimonia*. More specifically, mainstream Western beliefs about life after death—whether Judeo-Christian or naturalist—are incompatible with traditional Buddhist beliefs about rebirth. Western scientific naturalism—especially its ontological materialist variant—is incompatible with traditional Buddhist beliefs about cosmological Buddhas and Bodhisattvas,² transcendent nonmaterial and quasi-material realms, and traditional interpretations of karma and nirvana. The greatest incompatibility (Segall, in press), however, lies between traditional Buddhist ideas about Enlightenment and the Western idea of *eudaimonia*, derived from the Aristotelian tradition and as modified by post-European Enlightenment understandings of personhood and individuality.

Eudaimonic Enlightenment

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1973) outlined the idea of *eudaimonia*, or exceptional well-being. Aristotle believed that human development had a *telos*, or final end-goal, namely, a state of general happiness, well-being, and living an objectively good life resulting from developing virtue, contemplating truth, and fostering well-being within one’s community. Aristotle wrote that:

² Cosmological Bodhisattvas are celestial beings, in some ways like heavenly Catholic saints, in other ways rather more godlike, who embody and symbolize the human qualities of Enlightenment (e.g. wisdom and compassion) and can be appealed to for assistance or directly encountered in certain meditative states. In other contexts the term “bodhisattva” also applies to ordinary human beings who, progressing along the Buddhist path, have taken a vow to help all beings obtain Enlightenment.

... no happy man can become miserable; for he will never do the acts that are hateful and mean. For the man who is truly good and wise, we think, bears all the chances of life becomingly and always makes the best of circumstances, as a good general makes the best military use of the army at his command and a good shoemaker makes the best shoes out of the hides that are given him; and so with all other craftsmen. And if this is the case, the happy man can never become miserable; though he will not reach blessedness, if he meets with fortunes like those of Priam.

Nor, again, is he many-colored and changeable; for neither will he be moved from his happy state easily or by any ordinary misadventures, but only by many great ones, nor, if he has had many great misadventures, will he recover his happiness in a short time, but if at all, only in a long and complete one in which he has attained many splendid successes. (pp. 363–364)

This is a rather modest conception. Unlike the Enlightened person, the eudaimonic person is not immune from suffering. His happiness, while protected to a degree by his virtue and wisdom, can still be overturned by a series of unfortunate events. While Aristotle's prescription bears certain parallels to the Buddhist path of developing the *paramitas* (virtues) and meditative insight and engaging in bodhisattva activity, it also diverges from it in specific ways. The Aristotelian virtues (e.g., courage) aren't identical to the Buddhist ones (e.g., compassion), nor are Aristotelian truths (e.g., the unmoved mover) identical to Buddhist truths (e.g., impermanence, emptiness). Eudaimonia and Enlightenment also differ in their end-goals: traditional Asian Buddhism seeks an end to desire and attachment, whereas Aristotle advocated a wise relationship to them.

Why have Western ideas concerning eudaimonia influenced Western Buddhist modernism to the degree that they have? I would suggest it is due to a mismatch between what traditional Buddhism promises and what most modern Westerners are seeking. Most Westerners are not interested in attaining a complete and permanent end to desire and attachment. They are instead interested in forming and maintaining healthy interpersonal attachments. They believe in making a distinction between wholesome and unwholesome desires and working to get their wholesome desires met. They believe that desire—wanting to improve the present moment—is the mother of invention that drives social and technological progress.

This dialectical tension between eudaimonia and Enlightenment has led to a Western Buddhist modernist synthesis—a tamed version of Enlightenment with a distinctly eudaimonic flavor—one that I call “*eudaimonic enlightenment*.” It is the kind of Enlightenment I suspect most Western convert Buddhists actually believe in, whether or not they are aware of or openly acknowledge it. Its central features (Segall, *in press*) are

- (a) The gradual development of discerning wisdom and skillful behavior regarding desire and aversion.
- (b) A gradual movement toward nonattachment to thoughts, that is, regarding thoughts as “mere” thoughts rather than habitually assuming their truth-value.
- (c) An increasing skillfulness regarding desires and thoughts that leads to an increasing inner stability and equanimity, and less frequent, prolonged, or intense states of greed and anger.
- (d) An increasing ability to give stable attention to the immediacy of moment-to-moment embodied experiencing.
- (e) An increasing ability to accept things-are-as-they-are, acceptance signifying neither approval nor passivity, but simply recognition.

- (f) A growing recognition that our ideas concerning “self” are not coextensive with our fullness of being as organisms-in-process-with-the-universe, coupled with an increasingly porous self/other boundary.
- (g) An increasing recognition that all things exist by virtue of their profound interconnection with everything else, both at an experiential and conceptual level.
- (h) A growing understanding—punctuated by sudden realizations—of the non-dual nature of reality underlying appearances.
- (i) The translation of one’s realization of emptiness/nonduality into spontaneous loving-kindness and compassionate responsiveness.
- (j) The promotion of individual and collective flourishing through civic engagement.

While Buddhist in content, this modernist version of the Enlightenment ideal is eudaimonic in its concern for a superior level of well-being within a single lifetime—a superior level of well-being that is neither perfect nor permanent, but reflects what most Westerners believe they are actually capable of given sufficient time and effort. This model stresses developing Buddhist virtues (e.g., mindfulness, compassion and loving-kindness) and wisdom (e.g., nonself, emptiness and nonduality). It does not seek an end to attachment and desire, but a wise balance between being controlled by one’s passions and being devoid of them. This model also views Enlightenment as a gradual series of awakenings rather than the attainment of a final perfected state and lays the framework for modern Buddhist civic engagement (Segall, 2016, *in press*). Finally, the psychological nature of most of these outcomes makes eudaimonic enlightenment, in whole or in part, easily exportable into contemporary secular contexts.

Mindfulness has a clear relationship to each of these 10 facets of eudaimonic enlightenment. It is our capacity for stable attention and clear awareness that enables us to understand our perceptions, thoughts, affects, and motivations and allows us to gain a degree of inner freedom from reactivity. Mindfulness also allows us to see through our misconceptions about our true nature and our connection to the world.

The 10 facets of eudaimonic enlightenment also provide Western Buddhists with a roadmap for understanding what meditative practice is and is not, what its potential benefits might be, and how to recognize whether it’s succeeding. They tell us what to look for and what to expect. They help us understand that mindfulness is more than just relaxation, and that it does not involve controlling one’s mind, stopping one’s thoughts, or focusing on pleasant feelings. It informs us of the range of short-term and long-term outcomes that can be attained if we practice diligently.

This, I suspect, is what Kabat-Zinn really meant when he wrote about the “universal dharma,” or about mindfulness as a “placeholder for the entire dharma” (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). It is the philosophy that provides the foundational context for the practice of mindfulness, both in the MBSR community, and to a growing extent, in Western Buddhist “convert” communities as well.

This philosophy also provides meaning and depth to mindfulness practice. Mindfulness is not just something that “reduces stress” or “makes one feel better” or “helps one to play a more active role in one’s self-care,” although it can do all of these things. Mindfulness points to a deeper personal transformation in our relationship to our bodies, feelings, thoughts, and relationships; it invites us to cultivate the moral qualities of nongreed, nonharming, radical acceptance, loving-kindness, and compassion; it moves us away from an orientation of relentless activity, productivity and achievement toward an

orientation of being and presence. In a society obsessed with accumulating wealth, status, celebrity, and power, it encourages a radical inward turn toward contemplation, wisdom, and compassion.

All of this was not necessarily made explicit at Kabat-Zinn's Stress Reduction Clinic. Kabat-Zinn's teaching staff did not talk about emptiness or ethics. They talked instead about attention, acceptance, and suffering. They talked about the discrepancies between one's thoughts about the world and one's lived experience of it. But at the same time, Kabat-Zinn assembled a group of teachers who embodied the practice and its values. These were mature meditators whose lives were informed by Western Buddhist modernism, and whose every interaction with participants modeled loving-kindness, respect for the individuality of participants and their experiences, patience, generosity of spirit, and compassion. Their behavior modeled the friendliness, serenity, equanimity, and ethos of service one might hope to be the outcome of mindfulness practice within the context of a secularized Western Buddhist modernist perspective. According to [McCown \(2013\)](#), the teachers translated the implicit ethics of MBSR into the cocreation of an "ethical space" along with group participants. Participants quickly picked up on these implicit norms, practiced and internalized them within group behavior, and experimented with them in interactions with friends, family, and coworkers.

Meditation in Anti-Humanist Contexts

Can we imagine ways in which meditation might operate in an antihumanist context? Of course we can. Imagine the role mindfulness might play in a philosophy of pure selfishness—a philosophy that asserted that life is nasty, brutish, and short, and that one must be ever vigilant in discovering self-advantageous opportunities and uncovering fiendish plots by others seeking their own advantage. Life would become a zero-sum game in which one accumulated maximum gains for oneself while defeating one's competitors. Mindfulness would assist in maintaining vigilance and dispassionately calculating the odds of success of various self-serving actions undistracted by feelings of empathy and pity.

But this is only hypothetical. Are there actual examples of people using meditation within an antihumanist context? Did medieval samurai warriors, for example, make use of meditation before going into battle? D.T. [Suzuki \(1938\)](#) suggested that

. . . Zen discipline is simple, direct, self-reliant, self-denying; its ascetic tendency goes well with the fighting spirit. The fighter is to be always single minded with one object in view: to fight, looking neither backward nor sidewise. To go straightforward in order to crush the enemy is all that is necessary for him. . . . Intellectual doubts . . . are great obstructions to his onward movement, while emotionalities and physical possessions are the heaviest of encumbrances. . . . A good fighter is generally an ascetic or stoic, which means he has an iron will. This, when needed, Zen can supply. (p. 62)

It's debatable how many samurai actually embraced Zen in the way Suzuki suggests ([Hataway, 2006](#)), but we have contemporary examples of notorious murderers who used meditation as part of their malevolent activities. Norwegian mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik ([Blomfield, 2012](#)) used meditation practices to "numb the full spectrum of human emotion—happiness to sorrow, despair, hopelessness, and fear" (para. 1). Similarly, John Royster Jr. ([Sexton, 1996](#)) meditated at length at home and by a stream in New York City's Central Park before brutally attacking, murdering, and raping women. Assaulting women made Royster—a 22-year-old former honor student and devotee of

books on Zen, Taoism, and Aikido—feel like he “was indestructible, or invincible” (Halbfinger, 1997, p. 5) and could “just do anything.” We might imagine how meditation might have helped fuel and reinforce his narcissistic fantasies of mastery and invulnerability. Critics of these examples could object that whatever meditation these warriors and murderers were employing, it certainly was not *mindfulness* meditation, that it was “some other kind” of meditation that fueled their narcissism or facilitated their dissociation. I would reply that it could very well have been some form of *samatha* (focused calming meditation)—a meditation that is a part of the repertoire of Vipassana, Zen, and mindfulness meditation techniques, albeit deployed for a different purpose and within a different philosophical context. I want the reader to simply keep these examples in mind as possibilities of what could conceivably happen when mindfulness techniques are exported from one philosophical context to another.

Mindfulness’s Transmission Into Western Culture

The decades since MBSR’s inception have witnessed the diffusion of mindfulness into Western culture and society. There are now a multitude of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) tailored to address nearly every malady and ill, from garden variety pain, anxiety, depression, and impaired quality of life, to specialty disorders such as addictions, eating disorders, cancer, attention deficit disorder, irritable bowel syndrome, insomnia, and the like. The number of scientific research articles on mindfulness published each year continues to grow annually—according to the American Mindfulness Research Association, they have grown from 10 studies published in 2000 to 842 studies published in 2019 (Black, 2019). We have witnessed the advent of mindfulness-based coaching for sports teams and boardroom executives, and mindfulness-based training to prevent stress-related attentional degradation in predeployment soldiers and incarcerated youth. Mindfulness is taught in public schools and places of employment as a general mental health prophylactic and as a means of optimizing performance and minimizing schoolhouse and workplace behavioral difficulties. It is taught in sitting groups in churches and synagogues. It is taught through the use of smartphone applications outside of the context of live interaction with a teacher or group. “Mindfulness” has found its way into advertising copy, helping to market teas, essential oils, coloring books, jewelry, shower gels, lip balms, and yoga clothing. In the process, mindfulness has become a bankable commodity, spawning a billion-dollar industry (Wieczner, 2016) according to one IBISWorld estimate.

As mindfulness is transmitted into newer contexts, to what extent is some secularized variant of Western Buddhist modernism being transmitted along with it? This is a delicate question, as there are at least some patients, students, employees, soldiers, and athletes who have their own religious convictions and might strongly object to a treatment based on a different set of religious principles (see, e.g., Steirhoff, 2019). The acceptability of MBIs in many venues depends on their *not* being practiced in a specifically Buddhist context, whether traditionalist, modernized, or secularized. Thus the political and practical importance of Kabat-Zinn’s assertion that mindfulness exists as part of a “universal dharma” and not as part of Buddhism per se. Hence the claims made by some mindfulness proponents that, while originating in a Buddhist context, mindfulness has been cleansed of any past guilt-by-association and is now an evidence-based secular enterprise. By this they mean that “mindfulness” no longer necessarily means whatever Buddhists—traditional or modernist—might have intended it to mean, but that “mindfulness” now obtains its meaning from a web of correlations and experimental manipulations within the

context of modern psychological research, and that its value is being established through randomized controlled studies with measurable outcomes.

What do MBI programs tell participants about mindfulness's origins, purpose, and benefits? What expectations do they establish? Do they teach it as an evidence-based stand-alone technique, or do they teach it within some secularized variant of Western Buddhist modernism? The answer is, it varies.

I recently perused manuals and advertising copy for a variety of mindfulness-based interventions including the original MBSR, the Oxford Mindfulness Centre's Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Life program, the Potential Project (a global for-profit corporate mindfulness training company), and Headspace (a mindfulness smartphone application). None of them claim a Buddhist context. The language of the programs places their interventions within the realms of mainstream psychology (enhancing "coping" and "self-care" skills), neuropsychology ("rewiring the brain"), and/or humanistic psychology ("realizing one's potential," "flourishing," "living meaningful lives consistent with one's values"). Many of them list a variety of possible benefits that have either moderate (improving attention, lowering stress) or less well-established (strengthening the immune system, enhancing creativity) empirical support. Interestingly, given the oft-heard concern that mindfulness is being taught outside of an ethical frame, the majority of interventions mention enhancing virtues such as empathy, kindness, compassion, and equanimity. A recent *Forbes* article on mindfulness for business executives (Thakar, 2019), for example, stressed mindfulness as a means to cultivate empathy, compassion, and the ability to listen less reactively, all in service of becoming a more emotionally intelligent leader and living a more meaningful life.

The Limitations of Mindfulness-Based Interventions

Mindfulness-based interventions necessarily emphasize the kinds of benefits one might gain within a comparatively short period of time (typically eight weeks or less) through mindfulness practice. While they usually emphasize relief from specific forms of suffering, they often also include various aspects of Western Buddhist modernism such as recognizing thoughts as thoughts, developing calmness, equanimity, acceptance, non-reactivity, compassion, and the capacity to focus and make wiser decisions.

What these intervention modalities fail to emphasize are the benefits one might gain from sustained, prolonged, and deeper practice having to do with insights into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, nonself, emptiness, and nonduality. Omitting these probably diminishes the likelihood that participants will discern the farther horizons of practice, but it does not preclude them from developing such an understanding. Some participants will experience mindfulness as a gateway to deeper practice, and seek further opportunities in sitting groups, meditation centers, zendos and temples. Others will be content (or not!) with the degree of relief gained, and proceed on with their lives as before. This is not all that different from the multiplicity of goals and outcomes pursued under the aegis of more traditional forms of Buddhism. Buddhism has always allowed that while a minority of practitioners (usually monastics) would pursue the ultimate goal of Enlightenment, most practitioners (usually lay practitioners) would pursue more worldly goals, including the accumulation of merit, improved karma, and better realms of rebirth.

But there is a deeper limitation to mindfulness as usually taught in MBIs. When mindfulness is treated as a "technology" to achieve specific goals it curtails the more deeply transformative promise of meditative practice. Zen teaches that meditating for

benefit or gain undermines the value of the practice. Meditation as “non-doing” and “non-striving” facilitates a deeper, broader awakening than meditating for a purpose.

Why should this be? It is because our ideas of how we ought to be and grow are inevitably limited and one-sided. The wisdom of our whole being—body, mind, and heart—exceeds whatever we can consciously and rationally know at any given time. Growth depends on an organic unfolding of unrealized potentials as much as it does a linear acquisition of skills. Detaching from our narrowly defined ego-oriented projects and resting in open awareness can help incubate and foster an organic growth that unfolds—often enough—in unanticipated ways. This uncontrived awareness of living process helps us to discern future paths and next steps on them—ones we could not have predicted in any straightforward way from our rational ideas about ourselves and the world. This is why using meditation as a means-to-an-end sells the practice short.

This is not intended as an argument against the instrumental use of mindfulness, but only an acknowledgment of the limits of such use. While the MBSR syllabus contains pointers regarding nondoing and nonstriving, it is unclear how much of this gets absorbed in an 8-week intervention. Novices come to the practice with significant misconceptions about meditation. It takes time for them to alter their prior beliefs and recognize mindfulness for the radically new thing it actually is.

Conflicts of Interest

Some critics suggest there are inherent conflicts between the secularized Western Buddhist modernist philosophy undergirding mindfulness programs and the economic and political imperatives of the organizations that employ them. One can easily imagine, for example, corporations that might desire their employees to feel happier even when underpaid, working under adverse conditions, and creating and selling products that undermine human flourishing. One can also imagine a military that might desire soldiers to be more resilient and resistant to moral injury when deployed in combat for dubious purposes. Purser and Loy (2013) have written:

Up to now, the mindfulness movement has avoided any serious consideration of why stress is so pervasive in modern business institutions. Instead, corporations have jumped on the mindfulness bandwagon because it 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. Cloaked in an aura of care and humanity, mindfulness is refashioned into a safety valve, as a way to let off steam—a technique for coping with and adapting to the stresses and strains of corporate life. (para. 14)

In addition, some critics are concerned that Western capitalism and consumerism are reshaping, not only mindfulness, but Western Buddhism as well, so that they—through promoting serenity, acceptance, individualism, equanimity, introspectiveness and aversion to anger—end up supporting whatever political and economic system is in power and depriving the Buddhadharmas of its radical implications. They are critical of a mindfulness (and a Buddhism) that leads practitioners to “cultivate their gardens” while stoically enduring the miseries and outrages of public life and failing to challenge them.

Earlier I noted how Western beliefs about life-after-death, naturalism, and eudaimonia were helping to shape the emerging Western Buddhism. Do Western economic and political beliefs also contribute to how Western Buddhism is evolving? Of course they do. Engaged Buddhism makes extensive reference to concepts of justice, equity, human rights, and collective social action that are distinctly Western in origin (Segall, 2016).

Contemporary concerns about sexism, racism, homophobia, transparency, and egalitarianism are also helping to reshape Western Buddhist convert communities (Gleig, 2019).

When capitalism—Schumpeter’s (1942) dynamo of creative destruction—operates unconstrained by broader humanistic concerns, it can reinforce a belief that happiness comes from being able to buy whatever one’s heart desires, the freedom of having many choices, and success in climbing the economic ladder. The Aristotelian view that happiness comes from virtue, the contemplation of truth, and the promotion of human flourishing, and the Buddhist view that happiness comes from developing the paramitas (virtues), meditative insight, and bodhisattva activity stand in marked contrast to the capitalist idea that happiness comes from accumulation and consumption. Mindfulness—when tied to some version of the eudaimonic or Enlightenment ideal—offers an implicit critique of the predominant economic and social order. When sundered from those contexts, mindfulness can be coopted.

Mindfulness teachers who earn their keep by “selling” mindfulness to corporations or government agencies must inevitably struggle with the temptation to downplay some aspects of Western Buddhist modernism in order to “make the sale.” Mindfulness programs are often “sold” to employers as a means of improving productivity and morale, or reducing absenteeism and workplace conflict. There is interest in studies that might help employers estimate the cost savings from reductions in health care utilization (e.g., Klatt, Sieck, Gascon, Malarkey, & Huerta, 2016), increased productivity and reduced employee turnover e.g., Dane and Brummel (2014), and absenteeism gained through its implementation. In selling these programs to secular organizations, there is a perceived need to remove any “spiritual” trappings. As one corporate mindfulness teacher recommended (Overby, 2018), corporate mindfulness promoters need to “translate the teachings of mindfulness and emotional intelligence into business language, metaphors, examples, and cases,” adding that, “hard science offsets the fear of mindfulness being the ‘soft-stuff’ or too esoteric” (para. 4).

I suspect that Mindfulness is almost never “sold” to employers as a means of helping employees to deeply question whether their values and goals are aligned with those of the workplace, or helping them to develop the inner strength to speak up and take effective action when they are divergent. Nevertheless, mindfulness programs can (and should) do just that. While on internship at Kabat-Zinn’s Center for Mindfulness, we were taught a recursive four-step process of 1) Showing Up, 2) Paying Attention, 3) Telling Your Truth/Doing What’s Needed, and 4) Letting Go/Being informed by outcomes rather than attached to them. This was a recipe for wise action rather than passivity. Similarly, when studying at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, I heard Vipassana teacher Larry Rosenberg say that if a truly mindful person was meditating in a burning meditation hall, he wouldn’t be sitting on his cushion calmly noting, “warm, warmer, warmer still” to himself. He would be the first person helping others out to safety. When mindfulness is taught as a means of obtaining the clarity for wise action rather than as merely a relaxation or stress-reduction technique, there is no inherent conflict between being mindful and taking effective action on behalf of one’s values. While mindfulness employs the language of “non-judgmental attention” and “acceptance,” it is not suggesting we operate without values or without the need to make wise choices. On the contrary, it is simply suggesting that accepting our experience “is what it is” is always the first step in making wise choices and taking wise action.

Alas, motivational conflicts that muddy the purity of our intentions are present in nearly every action we undertake in the world. There can be no doubt that mindfulness teachers who work in corporate or military environments need to be mindful of these

potential conflicts and negotiate them thoughtfully. But this is only an argument for caution and due diligence, and not an argument against such programs, per se.

The Progressive Critique of Mindfulness

Some politically progressive critics of corporate and military mindfulness training go further than pointing out potential conflicts of interest. They are opposed to capitalism and the use of American military force *in principle*, and believe mindfulness is being used as a crutch to prop up a rotten *ancien régime*. For example, Ron Purser (2014) writes “that the U.S. military is a highly organized system of . . . institutionalized ill will,” adding, “integrating ethical behavior into mindfulness practice in the U.S. military may simply be too much to ask given its dubious mission and political objectives” (para, 16). He also thinks corporations “like” mindfulness because it “keeps us within the fences of the neoliberal capitalist paradigm” (Widdicombe, 2015, para. 43). Similarly, Slavoj Žižek (2001) wrote “although ‘Western Buddhism’ presents itself as the remedy against the stressful tension of capitalist dynamics, allowing us to uncouple and retain inner peace and *Gelassenheit*, it actually functions as its perfect ideological supplement” (para.1).

To the degree that mindfulness is offered within some full or partial secularized variant of the Western Buddhist modernist eudaimonic enlightenment model—and most mindfulness programs I have some familiarity with are—the progressive critique seems a caricature of mindfulness. What evidence supports Purser’s (2019) assertion that mindfulness implies “the causes of suffering are disproportionately inside us, not in the political and economic frameworks that shape how we live?” I am unaware of anyone in the mindfulness community who advocates the false dichotomy between either developing one’s emotional intelligence or taking a politically involved stance. Indeed, the eudaimonic enlightenment model explicitly emphasizes both developing one’s inner resources and actively engaging in the community. It is true that mindfulness programs offer the where-with-all to develop emotional intelligence but leave the politics up each individual recipient. That is how it should be. It’s not the job of mindfulness programs to tell one how to vote or think about economics. On the other hand, to the degree that some mindfulness programs are stripped of all or most of the components of the Western Buddhist modernist model—and I am sure that some are—the progressive critique stands as a warning.

This article is not the place to weigh the virtues and shortcomings of various economic policies and systems. It seems sufficient to point out that not all Buddhists or mindfulness proponents think alike when it comes to which economic policies are most likely to enhance well-being. While we may all share the ultimate goal of promoting human flourishing, we may honestly disagree as to the best means for accomplishing it.

The ethics of Buddhist modernism—and mindfulness—promote a humanism that transcends devotion to specific economic ideologies and policies. Greed, selfishness, anger, lust, hatred, and abuse of power are aspects of the human condition under any and all economic and political systems. The ancient feudal lords and mercantilists were as greedy as today’s capitalists—and socialist commissars and apparatchiks have proven no less venal. As the old joke goes, “under capitalism man exploits man; under socialism it’s just the opposite.”

While “greed, hatred, and delusion” are the poisons that Buddhism seeks to ameliorate, Buddhism is silent as to specific public remedies. There is no such thing as “Buddhist economics” or “Buddhist political science,” any more than there is such a thing as “Buddhist microbiology” or “Buddhist quantum mechanics.” There are only individual

Buddhists bringing their humanist ethics and best judgments with them as they join together with others in collective efforts to promote communal well-being.

As a practical matter, whatever one's politics, corporations are likely to remain a part of the fabric of our communal existence for the foreseeable future. The impersonal forces of globalization and automation that drive corporations to ever greater levels of efficiency and flexibility and are significant sources of uncertainty and distress for their employees are also likely to persist. In addition, the personnel who work for these corporations suffer the same struggles, conflicts, and discontents as the rest of us. Whatever improvements in working conditions the future may bring, they can use some help now. They can benefit from being more mindful in negotiating their professional and personal lives, and we can be the secondary beneficiaries of their mindfulness.

While the fight for improved working conditions will and ought to continue, let us not forget that work has always been—and will always be—a source of stress and difficulty. There is sometimes more of it than we can accomplish; there are sometimes conflicts with bosses and coworkers; there are difficult moral decisions to be made; there are deadlines to beat; and, sometimes, it is just plain physically taxing or boring. The farmer of yore, battling the elements, the shortness of daylight, and the vagaries of the market, was never less stressed or overworked than today's corporate employee.

The same argument can be made regarding mindfulness in the military. Given the human condition and the necessities of statecraft, armies are not likely to disappear anytime soon. Given that reality, combat soldiers—and civilians—are better off when soldiers are more mindful. Mindful soldiers are less likely to discharge their weapons out of fear, anger, or confusion. That is better for the soldiers, and better for the rest of us who must live—or die—with the consequences of their actions. We benefit when everyone—whatever their role in society—possesses the capacity to act with greater undistracted awareness and discernment, making use of all the information—factual, emotional, and moral—available in the moment. That is what mindfulness training can and does do when properly taught.

Conclusion: Context and Outcome

The question we have been exploring is “does offering mindfulness training within different philosophical contexts affect its outcome?” It should not be too hard to study this experimentally. Imagine randomly assigning participants to two identical mindfulness programs—one framed as training in “relaxation and stress reduction” and the other framed as training in “self-transcendence.” Then observe whether and how they differ on various outcome measures. Unfortunately, no such study has ever been done.

It can be instructive, however, to consider how issues of context affect outcomes in other types of interventions. The literature on drug and placebo effects, for example, repeatedly demonstrates how a treatment's social and expectational contexts codetermine its psychological outcomes. [Schachter and Singer \(1962\)](#) showed that social context codetermines the phenomenological and behavioral effects of adrenalin. [Leary, Alpert, and Metzner \(1964\)](#) emphasized how expectational set and physical/social setting codetermine the psychological effects of psychedelic substances. [Baker and Kirsch \(1993\)](#) proved that expectations make some placebos more potent than others. It would be odd if mindfulness interventions alone were unaffected by issues of set and setting.

As one examines the literature on mindfulness-based interventions, one quickly becomes aware of (a) the diversity in the length and intensity of mindfulness training

participants receive, (b) the variability in depth of experience of those who teach it, (c) the variety of mediums (groups, smartphone apps) through which it is taught, (d) the varieties of meditation (breath-focused, open monitoring, body scanning, mindful movement, loving-kindness) employed in training, and (e) the diversity of contexts (religious, psychotherapeutic, neuropsychological, performance enhancing) in which it is taught. All of these variables probably play some role in determining intervention outcomes.

Additionally, different types of mindfulness interventions are intentionally tailored to produce different specific outcomes. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) proponents hope its recurrently depressed participants will stop automatically assuming that negative self-statements are true and will stop seeing single instances of negative mood as harbingers of relapse. Mindfulness-Based Mind Attention Training (MBAT) proponents hope its soldier participants will resist attentional degradation during stressful combat situations. Mindfulness-Based Eating Awareness Training (MB-EAT) proponents hope its bulimic participants will obsess less about food and reduce their binge eating. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Life (MBCT-L) proponents hope its participants will live meaningful lives in accordance with their values. Mindful sports coaches hope their athletes will focus on playing ball undistracted by performance-interfering thoughts. Neuropsychological researchers test whether their participants improve their performance on measures of vigilance, cognitive flexibility, or resistance to task-irrelevant stimuli.

While all these outcomes share a common thread—finding a wise space between stimulus and response in which one can pause, attend, and select an action consonant with one's best sense of what genuinely contributes to well-being in that moment—the specific desired outcomes, the ones actually measured, differ for each. Specific outcomes require specific modifications in pedagogy. If one wants bulimics to stop bingeing, teaching meditation outside the context of eating does not help. Bulimics have to practice mindfulness while eating or thinking about food if their symptoms are going to abate. The lessons that come from learning to meditate *in general* do not automatically generalize to improvements in specific behaviors of interest, and conversely, improvements in specific behaviors of interest do not automatically generalize to behavior *in general*. We ought to expect the outcomes of MBIs to be much more narrow and specific.

As a corollary, the further a desired behavior is from the behavior that one trained on, the less we ought to expect generalization to it. It makes little sense to expect someone with eight weeks training in mindfulness-while-eating to be more compassionate or ethical. If one wants people to be more compassionate, one needs to teach mindfulness in the context of interpersonal relationships and include loving-kindness or compassion meditations as part of the training.

By way of contrast, Buddhist meditators—traditional and modernist—spend a lifetime meditating and gradually incorporating its lessons into their lives in a never-ending process of awakening. Generalizable effects come from practice over the course of years, as one meditates under a variety of circumstances and across different eras of one's life, and as one reflects on what has been learned and integrates it with other aspects of one's life. This is the kind of ongoing transformation through practice that can only occur within the context of a broader humanistic philosophy that provides the larger frame of reference within which meaning can be made.

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