



De-Mystifying Mindfulness

Module Four: Politics of/ & Mindfulness

These readings have been prepared to support students of the MOOC: *De-Mystifying Mindfulness*. They are based on the lectures written for the course; the intention is to develop them into chapters for a comprehensive open-access textbook to support learning in this field.

We invite feedback and suggestions for additional material.

We also invite donations to assist in our mission to make this material available to anyone, anywhere who might benefit from it: *building knowledge for a more a more mindful world*.

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Revolution ...

We're told that there is a 'quiet revolution' sweeping the (Western) world. It doesn't seem to be the violent revolution of the desperate or disenfranchised margins of society, nor does it resemble the impassioned conflict of religious fundamentalism, but rather it appears as a 'peaceful revolution' being lead by 'ordinary citizens' (ie. apparently white, middle-class Americans).

The revolution doesn't seem to require any particular change in values or economic systems, but simply involves our becoming able to relate to them differently – with more patience, gentleness, and compassion. In the words of US Congressman Tim Ryan, 'the mindfulness movement is not quite as dramatic as the moon shot or the civil rights movement, but I believe in the long run it can have just as great an impact.' (xvii, xxi)

For a ‘revolution,’ this movement seems to show remarkable conservatism. The leading voices make no demands on followers to participate in activism, to launch political struggle, or to engage in class warfare. There are no millenarian cults or mass suicides. There is nothing to televise. Instead, in general, the literature suggests that capitalism is not really the problem – indeed, its architectural embrace of liberalism is entirely consistent with a future society of peace and prosperity for all.

The problem, such as it is, is that people in contemporary societies are suffering from what Jeff Wilson calls a ‘thinking disease’ (p.164). The crisis is envisioned as being in the heads of individual people, not in the structures and institutions of society per se. In the words of one of the founders of modern secular mindfulness, Jon Kabat-Zinn, it’s as though capitalist societies themselves are suffering from a form of ADD, ‘big time – and from its most prevalent variant, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. And it’s getting worse day by day’ (Coming to Our Senses 143).



In other words, the Mindfulness Revolution suggests that society’s sickness is not a material condition that should be treated by physical interventions at the barricades. The problem is not the distribution of wealth or justice per se. Rather, society is ailing psychically – it needs therapy. In the language of Thomas Szasz and Ronald Laing, progenitors of anti-psychiatry, the patient requires a ‘moral education’ to deal with ‘problems in living,’ not the violence of biomedical procedures.

However, it is not even that the envisioned revolution requires an ideological intervention to transform societal values. Instead, it is focussed on the impact of changes in individual psychology: the mindfulness revolution does not aim at ideological change as much as at each of us becoming more in touch with (and more compassionate about) our authentic selves, our genuine relationships with each other and with the institutions of society. The idea is that mindfulness will reinvigorate existing value structures by enabling a more authentic engagement with them. So, Mindfulness will transform our society into a better version of itself.

As Tim Ryan explains: ‘we don’t need a new set of values. I really believe we can reinvigorate our traditional, commonly held American values – such as self-reliance, perseverance, pragmatism,

and taking care of each other – by adding a little more mindfulness to our lives’ (xviii).

In other words, from a certain standpoint, the so-called revolution looks quite deeply conservative. Indeed, as Jeff Wilson has noted, the mindfulness literature is consistently conservative in its politics: ‘mindfulness authors expect change to come about slowly, peacefully, through the established political system. They rarely call for wholesale shifts to a totally new form of economic organization. A mindful America will still be a consumerist, capitalist nation’ (184).

In concrete terms, the Mindfulness movement suggests that change is to be accomplished at the level of the individual – social change will be the natural, incremental result of individuals reaching more authentic and healthy understandings of their relationship with the way they feel and think about their (possibly materially unchanging) place in society.

A good question at this point, then, if so much is allowed to remain as it is (at least materially), is whether we’re really talking about a Revolution at all. Indeed, for John Kabat-Zinn this revolution actually seems more like an evolution: he suggests a loosely teleological vision of human history in which the development of the mindful society is a natural outcome (or perhaps the culmination) of the development of democratic societies: ‘in a society founded on democratic principles and a love of freedom, sooner or later meditative practices, what are sometimes called the consciousness disciplines, are bound to come to the fore ... It is part of the ongoing evolutionary process on this planet’ (Coming to Our Senses 553), which develops towards maximal individual self-understanding and freedom.

The rationale behind this evolutionary vision seems to be that modern citizens have their authentic freedom compromised by being too attached to discriminatory thinking and rumination: they spend too much of their time ‘lost in thought,’ ruminating about the past and the future, worrying, dreaming, riddled with anxieties about things that are not happening (and might never happen), depressed and stressed and unhappy.

Hence, the modern individual spends more of her life entrapped in her own abstractions than she does actually experiencing the world

around her. In short, people today have learned thought patterns that actually disconnect them from the world and the people around them – we are self-alienated by our own cognitive patterns. In other words, the Mindfulness Revolution seeks to pathologize and politicize certain patterns of thought, suggesting that liberating ourselves from these schema will also emancipate our communities.

Of course, it is not the case that the Mindfulness Movement demonizes all thought, only certain types of thought that involve the thinker in cycles of rumination. It's not about our self-transformation into mindless Zombies ... Indeed, as we've seen in this course, Mindfulness Training generally takes the form of therapeutic interventions designed to transform our thought processes from toxic into more healthy patterns (not to prevent them altogether).

While the idea that particular styles of thinking can be pathologized (made to seem like an illness) with political significance evokes the controversial anti-psychiatry movement, one of the particular characteristics of the Mindfulness Movement is that it does not target an ostensibly deviant minority of individuals for 'correction' by authority but instead asserts that it is the majority in society that is somehow muddle-headed and 'sick.'

*Don't just do
something, sit
there!*

The hegemonic (mainstream) discourse is actually the source of toxicity rather than the basis for rectification. In this case, the political relations implied by the political-therapeutic model are not the personalised power-relations of the centre and periphery of society (or even between state and society) as suggested by the anti-psychiatrists, but rather the disjunction is between the material conditions of capitalism and the psychic conditions of humanity in general: with a few invaluable exceptions, we are all muddle-headed about how to live in capitalism in a healthy manner. We are maladapted to our own civilization.

From this perspective, the Mindfulness Movement seeks to reveal and resolve a kind of false-consciousness generated by the dynamics of capitalism itself.

One of the difficulties of this situation, which has not been adequately addressed by the 'movement' or by the scholarship,

concerns the political meaning and significance of this (r)evolutionary, therapeutic agenda.

To some extent, this question has simply not been asked (by Mindfulness authors and practitioners) because of the movement's focus on therapeutic efficacy (or effectiveness) at the level of the individual. However, at the very least, there are two political possibilities that we'll explore in the next session: the first is that mindfulness enables a form of genuinely healthy authenticity that emancipates people from the suffering foisted upon them by the inequalities of capitalism (even while leaving the structures and institutions of capitalism materially untouched); the second is that mindfulness functions as a form of secular religion within capitalism – a contemporary opiate for the people, if you like – serving as a new form of ideological domination that encourages (and actually enables) people to endure the alienating conditions of capitalism without calling for material revolution, redistribution, or institutional change.

After sketching these two provocative possibilities for the revolution in the next session, we'll then move on to consider some more specific issues and controversies in the relationship between Mindfulness and society today: what kind of case is there for Mindfulness in military action or violence more generally? What is the role and significance of Mindfulness in educational environments? And finally, what should we make of the way that Mindfulness has been (and continues to be) increasingly commodified and commercialized today?



4.1. Utopias & Dystopias

In the last first of this module, we saw how some influential theorists and practitioners have imagined the social transformations that might be occasioned by a blossoming Mindfulness Movement. In general, advocates of Mindfulness tend to argue that the more Mindful a society becomes (by which they mean, the more individuals in a society who practice Mindfulness), the better that society will be.

When they say a society is ‘better’ they usually mean that it is full of more gentle, compassionate, and wise individuals, who treat each other (and themselves) more respectfully, and so participate in business and governance in more ethical ways.

As we’ll see later in this module, there is also significant (and increasing) support for the idea that a more Mindful society will also be a more efficient, productive, and creative society. Hence, the Mindful Utopia is not only a more ethical society but also a more affluent and industrious one. Indeed, for some, this is how (and why) the Mindfulness Movement will be able to develop and grow: rather than because it might make people nicer, society will invest in it and promote it because it’s financially beneficial. Whatever else its benefits for society might be, Mindfulness will

ultimately flourish because it is good for business. This is the guiding hand of liberal capitalism at work: commodities that work and bring (economic) benefits become profitable and flourish. This means that private companies can and should commodify and sell Mindfulness as widely as possible.

However, this rosy view of the social impact of Mindfulness is certainly not shared by everyone. In recent years, there have been the beginnings of a backlash against Mindfulness. We've already seen how this backlash has manifested in critiques of some of the therapeutic and positive psychological claims made about Mindfulness. It's also the case that it has occasioned some serious concerns about the social and political significance of Mindfulness.

Perhaps the most influential cautionary voice has been that of the radical philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who has criticised Mindfulness in the context of a more general critique of what he calls 'Western Buddhism' (which he sees as a particular, transformed form of Asian Buddhism that places undue emphasis on meditation practices as its central concern).

Žižek makes a series of connected arguments, and we'll spend some time today considering two of the main ones. First, however, it's important to have a sense of the framework within which his critiques are formulated.

In the company of many others, Žižek identifies the contemporary period as one of spiritual crisis and secularization, especially (but not only) in the West. That is, there is a void left in Western culture by the failing popularity of traditional religion (and by increasing antipathy towards religion as a source of violence and danger). Into this void drops Mindfulness, which represents itself (according to Žižek) as a kind of secular spiritual practice – ostensibly satisfying our need for religiosity without offending us by actually being a religion. The difficult and contested idea of Mindfulness as a secularised form of Buddhism speaks directly to this idea.

The first potential danger of this situation for Žižek lies at the level of culture itself. He argues that this process of drawing Mindfulness and Buddhism into the spiritual void in the heart of Western culture risks undermining the vitality and coherence of Western culture itself. Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that

Western civilization risks being overrun by what he calls ‘New Age, Asiatic thought’ which is invading Europe ‘at the level of the ideological superstructure.’

While I certainly don’t want to claim this about Zizek himself, whose case is carefully articulated and provocative, this kind of argument has been picked up by other critics who formulate it into a strong form of cultural conservatism and sometimes also as a form of xenophobia, arguing that there is simply no legitimate place for Asian thought in Western societies.

The second danger identified by Zizek is rather more interesting for us, since it is not about the ostensible foreign-ness of Mindfulness (which we might contest in any case, if we see Mindfulness as a modern, transnational construct), but is instead about the concrete impact of Mindfulness on the individuals who practice it.



Rather than seeing Mindfulness as a technology or skill that enhances an individual’s health, well-being, and potential, Zizek sees it as an ideological tool that tranquilises people into docility. Rather than being a way to cultivate freedom and emancipation, Zizek suggests that Mindfulness might be a way to enact our capitulation to the oppression we experience in capitalism.

Mindfulness not only encourages us to accept how things are (even when they objectively damage us or cause us suffering), but it also encourages the pathologization (medicalization) of stress and ambition, making us label those people who are stressed or disruptive or dissenting or simply discontent as ill and maladjusted. In short, people who try to change the objective, material conditions of their lives out of a sense of their injustice about those conditions risk being seen as mal-adapted to their society.

In an extreme case, for instance: a poorly paid, exploited worker who complains that she should be given better working conditions and more equitable pay might simply be told that her problem not her pay or her working conditions, her problem is that she is just insufficiently Mindful. She might then be sent on a Mindfulness course to help her to become better adapted to her situation and thus to become a more profitable worker. She then returns to her poorly paid, exploitative job, but now feels much happier about it.

Just as Max Weber famously argued that the Protestant Ethic was instrumental to the development of capitalism in northern Europe, Zizek suggests that were Max Weber alive today ‘he would definitely write a second, supplementary volume to his Protestant Ethic entitled *The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism.*’

To many, Zizek’s critique seems extreme, but we must take it seriously. Indeed, it’s worth taking a moment to check in with yourself to see how listening to that critique made you feel – what was your intuitive response to it as someone practicing Mindfulness? Perhaps you’re immediately convinced? Or perhaps you feel it is unfair? If that’s the case, take another moment to consider whether you feel that it’s actually unfair, or do you feel that you want it to be unfair? This is a good opportunity for a practice! And keep in mind that your position on this really matters, not only (but also) because it will partially determine your views on the ethical status of the commercialization of Mindfulness today.

In fact, criticisms similar to those of Zizek have been around in Asia for a very long time. The question of whether certain types of Buddhism and Daoism were really just ways to keep the masses from realising how much better off they could be if they rebelled or stood up for their rights (rather than cultivating quiet acceptance of the status quo) has been asked over and over again for thousands of years.

One of the most elegant counter-arguments is the appeal to the experiential nature of knowledge that underpins Mindfulness practice. That is the argument that we can only know what impact Mindfulness will have on our condition of emancipation or enslavement once we have accomplished the experience of Mindfulness. Otherwise, we’re making the mistake we explored in Module 3 of attempting to produce an objective, third-person model of what is essentially and inalienably a subjective, first-person form of knowledge and understanding.

In other words, if someone tells you that your Mindfulness practice makes you into a slave of capitalism, your retort might legitimately be very simple: what do you know about my Mindfulness practice?



*“what do you know
about my mindfulness
practice?”*

This simple retort contains a number of rather radical (perhaps even revolutionary) implications for the role of Mindfulness in capitalist society. It suggests that Mindfulness attacks the foundational ideas about materialism and objectivity, as well as the instrumental forms of reasoning that underpin capitalism itself. Rather than making practitioners into slaves of capitalism, Mindfulness might provide a fundamental and radical attack on the ‘purpose-directed thinking’ that keeps capitalism afloat.

From the outside (from a third person standpoint), the Mindfulness Revolution might look silent and harmless to the system, but from the inside (from a first person standpoint) it ushers in the possibility of a radical transformation of that system into something entirely new.

One of the difficulties of this idea of a Mindful Utopia lying on the other side of capitalism (which rests upon the kinds of knowledges, processes, and practices that we have associated with Mindfulness) is that we will not (and cannot) know what it will look like until it arrives and we experience it.

Indeed, in a sense, it’s entirely possible that your practice has allowed you to experience this already and hence that you live in this utopia right now, and that I don’t live in it precisely because I haven’t experienced it yet.

If you think that’s the case, please let me know – I’ll be really happy to hear from you!

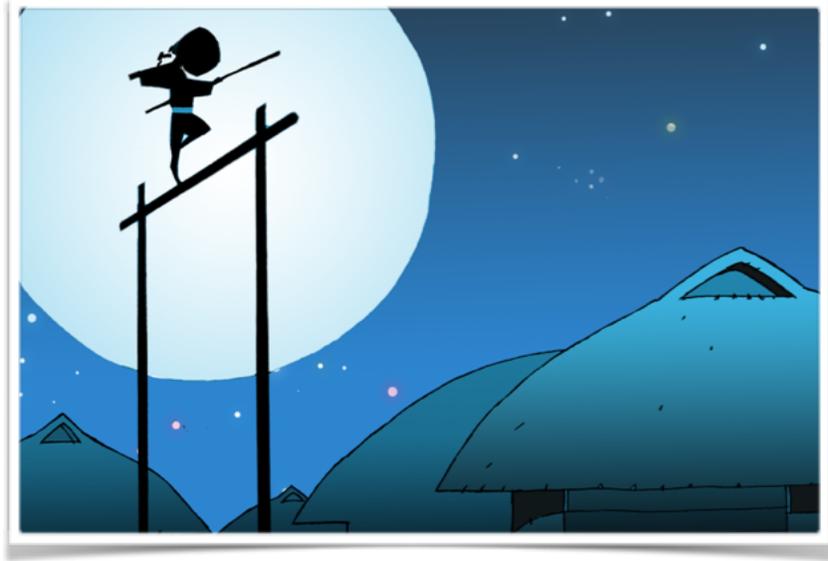
As it happens, these kinds of fears and uncertainties about the implications and impacts of Mindfulness on individuals and on society are also discussed in the Buddhist literature. Indeed, at the level of the individual we’ve seen some of this with respect to the emergence of existential anxiety during meditation practices.

One of the fascinating and elegant implications of this is that critiques of Mindfulness like those of Zizek might be reinterpreted as evidence of a psychology of fear. Our fear that we will become slaves or zombies is a device generated by our subconscious to prevent us from continuing our practice and transforming ourselves. In the language of Buddhism, this fear is a form of Mara (the daemon who attempted to prevent Buddha from attaining Enlightenment by tempting and frightening him with images of

desire and aversion). But in the end, as we know, Mindfulness is specifically tasked with tackling our enslavement to desires and aversions.

So, before we move on to consider the relationship between Mindfulness and violence in the next session, I'd just like to leave you with these wise words by Joseph Goldstein:

'Meditators sometimes report that fear of liberation holds them back in their practice; as they proceed into unchartered territory, fear of the unknown becomes an obstacle to surrender. But this is not really fear of enlightenment. It is rather fear of ideas about enlightenment ... The mind might invent many different images of the experience of liberation. Sometimes our ego creates images of its own death that frighten us' (§, emphasis added).



4.2. Martial Mindfulness

In the previous sessions of this module we've explored some of the large, architectural questions about the possible impact of Mindfulness on society as a whole. In this session, we're going to focus a little more closely on one of the most controversial areas with which Mindfulness is often associated – the conduct of violence and the deployment of Mindfulness in the military. In recent years, there has been considerable growth of interest in Mindfulness for soldiers, with many national militaries adopting training programmes of various kinds; we'll look at some of the reasons for this and some of the concerns today.

In fact, as we saw in the very first module of this course, quite a few people become interested in Mindfulness because of a perceived connection between it and the martial arts. This representation is fuelled by all kinds of popular media, where the image of the warrior-monk has become so pervasive that it is now a cliché. These images range from representations of the mythic ninja sitting in meditation in order to cultivate greater martial efficacy, to depictions of Jedi-knights quieting their minds in order to listen to the living force around them.

These romantic ideas of the mindful warrior have considerable appeal in contemporary societies, but not only in contemporary societies. Indeed, as we've already seen, to the extent that modern forms of the martial arts rest upon real historical traditions in Asia,

we can find considerable support for the veracity of aspirational figures like the mindful swordsman, especially in the Zen traditions of Japan.

In various ways, much of the literature about the connections between the cultivation of Mindfulness and the practice of the martial arts rely on more generic connections between Mindfulness and the practice of skilled actions more widely. To some extent, the cultivation of Mindfulness through martial arts emerges as a species of the practice of what we have called (and experienced as) Mindful Movement.

That is, Mindfulness in the martial arts, like Mindfulness in yoga or qi-gong (or simply while stretching, walking, or climbing a mountain), involves bringing our attention into the particular sensations of the present moment as our bodies work to perform specific actions. A punch, a kick, a lock, or a throw is just as legitimate as a site of attention, awareness, and discipline as a yoga pose or a deliberate step.

Indeed, like some of these other bodily practices, the martial arts involve some of the same basic tensions with the idea of Mindfulness. We might entertain two of them very briefly: the first is a concern about aspiration and judgement – that is, when we're performing specific techniques that are cultivated for specific purposes, we quite often find ourselves judging our performance in terms of those purposes.



So, rather than practicing a kick as an opportunity for Mindful action, we quite easily and naturally slip into judging the perfection and effectiveness of the kick as a kick, we berate ourselves for our lack of flexibility, strength, or precision, and then we resolve to practice harder in order to improve. This pattern of 'discrepancy-based thinking' is exactly the kind of thinking that Mindfulness is supposed to help us to overcome. So it's something to which we need to be alert when incorporating Mindfulness into skilled actions of various kinds, not only the martial arts.

The second tension revolves around the idea of 'auto-pilot.' This contemplative discourse of the martial arts is often concerned with how repeated practice of the same techniques leads to a moment of sublimation of those techniques – that is, our training is a process of constant repetition designed to liberate us from having

to pay attention to our actions at all. The goal is precisely to cultivate a form of auto-pilot, as a form of emancipation from our selves. When we have to think carefully about our movements and techniques (as we might in a Mindful Movement exercise) the chances are very low that such techniques will be effective; indeed, to some extent, mastering a martial art means no longer having to pay attention to what your body is doing because it does it all by itself.

This interpretation of ‘auto-pilot’ resembles the kind of thinking that Mindfulness is supposed to help us to overcome. So it’s something to which we need to be alert when incorporating Mindfulness into skilled actions of various kinds, not only the martial arts.

Between them, these two concerns contribute to an explanation for why most practitioners who seek to combine Mindfulness and the martial arts tend to prefer the ‘internal’ or ‘soft’ martial arts like Taiji quan, or allied forms like qi-gong, rather than more explosive styles like Karate or Taekwondo. Indeed, in general, martial arts that emphasis the cultivation of ‘qi’ (or ki) seem to lend themselves especially well to Mindfulness, since it is believed that the flow of qi in our bodies follows the flow of our attention. Hence, an exercise like the body-scan, for instance, might also be a means to lead qi throughout our entire bodies.



Of course, all of this overlooks one of the core defining features of the martial arts, which is this: they are not only systems of bodily movements; their focus is on the disciplined performance of violence and combat. And this basic fact provokes all kinds of ethical questions about the association between Mindfulness and the martial arts.

In fact, these questions have been long-standing features of the literature and practice of Mindfulness for centuries in East Asia in particular. In broad terms, there seem to be two interrelated concerns here: the first is that, as we’ve seen, it seems plausible that the practice and cultivation of Mindfulness enables the development of higher levels of expertise and skill in martial conduct; the second is that, as we’ve seen, the practice of Mindfulness is associated with the cultivation of forms of non-judgement and non-attachment that might disable our capacity to

make sound choices about when it is appropriate to perform violence.

The over-arching ethical question here is whether the cultivation of Mindfulness interferes with our ability to appreciate the moral significance of violence, and, indeed, whether it is ever appropriate to be non-judgemental about the exercise of violence.

Of course, it shouldn't be surprising to know that various Buddhist traditions have attempted to deal with these questions in very sophisticated ways. One of these ways is to make the experiential argument that our encounter with Mindfulness precisely means the accomplishment of moral wisdom about our actions, such that any genuinely Mindful behaviour is always and already ethically upright. That is, the meta-cognitive space of Mindfulness is a site of moral conduct.

However, in the context of secular Mindfulness which, as we've seen, is often constructed in the absence of Buddhist ethics, it is understandable that critics (like Slavoj Zizek, for instance) might argue that Mindfulness is a site of ethical vacuity – it contains the potential for good or evil depending upon how the individual chooses to make use of it. Indeed, Zizek likens it to the Force in Star Wars, saying that practitioners are poised between the Dark Side of the Sith and the Light Side of the Jedi, but that the Force itself makes no necessary tendency in either direction.

For these reasons and others, the use of Mindfulness in the military today is seen by some commentators as a dangerous perversion of the moral intentionality of Mindfulness. For others, however, soldiers are people too, and they perform invaluable tasks for the societies that they protect. Indeed, soldiers work in some of the most stress-inducing and traumatizing environments imaginable, so it seems entirely appropriate that they should be given the opportunity to benefit from Mindfulness training.

To be clear, as far as I'm aware, militaries are no longer pursuing a fantastical 'First Earth Battalion' programme to train psychic soldiers – warrior monks or Jedi – as allegedly attempted by the US Army in 1970s. Soldiers are not taught to meditate in order to be able to levitate, walk through walls, or kill people with their minds.



Rather, Mindfulness training has been adopted by many militaries as an efficacious way to support soldiers dealing with stress, trauma, depression, and anxiety disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Recent studies in this area have focussed on how Mindfulness Interventions help soldiers to recover from their experiences in combat zones after they return home, but also on how they can help soldiers to cultivate a form of ‘mental armour’ before they are deployed. Rather than (or as well as) being a form of stress reduction (as we saw in MBSR), Mindfulness in military contexts is also envisioned as a form of ‘stress resilience’ or resistance. Preliminary studies also seem to suggest that Mindfulness training makes soldiers less impulsive and more considered in their actions during deployment, raising the possibility of more compassionate and less reactionary military interventions.

The basic idea in such contexts is that conventional military training makes soldiers physically resilient and tough, so why should it not also make them psychically or mentally resilient as well? Indeed, one of the customised Mindfulness Training programmes for the military is called Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training (MMFT or M-Fit).

Again, as with many of the issues we’ve looked at regarding Mindfulness as a therapeutic technology, there seems to be clear water between the benefits to individual health and well-being provided by this training, and then larger questions of the social, political, and ethical significance of this training for society as a whole.

Taking a lead from this dilemma, in our next session we’re going to look at the question of Mindfulness in education today. More than just about anywhere else, the educational setting is one in which society’s norms and values are cultivated, defended, and challenged.



4.3. Education

So far in this module we've looked at some ideas about the general impact of Mindfulness on society as well as some specific ideas about the relationship between Mindfulness and military action. In this session we're going to consider some of the ways in which Mindfulness relates to one of the most important institutions in any society: education.

One of the major roles of education is to cultivate and disseminate a society's norms and values, passing them along to the next generation of citizens. This makes any and all changes to the educational environment deeply contentious and controversial, especially if those changes appear to challenge any of these norms and values.

With respect to Mindfulness training in schools, then, one of the early dilemmas has been about the nature of the relationship between Mindfulness and Buddhism. In particular, if it's the case that Mindfulness is a kind of Buddhism, does that make it into a form of religious education that should not be part of a mainstream, secular education in a liberal democracy? Taking this even further, if Mindfulness is essentially Buddhist, is it even imaginable that it could have any place in a religious denominational school dedicated to other religions?

As we have seen, however, it is relatively clear that modern, construct Mindfulness need not be related to Buddhism – and it is

certainly not necessarily related to Buddhism. That is, construct Mindfulness can be taught and learned as a technology or skill without dealing with its wider associations and implications.

In it in this spirit – ie. in the spirit of a value-neutral skills education – that Mindfulness has been introduced into schools in various places. In the UK, for instance, the so-called ‘dot B’ programme has been very successful for teenagers (11-18 years) as has the ‘paws B’ programme for children (7-11 years), both of which emerge from the important and influential Mindfulness In Schools Project.

These programmes are clear and forceful about what they are not. Their literature explains that they are not:

‘Soft, fluffy, hippy dippy,’ but instead they are based on scientific evidence about the efficacy of particular techniques;

‘Buddhism by the back door,’ but instead they are thoroughly secular technologies that can be used by anyone without conflicting with any of their existing beliefs;

‘Therapy,’ but instead they are educational programmes designed to teach specific transferable skills.

Of course, as we’ve seen, none of these claims are uncontested, but it's very clear that these do represent the purpose and force of the interventions framed by the Mindfulness in Schools Project. The purpose here is to help school children to gain some of the psychological benefits that we have seen as associated with Mindfulness training as a means to improve the quality of their experience at school as well as their performance at school. And evidence does indeed suggest that such programmes are pretty successful in these terms.

In general, students experience similar benefits from Mindfulness training as everyone else – after all, students are people too. So, evidence suggests that Mindfulness can reduce student stress and anxiety, reduce tendencies towards depression; it can also help with improving concentration, enhancing creativity, and bolstering sociability.

However, one of the great challenges for Mindfulness training in schools, of course, is how to capture the interest and attention of

young minds, which are even more constantly and intensely distracted by mobile phones, hunger, fashion, popularity etc. than older minds. Hence, dotB and other programmes in schools have had to develop new techniques and exercises in order to reach the same ends. One very effective, simple exercise for instance (which we can try in our meditation lab) is to ring a bell in class and to ask students to raise their hands when they can no longer hear it. Indeed, the 10-week dotB programme has been designed from the ground up for this particular population.

The flip side of Mindfulness in education is the way that it might support teachers. Like soldiers in our last session, teachers work in unusually stressful (and sometimes dangerous) environments, which can have seriously detrimental effects on their health as well as their well-being and performance in the work-place. Again, teachers are people too, so Mindfulness Interventions like MBSR have been shown to be quite effective in supporting and enhancing the well-being of teachers.



Anecdotally, some teachers also report feeling that their teaching improves when they cultivate greater attention to the present moment in class. Rather than clicking into auto-pilot when covering familiar material that they have taught dozens of times, it keeps them present and attentive to both the material and the responses of the students. I know of some teachers who attempt to promote this in themselves by, for instance, removing their shoes when they teach, so that they are (literally and physically) more in touch with the ground as they speak and listen.

This apparently innocent (if potentially quite smelly) move by a teacher (to remove their shoes in class) actually hides a really important and potentially radical issue for schools. For one thing, it might be seen as representing a shift in the power dynamics of the classroom, from more to less formal. It's a small step, for instance, between the teacher removing her shoes and then all the students doing the same thing. Then you have a classroom in which nobody has to wear shoes. For some, this is a vision of chaos and horror!

Of course, the shoes are not themselves the point – they are the proverbial finger point at the moon: In my classroom here in Leiden University, for instance – a rather conservative, old European university – I'm quite happy for students to sit on the

floor during class, if that helps them to concentrate. I often do it myself. Or I sit on the desk. I'm quite happy for people to take their shoes off if this works for them.

So, I've had the experience of colleagues walking into my class and finding all of us sitting on the floor without our shoes on, disputing heatedly about some issue in philosophy; and then my colleagues freak out because to them education involves standing at the front of a room full of neatly dressed students in well-polished shoes, sitting on neatly arranged chairs, and professing to them while they take notes. To them, in other words, education involves the performance of power over students.

Of course, I'm not saying that there should be no rules in universities and I'm not even saying that professors should not have power over students, but I am observing that the more we pay attention in a particular way (on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally), the less likely it is that those power relations will feel so basic to the classroom experience. Indeed, they begin to feel cosmetic and artificial, perhaps they even feel like obstacles to an atmosphere of productivity, trust, and communication.

But again, these examples are indications rather than arguments. They point us towards some of the potentially radical implications of Mindfulness in education. This is not about concrete practices in the classroom and not even about the materials taught in those classrooms, rather it is about the ethos of education in general.

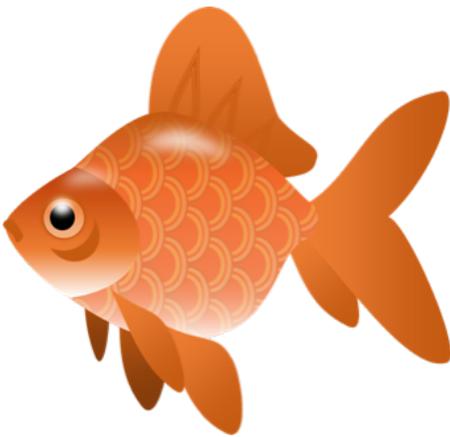
As we've already seen in this module, there is considerable debate about whether Mindfulness is implicated in the production of conformist, accepting students who learn not to challenge authority, or whether Mindfulness is a radicalizing technology that encourages students not to accept anything before they have experienced it for themselves. Does Mindfulness in education produce slaves to capitalism or rebels seeking to overthrow it? Or both? Or neither?

In the end, this issue speaks to much larger questions about the purpose of education in general. Schools and universities today are under increasing pressure to focus on training students for specific tasks in the workplace, rather than on educating them into fully

rounded human beings. As a result, the Humanities and the Liberal Arts are somewhat under siege.

In this way, I see Mindfulness and the advent of Contemplative Studies in major centres like Brown University in the USA as allied to a Liberal Arts agenda to reclaim the humanistic purpose of the university, to help students to learn how to discipline and control their attention and awareness, to bring it to bear on all those things that we might otherwise take for granted (just because authority tells us they are so).

You may recall David Foster Wallace's parable of the two fish from module 2, when we used it as a way to explain what Mindfulness means. But it's important to know that Wallace wrote that brilliant little story to express his views on the importance of the liberal arts in education, as part of a commencement speech at Kenyon College.



There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says 'Morning boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?'

And we may also recall from module 3 that William James also advocated the value of a liberal education by bringing our attention to the question of our ability to bring our attention to (and then back to and back to and back to) those things we chose to focus on. Indeed, he said:

The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. No one is compos sui if he have it not. An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about. (1890).

And it is at least debateable that the 'practical directions' that James struggled to provide might relate to the practice of Mindfulness today. Is Mindfulness the best way to answer the question of Wallace's fish: what the hell is water?

In our next session, we move away from the possibilities of Mindfulness as a radical ideological intervention and towards its possibilities as a commodity in capitalist societies.



4.4. Industry & Commerce

One of the things that is hard to ignore about Mindfulness today is that it is deeply and painfully fashionable. No matter what our concerns might be about the social issues we've dealt with in this module so far (the ethics of capitalism, the relationship between self-cultivation and violence, or the purpose of a modern educational system) it's difficult to ignore the urge to buy a new meditation cushion, download a new app on our smartphone, or purchase a new device to monitor our heart rate while sit silently on a custom-made platform overlooking the ocean for \$40 an hour.

With fashion comes fashion. We can now buy special thermal meditation clothes that keep our joints warm while we sit motionlessly. We can have our hair cut into the mythical styles of legendary gurus. We can buy jewellery emblazoned with Sanskrit text to deepen our practice and identify us as travellers of the Path, or bracelets with hand-carved beads made from semi-precious stones or rare woods for each breath we take.

We can buy wearable technology that measures our heart, our breath, and even our brain waves, explaining to us whether we have made progress in a quantifiable way. Indeed, we can even use these devices to make our meditation into a competitive sport: I can demonstrate statistically that I was more mindful than you today, but that I was only the 15th most mindful person in my local area.

I can subscribe to courses about mindfulness, about mindful eating, mindful walking, mindful motion, mindful talking, mindful leadership, mindful working, mindful drinking, mindful relationships, instant mindfulness ... even mindful sleeping.

Indeed, I can now spend my entire day engaged with the mindfulness industry in dozens of different ways, spending hundreds of dollars, and not once have engaged in even a single moment of Mindfulness practice.

It is one of the most revealing ironies of this field that a simple practice that emphasises liberation from arbitrary desires and attachment to external objects should spawn a marketplace worth more than a billion dollars per year in the USA alone. A practice that calls on us to interrupt our tendencies towards unreflective, impulsive or compulsive behaviours (that do not nourish us but diminish us) has given rise to an industry of gimmicks and toys that we snap up without thinking.

When I say this is an irony, I mean this partly because many people use this ballooning industry as evidence that we are in the midst of a Mindfulness Revolution. Mindfulness seems to be everywhere. And there is a sense in which this does show that aspects of Mindfulness (ie. those aspects that can be monetized) have permeated into mainstream culture.

However, the irony here is that this kind of commodification and commercialization of Mindfulness actually serves as evidence that the Mindfulness Movement has not yet succeeded in working a transformation on the norms and values of our culture and societies. For as long as society sees Mindfulness as something that can be wrapped in cellophane and bought in a shop or online, we remain as far away from the revolution as we've ever been.

We've already seen how, if it means anything at all, the Mindfulness Revolution means transforming the way that we understand and signify the devices and structures of capitalism around us. So, if Mindfulness isn't accomplishing this for me or for you, then either we're not part of the Revolution, or there simply isn't one to be part of. Mindfulness emerges as just another commodity in the marketplace, like football or Lego.

We don't need to sit on a particular cushion (although we might like to), and we don't need to sit in a particular place (although we might like to), and we don't need to smell particular smells or wear particular clothes (although we might like to).

So, it is important for people who are studying and practicing Mindfulness to remember that there are no necessary or sufficient trappings. We don't need any particular equipment or any particular spaces in order to bring our attention to the present moment on purpose and non-judgementally.

We don't need to sit on a particular cushion (although we might like to), and we don't need to sit in a particular place (although we might like to), and we don't need to smell particular smells or wear particular clothes (although we might like to). Mindfulness is simply about bringing our attention and awareness to how things actually are with a compassionate sense of acceptance, howsoever they are. It's not about striving to construct material conditions that make doing this more pleasurable or easy for us (although we might like it to be).

Just to be clear, I'm not saying that the Mindfulness Industry has no value – indeed, it's clearly worth more than a billion dollars. All I'm saying is that the relationship between the Mindfulness Industry and your practice of Mindfulness is not obvious or clear.

I'm not saying that you are wrong to want to sit on a new cushion rather than on the old one you've had for 10 years. And I'm not saying that you're wrong to want to practice on the top of a mountain or in a carefully constructed meditation studio in the heart of a bustling city, rather than on the bus or in the kitchen. All I'm saying is, you don't need these things in order to practice; in order to practice you just need to stop and practice. It's as immediate and free as taking a breath. You can do it right now ... let's do this right now ... just pause and do a 3-step breathing space. Or don't pause and do the breathing space anyway while you continue reading. It doesn't matter!

The point here is to try to be more Mindful of how we engage with society, including with the Mindfulness Industry that is part of that society. Remember, the industry is part of society, not part of your practice.

For some of us, it is genuinely useful to have a material something-or-another to which we can shift our attention in order to help us regulate our emotional arousal by moving the quality of our experience onto something else. If wearing a bracelet or sitting on a particular cushion does this for you, then great. But don't assume

Remember, the mindfulness industry is part of society, it's not a necessary part of your practice. You can make choices about your engagement with it, and perhaps those can be mindful choices ...

that it will for you just because it does for someone else (or, even worse, just because you're told it will by an advertisement). Neither the bracelet nor the cushion have magical powers to make you more Mindful. Only you can do that, and you already know how to do it without these things.

I have this bracelet; it means a lot to me and I find that it helps me to regulate myself. When I see it, I'm reminded of what it stands for (to me), and that in itself helps to affect a shift in the quality of my attention. It reminds me to make the effort. It triggers my practice. It doesn't replace it.

In short, there is nothing you can buy that will make you instantly Mindful or provide you with a short-cut. Believing and behaving as though this is possible is part of the evidence that the Mindfulness Revolution has not yet happened. Of course, you might want to buy stuff as a fashion statement or just because you like it, and that's obviously fine and splendid. And the fact that people want to cloth themselves in a Mindful-like identity also says something about the status of Mindfulness in today's societies and cultures.



Finally, we should also spend a moment on the commercialization of Mindfulness Training, by which I mean the packaging of Mindfulness training programmes as commodities that can be sold to the general public or to specific client-groups. These could range from online subscription services (that individuals can take with them anywhere they go to bolster their well-being) to professional interventions in corporate settings (designed to bolster productivity and efficiency in the work place).

One of the things we've already discussed at length is the importance of understanding the responsibility of teachers of Mindfulness, and it's important to think about these responsibilities in the context of an unregulated industry. While many companies take these issues very seriously and some provide excellent training opportunities for clients, it's important to keep in mind that some do not – for some there is a straight-forward and cynical attempt to 'cash-in' on the fashion for Mindfulness. In the worst cases, this can involve exploiting the vulnerabilities of populations who need support. Hence, provision can be uneven and sometimes even irresponsible. Somewhat ironically, this is not only true of some commercial ventures, but also of some Buddhist organizations who attempt to appropriate Mindfulness as their

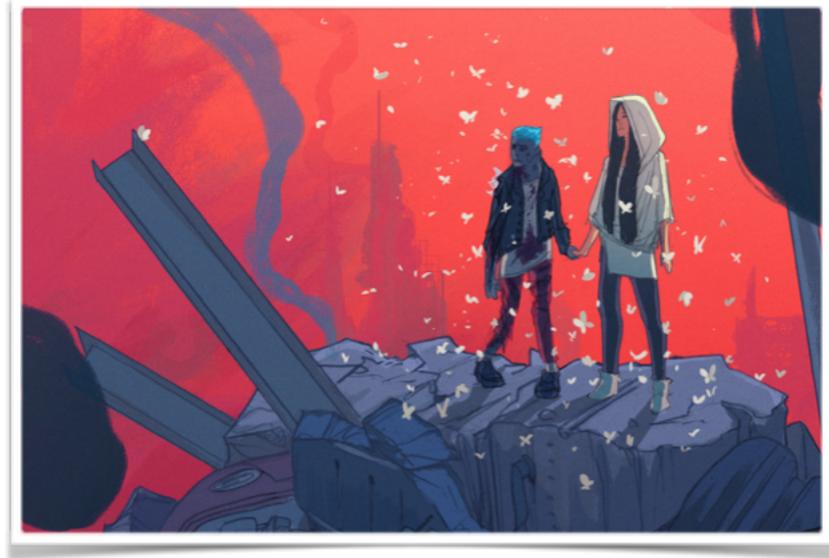
own in an attempt to get people in the doors of their temples and raise enough money to repair the roof.

As we saw earlier in this module, the best hope for regulation in an unregulated space like this might simply be the market itself. There are some very successful companies providing Mindfulness training in various ways, and for those who believe in the power of the free market this is in itself an indication of the quality and reliability of their services. Such companies contribute directly to furthering the Mindfulness Movement in societies today.

However, as we've also seen in this module, one of the big questions about the role of Mindfulness in society today is about the extent to which it should be disruptive of capitalism rather than furthering its interests. So, if we take a more radical stance on the potentials of Mindfulness, then commercial success might indicate the ethical and ideological failure of this potential.

In the end, then, the Mindfulness Industry is a complex and fascinating space in which many of the most interesting and important issues surrounding contemporary Mindfulness play themselves out. It is a vibrant and experimental space, full of risks and opportunities for everyone involved. If we learn nothing else from this course, we should at least learn to enter this social space Mindfully, making sure that we bring a quality of attention to it that enables us to make use of it in nourishing ways rather than to allow it to feed on us.

In the final session of this module, we'll take a look back over the issues about mindfulness in society and see whether there are common themes or concerns that can be highlighted.



4.5. Summary

There have been all kinds of troubling things in this module. So, if you find that you're troubled by some of them, then I suspect you're in good company. I know that I'm troubled by a lot of this stuff.

In earlier modules, we've really focussed on understanding and experiencing Mindfulness as an intensely personal practice that focuses inwardly on our individual health, well-being, and orientation to the world around us. That's already potentially troubling enough, at least for me. But then in this module we've made a really complicated transition to trying to understand and experience Mindfulness as a more externally oriented force in social and political life; this is a really serious conceptual and experiential challenge. And it is also a step that is not made in much of the scholarship about Mindfulness. Indeed, we might go so far as to say that much (not all, but much) of the work on Mindfulness today is politically naïve.

To some extent, this situation reflects the way that Mindfulness has emerged into the discourse of modernity as a therapeutic instrument. That is, its respectability as a technology or tool or skill or treatment rests largely upon its efficacy at the level of an individual's psychology or neurophysiology. Nearly all of the self-help books that we can buy are focussed on utilizing Mindfulness

as a way to (surprise surprise!) help one's self. Most of the scholarship about Mindfulness is focussed on assessing and analysing the extent to which it bolsters (or fails to bolster) various emotional and mental qualities. And thus most of the exercises we practice when we practice Mindfulness are also focussed on our own sense of our adjustment or adaptation to the world around us. Hence, our theoretical and experiential knowledge of Mindfulness is strongly biased towards knowledge of ourselves and how we 'fit in' to the world, rather than towards how we might fashion the world around us into the kind of place into which we'd rather fit. So there appears to be (if not an anti-social bias) at least an a-social bias (ie. a bias away from concerns about society).



Having said this, (even if it's correct) it seems naïve to assume that this kind of vision of the role and meaning of Mindfulness does not already contain social, political, and ethical implications. In some ways, this is simply the naïveté of assuming that anyone is able to live in complete isolation from society today, and hence that their actions, opinions, and self-transformations have no impact on anyone else.

So, if you find that you're instinctively dubious about whether we need to consider the societal impact of Mindfulness (because you believe that your Mindfulness practice is wholly and exclusively yours, about you and your relationship with yourself, whatever your 'self' might turn out to be), it's worth taking a moment to look around you, wherever you happen to be right now.

At the most immediate level, most of us know some other people. Or, at least, we've met some other people, and we might even see some of them quite regularly, sometimes on purpose. We might even like some of them, and think of them as family, or friends, or lovers, or colleagues, or whatever. A really interesting question, then, might be whether they have noticed that you have started to practice Mindfulness. And if they have noticed, what is it that is noticeable to them about this? If they've noticed, the chances are good that it's because something about you has changed, and that this change is somehow visible to and affective on the people around you. It's actually a really interesting experiment: you might try asking people this week whether they've seen any change in you, and perhaps you might share what you discover with your fellow students or with me.

For my part, as someone who has taught Mindfulness to a lot of people over the years, I can honestly say that I have seen lots of these people change as a result of their practice – not everyone, of course, but enough for the tendency to be clear and noteworthy. And importantly, I've seen how (at least some) people change the way that they interact with other people in the group, and I've listened to so many people explain to me how they feel that they have changed the way they relate to and interact with other people in their lives. Indeed, there are now quite a few scientific studies focussed on how the practice of Mindfulness might impact on our interpersonal attitudes and skills.

All of the Mindfulness students here at Leiden University complete a kind of journal that documents their experiences during and after the course. And quite a few of them report various things that have very clear social, ethical, or even political implications. This year, for instance, several students noticed that they had become vegetarians during the course. Their reasons for this were interesting: they made no association with the fact that many traditions of Buddhism advocate vegetarianism, and instead they explained that the experience of trying to eat more Mindfully simply made the thought (and practice) of eating meat rather horrifying for them. When they took the time to be fully aware of what they were eating, they just could not eat meat; and this emerged as a direct experiential insight for them.

Now, I'm not saying that everyone has this experience, nor that there is anything objectively true or ethical about their insight or choices. This is not about whether all Mindfulness practitioners (or even all people) should be vegetarian. Indeed, quite the contrary, what I'm saying about this is that these particular students had these particular experiences that felt subjectively true and insightful, and led to choices that felt authentic and ethical to them. They learned something about themselves and their relationship with the world around them, of which they'd previously been unaware, and then they made a change to how they choose to live in that world.

The point here is not that we should all become vegetarians, but rather the point is simply to acknowledge that the practice of Mindfulness can change the way we live our lives (in accordance with the lessons we learn from our own direct experiences).

Hence, at the very least, even without talk of revolutions or movements, we might have to accept that Mindfulness can have meaningful and rather significant impacts on society.



Indeed, one of the intuitively appealing aspects of Mindfulness as a force for social change is that it is a profoundly grassroots driven movement. By this I mean that it works on society through the actions and intentions of individuals who change their behaviours because of their own insight into themselves. It's not about (and cannot be about) grand political organizations or evangelical rallies in which we're told by others what should feel right to us. It's about sincerely checking in with ourselves to see what actually does feel right to us, and then acting on it.

So, while it's possible that something like a coherent Mindfulness Movement could emerge, this is only legitimate if it happens to be the case that enough people discover something sufficiently similar about themselves and the world when they practice Mindfulness (or, even better, if what we discover in moments of Mindfulness is actually some form of transpersonal, shared ground for all humanity).

It's also possible, then, that something like a coherent Mindfulness Movement is simply impossible, and that a Mindful Society might resemble a kind of chaos of compassion, with each individual behaving in sincere accord with their own authentically felt, subjective insights and experiences.

What is clear, though, is that we all have to take our own stand on all of this, based on our own understanding drawn from our own experience of Mindfulness itself. In the end, as we've seen, Mindfulness is about attention, awareness, discipline, and compassion – we practice precisely so that we can make more skilful and wise decisions about how we should live in the world and so that we can recognise the ways in which how we choose to live in the world impacts on it.

In other words, one of the really heartening and encouraging features of Mindfulness as a social and political force is that it clearly emphasises the importance and value of the little, everyday things that we can contribute. We don't need to aspire to change the whole world all at once, we just need to change it as we go

along ... as we eat and walk and practice little, trivial, unimportant things everyday.

So, at the end of this module about the social and political impact of Mindfulness, it's worth taking some time for each of us to reflect on whether our practice has changed the way we relate to other people or to objects and commodities around us, not because we've been told that it should but because it feels like it has. As we move towards the end of this course as a whole, in the next (and final) session, it's a good opportunity to look back over our practice journals to check-in to see whether our attitudes and actions have changed ... or not.



These readings have been prepared to support students of the Coursera MOOC: *De-Mystifying Mindfulness*. They are based on the lectures written for the course; the intention is to develop them into chapters for a comprehensive open-access textbook to support learning in this field. The images were conceptualized by Chris Goto-Jones with art by Siku, copyright on the images is reserved, mentalpraxis.com (2016). Additional images (zombie apocalypse) were conceptualized by Chris Goto-Jones with art by Ricardo Bessa, copyright on the images is reserved, mentalpraxis.com (2016)

We invite feedback and suggestions for additional material for these readings.

We also invite donations to assist in our mission to make this material available to anyone, anywhere who might benefit from it: *building knowledge for a more a more mindful world.*

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