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McDonaldizing Spirituality: Mindfulness, Education, and Consumerism

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Abstract

The exponential growth of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) in recent years has resulted in a marketisation and commodification of practice—popularly labeled "McMindfulness"—which divorces mindfulness from its spiritual and ethical origins in Buddhist traditions. Such commodification is criticized by utilising ideas and insights drawn from work in educational philosophy and policy analysis. The "McDonaldization" process is applied to the emerging populist versions of mindfulness and analysed in some detail, alongside the capitalization and marketisation of MBIs on the McMindfulness model. The central argument is that the crucial educational function of MBIs needs to be informed by the moral virtues which are at the heart of Buddhist mindfulness. Without such an ethical and educational foundation—actively connected with engaged Buddhist foundations aimed at individual and social transformation—mindfulness becomes just another fashionable self-help gimmick that is unlikely to be of any lasting individual or social benefit.

Keywords

mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), McMindfulness, commodification, McDonaldization, Buddhist ethics, education philosophy, education policy, social transformation

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In a recent article in the UK newspaper, *The Guardian*, Jon Kabat-Zinn (2015)—arguably, the person most responsible for the "mindfulness revolution" (Boyce, 2011) which has influenced so many aspects of academia and popular culture in the last decade or so—noted the emergence of

> concerns that a sort of superficial "McMindfulness" is taking over which ignores the ethical foundations of the meditative practices and traditions from which mindfulness has emerged, and divorces it from its profoundly transformative potential. (p. 1)

Kabat-Zinn was fully justified in referring to such concerns although his fairly anodyne remarks about the dangers of seeing mindfulness as a panacea fail to do justice to the enormity of the problems raised by the exponential growth of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) in recent years.

The *Guardian* piece was intended to coincide with the publication of *Mindful Nation UK* by the Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group (MAPPG, 2015) in Britain. Recommendations—all generally favourable to mindfulness practices—were made in the Report for the introduction of MBIs in four key areas: health, education, the workplace, and the criminal justice system. The fact that—in a time of economic austerity and severe cutbacks in public services—a group of British parliamentarians considered it worthwhile to promote mindfulness in this way is in itself ample testimony to the extent to which mindfulness has swept virus-like through academia, public life, and popular culture over the last decade or so (Hyland, 2016). In 2011, Wallis was bemoaning the fact that the mindfulness "juggernaut continues to roll joyously throughout the wounded world of late-capitalism" (p. 1). Five years later, mindfulness has now become a massively influential meme, a valuable product, a fashionable spiritual commodity with enormous market potential and, in its populist forms, has been transmuted into an all-pervasive "McMindfulness" (Purser & Loy, 2013) phenomenon.

The Commodification of Mindfulness

The reductionist, commodified forms of mindfulness practice—popularly known as McMindfulness—have been brought about by a number of processes operating within academia and the public socioeconomic sphere. In the academic sphere, mindfulness has been taken up most energetically by psychologists, psychotherapists, and educators, and there has been an exponential growth of publications measuring the impact of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and related mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) programmes on anxiety, depression, and chronic pain sufferers, on addictions of various kinds, and to enhance mind/body well-being generally (Hyland, 2015a). Since his original MBSR programme has played such a large part in generating much of this research activity, Kabat-Zinn's criticisms of contemporary developments are understandably nuanced. Acknowledging the "challenging circumstances relating to the major cultural and

epistemological shifts" as Buddhist meditation was introduced into clinical and psychological settings, Williams and Kabat-Zinn (2013) observe that:

> Buddhist scholars, in particular, may feel that the essential meaning of mindfulness may have been exploited, or distorted, or abstracted from its essential ecological niche in ways that may threaten its deep meaning, its integrity, and its potential value. (p. 11)

Kabat-Zinn (2015) has latterly acknowledged that there are "opportunistic elements" for whom "mindfulness has become a business that can only disappoint the vulnerable consumers who look to it as a panacea" (p. 1). Committed mindfulness practitioners would want to endorse the conception of mindfulness as a "way of being" which needs to be grounded in the "meditative practices and traditions from which mindfulness has emerged" (Kabat-Zinn, 2015). However, the opportunistic elements warned against by Kabat-Zinn are surely underestimated here, and there is insufficient attention given to the ways in which such forces have managed to produce a grossly mutated version of mindfulness until it has now become a commodified consumerist product used to sell everything from colouring books and musical relaxation compact discs (CDs) to "apps" for mindful gardening, cooking, and driving. Such commercial activity—arguably a paradigm case of McMindfulness—results in the *misuse* of mindfulness, whereas the inclusion of mindfulness in U.S. army training regimes and by Google in staff development programmes (Stone, 2014) clearly raises issues about the outright *abuse* of MBIs since foundational mindfulness values such as right livelihood, loving-kindness, compassion, and nonmaterialism are self-evidently and fundamentally at odds with aspects of the core business of corporations and the military. As a practitioner and teacher of mindfulness in adult education contexts, I find that such misuse/abuse of practice causes much consternation and soul-searching in participants.

McDonaldizing mindfulness. The process by which McMindfulness has been produced—McDonaldization—was originally coined and developed by Ritzer (2000) in the construction of a model informed by Weber's writings to describe and explain the increasing technical rationalization and standardization of more and more aspects of social, economic, political life, and culture. As a form of policy analysis, Ritzer's model has been used extensively to critique developments in education (Hartley, 1995; Hyland, 1999) and other spheres of public life and culture (Alfino, Caputo, & Wynyard, 1998) and its main stages can be usefully employed to map the emergence of McMindfulness. There are four main elements, and they are worth examining in some detail in relation to the evolution of the commodified versions of mindfulness practices.

Efficiency. Defined by Ritzer (2000) as "choosing the optimum means to a given end" (p.40), efficiency results in streamlining, standardization, and simplification of both the product and its delivery to customers. In terms of items sold under the

mindfulness label, this process is relatively simple. If you want to maximize the sales of a colouring book, you just put mindfulness on the front cover (e.g., Farrarons, 2015), and the same principle applies to all cultural products such as self-help and health/well-being manuals (arguably, the most lucrative sphere) and leisure activities such as cooking, gardening, and sport. When it comes to mindfulness courses, the standardization process is greatly helped by having handy bite-sized MBSR/MBCT programmes to hand ready for delivery to potential consumers. Such courses are, of course, the original core vehicles for employing mindfulness practice to deal with depression, addiction, pain, and general mind/body afflictions. It is not suggested here that they are typical examples of McMindfulness. However, their 8-week structure—particularly as this is reduced, condensed, and transmuted into apps and online programmes (see "control" element below)—clearly lends itself to these efficiency conditions and is undoubtedly complicit if not directly responsible for the exponential growth of MBIs and the McMindfulness brand over the last decade or so.

Calculability. This element of the process involves "calculating, counting, and quantifying" such that this "becomes a surrogate for quality" (Ritzer, 2000, p. 62). Ritzer (2000) describes how the business of reducing "production and service to numbers"—examples of higher education, health care, and politics are offered in illustration (pp. 68–77)—results in regression to mediocre and lowest common denominator production and produce. The competence-based education and training techniques informed by behaviourist principles provide a graphic illustration of how this obsession with measuring outcomes—at the expense of process and underlying principles—can distort, deskill, and deprofessionalize education and training from school to university learning (Hyland, 1994, 2014). In a similar way, the drive to measure the outcomes of mindfulness has led to similar negative transmutations. Since the exponential development of the mindfulness industry, Grossman (2011) has been forceful in his criticisms of mindfulness measurement scales, particularly those relying upon self-reports by MBI course participants. The key weaknesses are that they decontextualise mindfulness from its ethical and attitudinal foundations, measure only specific aspects of mindfulness such as the capacity to stay in the present moment, attention span or transitory emotional state, and, in general terms, present a false and adulterated perspective on what mindfulness really is. Such developments are of precious little benefit to any of the interested parties whether they are, learners, teachers, mindfulness practitioners, or external agencies, interested in the potential benefits of MBIs. The position is summed up well by Grossman:

> Our apparent rush to measure and reify mindfulness—before attaining a certain depth of understanding—may prevent us from transcending worn and familiar views and concepts that only trivialize and limit what we think mindfulness is. The scientific method, with its iterative process of re-evaluation and improvement, cannot correct

> such fundamental conceptual misunderstandings but may actually serve to fortify them. (2011, p. 1038)

The proliferation of mindfulness scales which has accompanied the exponential growth of programmes has exacerbated this denaturing of the original conception, and it is now no longer clear precisely what is being measured. As Grossman and Van Dam (2011) note, such developments may prove counterproductive and unhelpful to all those working in the field. They argue further that:

> Definitions and operationalizations of mindfulness that do not take into account the gradual nature of training attention, the gradual progression in terms of greater stability of attention and vividness of experience or the enormous challenges inherent in living more mindfully, are very likely to misconstrue and banalize the construct of mindfulness, which is really not a construct as we traditionally understand it in Western psychology, but at depth, a way of being. (Grossman and Van Dam, 2011, p. 234)

Along with the gradualness of mindfulness development, this "way of being" is not susceptible to summative psychological testing. Instead, Grossman and Van Dam (2011) recommend formative assessment techniques employing longitudinal interviews and observations of MBI participants in specific contexts. More significantly, they go on to make the eminently sensible suggestion that "one viable option for preserving the integrity and richness of the Buddhist understanding of mindfulness might be to call those various qualities now purporting to be mindfulness by names much closer to what they actually represent" (Grossman and Van Dam, 2011, p. 234). There are also issues about the failure to record dropout (hidden failure) rates of MBIs and also the reporting of negative impacts of mindfulness experiences (Burkeman, 2016; Foster, 2016). On this crucial point, recent meta-analytical studies have discerned the positive skewing of results in 124 mindfulness treatment trials with the suggestion that wishful thinking may have led to negative outcomes going unpublished (Nowogrodzki, 2016). The dangers and pitfalls of summative measurement are returned to in later sections in relation to MBIs in educational contexts.

Predictability. In order to produce uniformity of outcomes in line with customer expectations, systems must be reasonably predictable and, to achieve this, a "rationalized society emphasizes discipline, order, systematization, formalization, routine, consistency, and methodical operation" (Ritzer, 2000, p. 83). The standardization of MBSR/MBCT programmes fully satisfies these predictability criteria. Kabat-Zinn's original 8-week course has been modified slightly over the years but remains essentially similar to the 1979 MBSR version. This includes—as Williams and Penman (2011) describe—the standard ideas about switching off the autopilot, moving from "doing" to "being," and so on, realized through breath meditation, body scan, noting pleasant/unpleasant thoughts and feelings, and the like. Similar "predictability" elements can be discerned in the strict control of teacher training for all those wishing to deliver such programmes (McCown, Reibel, & Micozzi, 2011).

Of course such "routinization" and standardization are ultimately justified in pragmatic terms of what has been shown to "work" in the sense of preventing relapse in depression sufferers, alleviating suffering for patients with chronic pain, and the other positive outcomes claimed for course participants. However, there is too little analysis of why it is just *these* standards and routines which need to be implemented and not potential alternatives. Why, for instance, is a course 8 but not 6 or 12 weeks long, and why so little attention given to the positive benefits of illness and the darker aspects of the human condition (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014)? There are also issues about the failure to record dropout (hidden failure) rates of MBIs and also the reporting of negative impacts of mindfulness experiences (Burkeman, 2016; Foster, 2016). Moreover, from an educational point of view, it may be more conducive to effective learning if flexibility of content and methods was allowed in accordance with the fostering of learner independence. Inflexibility linked to the strict adherence to prescribed routines, for example, has been cited as one of the reasons for the failure by the American Philosophy for Children programme to make any substantial impact on European educational systems (Hyland, 2003; Murris, 1994).

Control through nonhuman technology. The chief aim of this control element is to diminish the "uncertainties created by people" and "the ultimate is reached when employees are replaced by nonhuman technologies" (Ritzer, 2000, p. 121). On the face of it, MBIs seem to be quite some way from this form of control since they aim to foster values and dispositions which enhance human agency. However, the use of mindfulness in the military—particularly in the form of mindfulness-based mind fitness training (Purser, 2014a)—is, arguably, a clear case of control of human capabilities directed toward particular purposes, in this case the production of efficient national warriors. Allied with the increasing use of nonhuman drone technology, it is entirely possible that mindfulness can be implicated here in the production of more effective killing machines, obviously in direct contradiction of core ethical precepts (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Similarly, the use of mindfulness techniques by employers to influence employee attitudes and behaviour may be discerned in certain workplace applications (as discussed further below). Moreover, the increasing use of mindfulness apps such as "Buddhify," "Smiling Mind," and "Headspace" (http://www.independent.co.uk/extras/indybest/the-10-best-meditation-apps-8947570.html)—along with the increasing use of online versions of MBSR/MBCT programmes—provides ample evidence of the full satisfaction of Ritzer's fourth McDonaldization criterion.

The capitalization of mindfulness. Within the framework of the McDonaldization process outlined above, the exploitation of mindfulness by industry and corporate culture has contributed massively to its degeneration in recent years. The appropriation of MBIs by corporations such as Google has been labelled the "gentrification of the dharma" by Eaton (2014), who reports that "many Buddhists now fear their

religion is turning into a designer drug for the elite" (p. 1). In a similar critical vein, Stone (2014) has observed that:

> Mindfulness meditation has exploded into an industry that ranges from the monastery to the military. Google, General Mills, Procter & Gamble, Monsanto and the U.S. Army are just a handful of the many enormous institutions that bring meditative practice to their workforce. (p. 1)

Arguments that the corporate takeover of mindfulness might work to change the culture and improve working conditions for employees (see Wilhelmson, Aberg, Backstrom, & Olsson, 2015, for an account of the problems of introducing transformative methods into the workplace) are challenged by Purser and Ng (2015) who argue that many of the companies now offering MBIs as forms of stress reduction are actually responsible for causing such stress in the first place. As they contend:

> Buddhist teachings about awakening to the reality of impermanence "as it is" become inverted in corporate mindfulness. Instead of cultivating awareness of the contingencies of present reality that cause suffering, and thereby developing the capacity to intervene in those conditions of suffering, corporate mindfulness goes no further than encouraging individuals to manage stress so as to optimize performance within existing conditions of precarity—which, curiously, are portrayed as inevitable even as they demand flexibility from individuals. (p. 1)

The manic scramble by corporate organizations and workplace staff development firms to jump on the mindfulness bandwagon has direct parallels with the expropriation of the Protestant ethic to serve capitalist interests during the 18th century Industrial Revolution. Weber (1930/2014) described in some detail how the Calvinistic strands of Protestantism in particular were ideally suited to transform the "other worldly" ascetic aspects of Christianity into an enlightened "this worldly" materialistic principle which justified the new commercialism. Under the influence of the new trends, the "intensity of the search for the Kingdom of God commenced gradually to pass over into sober economic virtue" (p. 100). Weber goes on to observe:

> With the consciousness of standing in the fullness of God's grace and being visibly blessed by him, the citizen business man . . . could follow his pecuniary interests as he would and feel that he was fulfilling a duty in doing so. The power of religious asceticism provided him in addition with sober, conscientious, and unusually industrious workmen, who clung to their work as to a life purpose willed by God. Finally, it gave him the comforting assurance that the unequal distribution of the goods of this world was a special dispensation of Divine Providence . . . (Weber, 1930/2014, pp. 101–102)

This handy multipurpose nature of the religious ethic described by Weber is more than matched by the more recent appropriation of mindfulness spirituality on the part

of contemporary business interests. In contemporary economic culture, corporate mindfulness—McMindfulness—now stands in for the Protestant ethic. As Slvoj Zizek (2001) has suggested "if Max Weber were alive today, he would definitely write a second, supplementary, volume to his Protestant Ethic, entitled "The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism" (p. 1). He goes on to argue that:

> 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. (Zizek, 2001)

The capitalization of mindfulness achieves a number of desirable objectives for corporate and industrial users:

- Firms offering mindfulness have appreciated the enormous public relations potential of such provision. Mindfulness sessions in workplaces come to symbolize caring environments in which all the needs of employees—including psychological and spiritual, alongside the free coffees, and employer-friendly arrangements of space—are catered for to the fullest extent. Such a badge of spirituality becomes a valuable marketing tool—as the Apple founder, the late Steve Jobs realized (http://www.mindfulnessresource.org/category/steve-jobs/)—as well as being a convenient way of deflecting workers' claims for compensation for stress-related illnesses. If employees are stressed, after all, facilities in the form of in-house therapeutic and mindfulness classes are available to all.
- Marx saw clearly how religion—famously described as the "sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world . . . the opium of the people" (McLellan, 1977, p. 64)—functioned to support the socioeconomic status quo with its class divisions and inequalities. With the nature of things endorsed as a form of divine providence—and with the eyes of the masses turned toward other worldly affairs—the tragic social injustices and fundamental immorality of capitalist production and relationships were thus maintained and reproduced through religion. McMindfulness—now functioning to support the new "hegemonic ideology of global capitalism" (Zizek, 2001, p. 1)—serves a similar purpose in the contemporary capitalist economy by offering forms of spiritual support for oppressive working conditions and unequal industrial relations (Eaton, 2014; Purser & Ng, 2015). Major corporations relish staff development and training which encourages employees—naturally through mindful present-moment awareness—to say "yes" to all aspects of their experience no matter how painful and unpleasant (Amaranatho, 2015). Such "training" will guarantee a docile workforce in which there are few challenges to the status quo and which is claimed to lead to "improved productivity, improved creativity, less absenteeism, better communication, and interpersonal relating" (Amaranatho, 2015). Now, we can appreciate fully

why Google has invested so much in mindfulness-based activities (Bush, 2014).

- In addition to the substantial capitalist gains noted above, mindfulness has now been acknowledged as a valuable commodity in itself with enormous sales potential in a spiritually impoverished society. Kabat-Zinn's (2015) warning that MBSR "can never be a quick fix" and that there are grave dangers in ignoring "the ethical foundations of the meditative practices and traditions from which mindfulness has emerged" (Kabat-Zinn, 2015) has been completely ignored in the scramble to expropriate the mindfulness label to market just about any product imaginable. The proliferation of mindfulness apps and online programmes noted in the preceding section has contributing enormously to the marketising potential of this most lucrative spiritual commodity. Moreover, the virus-like spread of the meme now means that the mindfulness brand is now free-floating and available for use by anyone wishing to sell their products, whether these are colouring books or lifestyle programmes (for a satirical and humorous perspective on this crude commercialism, see the *Ladybird Book of Mindfulness*; Hazeley & Morris, 2016).

The emergence of the McMindfulness phenomenon in recent years closely follows and fully satisfies the Ritzer model of the increasing technical rationalization of all aspects of life. Harvey (2014) has described in graphic detail how the voracious appetite of neoliberal capitalism has come to devour all aspects of public and private spheres bringing about the total commodification of everyday life. As indicated above, the pseudospirituality of McMindfulness approaches has proved an invaluable vehicle—with far wider applications and purposes than its forerunner in the Protestant Ethic—for contemporary capitalist exploitation. It is crucial for committed practitioners to combat such developments, especially those who, like Stephen Batchelor, abhor a "dharma that is little more than a set of self-help techniques that enable us to operate more calmly and effectively as agents or clients, or both, of capitalist consumerism" (2015, Kindle edition, loc. 340).

Mindfulness, Ethics, and Education

It goes without saying that most serious and committed mindfulness practitioners and teachers would—along with Kabat-Zinn—deplore the McMindfulness developments noted above. What matters, however, is to inform the critiques of such degenerate interpretations with accounts of what is lost through the proliferation of mindfulness practices which are divorced from or at odds with the basic tenets of the Buddhist foundations. Predominant in this task must be the insistence that mindfulness becomes denatured and decontextualized if practice is divorced from the ethical foundations inherent in the universal dharma.

Mindful practices such as breath meditation, walking meditation, and mindful movement have been demonstrated to have positive impacts on the behaviour of people of all ages from school to lifelong learning (Burnett, 2011; Hyland,

2011;Langer, 2003). On the basis of 15 years of utilising mindfulness techniques in American schools and colleges, Schoeberlein and Sheth (2009) argue that:

> Mindfulness promotes resilience and enhances social and emotional competence. Mindfulness combined with empathy, kindness and compassion supports constructive action and caring behaviour. Living mindfully begets greater mindfulness. The more you practice, the more mindfulness will infuse your experience of life, work and relationships. (p. 178)

The suggestion—in both Buddhist contemplative traditions and modern therapeutic interpretations—is that the practice of mindfulness leads naturally to the moral principles underpinning the noble 8-fold path and is instrumental in fostering a form of virtue ethics (Gowans, 2015). Direct connections are made between the inner clarity that Siegel (2010) calls "mindsight"—the "focused attention that allows us to see the internal workings of our own minds" (p. xi)—and the foundations of morality. This is brought out clearly in Kabat-Zinn's (2005) discussion of mindfulness and the moral life. As he suggests, the "wholesome mind and body states"—the ethical foundations of mindfulness which tend to be neglected by McDonaldized approaches—resulting from the practice include:

> Generosity, trustworthiness, kindness, empathy, compassion, gratitude, joy in the good fortune of others, inclusiveness, acceptance and equanimity are qualities of mind and heart that further the possibilities of well-being and clarity within oneself, to say nothing of the beneficial effects they have in the world. They form the foundation for an ethical and moral life. (p. 103)

Although the process of ethical development within mindfulness practice can never be based on a simplistic input/output model (no more than any form of deep and rich teaching and learning), the centrality of the ethical dimension is clearly paramount. Schoeberlein and Sheth (2009) argue that "mindfulness and education are beautifully interwoven" (p. xi), but the specifically *educational* nature of MBIs needs to be foregrounded at all times if practices are to remain true to the ethical foundations outlined by Kabat-Zinn and committed mindfulness practitioners.

In explaining and justifying his conception of education as the initiation into worthwhile activities, the philosopher of education R. S. Peters (1966) makes use of an analogy between the activities of "education" and those of "reform" (this analysis is still widely respected; see Cuypers & Martin, 2009). He argues that education is like reform in that it "picks out no particular activity or process" but, rather, it "lays down criteria to which activities or processes must conform." It is suggested that:

> Both concepts have the criterion built into them that something worthwhile should be achieved. "Education" does not imply, like "reform," that a man should be brought back from a state of turpitude into which he has lapsed; but it does have normative

> implications . . . It implies that something worthwhile is being or has been intentionally transmitted in a morally acceptable manner. (p. 25)

This analysis is on all fours with the therapeutic function of education which is connected with the contemplative tradition by Salzberg and Goldstein (2001) as they explain how the "function of meditation is to shine the light of awareness on our thinking." The educational implications are brought out clearly in their description of how:

> The practice of bare attention opens up the claustrophobic world of our conditioning, revealing an array of options. Once we can see clearly what's going on in our minds, we can choose whether and how to act on what we're seeing. The faculty used to make those choices is called discriminating wisdom . . . the ability to know skilful actions from unskilful actions. (p. 48)

Against this background of normative criteria, it is easy to discern how McMindfulness practices fail to satisfy even the most basic educational requirements. There are no connections with the broad transformation of perspectives which allows for the fostering of wholesome thoughts and feelings and the reduction of harmful rumination and avoidance. Moreover, even the most basic minimum requirements of transformative learning concerned with self-direction and the critical analysis of our values and assumptions are distorted by and submerged beneath the dominance of consumerist and market-driven objectives. In discussing the role of mindfulness practices in transformative education, Ergas (2013) explains how the combination of principles from both domains can lead to

> mind-altering pedagogies . . . [by which] . . . we study our mind directly and learn that we actually have a choice other than the default doing mode. We are not compelled to one mode of being within thinking. We are thus educated directly at the level of the mind, as we do not heed to the level of thought content whether controlled or uncontrolled. (p. 289)

Using mindfulness to calm students down or enhance their attention span to achieve higher grades falls some way short of the mind-altering pedagogy called for by Ergas and other educators committed to the transformative learning principles linked with the development of autonomous critical thinking about knowledge, values, and culture in all aspects of personal and social life (Cranton, 2006).

Workplace and commercial applications of mindfulness are concerned only with specific strategic outcomes linked to productivity and persuasion. Moreover, many of the techniques employed at this level clearly fail to meet the autonomy criterion since they are directed at controlling and manipulating hearts and minds for ulterior purposes. On this account, the numerous mindfulness apps and products such as simplistic self-help and colouring books are—not simply ludicrous and exploitative mutations of mindfulness—but positively harmful to health in that they mislead

people and construct obstacles to the sort of mindful transformation conducive to mind/body well-being. Authentic educational practice—rich and deep learning—cannot be divorced from ethical considerations (Palmer, 1998; Peters, 1966) and the same applies to mindfulness processes. McMindfulness applications fail miserably when they separate something called "present moment awareness" (surrounded by a dangerous "myth" exposed by Purser, 2014b) from moral principles such as compassion and loving-kindness. As Batchelor (2015) puts it in citing the *Kalama Sutta*, the "transformation involved in the practice of the dharma is as much affective as it is cognitive," directed toward enabling us to "dwell pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity" (loc. 428).

Moreover, even the more orthodox MBIs—MBSR/MBCT programmes and mindfulness in schools—may suffer from some of the countereducational defects noted above. The control and "standardization" elements noted in the McDonaldization analysis earlier may be unfavourably applied to certain aspects of the standard 8-week programmes to the extent that the drive for uniformity delimits the capacity for independent development on the part of participants. There does appear to be an element of prescriptive rigidity about the way in which participants are required to, for example, note pleasant/unpleasant events in Week 4 and focus on thinking in Week 6 (Williams, Teasdale, Segal, & Kabat-Zinn, 2007, pp. 237–241). Furthermore, surely there are many ways for teachers to embody mindfulness in addition to those officially approved by centralised teacher training organisations such as MBI-TAC (2012). The fact that such formalised teaching criteria make extensive use of "competences" (MBI-TAC, 2012, pp.3–4) also tends to align them with discredited behaviourist assessment regimes (Hyland, 2014).

However, it is in the specification of outcomes that MBIs in education and workplaces run the risk of degenerating into McMindfulness practices. Problems in this area stem partly from the fact that—whereas MBIs in the health service and in therapeutic practice aimed at combating addictions and depression are essentially *remedial*, thus directly connecting them with foundational mindfulness principles concerned with relieving suffering—this is not quite the case in other spheres. In education and work, there has been a tendency for this core *transformational* function to be co-opted in order to achieve specific *operational* objectives, and such pragmatic purposes have obscured the links with the foundational moral principles (Hyland, 2015a, 2015b). The empirical research on mindfulness in schools is characterized by an instrumentalist concern with performative outcomes which appears remote from the original transformational intentions and goals of practice and, indeed, runs counter to the principal recommendations for best practice made by transformative educators (Taylor, 2008).

A review of Australian research on teaching mindfulness in schools, for example, concluded with the comment that "mindfulness practices have been shown to help teachers reduce their stress levels, assist with behaviour management strategies, and improve self-esteem" (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012, p. 11). Similarly, UK

research linked to the *Mindfulness in schools project (Misp)* or stop.breathe (.b) describes the outcomes of mindfulness lessons in secondary schools in terms of reducing "negative emotion and anxiety" in students and contributing "directly to the development of cognitive and performance skills and executive function" (Weare, 2012, p. 2). The recent meta-analysis of work in this field by Zenner, Hermleben-Kurz, and Walach (2014) concluded by noting that "analysis suggests that MBIs for children and youths are able to increase cognitive capacity of attending and learning by nearly one standard deviation" (p. 18). Such research does, of course, also include much anecdotal talk about enhancing emotional well-being and general mind/body health for both teachers and students (Burnett, 2011; Schoeberlein & Sheth, 2009), but the overriding impression is that mindfulness practice has in many instances been co-opted to achieve strategic instrumentalist ends in the pursuit of predominantly academic outcomes. This obsession with training attention and focus through mindfulness in a way which detaches it from foundational ethical principles has been noted by a number of philosophers concerned with MBIs in education (Lewin, 2015; O'Donnell, 2015).

Mindfulness, Education, and Critical Social Engagement

The moral foundations of mindfulness training lead naturally to a progression from self-regarding to other-regarding virtues as greed, hatred, and delusion are gradually replaced by generosity, kindness, and understanding about the nature of the world and the human condition. Although the "engaged Buddhist" movement is traditionally associated with the pioneering work of Thich Nhat Hanh from the 1960s (Kraft, 2000), it is, arguably, as old as Buddhism itself and takes its inspiration from the ethical elements of the 8-fold path and the core virtues of compassion, nonharming, and loving-kindness (Gowans, 2015). The Buddha's words from the *Mahavagga*: "Come, friends . . . dwell pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with lovingkindness . . . compassion . . . altruistic joy . . . equanimity without ill will" (Bodhi, 2000, p. 1608) are interpreted by Olendzki (2010) as the origins of our duty of care to the world and its contents which provide a foundation for engaged Buddhism.

Other influential *dharma* strands have been suggested by Harvey (2000), and the theory and practice of socially engaged movements has expanded and diversified considerably over recent years. More significantly, there are now national and international Buddhist movements campaigning on a vast and diverse range of issues. The *International Learning Resource* Site on "engaged practice" includes a wide range of articles and news about groups and meetings on topics as diverse as consumerism, the environment, race and gender, globalisation, work in prisons and hospices, in addition to peace-making in every part of the world (www.dharmanet.org/lcengaged.htm). The first world symposium on socially engaged Buddhism organised by Zen Peacemakers took place in Montague, Massachussets in 2010 and

the group regularly organizes "bearing witness" retreats in areas of conflict, injustice, and deprivation (http://zenpeacemakers.org/bw/).

Acknowledging Hanh's pioneering work in this area, Garfinkel (2006) sets out to travel the world in search of socially engaged practice. From a Zen Hospice project in San Francisco (pp. 2–3), a bearing witness group remembering the Jewish holocaust at Auschwitz (p. 46), organisations challenging caste in equalities in India (p. 96) to nongovernmental organizations fighting urban poverty in contemporary Japan (p. 221), Garfinkel demonstrates how engaged Buddhism is constantly striving to make a difference to the way the world is. As Garfinkel notes, "right livelihood" (p. 6) would be a most appropriate label for the modern applications of mindfulness he observed throughout his world tour in the footsteps of the Buddha.

Mindfulness practice is designed to promote well-being in ourselves and others or—in the language of the Buddhist noble truths—to work toward the reduction of the suffering of all living beings. What stands in the way of achieving such objectives? Clearly, the key *internal* obstacles are located in unwholesome instincts and the capriciousness of the emotions, and mindfulness can help in fostering the requisite control and, eventually, transforming these to promote generosity, kindness, and compassion. Once this is achieved, however, there is a host of *external* factors which clearly contribute to what Schopenhauer (1970) called the "suffering of the world" (p. 41) or, to express this in a less negative way, which militate against the promotion of human flourishing and well-being. Thus, the internal and external can be seen to come together in mindful engagement to bring about the desirable ends.

As Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) conclude in their analysis of levels of inequality around the world, "further improvements in the quality of life no longer depend on further economic growth: the issue is now community and how we relate to each other" (p. 254). The idea of education as the prime mover in the fostering of economic capital is now an empty and hollow slogan, particularly as countries around the world struggle with the consequences of the abject failure of neoliberal economics. Yet, it is not only the economic consequences of Chicago school free marketeering (Klein, 2007) ideas that have turned out to be disastrous but also their impact on the social fabric in glorifying selfish and materialistic possessive individualism. The selfish capitalism which James (2008) and Gerhardt (2010) have criticised so forcefully has produced sickness—mental, physical, and psychological—in all nations in which it has gone unchallenged by social-democratic and moral values concerned with societal well-being and the common good. Levels of public and community trust have plummeted in recent years (Judt, 2010; Seldon, 2009), and the fostering of social capital has never been more urgently needed from our education systems (Ergas & Todd, 2016).

The engaged Buddhist response to this global malaise stems—not just from the basic immorality of injustice, greed, and social degeneration—but from its consequences in terms of poverty, conflict, and the exacerbation of human suffering on a massive scale. A recent Oxfam report, for example, which reported solid evidence

that the wealth of the richest 1% of the world will shortly exceed that of the other 99% (https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2015-01-19/) explained clearly why this was not just monstrously unjust and immoral but, more importantly, served to militate against the possibility of the economic, social, and political reform which could ameliorate global problems of poverty, overconsumption, and environmental destruction. This message has been reinforced in a number of recent economic analyses by Thomas Piketty (2013) and former World Bank Chief Economist, Joseph Stiglitz (2012), which point to the dangers for all of us of the growing gap between rich and poor throughout the world.

Stiglitz (2012) looks forward to the day when "the 99% could come to realize that they have been duped by the 1%: that what is in the interest of the 1% is *not* in their interests," and this might lead to a "society where the gap between the haves and have-nots has been narrowed, where there is a sense of shared identity, a common commitment to opportunity and fairness" (pp. 359–360). In a similar vein, Seabrook (2015) has written extensively about the "impoverishment of riches" by which the myth of material progress has led to tragic losses in terms of our humanity and the planet we inhabit. He talks of neoliberal capitalism as causing a "wasting disease" which "not only wears away the fabric of the world, it also consumes human resourcefulness from within" (p. 208). Placing all this within a context of Buddhist values, Simmer-Brown (2002) explains how the "crisis of consumerism" has impoverished an exacerbated human suffering in recent decades such that:

> we see the poor with not enough food and no access to clean drinking water . . . we see the sick and infirm who have no medicine or care; we see rampant exploitation of the many for the pleasure and comfort of the few; we see the demonization of those who would challenge the reign of wealth, power, and privilege. (p. 3)

Socially engaged Buddhists are in common agreement with economists such as Stiglitz and social commentators such as Seabrook about both the causes of the present malaise and the ways to cure it. Myths about unconstrained growth and the need for ever-expanding consumerism need to be exploded in conjunction with the transformation of the craving which fuels this impoverishment. Seabrook (2015) argues with passion that:

> The raising of "the consumer" into human identity has been a fateful development. It demonstrates the power of an economic system to sustain its growth by expanding the capacity of humanity to ingest whatever it produces: without a voracious appetite for all available goods, that system would perish. As it is, people grow obese as the world shrinks. (p. 218)

His claim that capitalism has learned to "render itself indistinguishable from human yearning" (Seabrook, 2015) is interpreted within a Buddhist framework by Allan Hunt Badiner's (2002) argument that "consumption has become one of the most urgent topics in our lives." He goes on to suggest that:

> Revisiting our moral and spiritual values is an important part of our response to the fundamentally alienating ethic inherent in consumer culture. The Buddhist perspective offers not only a critique, but also practical ways to empower people to resist the prison of consumerism. (p. ii)

Coda: Practical Implications for Transformative Education

Not only does the degeneration of spiritual practice through McMindfulness commodification stand in the way of the changes which socially engaged Buddhism—what Ng and Purser (2016) have recently called "critical mindfulness"—is striving for, such commercialism serves to reinforce the consumerist craving which fuels such impoverishment and suffering.

Critiques of the implementation of mindfulness strategies in the workplace have been predominantly pessimistic with—apart from those such as Amaranatho (2015) and Chaskalson (2011) who are in the business of taking mindfulness into such contexts—little indication that much good can come of this. There are some arguments that the "Trojan Horse" of mindfulness (Lavelle, 2016)—through the gradual enlightenment of individuals, especially leaders, within corporate organizations—may eventually engender institutional reforms which will benefit both employers and employees. Lavelle, however, sees "no evidence for the effectiveness of this strategy" (p. 241), and the wealth of evidence against has been amply demonstrated by Purser and Ng (2015), Forbes, (2016), Caring-Lobel (2016), and Titmuss (2016). Titmuss, in particular, is scathing about a corporate takeover of mindfulness which has provided powerfully positive public relations propaganda for organizations such as Google and Amazon whilst leaving untouched appallingly stressful working conditions for employees in a wider society riddled with corporate greed, corruption, and gross inequalities of wealth, status, and opportunity.

However, the history of Buddhism over two millennia is characterized by a robust pragmatism, so it is legitimate to speculate about whether the famous "middle way" might not be able to offer some hope of reconciliation between optimists and pessimists in the field of workplace mindfulness. The Mindfulness Initiative (2016) in the UK—a project established initially by British parliamentarians interested in introducing mindfulness practices into schools, workplaces, and the health service (which resulted in *Mindful Nation UK* referred to in the introduction)—has recently published a document entitled *Building the Case for Mindfulness in the Workplace*. Alongside the predictable business-speak and cost–benefit analyses, the report does attempt to tackle a number of contemporary critiques of workplace mindfulness in addition to suggesting certain criteria of good practice in response to the perceived limitations. In seeking to explode what are described as myths about workplace mindfulness being exploited by employers seeking to produce passive employees, the report asserts that "there are many anecdotal accounts of employees walking away from toxic working environments, or pursuing other goals and career

aspirations, as a result of having received mindfulness training" (p. 26). Critics of corporate mindfulness would certainly welcome such anecdotal evidence but would make the obvious point that, if such postmindfulness activity became widespread, organizational investment in mindfulness would be rather quickly curtailed. Whether mindfulness programmes which allow for a cultivation of values which may question working practices and the role of work in the wider political/social/cultural milieu (allowing workers to say "no" as well as "yes" to conditions of service in speaking truth to power) can ever be successfully implemented in the current climate is a question which can only be answered by the work of current and future practitioners and researchers in the field. Majority opinion remains overwhelmingly pessimistic about this possibility (Poirier, 2016; Purser, Forbes, & Burke, 2016). An alternative option for the pessimists would be to insist that employee training is conducted outside of the workplace according to standard MBI procedures designed to ensure the incorporation of ethical values and the fostering of critical mindfulness.

Transformative learning has been usefully combined with mindfulness practice by educators concerned to enhance both the moral/spiritual dimension of the standard curriculum (Wilber, Engler, & Brown, 1986) and to emphasize the links between education and wider social, political, and cultural developments (Adler & Goggin, 2005). In terms of learning and teaching in schools and colleges, the mindfulness practices of insight meditation, mindful movement, journaling, community enquiry, and emotional introspection (Hyland, 2011; Schoeberlein & Sheth, 2009) can be conjoined with transformative methods such as the investigation of "critical incidents, metaphor analysis, concept mapping, consciousness raising, life histories, repertory grids, and participation in social action" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10). The principal aims of all such activity will be to help learners to switch off the automatic pilot by examining the impulses and emotions which distort or inhibit clarity of thinking about the world around them. In this way, the cultivation of a critical attitude toward contemporary culture may encourage the development of autonomous moral decision-making which can transform understanding and alleviate destructive emotional suffering in individuals and society. Ergas (2015) explains the process well in arguing that:

> in allocating curricular time to activities that ask students to note their breathing, thoughts and sensations—their inner workings and the *here-ness and now-ness of their existence*—we are transforming the social understanding of "education" and the "educated person." (p. 218, original italics)

It is too early to tell whether the relatively recent introduction of mindfulness in schools and colleges will achieve such wide-ranging transformations of learning and education. In terms of narrower, more task-specific outcomes, there is a good deal of evidence indicating that mindfulness strategies may enhance attention span, emotional resilience, on-task focus, and so on (Albrecht et al., 2012; Zenner,

Hermleben-Kurz, & Walach, 2014). Critics of such research, however, assert that such outcomes—though having obvious educational benefits—have little relevance to the fostering of mindfulness qualities which may help to transform the lives of students in the context of the challenges posed by contemporary culture (O'Donnell, 2015). Moreover, much of the research on mindfulness in schools has been poorly designed and—particularly those using self-report measures—falls well short of accepted standards in psychological research (Rosenbaum, 2016; see also the work of Nowogrodzki, 2016, on the positive skewing of mindfulness research referred to earlier on p. 7).

Citing the work of Stanley, Barker, Edwards, and McEwan (2015) and Jennings (2015), Forbes (2016) has outlined ways in which schools:

> can engage in critical mindfulness research that investigates hidden norms in everyday culture and local social systems such as consumerism . . . that impede personal and interpersonal development. (p. 364)

Whether school programmes will be able to realise such critical and transformational ideals amidst the demands of contemporary outcome-driven and prescriptive curricula will be determined by the commitment of practitioners driven by a conception of mindfulness informed by the ethical principles which underpin what Kabat-Zinn refers to as the universal dharma.

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