

McMindfulness¹

When I googled “mindfulness meditation” I had 33,300,00 hits! Most of them are scientific and authoritative accounts that report mindfulness as providing stress reduction, attention-enhancement and other health benefits. These human performance benefits are a major attraction for corporations and working individuals.

Meditation merchants are savvy in branding their product. They preface their mindfulness package as being “**Buddhist-inspired**.” Potential clients are dangled with the carrot of class and hip mindfulness as a legacy of Buddhism, famous for its ancient and time-tested psychology and meditation. But, often, in the same breath, well-dressed consultants assure their corporate sponsors that their special brand of mindfulness has no ties at all to Buddhism. This is a sad case of corporate piracy, plagiarizing Buddhism, and denouncing it at the same time,

Cunningly marketing Buddhist meditation as a “non-religious” meditation programme may entice stressed and worldly corporate clients. However, meditation is divorced from its ethical and spiritual context. This unfortunate violation of a sacred practice for monetary gains will not work well outside its original set-up. Buddhist meditation is intended for far more than relieving work stress, reducing blood pressure, or increasing productivity. It is meant to work on the whole person, body and mind, work and life, and it has a noble goal: spiritual awakening.

For good reasons, some western critics have given such a stripped-down, secularized technique the label, “McMindfulness.” It has become a convenient fast-food for the corporate minds. But it becomes what a critic termed as a “Faustian bargain,” where a spiritual exercise is made “more palatable to the corporate world, decontextualizing mindfulness from its original liberative and transformative purpose, as well as its foundation in social ethics.” (Purser)

Instead of applying mindfulness as a means to alleviate individuals from the unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion, it is often transmogrified into banal, therapeutic, self-help mantras and means that actually encourage or reinforce those very unwholesome roots. This is what early Buddhism calls “**wrong mindfulness**” (*micchā,sati*).

Mindfulness, as taught and practiced in the Buddhist tradition is not merely an ethically-neutral commercial technique for reducing stress, enhancing concentration and increasing productivity. Rather, mindfulness (*sati*) is only a part of a broader system of meditation, where the practitioner learns to “let go” of negative states and cultivate positive ones. Meditation involves various techniques of preparing the body and mind so that they are properly cultivated.

Those taking up meditation, as a rule, approach an experienced teacher, who may be a monastic or a lay teacher, but who have had at least 5-10 years, and some 30 or more years, of training and meditation. Such teachers are not only familiar with meditation techniques, but also with the spiritual psychology of meditators. As such, they are like master conductors for a meditation orchestra: they themselves go into meditation, setting the proper mood and aura of mindfulness, guiding and harmonizing the practice.

¹ Inspired by Ron Purser, “Beyond McMindfulness,” 2013: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-purser/beyond-mcmindfulness_b_3519289.html & J B Rubin, “The McMindfulness craze,” 2015: <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/28278-the-mcmindfulness-craze-the-shadow-side-of-the-mindfulness-revolution>.

The corporate meditation instructors generally only go for short seminars or retreats, and they often cannibalize some management techniques into their “meditation” techniques. Furthermore, such courses are often too short and superficial for any significant benefit. Those who are able to pick up a few techniques or feel some benefit are themselves already quite calm and positive people in the first place. The effects generally do not last, anyway, or are simply forgotten – like some fancy product we had been compelled to buy.

We also tend to fall for **the “mirage” effect** when selecting meditation by labels. For example, if it is a “Google” meditation, we associate the bigness of Google with the efficacy of the meditation. The prefix Google simply means that Google (or whatever corporation or guru) comes first, and the meditation serves that name: a mere tool hijacked to enhance the corporation.² The name is *not* the thing.³

Buddhist meditation is properly founded on “bodily cultivation,” that is, living a life inspired by at least some **basic moral values**: not harming anyone, not exploiting others, respecting boundaries, valuing truthfulness, and avoiding any kind of addiction.⁴ Such a cultivated body prepares and helps us to calm the mind in readiness for meditation.

Early Buddhism clearly lays out the steps in **right mindfulness** (*sammā,sati*). The first step is the contemplation of the body, which has a wide range of practices, including the breath meditation and full awareness (being mindful of every action). Through such a practice, we first joyfully cultivate inner calm, and sustaining that joyful calmness as long as we can.

Towards the end of the practice – or at any suitable stage after an episode of sustained inner calm – we review that state as “rising and falling,” as being impermanent. This is, in fact, done habitually, even towards experiences outside of formal meditation. At the very end of the sitting, we review our experience to note the difficulties and remember the wholesome parts.

Theoretically, anyone – even if we have some serious problem that needs counselling – can meditate, that is, with proper counselling and the close guidance of an experienced mentor. When the mentor notices that we have resolved the troubling issues, then we are able to proceed smoothly in our own sitting.

Breakdowns are likely to occur in those who jump into meditation unsupervised, especially sitting for an hour or more. Experienced teachers never force their students to sit long sessions, especially when they are not ready for it or have some emotional issue. We should not summarily dismiss such meditation difficulties with Zen-like rhetoric⁵ – we may be ignoring or reinforcing a serious pathological condition that can deteriorate into an emotional breakdown or worse.

² A corporation may, however, send its employees for proper meditation run by experienced Buddhist meditators themselves in a proper meditation environment.

³ See Reflection, “Google stops thinking,” [R315](#), 2013.

⁴ This is an overview of [the 5 precepts](#), incumbent on all Buddhists, monastic or lay: see Reflection, “We are not born human,” [R216](#).

⁵ Talk therapy often does not work in meditation difficulties when the method itself is not suitable for the meditator. He may need meditation therapy, such as a one-to-one counselling and guided sitting.

Early Buddhist meditation is meant as a personal practice. For beginners, any group larger than say 20 people are not likely to be effective. In fact, the smaller the group (ideally a one-to-one sitting) the more effective it is. After the neophyte is familiar with the steps and strategies of meditation, he may continue sitting by himself at his own pace.

Commercial meditation is often marketed as a method of **personal self-fulfillment**, a break from the stress and trials of the ruthless and cold corporate life. “Such an individualistic and consumer orientation to the practice of mindfulness,” notes Purser, “may be effective for self-preservation and self-advancement, but is essentially impotent for mitigating the causes of collective and organizational distress.”

Such a person-centred attitude to meditation may seem to alleviate the symptoms of corporate pathology, or worse, it simply numbs the person to the corporate culture of inhuman domination and exploitation. In this way, McM mindfulness is actually ignoring, even accepting, the roots of the common problems that trouble us in the first place.

Such a privatized practice is simply an alienated form of mindfulness – a wrong mindfulness. Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, in their book *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (2005) characterizes such a wrong mindfulness as an “accommodationist” orientation. Corporate leaders may have noticed the value of McM mindfulness as an effective means for “subduing employee unrest, promoting a tacit acceptance of the status quo, and as an instrumental tool for keeping attention focused on institutional goals” (Purser).

Bad management and corporate exploitation cannot be corrected by meditation, much less by McM mindfulness. Ideally, a corporation should provide its employees with the most humane conditions of work – Buddhism calls it “right livelihood” – and meditation in its traditional early Buddhist “non-religious” form can be a catalytic part of such a healthy corporate culture.⁶

Buddhist meditation should not be shanghaied into being a slave to consumer capitalism. Meditation can be a genuine and positive means of personal development and social transformation. For that, it should be accepted and practised just as it is meant to be – with its ethical grounding and spiritual vision of personal happiness and compassion for others, inspired by the spirit of the joy of work, and the work of joy.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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⁶ On the mutual duties of employer and employee, see **Sigalovāda Sutta** (SD 31,32), [SD 4.1](#).