

McMindfulness (1 of 2)

An excerpt from SD 60.1d: An Evolutionary Psychology of Mindfulness, Piya Tan.

4.2.1 Marketing mindfulness

4.2.1.1 The so-called modern **Mindfulness Movement** or “Mindful Revolution” (as the Time magazine called it, 2014)¹ that is sweeping the world now has been criticized for drowning the public, especially the corporate world, with its spiritual materialism (ie, religion for worldly benefits). “But anything that offers success in our unjust society without trying to change it is not revolutionary,” Ron Purser stresses, “it just helps people cope.”² There are 2 big issues with the Mindfulness Movement: (1) in promoting so called “self-help,” it really distracts us from seeing and dealing with the real conditions of our stress and lack; and (2) after pilfering the idea from Buddhism, it now claims to have nothing to do with Buddhism.

Employers and entrepreneurs strongly support the Mindfulness courses and training because their employees are able to take more stress and learn to look within themselves for solutions to any issues, especially those related to their work. In other words, they are conditioned not to find fault with their work, working conditions or employers by learning to “be with the present,” accepting what comes, “just as they are,” by giving an ironic Procrustean twist and trim to the Buddhist teachings.

4.2.1.2 “What remains,” warns Purser, “is a tool of self-discipline, disguised as self-help. Instead of setting practitioners free, it helps them adjust to the very conditions that caused their problems. A truly revolutionary movement would seek to overturn this dysfunctional system, but mindfulness only serves to reinforce its destructive logic. The neoliberal order has imposed itself by stealth in the past few decades, widening inequality in pursuit of corporate wealth. People are expected to adapt to what this model demands of them. Stress has been pathologised and privatised, and the burden of managing it outsourced to individuals” (id).³

The promoters of modern Mindfulness training, unwittingly at first, then helplessly, are bolstering up the status quo. Rather than warning us how attention is monetized and manipulated by corporations such as Google, Facebook, Twitter and Apple, they instead locate the crisis and its causes in our own minds. The capitalist system, it seems, is inherently unproblematic. Rather, the failure is ours in not being mindful and resilient in a precarious and uncertain economy. Then, they sell us solutions that make us contented, mindful capitalists. This, in fact, sounds just like the evangelists who proclaim, “You are sinners!” and then claim to have the salvation for us!

¹ See SD 17.8c (Fig 1.).

² R Purser, “The mindfulness conspiracy,” *The Guardian*, 14 June 2019: [The mindfulness conspiracy | Mindfulness | The Guardian](#). Adapted from Purser, *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*, London, 2016:6 pdf (ch 1).

³ Implicitly, this is also a warning for us as Buddhists not to be extremes in our practice until it hurts us, in the end, preventing us to continue with it, or negatively affecting others who are significant to us.

4.2.2 Why McMindfulness is so successful

4.2.2.1 According to Purser, the term “**McMindfulness**” was coined by Miles Neale, a US Buddhist teacher and psychotherapist, who described “a feeding frenzy of spiritual practices that provide immediate nutrition but no long-term sustenance” (“McMindfulness and Frozen Yoga,” 2016:13).⁴ The contemporary mindfulness fad is veritably the entrepreneurial equivalent of McDonald’s.

The successful fast-food industry, **McDonald’s**, was started by US businessman Raymond Albert Kroc (1902-1984). At the start, when Kroc was selling milkshakes, he noticed the franchising potential of a restaurant chain in San Bernadino, California. He made a deal to serve as the franchising agent for the McDonald brothers. He bought them out and transformed the chain into a global empire. Kroc saw his chance to provide busy Americans with instant access to food that would be delivered consistently through automation, standardization and discipline.

4.2.2.2 US professor of medicine, **Jon Kabat-Zinn** (1944-), on the other hand, started off with a deep interest in Buddhism and meditation. During a retreat, he had a vision of how he could adapt Buddhist teachings and practices to help hospital patients deal with physical pain, stress and anxiety. His masterstroke was the branding of mindfulness as a secular spirituality.

Like Kroc, Kabat-Zinn saw the opportunity to give stressed-out Americans easy access to his own instant meditation brand, Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR), through an 8-week mindfulness course for stress reduction that would be taught consistently using a standardized curriculum. Basically, this is a clever application of the principle of the specialization of labour that is the foundation and heart of the Industrial Revolution that continues to feed modern capitalism and all its ills.

MBSR teachers would gain certification by attending programmes at Kabat-Zinn’s Center for Mindfulness in Worcester, Massachusetts. He continued to expand the reach of MBSR by identifying new markets such as corporations, schools, government and the military, and endorsing other forms of “mindfulness-based interventions” (MBIs).

Both Kroc and Kabat-Zinn took measures to ensure that their products would not vary in quality or content across franchises. Burgers and fries at McDonald’s are the same whether one is eating them in Dubai or in Dubuque. Similarly, there is little variation in the content, structure and curriculum of MBSR courses around the world.

McMindfulness (2 of 2): 4.2.3 What’s wrong with McMindfulness?

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⁴ M Neale, “McMindfulness and Frozen Yoga”:

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