

## McMindfulness (2 of 2)

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

### 4.2.3 What's wrong with McMindfulness?

**4.2.3.1** What's wrong with McMindfulness? What's wrong with fast food? In principle, the problem is the same: "a feeding frenzy of spiritual practices that provide immediate nutrition but no long-term sustenance" [4.2.2.1]. The McMindfulness Gurus claim that "individual freedom" is found within our "pure awareness," undistracted by and unconcerned with external corrupting influences. This *sounds* Buddhist, but it is not so.

**The Nibbedhika Pariyāya Sutta** (A 6.63), has this instructive *kāma verse* that is also found in **the Na Santi Sutta** (S 103):

The thought of lust is a person's sensuality:  
These varied wonders in the world are not desires.  
The thought of lust is a person's desire.  
The varied wonders in the world remain just as they are.  
Hence, here, the wise remove desire (for sensuality).

A 6.63,3.4 ≈ S 103 (SD 6.11 (2.2.2))

This verse basically teaches us self-accountability: don't blame the world out there, that is, both other humans and the society itself. We may not be able to change others or the world, but we can change ourselves. Taken by itself, this may actually support what McMindfulness is doing. However, we need to read this verse along with **the 3 points of utter purity** (*ti,koṭi parisuddhi*) in terms of wholesome moral action, that is, our action or speech, as laid out in **the Amba,laṅṅhika Rahul'ovāda Sutta** (M 61):

- (1) should not harm ourselves;
- (2) should not harm others;
- (3) should not harm both (society in general). (M 61,9-17/1:425-419), SD 3.10

**4.2.3.2** Another set of "**3 points of utter purity**" (*ti,koṭi parisuddhi*) of moral actions (of body and speech) was explained in, for example, **the Veḷu,dvāreyya Sutta** (S 55.7), in terms of keeping the 5 precepts, in connection with the golden rule (as in M 61), as follows:

- (1) we should keep the precepts ourselves,
- (2) we should encourage others to do so, too, and
- (3) we should "speak in praise" of keeping the precepts.<sup>1</sup>

The first 2 of the threefold purity of moral action also form the first 2 of the 4 accomplishments of a lay follower, as laid out in **the (Upāsaka) Mahānāma Sutta** (A 8.25):

- (1) a lay follower is one who takes the 3 refuges (the Buddha, the Dharma, the noble sangha);
- (2) he keeps himself morally pure by keeping to the 5 precepts;
- (3) he lives for his own welfare; and
- (4) he lives for the welfare of others. (A 8.25), SD 6.3

This wealth of references clearly stands to show how vitally important all our actions should be not just for our own benefit, but also to benefit others and society as a whole, and that we should not merely be insular in doing good, but be proactive for the good of others, too. Furthermore, we have

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<sup>1</sup> These threefold purities elaborate on the golden rule, ie, the rationale for moral virtue or ethics: **Veḷu,dvāreyya S** (S 55.7,6-12) + SD 1.5 (3).

at least 2 expositions of **dependent arising**, the first showing how widespread strife arises, and how it ends, shown in **the Cakka,vatti Siha,nāda Sutta** (D 26).<sup>2</sup> A similar dependent arising of social strife, due to self-centredness, is mentioned in **the Mahā,nidāna Sutta** (D 15).<sup>3</sup> In short, our actions affect society, and as the laity, we should be wholesomely and morally engaged with society.

**4.2.3.3 Engaged Buddhist thinkers and activists** have severely criticized McMindfulness. This packaged Mindfulness that we practise is found within “pure awareness,” undistracted by external corrupting influences [but see 4.2.3.1]. Just close our eyes and watch our breath: that’s the crux of the supposed revolution; the world is slowly changed, one mindful individual at a time. This political philosophy is oddly reminiscent of George W Bush’s “compassionate conservatism,” writes Purser (2016:8 digital).

Mindfulness becomes a very private, limited enterprise—a religion of the self, where we do not need to engage with the world outside with any wisdom or compassion. As a result, notes the political theorist Wendy Brown, “the body politic ceases to be a body, but is, rather, a group of individual entrepreneurs and consumers.”<sup>4</sup> Instead of getting healed, the patients are convinced and conditioned to live with their disease, even enjoy it.

**4.2.3.4** According to Purser, Mindfulness is said to be a US\$4bn industry in the US alone. More than 60,000 books for sale on Amazon have a variant of “Mindfulness” in their title, touting the benefits of Mindful Parenting, Mindful Eating, Mindful Teaching, Mindful Therapy, Mindful Leadership, Mindful Finance, a Mindful Nation, and Mindful Dog Owners, just to name a few. “The Power of Mindful Sex” was a TEDx talk (2018). There is also The Mindfulness Colouring Book, a best-seller for the young who may otherwise miss out on this Mindfulness Revolution. Besides books, there are workshops, online courses, glossy magazines, documentary films, smartphone apps, bells, cushions, bracelets, beauty products and other paraphernalia, as well as a lucrative and burgeoning conference circuits. Mindfulness programmes have made their way into schools, Wall Street and Silicon Valley corporations, law firms, and government agencies, even the US military. (2016: 10 digital)

By deflecting attention from the social structures and material conditions in a capitalist culture (like that of the US), Mindfulness was easily co-opted. Movie stars and celebrity role models endorsed it, while Californian companies, including Google, Facebook, Twitter, Apple and Zynga, embraced it as an adjunct to their brand. Google’s former in-house mindfulness tsar TAN Chade-Meng had the actual job title “Jolly Good Fellow.” His best-selling course and book was “Search inside yourself” (2012)—for there, not in corporate culture—lay the source of your problems.<sup>5</sup>

At Google’s Search Inside Yourself (SIY) mindfulness programme, emotional intelligence (EI) figured prominently in the curriculum. The programme was marketed to Google engineers as instrumental to their career success—engaging in mindfulness practice and managing emotions, it was said, would generate surplus economic value, equivalent to the acquisition of capital.

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<sup>2</sup> On the arising of widespread social strife (D 26,9.1-21.3), and the ending of social strife (D 26,21.4-26): SD 36.10.

<sup>3</sup> D 15,9/2:58 f (SD 5.17).

<sup>4</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, MIT Press, 2015:15.

<sup>5</sup> In July 2018, Tan abruptly stepped down as chair of the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute (SIYLI), apparently over some precept-breaking issue in some relationship. In due course, he returned to Singapore as a local celebrity. On Tan’s return to Singapore, the local daily published a bowdlerized version of this NY Times article: [Opinion | The Morality of Meditation - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#). Also [Google’s former mindfulness guru steps down from nonprofit over ‘inappropriate behavior’ – ThinkProgress](#).

This was the **mood economy**, the “science of happiness,” that pronounced we should have the ability to bounce back from any setback to stay productive in a precarious economic situation. Packaged in this way, Mindfulness sold like hot cornmeal cakes as a technique for personal life optimization, disengaging individuals from their social contexts.

**4.2.3.5** One of Mindfulness’ sharpest marketing hooks is its relationship with Buddhist teachings, from which it was excised. Buddhism was a hot selling point in the US, but the market included non-Buddhists, too. Hence, Buddhism was dismissed as a “foreign religion” and “cultural baggage.” Even the word “meditation” was switched to “**Mindfulness**” to give a sense of novelty and efficacy of “Buddhist meditation without the Buddhism,” or “the benefits of Buddhism without all the mumbo jumbo.”

Management professor and long-time Buddhist practitioner, **Ron Purser** (1956- ), felt a moral duty to start speaking out when large corporations with questionable ethics and dismal track records in corporate social responsibility began introducing mindfulness programs as a method of performance enhancement. In 2013, he published an article with David Loy in the *Huffington Post* that called into question the efficacy, ethics and narrow interests of mindfulness programs. What they wrote surprisingly went viral, perhaps helped by the title: “Beyond McMindfulness” (2013).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [Beyond McMindfulness | HuffPost Religion](#).