

Book Review



***Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture***

By Jeff Wilson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 280 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-982782-7 (hardcover), \$29.95; ISBN 978-0-19-982782-4 (eBook)

Reviewed by Per Drougge, *Stockholm University*

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The first thing to be said about Jeff Wilson's latest book is that its appearance was extremely well-timed. While several trend-spotting journalists and other observers of the psycho-spiritual marketplace dubbed 2014 as "the year of mindfulness," the last couple of years have also seen an upsurge in critical engagement with the mindfulness phenomenon. The number of lively debates provoked by articles published in popular media also indicates a growing willingness—as well as the need—to think critically about mindfulness and the global mindfulness industry. *Mindful America* is the first book-length study of mindfulness as a social and cultural phenomenon, and with its wide scope and accessible style, it is likely to become an important reference for further discussions on the subject.

Wilson does not spend much time dealing with the various criticisms that have been directed at the mindfulness movement by Buddhists, scholars, and theorists over the years. In fact, he goes to great pains avoiding anything resembling a polemical stance. The book is nevertheless structured around two basic assumptions on which not everyone will agree. The first is that we can meaningfully talk about a singular mindfulness *movement*, encompassing everything from the docile pieties of Thich Nhat Hanh to masturbation manuals and MindfulMayo™. The second is that the proliferation of mindfulness-labeled products and services is a paradigmatic example of how Buddhism adapts to and gains mass appeal in a new host-culture by offering practical or worldly benefits.

While certainly not unproblematic, I find these approaches to the subject matter both refreshing and illuminating, for a number of reasons. The extremely inclusive view (anyone using the word "mindfulness" for marketing purposes belongs to Wilson's mindfulness movement), effectively avoids the normative trap of deciding what is proper or authentic mindfulness. Placing mindfulness firmly in the context of North American Buddhism also brings into focus the close connections between "religious" Buddhism and "secular" mindfulness and the many similarities which easily become

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Corresponding author: Per Drougge, Dept. of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University, [per@drougge.eu](mailto:per@drougge.eu)



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obscured by both the bells and smells of the former and the increasingly medicalized language games of the latter. (Wilson does not explicitly make the point, but many of his examples suggest that much of the mindfulness movement could be seen as extreme forms of “modernist” Buddhism.)

The Introduction opens with a few examples illustrating how deeply mindfulness has penetrated North American mainstream culture, followed by a discussion of how this success story can be seen as the most recent example of the selective adaptations and modifications by which Buddhism moves into new cultures. Drawing parallels both to pre-modern China and contemporary Japan, Wilson emphasizes the importance of practical benefits in these processes, and points out the peculiar irony at work in the case of mindfulness. While sutra chanting and lucky charms have played an important role for the dispensation of security, health, and prosperity among Asian Buddhists for centuries, few contemporary North Americans have much faith in their power. Instead they turn to meditation—a practice which only recently was divorced from a monastic context and a rhetoric of asceticism, other-worldly aspirations, and magic.

As someone thoroughly exposed to the afterglow of the “reflexive turn” in the social sciences, I was a little puzzled by the three-page section called “A Personal Reflection” where the author describes the aims of his study and position vis-à-vis the mindfulness movement. Wilson insists that he is “neither an advocate for nor an opponent of mindfulness” (10) but a “chronicler and analyst,” (11) and he does this in a way which seems to suggest that his theoretical commitments, biases, and personal reactions are both unproblematic and irrelevant for his results. Although I sympathize with the refusal both to define mindfulness (linked with the inclusive view mentioned above) and evaluate its efficacy, I fail to understand how one could make a selection of empirical material (most of it consisting of books, articles, and various electronic media)—much less attempt an analysis of that material—without making judgments affected by such factors as commitments, biases, and reactions. Or, to put it slightly differently, “trends” and “storylines” do *not* simply “present themselves,” as Wilson suggests (12). Having made this obnoxiously obvious point, I hasten to add that I often found the examples and storylines in *Mindful America* both compelling and thought-provoking.

The rest of the book consists of six thematically arranged (and wittily alliterated) chapters, followed by a Postscript. Each chapter focuses on a particular adaptation process, and although these tend to overlap somewhat, resulting in some repetition, the outline is generally clear and easy to follow.

Chapter one, “Mediating Mindfulness,” provides a historical background, highlighting a few trends, events, and people of particular importance. The chapter begins with an account of how the slightly quaint word “mindfulness” came to be the preferred translation of *sati/smṛti*, followed by a description of how both the concept and practice of mindfulness were understood within North American Buddhism prior to the 1970s. The concluding sections focus on key individuals paving the ground for the subsequent mindfulness boom (a handful of meditation teachers associated with the Insight Meditation Society, Thich Nhat Hanh [whose best-selling *The Miracle of Mindfulness* was first published in 1976], and Jon Kabat-Zinn) and swiftly summarizes how “mindfulness”

went from being part of a relatively obscure sub-cultural jargon to something very different: a “basic part of the spiritual landscape of North America; authorized by science, endorsed by Oprah, marketed by Buddhists, appropriated by self-help gurus” (40). Here and throughout the book, Wilson provides the reader with an almost mind-numbing abundance of examples of books (including *Mindful Knitting*) and other commodities, such as Jurisght® (“the mindfulness-based teaching developed specifically for law students and lawyers”). While such litanies can be an effective stylistic device, they also tend to become tedious.

The chapter traces early western interest in mindfulness and Buddhist meditation back to the lay-oriented reform movements in Southeast Asia known as modernist (or Protestant) Buddhism, via figures like Nyanaponika Thera, Walpola Rahula, and various teachers in the lineages of Ledi Sayādaw and Mahāsī Sayādaw. While this genealogy is well-known to students of western Buddhism, it is a most welcome corrective to the all too common claim that MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction) and other forms of mindfulness represent the “essence” of the Buddhist tradition as a whole. I was both surprised and a little disappointed, however, that Wilson avoids the important question as to why and how the particular interpretation of *sati*/mindfulness as “non-judgmental awareness” and “bare attention” came to be dominant, and why it is so enormously attractive today. While idea(l)s of pure apprehension and “living in the here and now” were important features of Buddhist modernism (and fit nicely with both the perennialism and the anti-intellectualism that are strong undercurrents of contemporary “spirituality”), they are deeply problematic and have been criticized on both epistemological and ethical grounds, from without and within the Buddhist tradition.

Chapter 2, “Mystifying Mindfulness,” begins the book’s extended discussion of how this particular understanding of a technical term in the Pali canon became such a powerful floating signifier in late capitalism. The word “mystification” is not used in a Marxist sense here, however, but refers to the way “Americans alter, diminish, obscure, eliminate, or simply ignore the historic connection between Buddhism and mindfulness” (44). A succinct summary of how this works is presented in the chapter’s conclusion:

- Buddhism is first made palatable via mindfulness in order to sell Buddhism.
- Mindfulness is then made palatable via eliminating Buddhism in order to sell mindfulness.
- Mindfulness is finally made so appealing and denatured that it can be used to sell virtually everything (including financial services and products like MindfulMayo™).

A few examples of this mystification are discussed in some detail. Certain aspects of Buddhist cosmology have been ignored or radically re-interpreted by proponents of mindfulness, typically in the psychologizing way here exemplified by the way notions of *preta* or “hungry ghosts” have become a widely used trope within mindfulness-related discourses of addiction and eating habits. The process by which Buddhist meditation

practice has been transplanted from its pre-modern, monastic context is shown to have had significant consequences for popular understanding of both mindfulness and Buddhism in general. The ideal of renunciation has become thoroughly marginalized, and even the intensive meditation retreat (still a common practice among lay-followers of modernist forms of Buddhism) is extremely uncommon in the practice of secular mindfulness (which, on the other hand, has created a market for books with titles like *5-Minute Mindfulness: Simple Daily Shortcuts to Transform Your Life*). A final example is the even more radical removal of any Buddhist context in the packaging of mindfulness—a move which typically takes one of two distinct forms: either mindfulness depicted as a core feature of any and all religious or spiritual traditions, or mindfulness presented as a fundamental human faculty which, in itself, has nothing to do with any form of religion.

This final form of mystification is an important theme in Chapter 3, “Medicalizing Mindfulness,” where the essential humanity of mindfulness is linked to an equally radical re-contextualization of mindfulness “as a psychological technique intended to provide physical and mental benefits” (76). Both strategies were necessary (if not sufficient) for the remarkably successful infiltration of what is arguably a form of crypto Buddhism into ostensibly secular spheres, such as public schools and hospitals. Reasonably enough, the chapter focuses on the case of Jon Kabat-Zinn and the MBSR technique, although the latter’s many offshoots (DBT, ACT, MBCT, MB-EAT, MBAT, MBRE, et cetera) are also mentioned.

The ambiguous relation between (secular, medicalized) mindfulness and (religious) Buddhism raises many interesting issues, including some that challenge the distinction itself. The almost universal acceptance of MBSR as a biomedical, psychological technique becomes even more striking when considering how up-front Kabat-Zinn has been with his (crypto) Buddhist aspirations, and how shot-through the MBSR discourse is with an eclectic, Buddhist jargon. Wilson does not follow this particular line of thought, but I would suggest that this can, at least partly, be explained by two closely related phenomena: current western buddhaphilia and the century-old idea that Buddhism is less a “religion” than a kind of “science” (miraculously always in sync both with current interests, e.g., evolutionary theory, quantum mechanics, or neuro science, as well as with white, middle-class norms and values). Wilson does bring up a related point, though: Kabat-Zinn (like quite a few other western Buddhists) seems to be fond of making a subtly chauvinistic distinction between a naturalized “true Dharma” and “Buddhism”, where the latter is seen as an inferior, distorted expression of the former, contaminated by (Asian) cultural accretions.

Chapter 4, “Mainstreaming Mindfulness,” brings to the fore Wilson’s general point that the current proliferation of mindfulness, in all its forms, is an example of how Buddhism moves into new socio-cultural contexts and is itself changing in the process. By focusing on the way a few, culture-specific issues haunting North American middle classes (particularly eating and sex) are targeted by the mindfulness industry, Wilson simultaneously demonstrates both the absurdity of the claim that mindfulness is a timeless, universal practice *and* how fundamental Buddhist teachings can be mainstreamed into almost complete inversions of their traditional forms.

Two examples stand out here: first is how an explicit suggestion to “heal one’s soul” (sic) by “giving it what it craves” (sic) has found its way into a popular book on “mindful eating.” Second is how the Theravāda practice of systematic contemplation of body parts, carried out in order to cultivate revulsion and detachment, is given a *very* different spin by advocates of “mindful sex.” Less spectacular, but arguably more significant, are the ubiquitous references to innate, positive qualities that can be actualized and made manifest through mindfulness practice, and which seem to suggest a soul-like essence or *atman*. Although this “theology of human nature” as “unambiguously good” (170) is brought up in a later chapter, it is a subject which deserves a more thorough treatment as it is closely linked to popular ideas of mindfulness (and Buddhist) practice as a process of de-conditioning (bringing us back to a supposed original and pure nature), rather than re-conditioning (merely replacing current conditioning with another, more palatable, form).

Chapter 5, “Marketing Mindfulness,” focuses on the commodification of mindfulness and the various marketing strategies utilized for selling it in an increasingly competitive market. As the thing itself (if there *is* such a thing—here it is simply described as “the act of awareness”) cannot be packaged and sold, peddlers of mindfulness have to sell either auxiliary products or their own expertise (or, in some cases, a combination of both).

As an example of the first category, Wilson describes the supplies for sale by companies like DharmaCrafts and Dharma Communications (a wide range of familiar Buddhist paraphernalia including a sublimely absurd item which has been around for at least 25 years now: a CD recording consisting of nothing except a long period of silence followed by three chimes of a bell indicating the end of a meditation session) as well as the niche offerings from OneTaste (a “female genitalia-oriented mindful sexuality organization”). Another section, “Showing What Can’t Be Seen,” is devoted to an iconographic mini-study of mindfulness-related book and magazine cover art. The section on mindfulness expertise returns to one of several threads running through *Mindful America*: how the authority to define and to teach mindfulness have moved away from the monastic community, via lay Buddhist teachers, into the hands of people with increasingly diverse backgrounds. This section is followed by a few, relatively lengthy, examples of niched and branded mindfulness, ranging from *Momfulness* to the controversial Mindfulness-Based Mind Fitness Training™ developed specifically to be used by the US military.

Chapter 6, “Moralizing Mindfulness,” deals with values and worldviews commonly expressed by the mindfulness movement. Wilson demonstrates once again how it would be both futile and misleading to uphold a clear distinction between “religious” and “secular” registers within the context of mindfulness. Using numerous examples, he shows how a significant segment of the mindfulness movement “continues to operate in a religious or quasi-religious fashion, despite its advocates’ insistence that it is not (or, at least, need not be) connected to religion” (161). Wilson also suggests that mindfulness has come to function as a kind of civil religion, “written into the teleological evolution of the human race itself, destined to flower in democratic, freedom-loving societies such as America. So America leads to mindfulness, and mindfulness in turn will save America” (179). Juxtaposed quotes from Kabat-Zinn and his student Congressman Tim Ryan are

quite revealing in this respect. (More than once, these pages made me think of Slavoj Žižek's famous dictum about the "meditative stance" of western Buddhism being the "most effective way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity".<sup>1</sup>)

*Mindful America* ends with a brief but dense Postscript, part summary, part deepened theoretical engagement, part suggestions for further research, where each of the three main sections easily could function as a starting-point for a comprehensive study.

Other observers have noted the emergence of a generic, eclectic kind of "American" or "Western" Buddhism but, as far as I know, Wilson is the first to stress how important the mindfulness phenomenon has been in this formation. In the chapter on mystification he makes the cogent observation that "Hinduism is appropriated as yoga, Islam as Sufi poetry, Japanese folk healing as reiki, and Buddhism as mindfulness" (61). In the Postscript, he persuasively suggests that this understanding is having a profound influence on already existing forms of Buddhism. (One typical example is how mindfulness-style meditation has been introduced in the Jōdo Shin Buddhist Churches of America.)

In the second section, Wilson expands the theoretical frame by considering how the mindfulness movement fits into the context of North American religion as a whole, arguing that it can be understood as an example of Albanese's category "metaphysical religion." It is also suggested that mindfulness is a descendant of 19<sup>th</sup> century phenomena like spirituality and liberal religion. This assertion that mindfulness (or "western Buddhism," for that matter) seems to fit so suspiciously well with pre-existing religious traditions will likely seem troubling to some of its advocates. Wilson, however, asserts that not only has Buddhist mindfulness benefitted from being assimilated into already existing ways of thinking; those ways of thinking influenced what elements of Buddhism were appropriated, "and without them Buddhism might be so thoroughly foreign as not to be capable of finding a place here" (192).

The short and aptly titled third section, "All Things to All People," highlights the seemingly endless adaptability and heterogeneity of the mindfulness phenomenon, as well as its often contradictory and more or less grandiose claims. While some critics (myself included) have contended that "mindfulness" is an empty or "floating" signifier, Wilson declares this amorphous nature a demonstration of the "central Buddhist insight that all things are empty of self-nature, including every single element of Buddhism and the tradition as a whole" (195), before listing a number of possible outcomes of mindfulness. (Clearly, like other human practices, mindfulness can be used for many different ends. Whether it actually accomplishes what it purports to do is another question altogether, and I can only guess to what extent this final litany was written tongue-in-cheek.)

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<sup>1</sup> Žižek, 2001, "From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism," *Cabinet Magazine*, Issue 2 <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/2/western.php>, accessed 11/28/15].

Considering the amount of information packed into just under 200 pages of main text (including a comprehensive list of suggestions for further research), it would be uncharitable to complain about the inevitable lacunae. I have already mentioned a few quibbles I have with *Mindful America*. A more substantial criticism has to do with its impressionistic style. The book as a whole tends to stay on a descriptive level, and while there are many interesting observations, these are often left undeveloped. I could be wrong, of course, but I suspect Wilson's non-judgmental, "objective" stance is to blame here, as it is likely inhibiting a more far-reaching analysis.

Nevertheless, that last critique does not detract from the importance of this work. *Mindful America* will be valuable not only for anyone interested in the mindfulness phenomenon, but also for students of North American Buddhism and religious appropriation in general.