

Book Review

McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality

By Ronald E. Purser. New York/London: Repeater Books/Random House, 2019, 304 pages, ISBN 978-1-912248-31-5 (paperback), \$15.95.

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Ever since Ronald Purser and David Loy’s 2013 Huffington Post article “Beyond McM mindfulness” went viral, Purser has been one of the most vocal public critics of the commercialized mindfulness industry. He has earned himself a reputation as a “crank” on the mindfulness conference circuit, a label he appropriated when he co-created the *Mindful Cranks* podcast featuring interviews with scholars and practitioners, many of whom contributed to two volumes on mindfulness that Purser co-edited (Purser 2016; Stanley et al. 2018). All these activities, collaborations, and writings led up to his searing comprehensive appraisal of the mainstream meditation industry in *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*.

Those are fighting words in the title, and Purser backs them up with clear argumentation and ample research. Lest we think he is merely throwing around provocative language, in the first chapter he draws intriguing parallels between McDonald’s fast food tycoon Ray Kroc and “spiritual salesman” Jon Kabat-Zinn, creator of MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction). Kroc popularized fast food, providing “busy Americans instant access to food that would be delivered consistently through automation, standardization and discipline” (16). Similarly, Kabat-Zinn sought to provide “stressed-out Americans easy access to MBSR through a short eight-week mindfulness course for stress reduction that would be taught consistently using a standardized curriculum” (ibid). Kabat-Zinn secularized and streamlined Buddhism to fit the demands of the market and the logic of contemporary capitalist society, and gave birth to what would become the “McMindfulness” industry.

Purser details how mindfulness courses and self-help books tend to focus on the first step of meditation—attention to the breath and sensations—and ignore the larger framework of teachings and practices that lead to a culturally Buddhist awareness of the relative and impermanent existence



of the self. The ethical bases of Buddhism are largely ignored in mainstream mindfulness, the goal of which is exclusively therapeutic. Yet, even as a therapeutic approach, Purser suggests that mainstream mindfulness is highly reductive, and disregards social and psychological causes of suffering in favor of rote mental exercises that provide an often fleeting sense of calm and contentment.

These critiques are well-known to scholars of contemporary Buddhism, and many other recent publications have discussed topics that Purser covers. To name a few, Donald S. Lopez's *The Scientific Buddha: His Short and Happy Life* (2012) historicizes and critiques the conversion of Buddhism into a self-help technique backed by dubious scientific claims; Candy Gunther Brown explores legal and ethical debates around the secularization of Buddhist practices in *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools: Reforming Secular Education or Reestablishing Religion?* (2019); Jaime Kucinkas carries out a sociological study of American mindfulness in *The Mindful Elite: Mobilizing from the Inside Out* (2019); and Jeff Wilson's *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhism Meditation and American Culture* (2014) tracks the mindfulness movement's widespread penetration into different areas of contemporary American society. Purser's book is primarily aimed at a more general readership than these university press titles, and some scholars may be turned away by its incendiary title and non-academic presentation.

Purser's critiques, however, are rigorous and grounded in a wide body of research. He recognizes that mindfulness—even when taught superficially through express courses, self-help books, and mobile apps—can benefit individuals, and he does not question the good intentions of its proponents. But he also unmasks the insidious underside of the practice when it is used as a balm in a society that produces both isolation and economic precarity. Purser suggests that mindfulness, as it is often taught, only awakens individuals to a source of inner self-comfort, when it should also be awakening them to the outer conditions that make their existence difficult to bear in the first place.

In chapter two and throughout the book, Purser charges that mindfulness has become a tool of neoliberal ideology that aims to destroy collective structures and reshape society as a collection of isolated individuals who are valued mainly for their usefulness to the market as workers and consumers. When the ethical base of the dharma is forgotten, the Buddhist instruction to not judge can be deployed as a call for the passive acceptance of structures of social and economic relations. Mindfulness becomes a mere aid for the self to maintain composure in the face of suffering. Attention to our sensations is no longer a first step toward understanding our basic entanglement with the wider world, but rather a magnification and correction of the inner self.

For Purser, this deployment reduces mindfulness to what Michel Foucault called a technique of the self, which works subtly on our desires and aspirations and drives us to adopt methods of self-regulation that we believe are in our own interest. Purser reads the mandate to pay attention to the present moment without judgment during meditation as an illustrative example of this self-regulation.

Needless to say, it can be a great revelation for individuals to step back from their thoughts and observe the reactivity that perpetuates destructive cycles. But Purser contends that watered-down mindfulness programs often regard all anger and other expressions of dissatisfaction as ill-

suites responses to be indiscriminately extinguished by the elixir of conscientious breathing. These programs' proponents point out that there is a great need for mindfulness in today's fast-paced and unstable world, where our attention and emotions are continually pushed to the limit. Their solution, however, is not to seek changes to social, economic, and institutional systems. Instead, they teach people to care for themselves individually, focusing on their own habits of mind as the cause of their suffering, and to dismiss any external causes. In that way, mindfulness becomes the psychological equivalent of the neoliberal economic call for individual responsibility, rather than government "interference in the market" as a solution to poverty and inequality (30–31).

In chapter three, Purser contextualizes mindfulness, and especially MBSR, within the long history of North American psychological and spiritual currents. These have dealt with the ailments of modern life on a purely individual level and have created novel medical diagnoses with dubious claims to scientific validity. In the 19th century, the condition "neurasthenia" was formulated to explain supposed nervous exhaustion in members of the middle and upper classes. Similarly, the concept of mental stress itself is a 20th-century invention, which was popularized by Czech-Canadian biochemist Richard Seyle. Seyle found a connection between external stressors and disease in laboratory rats and hypothesized that humans, too, would develop medical conditions in the face of overwhelming stress. Purser points out that corporations and governments are only too happy to embrace scientific research like Seyle's that seems to show anxiety and depression to be individual, not societal, dysfunctions.

In the book's middle chapters, Purser shows how mindfulness has similarly been recast as a science to secure a great deal of financial support for research projects and training courses. Numerous studies make bold claims for the transformative effect of mindfulness on cognitive and psychological processes, and provide the media with dramatic headlines that capture the public imagination. Less attention has been given to scientific reviews that question the validity or reach of these claims. Neural brain-mapping studies are particularly effective at conveying an aura of scientific precision. While these studies may appear to give us a transparent window into the workings of the brain in all its complexity, they are only rough models showing locations and patterns of activity. The science of interpreting what this activity reflects is an exciting frontier, but still a matter of speculation and debate (125–127).

To Purser, even more disturbing is the tendency of mindfulness purveyors like Kabat-Zinn to obscure the connection between mindfulness and Buddhism to reach a broad Western public. Mindfulness has often been packaged as Buddhism without cultural baggage. Traditional Asian cultural knowledge is thereby appropriated by Western businesses and rebranded at great profit. This packaging also implies that practices from the communities in which mindfulness evolved are clouded by local tradition and superstition and ripe for rationalization and improvement by Western methods. Kabat-Zinn has even claimed that the mindfulness he teaches belongs to a "universal *dharma*" (cited on 89), which is not the property of Buddhism.

Drawing on Wilson's *Mindful America*, Purser points out that such universalist and essentialist claims about human nature make contemporary mindfulness itself into a sort of religion (ibid). Moreover, it is a religion that sacralizes the private experience of the present moment, detached from

any consideration of its cultural context (90–94). The very approach of using brain mapping to prove mindfulness’s effectiveness illustrates this reductive view of what it means to be human in a concrete social and physical world. As Purser writes, “Cognitive functions are not just in the head, but are embodied, involving an array of affective and bodily skills that are situated in a social environment. . . . The same is true for mindfulness. Decontextualizing it promotes the myth that it is a private mental state detached from social and cultural contexts” (127). This statement expresses the heart of Purser’s critique of the mindfulness industry: that carefully selected Buddhist practices are lifted from their cultural and spiritual contexts to be deployed within the social void of standardized and franchised distribution.

For Purser, this type of mindfulness practice reinforces the isolated personal and social bubbles that increasingly characterize contemporary society. A case in point is House Representative and presidential hopeful Tim Ryan, a graduate of MBSR and a mindfulness convert discussed in chapter thirteen. In his book *A Mindful Nation* (2012), Ryan lays out a political vision for America based on teaching people to rediscover their authentic inner selves. Purser asks how being mindful might help Ryan’s constituents in Youngstown, Ohio, a community devastated by the collapse of the steel industry. In a poignant passage, Purser comments on Ryan’s delight with the standard MBSR exercise of eating a single raisin:

When he marveled at his mindful moment with a raisin (“Have you ever just looked at one?”), what if he had seen it from a broader perspective than his self-centered view? Never mind how the raisin looks, feels, smells, and tastes to a privileged congressman, what if Ryan had contemplated the farm where the raisin was grown by Hispanic migrants doing back-breaking work in the San Joaquin valley, earning a cent for every two hundred grapes harvested. Reflection on the raisin could call to mind units from US Immigration and Customs enforcement rounding up workers like cattle and deporting them. Might Ryan be cognizant of the smog where the raisin was grown? What about the water shortages, or the fossil fuels burned to transport raisins from central California to his Catskills retreat? What about the grocery store staff that unloaded, unpacked and stocked raisins on the shelf? Would Ryan be mindful of the fact that the CEOs who run large agribusiness and grocery chains earn hundreds of times as much as store clerks? [220]

Purser’s treatment of the Wisdom 2.0 conference in chapter ten even more vividly critiques how elites can use mindfulness as a tool for delving within the self and ignoring the world outside their privileged lifestyles. In 2014, a conference panel was interrupted by activists who unfurled a banner reading “Eviction Free San Francisco” and encouraged attendees to mindfully consider the effect of their industry on the city. Amid the ensuing confusion, Google’s Bill Duane decided to lead a meditation prompting the audience to scan their bodies to “feel what it’s like to be in conflict with a group of people with heartfelt ideas” (178). As Purser wryly observes, “The protestors and their message were mindfully managed out of meaningful existence” (180).

In the book's latter half (mostly in chapters six, eight, eleven, and twelve), Purser investigates how mindfulness programs are utilized to foment conformity in several private and public contexts. Large corporations purchase mindfulness training to help manage worker burnout without changing the demands they place on employees (134–135). Schools frequently deploy mindfulness as a disciplinary tool, particularly in areas where students come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. These institutions encourage workers and students to see their feelings of anger and discontent as inner imbalances to be self-managed, rather than as reasonable responses to external conditions (183–184). Even the military has contracted MBSR to build soldiers' concentration and resilience in battle conditions, as well as to prevent damages that often result from participating in the trauma of warfare (203–209, 215–216).

In these contexts, Purser details how particularly troubling it is that the ethical components of Buddhism are erased, reducing the religion to a practice of self-care and self-management. When confronted with this concern, mindfulness purveyors often resort to what Purser terms the “Trojan horse” argument: through the introduction of mindfulness, these institutions will, over time, become more compassionate, kinder places, even if compassion is not an explicit part of the mindfulness curriculum (146–148). So far, the evidence does not suggest that mindfulness training has had this effect on corporations like Google and Monsanto (148), on public schools (197–201), on US military missions (203–217), nor on elite political and economic circles (167–182, 219–239). There is a similar “lack of credible evidence that corporate mindfulness programs result in any such ‘greater good’” (148). Mindfulness in schools may even be harmful for children suffering trauma (197–201). When introduced into contexts like the military and elite financial circles, it is doubtful that mindfulness could ever modify the former's main activity of honing the capacity to kill efficiently (203–217) or the latter's primary objective of preserving economic inequality (167–182).

McMindfulness is one of those rare books that functions both as a well-documented academic study and as an accessible book for a wider audience. While many of the topics Purser discusses are investigated in greater depth elsewhere, this book addresses the diversity of the mindfulness movement and formulates an impressively coherent and forceful argument in response to it. After reading *McMindfulness*, the reader may be tempted to see any formulation of mindfulness not grounded in comprehensive Buddhist practice as, at best, useless and, at worst, genuinely harmful. Still, one might ask if there can be a productive middle ground between the lifelong dedication of serious practitioners of Buddhism and the superficial mindfulness Purser interrogates. There may be a wider range of variants of the mindfulness boom than those he considers. What would Purser make, for example, of Tibetan teacher Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche who, to deepen his spiritual practice, undertook a four-year sojourn living in caves and begging for food, but has also worked to popularize Buddhist practices by teaching workshops for diverse groups of students around the world and publishing several bestselling self-help guides? His guides are written in a light and engaging style and refer to neuroscience studies as evidence of the effectiveness of meditation, but also explain the teachings and practices of Tibetan Buddhism, thereby grounding them in a clear, ethical framework.

Similarly, American psychotherapist and insight meditation teacher Tara Brach has published several popular books on Buddhism that aim to reach a broad public without diluting the dharma.

Her flashy website includes online courses but does not reduce the dharma to stress reduction or attention exercises. It takes meditation seriously as a spiritual practice and encourages readers to face their suffering head on, rather than suppress it through breathing exercises. Mingyur Rinpoche and Brach are among several teachers from both the East and West who seek the widest possible audience and reach those interested in serious practice, as well as casual dabblers, without ignoring the cultural roots and sources of Buddhist dharma. Would Purser consider this “McMindfulness”? Perhaps it is a more conscientious middle-brow version, or what we might call Prêt-à-Méditer.

A recent, broad study of lower-profile mindfulness teachers in the UK reveals a counternarrative to that of *McMindfulness*. The study found that the plethora of courses across that nation may be building community rather than privatizing suffering. Results have yet to be published, but in a recent interview on the *Mindful Cranks* podcast, principal investigator Steven Stanley suggested that the community mindfulness programs investigated can be seen as a new women’s movement that builds networks of support and care.

Buddhism has long influenced certain Western intellectual and countercultural circles. It remains to be seen how the latest broad wave of interest in it will ultimately influence different sectors of society. Undoubtedly, meditation is a powerful practice that can transform consciousness. That potential is not proven by modern brain scans but is rather borne out by testimonial evidence and life changes. Purser shows, however, that mindfulness may also serve as a pacifier and make us into more compliant worker bees and passive consumers. Lest we let mindfulness devolve into the happiness pills of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Purser calls on practitioners of the “new capitalist spirituality” to pay more attention to where and how their attention is being directed.

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