My mindfulness is better than your mindfulness

Anyone who has engaged with the so-called ‘Mindfulness Movement’ will have encountered a range of fads and practices that, if nothing else, is one step along the Eightfold Path, but is mindfulness Buddhism? To this, we must give a qualified answer, even if only because the term mindfulness has become so elastic that it now incorporates a range of practices that are almost completely unrecognizable from those drawn from Buddhist traditions. Today, the word ‘Mindfulness’ (like Buddhism) isn’t only one thing.

It is not uncommon to hear mindfulness practitioners claim to be Buddhists simply on the basis that they practice mindfulness for 20 minutes every morning, sometimes using an app like Headspace or Calm. The commercialization about mindfulness today has contributed to the idea that being a Buddhist is cool (and perhaps isn’t a religious identity at all), I experienced a variation on this when a renowned neuroscientist confessed in a research seminar that people used to think she was a science nerd, but now that she calls herself a ‘neuro-Buddhist’ they all think she is cool. She gets invited to more parties.

Conversely, it’s just as common to hear both advocates and opponents insist that, in its contemporary form, mindfulness has no necessary connection with Buddhism at all. For the advocates, this makes mindfulness mainstream, or even to secular technology that can benefit (and be sold to) anyone from any background without prejudice. Advocates today have a wealth of data to support the universal benefits of the practice. For the opponents, the deracination of mindfulness makes the contemporary practice ethically and spiritually vacuous; making mindfulness into something popular and mass-market acceptable is impossible to do, culturally. For these opponents, calling contemporary mindfulness ‘Buddhist’ insults the dignity of Buddhism. It would be akin to saying that making a wish as you blow out birthday candles is the same as Christianity.

The Study

The word ‘Mindfulness’ has become so pervasive today that it’s almost impossible to keep track of all the different ideas and practices that it is used to label. It is neither my purpose here to survey them all nor to trace the philosophical, philological, or cultural histories of the different usages. Rather, my concern is to identify some of the ways in which the so-called ‘Mindfulness Movement’ might touch on or even participate in systemic anti-Asian discrimination and other forms of harm. I do not claim that any such harm is intentional, but I would like to suggest that it might be avoidable. And I claim neither that this account characterises the entire field nor that it exhausts all the possible systemic harms, but it identifies a current for which the mindfulness field should take responsibility. Paying more attention to Asia, Asians, and Asian Studies might be a good way to start.

Doing No Harm

Mindfulness, (Western) Buddhism, Appropriation, Systemic Racism

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What does it mean to do no harm?

The mindfulness field is increasingly attentive to the dangers of doing harm. However, the conception of ‘harm’ is largely limited to the possibility of ‘adverse’ experiences of individuals on the cushion in various contexts, be they clinical, spiritual, recreational, or religious. These range from rather common and mild feelings of dissociation to quite rare and profound episodes resembling psychotic breaks. Wiloughby Britton of Brown University has even established a clinic devoted to supporting repair and healing after such damage has been done.1 For as long as mindfulness-based treatment for trauma, initially focussing on military veterans and first-responders in the USA. Meanwhile, David Treleaven’s Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness (TSM) has helped clinicians and other mindfulness vendors to adapt the delivery of mindfulness to minimize the likelihood of triggering traumatic memories (whether the client is conscious of having memories or not).1 Looking a little closer, however, the attention to trauma also opens the door to the possibility of systemic, cultural, and racial harm. Can the Mindfulness Movement do harm to identities, communities, and to the individuals who inhabit those categories? Like so many other areas of knowledge and practice today, should contemporary mindfulness be striving to be more mindful of its location in and contribution to systemic prejudices and violence?

One place where these questions edge into the categories of harm already outlined is in the field of trauma-sensitive mindfulness. For example, there we find compelling and copious evidence of the ways in which the unacknowledged or accidental Orientalism of ‘often well-meaning’ mindfulness teachers, writers, and vendors can trigger the deep-rooted trauma of having been subjected to consistent patterns of racism in society more broadly. Growing examples that I have witnessed might involve a teacher’s (often well-meaning) remarks that the original Asian—present or participant in a group—will have a natural advantage in mastering mindfulness, perhaps even noting that this participant probably grew up meditating all the time at home.

Fig. 1: Graphic of “May We Gather: A National Buddhist Memorial Ceremony for Asian American Ancestors”, Photo downloaded from maywegather.org.

May we gather

4th May 2021 marked the 49th day after the attacks since March 2020 and the emergence of harassment, discrimination, and physical attacks. Meanwhile, the sense that this was the longest time that a person can reside in the intermediate stage between death and rebirth is sometimes known as the bardo. Because of this, in such traditions, a special ceremony will be held on the 49th day, completing a cycle of 7x7 funerary rituals, marking the final passage of the deceased from their previous state into whatever follows for them. This is traditionally also a moment of release and healing for those left behind.

For 4th May 2021, leaders and followers of two dozen different Buddhist traditions gathered at Higashi Honganji temple in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles. Reflecting the demographics in the United States in general, where more than two-thirds of Buddhists are Asian-American, the vast majority of attendees were of Asian descent. One of the organizers, Rev. Duncan Ryuken Williams, explained that an assembly of this kind would be the first-responders in the USA. Meanwhile, Treleaven’s Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness (TSM) is icons of acceptance and perseverance, of beauty of shattered and broken things. Both art that seeks to demonstrate the ongoing presence of a special ceremony will be held on the 49th day, completing a cycle of 7x7 funerary rituals, marking the final passage of the deceased from their previous state into whatever follows for them. This is traditionally also a moment of release and healing for those left behind.

The purpose of the ceremony was not only to mark the end of bardo for the eight human lives lost in Atlanta on 16 March, but also to offer some healing to Asian-Americans, Americans in general, and the world that is suffering from racial hatred. The ceremony included an acknowledgment that Higashi Honganji was built on Tongva territory, which remains sacred to some peoples of the area in a period of colonial violence. It included acknowledgments of the anti-Chinese violence of internment during WWII, and the discrimination against South and Southeast Asian immigrants and refugees in the 1970s. The ceremony ended with each of the Buddhist leaders pointing a line of gold into a cracked porcelain lotus flower, a ceremony inspired by the Japanese tradition of kintsugi, and then processing out of the temple with each person clapping a single on a point, a unbroken length of thread. The lotus is pervasive in Buddhist thought as a pristine beauty that emerges only from the dirtiest, unwholesome conditions. In Thich Nhat Hanh’s famous phrase: ‘no mud, no lotus’. Meanwhile, kintsugi is an art that seeks to demonstrate the ongoing beauty of shattered and broken things. Both are located in the interstices of life as it passes through beauty emerging from ruin. In the language of therapeutic modernity, we might see them as metaphors for post-traumatic growth.

It was a beautiful, powerful, and moving event in multiple ways. A few days later, NBC News characterised the ceremony, at least partially, as a response by Asian-Americans to the mainstream white-washing of Buddhism in US, especially since its recent surge in popularity on the back of the so-called Mindfulness Movement. Caitlin Yoshiko Kandall cites the high-profile conversion of Richard Gere and covers of Time Magazine as samples of...
An Asia-shaped hole in mindfulness and (western) Buddhism?

We must accept that anti-Asian racism is a powerful current in many Western societies today. In America, this has been demonstrated by the presence of many Asian-American Buddhists as marginalized from the mainstream narrative of Buddhism in the West. So, the next question is: what do we do when we find out it is ourselves who are the subject of significant cultural and religious deracination? We are the ones who are the beneficiaries of the practices and traditions that are our heritage, and we have a responsibility to ensure that the story of our own history is told and not overlooked. Asian-American Buddhists are examples of this, as they are often the first to be exposed to the teachings of their own spiritual tradition. It is important to recognise that the history of Buddhism in the United States is not always as simple as it might seem. There have been instances where non-Abrahamic traditions have been given prominence over Abrahamic traditions, and this has led to a situation where the history of mindfulness in Buddhism is not always recognised.

The concept of mindfulness meditation is a powerful one, but it is important to remember that it is not a one-size-fits-all approach. It is important to understand the different cultural and religious contexts in which mindfulness meditation has been practiced and to ensure that it is not imposed upon others without their consent. It is important to recognise that mindfulness meditation is not a universal concept, and that its application can vary depending on the context in which it is used. It is important to ensure that mindfulness meditation is taught in a way that is respectful of the cultural and religious traditions of those who are being taught.

The role of mindfulness meditation in contemporary society is complex, and it is important to consider the potential benefits and risks of its application. It is important to ensure that mindfulness meditation is taught in a way that is respectful of the cultural and religious traditions of those who are being taught. It is also important to ensure that mindfulness meditation is taught in a way that is respectful of the individual's personal beliefs and values. It is important to ensure that mindfulness meditation is taught in a way that is respectful of the individual's personal beliefs and values. It is important to ensure that mindfulness meditation is taught in a way that is respectful of the individual's personal beliefs and values.

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