

# Doing No Harm

## Mindfulness, (Western) Buddhism, Appropriation, Systemic Racism

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### My mindfulness is better than your mindfulness

Anyone who has engaged with the so-called 'Mindfulness Movement' will have encountered the question of the relationship between contemporary mindfulness practices and Buddhism. Buddhism is vastly more than mindfulness (right mindfulness is only one step along the Eightfold Path), but is mindfulness *Buddhist*? 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 of mindfulness today has contributed to the idea that being a Buddhist is cool (and perhaps isn't really 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 contemporary mindfulness into a 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 exchanges its true value for a dollar value. 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 Christian prayer.

It is easy for scholars in various disciplines to get so wrapped up in the intellectual gymnastics that they forget that mindfulness is a practice that impacts the lives of real people. That said, one thing that nearly everyone in the field seems to accept is that mindfulness in various forms appears to have generally beneficial impacts on the people who practice it. That is, whatever else we can say about it, at least we can say that contemporary constructions of mindfulness *do no harm*. But is this true? In particular, what definition of 'harm' must we maintain in order for that to be true? Where are we looking for harm, and whose harm is neglected? And is that neglect already harmful?

### 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

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.



Fig. 1: Graphic of "May We Gather: A National Buddhist Memorial Ceremony for Asian American Ancestors". Photo downloaded from [maywegather.org](http://maywegather.org).

dissociation to quite rare and profound episodes resembling psychotic breaks. Willoughby Britton of Brown University has even established a clinic devoted to supporting repair and healing after such damage has been done.<sup>1</sup>

For as long as mindfulness has been deployed in therapeutic and clinical settings, such as in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), there has been guidance about circumstances and conditions in which mindfulness should be contraindicated for specific individuals, lest it exacerbate rather than relieve suffering. In this context of therapeutic mindfulness, 'do no harm' means the alteration of practices and practitioner groups based on evidence of beneficial outcomes.

For example, recent work by Elizabeth Stanley has produced protocols for mindfulness-based treatments for trauma, initially focussing on military veterans and first-responders in the USA.<sup>2</sup> 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 such memories or not).<sup>3</sup>

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, cultures, 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 unexamined 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. Common examples that I have witnessed might involve a teacher's (often well-meaning) remarks that the only Asian-presenting 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.

### May we gather

4th May 2021 marked the 49th day after the killing of eight people, six of whom were Asian-American women, in Atlanta. This mass shooting followed a surge in anti-Asian racism and violence, especially (but certainly not only) in the USA, with thousands of reports of harassment, discrimination, and physical attacks since March 2020 and the emergence of the COVID pandemic.

In some Buddhist traditions, such as Tibetan Buddhism, 49 days after a death is believed to be the longest time that a person can reside in the intermediate stage between death and rebirth – it 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.

On 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 people in attendance were of Asian descent. One of the organizers, Rev. Duncan Ryuken Williams, explained that an assembly of so many different Buddhist traditions for one event might be historically unprecedented, and perhaps it would only be possible in California, with its rich religious and ethnic diversity.<sup>4</sup>

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 whole world that is suffering from the harm of racial hatred. The ceremony included an acknowledgment that Higashi Honganji was built on Tongva territory, which was stolen from the Indigenous people of the area in a period of colonial violence. It included acknowledgments of the anti-Chinese violence of the 19th century, the anti-Japanese 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 painting a line of gold-gilt onto a cracked porcelain lotus flower, a ceremony inspired by the Japanese tradition of *kintsugi*, and then processing out of the temple with each person clasping a point on a single, unbroken length of thread. The lotus is pervasive in Buddhist traditions as a pristine beauty that emerges only from the dirtiest, swampiest conditions. In Thich Nhat Hanh's famous phrase: no mud, no lotus.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, *kintsugi* is an art that seeks to demonstrate the ongoing beauty of shattered and broken things. Both are icons of acceptance and perseverance, of 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 USA, especially since its recent surge in popularity on the back of the so-called Mindfulness Movement. Caitlin Yoshiko Kandil cites the high-profile conversion of Richard Gere and covers of *Time Magazine* as samples of



the mainstream.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most illustrative cover of *Time* was on 13 October 1997, which bears the headline, “America’s Fascination with Buddhism,” and shows a photograph of Brad Pitt from the 1997 movie *Seven Years in Tibet*, about the Austrian explorer who escaped from a prison-camp in the Himalayas and smuggled himself into Tibet in 1944. The point here is that Buddhism has been given a series of beautiful white faces and bodies to represent it in the media, especially as it has grown in popularity in the so-called West. If this case can be made for Buddhism, it’s even easier to make for Mindfulness, especially in its commercial forms.

Kandil also suggests that the history of Buddhism in the United States tends to focus on the role of white converts, especially those in the countercultural movements of the 1960s, rather than on the hundreds of thousands of Asian immigrants and Asian-Americans who brought Buddhism to the country and cultivated it. The story of the “Westernisation” of Buddhism is presented as the story of its adoption by white Americans, including by white scientists, rather than the story of generations of Asian-American Buddhists. Where Asians or Asian-Americans do appear in such stories, they often appear in Orientalised ways, as lost in pre-modern superstition and magical thinking, while the white converts are shown as having brought Buddhism into the light of reason and modernity.

In fact, the “May We Gather” event was not Asian-American Buddhists’ first intervention into this mainstream narrative: groups such as the Young Buddhist Editorial<sup>7</sup> provide a forum and profile for young Asian-American Buddhists. The idea is partly to help build community amongst Asian-American Buddhists, who often struggle to recognise themselves and their experiences in depictions of Buddhism in the media. In part, the strategy is to showcase images and experiences of real, living, young Asian-American Buddhist lives to combat the stereotypes.

My point here is that there are clearly some systemic social and cultural factors around (Western) Buddhism that demand we consider the dimensions of potential ‘harm’ more broadly than directly induced experiential dis-ease, adversity, or even trauma on a meditation cushion. “May We Gather” points towards the possibility that there are systemic issues in and around Western Buddhism that do harm to Asians and Asia, and perhaps also to Buddhism itself. If this is true of Buddhism, how much more true might this be of mindfulness – the exemplary case of white-washing Buddhism and Buddhist practices more generally?

### 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, and also accept the lived experience of many Asian-American Buddhists as marginalized from the mainstream narrative of Buddhism in the West. So, what do we find when we explore the situation around so-called secular mindfulness? Outside Buddhist communities, are there aspects of this secular narrative that potentially cause harm? If so, what are they and what can be done about them?

One of the most immediate issues involves a consideration of how the kinds of secular mindfulness that we see today have entered the marketplace. A fairly conventional narrative in the world of “secular mindfulness” would start this story in the late 1970s with the groundbreaking work of Jon Kabat-Zinn. Indeed, in some communities of practice, the story of Kabat-Zinn establishing a mindfulness clinic in the basement of Massachusetts Medical Center to support patients with chronic pain is teetering on the cusp of legend today.

In the 1970s Kabat-Zinn made a strategic decision to present mindfulness as a simple technique or technology that could be practised by anyone from any background without any ethical or religious connotations. So, even though Kabat-Zinn was a practicing Buddhist himself, the decision was made to develop a language to describe, teach, and practice mindfulness without employing references to Buddhism or Buddhist terms. The rationale for this was simple: in order to



Fig. 2 (top): *Time Magazine* cover showing of Brad Pitt from the 1997 movie *Seven Years in Tibet*.

Fig. 3 (middle): *Time Magazine* cover “The Science of Meditation”

Fig. 4 (bottom): “The Mindful Revolution”.

make a therapeutic technology palatable to clinicians, hospitals, and patients in the United States, mindfulness had to be stripped of any necessary connection with any religion, and with a non-Christian religion in particular. When we talk about ‘secular mindfulness’ today, we’re talking about a version of an originally Buddhist practice in which the language, trappings, and textual framing of mindfulness have been modified strategically to accord with a modern scientific context that is itself situated in an unevenly Christian polity. This is another way of saying that, at least at that time, Buddhism was seen as something of a liability. Buddhism was like mindfulness’ embarrassing, older, first-generation-immigrant relative who threatened to show up and dance at the highschool prom; nobody look at grandpa, you’ll just encourage him.

Thankfully, this allergy to acknowledging the Buddhist roots of contemporary mindfulness has diminished. However, a factor in this diminishment has been the trend towards arguing that Buddhism itself isn’t really a religion. That is, not only can one construct secular mindfulness, but one can also fashion a secular Buddhism. The implication of this is that even if clinicians, scientists, and commercial vendors of mindfulness admit that it has Buddhist origins, this need not involve associating it with a religious worldview, which is often depicted as pre-modern, unscientific, and superstitious. That is, “Buddhist modernism” involves the Western liberation of Buddhism from the murky category of religion.

There are various possible ways to make the argument that it is inappropriate to call Buddhism a religion. As scholars of Asian Studies will know well, it is relatively common, for instance, to argue that the category of ‘religion’ was developed to encompass Abrahamic traditions and that non-Abrahamic traditions just got forced into that category through a process of colonial, epistemic violence as European scholars encountered other cultures. Historically, Buddhism might

have performed a range of religious functions in various societies, but perhaps calling it a religion is forcing a circular peg into a triangular hole?

In general, though, the mindfulness movement does not appeal to anti- or de-colonisation in this way. Instead, the most pervasive argument in that field is usually about the discovery of scientific evidence that some of the therapeutic claims of Buddhism have reliable neurological correlates. The discovery of neuroplasticity in particular has opened this door. The argument is something like this: because various aspects of Buddhist philosophy have now been shown scientifically to be ‘true,’ Buddhism no longer demands belief or faith from its adherents and thus is no longer a religion. On this account, Buddhism is really a branch of experimental psychology; so, mindfulness is a psychological technology even if it is Buddhist. Leaving aside the question of whether belief or faith are necessary or sufficient conditions for categorisation as a religion (which they are not), this argument does reveal that faith and belief are the issues that risk making a practice unpalatable to clinicians, scientists, and commercial vendors in contemporary modernity.

Important in this context is that this orientation towards Buddhism as a form of psychology rather than religion implies two allied positions: first, mindfulness and Buddhism can be rooted in science rather than religion, and, second, that mindfulness and Buddhism *should* be saved from the darkness of religion by science. So, removing religion is not only technically possible, but it is a form of good. That is, on this account, science is a superior form of knowledge, bringing enlightenment into the darkness; modern science can save Buddhism and mindfulness from their extended history of superstition (in Asia). Asia, Asians, and scholars of Asian Studies might contest this saviour-narrative.

In the context of the attempt to excavate issues of systemic injustice in this field, this kind of approach to secularisation carries a host of important implications. Perhaps the most glaring is that more than two millennia of the lived history of Buddhism and the practice of mindfulness meditation is effectively bracketed out of the field as pre-modern, superstitious, or religious; instead, Western scientists are held to have discovered the truths of Buddhism and mindfulness for the first time, just as Columbus discovered the Americas. Indeed, many of the contemporary trainings in therapeutic mindfulness that do include references to the ‘original’ formulations of mindfulness in Buddhism refer directly back to the Pali canon, leap-frogging 2500 years of scholarship, interpretation, commentary, and experience in order to show that contemporary science has discovered the veracity of some of this “ancient wisdom.” The tremendous sophistication and diversity of the myriad Buddhist traditions – so richly showcased at the “May We Gather” ceremony and so carefully explored in the field of Asian Studies – is largely flattened into a couple of classical texts.

### Territorial acknowledgments

I am very lucky to be able to live, work, and learn on the unceded territories of the Lekwungen peoples, here on Vancouver Island, Canada. It is the normal practice of universities here to acknowledge this living territorial heritage whenever there is a public event. The practice is not perfect, and it is sometimes performed in a routine and bureaucratic way, but at least it is an attempt to prevent denial from doing further harm to those Indigenous communities whose identity was subjected to systematic attempts at erasure. When I teach meditation or mindfulness here, in the university or elsewhere, I always start with a territorial acknowledgment and also with a heritage acknowledgement, recognizing the millions of Asian ancestors over thousands of years who preserved, cultivated, and developed most of the techniques upon which contemporary practices rely. In a secular context, I explain that this does not mean that contemporary mindfulness is necessarily Buddhist in all/any of its popular forms. It simply means accepting that we would not be sitting on these cushions in Victoria without the remarkable lives of generations of Asian

Buddhists, including those who sacrificed so much to bring it to North America and then to preserve it here in the face of violence and discrimination.

It is certainly true that this acknowledgment causes some people who might otherwise have benefitted from practicing mindfulness to stand up and leave. They do not wish to participate in something Asian or something with Buddhist associations. If I were a commercial vendor, I would not be maximising my market by explaining the heritage of this product. But I am not, and I immediately recognise my privilege in that respect.

More complicated in this context is the dilemma of healthcare providers. Often, such workers are still encouraged to obscure the Buddhist origins of the techniques they teach precisely so that they can help anyone whose suffering might be alleviated by the practices, regardless of their personal commitments. If revealing this heritage story means that some people refuse even to try the practices, is telling this story potentially doing them harm?

It’s such a complicated question. Consider the possibility, for instance, that it is the practice itself that contains the meaning, the knowledge, and the seed of transformation, as Mahayana Buddhist teachers have argued for at least 800 years. That is, unlike the privileging of text, doctrine, and language that is so central to the Western philosophical tradition, there is a thread in Buddhist epistemology that clearly emphasizes how none of those things matter in the end; what matters is just that you sit and practice. The practice itself transforms us. So, if we persuade someone to practice mindfulness today who is anti-Asian or anti-Buddhist on the basis that the contemporary practice has been freed of those connections by science, are we simply tricking them into becoming practicing Buddhists? Is this bad faith? Expedient means? Is this doing no harm?

Perhaps the most complicated dilemma is the question of weighing the various possible harms against each other. On the one hand, we might consider the various ways in which contemporary mindfulness can benefit diverse populations by constructing itself as a value-neutral form of scientific technology, and thus the potential harm of erecting obstacles to accessing that technology by associating it with an ethnic and cultural group that is subject to discrimination in many Western societies. On the other hand, we must consider the various ways in which deracinating mindfulness risks inflicting further harm on populations that are already subject to systemic harm in many contemporary societies.

I’m more than aware that mindfulness is not the only field in which the balance of potential harms must be balanced. However, in this case at least, there appears to be a non-trivial current of opinion that it is a mistake to think that there are no (or perhaps even minimal) potential harms to be balanced. It seems to me that these emerge, at least in part, from a marginalization of the voices of Asians, Asia, and Asian Studies, and thus affect harm in themselves.

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#### Notes

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