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Occupy Mindfulness

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Mindfulness is all the rage—indeed, it's been called a revolution. Mindfulness increasingly is being adopted in education, psychotherapy, addiction treatment, and health care. Children, teens, adults, parents, and families are learning and practicing to become aware of their thoughts, feelings, and sensations, moment to moment.

In mindfulness you observe experiences as they arise in the mind and hold them with compassion. Over time you begin to notice that thoughts and feelings are not substantial or permanent, and you are able to let them go and become less identified with them. Many people gain practical benefits from mindfulness in terms of personal growth, relationships, and overall well-being. (See here and here for example.¹)

Mindfulness can lead to less stress, heightened sensory awareness--i.e. being more fully in the present--as well as more regulation of attention, thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. Practitioners begin to notice that they are less judgmental and more accepting of themselves and others; they can extend that compassion and openness to more and more people and living things. They may experience an increasing sense of interconnectedness with everyone and everything. Being mindful helps those that seek long-lasting, positive political change and conflict resolution. Peace, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, is not just some future end, it is the way to be in the present.⁽²⁾

You know that mindfulness is catching on when institutions of power adopt it. Corporations, even the military, according to Representative Tim Ryan (3), employ mindfulness to meet their own goals. Those who are optimistic about how corporations, the military, and other dominant institutions employ mindfulness see it as an opportunity to introduce higher practices and values into monolithic sources of power; mindfulness, they feel, could even lead those institutions that rely on aggression and cutthroat competition to question their own means and values and become more compassionate.

My concern is that mindfulness may fall victim to its own success. Mindfulness is not about stress reduction, maintaining a steady state of bliss, helping an individual act with more control or an organization run more smoothly and efficiently. Even after we're de-stressed and feeling great, we still need to ask: how do we live now? We're in control and are more efficient, but toward what end?

In the eagerness to secularize mindfulness from its Buddhist origins—a necessary move that has enabled it to establish a practical foothold in the west—something too often gets left out. Mindfulness contains an implicit ethics, even a universal, transcendent purpose: the liberation of all sentient beings from suffering and the evolution toward genuine happiness for all, here and now. Mindfulness means wise or skillful compassion for everyone. It leads people to see that everyone is interdependent and interconnected. From this deeper sense mindfulness is a radical, activist worldview and practice that gives the lie to self-centered seekers of power over others, be it personal, corporate, or collective. In this light, when those in power employ mindfulness as a technology for their own self-serving purposes, unmoored from its ethical meaning, we need to ask, is mindfulness a transformative practice and ethics, or does it unwittingly reinforce self-centered and conformist values and behaviors of society?

Mindfulness is a way to occupy yourself, to fully inhabit your body and mind with presence and awareness and not over-identify with one's fleeting thoughts and unmindfully act on them; in this sense it mirrors the occupy movement itself by committing to a stand of non-participation. Non-participation is a conscious position of openness, of noticing, questioning, checking in with and exploring one's own and other's needs, feelings, and desires. It refuses to foreclose on the present by seeking a pre-determined goal or outcome or to become overly attached to one particular worldview, identity, or behavioral regimen. Adopting this stance allows one to fully participate in activities that reflect inclusiveness and openness themselves.

It is encouraging that mindfulness is spreading to occupy society in some of the ways noted earlier. But mindfulness itself needs to be occupied. It needs to reflect on itself, to take a step back and uncover and make explicit its own developmental stages, its cultural, social, and political contexts, here and now, and become re-connected to its original emancipatory meaning. Otherwise mindfulness can be misused when it over-identifies with and participates in self-serving acts of power.

We all know about the recent gurus who could reach subtle states through meditation yet still exploited some of their followers— doubtless believing they were doing so with compassion. During World War II there were Zen Buddhist monks who could regulate their attention and remain fully present like nobody's business yet followed the orders of the authoritarian emperor with unquestioning obedience (4).

And sorry, the turn toward neuroscience of which many mindfulness proponents are so enamored - as sexy, and significant as it is - doesn't guide us in this respect. For an example of a mindfulness program whose curriculum uses "brain-focused learning" with young children see "The Hawn Foundation—The MindUp Program," (also this interview with Goldie Hawn). We won't find the cultural meaning or developmental level of intention of someone's experience inside the brain; ethical and moral values can't be read off of changes in neurological data. We need to look at the occurrences within their actual social and cultural context and then interpret the meaning of events from the most comprehensive worldview possible—developmentally, morally, culturally, scientifically; we then enact that position from that informed perspective in the best way we can.

While I'd like to see mindfulness expand in as many ways as possible, there are some places in society that already employ mindfulness that could benefit from a critical, integral eye toward questions of meaning, purpose, and values.

Mindfulness and the Military

Mindfulness training has been used in the military, with one study suggesting it helped military groups prepare for deployment in Iraq (5). Let us grant that soldiers, who serve their country with courage and dedication, deserve the absolute best care and support and the least suffering under any circumstances, which mindfulness in this case apparently can provide. Let's also acknowledge that there are times when war is necessary and justified: that is not the issue here. What is missing is any reference to the background and reasons why the soldiers need mindfulness in the first place. Note the technocratic language used to describe mindfulness in the study that reinforces this perspective: adequate

mindfulness practice "may protect against functional impairments associated with high-stress challenges that require a tremendous amount of cognitive control, self-awareness, situational awareness and emotional regulation." There is no mention, let alone evaluation, of why the soldiers face high-stress challenges and for what purpose, namely, carrying out an unconscionable war in Iraq. Should mindfulness always be employed in the service of a devastating war based on a lie? Will mindfulness lead just one soldier, or even more, to question their activity and mission? That's possible, though it not likely as long as mindfulness is rendered as a neutral technique.

This supposed neutrality allows the context--fighting an immoral war--which frames the intent of employing mindfulness to remain hidden in the background and escape scrutiny. To those who think such questions are out of bounds, that the only focus should be on helping the soldiers, mindfulness should remind us of our interdependence: everything is connected, including means and ends. When, if ever, should one kill with calmness and compassion? That question demands we engage in mindful and informed dialogue about the specifics of our particular society, our values, and our level of moral development, and requires we take action to bring ourselves in alignment with our highest worldview.

It's worth noting that during the recent International Symposia for Contemplative Studies held a panel on "The Ethics of Teaching Contemplative Practices to the Armed Forces," the only scheduled session to explicitly address the larger ethical and social context of mindfulness. The symposia abstract acknowledges that this is a "charged issue within contemplative studies" and questions whether teaching contemplative practices in the military could lead to "creating better killers." The focus, however, appears to have precluded any discussion of actual policy or the merits of war or any particular war. The discussion confined itself to the realm of philosophy, with reference to Hume, Locke and traditional Buddhist teachings, and the input from a navy lawyer, an air force fighter pilot, and an armed forces psychologist.

Mindfulness and Business

Google is a stressful place to work. One employee, quoted in the New York Times, says that "when you get to a place like this, it can tear you apart" if you don't find a way to handle the hard-driving culture. Some workers there, despite being accustomed to a hard-driving workplace at previous jobs, say that Google pushes them to produce at a pace even faster than they could have imagined. So the company offers its employees a course that includes the use of mindfulness at work, which has helped some of them cope better.

Let us again grant compassion to those who work under enormous pressure and stress, and rejoice that a powerful company like Google is aware and considerate enough to provide its workers the skills and the space for peaceful coping strategies such as mindfulness. Perhaps the mindfulness practice over time will sweep over the company and make it a kinder, gentler place to work. Perhaps, as a result, Google will also shed its reputation as a corporate giant that is "both admired and feared" and will allay concerns about its business practices that have attracted the attention of a Senate antitrust panel. The panel is investigating whether Google provides its own businesses with preferred placement in search results.

Perhaps, but as their mindfulness course would appear to have it, changing the stressful and emotionally harmful culture of the workplace itself is not on the agenda; the focus instead is on how to cope with the pressures rather than to question why the pressures are there and how they can be changed. Nor does it appear that the course examines the way the company possibly operates in the outside world and whether that too connects with and impacts on the everyday well-being of its employees. Instead, mindfulness appears to serve as a technique for adjusting employees to the company's culture, rather than being part of a way to help them question and change it. It thus appears that mindfulness in part serves as a safety valve, allowing things to remain as they are. Without a clear higher intention and understanding, mindfulness may be another way to get more productivity out of the workforce in order to make the company more efficient and therefore more profitable for management. Those are not necessarily bad things in themselves; the point is that there's a need to look at how mindfulness is employed, for what purpose, and in whose interest.

Even when mindfulness leads to compassion and more collaboration in corporate settings, by itself mindfulness is not going to transform the fundamental structure of competitive, win/lose capitalism in which the bottom line is the bottom line—there is still a need to study, debate, evaluate, and enact ethical, more equitable, political, economic, and policy changes on a broader level.

Mindfulness and Education

In many schools students and teachers are stressed out. According to Tish Jennings, who has done significant work training teachers and researching the effects of mindfulness in schools, students are overexposed to the distractions of social media and other technology. They experience considerable pressures, and attempt to cope through multi-tasking, which often just increases the stress. As a result many students find it difficult to relax, focus, and concentrate and often are unable to learn what they need. Studies find that developmentally appropriate mindfulness practices can contribute to positive outcomes for students: reducing stress and reactivity, promoting greater presence, self-regulation of thoughts, affect, and behaviors, and improved self-reflection, resilience, interpersonal skills, receptivity, and learning. Programs that employ mindfulness and other contemplative practices work with teachers to help them relieve stress and regulate their attention and emotions in order to teach better, and to connect emotionally with their students in order to improve their learning.

At issue here is that such programs may operate in a political climate that unwittingly reinforces a dominant ideology that is anything but mindful. Mindfulness practices may be used as a technocratic tool in the service of administrators' need to increase student test scores or in managing student behavior. These are ends that have little to do with actual education and optimal self-development.

Yet this is the educational context today. Much current educational policy reform is geared toward remaking public education to serve corporate interests: see Peter Taubman and Stanley Aronowitz,(6). These policies reduce education to an economic commodity, as an engine of mobility for both individuals and the country as a whole. What drives much of current educational reform is a belief that education should serve as a means for students to gain employment and to keep the U.S. economically

competitive worldwide. It is an aspect of a particular political ideology, namely neoliberalism, much of which is an attack on public education. In the educational context, neoliberal reforms center on student test scores as a measure of the school's and teachers' accountability to learning. These policies include scapegoating public school teachers along with public sector unions and attacking public schools in favor of creating charter schools--which, by the way, evidence shows are no better than public schools. Further these policies belittle the value of schools of education and advocate adopting a market-based accountability system, e.g., making teachers' jobs dependent on the success of their students ("value-added assessment"). The sum total of which reduces pedagogy to soulless, routinized methods, and equates student knowledge with national standards based on test scores. These practices attempt to reduce education to measurable outcomes or units of productivity and make it easier to control teachers and students in the service of a corporate-dominant economy.

There is an imbalance in education. Rather than valuing the intrinsic experience that mindfulness embraces--curiosity, creativity, pondering, wondering, exploring, not knowing, cherishing openness, a sense of awe, without presupposing or seeking correct results and predetermined answers--education instead values the production of successful outcomes such as test scores as desirable ends in themselves. But test scores are not education. Education researcher Gerald Bracey notes, "It would be one thing if all of this testing could be linked to what happens later in life or the health of the economy, but it can't. No research shows anything other than test scores predict grades and other test scores."(7)

Is this the kind of educational setting that proponents of mindfulness should accept? When mindfulness seeks to help children "learn", just what kind of learning is that, and what kind should it be? When we help students become calm and focused so they can take a high-stakes test that presents no evidence of meaningful knowledge, does that square with the ethics of mindfulness? When mindfulness is used to help teachers do their jobs better, what does "better" mean, and who defines that in the current neoliberal context? Why are so many teachers and students stressed out, or turned off to education? Why are teachers alienated by a system that takes away their professional skills and makes them teach to the test? I would like to see mindfulness proponents address education from both interior and exterior perspectives and take an explicit stand on the neoliberal agenda with respect to its own ethics. Perhaps mindfulness advocates see it as a Trojan horse working its way into the schools in order to transform the system, and are not just playing it safe by using it as a technology in the service of the status quo. Either way mindfulness needs to follow through on its own ethical principles and bring them to bear on the educational system itself.

Occupy Mindfulness

There are recent moves toward shoring up the ethical aspect of mindfulness but they need to go further. Contrary to what some mindfulness proponents claim mindful qualities such as compassion and openness do not spontaneously and automatically lead you to engage in skillful and healthy behavior, or what Buddhists call right action. A number of mindfulness educators acknowledge this to an extent and for a solution propose that mindfulness be paired with Social Emotional Learning (SEL): the teaching of what are considered to be optimal, healthy, psychological and interpersonal skills that help people better deal with strong feelings, communication issues, and conflict resolution. Some even see SEL skills

and values as the highest available ethical component that can be offered today, especially since Buddhist ethical precepts cannot be brought in to secular educational sites. Leading mindfulness researchers and educators stress the importance of skillful interpersonal relationships and qualities of joy, tranquility, and equanimity, with love and compassion being the highest ethical value. They want an aware, caring society that seeks to minimize harm, greed, and aversion.

SEL now has become standardized; Kansas has just become the first state to adopt a set of social, emotional, and character development standards for all its schools. The summary of the Kansas standards refer a number of times to managing thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and experiences; to having effective cooperation, problem solving, and management; and doing so for the purposes of success in school and life.

This kind of language to describe how we want students to grow up sounds less like universal values and more like ones reflective of a technocratic, entrepreneurial, corporatized worldview. The point is that SEL is no ethical gold standard itself—any standards need to be discussed, practiced, interpreted, and evaluated with respect to the context of values and whose interest they serve. Who determines managing, effectiveness, and success? Without asking these questions SEL, like mindfulness, can turn into an extrinsic, rote method or technology taught to achieve pre-determined, socially acceptable behavioral outcomes for normative or self-serving ends.

To occupy mindfulness we need to expand ways to express and make explicit what mindfulness is. An integral perspective offers a comprehensive framework to help do this in ways that mindfulness does not by including as many perspectives as possible, including developmental, cultural contexts, and systemic ones. It respects and encourages people be their best at whatever stage they're at and at the same time holds out a universal vision that is both a state of awareness and a stage of development. According to researcher Susanne Cook-Greuter, from such a later evolved perspective "Consciousness or rational awareness is no longer perceived as a shackle, but as just another phenomenon that assumes foreground or background status depending on one's momentary attention." Imagine that you are so well attuned to the unity of all things that you can easily switch back and forth between the relative and the absolute, between the small self and the big universal self, or the ground of all being, and even "perceive the concrete, limited, and temporal aspects of an entity simultaneously with its eternal and symbolic meaning" (8).

An important aspect of the integral approach is to consider stages of self-development, an outside perspective on inside experience that mindfulness per se cannot take. That is, as Ken Wilber notes, you can meditate till kingdom come and not discover the exterior developmental structures of consciousness itself—that requires the perspective of objective psychological research that is external to states of inner experience. And the same goes for not arriving at deeper meditative states of awareness by studying stages of self-development. Researchers place self-development within a model of an evolving self in which each stage includes and transcends earlier ones. Stages are filters or lenses through which mindfulness is experienced and interpreted. Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey say that "True development is about transforming the operating system itself, not just increasing your fund of knowledge or your behavioral repertoire." (9)

Mindfulness as well can then be seen in terms of whether it reflects egocentric, conventional, post-conventional, or universal perspectives and values. For example, the monks who meditated and reached an advanced state of awareness nevertheless followed a militaristic emperor because their level of self-development took on a conventional, authoritarian worldview. Stressed-out managers and professionals at a more individualistic, post-conventional stage may practice mindfulness but as a means to reinforce their competitive careers and expensive, never-have-enough lifestyles to which they are attached while seeking to mitigate its effects.

Another integral aspect is to look at and work with your unconscious, in which unacknowledged thoughts and feelings can be brought to light within your conscious awareness. This includes converting something seen, if at all, as an outside or foreign aspect of the psyche (an it) into an owned and familiar part of yourself (the I). The practice of bringing shadow parts of yourself into awareness is not assured by mindfulness—recall the self-serving gurus who were motivated by unacknowledged aspects of themselves to act out their self-centered needs that mindfulness did not touch, let alone address. A more integral education also honors the vast non-rational, playful, creative, nature-driven aspects of the self without trying to convert them into means to achieve conventionally successful outcomes.

A third advantage of examining mindfulness from an integral perspective is that it can clarify the implicit cultural context in which it operates. Cultural worldviews are shared meanings, social constructions that are based on implicit understandings and relationships between people. Cultural contexts fall into developmental frameworks as well, for example, traditional, modern, postmodern, and universal. The culture of the military takes a traditional perspective: loyalty, obedience, a clear chain of command, and a clear system of rewards and punishment. In the case of Google, the more modern cultural worldview favors values such as individual hard work, competition, and entrepreneurial initiative. Postmodern workplace cultures favor collaboration, consensus, and non-hierarchical relations as the one way to go. In each case when the cultural context is made explicit it becomes understandable what role mindfulness could play to help strengthen those shared values that the culture endorses.

Culture is socially constructed—because it depends on second person (You and I) perspectives that create a shared "we", dialogue and mutual practices can contribute to shaping and changing culture. Yet what is often missing from discussions of mindfulness is this intersubjective or second person perspective that addresses the context of shared meaning. An outside way to get at this perspective is to make conscious the unspoken norms, values, and worldviews that operate and frame interactions. For example, in *Queen Bees and Wannabes* Rosalind Wiseman uncovers and shows middle school girls the implicit roles they play out within their own peer relations upon which they are then free to improve. An inside way in education, for example, is to cultivate an "optimal we-space" in a classroom that invites students "into a collective experience of deeper states of consciousness..." (10)

Looking again at the program of the recent International Symposia for Contemplative Studies shows that the topics of the master lectures focused almost exclusively on first person (contemplative practices in education and therapy) and third person (science, neuroscience) perspectives, monological knowledge, and not on the cultural context and interpretations that arise from second person, dialogical accounts. The more numerous panels followed suit with two exceptions: the earlier noted panel on the ethics of

teaching contemplative practices to the military two and another on developing a multi-culturally inclusive contemplative pedagogy that explicitly addressed the differences between students of color and white students of privilege in teaching contemplative practices—the very kind of issue that contextualizes mindfulness practices and that needs to be discussed. Women of color and other feminists, as well anyone who has felt marginalized and minimized at mindfulness-based gatherings can benefit from an integral perspective that takes on cultural context, inclusivity, and interpersonal dynamics as part of the overall awareness. (11)

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society recently recreated its vision and mission to be "open and inclusive of all backgrounds" and work "in service of a more just and compassionate society." How that translates into tackling neoliberal policies and emotionally navigating the micro-politics of status and other constructed hierarchies within academia, contemplative and otherwise, remains to be seen.

A related context necessary to consider is the political and economic structure, the power relations of the system. Most K-12 schools have elements of both traditional and modern worldviews and goals that reflect various power interests. Mindfulness may serve conventional norms and socialize children in positive ways, but also serve to reinforce conformity and shore up the existing power structure. From within a modern framework mindfulness can be subversive and emancipatory, helping to call into question conventional ideologies and practices, but can also reinforce competitive individualism. I have been arguing for the need to situate mindfulness in the schools squarely in the political context of education reform and for its proponents to take a stand on how it should be best practiced in order to evolve to an integral, universal level.

Occupy Integral Too

The integral community recently has been challenged to become occupied as well. The call is to stay loose and non-attached to the integral map, to join in, be inclusive, and active wherever there are pockets of conscious practices of health, joy, community, and love. The Integral Trollz remind the integral community it should not become overly concerned with theory to the detriment of enactment; nor become ossified and commodified such that it ends up reproducing dominant forms of society; and that self-aware tricksters have a significant part to play in shaking things up. To occupy mindfulness means we commit ourselves with as much integral awareness and knowledge as we can to help the universe evolve—that's our highest intention and enactment. And whatever we do includes occupying oneself fully, just here, just now.

Footnotes:

1. "The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being," Brown, Kirk Warren; Ryan, Richard M. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Vol 84(4), Apr 2003, 822-848; and Elizabeth Scott, *Mindfulness: Health and Stress Benefits Beyond Stress Relief*. www.verywell.com.
2. Nhat Hanh, T. *Peace is Every Step*. New York: Bantam, 1992.

3. *The Mindful Society*, Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2012; "U.S. Congressman Tim Ryan—Need for a More Mindful Society.MP4.

4. B. Victoria, 2006. *Zen at War*. New York, Rowman & Littlefield.

5. Mindfulness Training Helpful for the Military, Rick Nauert, PhD. Senior News Editor, *PsychCentral* Reviewed by John M. Grohol, Psy.D. on February 18, 2010.

6. Peter Taubman. *Teaching by Numbers: Deconstructing the Discourse of Standards and Accountability in Education*. New York: Routledge, 2009; Stanley Aronowitz. *Against Schooling: For an Education that Matters*. Boulder: Paradigm, 2008.

7. Bracey, G. W. ,2009. *Education hell: Rhetoric vs. reality*. Alexandria VA: Educational Research Service, p. 105.

8. Susanne Cook-Greuter, "Nine Levels of Increasing Embrace," 2005, p. 32-33.

9. Kegan, R. & Lahey, L. *Immunity to Change*, Cambridge: Harvard Business School, 2009, p.6

10. Olen Gunnlaugsson, "Presenting the Optimal We: Cultivating Collective Intelligence in the University Classroom," in Willow Dea, ed. *Igniting Brilliance: Integral Education for the 21st Century*, Tuscon: Integral, 2011, pp. 91- 96.

11. for examples within Buddhist gatherings see the chapters by bell hooks, Rita M. Gross, and Gaylon Ferguson in *Mindful Politics*, Melvin McLeod, ed, Boston: Wisdom, 2006.

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