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Critical Integral Contemplative Education

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Education

David Forbes

What the Hell Is Water?

Wallace's (2005) commencement address at Kenyon College, known as "This is Water," leads off with the story of two young fish who meet up with an older one. "Morning boys, how's the water?" he asks them. The two swim on for a bit and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and says, "What the hell is water?"

Like the young fish, many of those who practice mindfulness in educational settings do not seem to know what the hell the water is in which they swim. They glide along unwittingly within the powerful undercurrents of biased cultural worldviews, constraining structural inequities, conformist developmental stages, and uncharted harmful emotional forces. Mindfulness educators are often unmindful of the problematic context of mindfulness itself. They need to get outside their own water bubble and critically awaken to, engage with, and tackle the challenges of the swelling seas of which mindfulness by itself cannot be aware.

As a secular program that has severed itself from a morally based tradition, Buddhism, mindfulness in education swims in shallow waters. It flounders with regard to moral principles and practices of social justice and engagement, inquiry into the development and nature of the self, and reflection on and enactment of everyday cultures and meanings. There is a need to embed mindfulness within critical, integral programs that uncover and resist dominant ideologies and institutions in which we swim and to consciously help us heal and create new relationships that work toward optimal personal development and universal social justice (Ng and Purser 2016). Part of this can be called a critical, civic mindfulness: "Mindfulness in education offers an opportunity to reorient education away from narrowly conceived instrumental ends towards broader ethical and socially-engaged ones" (Ng 2015; see also Healey 2013).

What place and role does mindfulness education have in a shrinking, interdependent world—amidst predatory corporate institutions that generate poverty and inequity, racist and cultural domination and the rollback of civil rights, alarming climate destruction, and global

militarism and violence? Mindfulness education programs can be helpful for some individuals: They tend to alleviate stress, promote skills useful for self-success, adjust students and teachers to the pressures and inequities of schooling, and help individuals competitively navigate around high-stakes tests, teacher bashing, and other neoliberal detritus strewn on the surface. Overall many do little to nothing to link agency with social justice and challenge the moral crises of our day that are based on

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self-attachment, greed, and delusion which fuel the sources of stress in the first place. They tend to unwittingly reinforce rather than challenge the neoliberal individualist practices, culture, and social structures that prime the self for marketability. What the hell indeed.

We need a comprehensive, critical perspective on contemplative education that accounts for the varieties of experiences, worldviews, developmental orders, cultures, and systems, and that stands for optimal development for all. Integral meta-theory (Wilber 2006, 2016; Esbjörn-Hargens 2009) is a good place to start; it is a method of inquiry, a way of seeing things, and a vision of human history that encourages us to consciously evolve toward universal goodness, truth, and beauty. As it turns out, integral meta-theory is arguably not comprehensive or explicit when it comes to social justice (Stein 2015; Corbett, n.d.; Patten and Morelli 2012); for example, see Wilber (2016). I add the call for a universal ethics that brings together the contemplative traditions of the East and the prophetic demand for social justice for all from the Abrahamic traditions of the West (Loy, n.d.; Bodhi 2015; Woods and Healey 2013). Both demand we shed attachment to the self in favor of universal compassion. Both exhort us to realize and enact the inseparability of all aspects of life, including societal institutions. Both together challenge society's self-centeredness: its individualism, commodification, materialism, and the maintaining of the status quo of inequitable power and privilege, for example, around class, race, gender, and sexual orientation, that thwarts optimal development, intrinsic love, mutual relationships,

democratic social justice, and universal care. A critical integral approach includes the best of traditional prophetic and contemplative values and practices, modernist scientific methods, knowledge and critical thinking, and postmodern multi-perspectives and inclusivity. It situates mindfulness education within the waters of both inner and outer awareness and enhances it from a more evolved and comprehensive perspective.

A Brief Murky History: MBSR and the Critique of McMindfulness

Mindfulness meditation has its origins in Buddhism in which mindfulness is but one of a number of activities that revolve around ethical and wisdom precepts (the dharma). In Buddhism, mindfulness refers to remembering and reflecting on other previous moments in the mind's life in terms of what is wholesome, and establishing links with what are right thoughts, action, speech, concentration, intention, livelihood, and effort. Mindfulness meditation is an essential part of following the dharma which includes wisdom about the insubstantial nature of the self and the impermanence, interdependence, and non-duality of all things in the universe, the moral demand to promote a compassionate life free of suffering for all beings, and the quest to realize non-duality, enlightenment or awakening.

When mindfulness was secularized, it became severed from its organic connection to its original Buddhist ethical context and purpose to attain awakening. People credit Jon Kabat-Zinn who created the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program and whose definition of mindfulness has become the gold standard in secular settings (clinics, hospitals, corporations, schools, the military): mindfulness means "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non judgmentally" (Mindfulnet.org, n.d.). This morally neutral, technical, or instrumental definition of mindfulness gained popularity and became accessible to many people outside of a religious framework. For Buddhists, mindfulness is not about stress reduction or being non-judgmental but is part of the study and practice of the dharma which indeed includes judging and enacting what is right. But for Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness, in his words, is "not about Buddhism, but about paying attention" (Szalavitz 2012). Despite this dismissal, Kabat-Zinn also claims that MBSR is the "universal dharma" (Kabat-Zinn 2011, p. 296). Kabat-Zinn would like it both ways: Calling MBSR "the universal

dharmā” acknowledges its Buddhist roots and aims; yet by making it about non-judgmental attention and stress reduction, it has little to do with what the dharma teaches, for example, in terms of gaining awareness and understanding about non-duality and the non-existence of self (Kabat-Zinn 2011; Purser 2014).

Instead of grounding mindfulness ethics in a moral tradition, Kabat-Zinn sidesteps the issue and takes a relativist stance at best. He leaves questions of ethics to the quality of the training and background of the individual MBSR instructor (Kabat Zinn 2011, pp. 15–16), some but not all of whom have Buddhist backgrounds. In a dialogue with Angela Davis, Kabat-Zinn frames his statements about ending social injustice in global terms that float above distinctions about race and white privilege. He says that mindfulness is a “transformative practice” that is capable of moving society in a more “human” way and “that we need something that speaks to all humanity”; to which Angela Davis, conscious of white privilege, asks him, who are “we?” (Spirit Rock Meditation Center 2015, April 21). Kabat-Zinn’s approach is akin to spiritual by-pass, the appeal to absolute truths as a way to avoid and dismiss painful or difficult everyday needs that require concrete consideration. Elsewhere, as do other mindfulness believers, he even suggests that mindfulness itself can lead to a moral life (Kabat-Zinn 2006, p. 103); Hyland (2016) notes that this evokes that same uneasiness we feel in the face of the Socratic claim that the truly wise person will never act in an evil way. Kabat-Zinn’s brilliantly ambiguous move has allowed secular mindfulness to flourish and become many things to many people. With its eastern, Buddhist caché and relativist, vague, but benign ethos (compassion, non-judgment, happiness, lack of suffering), secular mindfulness generates various interpretations and practices that aim to promote personal well-being in education as well as in medicine, psychotherapy, government, the military, and the corporate workplace.

At the same time, the technical, neutral definition, and relativist lack of a moral foundation has opened up secular mindfulness to a host of dubious uses, now called out by its critics as McM mindfulness (Purser and Loy 2013). McM mindfulness occurs when mindfulness is used, either with intention or unwittingly, for self-serving and ego-enhancing purposes that run counter to both Buddhist and Abrahamic prophetic teachings to let go of ego-attachment and enact skillful, universal compassion. Instead of

letting go of the ego, McM mindfulness aims to enhance it and promotes self-aggrandizement; its therapeutic function is to comfort, numb, adjust, and advance the self within a neoliberal, corporatized, individualistic society based on private gain.

In this way, instead of bringing the self into question (Buddhism), or having a moral worldview, or a soteriology—a way out of human suffering, mindfulness becomes a neoliberal technology of the self (Reveley 2015). Rather than a way to attain awakening toward universal love, it becomes a means of self-regulation and personal control over emotions (Ibid). McM mindfulness is blind to the present moral, political, and cultural context of neoliberalism. As a result, it does not grasp that it is an individualistic, commodified society that creates distress and that needs to be called out; instead, the best it can then do, ironically, is to offer to sell us back an individualistic, commodified “cure”—mindfulness—to reduce that distress. By refusing to critically discuss actual social context, McM mindfulness ignores seeing our inseparability from all others and from social institutions; it thereby abandons the moral demand that follows this insight to enact universal compassion, service, and social justice in all ways and all forms of human endeavor. Calling out McM mindfulness is a prophetic critique of greed, ill will, and delusion in concrete, historical terms at both personal and societal levels. McM mindfulness critics insist that the personal and the social are inseparable and that mindfulness should contribute to both full development and universal social justice in all areas of life.

Constructive Critique

McMindfulness critics, myself included, have been accused of being too critical. On Facebook

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pages and in responses to articles I have observed some advocates of mindfulness programs to be defensive and even hostile—they appear unable to mindfully sit with their own discomfort, are quite attached to their own beliefs about mindfulness programs, and project their own intolerance on to the critics. They conflate criticism of how mindfulness is employed with an attack on the value of mindfulness itself. A number declare that critique is just being negative and unhelpful and that being critical serves no purpose. They see social criticism as a waste of time. Some argue that if you have not taken an MBSR course, you have no right to question anything

about it, including the social context in which it occurs. In line with the ideology of positive psychology, true believers in mindfulness prefer to just cite programs they think have a positive effect and some argue that everyone should do the same (see Nowogrodzki 2016). They regard mindfulness in individualist and personal terms: It helped these people, it helped me—end of story.

But social criticism not only can and should be defended; it can be turned on its head as a positive force. First, McMindfulness critics (Ng and Purser 2016), following Foucault, point out that critique is not just to say things are not right but to undercut what is considered as self-evident and show that it no longer has to be accepted as such. Social critique is therefore valuable in its own right as a practice of questioning normative ideologies, beliefs, and practices. Critics are not required to come up with proper, predetermined alternatives then and there. Critique can be useful in order to dislodge everyday notions and create a space to consider how things could be different. Second, the same critics propose a “critical mindfulness” which converts critique into something constructive, a liberating act that employs mindfulness to dismantle attachments to conditioned patterns of dominant beliefs and open possibilities toward more evolved and encompassing perspectives—which themselves need to be critically discussed and enacted.

A prophetic, integral stance is critical and discerning and at the same time holds out the possibility for inclusivity, respect, and mutuality.

Rowe (2015) shows that skillful oppositional thinking, even among socially engaged contemplative communities, is crucial to social change; contemplatives need to skillfully deploy oppositional approaches to, for example, toxic fossil fuel companies, while being aware of relative and absolute truths. Yes, we are all interconnected in an absolute sense but in relative terms we also are required to oppose those who seek to harm ourselves, others, and the earth—and that practice can lead to “collective liberation” (ibid.) Let us first critically look at culture, social structure, and development before suggesting an integral contemplative approach.

Culture

We all swim in culturally constructed beliefs, norms, and rules that implicitly frame everyday meanings. For example, some are individualism and consumerism and assumptions about race, class, gender, and sexuality. Within the same shared everyday space, people inhabit different implicit orders of cultural development. Members

of traditional cultures tend to operate in terms of eternal truths and believe there is one established way to know what is right. Those who adhere to a more recently developed modernist culture subscribe to scientific evidence, materialism, reason, individualism, and entrepreneurial values. The latest postmodernists dismantle master narratives and seek their own relative truths and interpretations. Without bringing awareness of such cultural frameworks to the foreground mindfulness education programs fall prey to the Myth of the Given (Wilber 2006). This is the belief that events and actions in everyday life are directly perceived as given, objective facts rather than as socially constructed, interpretable, and contested meanings that can be uncovered, discussed, and transformed. Many educators do not question the problematic, socially constructed nature of schooling and school values in which they offer mindfulness programs. Without this, mindfulness itself becomes an ideology that reinforces the ideology of neoliberal schooling. Students and teachers are directly encouraged to perceive things as given reality; in this way, implicit culturally

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constructed meanings are glossed over yet still operate in the background. This mystification is compounded by the pseudo-objective language overlaid with a spiritual patina employed in mindfulness practices. Programs encourage students and teachers to “be in the here and now,” “see things as they are,” and “be with whatever is.” The actual social relations that frame the meaning of these terms—how do we construe what is happening here and now?—are not critically exposed and discussed but stand around outside conscious awareness like stagnant water. Let us name a few unexamined cultural myths lurking in the education water. Two predominant beliefs that operate under the surface are that the individual alone is both the source of and solution to unhappiness (neoliberalism) and that therapeutic behavioral change and neuroscience are the means by which the individual attains and proves personal success (scientism). Neoliberal ideology in education posits that stress, lack of attention, and reactivity are problems that lie within the individual, not society, societal institutions, or social relations. The individual by oneself is believed to be responsible to overcome these presumed deficits. One can and should obtain success and happiness by purchasing, owning, and consuming things and by marketing

one's self as a personal brand (Giroux 2014; Ravitch 2014). Solutions are achieved through scientific and technocratic approaches: The individual should employ the technology of mindfulness to improve individual wellness, social and emotional skills, academic performance, and self-regulation, and have these confirmed through brain imaging and other "objective" outcome measures such as education audits and test scores (Taubman 2009). Scientism then serves as an ideology through the predominant assumption that in education only measurable, observable phenomena are real and truthful and are the only measures of success, e.g., high-stakes testing, outcomes assessments, self-regulation practices, and data-driven or evidence-based programs.

Other aspects of everyday culture swirl about unaddressed by mindfulness programs. Fromm's (2010) insights into the pathology of normalcy still resonate, the everyday unconscious acceptance of and adjustment to unhealthy and unethical values, practices, and ways of being. Examples are racist perceptions and attitudes around white norms and privilege that are woven into day-to-day life, as is the acceptance of much white working class resentment (Sleeper 2014) which is seldom acknowledged and addressed. Trauma and its aftermath, including addictions, is mostly regarded as an individualized phenomenon but is also an unaddressed aspect of many people's everyday culture; Bloom (2013) considers the USA as having much unresolved trauma as a nation of immigrants and formerly subjugated ancestors; many have generational issues of loss and live in a culture that has tried to solve conflicts through violence, militarism, and domination over others that are then papered over with denial. Positive psychology is offered up as a popular therapeutic solution to problems that are seen to lie solely within the individual. Yet an emerging critical literature uncovers its ideological undercurrents and shows how positive psychology, the marketing of spirituality, the therapy industry, and the self-help culture reinforce adjustment to neoliberal values and institutions (Binkley 2014; Carrette and King 2005; Cederstrom and Spicer 2015; Davies 2015; Ehrenreich 2010; Ilouz 2008; Moloney 2013; Rakow 2013). Mindfulness practices along with social emotional learning (SEL) programs in schools share the same approach and play well into reinforcing conformity to the individualist, competitive, and marketing aspects of neoliberal culture. Left behind by mindfulness education programs in the wake of the neoliberal wave is

the cultural capital of many schools and communities of color in urban areas. It is rare that mindfulness school programs acknowledge these and work with and within them to discuss and employ shared skills, strengths, and interests. At a deeper level, we experience a culture of lack—Loy's (2002) term to describe the feelings of emptiness and craving and that one is never enough. These fuel consumerism and addictions, the endless search for external goods or relationships to feel better or complete one self. From an engaged Buddhist perspective, the way

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through is to realize that because we have no solid self to which to cling we are already complete, and to also work to change institutions such as corporations, the media, and the military that reinforce ego-attachment (“wego”) on a cultural scale as well as in personal terms.

Social Structure

Structural and systemic injustices frame the lives of children and teachers and the mindfulness practices in which they engage; they too do not figure into the mindfulness navigation plan. These are shark, capitalism-infested, waters which get naturalized and accepted (“seeing things as they are”) as part of everyday life. The system creates painful income, class, and racial inequalities. These contribute to poor neighborhoods of disenfranchised citizens who suffer from poor health and health care, inadequate housing, and chronic unemployment. Impoverished schools without decent resources and programs further inflame students' anger, violence, substance abuse, and despair. The wealthy that benefit from enormous tax breaks send their children to privileged schools that provide enriched learning environments. The children, however, pay their own psychic price, the stress that accompanies the intense pressure to produce and compete for limited elite college slots. Neoliberalism (Giroux 2014; Harvey 2005; McGuigan 2014) is the dominant ideology and system that impacts education policies and practices. It promotes an individualistic, market-based worldview and structure. It glorifies the private individual who competes for and purchases all of one's needs through the market, which replaces social institutions and the public good. The neoliberal self is self-reliant, a risk-taker, and not dependent on or connected with others; one is motivated by personal gain as a perpetual self-entrepreneur and consumer of choice. Education reformers push neoliberal,

market-based ideas, policies, and practices in schools. Neoliberal policy makers in public education are in it to promote world market competition; they are happy to employ mindfulness in the schools as an instrument to better adjust teachers and students to conform to corporatized high-stakes tests, arbitrary standards, and micromanagement, surveillance, and scripting of classroom lessons—all the while those stressors continue to lurk in the background, unnamed and unchallenged. Policy makers want students and teachers to gain greater self-regulation and adjustment to a neoliberal society, to successfully adapt to stressful and often morally reprehensible situations (Forbes 2015). Not only is there no link made between mindfulness and problematic ethical and social justice values and conditions, there is no consideration that these contribute to serving as the actual sources of stress themselves—which mindfulness, along with social emotional learning (SEL) programs, is then expected to mitigate (Forbes 2012; Hsu 2013, November 4; Zakrzewski 2015).

The impact of neoliberal practices on urban students of color is of particular concern. Because neoliberalism negates the notion of society, it obscures social inequities such as systemic racism and the need to fight them. It dismisses systemic racism as a social, structural, and institutional problem since everything should be a matter of individualized choice and each individual is personally responsible for one's own success and failure (Davis 2013; Robbins 2004). Although racial neoliberalism and unequal structural power relations still exist, they disappear as topics from public discourse and public policy (Enck-Wanzer 2011). Yet mindfulness is employed in a number of impoverished inner-city schools attended by many disaffected, indignant, and at times disruptive students of color. Without a critical understanding of the neoliberal education agenda, mindfulness practices geared toward stress reduction, conflict resolution, emotion regulation, anger management, and focus and concentration serve as functions of social control and reinforce emotional self-regulation that puts the onus back on the individual student. The need to conform to school expectations preempts the issue of why there is so much stress, suspensions, and angry behavior in the first place. It pushes aside structural questions of what needs to better occur in the school and community. Mindfulness of one's

anger and frustration in the “here and now” leaves out the social context of the social injustices that many students of color experience. In particular, SEL programs tend to ignore the cultural context and cultural capital of students of color and the impact on them of racism and prejudice (Slaten et al. 2015; Zakrzewski 2016). Mindfulness programs teach awareness of emotions. But they do not address or analyze how emotional life is inextricably related to the complex, rich, and often problematic social nature of the lives of students, teachers, and community members. Experiences of trauma, addiction, anxiety, and depression of course require healing, dialogue, and support. But mindfulness programs do not see these, along with anger and sadness, as responses embedded within social relations and systems that often require both critical reflection and transformation toward greater caring and justice. Mindfulness instead becomes one more individualist endeavor that excises personal experiences from their social context and adjusts individuals to swim better in the polluted waters. Mindfulness programs and teacher trainings (e.g. Jennings 2015) ignore the structural context of class and racial inequities, competitive individualism, and the neoliberal assault on public education, teachers, and their unions. Social problems that contribute to stress, burnout, and demoralization are obscured and translated into personal concerns in need of psychotherapeutic and/or mindfulness solutions. We need to understand these waters and what lies within them, and work with others to swim toward clearer currents.

Development

Stages or orders of self-development are another crucial medium that, like the unacknowledged water, surround educational mindfulness programs. Developmental models are seldom if ever applied or even acknowledged as a way to inform and help students, teachers, and the schools. Mindfulness practices can create a heightened state of awareness; a student or teacher through practice might notice or witness one’s feelings, thoughts, and sensations and come to distance one’s self from and disidentify with them in a calm manner. However, the developmental stage of self and moral development of the student or teacher frames how that state is interpreted and contributes to how the person thinks about how to respond (Wilber 2016). As we develop, we turn our patterns of thinking, experienced from within, into objects of our own awareness from a more inclusive perspective; our subjectivity at each order becomes the object of our awareness

at a later stage (Kegan 1994).

A mindful teacher or student may attain an advanced meditative state through mindfulness but one's developmental structure constrains one's worldview and how the experience is interpreted. Educators and students can gain a contemplative experience or state by practicing mindfulness, but many still have at best a conformist and conventional stage mentality. In some mindfulness programs, participants despite their practice still adhere to loyalty to authority, strict rule-following behaviors, and uncritical, conformist thinking. Mindfulness practice by itself does not lead to critical questioning, moral reasoning, or skillful and moral actions. Nor by itself does it lead to later stages of autonomous thinking, the ability to hold ambiguity, and to think on one's feet from a post-conventional cognitive or moral developmental order.

While mindfulness education programs encourage awareness and reflection of emotions and intentions, they steer a middle course through the developmental waters of interiority. Mindfulness is mostly taught and practiced in the service of producing conventionally successful students and teachers who can adjust to the demands of neoliberal society. Unlike depth psychology, they avoid the uncharted realms of unconscious emotional life; unlike Buddhism, they by-pass higher, ego-transcendent states and stages. For full and optimal human development, educators would need to be free to explore the shadow and contemplative aspects of human experience. These require the knowledge and awareness of developmental orders from which one views the world: unconscious (at any level), egocentric, conventional, post-conventional, and ego-transcendent (integral), and a conscious

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intention and practice to gain higher, more inclusive perspectives.

Mindfulness programs rely on social emotional learning (SEL) curricula to provide the best version of secular ethics with which mindfulness can associate. Yet, SEL programs are unaware of their own self and moral developmental stage and worldview. The competencies or behavioral skills favored by SEL fit in nicely with neoliberal achievement-oriented values designed for conventional levels of success in a competitive, corporatized, market-based society. Employing corporate language, two SEL educators (Brackett and Rivers 2014) approvingly note that leading economists, including a Nobel Prize

Laureate, call for these “soft” emotion skills to be taught in schools since they yield the greatest returns on education investments and lead to greater success in life. According to the authors, the Laureate thinks this is a cost-effective way to increase “the quality and productivity of the workforce through fostering workers’ motivation, perseverance, and self-control” but are concerned that “[a]s increasing efforts move toward better preparing youth to enter and contribute to a competitive and global workforce, epidemiological evidence suggests that the basic needs of youth still are not being met” (p. 3). SEL skills are framed in terms that emphasize pseudo-objectivity, self-control, and success. These include the ability to “accurately” recognize one’s emotions and thoughts; “accurately” assess one’s strengths and limitations; self and stress “management”; attain relationship skills such as cooperating and resisting “inappropriate” social pressure; “responsible decision making”; and with a nod to positive psychology, having “a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism” (CASEL, n.d.). Teachers and students can be mindful of thoughts and feelings and learn the latest skills that pass as secular ethics, yet continue to swim within conventional and conformist structures that govern and restrict their awareness.

In the absence of a developmental framework, the meaning of a trait such as compassion floats freely without being grounded in any particular social context. A vague but potentially important term, compassion is a socially desirable skill within SEL programs (Zakrzewski 2015, January 7) and serves as a catch-all buzzword that mindfulness educators favor. Its meaning depends, among other things, on the developmental and moral worldview of the practitioner.

There is no developmental framework, let alone any concrete social context, for analyzing and discussing how and why compassion is taught: Is it practiced to please the teacher and because everyone does it? Do students reach a later level of understanding and engage in compassion for the best of intentions and for its own sake?

A significant blind spot for mindfulness educators is their own unacknowledged level of self-development. Rather than stepping outside the individualist and neoliberal educational systems of which they are a part and with which they identify, some mindfulness educators at a fourth order of self-development (Kegan 1994; Murray 2009) may tend to identify with and are attached to their particular school of thought or their own mindfulness programs. As a result,

they do not examine and critically challenge these systems from later and more comprehensive perspectives that account for a fuller range of human development and social justice. At the fifth order, people are able to let go of their defensive attachment to their own fourth-order belief systems and reflect upon them with dispassion. They can now disidentify with particular belief systems and experience the self as embodying a variety of evolving beliefs that arise in different contexts.

Toward a Critical Integral Contemplative Education

We can consider paths for new directions that frame mindfulness in education within a critical integral meta-perspective. The challenge is to re-construe the contemplative and the prophetic as part of a broader project in education that revitalizes the wisdom and values of earlier traditions on new ground. It requires that we incorporate the best of contemplative and prophetic traditions, along with modernist knowledge and progressive

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postmodern awareness of multiple, culturally constructed and developmental perspectives on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other categories. At the same time, we seek to challenge and transcend the current limitations of a society governed by neoliberal, market-based structures, ideologies, and policies.

A critical integral approach helps students and teachers uncover implicit cultural values, interrogate neoliberal educational policies, and act to change them in terms of more encompassing and universal moral stages of self, cultural, and societal development. Students and teachers need to see, study, question, and act on the sources of stress, using mindfulness within an anti-oppressive inspired context of experiencing and working toward universal educational equality. This is embedded in the everyday culture of those whom are most impacted by stress and oppression. The goal is to contribute to rekindling and enacting values of democratic, quality education within a society that is seeking to create new mutually satisfying relationships and social structures that are healing and fulfilling for all.

Wilber (2016) proposes a model of integral meditation from which we can draw and expand on as a model for what a comprehensive critical education program would entail. Following the integral meta-model, we can look at four areas or quadrants which would provide an overall schema.

Subjective

In the Subjective realm, a program would of course include the individual practice of meditation and mindfulness to gain greater capacity to experience contemplative states and which can lead to the insight of non-duality. Wilber (2016) calls this “Waking up.” School community members would meditate not just for stress reduction, self-regulation, or to improve concentration but as part of an inquiry into the nature of the self and to cultivate a relationship with the patterns of their own mind in the context of greater moral and social values and relationships. In terms of stages of self-development school community members learn about models of development and ask, what developmental stage of mine and ours is interpreting how mindfulness is employed? They aim to promote healthy awareness and practices within one’s current stage (translative development) and also to help members when they are ready to develop toward later stages and toward universal compassion and non-duality (transformational development). Mindfulness in part can be valuable as an intentional developmental tool; like insight meditation, developmental growth occurs by witnessing and reflecting on one’s subjectivity and converting it into a more encompassing object of awareness (Kegan 1994; Forbes 2004). School community members can move through egocentric, socio-centric, and post-conventional to integral orders of self and moral development. At the later stages, one reaches a stable awareness of unity consciousness or awakening. Wilber (2016) calls this “Growing up.” A third practice within the Subjective quadrant is around psychological awareness and individual relief from emotional suffering and stress. This occurs through mindful individual and group counseling, programs, projects, and workshops that address issues around emotional self-awareness, moral values, trauma, addictions, disorders, and unconscious (“shadow”) realms, that is, dissociated factors of one’s self. Wilber (2016) terms this “Cleaning up.”

Cultural or Intersubjective

In the Culture/Intersubjective realm, there are inside and outside perspectives and practices. From the inside school community members create mindful, healthy, “We-spaces” (Gunnlaugson 2009, June) and relationships. These can be groups, even the school as a whole, that empower and foster support, trust, safety, respect, inclusiveness, caring, compassion, healing, and connectedness among everyone. They engage in mindful practices that explore sensitive

issues such as racism and white privilege between community members. They build on local diverse strengths of the community at large and also encourage cultural growth toward more inclusive stages at a later moral stage of development. Wilber (2016) calls working on relationships “Showing up.”

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From the outside perspective of culture, within groups and as a whole school, members study, uncover, and challenge hidden, implicit cultural biases, assumptions, attachments, practices, and rituals—that is, the cultural constructions of meaning that operate in the school and in education overall. These, for example, would be neoliberal ideology, individualism, materialism, consumerism, ethnocentrism, racism, white privilege, sexism, homophobia, colonialism, even contemplative education itself. The group would ask, what kind of school culture do we have that we are uncovering, what kind of moral culture do we want, and how do we change it? I call this “Wising up.”

Behavior or Objective

The school community can make healthy use of findings from neuroscience to enhance the quality of their lives, as opposed to reducing consciousness to a materialist stratum and fetishizing neuroscience itself: A thicker prefrontal cortex is not the goal, becoming a morally evolved, wise person who skillfully acts in the social world, is. Members can study if and how critical integral mindfulness can enhance healthy neural development and vice versa, and how broader cultural and structural realities such as stressful conditions that stem from poverty and other adverse situations may enhance or negatively impact brain development and overall health (Maté 2010).

Teachers and students can employ contemplative practices to deepen and strengthen meaning and connection in learning which is made more whole within a critical integral awareness of educational context. The school community can use data to support but not solely to validate or “drive” wise, skillful, meaningful educational projects. Members can engage in critical mindfulness research that investigates and uncovers hidden norms in everyday culture and local social systems such as consumerism (Stanley et al. 2015) that impede personal and interpersonal development.

With respect to personal action, community members can mindfully enact more evolved

compassionate, healthy behaviors such as social emotional learning skills. These, however, are performed critically and in a moral and social context of evolving, caring relationships and values that are relevant to the school community (Slaten et al. 2015; Zakrzewski 2016) rather than reinforcing individualistic, neoliberal attitudes and practices.

Social Structure or Interobjective

School community members can mindfully investigate and uncover barriers in the social structure that impede social justice. They identify, study, and resist together through classroom, groups, and workshops unjust social structures that impact their lives as aspects of a mindful anti-oppressive critical pedagogy (Berila 2016; Hyland 2015; Magee 2015; Orr 2002, 2014; Reveley 2015). These include taking on local school policies, larger neoliberal educational policies (high-stakes testing, Common Core), systemic bullying, and deep-rooted structural barriers such as poverty, income inequity, systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, neocolonialism, and the corporate power structure of school, government, society. This too is “Wising up.” The members of the school community also engage in mindful social action for social justice. They work together and develop alliances across class and race and with like-minded activists. They do so in the school itself, and at local, national, and even global levels in resisting unjust policies, practices, and institutions. Together, they create healthy, more inclusive, socially just, policies, systems, and political arrangements in schools and defend and demand universal quality public education, sustainability, and interdependence. I call this “Acting up.”

Back in the Water

A critical integral contemplative approach calls us to touch and see the water in which we swim: to both experience and evolve toward the absolute of contemplative awareness and to engage fully in helping make the relative world into one of universal justice and love. In his commencement speech, Wallace (2005) caught a glimpse of

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the water and shared it with his college audience. He describes a “spiritual-type” integral, visionary state which reconciles the ego-driven everyday life with the transcendent awareness of non-duality: “It will actually be in your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars:

love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down.” Later he adds a description of a similar inspiring state from a highly evolved plane of awareness that infuses sacred compassion into the mundane: the freedom of “being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day.” Wallace, sadly, was unable to sustain this state of awareness as a lasting stage of his own development—and could not envision a way out of “consumer-hell” that includes and involves others—but he left us with these inspiring images of the water of non-dual awareness in which we all swim. “This is water,” he concluded, “This is water.”

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