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Article

Neoliberal Hegemonic Masculinity and McMindfulness: The Need for Buddhist Values and Principles in Mindful Masculinity Programs

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Abstract: This paper explores how certain Buddhist-inspired principles such as impermanence of self and compassion for all (*metta*) and the practice of mindfulness can contribute to challenging ways in which young men adopt troublesome aspects of systemic patriarchy. It (1) briefly examines the problem of systemic patriarchy in its most dominant forms, neoliberal hegemonic masculinity and right-wing racist authoritarian masculinity; (2) critically discusses examples of mindfulness education and counseling programs for young men that have been severed from their Buddhist origins (McMindfulness) that attempt to challenge young men around patriarchal beliefs and thoughts but end up reproducing neoliberal hegemonic masculinity; (3) briefly considers the problem of McMindfulness and its relation to Buddhism and neoliberal hegemonic and mindful masculinity; and (4) offers Buddhist perspectives as part of a counter-view that may serve within programs as an alternative to current forms of patriarchy while including and renewing the aforementioned Buddhist principles.

Keywords: Buddhism; hegemonic masculinity; McMindfulness; mindfulness; mindful masculinity; neoliberalism; patriarchy



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Young men in the United States and Western Europe today tend to live in societies characterized by patriarchy, the structured system of gender inequality that privileges males over women and others. Specialized education programs in the U.S. and Britain aim to challenge patriarchal assumptions among young men by employing mindfulness as a way to help them reflect on and question patriarchal values and practices. However, many do not succeed. I argue that this is the case because such programs rely on a particular understanding and kind of mindfulness popular in the U.S. that is severed from its foundational moral meaning and purpose in Buddhism, an understanding of which could help challenge patriarchal thinking and relationships. In Buddhism, mindfulness is a way to see the self as a social construction, to let go of self-attachment, and to realize and practice with wise compassion (*metta*) one's interconnectedness with all other sentient beings. Within a particular American understanding of mindfulness, what several critics have referred to as McMindfulness, mindfulness as practiced in education programs for young men instead becomes a morally neutral technology that in neoliberal society maintains rather than challenging the predominant beliefs and practices of systemic patriarchy. For those who seek to counter current forms of patriarchy, I suggest introducing those aforementioned Buddhist perspectives and practices that can be applied within education programs for young men.

1. Systemic Patriarchy

Patriarchy refers to *systemic* gender inequality. To be critical of patriarchy therefore is not an attack on masculinity per se, nor is it to oppose, criticize, and blame each or any boy or man in personal ways for systemic problems, a too-common and careless conflation of structural and personal levels of causal analysis. Neither should patriarchy serve as a simplistic whipping boy (pun intended), a one-size-fits-all explanation, for all troublesome

circumstances that men cause or undergo (Al-Fardan 2020). Patriarchy is an unjust societal framework in which many males hold, and often feel entitled to hold, primary power over women. It often includes and sanctions violence or the threat of violence towards women, which has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (U.N. Women 2021; Povoledo 2021).

In patriarchy, many boys in the U.S. and Western Europe are socialized differently than girls. An ethnographic study in a Brooklyn high school Forbes (2004) found that young men learned to internalize basic beliefs about what it means to be an acceptable man, for example, to denigrate effeminate and gay men (see the 2011 study by Pascoe (Pascoe 2011), who also showed the problem of compulsive male heterosexuality in homophobia among boys), and to regard women as lesser than they and consider them as objects for their own pleasure. They learned to be competitive, conquer others, to not back down from confrontation, to repress and minimize feelings and relationships and instead focus on tasks and results, and always to be in control of oneself and others (for examples of how patriarchy as a specific arrangement of power relations is enmeshed with other systems of power in the capitalist U.S., see Ortner 2015).

1.1. Neoliberal Hegemonic Masculinity as the Predominant Form of Patriarchy Today

Despite the argument that it is akin to a “zombie doctrine”—a living dead system with nothing yet to replace it (Monbiot 2016), *neoliberalism* remains a powerful ideological, political, and economic movement in the U.S. and Western Europe. Neoliberalism rejects the notion of society and the public good and endorses a competitive, individualist, self-oriented market approach as the way to meet all of one’s needs (Harvey 2005, pp. 2–3). It transforms social and economic systems and personal behaviors into privatized commodities within a competitive global, corporatized market.

Hegemonic masculinity is the patriarchal standard by which boys and men are measured. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have reformulated the term and argue it is neither deterministic, essentialist, nor a simple model of social reproduction; it is more relational, dynamic, and depends on social contexts. However, they claim it still refers to a hierarchy of social power for boys and men and the subordination and marginalizing of non-hegemonic masculinities that include women, gay men, and transgendered persons.

Along with Smallen (2019), I argue that hegemonic masculinity serves neoliberal values, policies, and structures, and that we can speak of a *neoliberal hegemonic masculinity*, which is the predominant form of patriarchy in the U.S. today.

Neoliberal hegemonic masculinity is the ideal fit for successful competition and strength in a corporatized United States. It values male entitlement, individualist competition, and hierarchical power over and exploitation of others and of nature. It sanctions aggressiveness and violence as acceptable means of solving conflicts, and material success as the criteria for masculine identity. It values rationality and de-emphasizes and belittles the socialized values of many women and of feminism, such as empathy, emotional expression, perspective taking, caring, sharing, and collaboration in the service of non-exploitative, non-competitive, mutually enhancing relationships. When a system dominated by an elite class of entitled men serves their own interests such as is the case in the United States, Hedges (2021) states, “girls and women always suffer disproportionately. The struggle for equal pay, equal distribution of wealth and resources, access to welfare, legal aid that offers adequate protection under the law, social services, job training, healthcare, and education services, have been so degraded they barely exist for the poor, especially poor girls and women”.

Neoliberal hegemonic masculinity in the U.S. equates masculinity with being a “stoical” wage earner and conditions many males with a “breadwinner ethos” that leads to considerable burnout (Malesic 2022). Overall, it adds toxic stress on boys and men as well as gay men, girls, and women:

Given that capitalist society is inherently patriarchal, the burden of expectations can be extremely heavy on men and cause us to place unrealistic expectations upon ourselves. If capitalism tells me that I must accumulate as much as I can

and patriarchy tells me that I'm the one who's primarily responsible for it, it's going to result in the development of significant insecurity and anxiety issues (Galani 2021).

Holding up a male ethos of individualist autonomy as a cultural aspiration negatively impacts many working class non-college educated men, for whom it is often unrealistic and difficult to obtain. Researchers who interviewed racially and ethnically diverse working class non-college educated men found they sought to construct an individualist "autonomous generative self" (Edin et al. 2019). Many of the men were emotionally and socially detached from communal and social supportive ties of family, career, and religious institutions, and instead engaged with more autonomous forms of work, childrearing, and spirituality. This leads to what the researchers call an alienated "haphazard self" which "may be aligned with counterproductive behaviors". In particular, white males with a high school diploma, considering the recent rise among them in "deaths of despair", were more pessimistic in comparing their lives to their fathers, who had more secure connections to social institutions. The researchers are concerned that without social support, these men are not likely to achieve the autonomous generative selves they desire and will sink into greater despair.

1.2. Right-Wing Racist Authoritarian Masculinity as Extreme Patriarchy

An extreme variant of neoliberal hegemonic masculinity in the United States has metastasized into the toxic form of right-wing racist authoritarian machismo, reflected in Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) cult of white male toughness and bullying.

French (2021) calls out this "emerging culture of the right—a culture that idolizes a twisted version of masculine 'toughness' as the highest ideal and despises a false version of 'weakness' as the lowest vice". The Right dismisses any critique of Trump in unmasculine terms of cowardice and fragility, he writes. French shows how the Right has tied distorted meanings of toughness and courage to "strong, masculine virtues" they attribute to Trump himself—say whatever is on one's mind, favor cruelty over decency as an act of defiance, and promote direct violent action in "the increased prevalence of open-carried AR-15s at public protests, the increased number of unlawful threats hurled at political opponents, and outbreaks of actual political violence, including the large-scale violence of January 6".

The right-wing culture of masculinity is anxious about the male ego, which it feels is under siege, and is fearful of losing what it considers to be manliness. For example, in a video series, right-wing media propagandist Tucker Carlson claims there is a "total collapse of testosterone levels in American men" as a way to describe a growing loss of masculinity in the U.S. (Colata 2022, April 22). To address this bogus claim, he touts a bogus commercial product that provides red light to the testicles, along with others who falsely argue for testicular sunlight tanning as a way to increase testosterone.

There is a history of anxiety in the U.S. that claims a weak moral society makes men physically weak, devitalized, and effeminate and leads to further social problems; this claim has been employed as a rallying cry for males to toughen up against stronger foreign enemies such as the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Heffernan 2022, May 22). Much of this recent anxiety about masculinity, as Kristin Kobes Du Mez (Faith and Leadership, Du Mez 2020) shows, stems from the influence of revivalist white evangelicals, whose Christian nationalism has been a significant influence on the Right and on right-wing politicians, such as the 2022 Republican nominee for governor in Pennsylvania. As she describes, starting in the 1940s, evangelicals who feared the loss of a white Christian America seized on the unifying theme of "Christian living", in particular an ideal, traditional, rugged, and militant Christian masculinity influenced by secular cultural icons of manhood such as John Wayne. As Du Mez (Ibid.) points out, these desirable masculine qualities are embodied by Trump:

once you understand this history of militant evangelical masculinity, you can see that Trump in fact does embody many of those traits—a seemingly strong,

rugged man who is going to do whatever needs to be done, including violence, to achieve order. The ends will justify the means.

In U.S. society, a number of white, non-college educated working class young men have felt disempowered and experience a loss of status and of a traditional sense of masculine identity as their relational roles have changed. Traditional male breadwinner roles have diminished within a de-industrialized U.S. service economy that has seen gains toward equality for women in marriage, education, careers, and income. As Edin et al. describe for their older counterparts (2019), many of these young men likewise do not receive the kind of needed emotional support and insight into the changes occurring in society that educational and counseling programs could provide. Instead, they mistakenly feel threatened by and blame all women for their problems and turn to alt-right communities, who are keen to provide them with the emotional support they want (Romano 2018). Right-wing authoritarians prey on those vulnerable boys and men who are insecure about their masculinity (ADL Center on Extremism n.d.). As feminist journalist Marcotte (2021a, October 18) explains, they tell them they can rid themselves of self-doubt by adopting a bullying male chauvinist attitude: “The solution, they say, is to return to rigid, unforgiving gender roles that just so happen to value straight, cis men above all other people”. The prejudice against trans-gendered people is especially virulent, and threatening, Marcotte says, as “[t]he very existence of trans people is a reminder that gender—and therefore gender hierarchy—is a social construct, and therefore can be analyzed, criticized, and even changed”.

As Marcotte puts it, the irony is that those insecure men who are drawn to right-wing authoritarian groups prove the social construction of gender by trying to “prove” their manhood: “. . . they are constantly trying to ‘prove’ it, from demanding female submission to bashing trans people to refusing a vaccine. If masculinity isn’t a social construct, then one wouldn’t need to put so much work into socially constructing it”, she argues.

In the U.S., the authoritarian Right capitalizes politically on anxiety about masculinity and the desire to shore up patriarchy. Right-wing Senator Josh Hawley (R-MO) claims the Left wants to “deconstruct men” (Heffernan 2022, May 22). Journalist Featherstone (2021) points out that Hawley’s declaration of a “crisis of American men” resonates globally in autocratic countries:

China has also barred “sissy” men from appearing on TV; in Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro has said that masks are “for fairies”; and Mr. Hawley, in his speech, fueled anti-transgender prejudice by alluding to a bogus “war on women’s sports”. Nothing justifies this hateful nonsense. But Mr. Hawley, for all his winking bigotry, is tapping into something real—a widespread, politically potent anxiety about young men that is already helping the Right.

The Right wing, influenced by Christian nationalism, exhibits hatred and fear of women and seeks to control them by taking away their reproductive rights for which they have fought. The Supreme Court’s conservative judges’ oral arguments over abortion rights in November 2021 were contemptuous of women’s lives, observed Marcotte (2021c, December 1), and showed “contempt for women’s intelligence, contempt for women’s privacy and contempt for women’s very humanity”.

For right-wing Trump supporters, women are second class citizens and inferior to men. The best women can do, they believe, is to try to counter the culture they think is emasculating their sons and then to live vicariously through them. This is what lay behind Rep. Madison Cawthorn’s (R-NC) October 2021 speech aimed at these mothers, in which he encouraged women to raise their sons to be “monsters”—because women cannot be equal, they can taste power and experience their own vicious urges through at least raising vicious monsters (Marcotte 2021b, December 7).

Certain right-wing mothers and wives adopt this twisted and dangerous patriarchal view of their own roles. In 2020 and 2021, three prominent examples of mothers endorsing and cultivating their sons’ violence were the mother–son team that stormed the Capitol

on January 6 and the MAGA moms of shooters Kyle Rittenhouse in Wisconsin and Ethan Crumbley in Michigan (Marcotte 2021b, December 7; Signorile 2021).

Right-wing racist authoritarian masculinity is patriarchy in its most virulent, recalcitrant, and dangerous form. It must be understood and opposed in practical and skillful ways at the societal, political, cultural, interpersonal, and psychological levels. From a Buddhist perspective we can suggest, along with engaged Buddhist David Loy, that it is an extreme, dangerous, and futile attempt to overcome and heal the fear of a loss of self as a white male, the terror that one's very identity and existence are threatened with oblivion. The latest manifestation in the U.S. of this fear of loss of status and self-dissolution is the white supremacist conspiratorial "Replacement Theory", spread by right-wing media propagandists such as Tucker Carlson, in which white males believe their identity as holders of dominant power will disappear as they become a minority. Across the U.S. it has served to justify a number of deadly mass shootings by white males of African Americans, Latinos, and Jews whom they fear are overtaking them in terms of economic and political power.

2. "Mindful Masculinity" and Related Programs Reinforce Neoliberal Hegemonic Masculinity Instead of Challenging It

In the U.S., how can we prevent or at least minimize the harmful effects of patriarchal thinking and behavior at earlier stages of development of young men through education and counseling programs?

Secular education programs in schools, on social media, and elsewhere aim to help boys and young men critically examine harmful patriarchal messages they receive and internalize from society. They try to do this by adopting the Buddhist-originated practice of *mindfulness* in secular terms. Certain of these programs are referred to as teaching *mindful masculinity*. Their goal is for young men to reject those qualities of hegemonic masculinity deemed emotionally harmful to themselves and others and to gain a healthier masculine identity that allows them to be more emotionally vulnerable and more compassionate toward others.

The problem is that mindful masculinity, as a concept and program, endorses and reinforces an essentialist, individualistic, neoliberal hegemonic masculine self-identity. As a way to work with boys and men, such programs employ and thereby reinforce hegemonic masculine traits such as strength, power, and control, as shown in the following examples.

Davidson (2021), who calls himself a mindful masculinity coach, sees mindfulness itself in hegemonic masculine terms as a "power" men can "own" that can help them attain their personal goals. Even vulnerability is reframed in the dominant language of hegemonic masculinity. He says, "I have made it my mission to create mindful men to own their masculinity and enjoy being a male today, through Courage, Connection and Vulnerability to positively impact their world". The message to men is to protect them from the fear of not having an acceptably masculine and strong self. As a way to appeal to men, Davidson uses the same neoliberal hegemonic masculinity framework that reduces vulnerability, a positive trait, to another strategy to help them succeed in a competitive neoliberal world.

Psychologists Lomas et al. (2018) set up a mindfulness-based intervention along with interviews of adolescent boys at risk of academic failure and studied how they negotiated masculinity with mindfulness. The authors first point out that the boys had an "overriding need, desire and intent" to claim agency and exert self-control, which they describe as a "traditional hegemonic masculine norm". However, they suggest the boys deployed control in ways that challenged traditional masculine performances that promoted "emotional awareness and engagement", qualities not normally associated with masculinity. Within the context of a mindfulness-based intervention, the researchers say, the boys continued to speak the masculine discourse of control, except in order "to legitimize a non-conventional masculine performance involving emotional connection and agility".

The authors thereby argue for the ability of males "to refashion their way of 'doing' masculinity in more adaptive ways", as "alternative gendered performances", what

Lomas (2013) in an earlier article calls the “critical positive masculinity paradigm”. In that framework, Lomas asserts that men can reconstruct positive, not just negative, hegemonic masculinity norms, or “at least re-interpret” traditional masculine qualities through meditation. He adopts a particular definition of meditation used by other meditation researchers, who conceptualize it as “a family of self-regulation practices that focus on training attention and awareness in order to bring mental processes under greater voluntary control”. This is a self-enhancing, hegemonic, and masculine way of describing meditation in the interest of neoliberal values if there ever was one: to gain self-regulation and bring mental processes under greater control and as a way to maintain and strengthen a neoliberal masculine self.

The issue is that, despite mindfulness, or even due to how it is conceptualized and practiced, young men continue to perform masculinity as a re-conceptualized gendered social self. They want to assert control, a neoliberal, hegemonic, manly quality, in order to be better at being men in neoliberal society. Manliness continues to be an acceptable and essentialist social construct; there is a persistence of attachment to a solid, hegemonic masculine social identity.

Plank (2019), in *For the Love of Men: From Toxic to a More Mindful Masculinity*, sees being mindful as a way for men to awaken to their automatic habits in order to “choose which ones serve us and which ones don’t”. Men, she says, can then decide with intention what kind of masculinity they want, what kind of man they want to be. For Plank, “*Mindful masculinity is all about taking back control* (italics added)”. What is most important about mindful masculinity, she writes, is that “it’s not about shunning masculinity: it’s about claiming it back”. She quotes a colleague: “... there is nothing more masculine than having control over your emotions and mental health”.

Here, Liz Plank offers mindfulness as a way for men to strengthen their male self through individual choice, decision-making, and above all, control, a neoliberal hegemonic masculine characteristic, instead of as a way to let go of clinging to their identity and evolve toward a more encompassing, interdependent way of being.

Other mindfulness programs do not explicitly teach mindful masculinity to young men, and instead wish to connect masculinity and mindfulness. They are concerned that not enough males are interested in or willing to practice mindfulness, as many see it as a more feminine practice. They hope to convince young men by making how it is taught and presented, and by whom, an acceptably masculine, rather than feminine endeavor in which masculinity itself appears as a neoliberal hegemonic identity. Several employ traditional male role models and masculine cultural icons to draw in more boys and men.

For example, Richard Burnett, an organizer for the 2019 Millions Mind Matter Conference for educators in the U.K. (Burnett 2019), sponsored by the Mindfulness in Schools Project, tells the young men in his school that it is okay to meditate, because being vulnerable about your feelings is now considered manly and a show of strength. He convinced the young men in his school to meditate with male teachers who feel the need to be strong as men. For them, he says, “Mindfulness sits comfortably with masculinity because they see enough of their teachers practicing it. They know that you don’t have to be tough to be strong” (Burnett 2019).

Burnett (2019) wonders, “[h]ow do we help men to feel that mindfulness is more ‘for them’, particularly as the inexorable tide of commercialization wafts mindfulness downstream to the more immediately profitable shores of women’s interest and lifestyle media?” He answers that when boys in school see enough of their male teachers practicing it they take to it more quickly, and that his organization’s curriculum needed to “avoid being in any way ‘floaty’ or ‘angora sweater’”, i.e., identified as feminine, reflected by their mostly female teachers, in order to connect with fourteen-year-old boys. Burnett was proud that two male celebrities chosen for their conventional masculine traits spoke at the Conference as role models, who he was convinced served in order to increase access to mindfulness for boys and men.

Paradoxically, then, in order to recruit and appeal to boys and men to practice mindfulness in order to become more compassionate and adopt fewer masculine qualities by

shedding their “emotional suit of armour”, Burnett wants to provide hegemonic manly role models and teachers with traditional masculine selves and shun any association of mindfulness with feminine qualities.

In “Five Ways to Make Mindfulness More Manly” (Hatori 2013), an educator who teaches a mindfulness and compassion training course is concerned that there are not enough men taking such classes. In order to make compassion attractive and positive, he suggests the use of pop culture warrior icons to teach mindfulness to boys, such as the kung fu panda and the jedi knights: “meet men where they are”, such as in the marine corps and in prisons, and “make compassion training manlier” by encouraging men to lead other men in mindfulness training and by converting compassion techniques created by women into more hegemonic masculine versions.

The contradiction here is that, in an effort to build credibility among men, the attempt to promote less manly virtues such as compassion for oneself and others through mindfulness ends up relying on examples in the manly realms of the military, competitive sports training, and warrior pop culture. These reflect and reinforce identification with a neoliberal hegemonic masculine self.

While it might be argued that we need to first introduce young men to mindfulness practices with traditional language and concepts with which they are familiar, we need to go beyond these and investigate and change the deeper structural problems of neoliberal hegemonic masculinity.

3. McMindfulness: The Disappearance of Buddhist Principles

As we have seen, mindful masculinity programs and those seeking to attract young men to practice mindfulness tend to promote and reinforce rather than challenge qualities of the neoliberal hegemonic masculine selfhood that serve to adjust young men to function in neoliberal society. Such programs rely on a particular American version of mindfulness that is stripped away from its foundational moral Buddhist context and becomes instead a value-neutral technology that can be applied for many purposes. This particular definition of mindfulness is credited to Jon Kabat-Zinn, who adopted it based on his familiarity with Buddhism: the awareness that arises from paying attention, in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally (Finkelstein 2022, January 5).

The problem with the non-Buddhist definition of mindfulness is called by its critics *McMindfulness* (Purser 2019; Forbes 2019): “The term was coined by Miles Neale, a Buddhist teacher and psychotherapist”, Ron Purser writes, “who described a feeding frenzy of spiritual practices that provide immediate nutrition but no long-term sustenance (Purser 2019, p. 15). For David Forbes, “McMindfulness occurs when mindfulness is used, 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 compassion for everyone” (Forbes 2019, p. 25).

There is no one monolithic original version of Buddhism itself, and the meanings and practices of mindfulness vary in different contexts, for example, within various Asian countries (Cassaniti 2018, pp. viii, ix). The point is not that mindful programs for young men in the U.S. and Britain betray the original purpose within Buddhism, nor that we should invoke and return to a pure Buddhist mindfulness practice, which is neither possible nor desirable.

Nevertheless, by adapting this value-neutral definition of mindfulness, mindful masculinity and other programs aimed at young men sacrifice the radical and morally transformative potential of at least two significant aspects of foundational Buddhist thinking, namely, the impermanent nature of a self or identity, and the compassionate insight of interdependence with all living beings.

In Buddhism, mindfulness serves a particular purpose; it is a way to gain insight into the impermanent, transient nature of the mind, the self, and all things. The aim is to free one’s self from suffering by letting go of attachment to things that one realizes are impermanent and have no solid essence or nature, and are interdependent with everything

else. This leads to realizing that one need not cling with anxiety to one's identity, which is not a solid, privatized, unchanging self, and rather can be free to identify with all beings and things, and realize compassion (*metta*) for oneself as inseparable from the wellbeing of all others in the deepest moral sense.

Mindfulness becomes McM mindfulness when it is applied for the purposes of improving neoliberal structures and relationships: to hold oneself personally responsible for reducing stress, rather than questioning and challenging with others the troublesome sources of stress from workplaces, schools, and society; to increase corporate productivity and efficiency; to manage anger and difficult emotions in the service of classroom compliance, often with African American and Latino students; and to improve students' focus and concentration on the standard curricula and standardized tests in order to succeed in school (Forbes 2019; Purser 2019; Smallen 2019). The overall aim is individualistic, to promote and strengthen the privatized self in order to be a successful, competitive, and productive member of neoliberal society. Mindfulness as a consequence ends up strengthening neoliberalism and a neoliberal hegemonic masculine identity for boys and men.

The problem is that McM mindfulness runs counter to Buddhist values and serves as a way to enhance and bolster the private, competitive, hegemonic masculine self in order to do well in neoliberal society. Instead of a way to let go of the illusory attachment to a solid and unchanging identity and thereby transform both one's self and others in more socially just and caring ways, McM mindfulness practices serve as a technology to better adjust people to self-centered neoliberal societal norms of stressful and competitive individualism and self-commodification as a self-promoting marketable brand (see Forbes 2019, pp. 25–42; Purser 2019, pp. 25–46; McMahan 2008, pp. 195–99; Smallen 2019; Wilson 2014, pp. 133–58).

This problem further occurs when mindfulness educators apply secular mindfulness to working with young men around challenging patriarchal consciousness and behavior.

As we have seen, these programs are liable on two fronts. First, by proposing a supposedly healthier masculine "self" in lieu of a patriarchal one, they accept its existence a priori and ignore the Buddhist insight into the interdependent and non-essential nature of a "self", in this case, a masculine self or identity. Second, rather than applying mindfulness as a way to help young men let go of attachment to the self or ego in order to alleviate suffering and gain compassion for others, mindfulness educators inadvertently apply it as a technology to adjust and strengthen the neoliberal hegemonic masculine self in order to function with greater strength and succeed within a competitive and inequitable neoliberal society. Thus, instead of Buddhist non-attachment, McM mindfulness replaces it with competitive striving, which fits in well with neoliberal hegemonic masculinity (Smallen 2019).

As currently practiced, certain programs in the U.S. and Britain that employ mindfulness with young men reinforce rather than challenge attachment to the social construct and identity of masculinity as a stable self-identity. The strategy of replacing a patriarchal masculinity with qualities of a more positive or constructive masculine self continues to strengthen the concept of the stable and privatized self, which is then promoted as necessary in order to compete and succeed in neoliberal society. Without a broader framework that includes both the Buddhist insight into the interdependent, fluid, non-essentialist nature of the self and its relation to all other sentient beings and a social critique of the way in which McM mindfulness functions to promote and strengthen the self within neoliberal society, mindfulness masculinity programs end up maintaining rather than challenging hegemonic masculine thought patterns and structural inequities.

4. Examples of Engaged Buddhist Perspectives and Practices to Counter Neoliberal Hegemonic Masculinity

Engaged Buddhist values and practices can and should re-infuse secular mindfulness practices in order to overtake the amoral weakness of McM mindfulness and to counter the toxic effects of neoliberal hegemonic masculinity. We cannot afford to settle for a morally neutral technology that allows neoliberal ideologies, practices, and structures to continue

to harm males and all others. Instead of the neoliberal framework, in which mindfulness tends unwittingly to serve as an intra-psychic and individualist practice for promoting success through hegemonic masculinity, mindfulness requires an explicit, critical, and compassionate moral framework for universal social justice and optimal development (see [Mindfulness and Social Change Network n.d.](#); [Forbes 2019](#)).

Such values can help young men to explore and question neoliberal hegemonic masculine beliefs and tendencies to take in and act on unreflective and conditioned patterns of patriarchal gender roles that are troublesome to girls and women, to LGBTQ individuals, and to the young men themselves. Starting from a supportive and non-judgmental context that recognizes and allows for young men to be where they are in terms of their developmental worldview, an educational program can help to generate more caring, compassionate, and collaborative young people in the service of their own and others' full development.

In discussing whether and how mindfulness, which originated from Buddhism, may be helpful to young men in secular settings, several issues first need to be addressed. One is to acknowledge that, even within Buddhist communities, adherence to Buddhist values and practices such as mindfulness does not guarantee that racism, patriarchy, and sexist gender inequality will be taken up and challenged, let alone overcome. Racist and sexist norms have appeared in sanghas (communities) in the U.S., as described by [Ferguson \(2006\)](#), [Gross \(2006\)](#), and [Hooks \(2006\)](#). Other members from within such communities, however, do challenge these and call for more socially conscious, non-sexist, and anti-racist practices that are just and inclusive, for example, the [Buddhist Peace Fellowship \(2019\)](#) and the [\(East Bay Meditation Center n.d.\)](#).

One issue is whether Buddhism is a religion; if it is, then teaching Buddhist-based mindfulness in public schools for purposes such as helping young men counter patriarchy violates the separation of church and state. Certain Buddhist adherents who teach mindfulness in schools see Buddhism as a religion, and admit to deliberately transmitting Buddhist values without making them explicit. One critic who sees it as a religion charges that this is a kind of "stealth Buddhism" in which proponents aim to sneak and spread the religion of Buddhism into secular settings such as schools, which, she argues, is an unethical and problematic practice ([Brown 2019](#), pp. 176–78). The counter-argument of other scholars and Buddhists is that if the definition of a religion requires an exclusive belief in and commitment to a god or superhuman controlling power that people worship, then Buddhism is not one (see [Smith 1998](#) on the many definitions of religion and its conflation with spirituality). Not all Buddhists regard it as a religion; it is a practice anyone can do, while others similarly see it as a philosophy, a spiritual way of life, a wisdom tradition, or a science of mind.

As a way to transcend or bypass the secular/religious divide, mindfulness educators can acknowledge the Buddhist origins of mindfulness and the values they endorse and infuse them within the framework of promoting optimal moral and self-development for all ([Forbes 2019](#)). This is the most straightforward and open approach. Critical mindfulness educators who question, resist, and aim to transform neoliberal hegemonic masculinity and systemic power inequities such as sexism, racism, and homophobia enhance self-development and moral development among young men and promote optimal development for all students. [Forbes \(2004, 2019\)](#) has employed mindfulness practices in schools such as cultivating compassion for one's self and others while contextualizing them within a critical investigation and discussion of students' personal lives, communities, and broader inequitable neoliberal and racist social conditions. His teaching includes mindfulness of the thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and identities to which young men are attached, and encourages them to trace their origins to socially conditioned messages of hegemonic masculinity and other unjust neoliberal tropes within society. For example, the young men noticed what kinds of thoughts would arise when they meditated, such as never feeling good or adequate enough, and often feeling the need to be perfect, to compete with or dominate others, and to sell oneself. One issue that arose for many young men of color is how to

transcend hegemonic masculinity when they are denied conventional male roles in U.S. society in the first place. They would then discuss how these thoughts and feelings are connected to the broader neoliberal racist society that promotes and disseminates them and consider ways to challenge them in mutually supportive ways.

A critical social mindfulness that promotes optimal development requires a revised take on the Buddhist practice of exploring the nature of the self on both personal and societal levels. This would allow young people to more deeply and critically explore their own identities together in emotional, developmental, societal, philosophical, and spiritual terms, and extend this project to others (Forbes 2019).

Several significant Buddhist values and practices oppose those of hegemonic masculine consciousness. One is to develop an openness to experience, allowing for a not-knowing, a curiosity to explore one's mind without pre-judgment, to see what comes up and witness it with loving kindness. This openness runs counter to many rigid notions of hegemonic masculinity, including the belief there is just one acceptable way to be a man, to which males who are fearful of change and losing their status and power over others may cling.

A key element of mindfulness practice is to notice and discover how we hold on to our idea of a particular self, and then to practice letting go of our attachment to this notion of a separate, privatized, unchanging self. Over time we can learn to take our own thoughts, feelings, and sensations, as well as those of others, less personally, and are able to understand and empathize more with the perspectives of others and even all sentient beings.

With respect to hegemonic masculinity, instead of being over-identified with our gender identity and rigid gender roles, we can let go of attachment to these social constructs. We can dis-identify with conventional, patriarchal identities and notions of the self. When we do this, we can see our own and others' gender identity and gender attributes as not fixed or solid, and rather as socially constructed. This works to challenge the other side of the specious claim that all boys and men are flawed or problematic; to see masculinity as socially constructed is to reject seeing it from a "fatalistic essentialist perspective" or as an inherent risk factor (Lomas 2013).

Buddhist monk Ayyā Somā suggests that "When we look at gender through the lens of delusion [e.g., as a fixed conventional identity with immutable qualities], we inevitably cause others and ourselves to suffer. But when we see with correct wisdom things as they actually are, peace of mind becomes manifest" (New York Insight Center 2021, May 16).

The Buddhist notion that self-identity is not a rigidly defined or solid quality can address problems that young men might have with feeling insecure about their conventional masculine identity and about trying to prove it to themselves and others. It can free them up with respect to accepting themselves as they are without having to constantly prove themselves as boys or men. They no longer have to see effeminate and gay men, transgendered and non-binary people, and women as the Other, as people apart from them and to whom they must feel superior and attempt to dominate. It allows them to feel unthreatened by transgendered people, as they no longer have to work to cling to and hold up a rigid masculine identity.

As a consequence of letting go of self-attachment over time, instead of adopting an oppositional, either/or approach to others, who are seen as threats to one's identity and way of being, Buddhist-inspired mindfulness can contribute to recognizing the fluidity and interconnectedness of all beings and things. With moral guidance and in a supportive context that respects people's level of self-development, this perspective can open the way for more evolved, wholesome, and caring relationships that take into account the welfare of others and the earth itself. This deeper awareness of inter-being can cultivate empathy and compassion for all sentient beings who we now realize are inseparable from and a part of ourselves. Loy (2013) writes that the teachings of Buddhism "challenge us to wake up and realize that our own wellbeing cannot be separated from the wellbeing of others, or from the health of the whole Earth".

Following Loy, the fluidity of self and other, of inner awareness and outer world, means that there is no ultimate separation between a presumed privatized and individualistic consciousness and the interpersonal, cultural, and societal institutions of which we all are a part. In this way, engaged Buddhists take on the challenges of what Loy refers to as the “we-go”, that is, the critical examination and transformation of attachment to neoliberal institutions that reinforce and depend on qualities of hegemonic masculinity such as the corporate mainstream and social media, which pedal disinformation and value profitable ratings and “likes” over critical investigative truth-telling; global corporations, which turn human needs such as healthcare and housing into for-profit commodities; and the military, an institution addicted to a massive and often murderous war budget that is favored over other social needs. These neoliberal institutions reflect hegemonic masculine values of competition, self-centered individualism, aggression and violence, and racist, sexist, and heterosexist domination over others in various ways.

To the extent that hegemonic masculine consciousness and neoliberal racist cultural norms and societal structures reflect the three Buddhist poisons of delusion, greed, and ill-will and reinforce these institutions, they too can and should be subjected to critical scrutiny, resistance, and transformational mindful social action in the interest of the welfare of everyone. Such analysis and action as aspects of an engaged Buddhist practice are arguably necessary parts of any program that counters neoliberal hegemonic masculinity. Challenging the poison of delusion requires an empathic connection and critical analysis with those disaffected young men who mistakenly blame women for their confusion, anger, and fear of loss of self.

Buddhism is about both letting go of conditioned attachments and developing greater wise compassion (*metta*). The Buddha taught that there are two sides to the path of practice, as the Buddhist teacher Bhikkhu (2003, p. 90) writes: the side of developing and the side of letting go. He points out that if you only practice letting go, you throw out everything and leave nothing left, while if you only practice developing your self, you miss things that occur by themselves that might happen when you let go. To understand and promote personal, cultural, and societal development, then, is a valuable part of a compassionate counter-program.

On personal and interpersonal levels, through conscious mindfulness practice over time, young men can become aware of internalized messages and beliefs about manhood they have been conditioned to adopt and that reflect neoliberal notions of hegemonic masculinity. They can learn to let go of feeling the need to be aggressive and competitive and to conquer and dominate others and nature as primary ways to prove their self-worth. By becoming mindful in a compassionate way towards their feelings, they can allow themselves to develop and express the many-sided qualities of themselves and to act with greater self-care, as well as care and compassion for others. Recognizing how one is conditioned by neoliberal hegemonic masculinity and realizing instead one’s fundamental interconnectedness in personal, interpersonal, and societal terms could benefit those working class non-college educated men who are struggling to develop their autonomous selves in the absence of social support networks and relationships.

The Buddhist practice of *metta*, wise compassion for all, parallels the stages of self-development in psychology (see Wilber 2006, pp. 50–83). We first bear witness to ourselves with benevolence and kindness (egocentric). As we begin to let go of ego-attachment, we can extend compassion to those about whom we care (conventional); later, to others beyond those family, friends, and group members whom we do not know (post-conventional); and finally, to everyone, even those whom we dislike or who wish us harm and from whom we must defend ourselves (universal). We must engage in this practice with others, as it is not a privatized, intra-psychic experience, and is rather a moral, interrelated way of living and evolving with all people.

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