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From Medicalization To McMindfulness

The Impact Of Jon-Kabat Zinn's "Full Catastrophe Living"
On The North-American Mindfulness Movement.
A Close Reading.



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Introduction

Mindfulness, *sati*¹ in Pali, is a form of present-focused and non-judgmental awareness of one's feelings, thoughts and sensations (Bishop et al. 2006, 232). It is cultivated through various meditation techniques that stem from Buddhism where mindfulness aims to cultivate attention and awareness, embedded in a larger dogmatic conception of the universe. Ethical notions such as abstaining from taking any life are crucial (Hart 1987, 60) for advancement on the path towards liberation of the self, the so-called Eightfold Path² (Braun 2012, 'Mindfulness'). The US military has recently introduced mindfulness practice as a mean to support various aspects of deployment. It reduces the perceived stress levels of soldiers, (Stanley 2011, 566) and practitioners can use it during the execution of basic soldier skills such as firing a weapon (Stanley 2010, 263). That a Buddhist meditation practice was gradually turned into a stress-reduction technology is largely due to the work of the medical researcher Jon Kabat-Zinn and his MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) program as introduced in his book 'Full Catastrophe Living'. As an exemplary primary text of a cultural phenomenon that is currently sweeping through North America's³ middle class (Wilson 2014, 104), its public life, popular culture and academia (Hyland 2017, 335), the book endorses MBSR. It employs a medical frame and various other discursive elements that are typical for the mindfulness movement's self-help genre and its emphasis on health and medicine (Wilson 2014, 53; 140).

Mindfulness in North America has a long history of transformation and translation into new contexts that starts with the import of Buddhism in the 19th century (Wilson 2014, 14). In recent decades, Kabat-Zinn was able to provide proof of meditation's positive impact on the brain's connectivity, which has become a common "mantra" of modern mindfulness (Thompson 2017, 49). This culminated in the introduction of programs in the US military, hospitals and schools (McMahan and Braun 2017, 11). There has been an exponential growth in mindfulness-related research, mostly in North America and Europe that focuses on its potential to relieve a variety of ailments such as chronic pain or depression (Britton 2019, 159), but also to build resilience in high-stress environments such as the US military (Stanley 2011, 566). Since the 2000s, mindfulness has entered mainstream medicine through standardized interventions (Wilson 2013, 89) but the cultural mainstream as well,

¹ All Pali words are without diacritics in this thesis, for example Theravada instead of Theravāda.

² For a brief description of the Eightfold Path see 'Historical Overview.

³ In this thesis, the terms North-American and American are interchangeably. Although the use of American for North America is contested, many sources on North-American mindfulness simply use 'American' (Galeano 1997, 'Introduction')

'mcdonaldizing'⁴ meditation into a diluted but widely available, but reductionist form termed McMindfulness (Hyland 2017, 334). George Ritzer, who coined the term, characterizes it by rationalized strategies to reach higher levels of efficiency, calculability and predictability, and the employment of technology instead of human labor. The wide acceptance of Kabat-Zinn's short program replacing traditional retreats, or boasting with the number of completed mindfulness interventions (Center For Mindfulness 2019, 'History'), as well as the use of mindfulness audiobooks demonstrate how interwoven the concept of modern mindfulness is with this rationalization (Hyland 2017, 336–9).

Political and commercial pursuits seem to be crucial motivators to participate in mindfulness. This manifests itself in gimmicks and hypes such as selling “mindful mints” that help improve “mental focus and alpha brain wave activity” (Wilson 2014, 157) or the social class-signification in Silicon Valley (Walsh 2016, 150). Some participants believe in its capacity to transform individuals and society profoundly from within. Despite the dilution of its meaning it is referred to as a “quiet revolution” (Goto-Jones 2013, 4) and a social movement, mostly associated with white, middle class Americans (Wilson 2014, 61). Kabat-Zinn endorses its political potential based on the belief that a “in a society founded on democratic principles sooner or later meditative practice, what are sometimes called consciousness disciplines, are bound to come to the fore (...).” In the United Kingdom, the Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group (MAPPG) proposes the teaching of mindfulness in schools and hospitals around the country to enable human development that fosters Britain's prosperity. The ‘Mindful Nation Foundation’, a non-profit organization affiliated with Republican Congressman Tim Ryan, supposedly promotes “evidence-based contemplative practices” for the wellbeing of communities and building of “human capacity” (Mindful Nation Network 2019).

“The mindfulness movement is not quite as dramatic as the moon shot or the civil rights movement, but I believe in the long run it can have just as great an impact.”

-Republican Congressman Tim Ryan (Ryan 2012, 'Introduction')

The reconfiguration of meditation within the industry and context of therapy propelled its wide proliferation (McMahan and Braun 2017, 11). Instead of “moving society towards greater sanity and wellbeing” (Kabat-Zinn 2011, 282), however, this may have caused a mindfulness that satisfies “a narrower set of interests than what is explicitly claimed and desired.” (Walsh 2016, 159). The latest development of this reconfiguration may be the

⁴ McDonaldization is a term coined by sociologist George Ritzer in his book ‘The McDonaldization of Society’ (Ritzer 2015). That mindfulness took this development has been recognized by Kabat-Zinn but his contribution in the process, as will be shown, is unquestioned (Hyland 2017, 337–40).

gradual application of mindfulness in various militaries such as the US army and the British and New Zealand Royal Forces. Further applications are to be expected. The founder of the US military's Mindfulness-Based Mind Fitness program (MMFT), Dr. Amishi Jha, provided a keynote address at NATO in the spring of 2019 to present her program (Jha 2019, 'News').

Instead of focusing on Kabat-Zinn's influence as a medical researcher who was able to prove the medical effectiveness of mindfulness, this thesis looks at the discursive means involved in the selling of MBSR and its reselling into other commercial artifacts, through a close reading. The close reading identifies its frame and common themes within a certain narrative. It provides examples of how these elements may have influenced self-help books of the mindfulness movement. The research question is as follows: How have Jon Kabat-Zinn's discursive elements in 'Full Catastrophe Living' influenced the McDonaldization of mindfulness? It also incorporates salient academic critiques of the mindfulness movement that emerged in recent years. The text's singular and direct influence on the movement is impossible to assess but due to the importance of the MBSR program (McMahan and Braun 2017, 'Introduction'), many debates around the ongoing mindfulness movement can be traced back to writings of the author, in particular 'Full Catastrophe Living'. The thesis assumes a multidisciplinary, mostly cultural and historical, perspective on modern mindfulness. Economic and political aspects of the mindfulness movement are mentioned as well, for example its commodification and meaning within neoliberalism and the political meaning Kabat-Zinn attributes to it (Kabat-Zinn 2005, 553), but a lesser degree.

Scholars that have evaluated the mindfulness movement and its discourse can be divided into two camps. While the 'promoters' hope that mindful living cultivated by individuals will transform societies from within, termed the 'trojan horse hypothesis', the critical stance interprets it as a supplementary coping practice used and consumed by stressed individuals, which helps sustain unfair socio-economic structures untouched by enabling passivity. This supports the arguably exploitative dynamics of neoliberal economic system⁵ instead of questioning them (Hyland 2017, 334). This is often termed 'corporate quietism' (Walsh 2016, 156). Further, mindfulness has been extremely commodified (Wilson 2014, 133) and as a "supplement" to foster individual resilience against stress (Walsh 2016, 159) it may exploit the individual's agency, with potentially sinister consequences (Žižek 2001, 33). These points are related and manifestations of the transformability of mindfulness and its distancing away from its Buddhist origin, moving into new contexts. Kabat-Zinn

⁵ Neoliberalism is a critical economic term associated with the liberalization of markets, cultural homogeneity, individual responsibility, economic disparity but also autonomy from state interference (Young 2011, "Neoliberalism").

enabled this at least partially through his rendering. The literature reviewed contains scholars from a variety of disciplines such as Dharma⁶ studies, religious studies, psychology and philosophy and focuses on debates on the transformation of modern mindfulness and Kabat-Zinn's role in it. Certain commentators, such as the philosopher Slavoj Žižek who comments on its potential as a ideological supplement to capitalism, do not refer to Kabat-Zinn, but his stance is relevant due to its poignant questions (Walsh 2016, 157).

An analysis of modern mindfulness begins with the problem of categorization linked to its position between science, Buddhism and other fields, as well as its fast changeability (Calobrisi 2018, 94). Jeff Wilson, the author of 'Mindful America', sees it partially as a mere commercial activity (Wilson 2014, 133). The current mindfulness movement is hard to interpret by scholars⁷. Dharma scholar Thomas Calobrisi has suggested interpreting it as a cultural 'crossing'⁸. It claims to be both non-Buddhist while at the same time supposedly teaching the very essence of Buddhist practice – the 'Dharma' (Purser 2014, 26). Kabat-Zinn has used the analogy of universal laws to wed both science and Buddhism, describing 'Dharma' as something lawful irrespective of culture or religion. "The lawfulness of the dharma is such that, in order for it to be dharma, it cannot be exclusively Buddhist, any more than the law of gravity is English because of Newton or Italian because of Galileo, or the laws of thermodynamics Austrian because of Boltzmann" (Kabat-Zinn 2005, 137). He overwrites any cultural determination by applying the idea of universal 'laws'. While physical laws might be true everywhere, cultural ideas and practices are constructed and arguably require being cultivated. To distinguish his notion of Dharma from the Buddhist context, Kabat-Zinn simply spells 'Dharma' with a lower case 'd'. "In the present context, to recognize the universal character of the dharma, we use the term with a small 'd.'" (Center For Mindfulness 2019, 'History').

While Kabat-Zinn uses a mix of traditions such as Theravada⁹ and Zen, he hides their origin in order to make meditation available to anyone. This avoids that the mindfulness consumer would be intimidated by "Eastern" philosophies (Cassaniti 2017, 146) and shows

⁶ In Buddhist literature, Dharma usually refers to the full range of teachings by the Buddha, including such things as "universal law, righteousness, social duties (...)" (Oxford Bibliographies, 'Dharma').

⁷ The theory of cultural appropriation stresses the mutual influence of non-essential cultures, often coming from and producing hybrids, in the process of 'transculturation.' (Rogers 2006, 477). Since Buddhism and science or therapy stem from different fields all together however, modern mindfulness is difficult to categorize (Calobrisi 2018, 94).

⁸ This is a term by the philosopher Jane Bennett, who understands 'crossing' as an unprecedented new cultural form of 'modern life'. In this case, it emerged through the proximity between established notions such as "science" or "Buddhism" (Calobrisi 2018, 94).

⁹ Originating in Sri Lanka, Theravada is one of the most popular Buddhist schools (Britannica Academic 2019, 'Theravada').

Kabat-Zinn's cultural awareness towards the inability of a large segment of American society to accept unfamiliar practices (Wilson 2014, 85). "One might say that in order for Buddhism to be maximally effective as a dharma vehicle at this stage in the evolution of the planet, (...) it may have to give up being Buddhism in any formal religious sense (...)." (Kabat-Zinn 2016, 568). Because Kabat-Zinn separates dharma from Buddhism, it seems like he has 'updated' its essential teachings for the modern era. This simplified rendering hides that there is a wide variety of various streams of Buddhism, from which Kabat-Zinn liberally drew (Braun 2017, 181). While being internally coherent, these streams do not always agree with each other. Mixing different Buddhist traditions may lead to practical inconsistency in meditation or simply a "minimalist version of mindfulness" (Monteiro et al. 2014, 6).

This simplification has led to a de-contextualization of meditation from its Buddhist roots, distorting its original purpose and richness (Bazzano 2013, 117). Mindfulness mainly aims to put focus on fixing individual's disease, a mindfulness concerned mainly with "symptomatic relief" (Monteiro et al. 2014, 1). The extraction of certain parts of Buddhism from its context is seen with much skepticism (Kirmayer 2015, 447) because there has been little discussion on the "right" and "wrong" use of mindfulness as taught in Buddhism where it is embedded in the Eightfold Path towards liberation (Farb 2014, 1062). This narrow framing disappoints those who would like to see mindfulness inspire social change (Purser 2014, 43) while instead it is often being re-used as a mean to improve performance. Mindfulness sex, for example, is a major cause of suffering in the monastic context. A booming field of study in Anglophone Canada investigates the use of mindfulness in sexual complications and this has led to a myriad of books, podcasts and other commodities on how to become a better, mindful lover (Wilson 2017, 155). Mindfulness interventions wed seemingly opposed ideas with each other. The military mindfulness program MMFT (Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness) appears in news items as both the "latest military strategy" and a tool for "compassion and empathy" (Richtel 2019, 'Military Strategy').

Because the origin of mindfulness is not apparent in its many appearances it has liberally appropriated for other uses. The idea that something that bears the name of mindfulness is inherently good or wholesome is pervasive. The label 'mindfulness' seems to have turned into a necessity one cannot do without anymore. One can 'buy' mindfulness in the form of CDs, films, magazines, and articles of any genre (Wilson 2014, 73). Mindful products include clothing, software, financial services or vacations (Wilson 2014, 136). Certain aspects of every-day life in the United States seems to increasingly rely on the 'imagined' support of mindfulness, which is to say that these are things that could be mastered without mindfulness, such as walking a dog, knitting or just 'real life'¹⁰ (Wilson 2014, 41). The

¹⁰ The books *Mindful Dog Owner*, *Mindful Knitting* and the intervention "Real-World Mindfulness Training™ (RWMT) are examples of the pervasive need to integrate mindfulness into everyday life.

philosopher Slavoj Žižek understands the use of meditative practice in everyday life in the West as a 'fetish'¹¹. He sees it as a coping mechanism that gives the fetishist the illusory idea that after all, he or she can draw back into the safe zone of "inner peace" despite the upheaval of constant technological and social change (Žižek 2001, 33). Mindfulness has become an explicit behavioral intervention that resembles this. The branded mindfulness Jurisight®, for example, teaches mindfulness to lawyers to practice meditation within the six-minute interval commonly used for billing their clients (Wilson 2014, 248). MBRP helps against binge drinking in college students, MBSR-AT for art therapy with cancer patients, MBCT for parenting or childbirth and MBCT-C to regulate anxiety in children (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 239). Since many of these mindfulness programs are modeled after Kabat-Zinn's MBSR, it can be said to have set off a chain reaction of other mindfulness courses, many neatly packed into equally stylized products and available for purchase. These bite-sized schemes cause efficiency in the spirit of McDonaldization and lend themselves to further reduction and condensing (Hyland 2017 337).

The use of mindfulness as a supplement in the US military has led to controversy. Although this new form of application assures a relatively predictable outcome in soldiers' perceived stress levels (Stanley 2011, 566), meditation can arguably be used for whichever purpose, like a supplement (Žižek 2001, 33). The use of meditation in traditional Buddhist contexts safeguards certain behavior through an ethical framework that prohibits the use of one's mind for things, such as the intentional killing of any living thing. According to the 'Dhammapada', one of the most prominent texts of Theravada Buddhism "all beings fear violence all fear death. Using oneself as a criterion, one should not kill or cause death" (Dhammapada, v.129). A moral framework like this is absent in MMFT. MMFT does not teach any of the Buddhist ethical foundations, instead suggesting a relationship to Eastern culture through the aesthetic of martial arts. One abstract reads, "MMFT follows in the lineage of warrior traditions that train the body and mind to cultivate (...) wisdom and bravery" (Stanley 2014, 'Mind-Fitness Training'). It is unknown how rapid MMFT could develop from thereon, just as its emergence is the result of a re-contextualization (McMahan and Braun 2017, 'Introduction'). As the whole mindfulness movement shows, the divergence of seemingly related practices that all bear the name of 'mindfulness' happens at a fast pace.

¹¹ By fetish, Žižek means a Freudian concept. This is the idea that an "unpleasant idea", such as the "harsh reality" of capitalism is not being repressed, or "shunted away into the dark, inaccessible corners of the psyche", causing symptoms, but instead there is a process of disavowing ('verleugnen') of certain aspects from perception and intellect. This disavowal is only made possible by a "parallel process of fetishization" of an "extraneous entity", the object of fetishization (Johnston 2004, 265).

The introduction of mindfulness in the US military is not the first time that a Buddhist-related practice transformed into a form that supported the training of soldiers, with sinister consequences for some. During World War II, Zen, a particular school of Buddhism that originated in China and flourished further in Japan, helped politically foster passivity in society vis a vis the Japanese war machinery. Although Zen has not actively incited warfare in warriors, “it has passively sustained them when they have for whatever reason once entered into it”. Zen is practiced through meditation and although it was also accompanied by moral and philosophical teachings (Victoria 2013, 8), Zen as a tool to strengthen the mind has played a large role in Zen literature accompanying martial arts practice (Goto-Jones 2013, 29). The writings of D.T. Suzuki, the most prominent individual in the popularization of Zen meditation in the United States (Roof 2012, ‘D.T.Suzuki’) are exemplary of the relationship between Zen and war violence. In one text, Suzuki differentiated between the “sword that kills and the sword that gives life”. He argues that “when the sword is expected to play this sort of role in human life, it is no more a weapon of self-defense or an instrument of killing, and the swordsman turns into an artist of the first grade, engaged in producing a work of genuine originality” (Loy 1995, “Is Zen Buddhism?”). The emergence of a politically driven use of Zen practice may have led to atrocious acts without “feeling bad about them” (Žižek 2012, ‘Western Marxism’). Supposedly, drawing from the insight of Buddhists, philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues that an enlightened mind liberated from the effect of emotions, thoughts and sensations, does not necessarily mean having any moral decency. There is a fear that a particular mindfulness might “tranquillise people into docility” (Goto-Jones 2016, ‘De-Mystifying’). Suzuki’s writings display a relationship between radical acceptance of reality without judgment, a primary goal of meditation, and what looks from another perspective as careless bloodshed (Žižek 2012, ‘Western Marxism’). Žižek hints at a loss of self-determination in mindfulness by paraphrasing Suzuki: “The sword performs automatically the function of mercy” (Žižek 2012, ‘Western Marxism’). The present-moment mindful experience of “authentically being there” does not preclude committing atrocities such as murder or rape (European Graduate 2012, ‘Irony of Buddhism’).

On the other hand, these claims of passivity and exploitation for political ends seem like exaggerations. Employing the popular icon of a zombie, philosopher and mindfulness teacher Chris Goto-Jones suggests that this fear is akin to the Buddhist demon *mara*¹² that keeps individuals from taking on their path faithfully. He argues that fears of alternative states of mind generated by meditation evoke in us images of a zombi-like post-human¹³ self that

¹² In ‘Insight Meditation’, Joseph Goldstein from the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts describes *mara* as the “symbolic personification of ignorance and delusion—all those thoughts and impulses that try to draw us away from liberation.” (Goldstein 2011, 1254).

¹³ The term ‘post-human’ involves theories over the human subject in relation to technological advances and surrounding the question of the human/nature distinction (Castree 2006, 501).

“blunders with apparent mindlessness, bringing only contagion and chaos.” This demon supposedly appears to scare one away from the experience of liberation (Goto-Jones 2013, 16). Contrary to the fears of abuse, he suggests that a ‘post-self’¹⁴ brought about through the “emancipatory technology” of meditation is in fact equipped with more agency¹⁵ than before (Goto-Jones 2013, 38–40).

Having become a mere tool, mindfulness meditation helps people cope with the supposedly stressful economic circumstances they live in. Scholars refer to this as ‘corporate quietism’ (Walsh 2016, 156). The philosopher Slavoj Žižek for example sees ‘Western Buddhism’¹⁶, the proliferation of meditation techniques in the West as potentially making the individual passive (Žižek 2001, 33). While some talk about mindfulness as helping to foster “human capacity” and build “communities” (Mindful Nation Network 2019) his perspective is that meditative practices in the West are similar to the pathology of a fetish¹⁷, such as religion for Marx was “opium of the people, as the imaginary supplement to terrestrial misery” (Žižek 2001, 33). Žižek takes a counter-revolutionary stance in light of the allegedly revolutionary character of the mindfulness movement. Contrary to the idea that the mindfulness movement was a quiet revolution, he wants to debunk this revolution as a form of co-option into it. It arguably manipulates one to keep “a distance based on the insight that all the social and technological upheaval is ultimately just a non-substantial proliferation of semblances that do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being (Žižek 2012, ‘Western Marxism’. (Žižek 2001, 33). As a supplement, it thrives within this system.

Mindfulness is a flexible supplement within a larger economic system, a function that Zen has played before. “Zen is extremely flexible in adapting itself to almost any philosophy and moral doctrine as long as its intuitive teaching is not interfered with. It may be found wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy, atheism or idealism, or any political or economic dogmatism” (Daizen 2003, 36). Corporate mindfulness takes the function of helping with stress that work environments have created. It “conveniently shifts the burden onto the individual employee: stress is framed as a personal problem (...)” (Purser and Loy 2013, ‘Beyond McMindfulness’). Here, mindfulness occupies a self-help space within the neoliberal era, where the market provides spiritual practices. Self-help core assumptions such as “personal responsibility, self-control and development, self-blame,

¹⁴ Goto-Jones uses the term ‘post-selfhood’ to mean an enlightened form of existence that rests less on the subject-object dichotomy of capitalism and more on a pure “being-mode” (Goto-Jones, 38).

¹⁵ Agency involves capacities of knowledge, power, choice, autonomy or action (Coghland 2014, ‘Agency’; Kockelman 2007, 375).

¹⁶ In this thesis, the terms ‘Western Buddhism’ and ‘mindfulness’ are used more or less interchangeably in the sense that they are dealing with meditative techniques stemming from Buddhist teachings that are practiced mostly in North America and Europe.

¹⁷

commodification, and depoliticization” (Honey 2014, 5–29) are typical themes within the mindfulness industry (Walsh 2016, 157).

The main criticisms that have appeared in this debate can be summarized as its commodification related to McDonaldization and its use as a supplement in stress environments, arguably caused by circumstances instead of the individual. Further, there is a fear that mindfulness makes people passive, with potentially sinister consequences. These points of critique are interrelated manifestations of the adaptability of mindfulness to re-adapt to new contexts, which was to some extent enabled by Kabat-Zinn’s translation. It has distanced mindfulness away from the religious Buddhist framework. In the close reading section, this thesis shows how Jon Kabat-Zinn’s ‘Full Catastrophe Living’ has influenced the production of MBSR by-products such as self-help books, which are representations of the criticisms debated by scholars around McMindfulness and the commodification. Moreover, the meditation technique in ‘Full Catastrophe Living’ will be linked to the military application of mindfulness, a context that is probably most distant from its Buddhist purpose.

Modern American Mindfulness

Historical Overview

As mentioned before the meaning of mindfulness has become extremely flexible, not the least due to its commodification. Mindfulness in the context of meditation is the most common translation of the Pali word *sati*, literally meaning remembrance, attention or awareness (Braun 2012, ‘Mindfulness’). Apart from that, it has a traditional English meaning. ‘Mindfulness’ understood in a non-Buddhist context predating modern mindfulness implies “taking heed or care: being conscious or aware”, and Humanistic psychotherapists have used it before its current use. It is semantically close to memory and intention as in the use of “I’m minded to tell her” but it does not imply any form of meditative practice (Dryden 2006, 4). In Buddhism, *sati* necessitates the practice of meditation, which is the act of concentrating on a single object such as one’s breath, for an extended period of time. Mindfulness today is

commonly associated with the practice of mindfulness meditation¹⁸. The motivations to practice range from gaining better health to the Buddhist goal of full liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Ancient Buddhist texts that subscribe to this as the main goal are still widely used by various Buddhist traditions today. They are embedded in a larger Buddhist cosmology that includes the Eightfold Path (Braun 2012, 'Mindfulness'). The Eightfold Path (marga) aims to end suffering (dukkha) through 'cessation' (nirodha) of afflictions and it consists of a set of practices, of which 'correct mindfulness' (sati) is but one component. The others are 'correct view', 'correct intention', 'correct speech', 'correct action', 'correct livelihood', 'correct effort' and 'correct concentration'(Britannica Academic 2019, 'Eightfold Path'). Although it makes sense that these components constitute one complete whole, many areas of society that modern mindfulness has penetrated use only whatever they need, which often differs greatly from the traditional context. An example of this is the use of mindfulness practice for better sex (Wilson 2017, 21).

Several sources have provided Westerners with knowledge of sati historically. One was through an investigation of the Pali canon¹⁹ during the nineteenth century; others were exposure to Zen and Vipassana, a reformist Buddhist meditation practice that came to the West via colonial Burma. When large parts of the Burmese capital of Mandalay went down in ashes because of civil war related to British destabilization across the southern border, the Burmese monk Ledi Sayadaw feared the loss of important Buddhist teachings. He decided to spread meditation as a Buddhist technique among lay people in order to preserve the religious practice (Wilson 2014, 4). This is a crucial event in the emergence of popular meditation, which had before mostly been reserved for monastics. The Vipassana technique is the most common one popularized in the West. Zen was received in the United States in the context of an increasing, orientalist fascination with other religions, especially during the end of the 19th century and in the context of the 'World Parliament of Religions', a conference of world religions in Chicago. Scholars and Buddhists explored the relationship between science and meditation extensively in the United States throughout the 20th century, involving various streams of Buddhism. They all were largely compatible with Western scientific views of the universe, and starting in the 1950s the correspondence converged more closely. D.T. Suzuki influenced the attempts to converge Zen Buddhism with Psychoanalysis (Braun 2017, 4-8).

¹⁸ It is worth noting that the difference between the Buddhist and Western connotation are blurry, at least in the case of Jon Kabat-Zinn. He calls Thoreau's *Walden* a "rhapsody to mindfulness" although there is no evidence that Thoreau was really meditating as in the sense of actually sitting down and observing his breath for hours. This illustrates the ambiguity with which Kabat-Zinn treats mindfulness. By using mindfulness instead of 'sati', the expression has lent itself to easy re-appropriation (Wilson 2014, 15).

¹⁹ The Pali Canon is the standard collection of the Buddhist canon, which includes a threefold collection of sacred texts (Keown 2004, 'Tripiṭaka').

Throughout the 20th century, the Buddhist meditation techniques became increasingly the focus of Western science. A number of American meditators imported techniques from the Theravada tradition, establishing the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts, which rejected an affiliation with any specific Buddhist tradition but offered the practice psychotherapeutically (Braun 2017, 11). This ran parallel to the spread of Transcendental Meditation (TM). It was unable to become as popular as MBSR because TM had a larger religious component to that the modern version tries to do without. TM utilized mantras derived from Hindu tantric traditions could have not reached the same popularity in North America due to these connotations (Wilson 2014, 79).

Buddhists have known the therapeutic benefits of meditation for long but never popularized it on grounds of health benefits. This changed slowly throughout the 20th century. In 1947 the monk and author of 'Mindfulness in Plain English' (Gunaratana 1991), Bhante Gunaratana, who is also one of the most quoted monastics in mindfulness research today (Wilson 2014, 170) discovered its therapeutic effects. After a mental breakdown at age 20 as a result of overly zealous chanting in a Buddhist ceremony that required days of chanting practice, he decided that meditation was one of the only options left for him. "At this point of utter desperation, a very unusual thought occurred to me: Perhaps meditation would help. When my friends heard that plan, they burst out laughing" (Gunaratana 2008, 96). He then restored his mental health and decided to promote meditation as a therapeutic mean (Wilson 2014, 75–76).

It was not until the 'official' split of meditation from Buddhism and more radical reconfiguration as a therapeutic technique by Jon Kabat-Zinn that it spread to hospitals, and eventually to universities and corporations. Kabat-Zinn's MBSR has drawn the most scientific interest, supported by scientific studies and contemplative study programs at some of the most prestigious Universities in the United States (Braun 2017, 11). 20 million Americans have been drawn meditation by 2007 and more than 400 research articles on mindfulness were published in 2010 (Wilson 2014, 2).

Kabat Zinn's 'Karmic Assignment'

Kabat-Zinn decides to frame the technique in in his own terms, which has certainly contributed to its dissemination in North America. His personal motives play a crucial role in this process. He assumes traditional lineage by authorizing himself via Buddhist 'expedient

means' to transform the tradition to fit the circumstances (Maex 2011, 167). 'Expedient' or 'skillful means' (upaya²⁰) means that a Buddhist teacher addresses the pupil through their "frame and reference", in order to bring them on the right path (Maex 167). Buddhist teachers tell such parable in order to convince 'ignorant people' of Buddhist tenets. Accordingly, American scientists adjusted mindfulness meditation to fit the individual capacities of modern practitioners (Wilson, 90).

Kabat-Zinn sees the proliferation of mindfulness in hospitals as his "karmic assignment" (Kabat-Zinn 2011, 287). In an article from 2011 he reflects on an eureka moment he experienced during a meditation retreat. He openly shares his vision to devise a mindfulness program that would spread throughout the whole country. "I saw in a flash not only a model that could be put in place, but also the long term implications of what might happen if the basic idea was sound and could be implemented in one test environment—namely that it would spark new fields of scientific and clinical investigation, and would spread to hospitals and medical centres and clinics across the country" (Kabat-Zinn 2011, 287).

Backed up by scientific studies, mainstream medicine accepted mindfulness eventually as a therapeutic intervention (Purser 2014, 23). This framing of mindfulness as a resilience-building tool has led to a number of subsequent mindfulness programs. However, the use of mindfulness has not stopped there. "As Jon Kabat-Zinn teaches us how to heal our body and boost our immune system, we can actively contribute to the healing of our body politic and strengthen our nation's ability to attack the many challenges of our time", says Congressman Tim Ryan (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 'Introduction').

His rendering remains highly ambiguous because it weds both Buddhist and scientific, but also spiritual ideas. "Kabat-Zinn is a distinctive agent of change, and one who has had a powerful effect on religious/ spiritual world views" (Braun 2017, 196)

²⁰ They are common Buddhist parables found in the Lotus Sutra, from the Mahayana Sutras, which are widely accepted Buddhist scriptures.

“Full Catastrophe Living” – A Close Reading

Introduction To The Text

To begin with, this section will provide background information on ‘Full Catastrophe Living’. The text is a self-help guide that describes the MBSR program as it is being taught at the Stress Reduction Clinic at University of Massachusetts Medical Center (Kabat-Zinn 2013, ‘Introduction’). Despite its medical frame, the prominent Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh²¹, writes in the preface: “The book can be described as a door opening both on the dharma (from the side of the world) and on the world (from the side of the dharma)” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, ‘Preface’).

The title ‘Full Catastrophe Living’ stems from the novel ‘Zorba The Greek’ by the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis. It was adapted into the same-titled movie by Michael Cacoyannis in 1964. The movie tells the adventure of a young Greek bookkeeper named

²¹ Thich Nhat Hanh is one of the major personalities of mindfulness that appeared during the 1970s, alongside Kabat-Zinn. Hanh went on to become one of the most prominent Buddhist representatives internationally (Wilson 2014, 31).

Basil who plans to open a coalmine in Crete. Upon arrival on the island, he meets the buoyant villager Zorba who with whom he makes all sorts of troublesome experiences such as the complete destruction of the mine. On the other hand, he also learns the pleasures of love, food and drinking (Britannica Academic 2019, 'Zorba The Greek'). In one of the movie's most famous scenes, Basil asks the villager Zorba about his private life. Zorba declares, "Am I not a man? And is not a man stupid? I'm a man, so I'm married. Wife, children, house – everything. The full catastrophe" (gherasealex 2007, 'full catastrophe'). Based on this hook, Kabat-Zinn frames mindfulness as a way of life that embraces challenges. Instead of questioning what caused Zorba's situation, Kabat-Zinn trusts that the 'full catastrophe' will happen inevitably. What we need to change in life is our attitude: "It was not meant to be a lament, nor does it mean that being married or having children is a catastrophe. Zorba's response embodies a supreme appreciation for the richness of life and the inevitability of all its dilemmas, sorrows, traumas, tragedies, and ironies" (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 'Introduction').

Kabat-Zinn's paraphrase omits the quote 'And is not a man stupid?' suggesting that he does not think that Basil's life choices were 'stupid' per se (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 'Introduction'). In another scene, Kabat-Zinn's view is illustrated by another one of Zorba's remarks. When Basil says: "I don't want any trouble," Zorba charges at him: "Boss! Life is trouble, only death is not!" (gherasealex 2007, 'life is trouble') Instead of avoiding life, Kabat-Zinn proposes an educational intervention through MBSR that teaches us that we as selves do not consist of our suffering. Instead, he advocates a non-identifying with it (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 411). Kabat-Zinn stresses the inevitability of catastrophes and that mindfulness is a skill to learn a shift of interpretation. "(...)the level of psychological stress you experience depends on how you interpret things—in other words, on your attitude, on whether you are able to flow with change or, on the other hand, make every ripple in the way things are unfolding into an occasion for fighting or worrying or falling into despair" (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 504).

The main characters of the movie hardly seem mindful as their passionate behavior suggests in the movie trailer (YouTube Movies 2014, 'Zorba'). The theme 'full catastrophe' from the movie represents Kabat-Zinn's view that mindfulness is a full acceptance of the inevitable. For him it does not mean being passive or drawing inwards as others have suggested (Žižek 2001, 33).

Apart from this general theme, Kabat-Zinn endorses MBSR as a medical program. He packaged mindfulness into neatly into a product, which set up the basis for imitations (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 239). In addition, his medical framing has opened the doors for financial

resources. The framing in medical, ‘commonsensical terms’²² enabled public funding for a field of study that might otherwise be considered religious (Brown 2017, 197). According to the website of the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts where Kabat-Zinn started his research, 24.000 people have to date completed the MBSR program (Center for Mindfulness, 2019). From this therapeutic aim it has been remodeled to fit other environments such high level stress situations in the US military. The success of Kabat-Zinn is not only due to his medical framing alone, however.

‘Full Catastrophe Living’ employs a much more elaborate strategy to explain why one should meditate. The scientific evidence has certainly helped to persuade people to start meditating. Kabat-Zinn’s vision of mindfulness also includes a vision of humans and of our current time and this vision plays a crucial role in how at least a certain middle class segment of North America society conceives of mindfulness today. It views people as being in a state of constant transformation. “Our patients change in the direction of greater expansiveness, a greater sense of meaningfulness, and of seeing the world as a challenge and as comprehensible” (Gates and Nisker 2008, 36). A close reading of this primary text can reveal some of the salient discursive elements that have made it possible for meditation to become highly popular and rekeyed into new contexts.

Framing, Themes, Narrative

This section relates the discursive ‘sales strategy’, i.e. themes, framing and narrative, of ‘Full Catastrophe Living’ to the general mindfulness critiques mentioned in the introduction. Broadly speaking, it has been criticized that new forms of mindfulness have led to McM mindfulness through commodification, which are diluting its original meaning (Purser and Loy 2013, ‘McMindfulness’; Hyland 2017, 334) and that they have become a supplement to help sustain systemic causes of stress in ‘corporate quietism’ (Walsh 2016, 156). Possibly sinister consequences of its wrongful use such as in the military have also been scrutinized (Purser 2014, ‘Militarization’; European Graduate 2012 ‘Irony of Buddhism’).

Kabat-Zinn frames not only Buddhist meditation techniques but also concepts in medical terms. He speaks about “stress reactivity” to describe the Buddhist notions of “thirst” and “desire”, for example, as explained below (Maex 2011, 168). Further, the application of

²² Kabat-Zinn uses the term “commonsensical” in contrast to “Buddhist, ‘New Age,’ ‘Eastern Mysticism’ or just plain ‘flakey.’ (Kabat-Zinn 2011, 282).

meditation in everyday life occupies a large part in the book. Kabat-Zinn frames meditation as a mean to deal with the hardships of work and family. There is a whole chapter on various types of stress, such as “work stress”, “role stress” and “food stress” that convey how mindfulness should really be seen as a technique for coping better (Kabat-Zinn 2013, ‘Contents’). It is a vision of mindfulness that teaches how to become more resilient and better at enduring one’s circumstances (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 511).

‘Full Catastrophe Living’ starts by implying a general truth taught by the Dharma. This is the First Noble Truth in Buddhism, namely that there is suffering. Mindfulness (sati) is one necessary mean to cease this suffering (Maex 2011, 168).²³ Kabat-Zinn illustrates this through the metaphor of ‘catastrophes’. To convey this, he paints an image of the world that is infused with pain (Kabat-Zinn 2013, ‘Introduction’) and then goes on to conclude that one really has “only moments to live” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 3), which introduces the mindfulness meditation as a practice to live in the moment.²⁴ “In our era, the full catastrophe is very much in evidence on all fronts.” There are countries where the “suffering and death of people” happens on a daily basis and the ‘full catastrophe’ also lurks in our immediate environment. “Even if we don’t read or listen to or watch the news, we are never far from the full catastrophe of living.” He mentions “wife or husband, house and children, but also work, paying the bills, parents, lovers, in-laws, death, loss, poverty, illness, injury, injustice, anger, guilt, fear, dishonesty, confusion, and on and on” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, ‘Introduction’). There is not only a sense that reality itself is harsh but also that the world seems to be in decline. While Buddhism states suffering as an inevitable part of any life, one that the Buddha supposedly discovered thousands of years ago, Kabat-Zinn bemoans our times especially. He reinforces this with stories about patients that are “overwhelmed by fears and worries, often caused or compounded by painful family relationships and histories”, “beaten down through physical or psychological abuse” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, ‘Introduction’). There is a tone of urgency in Kabat-Zinn’s writing to wake up and ‘come to our senses’ (Calobrisi 2018, 89; Kabat-Zinn 2005). He gives us numerous reasons for why we are in a bad state of mind and why the world, as shown above, is too. This theme functions as the basis for his intervention

²³ The Second Noble Truth is about the origin of suffering, the Third Noble Truth is about its cessation and the Fourth Noble Truth is how to cease it, namely through the Eightfold Path (Maex 2011, 168).

²⁴ The idea that life consists of ‘only moments’ is undoubtedly representative of how much of the self-help literature has interpreted mindfulness. Eckart Tolle’s “The Power of Now” (Tolle 2004) or “The Joy of Now Journal: Mindfulness in Five Minutes A Day” (Burke 2018) are a telling examples of how fully ‘being’ in the present moment has become a trendy exercise in everyday life.

and a counteracting force against these troubling developments.²⁵ It equips the individual with a tool to overcome the ‘full catastrophe.’

After the bleak evaluation and the realization that life is lived better in a “being mode” rather than an unaware “doing mode” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 6), the reader is introduced to various systems of the human body to explain how this works medically. It is an introduction into the wisdom of modern “participatory medicine” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 171).

That Buddhist explanations of mind and perception are underlying this medical rhetoric, for example explaining the working of the nervous system in relation to meditation, is not obvious. The medical “Automatic Habitual Stress Reaction”, clearly frames a Buddhist equivalent. This process of conditioned and repetitive reacting to stress signals (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 338) is similar to the bodily sensations that the Vipassana meditation school calls *sankhara*. These are conditioned responses and reacting to them leads to a cycle of re-conditioning which meditation helps to stop (Hart 1987, 106). Kabat-Zinn’s “body scan”, a technique where all the various body parts are surveyed systematically through one’s attention (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 75) stems from a similar Vipassana technique of observing bodily sensations without reacting (Hart 1987, 108).

Not only the use of non-Buddhist, Western, medical terms make MBSR arguably less alien and more accessible, but also its positive side effects. The popular but clearly Buddhist reformist Vipassana school teaches meditation in a way that might not be appealing for US-American readers because it is much less charming. Ending suffering begins with the insight that it has an origin, namely ‘thirst’, and that this originates from feeling. This feeling can be prevented from becoming thirst (Maex 2011, 168). There is no purpose in this type of mindfulness other than to stop the conditioned reaction to either ‘craving’ or ‘aversion’, simply observing everything with a balanced mind, or “equanimity.” Even when pleasant sensations appear during meditation, one is to stay rather neutral (Hart 1987, 114).

In contrast, Kabat-Zinn offers at least two benefits from meditation. First, leads the meditator to experience heightened fascination for their environment and enchantment with everyday activities such as simply walking. This is a recurring theme of beauty in the everyday. Something simple becomes beautiful. “After all, it is nothing special, just walking and knowing that you are walking—and thus, also very special” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 124). Second, meditation makes one “emotionally resilient” and fosters connectedness to the

²⁵ Dharma scholar Thomas Calobrisi has identified this narrative in Jon Kabat-Zinn’s writing. He draws from Žižek who argues that post-Hegelian thinkers such as Marx, Nietzsche, Benjamin, Heidegger and Derrida all see their time in history as a crucial turning point. These thinkers all offer a solution to the negative developments of “historical decline”. This narrative of “human decline and restoration” resembles Kabat-Zinn’s view of mindfulness’ restorative function (Calobrisi 2018, 85).

environment. His message seems to be that practitioners of his meditation can overcome their struggles; there is a certain hope in that (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 314).

It is also worth pointing out that the medical frame has the advantage of facilitating the re-use of meditation by others. Scientific rigor surely has an important standing in North American society. Although Buddhism is relatively free of dogma and has therefore, among other things such as its connotation with pacifism, historically attracted Americans for that reason (Wilson 2014, 28), this is not likely for the broad mainstream. The medical 'proof' makes mindfulness now much more interesting for a wide audience, such as other scientists or self-help authors who modify and reduce its depth. The chapter on "food stress" for example seems to have produced a plethora of equivalent self-help mindfulness books such as "How to Raise a Mindful Eater" (Jacobsen 2016) or "The Mindfulness-Based Eating Solution" (Rossy 2016).

Another common theme in 'Full Catastrophe Living' is that of self-reliance. For Kabat-Zinn it is up to the individual to exercise his or her natural bodily and psychological faculty of healing themselves: "... to do something for themselves that no one else on the planet can do for them". His argument is that broadened awareness alone changes people's quality of life. "Research is showing that we can change our attitude, and thereby our relationship to our circumstances, in ways that can make a difference in our health, and well-being, and possibly to our longevity" (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 'Introduction'). According to Kabat-Zinn, a paradigm shift has moved medicine towards "integrative" and "participatory" ideas, which recognize humans in their wholeness and integrate them as active agents in the process of healing. Themes of individual responsibility, self-reliance and growth identify the problem and solution of stress in the individual but also aim to empower. Mindfulness enables them thereby to "transcend" their pain and stress by themselves. As proof of this progress, patients will benefit from "positive influence on their "executive functions, such as perspective taking, impulse control, decision making, long-term planning, postponement of gratification, and working memory (...)." Against the backdrop of criticism of mindfulness as a neoliberal supplement that shifts responsibility on the individual, the MBSR program aims to turn people "more resilient" so they can "cope more effectively with life stress" (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 306). The text doubtlessly aims to sell mindfulness as a mean to the end of physiological and psychological benefits to transcend and move towards progress. While mindfulness is defined as "non-judgmental" (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 396), present-moment awareness (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 442) that helps "seeing things as they really are" (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 578), Kabat-Zinn simultaneously lures the reader with scientific evidence. "None of us, hopefully, will be cultivating mindfulness for the sake of generating colorful brain scans, even

though the practice of mindfulness may very well result in beneficial changes not just to the activity in certain regions of our brain, but in the very structure of the brain and its connectivity (...)“ (Kabat-Zinn 2013, ‘Introduction’).

Apart from these alleged physiological benefits, one can expect to reach a higher level of awareness that makes every day experiences, including pain, meaningful. “It is a shift that links a mindful approach to dis-ease with a sense of meaning in material reality” (Braun 2017, 176). By enchanting the individual through any experience, existence gets a completely new quality. Dharma scholar Thomas Calobrisi offers the interpretation of Kabat-Zinn’s mindfulness as a form of modern “enchantment”. In this experience of enchantment, from Jane Bennett’s “crossing” in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, the everyday experience of objects and surroundings have potential in charming the individual (Calobrisi 2018, 85). Kabat-Zinn is able to satisfy both a romantic and a rational view of life in his readers. Enchantment happens when we supposedly look at things without spiraling into thoughts about them. The metaphor of a child, for example, conveys an essentialist, pure idea of mindfulness. “Have you ever looked at a dog and really seen it in its total ‘dogness’?” Children, whose “vision is fresh”, view it anew every time they look at it, not categorizing it too much, while asking things such as “What is it? Where did it come from? Where is it going? What is it doing here? Why is it shaped the way it is?” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 175). Such stories are pleasurable to read because they evoke curiosity. Gradually, however one can see how these stories are becoming the main idea about mindfulness. That mindfulness is associated with joy and inspiration may be to some extent because Jon Kabat-Zinn and others make an effort in charming their readers with their own experiences. Book titles such as “*The Art of Noticing: 131 Ways to Spark Creativity, Find Inspiration, and Discover Joy in the Everyday*” (Christelis, 2018) or “*Playful Mindfulness: a joyful journey to everyday confidence, calm, and connection*” (DesMaisons 2019) attest such a possible relationship. This playful aspect about mindfulness may have catalyzed an additional interest in mindfulness by the market.

Further, the text invites the reader to embark on a sort of adventure, to step into unknown territory that eventually leads to wisdom. It does not discuss what this experiment has potentially dangerous consequences. MBSR aims to “inspire people to learn more about their own bodies and about the role of the mind in health and illness as a fundamental element of their ongoing adventure in learning, growing, and healing” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 170). Mindfulness ‘explorers’ discover themselves anew by actually “stepping back” from negativity and observing themselves (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 170). It produces a completely new way of relating to their bodies and minds. The debate on a potential loss of agency might

be a comment to this new relational shift suggested by mindfulness, but possibly exercised by many without proper knowledge of how to go about it. In how far the breaking off from feelings and thoughts as Kabat-Zinn ‘teaches’ in MBSR and ‘Full Catastrophe Living’ make one passive difficult to assess but there is no mention in the book what some of the possibly negative side effects are.

There are several instances throughout the text that propose to separate one’s experience, in the form of emotions, physical sensations and thoughts, from one’s “awareness” of these emotions, physical sensations and thoughts. The Chapter title “Working with Emotional Pain: Your Suffering Is Not You ... But There is Much You Can Do to Heal It” summarizes this idea (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 361). “(...) you will be reminding yourself to observe the unfolding of your emotions with wise attention, with a degree of non-attachment. You may find yourself wondering how things will finally be resolved, and knowing that you don’t know, that you will just have to wait and see” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 414). Kabat-Zinn even proposes to think of oneself in the third person: “‘It is fearing at the moment,’ along the lines of ‘It is raining.’” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 445). This third-person experiential exercise has been embraced by the self-help industry, producing such titles as “You are Not Your Thoughts: The Secret Magic of Mindfulness” (Trussell 2018) or “You Are Not So Smart: Why You Have Too Many Friends on Facebook, Why Your Memory Is Mostly Fiction, and 46 Other Ways You’re Deluding Yourself” (McRaney 2011).

Sinister consequences, either for the individual or as a whole society, are disregarded “Full Catastrophe Living.’ Instead, he comments in another book that meditation “is not about trying to become a nobody, or a contemplative zombie, incapable of living in the real world and facing real problems” (Kabat-Zinn 2005, 239). That his suggestions to see oneself in the third person can lead to psychological upheaval in untrained meditators is obvious, although scholars discuss or downplay them compared to all the positive attributes mentioned about mindfulness (Britton 2019, 159). What might be required then to deal with disturbing experiences, known by long-term meditators, are “sophisticated Buddhist discourses on questions of agency and morality” (Goto-Jones 2013, 8). Here we can see that a rejection of religious notions altogether might evade such discourses, which justifies one of the critiques of a loss in depth in modern mindfulness.

The question of agency can be used to read a certain section that deals with splitting off from one’s thoughts. This reveals normative ideas about one’s relation to one’s body and thoughts in mindfulness. One’s thinking, for example is turned into something negative. “This liberation from the tyranny of the thinking mind comes directly out of the meditation practice itself” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 67). It sounds like an intervention against thinking is necessary. Interventions through medicalized mindfulness label certain mental processes as

pathological. Considering that mindfulness has made it into the medical mainstream, such ideas have a taste of outside control rather than agency.²⁶

The modern, commodified mindfulness movement deals with those aspects of meditation in that do not ask questions about ‘free will’ or ‘enlightenment’ especially in an economic system that is based on “instrumental rationality.”²⁷ Joseph Goldstein from the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts sees that meditators experience liberation as anxiety, which keeps them from proceeding into liberation. “The mind might invent many different images of the experience of liberation. Sometimes our ego creates images of our own death that frighten us.” Obviously, some long-term meditators discuss the problem of doubt over what happens alternatively to rational mode of thinking, that is to say discussing what happens when one transforms through meditation. Nevertheless, these seem to be rare cases and Kabat Zinn’s themes are much more about immediate effects and benefits.

The notion of liberation as the ultimate purpose of mindful living in Buddhist teachings is omitted, maybe because it would be too ‘esoteric’ for a scientifically-oriented readership. Reference works often translate mindfulness as ‘right mindfulness’. In the more conservative Buddhist understanding of sati, the goal of the meditative practice is consequential. ‘Right’ mindfulness aims at liberation from suffering, which is different from mindfulness as a practice that aims to achieve tangible goals (Lindahl 2015, 57). The aim of the mindfulness in ‘Full Catastrophe Living’ is rather vague but it is certainly not liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

Its themes are much more about self-reliance, overcoming challenges and being charmed by the beauty of everyday life. In fact, he uses the word ‘liberation’ in only one quote by Albert Einstein²⁸. There are plenty of practical instructions to adopt a proper meditation habit (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 19). Its goal as taught here is nothing more than “for you to be yourself”, stressing an individual approach (Kabat Zinn 2013, 23). This certainly makes an entirely individualistic interpretation of mindfulness and its goals, and its liberal re-use, for example as an emotional quick-fix, more likely.

²⁶ This also reminds of the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1970s in that it might open “the door to involuntary treatment of patients” (Goto-Jones 2013, 36). Further, one commentator used Erich Fromm’s “pathology of normalcy” to describe the potential of mindfulness to make individuals adjust to the status quo as they become passive, even if it this ‘normalcy’ was collectively pathological (Purser 2014, 42).

²⁷ This instrumental rationality is the strictly purpose-directed thinking, based on the notion of free will and is supposedly a defining factor of capitalism (Goto-Jones 2013, 27).

²⁸ Kabat-Zinn seems to have avoided the term ‘liberation’ because of its religious connotation. He quotes Einstein, as a personality associated with Western science instead: “The true value of a human being is determined primarily by the measure and sense in which he has attained liberation from the self” (Kabat Zinn 2013, 191).

By implying transcendence and a gain in wisdom about oneself but also about medicine, Kabat-Zinn provides a solution to the stress and problems to what Žižek calls the “harsh reality.” (Žižek 2001, 33). Kabat-Zinn’s stories convey that mindfulness, as a facing of catastrophes, leads to an experience of enchantment by everyday events and objects (Calobrisi 2018, 94). The meditator conquers the challenges of life and finds beauty in everyday simplicity (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 11). An expressed joyfulness gives readers a pleasurable experience and provides consolation in the light of the hardships of life. “What we ourselves have made laborious and difficult becomes easier the moment we see the reflection of our mind in the mirror of mindfulness” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 146).

Some discussion on modern mindfulness also touch upon the ethical questions of its potentially pro-violent use (Purser 2014, ‘Militarization’). ‘Full Catastrophe Living’ clearly distances itself from violence and aggression. The theme of wisdom that repeatedly appears in Kabat-Zinn’s writing rejects violence. “The arts, the sciences, architecture, technological wonders, music, poetry, medicine” stem from the knowing mind while “ignorance, cruelty, oppression, violence, genocide, holocausts, death, and destruction” from an unknowing mind (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 539). Kabat-Zinn is well aware of the ethical questions raised about mindfulness. It would be unfair to conclude that any abuse of mindfulness is due to his work. This thesis simply aims to describe how his MBSR in relation to ‘Full Catastrophe Living’s discursive elements have influenced others to use mindfulness liberally. Kabat-Zinn has answered to the criticism. His position is such that ethical conduct is a personal responsibility and that there is, in fact an ethical framework present in his MBSR already, namely the Hippocratic Oath of Western medicine that prescribes primarily not to harm (Kabat-Zinn 2011, 294). This oath, of course, is not applicable to MMFT (Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training) of the US military, an adaptation from Kabat-Zinn’s program (Purser 2014, ‘Militarization’). The ambivalence of possible applications that mindfulness can be used for, stemming largely from Kabat-Zinn’s medicalized mindfulness, becomes apparent when juxtaposing his context of healing, his themes of wisdom and enchantment with its use in the US military. “The military already incorporates mindfulness training—although it does not call it this—into perhaps the most fundamental soldier skill, firing a weapon. Soldiers learning how to fire the M-16 rifle are taught to pay attention to their breath and synchronize the breathing process to trigger the finger’s movement, “squeezing” off the round while exhaling. A further development of this application is likely. Looking back at the use of Zen during WWII Japan, one can imagine that mindfulness could be, in the service of certain ideas, be used to prevent personal moral interference with military agendas, although MMFT it is still framed as a mean to cultivate by the mean “compassion” (Richtel 2019).

Kabat-Zinn's narrative, themes and framing make MBSR easily accessible and thematically familiar, which all makes it much more attractive than using unfamiliar Buddhist terms. His framing through medicine and the telling of a story of transcending the catastrophes of life are powerful enough to make a simple technique appear like a panacea. This panacea alleviates not only bodily pains but also implies a spiritual experience.

Conclusions

'Full Catastrophe Living' is a primary text of modern mindfulness that teaches an ancient Buddhist meditation technique, taught as MBSR, without making this connection obvious²⁹. Although considering it as an essential translation of the dharma, the Buddhist teachings, it omits components, such as its primary strife for liberation or Buddhist ethics. Instead, its author Kabat-Zinn, who has had a unique impact on the modern mindfulness movement (Braun 2017, 196), uses discursive strategies that give the text meaning beyond the simple meditation instructions. As we have seen, mindfulness has taken many different meanings and forms in the modern mindfulness movement, diluting it into McMindfulness. This thesis claims that Kabat Zinn's rendering of meditation has influenced this proliferation, and it's McDonaldization through the success of MBSR.

The research question of this thesis asked which discursive elements in Kabat-Zinn's 'Full Catastrophe Living' have influenced the 'McDonaldization' of mindfulness. McDonaldization strives for rationalization of an idea or product through tactics of efficiency, calculability predictability and the use of technology (Hyland 2017, 337–40). This thesis has looked not only at salient points of critique related to mindfulness, such as its McDonaldization, involving commodification and its use as a supplement within an arguably unfair neoliberal economic system, to a large extent influenced by Kabat-Zinn, but also at examples of self-help guides that attest the relationship between Kabat-Zinn's discourse and these critiques.

First, the medical authority with which Kabat-Zinn frames mindfulness makes it easily available for a broad range of applications, such as in corporate environments or the military. Medicine is a widely respected authority and this frame offers wisdom to people who are looking for solutions to physical and psychological suffering, caused by high-stress economic relations, as some argue (Žižek 2001; Purser and Loy 2013). Framing meditation in purely medical terms while maintaining a vague relation to Buddhism through the 'dharma' has made it easily available for reuse. Further, medical proof acts as consoling evidence that meditation naturally improves our wellbeing. In Kabat-Zinn's words, "biological benefits" such

²⁹ The term "Buddhism" appears 10 times, mostly in the sources of the book. In contrast, the term 'MBSR' appears 318 times.

as reconnecting the structure of our brains “take care of themselves. They arise naturally through the practice of mindfulness” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, ‘Introduction’).

Second, Kabat-Zinn constructs a narrative of conquering the hardships and challenges of reality, leading readers to “new beginnings” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 565). This is a tough journey that requires “commitment” and “self-discipline”, it is also an adventure because one learns a shift in interpreting one’s own experience, to “see with eyes of wholeness” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 565).

Self-reliance and individual responsibility are common themes in both the criticisms against modern mindfulness’ role as a supplement in neoliberal economic conditions, and the solutions offered by Kabat-Zinn to cope with the ‘full catastrophe’ of life (Kabat-Zinn 2013, ‘Introduction’). The McDonaldization of mindfulness has turned it into a supplement to cope with problems, largely by the individual, sometimes called ‘corporate quietism’ (Walsh 2016, 153). There may be a relationship between a supposed need to ‘withdraw’ from reality as it is experienced by the followers of modern mindfulness and the function mindfulness serves (Žižek 2001, 33).

A narrative of general decline conveys this in Kabat-Zinn’s writing, calling for the individual to change his or her attitude and how they relate to their, arguably unchangeable circumstances (Kabat-Zinn 2013, ‘Introduction’). A deterioration of our behavior and environment is currently happening. This low point is something we face every day, it is “world stress” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 538). Next to the atrocities observed on the media day by day and the accelerated speed of technology, which endanger our quality of life, we have destructed the very system we live in (Kabat-Zinn 2013, ‘Introduction’).

Third, the reader can overcome these challenges through meditation. He or she is rewarded by the realization that everyday life is beautiful in its simplicity, transforming them into new people who enjoy the practice of “non-doing” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 135). Simple, every-day experiences such as walking or looking at a dog become somewhat special occurrences (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 175; 123). A quest for transformation will bring about hope and enchantment of everyday life. As pointed out Calobrisi, we as humans have spiraled out of a sense for our bodies, mindfulness can restore this loss through the naturally restorative power of self-observation (Calobrisi 2018, 88).

The MBSR program presented may have led to a new form of mindfulness that some consider a de-contextualization from its Buddhist roots. Nevertheless, it has made an enchantment of ‘everyday life’ through modern mindfulness possible. The commercial activity around mindfulness draws ideas from Kabat Zinn’s aesthetic of mindfulness, which may have

taken the form of a fetish in its extreme form, in the sense of an idealized object in a consumerist society (Žižek 2001, 33).

Kabat-Zinn's "naturalizing approach" covers a wide range of registers. It speaks scientifically and spiritually at once and offers a meaningfulness in a practice that is conveniently available at all times. This discourse has shaped the modern conception of mindfulness in the United States and increasingly around the globe (McMahan and Braun 2017, 19).

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