SECULAR DISCOURSE AS A LEGITIMATING STRATEGY FOR MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

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Introduction

The secular and scientific reframing of mindfulness meditation, among other things, functions to legitimise and supports the growth of this practice in western mainstream culture. As mindfulness expands the sphere of its influence, an increasing number of scholars have raised concerns about the ethics of implementing mindfulness-based programmes (MBPs) in secular contexts such as healthcare and education. These debates are morally charged and are often hinged on the bedevilling question regarding the nature of the practice: is mindfulness religious or secular?

Within academic circles, and among scholars of religious/Buddhist studies, opinions vary. Some have questioned whether ‘nominally secular mindfulness’ is actually secular (Brown 2016; 2017; 2019), arguing that even the so-called secularised versions of mindfulness are deeply rooted in Buddhist metaphysical assumptions about the nature of the world and the self (Wilson 2014). Others have argued that the modern application of and selling points of mindfulness are too far removed from the normative Buddhist doctrines, since the purpose of the practice is no longer aimed at cultivating an understanding of the nature of reality as marked by suffering; instead, it has become a panacea, a ‘science of happiness’ and a method of ‘easing the pain of existence’ (Lopez 2008; Sharf 2015). Some advocates and promoters of mindfulness, on the other hand, argue that the practice can and should be completely decontextualised from its religious/Buddhist framework and instead recontextualised in secular norms and scientific paradigms (Baer 2015; Crane et al. 2017), with an underlying aim of making the practice more ‘accessible’ to the non-Buddhist audience.

Conversely, meditation teachers often adopt an entirely different approach and often rhetorically resolve these tensions through fast and loose associations with Buddhism, which essentially allows them to relish the legitimacy associated with the historical Buddha and at the same time relinquish any unfavoured ‘religious’ connotations associated with the tradition. For instance, a pervasive line of reasoning, commonly used by teachers such as Jon Kabat-Zinn, argues that the technique they teach is not Buddhist but the ‘essence’ of the Buddha’s teachings, which is ‘universal’ and compatible with science, or that ‘the Buddha himself was not a Buddhist’. 
These discourses are rooted in the Buddhist reform movements that developed as a resistance to the colonialism, imperialism and missionisation of Southeast Asian counties by European nations during the late-nineteenth century (McMahan 2008). Satya Narayan Goenka (1924–2013) was one of the famous meditation teachers whose rhetorical strategies for disassociating Vipassana meditation from the category of ‘religion’ has helped to establish and promote these trends globally. Elsewhere, I have systematically analysed Goenka’s rhetorical strategies – namely: (1) the rhetoric of experience; (2) meditation as a ‘tool’; (3) the ‘pure teachings of the Buddha’; and (4) the rhetoric of ‘here and now’ – and demonstrated how these function to conceal the religious elements of his ten-day Vipassana courses for its committed followers (Rahmani 2017; forthcoming a). Goenka’s rhetorical strategies and their interrelated components can also be found in the discourses of mindfulness leaders and, by extension, mindfulness practitioners. In fact, I posit that they are the bedrock upon which contemporary mindfulness leaders have developed their very own constellation of discursive strategies to create legitimacy and to abstract mindfulness meditation from the category of ‘religion’ in order to facilitate its implementation in secular domains.

This chapter seeks to provide context to these debates by taking a sobering approach: instead of responding to the tiring question about the (religious/secular) nature of mindfulness, it will explore the popular strategies operationalised by meditation teachers to resolve these tensions. In other words, this chapter looks at the most common strategies through which mindfulness has been portrayed as a secular practice by the leading figures of this movement and the extent to which these discursive patterns are adopted by their followers. Similar points can be raised about the language of some contemporary yoga movements, though these are beyond the scope of this chapter.

Drawing from qualitative research, in the following pages I explore several of these strategies in the context of the mindfulness movement – namely: (1) science, scientism and neuroscientism; (2) academisation; (3) the rhetoric of universality; (4) the Buddhist discourse of suffering; and (5) mental health and resilience. Lastly, by taking Oxford Mindfulness Centre (OMC) as a case study, I contextualise the development of these discursive strategies by paralleling them with the evolution of, and the amendments to, this centre’s mission statement. Note that in this chapter I am not concerned with assessing the benefits or the shortcomings of mindfulness as a technology of the self: promoters have raised their points in support of the practice, and there is likewise an abundance of criticisms directed at the movement, such as the objections raised by the McMindfulness critiques (Purser et al. 2016). It is also not my intention to discourage readers from engaging with mindfulness, nor do I advocate against the application of MBPs as an optional treatment. Rather, my aim is to showcase the agendas and assumptions that sit beneath the surface of the movement’s discourses and, in doing so, further Brown’s (2017) call for transparency and informed consent.

**Research method**

My arguments are based on my ethnographic fieldwork at various mindfulness conventions and in-depth interviews with thirty-two mindfulness meditators/teachers, as well as secondary sources such as organisational documents. The material presented in this chapter emerged from a two-year, mixed-method, longitudinal study that examined ‘unbelief’ in the mindfulness subcultures of the USA and the UK, funded by the University of Kent’s Understanding Unbelief Programme. The interview participants were recruited based on their identification with non-religious identities/positions (e.g. atheist, agnostic, none, etc.) in our preliminary
online survey. Readers should keep these narrow recruitment criteria in mind while drawing conclusions from the findings of this study.

The interviews were semi-structured, steered to some extent by an interview guide that addressed themes such as participants’ background, the role of religion in their upbringing, their introduction to mindfulness, their experience and understanding of the practice and examples of its application in their day-to-day lives. The interviews also included conceptual questions, such as the participants’ definition of mindfulness, religion and reality, along with a set of provocative issues such as the implementation of mindfulness in the military. Moreover, all interview questions were open-ended in design, allowing for participants to build up their narratives at their own pace and to discuss matters they considered important.

The interviews were subsequently transcribed and analysed using a combination of thematic and structural narrative analysis (Riessman 1993). Pseudonyms are used to ensure the anonymity of all participants.

Science, scientism and neuroscientism

The assertion that mindfulness is secular because it is scientifically validated has been the dominant strategy of the promoters, advocates and practitioners of mindfulness. This pattern of reasoning takes advantage of the authority of science in modern western cultures and its history of perceived opposition with ‘religion’ since the European enlightenment. Hence, by virtue of associating mindfulness with science, two things are implicitly conveyed: its legitimacy (social approval), and its opposition to ‘religion’. This reasoning holds that because the practice is empirically tested, it is therefore not religious. Much like the rhetoric of experience (Rahmani 2017; forthcoming a), this argument rests on a limited Protestant notion of religion as being primarily about beliefs or simply the verbal declaration of transcendent beliefs. According to this line of thought, secularising a technique equates simply with the removal and/or translation of explicit religious language into a secular one (Brown 2017: 53).

It must be noted that this strategic use of the religious/secular binary has been orchestrated from within the mindfulness movement, although some advocates from within academic circles have recently called for a postmodern and ‘post-secular’ approach and attempt at resolving this tension by erasing the question altogether. Jane F. Compson’s (2017) chapter, ‘Is Mindfulness Secular or Religious and Does it Matter?’ is a fascinating example, whereby the author selectively renders certain categories – ‘secular’, ‘religion’, ‘Buddhism’ – as social constructs in favour of other, supposedly less daunting terms such as ‘spirituality’, ‘suffering’ and ‘mindfulness’. Subsequently, Compson (2017: 39) suggests that instead of asking if mindfulness is Buddhist or religious, and rather than assessing the nature of mindfulness based on ‘outdated’ assumptions about the nature of religion and its evolving relationship with science and secularity, ‘a better question to focus on is “is mindfulness helpful in reducing suffering?”’ – this is precisely the strategic use of the discourse of suffering that I examine later in this chapter.

At a discursive and ideological level, this (re)framing of mindfulness within a scientific narrative, as a means to legitimise the practice and position it under a secular canopy, could be best described as scientism. Scientism is the view that considers scientific knowledge as the only source of real knowledge, placed above and beyond all other branches of learning (Hutchinson 2011; Sorell 1991). This perspective renders all other systems of knowledge (religious, cultural, etc.) inferior ‘until granted the imprimatur of empirical verification’ (Harrison 2006: 65). Scientism is hence characterised by a tendency to ‘extend scientific ideas, methods, practices, and attitudes to matters of human social and political concern’ (Olson, 2008). Such dispositions
undergird the scientific endeavours of the mindfulness movement, and can also be seen in the discourse of its practitioners. Take, for instance, the following passage from my conversation with Juno:

Juno [60s, UK]: I’m more keen on science. And with mindfulness the science is evolving. It may be that Jesus and the Buddha had insights into their beings and what made them happy and fulfilled and compassionate to others. And didn’t necessarily have the scientific underpinning of that. Whereas I think that’s why it’s emerging … You know jogging helps the heart. Mindfulness practice, formal mindfulness increases your ability to not get lost in the ‘me’ and ‘I’ parts of the brain and I guess that’s why I’m more keen on that because there’s a lot of scientific basis to it.

Juno’s passage encapsulates not only how science is valued (above religious knowledge) but also how crucial this scientific reframing is to the appeal and the perceived legitimacy of the practice. In fact, the scientific representation of mindfulness was an integral factor for the clear majority of the participants in this research (who were atheists, agnostics and ‘nones’) to experiment with mindfulness in the first place. Further, Juno’s comment, ‘it may be that Jesus and Buddha had insights … And didn’t necessarily have the scientific underpinning of that’ is almost suggestive of a perceived shortcoming on the part of Jesus and the Buddha for not formulating their message to the liking of the modern audience – one that is now compensated through the scientific efforts the community.

In a recently published, manifesto-like article, ‘What Defines Mindfulness-based Programs? The Warp and the Weft’, the leading figures of mindfulness in the USA and the UK took it upon themselves to not only define MBPs and the characteristics of a mindfulness teacher (hence exhorting some kind of monopoly on the marketplace), but also to declare their aim as ‘recontextualising’ both the content and the theoretical underpinnings of mindfulness into a scientific paradigm so as to safeguard its implementation into mainstream settings (Crane et al. 2017: 992). In other words, they aim to actively unhinge a practice (which we realistically have little scientific understanding of, in terms of its functionality) from its original system of meaning (or, as the authors frame it, its ‘religious, esoteric and mystical elements’) in order to forcefully recontextualise it in a paradigm that appeals to mainstream Western culture (or ironically, as the authors put it, ‘ensuring that they [MBPs] are delivered in an inclusive and culturally appropriate way’).

This scientisation of meditation is a relatively modern phenomenon that has spread beyond Hinduism and Buddhism, encompassing other Asian traditions such as Jainism. The implication of this scientisation (and academisation; see below) of Asian practices entails a change in the sociological structure of these traditions involving a relegation of the authority of the monastics and ascetics (Aukland 2016). This appeal to science, which we witness in the case of mindfulness, as the means to increase legitimacy is comparable to the well-studied process of the scientisation of Transcendental Meditation by Maharishi, which took place in the 1970s (Farias and Rahmani, forthcoming). In fact, it could be said that Maharishi laid the groundwork for a scientisation model that is now being roughly followed (and expanded upon) by the contemporary mindfulness movement: specifically, Maharishi’s active initiative to establish universities, institutes, journals and quasi-academic conferences, and his promotion of devotees with academic (scientific) degrees into higher positions of authority in the TM organisation (Humes 2010: 346). In a sense, both movements turned to ‘modern Western science, with its graphs and charts’ to vouch for the efficacy of their practices (Lowe 2011: 61).
Yet, other than the rapid accumulation of literature, the evidence for the efficacy of mindfulness is not strong. In fact, within academic circles, studies on mindfulness are commonly known to suffer from various methodological and conceptual issues. In an article published in 2017, for instance, fifteen psychologists and cognitive scientists unanimously raised concerns about the methodological issues undergirding the research on mindfulness. These, according to Van Dam et al. (2018: 7), included:

(a) insufficient construct validity in measures of mindfulness, (b) challenges to (clinical) intervention methodology, (c) potential adverse effects from practicing mindfulness, and (d) questionable interpretations of data from contemplative neuroscience concerning the mental processes and brain mechanisms underlying mindfulness.

The severity of this situation has led mindfulness leaders to temper some of their enthusiasm in their public talks, particularly those that are tailored to their newly trained teachers. Interestingly, mindfulness leaders place the burden of the mindfulness ‘hype’ on the shoulders of the media. This was certainly the case for every mindfulness leader/figure whom I watched speak at different conventions and conferences between 2017 and 2018. However, a study by Sumner and colleagues (2014: 4) suggests that most of the exaggerations detected in health-related science news did not originate in the media; rather, inflated claims already existed ‘in the text of the press releases produced by academics and their establishments’. Yet, we should not be surprised if, in a few years’ time, mindfulness leaders do point fingers at the media for generating further hype, this time in the context of the neuroscience of meditation.

As a sub-genre of scientism, one might consider ‘neuroscientism’, which is ‘the pervasive yet mistaken idea that neuroscience does fully account for awareness and behavior’ (Tallis, 2010). Neuro-prefixed terminology – such as neuroplasticity, neurobiology and neurotransmitters – is currently one of the most popular and efficient discursive methods used by mindfulness leaders, teachers and practitioners to make the workings of meditation seem real, tangible and believable, even though this stack of literature lacks a robust understanding of how meditation affects the brain (Dorjee 2017). Here, too, a critique of the neuroscientific study of meditation is emerging from both within and outside this field, and most notably concerns the difficulties associated with the interpretation and the analysis of neuroimaging data (Van Dam et al. 2018), which is said to be analogous to a Rorschach test (Komjathy 2015). While most neuroscientists involved in the field of contemplative studies are aware of these challenges and are taking measures to develop more robust methodologies, such sophistication, as Komjathy notes, ‘rarely trickles down to popular publications and discourse, which tend to make sweeping claims about the “scientific benefits of meditation”’ (Komjathy 2018: 254). Instead, neuroscientific terminologies are constantly used in mindfulness events and in the programmes tailored to the general public (such as the introductory session of a standard eight-week Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy [MBCT]), without much context or explanation provided as to what is meant by using such terminology.

When used in such vague ways, the sole function of this language is to gain legitimacy, as recent evidence suggests that ‘non-experts in neuroscience are more likely to believe explanations if they contain some neuroscience terms’ (Dorjee 2018). Indeed, this was the case for many of the mindfulness meditators whom I have interviewed. Most of them referenced not only literature published by various neuroscientists working in this field – among other scientific literature, such as ‘that Harvard study’ – but also took at face value the anecdotal narratives that these neuroscientists broadcast on various outlets such as online podcasts.
Academisation as other sources of legitimacy

Legitimacy, like capital, is a resource that businesses and organisations require in order to succeed and survive. Yet unlike money, legitimacy does not have a material form; ‘it exists only as a symbolic representation of the collective evaluation of an institution’ (Hybels 1995: 243). More importantly, legitimacy is a dynamic construct simply because it relies on the expectations, values, beliefs and norms of a community/society, which are not static and change over time. A successful organisation is one that makes an active effort to both create and maintain legitimacy by aligning with, and adapting to, the social norms of the environment in which it operates.

Appealing to science and relying on empirical studies are not the only methods that mindfulness leaders utilise to lend explicit legitimacy to mindfulness and implicit credibility to the claim that mindfulness is secular. As the pool of ‘scientific’ literature on mindfulness grew in the past couple of decades, new avenues to legitimacy became available to the movement: cementing mindfulness as an academic enterprise. A case in point is the flourishing of MA and PhD programmes, conferences, specific journals and university-affiliated research centres dedicated to different applications of mindfulness. The precise processes involved in the establishment of these centres are beyond the remit of this chapter. Suffice it to note that other than being a source of revenue, they play a crucial role in shaping what mindfulness is, where it should be implemented and how it should be perceived by both the public and the policy makers.

In a keynote speech addressed to hundreds of mindfulness teachers and trainees at the 2018 MiSP event in London, Jon Kabat-Zinn uttered the following:11

The salient point here is that the movement and its leading figures borrow from the authority of academia and the prestige of their affiliated institutions, arguing implicitly that because these top universities are becoming increasingly invested in mindfulness studies, mindfulness is therefore credible and worthwhile. Another hallmark example involves the birth of the ‘Professorship in Mindfulness and Psychological Science’ (University of Oxford 2019). This position, which was created in April 2019 by the OMC, is demonstrative of the movement’s attempt to solidify and secure the future of mindfulness as an academic discipline.

Rhetoric of universality

The rhetoric of the universality of mindfulness is a multifaceted discourse that functions to unhinge the practice from the religious, social and historical contexts from which it was derived. In simple terms, when mindfulness is declared as an ‘innate human capacity’, it cannot be possibly bounded to any tradition, let alone Buddhism. This line of thought, as Sharf (2015: 477) has argued, borrows heavily from ‘perennialism’, which upholds the universality of mystical
experience: the notion that ‘there is a singular, transcultural, trans-historical, and spiritual experience’ common to all mystics around the world. The following passage from Jon Kabat-Zinn (MiSP Keynote, 2018) illustrates these points:

It’s [mindfulness] a practice, it’s a way of being, it’s not a philosophy, it’s not a catechism, it’s not an idea, it’s a way of being. And these practices come from all of the ancient meditative traditions of the world. And yet they are universal because they have to do with being human, they don’t have to do with being a Buddhist, or a Hindu, or a Yogi, or a Christian, or, or, Islamic or Jewish [...] It’s not that you have to get anything in meditation, it’s the recognition that we already have everything. We are complete and whole already. So mindfulness is pure awareness. It can’t possibly be Asian, or Western, or ancient or modern. It’s human. It’s in our DNA.

This desire to conceptualise mindfulness as universal was also apparent in the language of most meditators and teachers I have interviewed. However, this is not to say that all of the participants downplayed the Buddhist roots of mindfulness at the expense of portraying it as universal (as was exemplified in the above quote from Kabat-Zinn). See, for instance, the passage below from my interview with Marv:

Marv [30s; US]: My feeling about the way it’s [mindfulness] taught in MBSR-style programs [...] is more that it draws on lessons that come from Buddhism, but are not necessarily true, only of Buddhism. They are kind of like truths of human psychology, or the human condition if you will [...] I don’t see those lessons as being tied to any, particular spiritual tradition or faith. I think they’re basic truths of the human condition, um, and lessons that anyone could learn from regardless of their background or spiritual tradition.

Moreover, at a functional level, this universalist rhetoric also aims to abstract the ethical underpinnings of the practice from the Buddhist tradition by claiming that ethics are in fact an intrinsic aspect of the practice itself; that mindfulness contains implicit ethics and thus by virtue of practicing mindfulness, one can automatically cultivate virtues such as compassion. These universal claims, as Walsh (2016: 155) has argued, suffer on accounts of having no rational or empirical support and instead function purely on the basis of implicit ideology that serves to strategically ward off criticisms such as the implication and agenda behind introducing mindfulness into the corporate world. This pattern of reasoning is also apparent among the language of meditators and mindfulness teachers. In fact, in response to my question about the application of mindfulness in the US and UK military, almost all participants (30/32) expressed their unbounded support for such interventions, particularly as a method to combat PTSD (see the section ‘Mental health and resilience’), while almost half of them (15) seemed convinced that secular mindfulness can/will cultivate compassion and enable soldiers to ‘see the humanity in others’ in such a way that they ought to ‘ultimately quit the army’ and change their career. Lastly, two participants saw this intervention as deeply problematic and conflicting with what they conceived as the Buddhist ethics of nonviolence. These figures were particularly startling and demonstrative of how these discourses are intertwined with one another – both universalist and mental health (see below) – and how they arguably promote the kind of ‘passive acceptance and a suspension of critical reflection’ that King (2016: 42) sees as a trend in secular mindfulness practices.
Buddhist discourse of suffering

In his confession-like article in 2011, Kabat-Zinn notes that in order to facilitate the introduction of mindfulness to western mainstream culture and ‘make it acceptable’ to non-Buddhists, he ‘bent over backward’ to select a language that ‘avoided as much as possible the risk of it being seen as Buddhist, “New Age,” “Eastern Mysticism” or just plain “flakey”’ (2011: 282). Such an approach was also mirrored in the early promotion of MBCT in the UK. Ironically, Kabat-Zinn and, to an extent, his British peers draws upon Buddhist discourses, most notably ‘suffering’ as a means to justify his downplaying of the Buddhist roots of mindfulness.

For instance, Kabat-Zinn frames this motivation as being inspired by a ten-second ‘vision’ that occurred to him during a two-week Vipassana meditation course in 1979. According to his narrative, he envisioned, in a flash of light, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and its far-reaching implications (spreading across hospitals and clinics in the world, sparking scientific investigation, etc.) and took it as his ‘karmic assignment’ to share the ‘essence of dharma’ or the teachings of the Buddha with everyone, particularly those who are suffering. Kabat-Zinn thus vindicates his reframing of mindfulness in secular terms on the account of a noble cause: ‘to relieve suffering and catalyse greater compassion and wisdom in our lives and culture’ (ibid: 285). In fact, similar to Goenka, Kabat-Zinn’s (ibid: 281) vision to eradicate suffering has blossomed into a global, evangelical motive, inspiring him to anticipate the current interest in mindfulness leading to a multi-dimensional emergence of great transformative and liberative promise, one which, if cared for and tended, may give rise to a flourishing on this planet akin to a second, and this time global, Renaissance, for the benefit of all sentient beings and our world.

This particular use of the Buddhist discourse is not entirely unique to Kabat-Zinn; rather, it can be identified in the language of some proponents – such as Compson (2017: 39), referenced earlier – and other leading figures of this movement. For instance, not only did the Director of the OMC, Willem Kuyken, openly encourage mindfulness teachers to cautiously tailor their language according to the demands of their clients (i.e. avoid Buddhist terminology in promoting mindfulness in the workplace), but he did so by referring to the historical Buddha, arguing that the Buddha himself also changed his language in order to promote the practice to the king – a discursive approach that renders the ethical issues of purposely avoiding Buddhist terminology acceptable.

Ethics of rebranding: participants’ position

All the mindfulness teachers interviewed for this study were very cautious with how they negotiated their position in the marketplace and the language via which they chose to deliver their mindfulness packages (i.e. mindfulness in workplace, mental health, or education, etc.). They frequently spoke about the challenges of selling the practice in ways that appeal to the general public or in ways that do not repel those clients who may not have spiritual leanings. They spoke of the resistance they frequently face from mainstream culture and, more specifically, from their affiliated institutions or colleagues (in the case of those who strived to implement mindfulness in universities or schools as part of the curriculum). Regardless of whether these participants had an affinity towards Buddhism or whether mindfulness fulfilled a spiritual role in
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their own personal lives, the majority of the teachers and meditators in this study (28/32) were happy to compartmentalise their personal beliefs from their professional approach to teaching mindfulness and did not consider the strategic rebranding as ethically problematic. As Alfred [50s, UK] argued, ‘you say potato, I say potâto. You say dukkha and I say discrepancy-based processing.’ However, this was not necessarily the case for everyone:

Penelope [40s, UK]: To take mindfulness into the workplace, it feels like I’m having to use a completely different language again […] it really clashes with [pause] with the essence of what mindfulness is. So yeah, when we’re using words like ‘compassion’, like ‘empathy’. You know ‘awareness’ is safe. It’s ok to use ‘awareness’! But anything that has a kind of touchy-feely, um, ambiguous words then, yeah, my fear is that people wouldn’t be interested […] So my challenge is how to get those people in a room, to [pause] introduce them, [pause] to mindfulness! But, [hah] But! without almost [laughs] without using the word mindfulness! But then that goes against, you know [long pause], um, [pause] well, everything that I’ve learnt, and everything that I believe [long pause] is based on, on, these words.

Several participants (4/32), including Penelope, raised their concerns about the ethics of rebranding mindfulness in secular terminology and/or any intentional lack of transparency about the Buddhist roots of the practice. In short, while they accepted the reality of the marketplace and adopted these marketing strategies themselves, their concerns primarily stemmed from an ambivalence over the role that language and the Buddhist ethical framework played in bringing about the transformative efficacy of mindfulness. In other words, they were concerned that the essence of mindfulness, on which its efficacy rests, could potentially get lost in translation.

Mental health and resilience

That mindfulness meditators have found something of value in this practice and its teachings to help them better cope with anxiety and improve their mental health is by no means under scrutiny here. In fact, having had the opportunity to speak formally and informally with many mindfulness meditators, I have no doubt about the potential for this practice to bring about positive transformations, particularly in the context of anxiety and depression. Rather, my aim in this section is to shed light on a discursive pattern that is seldom addressed due to the persisting cultural stigmas associated with mental health: that is, using mental health as a discursive strategy in specific ways to legitimise the propagation of MBPs in secular spheres (education, military and healthcare), not only at the cost of hiding its Buddhist elements and/or potential spiritual effects, but by means of achieving these ends.

The majority (19/32) of the individuals who participated in this study explicitly framed mental health as their initial motive for engaging with mindfulness (while four individuals highlighted a desire for the self-regulatory benefits as a motive, six arrived through ‘serial seekership’ (Sutcliffe 2004) and four were introduced to the practice through their networks). Therefore, it was not surprising that their narratives revolved heavily around the theme of mental health and the ways in which meditation had proved helpful in this regard. The significant point is that while most of these individuals started meditation from a non-religious position, with increased participation, the participants’ sense of self and the world, their values, and even (for some) their relations with transcendent realities were transformed. In fact, the longitudinal interviews pointed towards a pattern of change in the unbelievers’ outlook, such as transit from atheism
to (1) secular Buddhism; (2) strong agnosticism; and (3) spirituality (Rahmani, forthcoming b).

Take for instance, the following passage from Zoey as an example of the latter pattern of change:

Zoey [40s; UK]: I’ve started to deepen my practice, so for about four years I’ve done it every day. And I’ve really found probably for the past couple of years, I’ve found this sense of something greater. Like this, I’ve got this sense of connection and while I still say I’m not, I’m not a fan of organised religion, but I do think there’s more than meets the eye. I meditate sometimes at a Buddhist monastery. I don’t count myself as Buddhist. I don’t count Buddhism as religion, it’s a philosophy to me. Yeah and I actually had, at the monastery, I had what I would class as spiritual awakening. Spontaneously! I, it was very odd and very amazing, and I became one with everything for a couple of hours and that really changed my life […] since then I’ve been really on a much more spiritual path. I teach mindfulness in a secular way but myself, I’m much more interested in the spiritual side now […] I don’t think you can have that experience and still consider [yourself] […] as atheist.

In any case, almost all of the mindfulness teachers I interviewed noted that they actively refrained from divulging their own spiritual approach to the practice, not only in their teachings but also in their conversations with other people. Instead, they simply preferred to use the language of mental health:

AUTHOR: What is your approach to meditation, and do you categorise it as a religious practice?
VERONICA [40s; US]: No. It’s [mindfulness] not a conscious religious practice to me. And when I talk to other people about it, I do it from the perspective of how it helps my physical and mental health. Anything it does for me, spiritually, is very private, and I, I wouldn’t discuss it.

Moreover, in these circles, mental health is being used as a discursive strategy to reason the downplay of the religious/Buddhist roots of the practice in order to avoid ‘triggering’ any trauma or negative memory associated with religion in their clients. This was pointed out to me by Alfred, a trained mindfulness teacher who, like many other participants, utilises mindfulness to improve his mental health. Yet, unlike most of the participants, he noted that he tries to ‘live by the sila’ (the Buddhist code of conduct) and ‘follows the dharma’ (the teachings of the Buddha) in his life:

Alfred [50s, UK]: If you read the green book on MBCT, the textbook, as far as I can recall it, it doesn’t have any kind of dharma associations or quotations or anything in there. And I think the encouragement at Oxford was to steer clear, um, of those what you might call ‘spiritual associations.’ For the simple reason that they can be very challenging to people in the group. And an unnecessary challenging to people in the group, particularly a mental health group. So, for example, if you’ve got a group with clinical indications that they may suffer from depression. For some of those people, their depression may have roots in the religious constrains in their upbringing. And as soon as you bring in any kind of spiritual or religious connotations, those people are going to be instantly turned off […] if I do talk about dukkha to an NHS group in [name of a town] that might just instantly turn some of them off from the whole course. Instantly! Because they feel they’re being preached at, and that I’m trying to brainwash them, or evangelise them. So it could be harmful.
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Alfred’s passage is of interest for three reasons: first, it provides indirect insight into the kinds of rationale that mindfulness organisations provide to their trainees. Second, it depicts the concerns that mindfulness teachers face in delivering their product to the public (note the way Alfred imagines how he might be perceived through the vantage point of his clients). Third, note how Alfred’s concerns about repelling his audience with religious terminology morphs into concern about their psychological wellbeing (‘harmful’). This particular use of mental health also emerged in the context of several interviews with mindfulness meditators, and in response to provocative questions that challenged their positions (i.e. their context-dependent identities) – for instance, questions about the Buddhist underpinnings of mindfulness or whether a regular practice can be seen as a form of ritual. In these contexts, and instead of responding to these questions directly, those participants who primarily framed their own motivation for practicing mindfulness as a tool to improve their mental health tended to remind me of this fact about their lives (e.g. that mindfulness helps them with their panic attacks) and end any discussion on these topics. In effect, this way of communication tilted the power dynamics between myself and the interviewee in such a way that I often felt both constrained and unwelcome to pursue those specific topics further.

At an institutional level, the strategic use of mental health is evident in the way mindfulness organisations such as the OMC and MiSP have marketed themselves in the UK, secured large research grants, lobbied in the British parliament and justified the promotion of mindfulness in schools; it is mirrored in the movement’s legal documents and the mission statements of the OMC (see below); it is reflected in the way these organisations encourage their members and trainees teachers to ‘stick with [the] mental health’ narrative when they pitch mindfulness to headmasters in schools and to utilise specific language such as ‘resilience’ and ‘grit’ when they pitch mindfulness to politicians.

Indeed, a similar critique applies to the buzzword ‘resilience’, which has gained currency in contemporary socio-political discourse, owing much of its power to the vagueness of the concept that makes it amenable to ‘(un)intentional scientific justification of particular policies, projects, and practices’ (Olsson et al., 2015: 6). In recent years, governments and educational institutions (schools and universities) have invested in programmes that aim to cultivate resilience in students. Notwithstanding the prevalence of such viewpoints among educators, no consensus exists among different educational bodies as to what resilience is, how exactly one develops a resilient student or, indeed, what defines a resilient person? In such contexts, institutions are left to define and supplement a resilience strategy on their own. It was precisely within this fuzzy context that the OMC’s Wellcome Trust-funded program, My Resilience in Adolescence project (MYRIAD), introduced mindfulness in British schools. Yet despite hinging this large project on the token of ‘resilience’, the term has not been adequately defined in the publications emerging from this project, and in fact it is often used interchangeably with ‘flourishing’ (Kuyken et al. 2017). I therefore consider resilience as the movement’s latest discursive strategy to support their promotion of mindfulness in schools.

OMC history and mission statement

To contextualise the above points and to trace the evolution of the discursive strategies used by the mindfulness movement, we can simply refer to the key developments in the historical timeline of the OMC and the strategic alterations of their mission statement. First and foremost, it should be noted that, contrary to common assumptions, this centre was not created within the department of Psychiatry at Oxford University – it attached itself to this department in 2011, when the name of the centre was legally changed to ‘Oxford
Mindfulness Foundation’. In fact, the centre was formally founded in 2007 by four members of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies: Geoffrey Bamford, a business man and Oxford graduate in Pali and Sanskrit and an active member of Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies; Professor Richard Gombrich, a renowned scholar in Buddhist studies; Venerable Khammai Dhammasami, a Buddhist monk and scholar; and Dr. John Peacock, a lecturer in Buddhist studies (Companies House Service [company no. 06144314]). At its inception in 2007, the OMC declared its objective as:

To advance the education and mental health of the public by both: (1) promoting research into: traditional Buddhist practices for the enhancement of well-being ('Mindfulness'); contemporary applications of those practices; and the neuroscientific understanding of their operation and effectiveness; (2) training others in those practices, their applications and relevant neuroscientific research techniques.

(Companies House 2019; italics added)

In 2008, the OMC’s mission statement remained largely the same, except that the terms ‘enhancement of well-being’ were replaced with ‘achievement and maintenance of psychological balance’.

In 2012, the words ‘traditional Buddhist practices’ had completely lost their footing in this equation, giving prominence to ‘mindfulness’, which by now had leapt out of the confinements of parentheses and became an entity of its own standing. Thus, the first component of the above-mentioned mission statement was altered to ‘promoting research into the achievement and maintenance of psychological balance through mindfulness’.

In 2017, the mission statement was reconceptualised as ‘(a) promoting research into (1) preventing depression and enhancing human potential across the lifespan and (2) reducing suffering, promoting resilience and the realisation of human potential across the lifespan through mindfulness’ (ibid; italics added). And finally, in the latest revision of the mission statement in 2018, the OMC stated its aim as:

To reduce suffering, promote resilience and realise human potential across the lifespan through mindfulness. We achieve our mission through rigorous scientific research, maximising the impact of our work through public engagement and dissemination.

(Companies House 2019; italics added)

These amendments to the OMC’s mission statements are by no means haphazard; they overlap and align with the discursive strategies I have explored above, starting from the scientisation of a traditional Buddhist practice and culminating in a strategic ambiguity.

Concluding remarks

This chapter has explored several strategies through which mindfulness leaders have created legitimacy for the practice and paved the way for its introduction into and growth in mainstream culture. Most of these strategies are not unique to the mindfulness movement. As noted, comparisons can be drawn between the mindfulness movement, TM, and Goenka’s Vipassana movement, particularly in utilising strategies such as the scientisation and academisation of meditation and the secular and universalist rhetoric. A noteworthy exception perhaps concerns the theme of mental health and resilience, which (to my knowledge) are not explicit in Goenka’s discourse. Moreover, these discursive strategies are tightly interrelated (e.g. universalism and
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mental health), as is evident in the interview excerpts and the participants’ responses (e.g. mindfulness in the military).

To the extent that these strategies are seen to be operationalised in order to support the growth of mindfulness, a certain critique is due – others may well disagree and reason that such strategies are unintentional. Undoubtedly, this moral criticism has coloured my language, analyses, and presentation of the material provided in this chapter. My critique is specifically directed at the institutional and leadership levels, pertaining to instances where language is manipulated in ways to mask evangelism; where trainee teachers are actively instructed to de-emphasise the spiritual/Buddhist associations of the practice for the sake of appealing to a larger market, leading the very same teachers to feel compelled to conceal their own spiritual leanings; where dishonesty is normalised and mental health is unwittingly trivialised and used to undermine peoples’ agency and freedom of choice; and where language obscures ethics and promotes social passivity.

Notes

1 Framing meditation as a ‘tool’, for instance, is a common rhetorical strategy that can be seen in the discourse of both Goenka’s Vipassana movement and the mindfulness movement. This line of reasoning is empowered by three intrinsically linked ideas that strongly resonate with modern meditators: autonomy (i.e. that an individual is responsible for their own spiritual/personal development), agency (i.e. that an individual should take an active role towards their spiritual/personal development) and practicality (i.e. the specific pragmatic benefits of meditation) – all of which are juxtaposed against the concept of ‘empty rituals’ (i.e. ritualistically praying to, and relying on, an external force for a desired outcome).

2 By the ‘leading figures’ of the mindfulness movement, I am referring to a handful of famous mindfulness teachers/academics and directors of key mindfulness institutions, such as Jon Kabat-Zinn and Willem Kuyken.

3 Additionally, for the qualitative dimension of this research, we only included those individuals who scored low on both self-report scales that measured spirituality and religiosity.

4 As an epistemic strategy – that considers embodied experience as a true source of knowledge, overriding intellectual knowledge – this rhetoric undergirds much of Goenka’s enterprise for abstracting his teachings of Vipassana from the category of religion. For instance, despite the fact that Goenka’s teachings rest on various Buddhist doctrines (including dukkha, anicca, anatta, sankhara, kamma, reincarnation, etc.), he actively discourages his students from accepting them ‘blindly’. Instead, they are advised to accept these insights as ‘truths’ once they have experienced them for themselves. This rhetoric leads meditators to disassociate these ideas from ‘religious doctrine’ and the movement from ‘religion’ simply because they have experienced one of them in an embodied way (anicca).

5 For instance, Penelope [40s, UK] noted, ‘Now that I’ve looked into the science of it, now I completely believe that it helps to self-regulate the brain. It self-regulates those hormones.’

6 A widely referenced meta-analysis (Goyal et al. 2014) suggests that mindfulness was only moderately effective in reducing symptoms of pain, anxiety, and depression. However, in this regard, it was not found to be more effective than other active treatments, such as exercise. In the context of other conditions, mindfulness proved to have low or no efficacy.

7 In 2017, I participated in an OMC Master Class, ‘Mindfulness-based Interventions in the Workplace: The Role of Theory, Science and Research’, led by Willem Kuyken. At this event, I witnessed a lecture room of approximately fifty mindfulness teachers gasp as they were informed about the actual state of scientific literature on mindfulness: that the higher the quality of a mindfulness study is, the positive effects appear lesser.

8 Willem Kuyken at OMC Master Class 2017, Jon Kabat-Zinn at 2018 MiSP and Mark Williams at the Summertown United Reformed Church in 2018.

9 See, for example, the final sentence quoted from Juno (i.e. ‘in the “me” and “I” parts of the brain …’), where she indirectly draws from the findings of cognitive neuroscience and neurobiology regarding the locality and mechanisms undergirding one’s sense of self. The use of neuroscientific explanations (regarding notions of selfhood, etc.) can be seen in the language of Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005: 326, cited in Husgafvel 2018: 290).
The most frequently referenced paper by the participants involved the famous article ‘A Wandering Mind is an Unhappy Mind’ by Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010).

Goenka and Kabat-Zinn both share an evangelical world-saving vision and use this idea as means to frame the promotion of their practice in other countries. In fact, a shared narrative between these two meditation masters is the idea of taking their practice ‘back to the land in which it originated’: India in the case of Goenka, and China in the case of Kabat-Zinn.

Kabat-Zinn’s vision of a ‘Global Renaissance’ is not specifically Buddhist, but a facet of the American New Age movement.

Fieldnote from a ‘Masterclass’ offered by Kuyken at the Oxford Mindfulness Centre in November 2018.

Katherine Weares’ presentation at MiSP 2018, London.


This is not to say that Goenka completely avoids promoting Vipassana as a tool to support mental health. In fact, the narrative he tells about his own introduction to Vipassana concerned his struggle with migraine. However, he considers such benefits as secondary in value and frames them as side-effect benefits of Vipassana as opposed to the prime objective.

Bibliography


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