

Perspective Piece

Mindful, mindless, or misunderstood? A critical perspective of the mindfulness concept

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Abstract

Mindfulness is everywhere, but the term is often used mindlessly. This article discusses the growth of mindfulness-based interventions in many countries over the past fifty years and, more recently, the emergence of the idea of ‘McMindfulness’, with particular emphasis on the concept of ‘spiritual bypassing’. Critical discourse is a valuable resource in any discipline. Proportionate, mindful incorporation of reasoned critiques strengthens mindfulness, rather than undermining it. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations of mindfulness highlight a need to counter the notions that mindfulness involves avoiding difficult issues in our lives or simply accepting social problems that need to be addressed. The opposite is true: mindfulness of reality inevitably generates insights about change. Before we change the world, we need to see it. Mindfulness practice is opting in, not opting out.

Keywords: Buddhism; Mindfulness; Meditation; Psychology; Spiritual bypassing

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The rise of mindfulness

Mindfulness means paying attention to the present moment, simply and directly. It involves maintaining a careful awareness of thoughts, actions, and emotions, but not judging them. It means staying focussed on the ‘now’ as much as possible and, when the mind wanders, gently re-directing it back to the present moment (Kelly, 2022).

Mindfulness finds its roots in ancient spiritual and psychological traditions, but its recent rise in western countries has been meteoric (Feldman & Kuyken, 2019). The growth of Buddhism in the United States during the 1960s was part of a broader counter-cultural movement that eventually declined, but certain themes persisted, as various Buddhist centres matured during the 1980s and 1990s, presaging the emergent focus on mindfulness (McCown *et al.* 2010).

The advent of mindfulness-based stress reduction in the late 1970s was a key step that brought particular focus to ‘mindfulness’ (Kabat-Zinn, 2013a). There is now strong evidence from rigorous randomised controlled trials that mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) improve outcomes in domains such as chronic pain, depression relapse, and addiction (Creswell, 2017). Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) is especially useful in preventing depressive relapse (Crane, 2017; Segal *et al.* 2018). There is more detailed evidence for MBIs among specific groups, such as doctors (Fendel *et al.* 2021) and

nurses (Green & Kinchen, 2021; Kang & Myung, 2022), and there are extensive curricula and resources for mindfulness teachers (McCown *et al.* 2010; Crane *et al.* 2021a, 2021b).

Alongside these careful, evidence-based developments, however, another line of discourse has emerged, focused on the limitations of MBIs and some of the less reliable claims made about mindfulness: ‘McMindfulness’.

The rise of ‘McMindfulness’

The rapid ascent of mindfulness in many countries inevitably drew criticism. Ronald Purser synthesises many of these views in *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (Purser, 2019). Purser argues that mindfulness depoliticised and privatised stress. He suggests that if someone loses their job, current models of mindfulness indicate that it is their responsibility to deal with the resultant unhappiness by becoming more mindful. Mindfulness, he argues, accepts the dictates of the marketplace and has become ‘the new capitalist spirituality’.

Purser does not give up on mindfulness, but argues that it should be taught differently to how he believes it is currently taught. He writes that mindfulness still has revolutionary potential, but that curricula should not focus solely on internal self-management (as he suggests they currently do) and should be broader, using the practice to develop insights into how social experience is embodied.

Purser is not alone in seeing certain current models of mindfulness in this way. Not unlike mindfulness itself, ‘McMindfulness’ and related concepts are now widely discussed by multiple commentators from diverse perspectives (Wolf, 2019). In 2019, David Forbes argued for a more critical, social mindfulness in

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Mindfulness and Its Discontents: Education, Self, and Social Transformation (Forbes, 2019a). Forbes summarised his views in *The Guardian*:

‘McMindfulness practices psychologise and medicalise social problems. Rather than a way to attain awakening towards universal love, it becomes a means of self-regulation and personal control over emotions. McMindfulness is blind to the present moral, political, and cultural context of neoliberalism’ (Forbes, 2019b).

In his comments, Forbes is careful to refer to ‘McMindfulness’, as opposed to mindfulness when it is properly taught and practiced.

Giraldi also provides a measured but critical account of the rise and marketing of mindfulness in *Psychotherapy, Mindfulness, and Buddhist Meditation* (Giraldi, 2019). Noting the inevitable complexities of integrating Buddhist ideas into western societies, Giraldi argues that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish meditation from various forms of cognitive and behaviour therapy. This is true: the overlaps are considerable, reflecting commonality between mindfulness and western approaches to psychological distress.

Most recently, psychologist Steven Hayes wrote a blog about ‘fast food meditation’ on *Medium*, pointing out that meditation is not a way to avoid difficulties in life, but a way of engaging with all of life (Hayes, 2022). Hayes’s point speaks especially to one of the key issues in the critical literature about contemporary mindfulness which concerns ‘spiritual bypassing’, a concept that helps explain some of the allure of ‘McMindfulness’.

Spiritual bypassing

The term ‘spiritual bypassing’ was coined by John Welwood and refers to a tendency to use spiritual ideas or practices to sidestep unresolved emotional issues, psychological problems, or incomplete developmental tasks (Welwood, 2000). It means using the goal of awakening to avoid human needs or relational difficulties (Fossella & Welwood, 2011) and misusing the spiritual life to circumvent psychological problems (Cashwell, *et al.* 2010). In 2017, the ‘Spiritual Bypass Scale-13’ was developed, to provide a screening tool and way of assessing spiritual bypass (Fox *et al.* 2017).

The following year, Picciotto and colleagues published a study of the phenomenology of spiritual bypass in eight people who self-identified as having experienced spiritual bypass in the past (Picciotto *et al.* 2018). Following detailed interviews, the researchers identified two broad themes: the development of spiritual bypass and its effects. The development of spiritual bypass was related to, among other factors, ideas of escape, avoiding pain, and the influence of religious or spiritual leaders. Negative consequences included depression, anxiety, lack of self-awareness, and disruptions in empathy. The value of a spiritual community that understands the importance of psychological work was identified as a way of preventing spiritual bypass.

Picciotto and Fox interviewed ten experts with backgrounds working with spiritual bypass and identified various specific themes, one of which was the symptoms of spiritual bypass; these include emotional and intellectual dissociation, relationship problems, and narcissism in the spiritual domain (Picciotto & Fox, 2018). Ways to manage spiritual bypass include empowerment-based models, empathetic approaches, helping people connect to the self, and being sensitive to the purpose that spiritual bypass serves in people’s lives.

Ironically, many of these approaches to resolving spiritual bypass are very consistent with mindfulness once it is properly

practiced, especially mindful awareness of the self and one’s experience. This suggests that while some mindfulness practitioners might experience spiritual bypass as their practice develops, mindfulness can be part of the solution, once spiritual bypass is identified, and mindful awareness is applied to the problem in a thoughtful, self-aware fashion.

What mindfulness is and what it isn’t

The criticism offered by ‘McMindfulness’ and the literature it has triggered is valuable, once this criticism is approached with openness, objectivity, and non-judgemental awareness. It is certainly true that recent years have seen the term ‘mindfulness’ become ubiquitous in media of all descriptions. It is virtually unavoidable in training courses, self-development seminars, and therapy programmes all over the world.

While this is largely a good thing, critics of ‘McMindfulness’ have a point: the concept of mindfulness is often applied mindlessly to all sorts of activities, including simple relaxation, which is a valuable activity but is not necessarily mindful (Weston, 2021).

There are several reasons for the rise of ‘McMindfulness’. First and foremost, there has always been an insatiable appetite for shortcuts to enlightenment, be it through psychedelic drugs or the spiritual bypassing of ‘McMindfulness’ or any other misinterpretation of mindfulness. In addition, mindfulness can sound like all things to all people, not least because it is difficult to measure (Baer, 2013). While there is significant psychometric progress in this area, misunderstandings about mindfulness still loom large, and critics usually choose the most extreme misinterpretations of ‘mindfulness’ in order to make their points.

Finally, all philosophies, psychologies, and spiritual traditions are misunderstood, parodied, misused, and commercialised – as well as properly used. While mindfulness finds many of its roots in Buddhism (Kabat-Zinn, 2013b), the emergence of ‘McMindfulness’ reflects adaptations and reinterpretations of mindfulness in western societies, with all of the positives and negatives that this brings. Some applications are careful and considered, including the use of mindfulness as part of programmes of dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT), which can reduce self-harming behaviours and improve depression in borderline personality disorder (Chen *et al.* 2021).

Future research could usefully examine not only the various uses of mindfulness in mental health services but also the extent to which such uses maintain fidelity with the spiritual practice, develop something new and valuable, or are more akin to ‘McMindfulness’, which mainly refers to corporate and popular use of the term. Future research could also further characterise the benefits of MBIs in specific conditions and the application of mindfulness to maintain wellness as well as address illness. The advent of ‘McMindfulness’ should encourage, rather than deter, such research.

Conclusion

The *Dhammapada*, a collection of sayings of the Buddha, emphasises the value of criticism:

‘Should one find a man [sic] who points out faults and who reproves, let him [sic] follow such a wise and sagacious person as one would a guide to hidden treasure. It is always better, and never worse, to cultivate such an association’ (Buddharakkhita (transl.), 2013).

The criticisms offered by those who write about ‘McMindfulness’ provide valuable opportunities for learning and

developing mindfulness, focusing on the strengths of the practice, addressing misunderstandings, and clarifying teachings. It is especially important to be aware of the risk of spiritual bypassing and address it appropriately (Cashwell *et al.* 2004, 2009; Clarke *et al.* 2013).

These misunderstandings highlight a particular need to counter the notion that mindfulness involves avoiding difficult issues in our lives or simply accepting social problems that need to be addressed. The opposite is true: mindfulness of reality inevitably generates insights about change (McLeod, 2006; Ward, 2021). Before we change the world, we need to see it. Mindfulness practice is opting in, not opting out.

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