

Book Review

Purser, Ronald. *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*. Repeater Books: London. 2019

Reviewed by Dr Peter Doran

A rather large pebble has been cast into the centre of the normally tranquil waters of the mindfulness industry. In a no-holds barred take-down of the mindfulness movement, the American author, Ronald Purser, has thrown down a challenge that is stirring a much needed debate about the meditation technique that has spawned a global industry generating billions of Euros in apps, gadgets, self-help books and workshops delivered everywhere from the corporate board room to schools and military training academies.

Purser, a Professor of Management at San Francisco State University and long-time Buddhist scholar and meditator, is the author of *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* from Repeater Books. The term “McMindfulness” was first coined by ...and later popularized by Purser and David Loy in an article that went viral. The thrower of the pebble is Ron Purser and the cause of this welcome disturbance is his new book, *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*.

In a political age marked by a flight from complexity and an overwhelming flood of news about climate breakdown and Brexit uncertainties, the elixir and promise of mindfulness was always going to prove seductive for many. Purser is uncompromising in his interrogation of the movement inspired and led by Kabat-Zinn. Could it be, he asks, that mindfulness has gained mainstream acceptance because it ensures a snug fit between individuals and institutions? Has it served as a useful accomplice in maintaining social control by regulating our unruly desires, downgrading thought, and teaching us to accept “what is” while retreating into comfortable depths of subjectivity? (p.109) “Is this non-judgmental flight to direct sensory experience (slowly eating a raisin, taking a deep breath before sending off that difficult email, etc.) propagating a sophisticated form of anti-intellectualism, throwing us a few breadcrumbs of stability at the expense of mindlessly accepting injustices, just as they are?” (p.109) Lest he be accused of wishing to throw the mindful baby out with the bathwaters, Purser is careful to acknowledge that for the walking wounded suffering the multiple consequence of a stress and dis-ease, MBSR can serve its “intended” purpose.

What is too often missing in this picture, and from mindfulness discourse, is an acknowledgement within the mindfulness industry that chronic disease – like most chronic disease and occupational accidents – has a social and political content. Curiously, for a practice that is all about ‘attention’ and cultivated awareness of what is arising, the phenomenon of mindfulness itself has been received with near-universal uncritical acclaim, in our schools, corporate board rooms, universities and now even in our national parliament. It is the

association of mindfulness with unthinking that annoys Purser. He notes that the fundamental message of the mindfulness movement is that the underlying cause of dissatisfaction and distress lies in our heads. We are told that by failing to pay attention to what actually is happening in each moment, we get lost in regrets about the past and fears for the future, which makes us unhappy. The suspect in chief for this over-simplification is Purser's chief target in the book, John Kabat-Zinn. Kabat-Zinn is accused of a dangerous act of depoliticization, similar to the positive psychology movement's naïve invitations to response to life's challenges, from unemployment to debt, by learning to meditate. Kabat-Zinn describes our proneness to a tendency to get lost in the past and the future as the "thinking disease". It is as if, for the father of secular mindfulness, whole societies now suffer from a form of attention disorder. The antidote on offer appears to be a privatised retreat into our own mental states, in pursuit of equanimity. John Kabat-Zinn's claims for mindfulness come on a grand scale, including a suggestion that the practice "may actually be the only promise the species and the planet have for making it through the next couple of hundred years."

Main Points of Criticism

Purser's work is not a wholesale dismissal of the merits of mindfulness. He concedes that there are worthy dimensions, including a reduction in stress, chronic anxiety and other maladies.

His problem is the packaging of mindfulness, a basic form of concentration training, stripped of its Buddhist teachings and ethics. At the core of Purser's message to mindfulness teachers is that while reducing suffering is a noble aim and is to be encouraged... "to do this effectively, teachers of mindfulness need to acknowledge that personal stress also has societal causes. By failing to address collective suffering, and systemic change that might remove it, they rob mindfulness of its real revolutionary potential." In Purser's view, promoters and teachers of mindfulness may actually be making things worse by uncritically accommodating the neoliberal claim that the causes of suffering in our society are disproportionately inside us, and not in the political and economic frameworks that shape how we live and die. And yet, observes Purser, mindfulness zealots believe that paying close attention to the present moment without passing judgement "has the revolutionary power to transform the whole world. It's magical thinking on steroids."

Purser's critique needs to be placed within an understanding of the psycho-politics of neoliberalism and the ways in which the attention economy places demands on us through mass distraction.

He concedes that the practice can help adherents learn to manage their emotional reactions and impulses, racing thoughts, stresses and worries, providing an oasis of relief. "Beneficial as this may sound," he warns, "it has hidden consequences. Firstly, it promotes a focus on oneself and the mind's inner workings, deflecting attention from sources of stress in modern society's massive inequalities, austerities, and injustices. As a result it reinforces some causes of suffering. Secondly, and more specifically, living in harmony with the world means accepting capitalism as a given. No radical critique or vision of social change is needed."

Moreover, having taken shape during the rise of the neoliberal era, the mindfulness industry has fallen into the trap of offering a palliative to those who experience the stresses and strains of the workplace, the market place, and corporate board rooms, but offers little more than a source of resilience and method of self-discipline dressed up as self-care to make them more productive and competitive. The Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, put it best when he observed that Buddhist mindfulness is enabling people to “fully participate in the capitalist dynamic while retaining the appearance of mental sanity.” As Purser observes, the ideological linchpin of neoliberalism is the individualization of all social phenomena. The genius of neoliberalism as an ideology is the conviction that individuals must render themselves responsible for managing whatever is thrown at them. Mindfulness has come along at just the right time and in the right package for corporate bosses, wellbeing services in our universities, and exhausted teachers in our schools.

Commodification

McMindfulness, a term first coined by Miles Neale, a Buddhist teacher and psychotherapist, captures the commercialization of mindfulness, an ironic turn of events given the Buddha’s association with renunciation of his family’s privileged lifestyle to embrace the life on a mendicant, wandering as a teacher as a forest dweller. Purser compares the contemporary mindfulness “fad” with the entrepreneurial genius of the McDonalds franchise pioneer, Ray Kroc. He describes Kabat-Zinn’s moment of awakening – mid-retreat – when he spotted an opportunity to brand “mindfulness as a secular crypto-Buddhist teaching” by adapting the Buddhist teaching and practice to help hospital patients deal with physical pain, stress and anxiety.

Mindfulness is now a \$4 billion dollar industry consisting of books sales, apps, short courses, and associated promotions, including a KFC “Pot Pie-Based Meditation System.” This has prompted a number of observers to warn that the privatized and commercialized brand of mindfulness – far from leading to a rejection of materialism – is likely to underpin consumer capitalism. Kabat-Zinn spotted an opportunity to give stressed out Americans easy access to Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) through a short eight week mindfulness course for stress reduction that would be taught consistently using a standardized curriculum. MBSR teachers would gain certification by attending programmes at Kabat-Zinn’s Centre for Mindfulness in Worcester, Massachusetts. This model has since gone global, with thousands of students and hundreds of teachers or teachers-in-training now entering the market place here in Ireland. Kabat-Zinn and his acolytes have continued to expand the model by identifying “new markets” such as corporations, schools, government and the military, and endorsing new forms of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs).

For Purser, mindfulness has now evolved as a form of “capitalist spirituality”, easily accommodating the status quo because proponents of mindfulness believe that the practice is apolitical, and “so the avoidance of moral inquiry and the reluctance to consider a vision of the social good are intertwined.” Wrapped in the language of mindfulness, spirituality is reduced to a therapeutic comfort blanket, a coping

mechanism in the face of demands for system change. This is an old story. The privatization of religious sentiment goes back a long way, and has been associated with humanistic psychology, positive psychology and the new age movement. It is a defining characteristic of Irish Catholicism, where the priestly obsessions with the morality of the bedroom has far outweighed considerations about the ethics of the boardroom. One of the most contentious claims of the stripped down practice is that ethical behaviour will arise “naturally” from practice and the teachers’ soft-spoken or embodied niceness.

Conclusions

In a fascinating section of the book, Purser examines the colonial origins of secular mindfulness practices. He notes that the technique taken up and popularized by Kabat-Zinn can be traced back to a popular form of “insight” meditation. This was first disseminated Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka, as part of a Buddhist response to colonialism, incorporating Western ways of seeing and wrapping meditative practice up in the language of science. Buddhist reformers, who would later export the practice to the West, played down the importance of Buddhist doctrine and as well as their more challenging concentration practices. Kabat-Zinn took these developments further, self-consciously stripping away Buddhist language and dressing up mindfulness in the acceptable, secular or medicalised language of of the clinic and the laboratory. Purser’s main criticism is of Kabat-Zinn’s apparent claim that MBSR is tantamount to a new Buddhist lineage, and not an abstracted set of practices that are dislocated from the ethical and wider teachings of the Buddha, also known as ‘the Dharma’. And most damning, in the eyes of Purser and others, is Kabat-Zinn’s self-appointed status.

Far from being context free, Purser points out that the MBSR and mindfulness movement has a context of its own insofar as it is “distinctively American, priding itself on the narrative of scientific progress, the belief in the individual as the sole nexus of meaning, an entrepreneurial ethos, and other underlying and generally unexamined assumptions that are anything but universal, much less Buddhist.” Purser cites the sociologist, Kirstin Barker, who has observed how Kabat-Zinn has located mindfulness within therapeutic culture, so that “the common malaise of everyday life is diseased state” and “mindfulness portrays our failure to pay attention as the principal reason.” (p.75) Mindfulness is perceived as a “thing”, as a “practice” that can be adopted and used by the individual in need of help. What Purser and Barker, with others, are pointing out is that “Mindfulness” contributes to a re-problematization of society’s ills, cast in a therapeutic frame. This posits responsibility primarily in the hands of the individual and her capacity (or incapacity) to pay attention. Within the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness is inseparable from ethical development. “The cultivation of ‘right mindfulness’ is only part of the Buddha’s Eightfold Path, along with “right” understanding, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort and concentration.” (P.79) Purser’s critique is not so much a critique of mindfulness as a critique of the translation of the Buddhist practice of mindfulness into a secular domain, stripped of its

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cultural and ethical bearings. The main culprit in this story is John Kabat-Zinn who offers a relatively easy target because – despite his lineage – he displayed an apolitical and at times naïve disposition when invited to explore the wider societal implications of what he has unleashed through his MBSR franchise. In some ways, Purser is critiquing Kabat-Zinn for something Kabat-Zinn never claimed was part of his mission in re-packaging “mindfulness” as a therapeutic technique, with the support of his medical research.