Moralizing Mindfulness: How Is Mindfulness Related to Values and Worldviews?

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Abstract and Keywords

Promoters allege that mindfulness will help to save American society. As they do so, an American Buddhist civil religion emerges, which valorises elements of the American past and culture, while proposing Buddhist solutions to problems faced by the country. Espoused by many mindfulness practitioners and embodied in books by U.S. Congressmen, major meditation teachers, and others, this vision aligns with a particular brand of liberal politics, and imagines that society is threatened by mindlessness, a condition of extreme and dangerous distraction. Bringing mindfulness into the schools, businesses, homes, and other areas of the nation will lead to a more compassionate, wise, sustainable, and productive society that can regain its place as a leader of the world. Thus even though much effort is spent on de-religionizing mindfulness, it continues to do religious work in terms of providing values,
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worldviews, and imperatives by which its practitioners operate.

*Keywords:* Buddhism, civil religion, liberalism, mindfulness, politics

Moralize: To make moral; to give a moral quality to or affect the moral quality of (actions, feelings, etc.)

—Oxford English Dictionary¹

Long-time Google engineer, executive, and self-described “jolly good fellow” Chade-Meng Tan (usually just called Meng) hobnobbed with celebrities and politicians for years as one of Google’s prominent in-house personalities. But he became a recognized celebrity in his own right after his 2012 book *Search Inside Yourself: The Unexpected Path to Achieving Success, Happiness (and World Peace)* rocketed onto the *New York Times* Best Seller list and stayed there, month after month after month. Like most books in the mindfulness movement genre, it promised practical, this-worldly benefits that anyone could access, and presumably every American wants. Page after page, he described the near-miraculous manner in which mindfulness delivers happiness, prosperity, and health, reinforced by forewords from his friends Jon Kabat-Zinn and Daniel Goleman, both best-selling mindfulness authors themselves. Filled with cartoons and jokes ranging from groan-inducing to genuinely amusing, *Search Inside Yourself* seemed to be the perfect embodiment of the mystifying, medicalizing, mainstreaming, and marketing trends explored in previous chapters. But although these aspects dominated most pages of the book, in a way these were just the mundane enticements that Meng used to attract skeptical readers—his real agenda was far larger than just ordinary self-help. This fine-tuned pop mindfulness confection had a very specific moral dimension as well, usually treated subtly but present at many points throughout the book. As Meng admitted near the end of the book, “*Search Inside Yourself* started with a simple dream, and that dream is world peace.”²

A Buddhist since his student days, Meng’s advocacy of mindfulness was tied to larger values and worldviews, not just
desires for personal happiness and financial achievement. He believed that meditation was “the key active ingredient in the formula for world peace” and that realizing this fact constituted “an epiphany:” “I have found my life’s goal. My life’s goal is to make the benefits of meditation accessible to humanity...I am confident that the transformative power of contemplative practices is so compelling, anybody who understands it will find it irresistible.”

So how should he go about making mindfulness accessible worldwide? First, he would start with his workplace, where he enjoyed inside access to one of the world’s most prominent and respected corporations. “The way to create the conditions for world peace,” he realized, “is to create a mindfulness-based emotional intelligence curriculum, perfect it within Google, and then give it away as one of Google’s gifts to the world.” As it turned out, the path to world peace lay not with large-scale economic change, social revolution, political solutions, or breakthrough scientific advancement. Instead, world peace required nothing more (or less) than creating a mindful world, one meditator at a time. “Like many others wiser than me, I believe world peace can and must be created from the inside out. If we can find a way for everybody to develop peace and happiness within themselves, their inner peace and happiness will naturally manifest into compassion. And if we can create a world where most people are happy, at peace, and compassionate, we can create the foundation for world peace. Fortunately, a methodology for doing that already exists and has already been practiced by various peoples for thousands of years. It is the art of using contemplative practices to develop the mind. Most of us know it as meditation.”

He concluded by quoting Thich Nhat Hanh and imploring his readers to become bodhisattvas who save the world.

Like other mindfulness movement authors, Meng genuinely wanted people to practice mindfulness in order to be happy. But personal happiness, though crucial and valuable in its own right, was not the final destination on the path of mindfulness. He believed that by being happy and mindful, people would become compassionate. Becoming compassionate and mindful, they would, he believed, naturally live and act in ways that
automatically led to worldwide peace and harmony. So selling happiness via mindfulness ultimately supported a moral outlook that valued compassion and peace, promised a utopian future, and used religiously derived techniques and scientifically derived rhetoric to advance this vision of global salvation. Mindfulness, allegedly decoupled from religion and values in the process of being commodified for the wider American market, nonetheless often seems to carry evidence of an implicit (or, in many cases, explicit) value system that provides orientation in the world, a sense of transcendent purpose, a program of action, and a division of the world into insiders (the mindful) and outsiders (the mindless). This same program can be found in the works of Kabat-Zinn and Goleman, and virtually all the most prominent movers and shakers of the mindfulness movement.

This final chapter considers the ways in which mindfulness continues to operate in a religious or quasi-religious fashion, despite its advocates’ frequent insistence that it is not (or, at least, need not be) connected to religion. As we’ve seen, religion and values are downplayed by mindfulness authors to garner larger audiences—but in many cases, the reason they want an audience in the first place is because they are convinced that mindfulness and other elements derived from Buddhism have a real ability to alleviate suffering (the goal of religious Buddhism); illuminate the truths of life (such as those of impermanence and interconnectedness); and bring about dramatic, even salvific improvement on the individual, national, and planetary levels. World peace turns out to be the ultimate practical benefit of mindfulness. And mindfulness can be used to provide an order to life that stabilizes, manages, labels, and assigns meaning to all possible activities and situations. Mindfulness is connected to a whole set of self-disciplinary and lifestyle practices that are given moral weight by their promoters. Even if we accept the protestations of many advocates that mindfulness is not a religion per se, it is nonetheless doing the work of religions.  

In the process of adapting mindfulness to meet the widest American market, and thus to create the greatest potential for peace, advocates have simultaneously worked out a type of American Buddhist civil religion. Civil religion is a
longstanding trope in the field of American religious history, which has received many different interpretations over decades of scholarly discussion and dispute.\(^8\) One way to approach the concept is to recognize the way that national symbols come to hold a sort of religious aura: the Constitution as divinely inspired scripture, the American flag as holy symbol, freedom as a sacred value, and so forth. Often this has been connected with a sort of generic monotheism on the one hand, and a visionary ideal of America as unique, anointed, or predestined nation of special cosmic importance, the major player in the next or final chapter of the divine storybook of the world’s history, tasked with great responsibilities as savior and warned of terrible consequences should the country falter in its heavenly appointed role, on the other.

Another approach to civil religion considers religiously based descriptions of what a good society would look like, how to achieve it, and who would \((p.162)\) be included (and excluded) in such a society. Through the examination of mindfulness, we find that American Buddhists and fellow travelers have produced a vision of their own, with particular understandings of the United States and its mission and potential; the qualities Americans should possess; the practices they must cultivate; and the proper interaction of mindfulness with politics, education, law enforcement, the military, the legal and prison systems, economics and consumerism, and the medical establishment. The total transformation of all of these aspects of society through the adoption of mindfulness is indeed a vision of the good society—the “Mindful Society,” as a regular column in \textit{Shambhala Sun} puts it, or \textit{A Mindful Nation}, the title of U.S. Congressman Tim Ryan’s best-selling book. According to Jon Kabat-Zinn’s foreword to \textit{A Mindful Nation}, mindfulness is the way for America to fulfill its greatest national destiny: “Mindfulness can literally change our brains, improve our capacity for perspective taking and decision making, and enhance our emotional intelligence and our ability to act with clarity and wisdom, alone and in concert with others. It could also catalyze a renewed and authentic civility in public discourse. It proffers, in small but not insignificant ways, the possibility for our nation to wholeheartedly and authentically embrace its deepest democratic principles and longings.”\(^9\) In
passages like this and others offered in this chapter, we see a type of American Buddhist civil religion at work. Let us examine what the mindfulness movement imagines as the problems and solutions facing contemporary Americans.

American Buddhist Jeremiads: What’s Wrong with America?

Religions are complex cultural products, providing everything from social control to recipes for matzah ball soup. It can be dangerous to reduce religions to any single dimension, but even if religions are many things, one thing that seems undeniable is that they are proposed solutions. Religions imagine problems—such as sin, attachment, pollution, spirit attack—and provide programs of action that deal with the problems, resulting in desired benefits, be they this-worldly or transcendent. Often, and especially in the West, the problems that concern the religiously minded are individual in nature and linked to improper personal behavior and thought, which are determined according to religiously mandated systems of morality.

One of the primary concerns that mindfulness authors voice is the idea of disconnection. Throughout the various applications of mindfulness, there is the sense of alienation from oneself and one’s surroundings. Modern Americans, apparently, are estranged from their minds, bodies, surroundings, and each other. They are parenting mindlessly, eating mindlessly, working mindlessly, and generally living in a detached, distracted manner. Leigh Eric Schmidt has pointed out that this feeling drove the emergence of mysticism in America: “Modern mysticism was always formed as much out of lacking and loss as it was out of epiphanic assurance. For many, it emerged out of an empty space of longing for ‘a heightened, intensified way of life’ and represented a troubled quest for a unifying and integrative experience in an increasingly fragmented world of divided selves and lost souls.” This earlier quest was a search for union with a God who seemed ever more distant in the industrializing, urbanizing, diversifying, increasingly rootless post-Darwinian world. If anything, the trend has intensified in the current age and is amplified not only by the changes in society and
technology but also by the decreased centrality of God and Christianity in 21st century American culture. The result is a feeling not only that God or spiritual values are absent, but that we too are no longer even present. According to pediatrician and *Mindful Eating* author Jan Chozen Bays, “When we aren’t present, it makes us feel vaguely but persistently dissatisfied. This sense of dissatisfaction, of a gap between us and everything and everyone else, leads to unhappiness.”

Jon Kabat-Zinn is sure that this characterizes our common condition in America: “We are out of touch with our feelings and perceptions, with our impulses and our emotions, with our thoughts, with what we are saying, and even with our bodies. This is mostly due to being perpetually preoccupied, lost in our minds, absorbed in our thoughts, obsessed with the past or the future, consumed with our plans and our desires, diverted by our need to be entertained, driven by our expectations, fears, or cravings of the moment, however unconscious or habitual all this may be. And therefore, we are amazingly out of touch in some way or other with the present moment, the moment that is actually presenting itself to us now.”

Out of touch, we spiral downward in a cycle of disaffection, compelled into an “incessant drive to fill up your time, to get somewhere else, or obtain what you feel you are lacking so you can feel satisfied and happy. In our loneliness and isolation, there is a deep longing, a yearning, usually unconscious or ignored, to belong, to be connected to a larger whole, to not be anonymous, to be seen and known.”

For most mindfulness advocates, this process is actually a double-whammy, because not only are we cut off from our experiences, but also our very thought processes heap further torture upon ourselves. As Ronald Seigel points out: “We live most of our lives this way—lost in thought, more often thinking about life than experiencing it. But missing out on the moment-to-moment richness of life isn’t our biggest problem. Unfortunately, our thoughts frequently make us unhappy. We’re all susceptible to a kind of thinking disease. In our attempt to ensure we’ll feel good, we think of all the possible developments that might make us feel bad. While sometimes this is helpful, just as often it generates needless suffering, since every negative anticipatory thought is associated with a bit of tension or painful feeling.”
problem here is worry about the future. Another problem is negative thinking about the present. From the point of view of Susan Smalley and Diana Winston in *Fully Present: The Science, Art, and Practice of Mindfulness*, “One of the most disturbing aspects of contemporary U.S. culture is the degree to which self-hatred runs rampant. Nearly everyone I encounter expresses some amount of personal dissatisfaction and harbors a ruthless critic within who compares them to others and judges everyone they meet. I even once read an interview with Meryl Streep in which she confessed to believing she couldn’t act. Unfortunately, most people have been conditioned by cultural norms, family, media, and a host of other influences to feel inadequate and unworthy.”

The human problem, it seems, is that we are unhappy, and our unhappiness stems from being disconnected from the world, each other, and ourselves, which is ultimately due to failure to live in the present moment—and then we ladle on top of this a generous portion of unhelpful, fearful, and often self-critical thoughts. In the mindfulness movement, all of this mindlessness leads to ill-health, stress, broken relationships, poor parenting, bad work performance, sexual dysfunction, and myriad other sources of unhappiness. Primarily, we are the source of our own problems—if we acted in wiser, more aware ways, we would avoid causing trouble for ourselves; our own failures at mindfulness cause or contribute to our unhappiness.

Religions also often posit not only a problem that exists for or within individual human beings—frequently, they also have a larger social or cosmic vision that suggests that there is an ideal way for the world to operate, yet it is not currently operating in that fashion. For example, in Christianity there has been not only a human fall from grace but also an expulsion from the garden, so that humankind wanders the face of the earth, struggling to eke out a living, quarrelling with each other, and violating God’s commandments. Since the time of the British Puritan colonies, American religious history has rung with jeremiads, strongly worded sermons that claim the community and nation are off-track, and that failure to get right with God will result in imminent destruction. This venerable tradition continues to be a favored pastime in the
present, for example in Pat Robertson’s claims on *The 700 Club* that the September 11th terrorist attacks were caused by God taking away his divine protection of the nation, due to rampant American materialism, pornography, secularism, occultism, abortion, and the removal of Christianity from the schools and courts. It continues in the American mindfulness movement as well, where failure to be mindful results in behavior that threatens not only the individual but also the nation and indeed the entire world.

One place we encounter this is in *A Mindful Nation*. As narrated in the book, Congressman Tim Ryan was a fierce patriot and a dedicated statesman, but as he reflected on the state of the nation, that didn’t prevent him from believing that there was an awful lot that was wrong with America: “The pain of war. Economic insecurity. The frustrations of being sick or taking care of sick relatives in a broken health-care system. The challenge of teaching children to pay attention and be kind to themselves and others as they swim in a world of distraction and aggression...[characterized by] lack of opportunity, divisiveness, daunting environmental and energy challenges.”

Given all this, he mused, “Is it any wonder that the courageous spirit of America, and faith in our cherished values of self-reliance and stick-to-itiveness, have flagged?”

He thought back on his late grandfather, a man strong enough that he could afford to be gentle, kind, and compassionate. The contrast with modern America pained Ryan:

I see in my grandfather an example for our country. Consider where bravado and ego-based posturing has put us over the past ten years. It has cost us too many lives, as well as a lot of money. America has always been strongest when we have been tough but gentle. Gentleness is not a sign of weakness; it’s a sign of strength. We all know from the playground that the one who is acting the toughest is really the most insecure. America is at its best when we are confident. I am sorry to say that we have lost our footing. We are running around now, in different directions, looking over our shoulder, scared and unsure. We don’t know what to do
or when to do it. If we could just slow down a bit, perhaps we’d see the answer.\textsuperscript{20}

Here Ryan, a Democrat, is looking back primarily over the years of George W. Bush’s presidency and insinuating that American aggression in the Muslim world after September 11, 2001—and the sort of belligerent American attitude often connected with it—has led the country down the wrong path. Others see America as a culture of aggression, especially in the political realm, which has allegedly become completely toxic and nonfunctional. This is the \textsuperscript{(p.166)} view of David Rome and Hope Martin, who ask “Are You Listening?” in an exasperated tone in their essays for the anthology \textit{The Mindfulness Revolution}. As they survey recent political trends, this is what they find:

With cries of “Armageddon!” and “Baby killer!” the great U.S. health care debate in 2010 reached its tortured climax. The debate was adversarial, angry, hateful, even violent—a long-running case study in dysfunctional communication. Politicians on both sides were trapped in scripts that required them to assert fixed political positions and ignore or attack what the other side was saying, rarely sharing their true thoughts and feelings. Cable television pundits leapt into the fray like gladiators, interrupting and out-shouting each other with fierce abandon. The health care imbroglio may be an extreme example, but it reflects a larger pathology in our culture, one that is driven by combativeness on the one hand and disingenuousness on the other. If we are to survive the twenty-first century, we must become better communicators, speaking and listening honestly and compassionately across diversity and difference. Unsatisfying communication is rampant in our society: between spouses; between parents and children; among neighbors and coworkers; in civic and political life; and between nations, religions, and ethnicities.\textsuperscript{21}

For Congressman Ryan, America was acting like a schoolyard bully, strutting around puffed up with stupid aggression in order to mask all the insecurities and problems lurking inside, while for Rome and Martin American society seemed a
seething cauldron of anger and dysfunction. For Jan Chozen Bays, leader of Great Vow Zen Monastery, America was closer to a ravenous spirit from Buddhist mythology:

Caught by desire. It’s true of everyone, but somehow, it seems especially true of Americans... We have learned to stay in constant motion, chasing after desires, only vaguely aware of the chronic feeling of dissatisfaction and emptiness underneath. This treadmill of unending desire creates a nation of hungry ghosts. In Buddhist art, hungry ghosts are depicted with the huge swollen bellies of chronic malnutrition, but with necks so thin they cannot swallow one grain of rice without choking. It is the realm of unending craving. Hungry ghosts are not phantoms born of superstitious beliefs of medieval people. They are alive and starving here in America, which we often brag about as being “the most affluent society in the world.” We think we have the “goods” but actually, we don’t. We don’t have good public education, or good health care for all our citizens. We don’t provide good pay for people who teach our children. We don’t have good public transportation so people can get to their jobs, doctors, and schools. We don’t even have good food. We are poor in the essentials and rich in the nonessentials. We have second snowmobiles, third cars, a freezer full of Haagen-Dazs and a TV in every room, including the bathrooms of our McMansions. But we don’t have happiness.

Desire, rather than insecurity or perhaps xenophobia, is the boogeyman for Bays. The result is a nation overloaded with second-rate institutions and more junk than anyone needs.

For many commentators in the mindfulness movement, America suffers from the rapid pace of modern life, often in connection with the instant and frivolous culture of electronic media, and the extremely fast (and, mostly, deleterious) changes in society being wrought by the online revolution. Susan Smalley and Diana Winston allege that “Modern society tends to condition us to be anything but mindful:” “The dominant American culture validates virtually mindless productivity, busyness, speed, and efficiency. The last thing
we want to do is just be present. We want to do, to succeed, to produce...But this is life in America in the twenty-first century and, to an increasing degree, around the world. We are so focused on doing that we have forgotten all about being, and the toll this takes on our physical, mental, and emotional health is significant.”

Jon Kabat-Zinn was even more sour on this development. In Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness he characterized America as “A.D.D. Nation,” claiming “the entire society suffers from attention deficit disorder—big time—and from its most prevalent variant, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. And it is getting worse by the day:”

It is now harder to pay attention to any one thing and there is more to pay attention to. We are easily diverted and more easily distracted. We are continuously bombarded with information, appeals, deadlines, communications. Things come at us fast and furious, relentlessly. And almost all of it is man-made; it has thought behind it, and more often than not, an appeal to either our greed or our fears. These assaults on our nervous system continually stimulate and foster desire and agitation rather than contentedness and calmness. They foster reaction rather than communication, discord rather than accord or concord, (p.168) acquisitiveness rather than feeling whole and complete as we are. And above all, if we are not careful, they rob us of time, of our moments. We are continually being squeezed or projected into the future as our present moments are assaulted and consumed in the fires of endless urgency. The relentless acceleration of our way of life over the past few generations has made focusing in on anything at all something of a lost art. That loss has been compounded by the digital revolution, which—think back just a few short years—rapidly found its way into our everyday lives in the form of home computers, fax machines, beepers, cell phones, cell phones with cameras, palm devices for personal organization, laptops, 24/7 high-speed connectivity, the Internet and its World Wide Web, and of course, e-mail, all now
increasingly wireless, not that long ago an unthinkable dream, the stuff of science fiction.\textsuperscript{25}

In this presentation, the things that many of us like to think of as conveniences and necessities of modern life are rendered as nightmares, a ceaseless flood of maddening technology by which we are “assaulted” and “consumed.” The situation is dire. Kabat-Zinn has maintained that he is optimistic that mindfulness will eventually save us from ourselves, but he has also repeatedly cautioned about what may lie in store for us: “The fate of our species may hang in the balance, not in some far-off future, but perhaps in the next few generations, much sooner than we might imagine.”\textsuperscript{26} He, like many involved in the mindful parenting and mindful teaching movements, was especially concerned about the impact of modern society on children’s development.

Finally, there are the environmentalist concerns commonly raised in the mindfulness movement. Stephanie Kaza, in \textit{Mindfully Green}, succinctly encapsulates the widespread view that America, if not the world, could face imminent environmental collapse: “With all our best efforts, it will still be impossible to eliminate all the harm being done to the world. The scale of environmental suffering is too widespread and too deeply entrenched. Many of today’s predicaments were set in motion long before our time. Many situations are simply out of our control. While we can do our best to reduce the harm associated with our own actions, we are limited in how much we can reduce the extensive harm caused by others...Today we look around the world and there is no shortage of environmental suffering. Strip-mining for coal now destroys whole mountains in West Virginia, filling valley streams with sludge and people’s homes with toxic waste...In the middle of the Pacific Ocean a floating waste dump the size of Texas collects billions of pieces of plastic debris—false ‘food’\textsuperscript{169} that attracts animals from up and down the food chain.”\textsuperscript{27} Such views are echoed by many other mindfulness advocates. Even mindfulness advocates like Thich Nhat Hanh—normally not a particularly alarmist writer—express grim worries about the future:
We are like sleepwalkers, not knowing what we are doing or where we are headed. Whether we can wake up or not depends on whether we can walk mindfully on our Mother Earth. The future of all life, including our own, depends on our mindful steps. We have to hear the bells of mindfulness that are sounding across our planet. We have to start learning how to live in a way so that a future will be possible for our children and grandchildren. I have sat with the Buddha for a long time and consulted him about the issue of global warming, and the teaching of the Buddha is very clear. If we continue to live as we have been living, consuming without a thought to the future, destroying our forests and emitting dangerous amounts of carbon dioxide, then devastating climate change is inevitable. Much of our ecosystem will be destroyed. Sea levels will rise and coastal cities will be inundated, forcing hundreds of millions of refugees from their homes, creating wars and outbreaks of infectious disease.28

Buddha, it turns out, is an environmentalist. Hanh here is speaking prophetically, as a variety of other prominent mindfulness authors do, trying to wake us up (thus his reference to mindfulness bells, which shake us out of our autopilot stupor) to the extreme challenges that we face. Mindlessness and greed have brought us to the brink of destruction, and everything we hold dear is imperiled. Kaza and Hanh are by no means unusual in their cries for environmental mindfulness. In fact, one can easily find all of the above dynamics operating in many mindfulness books. Humans as a species, and especially Americans, are apparently aggressive, stressed out, greed-ridden, fractious, distracted, and wasteful. America is rushing toward destruction and pulling the whole planet down with us.

Mindfulness, Human Nature, and Values

But the doom-crying voice is not the only mindfulness movement perspective on human nature. In fact, the sturm und drang can be partially blamed on the fact that mindfulness is usually associated with a very lofty opinion of human nature, and of individual human beings—and thus
when we fail to live up to that nearly divine potential, the frustration is all the greater.

Religions typically posit a theology of human nature, or at least of human capacity and worth. In the case of the mindfulness movement, human nature is unambiguously good. As a Shambhala Sun editorial put it, one of the magazine’s basic principles is “Mindful Living. All people share the same basic nature of awareness, wisdom, and goodness. That is our human birthright. People of all spiritual paths, or none at all, increasingly want to live in a mindful, loving way, and they see that meditative traditions like Buddhism can help them do it.”

This notion of birthright appears throughout the mindfulness literature and is a particular favorite phrase of Jon Kabat-Zinn, and therefore of the legions inspired by his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. As he explains, “These inner resources are our birthright. They are available to us across our entire life span because they are not in any way separate from us. It is in our very nature as a species to learn and grow and heal and move toward greater wisdom in our ways of seeing and in our actions, and toward greater compassion toward ourselves and others...Mindfulness is the final common pathway of what makes us human, our capacity for awareness and for self-knowing.”

Spiritual teacher Joseph Naft agrees: “To be truly human is to be mindful. The direct awareness of primary perceptions is one of the primary wonders of being human, enriching our life beyond measure...Mindfulness is the authentic state for a human being: a relaxed, open awareness of our inner and outer perceptions in the moment.”

This connection between mindfulness and authenticity appears frequently in mindfulness literature. Kabat-Zinn states it succinctly: “Ultimately, mindfulness can become an effortless, seamless element of our life, a way for our very being to express itself authentically, with integrity.”

Religions are primary sources of values for human culture. In the case of the mindfulness movement, we find that one of the highest values is the sacredness of happiness. Human beings are supposed to be happy—as Meng puts it, “Happiness is the default state of mind”—and we go off-track when we fail to be happy. Failure to be happy results in suffering, stress, pain,
and disease, which are the principle targets of the mindfulness movement. As Ryan explains, “Happiness is found by deeply experiencing the exact moment we are in. Happiness is being totally alive.” Suffering unhappily, by this logic, is equal to being sick, perhaps even dead. It is no coincidence that suffering is also the primary concern of traditional Buddhism, which seeks to eliminate suffering as its basic raison d’être. Despite the assertions from many mindfulness advocates that it is not Buddhism and that mindfulness’s connections to Buddhism are circumstantial or unimportant, mindfulness is used specifically to attack suffering—deeply coded as negative—and bring about happiness, as in Buddhism. The difference is that the horizon of happiness has been reduced from future lives or attainment of nirvana to the present life and more mundane conceptualizations of happiness.

A further value widely associated with mindfulness is compassion, as well as its translation into altruistic action. As Ryan noted, “I wrote A Mindful Nation to promote the values of slowing down, taking care of ourselves, being kind, and helping each other. It seems to me that if we embrace these values individually, it will benefit us collectively. And our country will be a little bit better off as a result.” As he saw it, “We need to raise our children in a nation that teaches them to be mindful, that teaches them about the importance of kindness and being connected to their fellow human beings and the environment that sustains them. A nation that teaches them to appreciate their basic human goodness and see that goodness in others.” For many this too seems to be almost an inherent human quality, as with mindfulness. The authors of Fully Present see lovingkindness as innate: “It is valuable to see that you already have feelings of loving-kindness and to appreciate yourself for your innate capacity to love and experience compassion.” As Jeff Brantley puts it in his “Mindfulness FAQ:” “It is useful to call upon some other qualities we have within us. These qualities are kindness, compassion, and equanimity. It is important to realize that we are not imagining these qualities or inventing them. Rather, they are already within us, important elements of our deepest nature as human beings.”
This emphasis on compassion is found in a great many mindfulness books. Sometimes, it is marketed strategically as a tool for increasing one’s own happiness: act nice to others and your life will be happier. But often the connection is more explicitly linked to ideals that genuinely value others. Many feel that mindfulness is an inherently compassionate activity. This has two sides. First, because mindfulness means just nonjudgmentally accepting whatever happens in your experiencing of the present moment, this is a form of extending compassion to one’s experiences and self. As Smalley and Winston note, “The attitude you cultivate in mindfulness practice—one of acceptance and openness—feels similar to loving-kindness. In mindful acceptance, a quality of kindness is present; you are kind to yourself and to your experience of the moment.”

Second, bare awareness of the present leads to insight into one’s inescapable interconnection with all others, as well as equivalency of others’ suffering with our own, both of which engender compassionate feelings toward other people, living things, and the world.

This valuing of compassion by the mindfulness movement often moves beyond simple mindfulness exercises to attempt to actively cultivate such feelings. A prime example of this is the popularity of metta (loving-kindness) meditations in mindfulness works. Like sati meditation, these techniques are derived originally from traditional Buddhist monastic practices. In the practice of lovingkindness meditation, one cultivates an ever-widening circle of loving feelings toward others. This form of Buddhist meditation is common in many MBSR programs and appears in dozens of mindfulness books. Smalley and Winston provide a good example:

Bring to mind someone who makes you feel happy the moment you think of them—a relative, a close friend, someone with whom you don’t have too complicated a relationship...While imagining your loved one in front of you, begin to wish this person well: May you be safe and protected from danger. May you be happy and peaceful. May you be healthy and strong. May you have ease and well-being... As you say these words, have a sense of letting this loving-kindness come from you and begin to
touch your loved one...Let yourself bring to mind one person or a group of people whom you wish to send loving-kindness...Let this loving-kindness expand, spreading out and touching anyone you want to touch right now. Let it go in all directions, toward people you know, toward people you don’t know, toward people you have difficulty with, toward people you love. Imagine expansive and pervasive loving-kindness, touching and changing every person and every animal...So may everyone everywhere be happy and peaceful and at ease. May we all experience great joy.  

MBSR and other mindfulness practitioners who encounter these teachings are not simply taught value-neutral awareness techniques—they are coached to cultivate profoundly universal feelings of compassion and love for all people and every living thing. This perspective on life is not only value laden but is also promoted as both improving the world and as key to one’s own health and happiness.

Compassion typically extends into a valuing of peacefulness, pacifism, and nonviolence. Given the movement’s Buddhist roots, the strong orientation toward healing in the mindfulness movement, and the involvement of large numbers of health care workers, this set of mindfulness-connected values is hardly surprising. As Jon Kabat-Zinn puts it, “The foundation for mindfulness practice, for all meditative inquiry and exploration, lies in ethics and morality, and above all, the motivation of non-harming.” Mindfulness advocates who simply focus on personal benefits such as success at work or sports wouldn’t necessarily agree, but the many for whom mindfulness is part of a more comprehensive approach to life would typically concur.

Mindfulness rhetoric turns on the idea of freedom, of liberation from one’s problems, whether they are practical (job loss, back pain) or internal (self-loathing, substance addiction). Mindfulness is part of the diffuse spirituality movement in the West and is often marketed as a friendly, easy, personal practice that has no rules or commandants. But we should recognize that self-control and discipline are also cardinal values for the mindfulness movement. As Thich Nhat Hanh
puts it: "When we sit down peacefully, breathing and smiling, with awareness, we are our true selves, we have sovereignty over ourselves. When we open ourselves up to a TV program, we let ourselves be invaded by the program." For those who actually comprehensively put into practice a full regimen of mindful activities, mindfulness programs are about establishing control over important aspects of one’s life, reflecting an anxiety about powerlessness in a complex and fast-paced society where personal success is less than guaranteed. It seems likely that control over eating and other mundane tasks is asserted when control over one’s job, family, and other aspects of life are impossible: anxieties are sublimated and transferred into a realm (such as eating) that is self-manageable.

Thus mindfulness authors frequently assert the need for strict personal discipline in one’s approach to mindfulness. In her book *Eating Mindfully*, Susan Albers claims that “the key to changing the way you eat is not to develop discipline over your fork, but to master control of your mind...becoming aware is the first step of being in control...Mindful eating requires you to consciously say to yourself, ‘I choose to change my eating, and I will work through any difficulties,’ every time you sit down to eat a meal.” This search for discipline becomes totalistic in many of these books. Jan Chozen Bays demands “never, under any circumstances, eat in front of the TV, computer screen, while driving, or on the phone” and recommends discipline not only of the mind and body but of the physical environment itself:

Find ways to turn a space in your environment into a place that fosters mindful eating. In that place, remove any clutter that could distract you while you eat. Objects like phones or clocks that pull you away from a mindful state should be moved elsewhere. Put your place setting so that it faces away from the kitchen (or refrigerator). Bring food to the table before you eat, so you won’t have to get up. Or, create a new space. Tailor it to be a calm, peaceful environment that brings you a mindful state. If you wish, burn incense or change the lighting. Add a pretty tablecloth and fresh flowers. Play soothing
This emphasis on strict self-discipline is partially a trace of the monastic origins of these practices—seemingly, rigorously applied mindfulness during eating and other daily activities develops into a sort of lay, fully secularized neo-monasticism in the American context.

Above all, mindfulness movement writers value the present moment. In *Coming to Our Senses* Jon Kabat-Zinn says: “The power of the present moment is inconceivable, just as inconceivable for us as the huge energy of the vacuum or the tininess of un-unfurled dimensions deep inside our atoms or nested within the fabric of space itself. In the case of the present moment, there is no way to believe in it, and no need to. One need only experience it and see for oneself how it might add back a dimension to living that accords us other degrees of freedom, whole new realms and ways to inhabit our lives and our world for the briefest moments we are here, that sum so quickly to what we call a lifetime, and that are so easily missed.”

In mindfulness movement writings the present moment becomes both savior and heaven: the vehicle for salvation and salvation itself. As Thich Nhat Hanh asserts in *You Are Here: Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment*: “The only moment in which you can be truly alive is the present moment. The present moment is the destination, the point to arrive at.” The mindfulness movement seeks to remedy existential suffering by re-inhabiting the present moment, the present body, the present mind, and the present environment. In strengthening one’s connection to these immediate phenomena, it is believed that one can be continuously refreshed, revitalized, and made whole. In other words, a sort of rupture between the self and the mind, body, and world is being allegedly healed in the act of mindfulness.

### Mindfulness: Meaning and Conversion Narratives

Because mindfulness is often packaged along with a set of values, it can become a powerful source for finding meaning in one’s life. Many feel that mindfulness should ideally become a
lens through which all of life is experienced. They say things like “You can use mindfulness as a way to approach anything you do in the world, in the way you work, relate to people, or deal with painful issues in your life,” and “When we use mindful eyes, everything is beautiful and everyone walks in beauty.” Ronald Siegel declares “Once we develop a bit of concentration, the whole world beings to feel more alive, more interconnected. Plants, animals, and even other people are experienced as part of a vibrant, interactive whole. If we have a theistic perspective, mindfulness helps us connect directly with God or the Divine. Everything becomes numinous, infused with the spirit of life.” Mindfulness, in other words, is not only a tool for gaining happiness—which, remember, is given positive, indeed quasi-sacred value by mindfulness advocates—for some of its most ardent advocates, mindfulness is also a complete way of viewing the world itself.

It is no surprise, therefore, that many mindfulness movement authors present their own conversion narratives to the way of mindfulness. Like traditional religious conversion narratives, these often appear in the wake of trauma, deep soul-searching, or hitting bottom in some profound manner. A good example is actress and mindful education advocate Goldie Hawn, as she explained in *10 Mindful Minutes*. Like many Americans, she could vividly recall the moment on September 11, 2001 when the phone rang and someone told her to turn on the television to see the real-time terrorist destruction of the World Trade Center towers. “Like relatives at a deathbed, we gathered in front of the TV—watching, waiting, and weeping. With each new image and every slow-motion replay, we mourned the passing of life as we had known it. This was real. This was a game changer. The world would never be the same after this. The events of 9/11 would polarize people of every country, religion, color, and creed. Reactions would ripple back and forth across oceans, creating a tidal wave of suspicion and fear. I saw the future unfolding before me, and it frightened me.”

This event was so huge, so terrifying, so disturbing, that it called out for some sort of reaction, something that would give
positive meaning to the trauma and restore a sense of goodness in the world:

I went to my knitting basket and found some old threads of red, white, and blue. Knitting has always been a form of meditation for me, and so I began to knit the American flag. As I sat there, tears falling onto my stitches, I came to a profound and deeply emotional decision. I felt compelled to do something, no matter how insignificant, that would be more meaningful and lasting than the joining of a few fragments of wool. My kind of patriotism doesn’t have to do with being red or being blue; it doesn’t even have a label. It has to do with loving my country and its great potential and respecting our powers of resilience. No matter how small a gesture, I believe that we can all do something to make this world a better place. If I could help just one little girl or boy move beyond those images that will haunt us all, that would be a gift.

The result was the creation of MindUP™, a program designed to deliver mindfulness skills to schoolchildren throughout America. Hawn became a tireless advocate of inserting mindfulness into the school system, which she pursued by funding studies that demonstrate the benefits of mindfulness, speaking and writing on the topic, and working with educators and politicians to get schools to adopt the MindUP™ program. Thus, like many zealous new converts to religious traditions, Hawn was inspired by her newfound love of mindfulness to become an evangelist, proselytizing the gospel of mindfulness in order to save an imperiled world. She hoped to convert her fellow Americans—if not the whole world—to her chosen path, and in doing so set aright the world that was so traumatically blown askew when the Twin Towers crumbled and America became deeply polarized. In doing so, she not only acted out religious scripts but also expressed her patriotic civil religious devotion to the United States.

Tim Ryan’s narrative follows the classic pattern of personal revelation, followed by assiduous evangelization. He described his experience of a “Power of Mindfulness” retreat in upstate New York led by Jon Kabat-Zinn in November 2008, just after
Barack Obama’s election as president: “Snow was falling on my face as I walked—silently and slowly—beneath still-colorful trees. Leaves crackled under my weight as my foot hit the ground. I heard water moving over rocks in the small stream just a few feet to my left. My body relaxed, my brow unfurled. Something just happened, but I wasn’t doing anything. I just let it be. The landscape looked crisper; my breath in the cold air entranced me. It felt as if a cloud had lifted from my eyes. I had no desire to be elsewhere—no thoughts about a better place. There was nothing to achieve or anything to prove to anyone else. I didn’t have to defend a political position and I felt no need to prove my self-worth through running for office. I didn’t need to be liked. I didn’t crave affirmation. I was...OK. I literally just was.”\(^50\) This stillness, couched in vaguely Buddhist enlightenment terms, was impactful to Ryan, who described it as pleasurable and blissful. Over the course of the retreat he sank further into this feeling, and it changed the way he perceived himself and the world: “The deeper the silence became, the deeper I realized the inanity, even the insanity, of putting so much effort into fictional story lines rather than listening to and noticing what’s happening in and around me at any given moment...I couldn’t believe I’d spent so much time and energy trying to uphold a story I created in my own head...Watching this crazy story line from a distance, I decompressed. The pain, the hurt, the judgments dropped away. And then I was in a state of disbelief that I had missed so much of my life. But now I could breathe. The pressure evaporated.”\(^51\) His view transformed by a source of peace, wisdom, relief, and forgiveness that he hadn’t previously imagined, Ryan immediately decided to dedicate his life to spreading the word about mindfulness:

The mindfulness retreat at the foot of the Catskills rocked my world. And now I felt that I wanted to share what I had experienced with my family and friends. I wanted to teach it to my two-year-old nephew, my brother, to my mom. “Everybody get off the roller coaster, I’ve found the answer,” I wanted to scream...At that moment, I decided I would advocate in Congress and on the Appropriations Committee for integrating mindfulness into key aspects of our society. Since the
committee I was sitting on funds health care, research, and education, I could use my position to help mindfulness become an element in various government programs. I had tried to use my life and talents to relieve people’s suffering through social and economic justice. But I realized at that retreat in the Catskills that if I truly wanted to relieve people’s suffering and make modest attempts to improve the social and economic situation of our country, there was more I could do. As I saw it, there would be no better way to help people than to dedicate my work to integrating mindfulness into health care, education, and society at large...I resolved that my life would no longer be driven by doing one thing after another or getting ahead or getting a new title. It would be guided more by seeing the wonder that unfolds in daily life and the millions of miracles that happen moment to moment.52

Since this experience, Ryan has written a book on mindfulness, given innumerable interviews, advocated for mindfulness in Ohio schools, and helped in numerous other ways to bring positive attention to the mindfulness movement. Part Paul, part Constantine, he has used his personal conviction and his position within the U.S. government to further the movement in ways beyond the capacity of most Americans. But his essential story—personal transformation, the desire to share with others, and the search for a better America—is repeated in the lives of many mindfulness teachers and practitioners.

The Dawning of a New Civilization: Mindful Society, Mindful World

So what is the civil religious vision for a good society as envisioned by mindfulness movement enthusiasts? For most, mindfulness itself is revolutionary (a good red meat American word): “A quiet revolution is happening in America. It’s not a revolution fueled by anger lurking on the fringes of our democracy. It’s a peaceful revolution, being led by ordinary citizens,” Congressman Ryan asserted.53 “At the core of this revolution is mindfulness.”54 This revolution will help bring about a change in America that is both transformative and yet
simultaneously a return to quintessential American principles, because this mindfulness will help us embody our most sacred ideals as Americans: “We don’t need a new set of values. I really believe we can reinvigorate our traditional, commonly held American values—such as self-reliance, perseverance, pragmatism, and taking care of each other—by adding a little more mindfulness to our lives.”

Listening to Jon Kabat-Zinn during retreat, Ryan had an insight. “I started to see mindfulness as very much in line with the values of America. Our founding fathers acted from the heart when they transformed our world by stating that ‘all men are created equal,’ ‘endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights’ such as life, liberty, and happiness.”

The results of the mindfulness revolution will be substantial: “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.”

As with Ryan, for many commentators the obvious solution to the problems facing us as individuals and as citizens is mindfulness deployed on a sufficiently large scale, so that it guides all aspects of our society, either because each individual is mindful or because mindfulness is somehow actively built into our institutions. A mindful society will either automatically be good, or it will at least establish a solid foundation for discerning what is good and necessary, and be able to effectively carry out programs of action that result in maximum success. Furthermore, American history and values have themselves been potentially leading to a mindful society all along. As Kabat-Zinn observes:

In a society founded on democratic principles and a love of freedom, sooner or later meditative practices, what are sometimes called consciousness disciplines, are bound to come to the fore as is happening now, as the climate for personal and collective independence and inquiry is nourished and blossoms. Democracy encourages and nurtures pluralism and a diversity of views. It encourages making use of our freedoms, inwardly as well as outwardly in the pursuit of happiness. We are naturally drawn to understand
ourselves in deeper and deeper ways as individuals, as a society, as a species. It is part of the ongoing evolutionary process on this planet...\

Mindfulness is here written into the teleological evolution of the human race itself, destined to flower in democratic, freedom-loving societies such as America. So America leads to mindfulness, and mindfulness in turn will save America.

What would such a mindful society or world look like, according to members of the mindfulness movement? For Ryan, it would be effective, compassionate, happy, and harmonious:

The evidence I’ve seen tells me that as we bring mindfulness into health care, we will find a tool that helps us to take care of ourselves better, to see the roots of many of our problems. An increase in self-care not only makes us feel better, but it also costs our system less, allowing us to focus more of our resources on illnesses beyond our control. When we bring mindfulness into education, we help our students increase attention, decrease their stress, and work more creatively with their social emotions. And teachers find they pay better attention to the real needs of all their students and foster a better classroom attention. When we bring mindfulness into the military, we help to enhance the greatest resource we have to ensure our own security and defense, something more powerful than any high-tech weaponry: well-functioning, high-performing human beings who have refined situational awareness. When we bring mindfulness into our approaches to energy, the environment, and the economy, we can find ways to live more simply while discovering a kind of prosperity that doesn’t abuse our planet. When the caregivers and social workers bring mindfulness into the street, you would be surprised by how they can help the most traumatized people find courage and heart—and how the practice can help the caregivers themselves prevent the burnout that plagues their professions.
All of these mindful applications will result in a truly mindful nation, which is a strong, compassionate society. As Susan Smalley and Diana Winston state, “A more mindful society is ultimately a kinder society.” Ryan agrees: “My goal is that America will be a kinder, more compassionate nation, because I know deep down in my heart that we are a kinder, more compassionate country than is evident today. Reviving our compassionate spirit will allow us to listen carefully to each other, find points of agreement, and recapture the unity of purpose that made America great. A mindful nation is about recognizing that we are all connected: we are in this together...We know that when we join together, work together, and care about each other, our freedom actually increases. Real independence emerges when we know how to support each other. The Declaration of Independence was a communal act.”

According to Roman Catholic nun and mindfulness promoter Elizabeth Thoman, what is needed is “re-imagining the American dream.” As she explains, the American dream is one of ever-expanding consumerism, inculcated in us by a dangerous mediascape that sells us the idea that we must always be buying, always acquiring. The American dream is now unsustainable and must be changed. Instead, we need to move “toward a materially renewable lifestyle that would fulfill the physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of all—not just some—of the world’s people, while allowing them to live in peace and freedom. Under such a system communication’s most important aim would be to bring people together.” For Thoman, the key begins with altering our relationship to the media, so that we can redirect it into healthy pathways, rather than being a victim of corporations’ desire to pick our pockets. “A positive alternative is needed. What I have called media awareness—the recognition of the media’s role in shaping our lives and molding our deepest thoughts and feelings—is an important step. The steps I have outlined above provide simple but effective tools for beginning to work through this process. Although they seem basic, they have their roots in the profound state of being that Buddhism calls mindfulness: being aware, carefully examining, asking questions, and being
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Mindful Politics

Mindfulness programs for achieving the good society support liberal values (racial tolerance, gay rights, feminism, environmentalism) but are usually far from radical in their understanding of social change itself. For example, as we saw in the opening selections from *Search Within Yourself*, they usually advocate social change through cultivation of personal morality, one meditator at a time. The basic theory here is that personal, social, and environmental problems are (at least partially) caused by a lack of mindfulness. On a certain level this implies that one’s sufferings are the result of poor life choices, but the harsher possible versions of this view are significantly mitigated by the general understanding that one’s choices are themselves influenced by an aggressively anti-mindful culture, designed to generate desire through advertising and infected by historic prejudices from an earlier era. As each individual becomes convinced of mindfulness’s power, they will begin to practice mindfulness as they see fit. This will lead to more compassion and flexibility in society, and as mindfulness practitioners approach a critical mass of the population, this will automatically result in kinder, more progressive lawmaking and enforcement, and corporations will voluntarily begin to produce healthier, more holistic products to be consumed by an enlightened, ever-improving consumer culture. Because mindfulness allows people to see things as they really are, without blinders or conditioning, they will naturally gravitate—individually, yet en masse—toward liberal American values and politics, because these are just self-evidently correct, based on reality and not on prejudice, one’s social environment, or delusion.

The tendency to link mindfulness and liberal values is so pervasive that when someone objects, it tends not to compute with others in the mindfulness movement. Consider the following exchange that played out in the letters column of *Shambhala Sun*. The May 2012 issue carried a letter from Jen Evans, a woman in San Francisco, critiquing the liberal bias of the magazine: “I think you have a great magazine and I love conscious." Thoman’s prescriptions are echoed in many mindfulness publications.
the articles on practice and mindfulness, but it’s difficult to swallow other articles, whose authors assume the readership is liberal or ‘progressive.’ Can someone not be both Buddhist and conservative? Is that not allowed? Why do you assume that your readership will simply follow along the liberal way of thinking about more government handouts and spreading the wealth around? I think it’s wrong to wait for some entity to save you. Where is the self-reliance and resourcefulness in that? Please consider the groupthink you are displaying.”


Nonetheless, other readers were baffled by the allegations of liberal slant in *Shambhala Sun*. In the September 2012 issue Malcolm Clark, another reader from California, professed to be startled at such an accusation: “As a subscriber who has read every issue from cover to cover (sometimes twice) for years, I am hard pressed to recall anything that overtly intends to ‘follow along the liberal way of thinking about government handouts and spreading the wealth around.’” One wonders how this reader overlooked, for example, “The Meaning of Barack Obama” article in the November 2008 issue, delivered shortly before the presidential election, which essentially endorsed the Democratic candidate—and was
partially reprinted for good measure the following year in the July 2009 issues as part of its “For 30 years the Best of American Buddhism” retrospective. Or for that matter, the September 2006 “Mindful Politics” issue, which showcased only authors shopping various degrees of liberal attitudes and solutions. The liberal preference can hardly be said to be subtle in passages such as the following, from that issue:

Here in America, a plutocracy with a broken moral compass, a cook’s tour of our dilemmas reveals that our ship of state has run aground on the problems of immigration; poverty; the lack of universal health care; the complex issue of a planet-altering global warming; political corruption such as influence peddling by lobbyists like Jack Abramoff; the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina; racism; the startling decline of literacy (only 31 percent of college graduates can read a complex book and extrapolate from it); the loss of not only civility and courtesy but also safety in so many of our public spaces; the failure of 1,750 schools to meet No Child Left Behind standards for math and reading (all fifty states received an F from the federal government on demonstrating their teachers had a bachelor’s degree, a state license, and proven competency in every subject they teach); a burgeoning prison industry; the failure to address the plight of young black males who are increasingly alienated from society in violent, drug-ridden neighborhoods; the outsourcing of jobs; growing economic electronic surveillance and accumulation of private information on citizens; a president (and congress) with the lowest approval ratings since Richard Nixon; and the saddling of future generations with a staggering national debt.

This is a laundry list of mid-George W. Bush–era liberal grievances, rolling with barely concealed anger and angst. And while particularly exhaustive, it is in no way out of line with the usual range of concerns and attitudes expressed in the primary mindfulness forums.

Clark, in responding to Evans’s letter, was so convinced that mindfulness and Buddhist practice lead to liberal values that
he forecast a coming change in the original writer’s views: “I do know conservatives who embrace Buddhist principles, but my consistent observation is that they shift their political outlook toward the center in the process. Is this because ‘reality has a well-known liberal bias’? I believe Ms. Evans has much joy to look forward to as she begins to see herself in everyone she encounters, inspiring the compassionate generosity that is the cornerstone of all lasting spiritual orientations, regardless of political leaning.” The nod to other political leanings is disingenuous, as the previous paragraph states that fundamental Buddhist values lead to a communalistic view that punctures the ideas of self-reliance that Evans suggests. From the standpoint of most mindfulness authors, no, you really can’t be both Buddhist and conservative, because mindfulness of interconnection confirms liberal points of view.

As might be expected from a politics that emerges primarily from white middle-class America—or in the case of Thich Nhat Hanh and similar figures, has especially been embraced by white, middle-class Americans—mindful civil religion does not call for mandatory participation in mindful activities, radical changes to the economic structure, aggressive or combative political struggle, or class warfare. Rather, for many it is apparent that mindful capitalism will be sufficient, as will mindful politics, mindful consumption, mindful work, and so on. As Kabat-Zinn asserts:

How we choose from moment to moment to live and act influences the world in small ways that may be disproportionately beneficial, especially if the motivation our choices come out of is wholesome, i.e., healthy, and the actions themselves wise and compassionate. In this way, the healing of the body politic can evolve without rigid control or direction, through the independent and interdependent agency and efforts of many different people and institutions, with many different and rich perspectives, aims, and interests, and with a common and potentially unifying interest as well, that of the greater well-being of the world...We are sitting atop a unique moment in history unfolding, a major tipping
point. This time we are in provides singular opportunities that can be seized and made use of with every breath. There is only one way to do that. It is to embody, in our lives as they are unfolding here and now, our deepest values and our understanding of what is important—and share it with each other, trusting that such embodied actions, on even the smallest of scales, will entrain the world over time into greater wisdom and health and sanity.\(^\text{72}\)

The way to heal the world is to be vigilantly mindful in every moment of our own lives, which will lead to good life choices, and hope that this will rub off on others in the long run.

Most mindfulness authors expect change to come about slowly, peacefully, through the established political system. They also rarely call for wholesale shifts to a totally new form of economic organization. A mindful America will still be a consumerist, capitalist nation—it’ll just be a kinder, more ecologically aware one. As Daniel Goleman tries to persuade readers in his essay “A Mindful Consumer Can Help Change the World::” “Mindful shopping is a potentially important practice, a socially engaged act that could collectively help us save the world from its greatest threat: us. It seems likely that if we practice mindfulness, we will become more in tune with our world ecologically. We will get more in touch with our actual needs and will be driven less by our desires.”\(^\text{73}\) So being mindful will save us because we will buy less. Furthermore, we will make more intelligent choices, so the products we buy will be more eco-friendly. This allows the market itself to become our savior:

To the extent that more people shop mindfully, it will have a telling impact on the market. Market share will shift toward the more ecologically virtuous products. Brand managers will pay attention, creating a virtuous cycle whereby our choices based on sound, transparent information influence the market. It will pay for companies to innovate, to change their practices, to go after our dollar by upgrading the ecological impacts of what they’re trying to sell us. Finally, our mindful
shopping habits could shift the debate within the corporate world about sustainability, which is stalled right now. Most voices for corporate social responsibility say that companies should pay attention to ecological impacts because it’s the morally and ethically correct thing to do. The counterargument is that the first duty of corporations is to their investors. But if doing good also becomes what is most economically advantageous, that debate will be over. They will make better choices because we’ve made the better choice.74

This is not a call for comprehensive wealth redistribution. Most mindfulness authors pin their hopes on a mindful capitalism as sufficient to bring about the kinder, wiser society they envision.

It should be stated that for some mindfulness authors, there is an implicit further step to this process. It isn’t simply that everyone will become mindful and therefore save the world through mindful consumption and mindful voting—because mindfulness promotes compassion, it is expected that mindfulness will lead many into actual social justice, environmental conservation, and political activism. So mindfulness is not just about sitting down quietly: there is an expectation that the meditator will eventually stand up energized to get to work on improving the world. When this happens, not only will mindfulness guide wise choices of voting, lobbying, protesting, helping, and consuming, but will also assist the worker in fighting burnout, political cynicism, and hopelessness in the face of setbacks and the scale of complex problems facing the world.

Conclusion

No matter how much effort is expended to remove the religious nature of mindfulness, it still continues to have the capacity to operate in a religious manner. We might call this a secular religion, one devoid of the supernatural and the afterlife yet operating as a deep well of values, life orientation, and utopian vision. This secular mindful religion can be married to a specific religious tradition such as Buddhism (as in the case of Chade-Meng Tan) or Christianity (as in the case
of Tim Ryan, a devout Roman Catholic), and it can also operate on its own as a free-standing system.

The total mindfulness movement in America is a broad spectrum. For every practitioner hoping mindfulness will bring about peace on earth, you can easily find another whose mindfulness practice doesn’t value anything higher than making money through increased attention at work or losing weight through more conscious eating habits. Those who do attach morals to or derive values from their mindfulness practice are often people with a connection to a religious tradition, especially Buddhism. They are people like Thich Nhat Hanh (a monk), Joseph Goldstein (trained as a monk in Asia), Jon Kabat-Zinn (trained by Buddhist missionaries in America), Jan Bays (a Zen priest), or Barry Boyce (employed by a Buddhist organization). Though they may mystify the religious origins of mindfulness in order to market it to a non-religious (or, at least, non-Buddhist) crowd, they are in fact motivated by Buddhist concerns to reduce suffering, spread compassion, and help society. Or, in the case of Catholics such as Tim Ryan, the social concerns reflected in how they contextualize mindfulness reveal perennial patterns related to longstanding progressive American Catholic concerns with workers, families, education, and economic justice.

The mindfulness movement can thus be said to have two ideal types, or at least two ideal types of expression: those that pursue or market mindfulness primarily for specific personal benefit, and those that pursue or market mindfulness out of commitment to a larger social vision (but one that emphasizes self-healing as the essential first step to larger healing of the body politic). From the point of view of the benefits-only crowd, socially concerned mindfulness teachers such as Jon Kabat-Zinn and Thich Nhat Hanh are still excellent instructors from whom one can learn a great deal. And from the point of view of the socially engaged mindfulness faction, even relatively self-oriented pursuers of mindfulness will be of benefit to society as they naturally reduce their level of stress, become more aware of their connections with others, and perhaps back their way into greater alignment with liberal
political views, progressive values, and a more ecological outlook.

Notes:
(2) . Tan, 2012: 229.
(8) . For a cogent recent summation of the discussion, see the introduction to Arthur Remillard. Southern Civil Religions: Imaging the Good Society in the Post-Reconstruction Era. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011.
(9) . Ryan, 2012: xi.
(10) . I do not suggest here that the problems imagined by religions really exist (or, for that matter, that they don’t really exist), nor do I suggest that the solutions religions offer actually solve such problems. And the reader should not infer that I consider religions to be benevolent or nurturing owing to their offering of solutions. Religious solutions include loving thy neighbor, exterminating the Jews, burning witches, and many others. I am merely noting a common pattern of religious problem solving. This idea is hardly original to me; it has had a long life in the discipline of religious studies. For one recent example of approaching religions as solutions to imagined problems, see Stephen Prothero. God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter. New York: HarperOne, 2010.


(13) Kabat-Zinn, 2005: 118.


(15) Seigel, 2010: 11-12.


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(33) Tan, 2012: 32.


(37) Smalley and Winston, 2010: 140.


(43) Albers, 2003: 3, 16, 45.

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(51) Ryan, 2012: 30, 33.
(53) Ryan, 2012: xvii.
(54) Ryan, 2012: xvii.
(57) Ryan, 2012: xxi.
(60) Smalley and Winston, 2010: 222.
(63) Thoman, 2002: 123.
(64) Thoman, 2002: 124.
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