

Mindfulness Goes Corporate and Purists are not Pleased

Buddhist Tradition Marshalled to Grow Profits and Productivity

By **Anne Kingston** April 21, 2013



Photo Illustration by Taylor Shute

When Janice Marturano conducted the “mindful leadership experience” workshop last January at the World Economic Summit in Davos, Switzerland, she was hoping for an audience of 20—at most. “I was prepared for one or two,” the founder and executive director of the Washington-based Institute for Mindful Leadership admits. She needn’t have worried. There was a lineup; people were even turned away. More than 70 of the world’s most influential people crammed into the room, many standing for 90 minutes to learn “techniques for developing focus, clarity and compassion.” The next morning, Marturano led a meditation—a Davos first—that drew 40 people, two-thirds of whom had never meditated before.

The spectre of masters of the universe chanting *Om* at Davos serves as only one measure of how “mindfulness” has become the new Western mantra. The technique, linked to Buddhist practice, teaches being present in the moment, always attentive to, and accepting one’s thoughts and responses, without judgment. In a 1977 study, mindfulness pioneer Jack Kornfeld presented the approach as a remedy to Western excesses, or “the egoistic, hedonic treadmill of continually avoiding discomfort and seeking pleasure from outside sources that are ultimately unsatisfying and short-lived.”

Mindfulness entered the medical mainstream in the 1980s as a clinically proven method for alleviating chronic pain and stress. Since then, it has metastasized into an omnibus panacea—to help children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder concentrate, soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder recover and, now, Fortune 500 executives compete. In Paul Harrison’s upcoming documentary, *The Mindfulness Movie*, psychologist Guy Claxton frames the benefits in mercantile terms: “At the most basic level, mindfulness enables you to get value for money out of life,” he says.

What has gripped Western attention is mindfulness’s ability to improve performance—of Olympic athletes, parents, and even nations, as promised in U.S. Congressman Tim Ryan’s 2012 bestseller, *Mindful Nation: How a simple practice can help us reduce stress, improve performance and recapture the American spirit*. Institutions and companies are racing to adopt “mindful” practices—among them Google, the U.S. military and Monsanto. Jeff Weiner, CEO of the social-networking site LinkedIn, is a disciple, boasting that “compassion” and “listening to others” are now his central management tenets.

A mindfulness industry has taken root, seen in a boom in corporate coaching, “yin” yoga (which develops mindfulness by holding poses at a point of intensity for five to 10 minutes) and books such as Raji Lukkoor’s *Inner Pilgrimage: Ten Days to a Mindful Meand 10 Mindful Minutes* by actress Goldie Hawn, who runs a mindfulness foundation. The first mass-market magazine devoted to the topic, *Mindful*, has just launched; the first issue of the Halifax-based bimonthly bills itself as “your guide to less stress and more joy” with features such as “The science of changing your brain.” Publisher Jim Gimian says he wants to send “a

very broad message that mindfulness is a lifestyle, a broadly appealing part of life and not something esoteric or foreign.” Even the ads are “curated” to reflect this message, he says; placing a full-page ad for women’s clothing line Eileen Fisher on the first page was strategic: the company also advertises in *Vogue*.

The trend to mindfulness would seem to signal mass recognition of the need to slow down and pay attention in a turbo-driven, reactive society. Yet its migration from ashram to boardroom is not without tensions. High-profile Buddhists are taking off the gloves, albeit thoughtfully; they say mindfulness is part of a continuum—one of the seven factors of enlightenment—not a self-help technique or “a path which can lead to bigger profits,” as the *Financial Times* put it. And long-time practitioners worry that mindfulness repackaged as a quick fix or a commercial platform could in fact lead to mindlessness, and reinforce the very problems it’s trying to heal.

The embrace of mindfulness by a distracted, stressed, Lululemon-wearing, iPhone-addicted culture isn’t surprising: it combines Zen chic with the scientific imprimatur of the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Microbiologist Jon Kabat-Zinn, famed for his mindfulness meditation seminars, is credited with bringing the practice into health care: his eight-week mindfulness-based stress-reduction training program, established at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1995, is now taught in more than 200 hospitals. Its efficacy is supported by a growing body of scientific research, including studies that show it can alter brain patterns and behaviour, and be as effective as antidepressants in treating mild depression.

Business, too, has quantified the benefits. Mark Bertolini, chief executive of Aetna Insurance, became a mindfulness proponent after breaking his neck in a skiing accident; it helped him get off meds and return to work. The bottom-line incentive of reducing employee disability payouts and increasing productivity also didn’t escape him. Bertolini recently rhymed off the stats on CNBC: the most stressed-out employees’ health care costs are \$2,000 higher than average employees’, he reported; “mindfulness” benefits, such as yoga classes, yield an 11-to-1 return on investment.

Toronto physician Patricia Rockman, who has taught “therapeutic mindfulness” for nearly a decade and is director of education at Toronto’s Centre for Mindfulness Studies, says mindfulness is entering the culture in “a tsunami,” noting her centre has just received a grant to train front-line social-service workers. “Mindfulness practice isn’t about fixing anything, or getting rid of pain and being happy and relaxed,” she says. “Those are nice by-products. But it’s about waking up to your life and enhancing mental and emotional resilience.” Mindfulness is “experiential,” she says, meaning you can’t do the work by talking about it or reading about it: “The effort comes in the development of a practice. It begins with self-discovery and becoming more compassionate to self, then ultimately toward others.” Currently, the field is unregulated—“anybody can teach a course,” Rockman says—though standards are emerging.

Rockman believes mindfulness resonates in an increasingly scientific and secular culture craving focus and meaning. “We’re so focused on acquisition, on stuff,” she says. As with many practitioners, her approach is influenced by science and secular Buddhism, which she defines as “concerned with this time and this world and this place.” Spiritual need or transcendence is developmental, Rockman posits: “If we’re not evolving as a species, we’re devolving.”

Not everyone views the current path as enlightened, however. Donald Lopez, a professor of Buddhist and Tibetan studies at the University of Michigan, calls “secular Buddhism” an oxymoron: “Buddhism has always been a religion,” he says. “To see it as a way of life is a modern conceit that disparages the lives and religious practices of Buddhists over thousands of years.” The author of *The Scientific Buddha*, published in 2012, says belief that “mindfulness” is an ancient Buddhist practice is a fallacy: “There’s a cachet that comes from saying some ancient sage a millennium ago in India invented these things,” he says. Lopez traces mindfulness as we know it to a quest to preserve Buddhism in Burma after the British occupation in the 19th century; they deposed the king and destroyed the hierarchical Buddhist institution: “Some monks saw the British arrival as a sign of approaching apocalypse,” he says. “So they disseminated Buddhist philosophy and practice through the

population.” That included meditation, traditionally done only by monks. “It was totally about self-preservation.”

Rockman counters that there is “territoriality” in the field. “There has been tension because people traditionally in the dharma field say it’s being diluted and stripped of meaning. But I would say they don’t know what we’re doing, either.” She sees mindfulness unbundled from religion as a plus: “It means anyone can buy it.”

That includes the U.S. Marine Corps, which is now using mindfulness to create more effective soldiers through “mindfulness-based mind-fitness training,” or “MBMFT for warriors.” Training includes “brain-calming” exercises to improve performance while being immersed in a mock Afghan village with screaming actors and controlled blasts.

Snipers could also benefit from mindfulness training, notes Ronald Purser, a professor of management in the College of Business at San Francisco State University and a practising Buddhist: “It would enhance attention, concentration and aim. Terrorists would benefit from it, too.”

And therein lies the other part of the problem. Purser is of mixed mind about the mainstreaming of mindfulness. “Kabat-Zinn created an extremely stripped-down, secularized technique to make it palatable to the scientific and medical community,” he says. “And that’s fine; it has benefits in terms of stress reduction and relieving chronic pain.” But the focus on “attention-enhancement” is problematic, he says: “Mindfulness in Buddhist tradition is to transform one’s sense of self; it’s not about attaining personal goals attached to personal desires; the goal is to liberate oneself from greed, ill will and delusion, not to achieve stress reduction.”

Purser’s major concern is the institutional readiness to adopt mindfulness: “In their rush to secularize it, they’ve turned it into a technique divorced from ethical responsibility or commitment,” he says, drawing comparisons to “human relations,” a developmental theory-based movement in business in the ’40s. “It was trying to make employees happy and

supervisors feel warm and fuzzy. But it was also criticized as ‘cow psychology’—as in ‘happier cows give more milk.’ ” He wonders if emphasizing “mindfulness” will allow corporations to gloss over problems: “Is it a means of helping employees adapt to a toxic culture, rather than calling into question the fundamental reasons why stress is being generated in that toxic culture?”

American Zen teacher, academic and author David Loy agrees. Loy recently posted online a letter he’d written to Harvard professor William George, an advocate of mindfulness in the corporate realm. Loy took issue with George sitting on the boards of Goldman Sachs, Novartis and Exxon Mobil, corporations that have been accused of ethical-practices breaches. In an interview with *Maclean’s*, Loy said he’s pleased mindfulness is helping so many people reduce anxiety and pain. “And if somebody wants to do better on their SATs [U.S. college-admission tests], I have no objection to that,” he says. But he sees a blurring taking place: “The real focus of Buddhism is on awakening, on coming to some insight or wisdom about our true nature. Without that, we can’t get at the real source of our *dukkha*, or suffering,” he says. Institutional *dukkha* exists, as well. “The mindfulness movement is good for adjusting certain types of *dukkha*, but from the Buddhist perspective, it’s not addressing the most deep-rooted and problematical forms of *dukkha*. In fact, it seems to be reinforcing the kind of self-centred individualism that seems to be our more basic problem.”

There’s a definite spirit of survivalism in the current mindfulness mania, a recognition that self-sufficiency is paramount, should systems—be they economic, institutional or religious—fail. People are seeking an alternative to technological or pharmaceutical fixes, says Jim Gimian, the publisher of *Mindful*. Mindfulness is elemental, he says: “You’re bringing your mind and body to respond to challenge, and to find a way to cope.”

Former monk Stephen Batchelor, the author of *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, has famously compared the mainstreaming of “mindfulness” to the Trojan Horse, in the sense that people don’t know what they’re getting, not unlike taking yoga for toned arms and also discovering spiritual enlightenment.

Loy is wary. If mindfulness is to make true cultural change, it must look beyond personal needs for serenity, good health or success, he says. “People say that, as people do mindfulness, they will become involved in something deeper, or look for more, or even turn to Buddhism. Or maybe they will find becoming more compassionate is changing them. These are possibilities. But it could also be the other way around. I’m not always sure which is Troy and which are the Greeks.” Right now, what we know for sure is that we’re all under siege.
