

MINDFULNESS IN WESTERN CONTEXTS PERPETUATES OPPRESSIVE REALITIES FOR MINORITY CULTURES: THE CONSEQUENCES OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

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Abstract

This paper examines mindfulness-based practices in North American classrooms as culturally appropriated through the dominantly western modality of individualism and scientific-rationalism. Through investigating MindUP™ and other mindfulness teaching resources, I demonstrate the construed qualities of mindfulness practices in western contexts. I argue that mindfulness is molded to fit colonial ontologies of values and knowledge and perpetuates oppressive realities for minority cultures. I propose that mindfulness should be reoriented into its Buddhist contexts through required lessons and trainings in Buddhist cultures, ontologies, and knowledges, and creators and supporters of mindfulness-based educational programs should refer to the practices they are promoting as attention-focusing and stress-reduction strategies and not as misconstrued, individualistic qualities of mindfulness. This paper intends to extend awareness to the broader sociopolitical consequences of culturally appropriating mindfulness practices.

Keywords: cultural appropriation, mindfulness, Buddhist, scientific-rationalism, oppression, individualism

Mindfulness in Western Contexts Perpetuates Oppressive Realities for Minority Cultures: The Consequences of Cultural Appropriation

Mindfulness practices within educational contexts are gaining traction as a viable source of “behavior management” and as strategies for focusing student attention (Hyland, 2017). Programs such as MindUP™, guided meditation phone apps, and scripted mindfulness-based activities allow educators to efficiently implement mindfulness into their classrooms. Although stress-management and focused attention are beneficial for both students and teachers (Hyland, 2017), researchers such as Ergas (2014), Hyland (2017), and Kabat-Zinn (as cited in Ergas, 2014; Hyland, 2017) are cautioning the dangers of the commodification and westernization of mindfulness. I argue that current, North American renditions of mindfulness have been culturally appropriated through a dominantly western modality of individualism and scientific-rationalism, in which the cultural appropriation of these practices continue to perpetuate the unjust and oppressive reality for minority cultures. To reorient mindfulness into its Buddhist contexts, mindfulness should be accompanied by required lessons and trainings on Buddhist cultures, ontologies, and knowledges. Further, creators and supporters of mindfulness-based educational programs should refer to the practices they are promoting as attention-focusing and stress-reduction strategies (Hyland, 2018) — *not* as misconstrued, individualistic qualities of mindfulness.

Mindfulness in Buddhist Contexts

Buddhism is a broad term that covers various forms of contemplative practices such as meditation, mindfulness-based practices, yoga, as several examples. As a Japanese-American, I am familiar with Zen and can speak specifically to its origins and the meanings behind its practices.

In Zen practices, forgetting the ego, or of one’s sense of self-importance (Suzuki, 1970), leads to a holistic acceptance of oneself *in relation* to the world. For example, Shunryu Suzuki, one of the most influential spiritual teachers of the 20th century and is considered the founding father of Zen in America (Zen Buddhism, 2018), states: “the purpose of studying Buddhism is to study ourselves and to forget ourselves. When we forget ourselves, we actually are the true activity of the big existence, or reality itself” (2011, p. 66). Although mindfulness is individually practiced, it serves a much larger purpose; our sense of interconnectedness allows us *to better serve others*. Overall, Buddhist goals are not *for* the self entirely; the main goal is the betterment of civilization through the practice of mindfulness. However, as Ergas (2014) and Hyland (2017) caution, current mindfulness practices are instead focused on individualistic and reductionist outcomes that reflect the misappropriated version of mindfulness in North American contexts.

Cultural Appropriation

Young and Brunk (2009) define *appropriation* as “the making of a thing private property” or “taking as one’s own or to one’s own use” (p. 2). *Cultural appropriation* is the “act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you

understand or respect this culture” (Cultural appropriation, 2018). To clarify, not all acts of cultural appropriation are necessarily negative. Some forms of cultural appropriation are inevitable in the globalization of the modern world. As described by Young and Brunk (2009), cultural traditions or practices, customs, technologies, social norms, values, and beliefs “emerge from or are influenced by pre-existing ideas, experiences and other forms of knowledge within, between, and among different cultures” (p. 140). However, the assimilation of these cultural foundations without the awareness or recognition of their cultural significance, or making it a part of one’s *own culture*, renders it cultural appropriation. The evident imbalance of power characterizes the appropriation as harmful and oppressive.

To illustrate, the colonial practice of stealing land from the Indigenous peoples is an example of the harmful consequences of this type of cultural appropriation. Young and Brunk (2009) explain that perceiving the Indigenous strategies of land division to be not of-value and insignificant undermines the value of their cultural knowledge and attacks “the viability or identity of cultures or their members” (pp. 5, 164). The Indigenous’ right to live was undeniably and harrowingly stolen.

Cultural Appropriation of Mindfulness

According to Blom and Lu (2016), westernized cultures, which champion an individualistic self and logical reasoning, have the tendency to “extract and abstract foundational practices such as mindfulness meditation and contemplation within an objectivist or scientific prejudice” (p. 1266). Mindfulness, as used in the western contexts, has been misappropriated and stripped of its original cultural purposes. The intended Zen qualities of mindfulness—the separation from one’s ego in order to experience oneness with all other beings—has been misconstrued to emulate the ideological overlays of individualism and reduced to accompany capitalistic purposes (Ergas, 2014). As Ergas (2014) explains, the adoption of mindfulness practices was a response to the stressful conditions caused by the standardization and competition of knowledge in educational contexts (p. 66). The competitive, individualistic, western educational culture successfully “extracted” and “abstracted” (Blom & Lu, 2016) the foundational moral principles of mindfulness.

The MindUP™ program supported by the Goldie Hawn Foundation is an example of a mindfulness-based program that has been extracted from its collectivist Buddhist roots. The program offers a curriculum for teachers to implement in their classrooms. Goldie Hawn claims, “I created MindUP™ [...] to help [teachers] improve student focus, engagement in learning academics, and give them the tools and strategies that would bring joy back into the classroom...” (MindUP™, 2018b). For a program that is grounded in the practice of mindfulness, fails to demonstrate adequate awareness of its cultural heritages or original purposes. Comments such as Hawn’s, and the listed implications of implementing MindUP™, such as “experience the children in the class as individual learners”, “respond more thoughtfully and mindfully rather than be reactive” and “[teachers will] be happier, more joyful and experience greater job satisfaction,” present the inherent individualistic undertones of the

programs goals (MindUp™, 2018a). In educational contexts, Hyland (2017) describe mindfulness as having “no connections with the broad transformation of *perspectives* [emphasis added] which allows for the fostering of wholesome thoughts and feelings and the reduction of harmful rumination and avoidance” (p. 11). The absence of accepting suffering, without accepting the existence of suffering, a founding principle of mindfulness (Ergas, 2014; Hyland, 2017; Suzuki, 1970), the inherent humanness of mindfulness and Zen practices that nonjudgmentally accepts all emotions is removed. Avoiding such negative emotion does not cultivate a sense of interconnectedness with the self and others because a dualism is promoted that separates the self from the natural upsets that exist in the world. Although one of the listed results of implementing MindUP™ is creating “a stronger, more vibrant school ethos and culture,”— an aspect most closely related to the original, core purposes of mindfulness— I argue that there is little emphasis of this aspect within the program.

The extraction process demonstrated prior results from a colonial framework that justifies cultural appropriation. The colonial representations of knowledge justify *which knowledge* is significant or “of value.” Mindfulness in North American contexts is situated within a knowledge base that prioritizes individualistic tendencies. According to Bruning, Schraw, and Norby (2011), knowledge influences perceptions, recognition, and the assignment of meaning; it also influences *what* to perceive (p. 21). As perceived through the lenses of the North American individualistic and rationalist paradigms, mindfulness is assigned a meaning that complements these lenses. Young and Brunk (2009) explain that a culture viewed from a person removed from the context will “appear fundamentally different” (p. 285) and cannot be rightfully emulated.

Segal, Williams and Teasdale (2002) have noted that “mindfulness lies at the core of Buddhist meditative practices, yet its essence is universal” (as cited in Hyland, 2011, p. 28). Similarly, Kabat-Zinn (2003), an influential proponent of therapeutic mindfulness, claims that “mindfulness... is also of necessity universal. There is nothing particularly Buddhist about it” (as cited in Hyland, 2011, p. 29). However, in cultural contexts, knowledge is highly pertinent to a specific culture’s conventions and is *not* universal. Young and Brunk (2009) explain how all cultures “develop rules for determining how knowledge gets used in the community, for what benefit, for whose benefit; and who gets to use it” (p. 162). Knowledge in cultural contexts assigns responsibility to learning in the community: what learning is retained, passed down, and ensures the learning is supporting societies’ values and goals (Young & Brunk, 2009). Japanese cultures rely on the Zen of mindfulness practices to carefully and methodically guide their society. The creation of knowledge that supports Zen and its practices are embedded into the culture and are taken seriously as a way of life; not as an intermittent practice primarily serving the individual. Gowans (2015) states, “the practice of mindfulness leads naturally to the moral principles underpinning the noble 8-fold path and is instrumental in fostering a form of virtue ethics” (as cited in Hyland, 2017, p. 10). Knowledge appropriation, in the case of mindfulness practices of North American societies, fails to recognize the original and specific cultural purposes of mindfulness as important, significant, or of value. The dominant, North American interpretations of mindfulness have overpowered the minority culture’s knowledge and continues

to support the unequal and oppressive colonial ideology that minority knowledge is irrelevant or “less than.”

Within an oppressive society, forms of knowledge in western contexts will commonly overpower forms of knowledge in minority cultures¹. Young and Brunk (2009) offer two factors that contribute to the harmful effects of cultural appropriation, each relating to the value of knowledge: *knowledge as Terra Nullius* and the scientific-rationalist paradigm of knowledge. Values of knowledge vary between different cultural frameworks. *Terra nullius* is translated as “nobody’s land” and refers to the colonial appropriation of Indigenous land. Colonizers overtook Indigenous land without perceiving or accepting Indigenous division strategies as legitimate. Therefore, colonizers felt justified in stealing land because it was not “of value” yet (Young & Brunk, 2009, p. 164). *Knowledge as terra nullius* is symbolic of Indigenous loss of land ownership and extends to include forms of knowledge as terra nullius until western, or dominant forms of knowledge add value to it. Individualized mindfulness practices as appropriated by the dominant cultures of North America is a manifestation of knowledge as terra nullius because these practices are not presented as “of value” in their original collectivist and holistic purposes.

The “scientific-rationalist paradigm view of knowledge,” largely accepted within western contexts, justifies the imposing of values and beliefs over other cultural knowledges and traditions (Young & Brunk, 2009, pp. 163-164). Bai (1998) provides evidence of the consequences of the rational-scientific paradigm. The logical prioritization of the Enlightenment period through “control by reason” and the dominance of rational reasoning has been used as a form of control and dictates which forms of knowledge are valued, credible, and just. Within educational contexts, Ergas (2014) cautions that “mindfulness is being molded through the hegemony of contemporary scientific methodology” and is framed in a way that accommodates the “achievements-based system” of curriculum, and directly dismisses the emphasis of *process* versus *outcome* (pp. 61, 68).

MindUP™ and other mindfulness-based activities that are situated within a dominantly colonial framework negligently omit, misconstrue, and replace the culturally relevant foundational knowledge of Zen. Reflecting the idea of knowledge as terra nullius, the new value assignment to mindfulness from dominating western cultures has overwhelmed the original cultural value of mindfulness. Mindfulness activities that are available for teachers to use, specifically phone apps and guided scripts, reflect the individualistic, misappropriated version of mindfulness. The intended, long-term, and deeply transformative benefits are reduced to short-lived, performative, behavior regulation and intended for efficiency and accessibility. Hyland (2015) explains how the “core transformational function” of mindfulness is replaced to accomplish “operational objectives,” and “such pragmatic purposes have obscured the links with the foundational moral principles” (as cited in Hyland, 2017). One cannot fulfill the main purpose of *being present* in mindfulness when the experience is prescribed with a specific

¹ In this context, a *minority culture* is defined in context to the political definition of a *minority group*, that states “a culturally, ethnically, or racially distinct group that coexists with but is subordinate to a more dominant group” (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018).

outcome. The “achievements-based” framing of mindfulness practices entails a misattunement with the original moral intentions of the nondual acceptance of the present moment. Suzuki (1970) elaborates:

These forms are not a means of obtaining the right state of mind [...] when you try to attain something, your mind starts to wander about somewhere else. When you do not try to attain anything, you have your own body and mind right here (p. 9).

Prescribed outcomes lead to fantasies of other places or emotional states rather than the current experience. Mindfulness that is presented in western contexts emulates this issue, where the present moment is no longer viable and the task of feeling something “better” becomes the main goal of mindfulness practices. Kabat-Zinn (2015) explains that the conception of mindfulness should endorse the way of being and needs to be grounded in the “meditative practices and traditions from which mindfulness has emerged” (as cited in Hyland, 2017, p. 3). Meditation sessions are reduced to short periods of time and individuals are no longer committed to Zen in any other aspect of their life, when, in actuality, meditation and Zen are a “way of life” that transfers throughout all parts of one’s life.

“Chocolate Mindfulness,” a North American mindfulness activity, involves slowing and vigilantly eating a piece of chocolate as the moderator guides your attention (MindSpace, n.d.). Attention to the bodily sensations as you eat the chocolate is the main focus. This activity is described as an introduction to mindfulness and experiencing the inner-self. Unfortunately, the goals do not extend further. The mindfulness activity is profoundly focused on the intersubjective experience and detached from its original ethical purposes. This interpretation of mindfulness has overpowered the knowledge of the minority cultures that situate mindfulness practices in collectivist frameworks. According to Hyland (2017), using mindfulness as a strategy to calm students down or to direct attention “falls some way short” of the holistically transformative nature of mindfulness and the development of interconnectedness that transpires from this transformation (p. 11). The knowledge used to support and add value to mindfulness practices in collectivist frameworks are neglected in western contexts and perpetuates the colonial-oppressive narrative.

Perpetuating Oppression

The above examples and exploration of mindfulness in western, scientifically and rationally dominated contexts may be beneficial to lowering anxiety and focusing attention in the classroom (Hyland, 2017), but the ramifications of these practices outweigh the benefits. Relevant to the sociopolitical conditions currently advancing², the systemic issues of cultural appropriation become increasingly important to address. Discriminatory and oppressive acts against minorities such as building walls to separate minorities from western-dominant cultures (Davis, 2017) and the displacement of immigrants and refugees seeking support (Silver, 2017) are only a few examples of the deeply embedded and pervasively oppressive conditions

² The conditions I am referring to are related to the political conditions as a result of the Trump administration; building a wall at the Mexican border (Davis, 2017) and the upheaval of political scandals.

underlying western ontology. These oppressive conditions are a result of traditional colonial frameworks that continue to dictate our ways of interacting with and perceiving the world, where minority cultures are subordinate and are only used as a basis of comparison to justify scientifically-based forms of knowledge common to western cultures. As Ergas (2014) analyzes, the scientific terms used to situate mindfulness in educational contexts are “a reflection of the scientific *ethos of control*,” and what purpose do these terms serve other than “of reducing perhaps the original numinous ‘no-self,’ as the peak of the Buddhist path that mindfulness traditionally sought to unfold?” (p. 66).

The foundation of the scientific-rationalist paradigm of knowledge is that scientific rationalization “more accurately” or “better” represents and justifies certain knowledges or claims of truth. However, this mentality and justification process is an ideology and a colonial myth that supports the oppressive system and continues to permeate our ideas of what it means to truthfully³ exist in the world. The historical example of colonial power overtaking Indigenous land demonstrates this colonial and oppressive mentality. Although the effects of cultural appropriation may seem distant or subliminal, this ideology has the power to induce highly immoral acts as we have experienced in current and past decades, such as racist groups (the KKK), African American enslavement, and even genocides. Bai (1998) states that “control by reason... was” (and still are) “used historically to oppress women, children, foreigners [...] perceived to be not in full possession of reason” (p. 97). These immoral acts are related to which knowledges are perceived as powerful and “true.” Specific cultural ontologies sway attention to certain forms of knowledge and influence our interpretations of that knowledge. These interpretations are weighted with power because interpretations of knowledge from dominantly western ontologies will, most commonly, dominate minority knowledge.

Concluding Remarks & Suggestions

Mindfulness, if used for individualistic purposes, is a culturally appropriated practice that perpetuates oppression and unequal cultural power dynamics. The cultural appropriation of mindfulness only serves to commodify the practice for economic gain and disrespectfully omits the meaningful cultural knowledge that situates mindfulness as a *way of life* for Buddhist cultures. To paraphrase Siegal (2010), educational programs that are entrenched in the ethical and moral endeavors of mindfulness practices, which include collectivist values, have the potential to reinstate the affective dimension of education that have been lost (as cited in Hyland, 2016). Mindfulness, if used in a way that directly acknowledges and teaches Buddhist values and ontology in its practices, combats the reductionist and oppressive consequences of appropriation by reinstating mindfulness in the hands of Buddhist cultures and practitioners. Alternatively, as Grossman and Van Dam (2011) suggest, to preserve “the integrity and richness of the Buddhist understanding of mindfulness,” the qualities and practices *disguised* as mindfulness should be defined as “what they actually represent” (as cited in Hyland, 2017, p. 5). To effectively

³ I am using “truth” in the context of western cultures that prioritize and promote scientific-rationalist modes of being over spiritual or religious ontologies; emulating the use in Bai (1998).

implement mindfulness, to benefit from the long-term and holistically transformative practice, it *must* be contextually situated and not misappropriated for individualistic purposes.

While Zen was the focus for this paper, it is possible for these criticisms to extend to other forms of Buddhism as well, although further research would be necessary for generalization.

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