

MATTHEW C. NISBET

## Sciences, Publics, Politics

# MINDFULNESS INC.

In February 2014, protestors from Eviction Free San Francisco walked on stage at the annual Wisdom 2.0 conference, interrupting a Google-sponsored corporate panel on “3 Steps to Build Corporate Mindfulness the Google Way.” Unfurling a banner and wielding a bull horn, their aim was to call attention to the affordable housing crisis in the San Francisco area, and to privacy threats as tech companies generate billions in profits from the selling of personalized user data. “Wisdom means stop displacement! Wisdom means stop surveillance! San Francisco’s not for sale!” the activists yelled.

As the protestors were led away by security, Bill Duane, a Google executive on the panel, asked the audience to “check in with their bodies and see what’s happening ... what it’s like to be around conflict and people with heartfelt ideas.” Wisdom 2.0 organizers praised Duane’s response as demonstrating “incredible grace and compassion,” transforming “an emotionally jarring interruption” into “a moment of awareness and peace.”

But the sociologist Jamie Kucinkas offered a different perspective in her recent book, *The Mindful Elite: Mobilizing from the Inside Out*. To Kucinkas, the reaction to the protestors was emblematic of a privileged community of mindfulness enthusiasts who preferred to optimize their own well-being, careers, and relationships, rather than address deepening social inequalities, and the role of the tech industry in promoting and sustaining them.

By stripping away any ethical framework or reference to its roots in Buddhism, leaders of the mindfulness movement encouraged Americans to seek individualized lifestyle solutions to their feelings of anxiety and stress, rather than to question the cultural and economic conditions that contribute to these emotions. Similar to positive psychology and the broader happiness and self-help movements, mindfulness was serving to depoliticize and privatize stress, displacing efforts to hold powerful institutions accountable for their role in people’s emotional lives. “Reducing suffering is a noble aim and it should be encouraged. But to do this effectively, teachers of mindfulness need to acknowledge that personal stress also has societal causes,” the management scholar Ronald Purser writes in 2019’s *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*. “By failing to address collective suffering, and systemic change that might remove it, they rob mindfulness of its real revolutionary potential, reducing it to something banal that keeps people focused on themselves.”

### **Buddhism and biophysics**

Generating an estimated \$1.5 billion in annual revenue, today’s mindfulness sector includes more than 2,500 meditation centers and studios, some 1,000 smartphone apps, and tens of thousands of books, CDs, and DVDs. Mindfulness-based approaches are used widely by mental health professionals to treat depression, anxiety, pain, insomnia, and other conditions. An estimated

20% of businesses in the United States offer mindfulness programs to their employees, and meditation-based curriculum has been incorporated into hundreds of schools and colleges. According to recent surveys, an estimated 50 million Americans, including nearly 20% of adults and about 7% of children, say that they practice some form of meditation.

The most influential figure in the acceptance of mindfulness as a secular and scientific practice has been the biophysicist Jon Kabat-Zinn. According to his 2005 best seller, *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*, the focus of mindfulness is not on making the mind empty or blank but simply letting the mind be at rest. From this perspective, mindfulness is a mental skill or trait acquirable through meditation that involves “paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally,” he writes. As a student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the early 1970s, Kabat-Zinn had been introduced to meditation by a Zen missionary, and he went on to study with various Zen and Buddhist teachers. After earning a doctorate in molecular biology, he started a stress reduction center at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979, developing an eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course.

Popular interest in mindfulness blossomed during the 1990s. As explained by the religion scholar Jeff Wilson in his 2014 book, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*, the Chinese occupation of Tibet, along with Hollywood movies about Tibet such as *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Little Buddha*, and *Kundun*, brought worldwide media attention to the Dalai Lama and Buddhist practices. Previously difficult-to-find magazines and books on meditation were now sold at Barnes & Noble and Borders. The 1993 Bill Moyers PBS special “Healing and the Mind” featured Kabat-Zinn and his MBSR approach, turning his books into best sellers. For sports fans and athletes, Phil Jackson, coach of the basketball champion Chicago Bulls, related in interviews how he had encouraged Michael Jordan and other players to practice meditation. By the early 2000s, with books, talks, and documentaries about mindfulness instantly available via Amazon, Netflix, and YouTube, and guided meditations downloadable to smartphones, public interest in mindfulness was set to explode.

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To gain legitimacy within the medical community, Kabat-Zinn understood that he needed to strip his approach of any overt religious connections, framing mindfulness as a mental skill acquired through meditation. In doing so, he had transformed meditation from a practice rooted in Buddhism to that of a scientifically based form of health promotion. As Wilson explains it, meditation became the “property of psychologists, doctors, scientists, and diet counselors

... to be engaged in by clients rather than believers, who are not expected to take refuge, read scriptures, believe in karma or rebirth, or to become Buddhist.”

Early mindfulness leaders founded several organizations during the 1980s and 1990s that would play a central role in convening scientists, philanthropists, educators, and business executives interested in meditation and its possible personal and social benefits. The leaders of these centers, Kucinkas writes in *The Mindful Elite*, hoped that in teaching mindfulness across secular settings, participants would become aware of their dependence on others, more sensitive to others’ suffering, and therefore better at engaging in difficult conversations focused on large-scale social and political problems. A first goal was to take advantage of professional contacts to launch pilot programs at Fortune 500 companies such as Monsanto and General Mills, recruiting top executives as participants. If successful, these initial efforts would help mindfulness-based programs spread to other institutions and organizations. But in doing so, explains Kucinkas, the leaders of the mindfulness movement also risked being co-opted by corporations for whom mindfulness programs were mostly a way to increase the creativity and productivity of their employees, a materialistic goal completely at odds with Buddhist teachings meant to foster detachment from worldly ambition.

**Is there a there there?**

The most successful corporate program in terms of publicity has been the mindfulness initiative at Google, led by senior programmer Chade-Meng Tan, who in 2012 published the best seller *Search Inside Yourself: The Unexpected Path to Achieving Success, Happiness (and World Peace)*. As Tan describes it, the emphasis at Google was on using meditation to cultivate skills deemed necessary to personal and corporate success such as emotional intelligence, focus, motivation, empathy, and social skills. The program

became popular, Tan writes, because as a computer engineer he was able to translate mindfulness “into a language even compulsively pragmatic people like me can process.”

Other Silicon Valley engineers would soon translate the process of meditation into flowcharts and algorithms, aimed at helping employees optimize their work routines and deal with the stressors of an ultracompetitive and individualistic tech culture. Today, meditation gurus are so ubiquitous across the tech industry that they are even the subject of spoofs on comedies such as HBO’s *Silicon Valley*, observes the media scholar Joseph Reagle in his 2019 book, *Hacking Life: Systematized Living and Its Discontents*.

Among the major evangelists for meditation is Tim Ferriss, author of *The 4-Hour Work Week* and other best sellers (and not to be confused with the science writer Timothy Ferris). On his influential podcast, Ferriss describes meditation as an operating system for managing high-stress environments and as a performance-enhancing tool. Similar messages, Reagle notes, are used in advertising to promote Headspace, the leading meditation phone app, which has been downloaded 11 million times, has more than four hundred thousand paying subscribers, and brings in \$50 million in annual revenue. “I meditate to crush it,” says a young woman in a Headspace ad as she lifts a barbell. “I meditate to get buckets,” says a young man holding a basketball in another ad.

Advocates for corporate programs and meditation apps often cite scientific findings to assert the mental and physical benefits of meditation, drawing on popular press reports of the more than one thousand studies published on meditation each year. Mindfulness is “increasingly presented in popular culture as something that can be studied and that has empirically verified benefits,” writes the health law scholar Timothy Caulfield. “This is how it is now sold: by practitioners, by funding agencies and by universities seeking to obtain research grants on the topic.” But systematic reviews of the evidence to date raise serious questions about the depth and quality of scientific research available to consider.

A 2017 meta-analysis published in *JAMA Internal Medicine*, for example, reviewed over 18,000 relevant studies and found only 47 randomized clinical trials

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that met the standards to be considered “high-quality.” The authors concluded that for an eight-week MBSR-style program, there is moderate evidence to support the benefits associated with reduced anxiety and depression, but insufficient evidence or evidence of no effect “on positive mood, attention, substance use, eating habits, sleep, and weight.” A 2017 review written by more than a dozen authors and published in *Perspectives in Psychological*

*Science* warned that studies on mindfulness suffered from conceptual murkiness, inconsistent methods of measurement and evaluation, lack of replicability, and serious questions as to whether statistically significant research findings held clinical significance. “Much work should go toward improving the rigor of methods used, along with the accuracy of news media publicity and eliminating public misunderstandings caused by past undue ‘mindfulness hype,’” they write.

Caulfield further warns of bias from researchers who are personally and financially invested in the outcomes of their work. “When a mindfulness practitioner, who works in a mindfulness clinic, writes an article and it is published in a journal called *Mindfulness*, I tend to read the article with a heightened level of skepticism,” he notes.

Ronald Purser argues in *McMindfulness* that scientific hype has played a critical role in mindfulness being oversold and commodified, reduced to a technique for achieving almost any instrumental goal. The good intentions of the first generation of mindfulness leaders have been handed off to corporations and a capitalist culture defined by profit-seeking, ultracompetitiveness, and a cult of the individual. “Privatizing stress as a personal problem, and using science to affirm this agenda, mindfulness turns individuals on themselves,” argues Purser, an ordained Buddhist teacher. “Not only does this blame the victims of cultural dysfunction, it drives a spiral of narcissistic absorption.” He calls for a social mindfulness that uses meditation to adopt a wide lens, and that deploys challenging arguments and direct social action to focus collective attention on the structural causes of suffering.

*Matthew C. Nisbet is a professor of communication, policy, and urban affairs at Northeastern University, where he studies the intersections among science, politics, and culture. You can follow him on Twitter @MCNisbet.*