

Liberating Mindfulness

FROM BILLION-DOLLAR INDUSTRY
TO ENGAGED SPIRITUALITY

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Introduction

The real challenge, one that the mindfulness movement is impaled on, is how do you take the next step from the superficial identity to the deeper identity?¹

How do we take the next step into greater depth as spiritual beings? And further, how do we take the leap into greater depth communally, toward a just society? You may consider yourself secular, spiritual, or religious. You may have dabbled in mindfulness or attended religious prayers or services. Yet, you may still feel your search has not quite been fulfilling—reaching outward, yet leaving you wondering if deeper inner groundedness is possible.

I teach religious studies, and often ask university students to define spirituality. They reply, almost inevitably, that spirituality is different from religion. It is personal and individual, they say; it is “my own unique path.” Religion, in contrast, they tell me, is believing what a group believes. Most of them would describe themselves as more “spiritual” than “religious.” I gently suggest to them that spirituality may be the opposite of personal and individual. And that if one is to discover the depths of spirituality, one will discover they are not an individual at all—in fact, they are deeply connected with all of life.

In a similar manner, when I ask students to discuss the purpose of mindfulness practices, which they are all by now familiar with at least in name, they say that these are also individual practices that help them foster better stress regulation. Indeed, mindfulness is largely marketed and taught as a personal stress-relief practice. It is

1. Cynthia Bourgeault, interview by author, November 27, 2019.

then suggested that if we all would just do it, it would lessen all our stresses and somehow emanate greater peace and create a more compassionate world. Yet, with my students, I investigate whether it may be doing precisely the opposite: emanating individualist, patriarchal, gendered, and racist social control cleverly disguised as a contemporary, popular promotion. We also investigate a central question of this book: Are we being mindful about mindfulness?

I have been traversing a spiritual journey for many years, through religious engagement to popular, secular mindfulness. In fact, without abandoning beliefs that had grown and matured, I had high hopes that mindfulness offered a new path that would supersede all others. I hoped it would bring depth into my life and others, whether they consider themselves secular, spiritual, or religious. Initially, mindfulness changed my life. It transformed my personal practice of meditation. It enabled me to help other people awaken to self-awareness better than anything else I had previously studied.

Mindfulness is often defined as living in the present with curiosity and without judgment. Most of us can recall mindful moments when we were immersed and curious. Time and space stood still, and we forgot what was before or was to come. These were not just experiences of distraction (like watching TV), but of being fully in the present moment. I recall sitting at the kitchen table with Pauline Thompson, a wise elder whom I interviewed for my first book. As I spoke with her, to my astonishment, I would glance at my watch to discover not one, but five hours had passed as I was enrapt in the rich space woven with story and meaning between us.² You may have had such experiences—perhaps while hiking in nature, singing with a choir, or deep in conversation, when time seemed to stand still. You were not anxious at all, but completely present. Mindfulness practices can help lessen our distractedness and be more present in our lives.

2. Gail J. Stearns, *Writing Pauline: Wisdom from a Long Life* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2005).

If mindfulness transformed my practice, prior to my discovery of it, Christianity grounded my life. Throughout my childhood, on Sunday morning my parents would rise early to prepare various dishes for Sunday dinner before we would head off to church. When we returned home, arriving shortly after us would be the choir director and her family, as well as friends from church, who were my local family growing up. Life centered around food and friends and faith. In this environment, I learned about caring for others as a foundational ethic in my life. I saw in my parents the ethic of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you, and to love your neighbor as yourself, and it was ingrained in me as well. I continued with the Presbyterian Church—graduating from seminary and pastoring a church as an ordained minister. Soon, though, I was hungry to study again, and went back to school for a PhD that intertwined critical gender theory with theology. I have since straddled the spheres of academics and ministry, and this book emerges from the space between the worlds of critical theory and of theological wonder.

I ran a campus ministry and taught university courses, with ample opportunity to engage daily with young adults at the university level. I searched for ways they might discover self-awareness, raise their conscience to the needs of the world around them, and deepen their spirituality. I discovered mindfulness to be the best tool for personal awareness, but for consciousness raising, developing compassion, and spiritual grounding, it fell short. In time, my eyes opened to see that what one does with mindful awareness is deeply dependent on the ethics one already holds and the intention one carries into mindfulness practices. And whether it is a tool for spiritual grounding depends on how deeply one engages in practice with devotion.

Mindfulness emerged into a multi-billion-dollar industry in the years I've been practicing and teaching, through the early decades of this century. Google searches for the term *mindfulness* turn up increasing numbers of results every day—I recently got 235 million in a search of fifty seconds. In recent years I have found myself increasingly disillusioned with the ethics underlying much of this

mindfulness profit-chasing movement around me. I began to suspect that dependent on the social context and understanding of persons in society, a transformative tool such as mindfulness can be used powerfully for good or for lethal means, for ushering in liberation or for tightening complicity.

Uncovering Contemplative Practices

Granted a six-month study leave from my university, I set out to study the mindfulness movement to discover its potential and its dangers. As I investigated mindfulness, I found myself gravitating toward ancient wisdom traditions. I uncovered in new ways this surprising discovery: that something like mindfulness continues to be practiced in many of these, even within my own tradition of Christianity.

I realized quickly I would get nowhere in my search unless I approached this time critically, but also mindfully and spiritually. I embarked on what I came to characterize as a spiritual pilgrimage for those six months. I met with mindfulness teachers but also found myself gravitating toward teachers who spoke of faith and a connect-
edness to a greater whole.

What I found truly inspired me. I encountered people engaged in contemplation—some including the observation of one's mind and some with a different focus, drawn from ancient practices that predate contemporary mindfulness. Though the latter are not to be conflated or called the same, these ancient rituals and traditions are all practiced within communities—both present communities and those that have existed throughout history. These practices are filled with poetic beauty and embedded within sustained ethics valuing justice for all people and life.

While hiking miles through the chilly mist around a Scottish island on uneven, slick terrain with a Celtic Christian teacher, I learned that a commitment to community and to resistance to empire or oppressive systems generating injustice are inseparable from personal awareness. Sitting at the feet of a Sufi Sheikha in Turkey, I

learned that kindness and personal practice are important, but that pure joy is found in devotional practice—understanding oneself not as a separate individual at all, but one with the Divine and all that is greater than oneself. From Buddhist teachers steeped in long lineages, I learned that coming to know one’s own mind takes disciplined, ethical practice. From Sikh activists, I learned that present awareness and deep compassionate activism arise from ritual practices coupled with service to persons of any ethnicity—even one’s cultural enemies. Resting with an enlightened spiritual friend just arrived from Corfu to live out the last days of her life, I learned that presence comes to us when we let go of fear as well as consumerism and begin to experience space and time in a way that seems to resemble what medieval mystics described simply as being “One.”

In these ancient wisdom meditation and prayer practices, self-awakening is never reduced to self-help techniques or severed from ethical consciousness of the world. Nor is it disengaged from a deep sense of spirituality and devotion to a greater Divine or consciousness. Yet, these meditative practices are not readily accessible to the average practitioner. What if, I began to wonder, we partnered the skills gained in mindfulness awareness to lessen our anxiety with the ethical frameworks of ancient traditions? Is there anything to stop us from doing this?

Mindfulness Stumbling Blocks

In fact, I found there was plenty to stop us. The current mindfulness movement is deeply entrenched in our consumerist culture. It can be difficult to discern where mindful awareness opens our eyes and where it is being used by systems to close them and prevent us from seeing the deep, systematic biases of our culture. It is a movement grasping for results—profit, for one, but also results such as reaching increased numbers of individuals with mindfulness; denying aging; self-gratification; and assuming a particular type of “calm” personality.

I discovered that the most frequent claim for mindfulness, coming from serious meditation teachers and frivolous marketing alike, is that it will bring happiness. Interestingly, that happiness is rarely defined. Instead, how you achieve it is carefully outlined. For marketing, that's easy—purchase their product or use their self-help guide. For more serious mindfulness teachers, it centers in methods for inner observation to develop self-awareness and gain equanimity, or more positive reactivity in your life—so that you can be happy regardless of the political, economic, or social conditions of your life or the world around you.

Similarly, there are historically entrenched issues within religious and spiritual traditions preventing a deep dive into that inner awareness and ethical consciousness. In this book I focus mainly on Christianity, which is, for one thing, so mired in the business of keeping its institutions afloat in this political, consumeristic, and secular culture that deep awareness and opening one's eyes to communion with the Divine and developing common humanity often gets lost. There are additional issues we must contend with: some Christian theologies persist that seem to view meditation as almost heretical, carrying one away from knowledge of the Divine. From such perspectives, wisdom is understood to come from an outside authority, and the inner self is not to be trusted. Additionally, we stumble over deeply embedded historic theologies of self-surrender and sacrifice advocated by those in authority, to be adopted by the oppressed. A primary message of Jesus instructing us to side with the oppressed is sometimes suppressed in favor of individualistic theology that awards power over the oppressed to preachers, politicians, and promoters who claim authority in the name of Christ.

Mindfulness and Spiritual Traditions

I believe we need each other—mindfulness practitioners need the ethical underpinnings and devotional stance developed through years within contemplative practices in spiritual traditions. And people of

faith need tools like mindful awareness to delve further into that faith and unlock compassionate action in the world.

In this book I invite you to join me in a critical examination of deep biases within the current mindfulness movement, using a framework of critical feminist theory that considers gender, race, and class to delve into this analysis. Additionally, I invite you to imagine what it would mean to feel spiritually grounded and unafraid. And to imagine what depth of compassion we could reach as individuals and as a society, learning to love our neighbors, as ourselves. With clear intention set within a system of ethics valuing all of life, we can even uncover powerful tools for dismantling systems of injustice and bring about awareness for both oppressor and oppressed.

Jim Burklo, author of *Mindful Christianity*,³ suggests that for those with an orientation or affinity for religious or spiritual practice, secular mindfulness can be an effective “gateway drug” that leads one to dive deeper into religious and spiritual practices.⁴ As senior associate dean of religious life at the University of Southern California, he was one of the founders of Mindful USC, which now teaches secular mindfulness to well over seven thousand people a year on the University of Southern California campus.

Burklo acknowledges that mindfulness truly fills a need in our stressed-out society, helping individuals to cope. But, he asserts, it’s when he takes groups of students on retreat to a Christian monastery to learn of the great tradition of spiritual devotion that they find their clearer purpose and connection in the world. There, they engage in *lectio/visio divina* (a method of praying with scripture and visual media), which takes them into the “heart of the Christian experience.” Sadly, the students have not heard of this rich tradition before. Even the simple act of showing them a huge row of books on Western spirituality astonishes them, Burklo says. “They stand in front of this

3. Jim Burklo, *Mindful Christianity* (Haworth, NJ: St. Johann Press, 2017).

4. Jim Burklo, interview by author, Long Beach, CA, August 22, 2019.

bookshelf and go, ‘Whoa. Whoa dude. Nobody told us about this.’ The Catholic kids, they never heard about any of it. The Protestant kids never heard. The kids that had no religion.”⁵

Chapter Outline

This book is a call for us to be mindful about our use and practice of mindfulness—to open our vision to new uses of mindfulness coupled with ethical, spiritual practice. It is a call for intentionality. It is a plea for greater awareness of the actual effect mindfulness is having on our society, and a suggestion that there are ancient traditions that can guide us in that awareness. Part One focuses on mindfulness in the context of American culture. In chapter 1, I describe my own journey into mindfulness and begin to examine its unquestioned ability to bring happiness to individuals, society, and the world, as is often claimed. I weave together what I have learned from my own journey into contemplation and my experience of what benefit simple mindfulness tools can have for individuals. We then begin a critical analysis of mindfulness to ask: In what ways is mindfulness helping break down, or shore up, structures upholding unjust systems of oppression?

In chapter 2, I analyze the social construction of mindfulness from a critical theory lens. I invite you to question with me: How is mindfulness being used, who is using it, and how do its promoters define it? I borrow from critical feminist theory to explore how a concept like mindfulness circulates among the population, and ask the question: When mindfulness is secularized and joined with values of consumerism and individualism, can it truly bring about happiness for the overall good of society?

Chapter 3 looks at the most frequent claim of mindfulness: that it will bring about happiness. Drawing again on critical theory, I question the very idea of happiness as celebrated in our culture. Rather than defining happiness, we explore how its pursuit affects society.

5. Jim Burklo, interview by author.

In response to Western society's obsession with seeking happiness, are we upholding consumerist and privileged values of the dominant society by pursuing happiness through mindfulness? We ask, what is the use or function of happiness in our culture?

Chapter 4 turns to the claim that mindfulness will bring about happiness by reducing stress in our lives. But could it be that stress, just like happiness, has culturally constructed meanings for us? We ask, what's the use of stress? Chapter 5 focuses on the use of mindfulness to reveal awareness of emotion. Could it be, also, that the construction of emotion in our culture has uses for social control and promoting normativity? In this analysis, we investigate whether focusing on emotion in mindfulness practice without attention to its cultural construction functions to uphold patriarchal control and white privilege.

In Part Two, I invite you into a journey to discover ways in which mindfulness can be used as a liberating force in culture and society. These approaches do not see the individual as isolated, nor do they pretend that structural injustice will get better just by individuals gaining compassion through mindfulness as self-help. We look at how mindfulness tools are currently being applied, and we imagine ways they can be further incorporated into ethical frameworks missing from most uses of mindfulness today. The advent of COVID-19 and the eruption of the Black Lives Matter movement onto the streets of America shed enormous light on the unequal distribution of happiness, stress, and emotions, including fear from lack of safety in our society.

Chapter 6 highlights just a few of the recent ways mindfulness is being woven into ancient and cultural traditions by Black Americans and by any who are marginalized from the dominant white, male, cisgender norm, to promote individual and communal healing from violence upon ancestors, individuals, and society today.

Mindfulness is popularly associated with Buddhism, both in serious teaching and in marketing today. In chapter 7, I look at whether what is being presented is faithful to Buddhism. What can we learn

about mindfulness as it emerges from Buddhist practice? And we consider: Is mindfulness Buddhist, or is Buddhism mindfulness?

Next, I turn to spiritual traditions that draw on ancient practice for inner awareness and that offer deep foundations for social justice. I suggest that these histories are present but not easily accessible today. What happens when we couple them with simple mindfulness tools? Chapter 8 introduces several traditions that include practices that are closely aligned with mindfulness practice: Sufism, Sikhism, and Judaism. I offer my personal encounters with wise teachers in each, to raise the question of how these traditions might offer ethical contexts for mindfulness practice.

We then move more in depth to the religion I am most familiar with, that of my ancestors and of my own life. Chapter 9 explores Centering Prayer in Christianity, suggesting what this practice could gain from—and what it adds to—mindfulness practice. Finally, chapter 10 focuses on justice and civil rights movements within Christianity and ways in which Christian contemplation centers on an ethic of justice. I analyze how Christian contemplative practice can be paired with mindfulness practice, offering an ethical context, so that mindfulness tools can help us awaken to social justice needs.

As I write I have you in mind, and this book is for you if you are a student of mindfulness or interested in mindfulness and take mindfulness seriously. This book is also for you if you are a mindfulness teacher. In this analysis I offer the work of contemporary mindfulness teachers as examples of how mindfulness is being used throughout the culture. I have learned from many of you, and I believe the vast majority have heart-felt and well-meaning intentions toward those they teach. I am convinced, however, that many teachers and serious practitioners have failed to notice the extent to which Western consumerist values have so rapidly and seamlessly become intertwined with the mindfulness movement. We are unaware of the extent to which our mindfulness promotion is perpetuating not only needless consumption but also racial, gendered, and classist oppression that is deeply embedded within Western culture. I believe it is our responsi-

bility to awaken to our complicity and to be much more intentional in our promotion, teaching, and practice of mindfulness. With deep concern about what we are doing with mindfulness, I share this analysis with you.

This book is also for you if you identify as Christian, and for any religious and spiritual persons who are worried about whether today's mindfulness is compatible with your theology and practice. By the time you finish reading, I hope you will find ways in which you might benefit from the tools of mindfulness.

A Spiritual Pilgrimage

When I took a sabbatical to study the mindfulness movement through a critical lens, that journey turned into a spiritual pilgrimage. I entered the world of contemplative spiritual traditions developed over centuries. This book is its own pilgrimage, and I invite you to join me to discover where it takes us. We might be accompanied by a koan from the twelfth-century Zen work *Book of Serenity*:

- Dizang asked Fayan, "Where are you going?"
- Fayan said, "Around on pilgrimage."
- Dizang said, "What is the purpose of pilgrimage?"
- Fayan said, "I don't know."
- Dizang said, "Not knowing is most near."⁶

We embark on this near, intimate pilgrimage, journeying first through serious critical analysis, then into ancient traditions eliciting awe and devotion. We travel in search of knowing, and perhaps ultimately toward not knowing and letting go, through the landscapes of mindfulness and spiritual practice, toward a discovery of wonder.

6. "Dizang's 'Nearness,'" in *Book of Serenity* (trans. Thomas Cleary; Boston: Shambhala, 1988), 86.