

Before and After Mindfulness

An Introduction to our Special Issue on *Mindfulness and Beyond*

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I met Jon Kabat-Zinn eleven years ago during a one-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) conference at Bangor University. I had already co-facilitated a few eight-week programs, and wanted to know more about this particular way (among many) of bridging Buddhism and psychology. Two days into an onslaught of data and statistics (seemingly aimed at convincing financing institutions that, well, meditation is good for you), I became unmindful and began to raise some questions, a lonely voice among the converted. In his intervention Kabat-Zinn used the word ‘scientific’ many times, and I objected that the view of science he seemed to hold was positivist to the core; I added, as politely as I could, that my impression was that science had moved on considerably since the days of the Vienna Circle. He seemed entirely baffled by my doubts. I also remember raising objections at Mark Williams’ frequent use of the word ‘ruminations’— the veritable *bête noir* of MBSR, and the culprit of all sort of ‘unwholesome’ thoughts and deeds. I asked him whether Marcel Proust’s *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* would have been written without all those unwholesome ruminations and unnecessary fixation with the past – and how much poorer we would all be. He brushed off the question as irrelevant.

Partly out of the goodness of his heart, partly to find out what the fuss was about (‘what are you, an *anarchist*?’ a couple of MBSR people had asked me at lunch), Jon Kabat-Zinn in

person came to have a chat with me. Our chat lasted some four hours, well into the early hours. Together with a friend, we went to the coast, walking and talking about everything under the late summer moon. I was impressed by his knowledge and commitment, and touched when I heard from his voice entire passages of Dante's *Divina Commedia* in Italian. We talked of Dharma friends we knew, of teachers and writers involved in the common endeavour of bridging East and West. Being at the time a rather orthodox 'Zennist', I told him that MBSR was all very well, but without the lineage and one-to-one transmission (from teacher to student) his was no real Dharma. His reply surprised me. 'What I am creating with MBSR – he said – *is* a new lineage'. I was disappointed: by his overconfidence, but also by the suggestion that his expedient technique could be compared to the sheer magnitude of the Dharma. Yet I was grateful for the time he did spend talking to me. Moreover, he was right, for in spite of all its scientific secularism, in many of the dewy-eyed participants one could glimpse the inevitable future of MBSR as Secularist Church and of Jon Kabat-Zinn as its Prophet.

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I practised Zen Buddhism and Eastern contemplative disciplines for thirty-five years. For some time now I've done my bit trying to uncover and generate links with western psychology and philosophy. My response to the current popularization of mindfulness is ambivalent. This is because I believe the teachings of the Buddha are subversive and that the mindfulness 'movement' makes them palatable at great cost.

At its core, the Dharma examines the substantiality of the self. It takes apart (gently but thoroughly) the foundations of what we hold most dear: our identity. Identity is not merely a personal issue. It is a political one. Many vested interests are built on it. What is colonialism if not forcibly exporting identity? What is corporate greed but organized fear of non-existence? The current upsurge of identity politics has made it possible to push aside the

things that matter: injustice, opposition to plutocratic and imperial power – structures assembled and thriving on identity and, conversely on the fear of insubstantiality. Identity politics gave us the abstracted, feel-good factor of a black president in the White House, his blackness aseptically severed from history and society. It gave us the near-inevitability of Hillary Clinton as Obama’s successor, on the grounds that she is a woman (never mind her zealous championing on neo-liberal policies). It gave us the rebranding of the Conservatives in the UK as the Party that ‘understands’ gays and is in favour of civil partnership (never mind its systematic destruction of welfare).

Identity has become everything. So powerful is our investment in identity (and in its universalist correlation, the exaggerated importance attributed to our own species), that it permeates even crucial issues such as climate change, which is potentially heading towards becoming the last refuge of the narcissist, with the titanic delusion of thinking we can in turn annihilate or save Planet Earth by the sheer power of our all too-human will.

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A widely held assumption in contemporary thought holds that it is possible to read and understand a culture and a practice whose roots are remote in space and time. It is believed that, as humans, we face joys and sorrows that are eternal and immutable. All we need to do is tweak here and there and adapt ancient languages to contemporary sensibilities. Closely linked to the above is the post-modernist principle that a text, a culture, a philosophical or religious practice can be read from a myriad of perspectives, all equally valid. One of these perspectives may become dominant – not necessarily because it is truer but because several contingent, inter-related motives converge to push it to the fore: for instance, the demands of the market, a widespread if hazy secularism, a specific view of what it means to be human.

What these parallel beliefs have in common is *hubris*, or arrogance. A beneficial antidote to the above view is what Walter Benjamin calls *the moment of readability* (or *the now of*

knowability). Counter to the rather cosy assumption that *any* culture can be duly understood by *anyone* (provided he or she employs the philological virtues of learning, diligence, aptitude, and persistence), Benjamin proposes a singularly different notion. Historical change, he says, brings about constant shifts and transformations which open and close our historical vision. There is a particular moment in which we can really understand something. But real understanding often eludes us, for this requires a little more than diligence and learning, let alone arrogance. A dynamic, historical element needs to be also in place, an aspect of time that is more than linear sequence (*chronos*), one that stands for mysterious and fortuitous opportunity, for occurrences full of pregnant possibilities – what the Greeks called *kairos*.

I would not go as far as to say that the Dharma is simply not readable in our time. There *are* Buddhist scholars (D. S. Lopez Jr. comes to mind) who have presented a convincing argument in this vein, effectively saying that our era has the Buddha it can understand, a ‘scientific’ Buddha, and nothing more. But perhaps Benjamin’s *now of knowability* is a sober reminder of our limitations in apprehending complex texts and practices across centuries.

It is fair to point out, however, that the Dharma’s inherently subversive element has been neutered in order to accommodate vested interests. This point is wonderfully and expertly explored by **Ron Purser** in the opening piece. He identifies what current ‘mindfulness’ blatantly lacks: the social dimension, with MBSR programs becoming a remedial appendix to neo-liberal ideology: the substitution of communal *welfare* with an atomized notion of *wellness*, a ‘smile or die’, positive-thinking panacea to the social ills of the world as well as a simplistic and misleading deification of the present moment. The irritation I confess feeling whenever this topic is discussed has to do with the fact that decades of fruitful experimentations by so many practitioners, teachers and psychologist in bridging Buddhism and psychology are currently hijacked by ‘mindfulness’.

In her personal, moving piece charting her experience with Zen practice and Core Process Psychotherapy, **Dorinda Talbot** succeeds in presenting a refreshingly different perspective, one that admirably avoids the byzantinism of academic jargon.

Rejecting the secularism of MBSR, **David Brazier** presents us with an alternative interpretation, unfashionably and coherently adhering to a metaphysical, even eternalist view of the Buddha's teaching and inviting us to savour the latter first hand. Brazier understands 'metaphysics' literally, as pertaining to what is not physical or subject to decay, rather than 'an explanation of the way things are', a more recent definition of metaphysics under whose heading secularism also belongs.

A similarly 'religious' critique of mindfulness is offered by **R. J. Chisholm** who, in addition, aptly questions some of the more ethically dubious applications of mindfulness techniques: among members of the military forces, law enforcement officers, intelligence analysts and undercover agents. His critique is well-argued and nuanced, even allowing for the genuine question as to whether MBSR is 'stealth Buddhism'.

Rebecca Greenslade rounds up these generous offerings by giving a different philosophical backdrop to secular contemplative and ethical practices connected to mindfulness and Buddhism: ancient Greek philosophy and a view of philosophy as *a way of life*.