



# Mind the Body: Mindfulness Meditation as a Spiritual Practice Between Neuroscience, Therapy and Self-awareness

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The Buddhist concept of mindfulness meditation (Conze, 1969; Anālayo, 2017; Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Bhikkhu Sujato, 2012; Cousins, 1994–1996; Crosby, 2013; Gethin, 2011; Jordt, 2007) is currently being met with broad receptivity in various social functional areas. Understood by its advocates as a non-denominational practice of self-awareness, mindfulness meditation is one of the most important phenomena of what various socio-theoretical approaches call ‘spirituality’, as distinguished from ‘religion’. Against this background, mindfulness meditation can be seen as a magnifying glass for the socio-cultural figurations of ‘spirituality’ in Western societies (Nehring & Ernst, 2013). Oscillating between therapy and religious experience, scientific subject matter and pedagogical concept, mindfulness meditation offers a way to ask how the added value of an implicit ‘spiritual’<sup>1</sup> certainty, practised and transformed in meditation, is expressed discursively in different social functional areas.

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<sup>1</sup> John Welwood has coined the term ‘spiritual bypassing’ (Welwood, 2002). See also: Sherrell & Simmer-Brown, 2017; Fossella, 2011).

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# 1 General Aspects of Mindfulness

The term ‘mindfulness’ describes a self-reflexive form of attention control in which one’s own experience of a situation is reflected upon from the perspective of a second-order observation within the framework of a meditative practice. The aim is a non-judgemental, neutral attitude in which thoughts and feelings are observed in the process of their coming into being and passing away.

As an attitude of emotional and rational acceptance of a given state, mindfulness results in insight into the dynamics of conscious thought processes and a deeper awareness of the interweaving of thought processes with physical constitutions (psychosomatic feedback).

Through its connection with the experiential situation of a meditative practice, that is a ritualized technique, the concept of mindfulness represents the possibility of a conscious experience of the interweaving of habitualized and automatized evaluational and emotional patterns with an implicit knowledge of the body. This experience is supposed to open up scope for shaping and changing them in everyday experience.

Borrowed to a large extent from the Buddhist tradition of Vipassanā (Anālayo, 2006), these qualities of mindfulness have been made available for therapeutic purposes in medicine and psychology by the American molecular biologist Jon Kabat-Zinn, among others. Since the late 1970s, these qualities have formed a therapeutic programme called ‘Mindfulness-Based-Stress-Reduction’ (MBSR) and have been used with great success in the treatment of a wide range of psychosomatic and physical illnesses (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Badham & King, 2019; Hickey, 2010).

Although the exercises used today are derived from the Buddhist meditation techniques, they have only found their present form through encounter with Western culture and its understanding of individual experience (McMahan, 2008; King, 2019; Husgafvel, 2016). Both a philosophical concept and a meditation practice, mindfulness has been appropriated in the West since the early twentieth century and is currently receiving considerable attention in science, religion, the educational system and popular culture, far beyond medicine and psychotherapy. It is no exaggeration to say that mindfulness is currently the most popular buzzword when it comes to the training of consciousness.

In the business world, mindfulness meditation is recommended to stressed employees and managers as a means of burn-out prevention. In medicine, psychology and cognitive neuroscience, research is being conducted into the

health-promoting effects of mindfulness meditation. Philosophers such as Thomas Metzinger call for mindfulness meditation at schools to familiarize children with the dynamics of their own consciousness and its physical effects (Metzinger, 2017; Metzinger, 2009). In pedagogy, mindfulness is discussed as a practice of self-care and a tool for preserving the joy of learning (Bache, 2008; Flores, 2017). In conferences between Buddhists and neuroscientists, the effects of mindfulness meditation on the brain are debated,<sup>2</sup> and in the media landscape, where the increased public attention towards mental illness is translated into questions of personal lifestyle, mindfulness meditation is presented reflexively as a contemporary offer of meaning to life. This area can be described as ‘popular mindfulness discourses’.

In order to adequately assess the variety of references to mindfulness in science and society, it is necessary to focus on the interaction between the various socio-cultural receptions and applications of mindfulness. This focus, which is missing from some of the previous research, is necessary not only to deepen our knowledge of the (empirically validated) psychological effectiveness of mindfulness (Sauer, 2011), but also to better understand the social and cultural prerequisites of the concept.

The acceptance and effectiveness of mindfulness overlap in the therapeutic, religious and educational functional areas. Acceptance, in turn, can only be explained by highlighting the cultural prerequisites. An approach into this discursive field from the perspective of cultural studies can, to my mind, show more than just the crispness of empirical research. Therefore, I attempt to look at the enormous amount of research that has been done in this field in recent decades from an abstract perspective by taking into account the interactions of psycho-social dynamics. The question of why mindfulness meditation in particular is so popular at present is thus seen as highly relevant in its apparent simplicity. As a step towards an understanding of what makes this meditation practice so attractive in contemporary culture, I will address a few key considerations.

## 2 Cultural Studies Approaches

A cultural studies approach considers the concept of mindfulness under contemporary conditions. Mindfulness as a practice is interwoven with discourses of its legitimation and interpretation, that is with explicit semantics. It is an

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<sup>2</sup> See a critical review of the Mind & Life conferences with the Dalai Lama (Samuel, 2014; Lopez Jr., 2008).

epistemological triviality, but in contrast to positivist attempts that empirically confirm the often unquestioned ‘effectiveness’ of mindfulness, it should be emphasized that these semantics are not only derived from interpretations of what is ‘experienced’ in meditative practice, but they also structure the experiential dimension of an engaged meditation practice in the form of expectations and pre-settings. In a way, albeit from a different perspective, this has also been highlighted by David Chalmers (Chalmers, 1997) in his discussion on the methodological problems of the neuro-phenomenological approach suggested by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch in their book *The Embodied Mind* (Varela et al., 1991). In this highly influential publication, they argue for an ‘enactive approach’ which could bridge the third-person perspective of science and the first-person perspective of individual experience. The authors explicitly refer to Buddhism as a means to overcome the gap “between the human mind as studied by science and the mind as personally experienced” (Rosch, 2017, p. 1). Chalmers argues,

Of course, there are deep methodological problems here. The first is the old problem that the mere act of attention to one’s experience transforms that experience. As we become more patient and careful, we may find that we are studying data that are transformed in subtle ways. This is not too much of a problem at the start of investigation—we have a long way to go until this degree of subtlety even comes into play—but it may eventually lead to deep paradoxes of observership. (Chalmers, 1997, p. 39)

I will argue from a different perspective. What makes the phenomenon of the multidimensional reception of mindfulness so exciting is that in the discussion on mindfulness, we can recognize the application of a superordinate social and cultural studies question. That is the question of how, in a given historical situation, the boundary between an experience accessible only to the individual consciousness (from the perspective of the first person) and its re-presentation in communication, i.e. externalized, stabilized and objectifiable for reflective observation (from the perspective of the third person), is drawn by means of media such as language, visual media and bodily practices. The question is whether mindfulness as a sensory experience (consciousness) that can only be experienced privately has something to do with public forms of negotiating mindfulness in social discourses (communication). This relates to one of the core questions of methodology in Religious Studies with regard to the analysis of religious experience (Proudfoot, 1985; Taves, 2009; Sharf, 1998).

Every cultural studies approach to mindfulness must develop not only a systematic cultural-analytical understanding of mindfulness but also a historico-cultural-comparative analysis of the reception of mindfulness in 'Western' and 'Eastern' discourses.

The contemporary reception of mindfulness in North America and Europe is, in many ways, layered by cultural exchange and transfer relations. One recalls, for example, the great line of reception of Buddhism since the nineteenth century (Prebish & Baumann, 2002; Batchelor, 1994; Coleman, 2001; Prebish & Tanaka, 1998; Tweed, 1992). But this is only one dimension of the phenomenon. For not only are the sources of the respective Buddhist interpretation of mindfulness itself extremely heterogeneous; mindfulness is not even necessarily Buddhist, and therefore it only fits to a limited extent into the stereotypes of a West-East cultural transfer. The reception of mindfulness in Europe is not directly 'Asian' in its essential parts, it is moreover mediated through discourses from the cultural area of North America (which is different from Europe).

Similarly, in a systematic cultural-analytical perspective, the reception of mindfulness cannot be reduced to the functional area of the religious sphere and its discourse on the quality of religious experience. Rather, mindfulness stands for a subsystem-wide offer of meaning that can be addressed as 'spirituality' (Carrette & King, 2005). In the background here is a term borrowed from the sociological research of knowledge: 'spirituality' (Knoblauch, 2009). Spirituality in a sociological understanding describes various forms of searching for personal meaning that are not bound to organizations and that can be defined as 'religious' but do not have to be.

Following Thomas Luckmann (Luckmann, 1967), Hubert Knoblauch has argued that the plausibility of the term 'spirituality' lies in the offer of a deep existential personal experience to the individual. This happens within the framework of a popular form of communication, that is a highly generalized, broadly connectable cultural form open to various interpretations, which is easy to learn, does not require any special prerequisites for participation and can be applied to almost all areas of life.

The concept of spirituality can epistemologically be conceived as an experiential dimension of implicit certainty, which is experienced and brought to life as the basis of a process of interpretation based on meaning.

Mindfulness aims at the development of the first-person perspective and thus at a self-perception through introspection. Introspection, however, is considered an inescapably subjective phenomenon that is not valid in scientific argumentation because it is not subject to observation and intersubjective comparison. This becomes very clear in a conversation between Matthieu Ricard and Wolf Singer. Ricard argues:

It is not enough to think hard about how the mind might function and then come up with complex theories, as Freud did, for example. Such intellectual adventures cannot replace 2000 years of direct exploration of the workings of the mind through thorough introspection by experienced practitioners who have already achieved stability and clarity. Even the most sophisticated theory of a brilliant thinker, if it is not based on empirical evidence, cannot be compared to the accumulated experience of hundreds of people, each of whom has spent dozens of years exploring the most subtle aspects of the mind through direct experience. (Singer & Ricard, 2008, p. 11f.)

This statement shows that it is not appropriate to speak of a lack of observability, but one has to focus on the positions of observation, since the phenomenologically interesting potency of human consciousness consists in being able to observe itself self-reflectively. Consciousness is always consciousness of something and therefore of oneself as well. The problem that arises is the insertion of subject and object of observation. How can people cognitively perceive, classify and symbolically transform the world, and at the same time apply these processes, which let reality come into being, to themselves? The human being draws a picture of him/herself as a subject equipped with a consciousness. These basic assumptions of phenomenology are now reactivated in various ways in the mindfulness discourse: For example human beings transcend themselves through this ego-centrism, or in the conception of the 'mind' as a counterpart to the 'brain', as is discussed in detail in the debates on the philosophy of mind and for the freedom of will.

### **3 Meditation as a Body Technique, Connection to Neuroscience**

In mindfulness meditation, however, introspection takes place on two reciprocally restricted levels, the physical and the mental. As already mentioned, it is a physical technique that seeks to influence consciousness through the body by first placing the body in the focus of attention, that is in the meditation terminology 'experiencing mindfulness'. The two central techniques are respiration and body scanning, somatically comprehensible for example in the measurement of heart rate and oxygen consumption. In this revitalization of the body-mind relationship, a closure to the inside is carried out in such a way that an interruption of the continuity of constant further differentiation of the self through new experiences is carried out through the interaction of

body and mind, which is usually associated with the charged concept of the 'holistic'.

A central assumption in the popular discourse on modernity is now that a new quality of a claim to self-location within one's biography is emerging for individuals, within the framework of differentiation processes on a social level. Due to the demands of contingency compensation, the decision-making processes become more complex, etc. it becomes more difficult to maintain the unity of the self or of 'wholeness' postulated as existential. Pathologies such as depression and burn-out emerge and are attested to as symptoms of social change, especially in working conditions. Meditation is supposed to offer a problem-solving strategy as well as a preventive measure at this very point.

Of course, the functionality of introducing meditation practices into everyday life can be questioned. As a social practice, mindfulness, despite its supposed distancing from all claims and dogmatic positions, is far from being a non-normative practice. In every discourse in which mindfulness meditation is received, this meditation practice is ideologically enriched according to the rules and guidelines of the respective discourse; that is it is placed under the conditions of that discourse. As mentioned above, this can include a definite reference to Buddhism but does not have to. Accordingly, the high adaptability of mindfulness is a socio-cultural indicator, namely an indicator for not least being attractive for various ideological enrichments in contemporary society.

A central prerequisite for the highly discursive adaptability of mindfulness seems to be that mindfulness as a practice of reflexive self-correction can be applied in everyday life. Whether in a medical, psychological or pedagogical understanding of therapy and education or as a philosophical-ideological concept, the tenor is that mindfulness increases the distance to 'faulty' states of consciousness, such as those caused by illness, painful relationships or attentiveness disorder.

Popular culture helps to control processes of individual self-management, that is to make offers in relation to lifestyles and so on, which are a special form of communication because they usually have a very clear narrative dramaturgy. In mindfulness meditation, for example, one finds above all a semantics of benefit for health, the psyche, but also for the individual meaning of life. As a form of spirituality, the successful model of mindfulness meditation consists of making a promise within the framework of one's own individualization, one's own 'personality development' and one's own 'bio-graphy', which refers to the function of the 'popular' (Knoblauch, 2009, p. 152).

This theoretical framework—that is understanding spirituality as a popular form of semantization and explication of individual experiences—allows us to elaborate the special nature of mindfulness meditation between religion, therapy, education and ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault et al., 1988). The reference to Buddhist traditions of self-liberation or self-redemption is obvious here.

Significantly, Buddhism is understood to promote a subjectivist approach, something which is reinforced in interpretations intended for Western readers. The subject, it is emphasized, is the ultimate foundation of Buddhist religion, both the starting point of the perception of reality, which is understood as suffering, and the potential for salvation from it (Wallace, 2004; Reddy & Roy, 2019). According to Nyanaponika Thera (Nyanaponika, 1965), whose works were fundamental to the reception of mindfulness meditation in the USA, the subjectivist perspective of Buddhism culminates in its self-understanding as “the doctrine of mind” (Nyanaponika, 2007, p. 14f.), which is about recognizing, forming and liberating the mind—which Nyanaponika synonymously describes as ‘consciousness’—through the practice of mindfulness. In discourses on mindfulness meditation, this subjectivistic character of the teachings of the Buddha is emphasized in a specific way by referring to the personal-individual character of the knowledge acquired through meditation. Nyanaponika speaks of mindfulness meditation as the ‘path of self-help’, which he considers to be the actually real help.

However, that this is already a normative construction becomes clear not only from Nyanaponika’s resolute dismissal of teachings “which claim that human beings can only be redeemed by the grace of a God” (Nyanaponika, 2007, p. 165), but rather from the fact that the ‘path of self-help’ requires explicit legitimation, which consists in seeing mindfulness meditation as one of the remedies against the ‘degeneration of humanity’, against the ‘catastrophes’ of self-destruction that were to be observed in Christian Europe in the twentieth century, as well as against the ‘mindless distractions’. Mindfulness, on the other hand, promotes the “unfolding of a high and supreme humanity, the true superhuman, of whom so many spirits have dreamed and to whom so many misdirected efforts have been made” (Nyanaponika, 2007, p. 21f.). It would therefore be naïve to believe that mindfulness meditation is only about the subjective path of self-liberation. Mindfulness meditation is a collective practice that aims to train a form of certainty that is socially predetermined and thus also under ideological assumptions. Mindfulness is a state of certainty.



## 4 Thich Nhat Hanh: Mindfulness and Interbeing

In the broad reception of the writings of the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, a 'spiritual' interpretation of mindfulness in the religious sense prevails, whereby the boundaries between the therapeutic scene and the esoteric scene that refer to him must be described as fluid. Thich Nhat Hanh adapts practices and teachings from the Theravāda tradition as well as from Mahāyāna, both of which are represented in his country. Known as expressions of a politicized 'engaged Buddhism', his books are dedicated to the connection of the concept of mindfulness with the holistic philosophy of 'inter-being', a mystically accentuated theory of conditional emergence. 'Interbeing' is an artificial term coined by Nhat Hanh himself and is meant to express the mutual connectedness of all beings. Nhat Hanh's claim is to rehearse the experience of that connectedness through mindfulness meditation. As early as 1966 he founded his own order, the Tiep Hien Order (Order of Interbeing), which can be considered an important nucleus of mindfulness centres throughout the world today.

Through the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh, alongside those of authors such as Alan Watts, Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein or Jon Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness has become so popular that in the meantime it does not seem possible to identify clear lines of reception, nor does it seem sensible to assign it to one religious tradition. For it is precisely in mindfulness centres that the concept of mindfulness has been decontextualized in such a way that it can be developed into a unified doctrine of contemplation that combines Western and Eastern mystical traditions. A well-known example of this in Germany is the former Benedictine monk Willigis Jäger, who represented a mystical form of spirituality based on a universalistic concept of religious experience (Nehring, 2005). Mindfulness centres are thus places where therapeutic and religious practice overlap to such an extent that it seems more appropriate to speak of 'popularized spirituality' (Knoblauch, 2009) than of Buddhist tradition in the narrower sense.

With the concept of mindfulness, Nhat Hanh tries to fructify the practice of meditation for positive change in everyday life, especially in social relations. He argues that, as a form of emotional and rational concentration on a given state, mindfulness results in insights into the dynamics of one's own thought processes. The aim is to achieve a deeper awareness of the interweaving of thought processes with the object world and the social environment. Accordingly, mindfulness not only causes fundamental changes in the

perception of one's own self and its relationship to reality, but also a changed practice of relating to the world resulting from this perception. With the help of the observer position, which can be taken up in meditation through introspection, the unity of reality should be realized/experienced.

The decisive factor for Nhat Hanh is that this experience is an intentionally aspired-to state within the meditation practice, a state which on the one hand was promised in advance in the mediation of the technique, and on the other hand is intended to evoke the living connection with reality as an ethical attitude. One can therefore speak of an initiated translation process from explicit to implicit knowledge. The propagated All-unity is to be internalized to the extent that it becomes physically manifest:

You are conscious of the presence of bodily form, feeling, perception, mental functionings, and consciousness. You observe these 'objects' until you see that each of them has intimate connection with the world outside yourself: if the world did not exist then the assembly of the five aggregates could not exist either [...]. You meditate on them until you are able to see the presence of the reality of one-ness in your own self, and can see that your own life and the life of the universe are one. (Nhat Hanh, 1976, p. 47f.)

Nhat Hanh develops mindfulness meditation, which focuses on the emergence in interdependence and the interrelation of reality, as a method of introspection. "It is a penetration of mind into mind itself" (Nhat Hanh, 1976, p. 45). This penetration is decidedly delimited from rational approaches: "Meditation is not a discursive reflection on a philosophy of interdependence, but rather one's own powers of concentration should be developed to reveal the real nature of the object being contemplated" (Nhat Hanh, 1976, p. 45). In this way the first-person perspective, self-perception through introspection, becomes the starting point for the perception of reality. Introspection—as an inescapably subjective method of observation—is thus removed from scientific observation from the third-person perspective and thus also from intersubjective discourse. It aims at an experience that can only be undergone by oneself or at a qualitative 'perception'. Nhat Hanh spuds in at the interface of the observer position in the first-person perspective and the second-person perspective. Consciousness is, as mentioned above, always consciousness of something and also of oneself. Starting from a certainty of reference to one's own thinking and consciousness, Nhat Hanh sees meditation as a method to guide human consciousness to reflexively observe itself and connect to one's bodily experience.

Breath is the bridge which connects life to consciousness, which unites your body to your thoughts. Whenever your mind becomes scattered, use your breath as the means to take hold of your mind again. (Nhat Hanh, 1976, p. 15)

The unity of body and thought cannot be achieved in conceptual reflection, but in the holistic meditative practice of perception and experience, which interweaves the perspectives of the first and second person. The meditator creates a self-image as a subject endowed with consciousness. This consciousness can reflexively refer to the subject as well as to the world as an object in such a way that the meditator transcends them through meditative self-reference—that is, that reflection is suspended in self-reflection.

Nhat Hanh has formulated this process in the theses of the ‘Seven Miracles of Mindfulness’, which have become basic articles on the websites of numerous mindfulness centres throughout Europe:<sup>3</sup>

1. Mindfulness is about bringing out our authentic presence, making us alive in the here and now and getting in touch with things.
2. Mindfulness makes us realize that life is already there. We can really be in contact with it and give it meaning and depth.
3. Mindfulness gives life force to the object of our contemplation, touches and embraces it. This makes ourselves alive and life becomes more real.
4. Mindfulness mediates concentration. When we concentrate in our everyday life, we will be able to look at everything more deeply and understand it better.
5. Mindfulness enables us to look deeply and allows us to better recognize the object of our observation outside and inside ourselves.
6. Mindfulness leads to understanding that comes from deep within ourselves. We gain clarity and thus the readiness for acceptance is encouraged.
7. Mindfulness leads to liberation through the insights thus gained. Wherever we practice mindfulness there is life, understanding and compassion.

What is interesting about these statements is that the experience itself is made a guarantor of presence and co-presence against an observer position from outside, which Nhat Hanh attributes to the natural sciences. The semantics of ‘presence’ takes on a central function in Nhat Hanh and in the further reception of his approach. Mindfulness is supposed to enable a sense of self as

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<sup>3</sup>Since formulations differ and there are several versions of the seven theses on the web, I offer a summarized version here. Cf. <http://www.intersein-zentrum.de/thich.html>.

release from ego-centrism and, at the same time, a higher degree of empathy and social competence.

The Seven Miracles of Mindfulness describe a state that is supposed to be achieved through meditation practice using certain techniques. The aim is not so much the classical liberation from the karmic process of coming into being and passing away through insight into the nature of the dhammas, but rather a change in everyday practice in dealing with oneself and one's environment—increased self-perception becomes a guarantee of increased self-awareness in one's own social relations. The promise is well known: The difference between subject and object is to be overcome through this interaction of body and mind. This state of perception is described in the texts on mindfulness meditation under the label 'holistic', a term which at first sight can hardly be conveyed with the ideas of transience, suffering and non-self-ness from the texts of the Pali Canon. Nhat Hanh sees in this the special contribution of Mahāyāna:

When reality is perceived in its nature of ultimate perfection, the practitioner has reached a level of wisdom called non-discrimination mind—a wondrous communion in which there is no longer any distinction made between subject and object. This isn't some far-off, unattainable state. Any one of us—by persisting in practicing even a little—can at least taste of it. (Nhat Hanh, 1976, p. 57)

## 5 Jon Kabat-Zinn: Mindfulness as Therapeutic Buddhism

Mindfulness meditation has become widely known in recent years, especially in therapeutic contexts. In particular, the method of *Mindfulness Based Stress-Reduction* (MBSR) developed in the USA by the American molecular biologist and physician Jon Kabat-Zinn has advertised this type of meditation as effective method for treating a wide range of diseases. From stress-induced mental illnesses, such as depression, anxiety disorders and somatoform pain disorders such as fibromyalgia and burn-out, to pain caused by illness, mindfulness meditation is praised as being successfully used to build greater tolerance for illness and improve pain management strategies.

Mindfulness Based Stress-Reduction is conceptualized as an eight-week course that combines elements from different meditation techniques. Kabat-Zinn has presented his approach in his book *Full Catastrophe Living* (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), which was published in Germany under the (somewhat more mundane) title *Gesund durch Meditation* (Kabat-Zinn, 2006). If one follows

the instructions of this book, then mindfulness is seen by Kabat-Zinn as an exercise or path that should lead to inner peace and to insights. “Cultivating mindfulness can lead to the discovery of deep realms of relaxation, calmness, and insight within yourself” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 12).

A ‘new territory, previously unknown to you or only vaguely suspected’ is to be opened up to patients through mindfulness meditation. The path to a ‘real self-understanding’ promises healing. “The path to it in any moment lies no farther than your own body and mind and your own breathing” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 12). With the MBSR method, Kabat-Zinn decidedly refers to the Buddhist tradition and to Vipassanā meditation in particular, and emphasizes that he is thus taking up a practice which “has flourished over the past 2,500 years”, and was not only practised in monasteries and among laypeople, but which is particularly widespread among the Western youth today “drawn by the remarkable interest in this country [US] in meditative practices” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 12).

While the reception of the concept of mindfulness in psychology focuses on the description of an attentive state of consciousness, Kabat-Zinn is aiming at more than that: Mindfulness is a ‘path’ or ‘life path’ that one has to follow. Kabat-Zinn sees himself as influenced by ideas of Buddhist ethics, but emphasizes that mindfulness meditation is an approach of universal validity.

It can be learned and practiced, as we do in the stress clinic, without appealing to Oriental culture or Buddhist authority to enrich it or authenticate it [...]. In fact one of its major strengths is that it is not dependent on any belief system or ideology, so that its benefits are therefore accessible for anyone to test for himself or herself. (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 12)

As I already pointed out, the universalization and especially the de-contextualization of Buddhist meditation practice by American meditation teachers such as Kabat-Zinn, or Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg prepared the ground for the adaptation of the practice into the therapeutic context.

There are various interesting aspects of Kabat-Zinn and his reception of the meditation practice. The discrepancy between Buddhist religious and non-Buddhist scientific contextualization of the programme is obvious. In analysing MBSR, one can investigate the borderlines between religion and science. MBSR is the key phenomenon of what might be called ‘therapeutic Buddhism’.

Mindfulness is described by Kabat-Zinn as a holistic body experience that differs from a state of ‘dis-attention’, whereby, according to the (controversial) parapsychologist Gary Schwartz, inattention—thinkably vague—is defined as

“not attending to the relevant feedback messages of our body and our mind that are necessary for their harmonious functioning” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 228). Kabat-Zinn sees the disregard of physical signals to the psyche as the cause of most diseases and therefore conceives of MBSR as an attempt to sensitize the patient to interactions between psyche and body. As a central insight, Kabat-Zinn teaches an ‘interconnectedness’ not only of body and mind but, by means of ‘feedback loops’, of all individual systems in the body and the environment, which leads him to a theory of the embedding of the body in the environment and to the definition of health as a ‘dynamic process’.

If connectedness is crucial for physical integration and health, it is equally important psychologically and socially [...]. The web of interconnectedness goes beyond our individual psychological self. While we are whole ourselves as individual beings, we are also part of a larger whole, interconnected through our family and our friends and acquaintances to the larger society and ultimately to the whole of humanity and life on the planet. (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 157)

The personal-individual disposition is seen as an activating potential for self-healing powers. A prerequisite for this is the perception of the body as a “universe in itself” that organizes itself and is equipped with cells that have the ability to

regulate itself as a whole to maintain the internal balance and order [...]. The body accomplishes this inner balance through finely tuned feedback loops that interconnect all aspects of the organism. (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 155)

With the help of a scientific superstructure, Kabat-Zinn designs an image of a human being as an entropy-producing system and establishes the ‘holistic’ perspective with the help of an analogy between the Buddhist concept of emergence in dependence (Pali: *paticca-samuppāda*; Skt: *pratītya-samutpāda*) and the so-called Gaia-hypothesis from systematic ecology, which is based on a systems-theoretical understanding of life. According to Kabat-Zinn, the body is able to adapt to its environment in a reactive and self-organizing (autopoiesis) way by means of the ‘feedback loops’ which connect all systems with each other. Kabat-Zinn thus ties in with approaches that have been developed in the environment of structural-functional and constructivist concepts in biology, anthropology and cognitive psychology by Gregory Bateson, Humberto Maturana, Francisco Varela and Eleanor Rosch. The Dutch scholar of religious studies Wouter J. Hanegraaff has aptly described this field of theory as New Age Science (Hanegraaff, 1996).

The central concept of Kabat-Zinn is, as already mentioned, ‘interconnectedness’, which marks the connection of mind and body and thus the ‘wholeness’ as well as the connection to all living beings. According to him, these idealistic, natural-philosophical speculations about ‘being whole’ make the difference between mindfulness meditation and other stress management techniques. (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 164)

What is striking is not the attempt to scientifically enrich the MBSR concept, but that the MBSR programme combines the life form of mindfulness with a very strong concept of individuality. On the one hand, it uses the affirmation of stereotypical ‘Eastern’ ideas and practices to distance itself from stereotypical ‘Western’ concepts of individuality, but on the other hand, it formulates nothing but a promise of salvation for the individual, in so far as the individual has to “walk the path of mindfulness” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 441) in order to reach the state of ‘being whole’ with him- or herself.

## 6 Mind and Body

Three aspects I would like to highlight as results from the reflections above.

Deepened everyday experience—mindfulness as reframing of everyday experiences: Whether it is interpreted as ‘just being’ or as a radical acceptance of one’s own existential ‘Geworfen-Sein’ into existence, mindfulness always carries with it the promise of an experience that is ‘purer’ precisely because it is ‘unconditional’. It is interesting to note that it is not the moment of experience itself that is conceived as something ‘deeper’ (e.g. as in mysticism), but that the results of meditation should allow for a ‘deeper’ way of life. It is not the practice itself that is the plunge into a deeper layer of experience, but the results of the practice that lead to a changed and ‘deeper’ insight. Mindfulness does not refer to elevated or transcendental experiences of presence, but it promises a new framing of everyday presence, that is new perspectives on everyday life, which is to be achieved above all by training greater tolerance towards everyday states of consciousness.

Embodied consciousness—mindfulness as a consciousness technique of embodied experience: Meditation practice promises the prospect of a changed life practice through the perception of consciousness as embodied consciousness. Mindfulness is intended to provide the individual with ways and strategies for dealing with the states of consciousness on the basis of his/her implicit knowledge that is initially explicitly learned and then habitualized. For this

purpose the embodiment of these states is made tangible, that is presented in meditation practice.

Difference-knowledge—body/mind—mindfulness as an insight into the transience of conscious states: Mindfulness meditation can be seen as a practice that provides the late modern subject with a difference-knowledge of the interaction of consciousness and body through the technique of consciousness conveyed in it. Consciousness is experienced as somatic consciousness. The sense and purpose of this practice seems to be to practice the phenomenal transience of states of consciousness and in this way to achieve a higher tolerance of affects and knowledge of dysfunctional states of consciousness. The existential self-presentation of motives such as transience is seen as an antidote to such dysfunctional states. What dysfunction is, however, is highly dependent on the respective discursive appropriation of mindfulness.

## 7 Conclusion

From the point of view of cultural studies, what is remarkable about mindfulness and its reception is that and how it is adapted in various discourses. Mindfulness obviously hits not only one but several nerves of Western lifestyle, it also carries an implicit normativity. As a social practice, mindfulness is, as mentioned before, anything but a non-normative practice despite its distancing from all claims and dogmatic positions. Mindfulness discourses take on a non-normative character that can be reflected upon precisely in its promise of purity, that is in the suppositional experience of ‘pure perception’, ‘mere existence’, ‘immediate presence’.

The normative tenor is that mindfulness enables distancing from ‘faulty’ states of consciousness. Faulty attitudes and convictions must—in order to be recognized as faults—deviate from a norm. The obvious question, of course, is: Who defines the norm? Who defines what is ‘dysfunctional’? In other words, the problem here is not that mindfulness as a social practice is necessarily normative, but the explicit attribution that mindfulness as a practice is ‘neutral’. It is also striking that the correction achieved through mindfulness as practice is designed as a self-correction. As a popular form of spirituality, mindfulness can be read as a practice of self-care, which—like all conceptions of the self—is subject to historical-contingent conditions. Mindfulness is at the centre of the concepts of how individual self-care is normatively conveyed and conceived in late modern Western society.



Mindfulness meditation, as a physical practice, is a technique of consciousness that has undoubtedly therapeutic value. From an ideology-critical point of view, however, it presents itself as something like a problematic self-interpretation of today's Western societies, and especially of the demands that arise for the individual.

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