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Learning to Stop
Mindfulness Meditation as Anti-violence Pedagogy

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Preface

Since I began writing on mindfulness and education a few years ago, I have been asked by the learners that I have encountered about the point and purchase of this topic. For some who I meet in occasional guest lectures and workshops, the questions are about making sense of the different parts of my work (and by inference, who I am). Given that much of my teaching and writing looks at the historical antecedents of contemporary educational policies and practices—with attention to the types of violence that they can reproduce or reduce—what is the relevance of mindfulness?

For others, not least the many students I have had the privilege of working with more closely over the past few years in teacher education classrooms, the questions are of a more practical nature. With all the challenges that educators face in systems and institutions that are often unsympathetic to their needs or those of their students, not to mention all the crises we experience in the world, what help is mindfulness?

This small book in no way pretends to answer any of these questions in a definitive way. Indeed, one of the key takeaways is that questions about mindfulness and mindfulness-based practices cannot be answered in the abstract. We do better by looking at those who teach it, their students, and the times and places they live in. Just like the question 'What is the best way to teach?' is a trick question (that I like to ask my students) because there is no 'best way'—only what is deemed 'best' for unique audiences with specific needs in particular situations—so too with mindfulness and practices deemed useful for cultivating it.

What this book does is attempt to join some dots between education, mindfulness, and (anti)violence. It does so by spotlighting some exemplary educators for whom mindfulness meditation was (and is) a powerful way of learning how to respond wisely, and not react rashly, to the types of violence that they and their students faced. It is my hope that those of us who are educators and practitioners of mindfulness meditation will be inspired to learn more from these teachers. And that having learnt from them, we might also join with them in crafting restorative and reparative responses to the many manifestations of violence in our world.

Sydney, NSW, Australia Remy Y. S. Low

Acknowledgements

As the heart and soul of this book are teachers and their students, I wish to thank my teachers and students.

While this book was being written, the two teachers who feature in this book as prime exemplars, and who have shaped me immeasurably, passed away: bell hooks on 15 December 2021, then Thich Nhat Hanh on 22 January 2022. In little ways, may this book and my life be a continuation of your teachings.

I am also grateful for the generosity of the Hsing Yun Education Foundation, which provided me with a scholarship in 2020–2021 to engage in transdisciplinary studies of Humanistic Buddhism at the Nan Tien Institute in Wollongong, Australia. Some of the ideas for this book were first seeded in that time. I especially thank the Venerable Dr Juewei Shi, Director of the Humanistic Buddhism Centre at the Nan Tien Institute, for her encouragement and engagement with my ideas in their messier early phases. I have learnt so much from her teaching—both in content and form.

And to my students past and present: It has become a common platitude for teachers to say they learn from their students, but it is no less true in my case for being an oft-repeated expression. The questions you ask, the experiences you share, the insights you bring, the kindness you show, and the irrepressible wit and energy you have—they have sustained and shaped me. I do not know what I would do or where I would be without you all.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

‘Just Sit and Wait’: Žižek’s kōan

Abstract Using the provocative musings of the philosopher Slavoj Žižek as a starting point, I introduce the key terms of this book by canvassing the debates surrounding mindfulness, as well as the different ways that the relationship between mindfulness and education has been framed. I then note some of the research that has been done on how the cultivation of mindfulness may attenuate violence and its effects at the interpersonal and systemic levels. Throughout, I suggest that philosophical and historical inquiry can offer novel ways of conceiving the relationship between different types of violence and how cultivating mindfulness through meditation may interrupt them.

Keywords Mindfulness • Education • Contemplative practice • Violence • Slavoj Žižek

Sydney Opera House, Australia, 2011

The crowd laughed, as could be expected, from the example of how ideology functions in the Roman Catholic Church. ‘If you look at intelligent Catholic propaganda,’ the speaker bellowed from the stage, ‘the official message is “renounce, renounce”, but the message between the lines is “pretend to renounce and you can get all the dirty stuff you want, and so on.”’

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Slavoj Žižek—the Slovenian philosopher variously dubbed as 'the Elvis of cultural theory' (McLemee, 2004) and 'the most dangerous philosopher in the west' (Kirsch, 2009)—was hitting his stride on the final day of the 2011 'Festival of Dangerous Ideas' at the iconic Sydney Opera House. As I sat there on the second tier of the concert hall amongst the nearly 1500 in attendance that day, I remember thinking that there had to be no other venue and occasion for bringing together the 'Elvis' and 'dangerous philosopher' dimensions of Žižek quite like this one. Having earnt some laughs with the example of Roman Catholicism, he was ready to bring it home.

'It's important to bear in mind these two levels. You find them everywhere,' he continued, indicating the simultaneity of what is officially said and what is actually done with twitchy hand gestures. 'Now it's easy to make fun of the conservatives. But what about our politically correct times?'

For those with some familiarity with Žižek's work, this turning around of crosshairs was to be expected. Indeed, it was his provocations that we had come for: the skewering of all-too-familiar liberal-progressive sensibilities like charity, corporate social responsibility, multiculturalism, and so on. He did not disappoint, trotting out his by then oft-repeated examples of Starbucks coffee and the use of African children in charity posters. But it was his example of ecology that seemed to ruffle feathers from where I was sitting.

'Just think about buying organic fruit… think about those half-rotten apples that cost twice the normal beautiful genetically modified apples. Maybe they are better at a material level, but I am not so sure that we buy it for that reason,' Žižek opined. He continued:

> Isn't it more that you buy organically grown apples because, to put it simply, it makes you feel good? 'My god, look, I'm doing something for mother earth. I am part of a great movement to save mother earth' and so on, and so on, all that stuff… I am just saying we should be very careful about how ideology is part of our everyday life even in ecology. For example, this is why I don't trust all this stuff about recycling and so on. I claim that nobody really believes that recycling helps. My god, much more radical changes will have to be done. But it makes us feel good, you know: 'Oh, I separate [the trash], I didn't put the bottle of coke in the same box as that piece of newspaper. It makes me feel good.' It's pure feel good ideology.

Perhaps it was the mocking ventriloquism of the liberal-progressive voice that he put on. Or maybe it was targeted at just the right audience—the sort who could afford the time and money to attend a weekend talkfest on 'dangerous ideas'. Whatever it was, the twin hit on organic apples and recycling seemed to get the rise that Žižek was seeking. There were a few scattered, nervous laughs around the cavernous hall. 'What the fuck?!' The festivalgoer behind me said to his friend audibly enough so that those around them could hear. One of my companions on the day turned to look at me when they heard this, as if to check if this made sense to someone who had more prior knowledge of Žižek. 'Is he serious?' they asked me afterwards. 'Are we supposed to not even try?'

To be honest, I too did not quite understand Žižek's exhortation at the time. I had by that point encountered this type of argument littered throughout his prolific writings. He had made it a trademark to lambast the 'fake sense of urgency that pervades the left-liberal humanitarian discourse on violence'—distilled in the injunction 'There is no time to reflect: we have to *act now*'—which he regards as thinly masking 'a fundamental anti-theoretical edge' (Žižek, 2008a, p. 6). 'Better to do nothing than to engage in localised acts the ultimate function of which is to make the system run more smoothly' (Žižek, 2008a, p. 216), he asserted at the end of his dizzying book *Violence: Six sideways reflections* published a few years before his Sydney Opera House keynote. Or more conceptually argued in the larger *In Defense of Lost Causes* published in the same year as *Violence*: 'The task of the Left is… more than ever to "subtract" itself from the entire field of the opposition between liberal modernisation [i.e., capitalist development] and the anti-modernist backlash [e.g., return to more organic or traditional lifestyles]' (Žižek, 2008b, p. 41). So, in the face of an interlocking global system that yields catastrophic amounts of suffering and that brook no simple 'practical' solutions, the stupefied reproaches of 'Do you mean we should do *nothing*? Just sit and wait?' are met with Žižek's (2008a, p. 7) retort: 'YES, precisely that!'

At the time, as a high school social studies teacher who would have self-identified as 'politically conscious' (this was before 'woke' became common currency), I appreciated Žižek's relentless insistence on piercing through the veil of humanitarian sentiment to pinpoint the deep-seated inequities undergirding our liberal lifestyles in the Global North. But I felt deeply dissatisfied with his deriding of most activism as playing on 'pure feel good ideology' and his counter-proposal for non-action and

withdrawal. Should I have told my students at school the next morning that their civic duty was to 'just sit and wait' (Žižek, 2008a, p. 7)?

These sorts of counterintuitive twists eventually led me away from Žižek's work. Yet his provocation stayed with me like a *kōan*—a test used by Zen masters featuring paradoxes that elude solution by means of discursive understanding, making it clear to the student the limitations of conventional thought and precipitating a break from it (Ehrhard et al., 2010, p. 117). 'Rational and discursive thought must be vanquished if the incommensurate, which koan demands upon receipt, is to be discovered,' according to Ronell (2004, p. 61). Ironically given Žižek's own antipathies (as I will discuss below), it was only after studying and practicing mindfulness with an engaged Zen Buddhist community for some years that his statements on violence and subtraction returned to me. In the space opened by this practice, I now see in Žižek's *kōan* a unique insight rarely articulated amongst contemporary philosophers who have written on violence.

This book brings together Žižek's musings on violence and subtraction with work on mindfulness meditation as pedagogy for resisting violence—both its perpetuation and its effects. More specifically, it is a philosophical and historical study that explores how mindfulness as a character trait and the practices that seek to cultivate it can be conceived as a unique form of anti-violence education—one that emphasises stopping and contemplation as a necessary precursor to action. In Chap. 2, I will elaborate on how Žižek's philosophical reflections on violence may furnish a helpful way of mapping the different ways it manifests and masks itself in contemporary life. I will also consider how his apparently ludicrous calls to 'do nothing' and 'subtract' oneself from the field of political options in the face of violence resonate with the growing uptake of contemplative practices in activist circles—practices such as mindfulness meditation, which I define as encompassing a range of meditative practices that seek to cultivate mindfulness as a character trait. These initiatives in the present can be enriched by a consideration of historical exemplars, which will be the focus of the following two chapters.

Coming on the heels of this philosophical analysis of violence and anti-violence, Chaps. 3 and 4 will illustrate how mindfulness has been practiced as a form of education against violence in contexts saturated by brutality and oppression. I will look particularly at two historical exemplars—two teachers with deep affinities situated in different times and places—and how the cultivation of mindfulness was for them a way of responding to

the types of violence they and their students faced. Chapter 3 focuses on the Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh and his students during the period of the Second Indochina War (1955–1975). Based on an interpretation of the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of 'True Self' or 'True Mind', I argue that mindfulness for the latter—defined succinctly as 'keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality' (Nhat Hanh, 1976, p. 12)—entails the combination of stopping discursive thought and habitual reactions, and then seeing the interdependent relational nature of reality beyond dominant discourses and concepts. To cultivate mindfulness as such, Nhat Hanh suggests a suite of practices, chief of which is the requirement that the leaders and volunteers of his youth activist movement take regular 'days of mindfulness' where they withdraw from their usual work for meditative contemplation. Based on mindfulness, practitioners are then able to take reflective action that does not contribute to cycles of violence. This is characteristic of what Nhat Hanh calls 'engaged Buddhism', which fuses mindfulness with 'engagement'—a term drawn from Jean-Paul Sartre—to advance 'mindful action'. Drawing on some recent research on mindfulness, stress, and reactive aggression, I posit that the seemingly innocuous practice of taking a 'day of mindfulness' per week might be an effective pedagogical program for resisting the perpetuation and effects of violence, especially amidst the intense warfare and militarisation of Vietnamese society at the time.

In Chap. 4, I look at how mindfulness practices like 'days of mindfulness' were taken up by African American studies professor and feminist cultural critic bell hooks in the United States in the 1980s. In a decade that saw a concerted conservative backlash against the modest gains of the civil rights era, hooks counsels her Black female students to 'have days of silence, times that allow us to practice what Thich Nhat Hanh calls "the miracle of mindfulness"' (hooks, 1994, p. 144). Combining mindfulness with Black feminist thought and the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, hooks's pedagogy offered a unique path for navigating the oppressive social environment of the United States in the 1980s, insisting on the foundational import of taking contemplative time out for self-recovery as a political act. The value of this, I suggest, can be inferred from research that is now emerging on mindfulness *vis-à-vis* racial stress and trauma. Her work in this period was the embryo of what she would come to name 'engaged pedagogy'—an educational philosophy that insists on both raising critical consciousness and enhancing wellbeing amongst students and teachers, especially amidst the ongoing struggle against systemic injustices.

In Chap. 5, I will conclude by returning to my beginning proposition considering the philosophical and historical analyses conducted: that mindfulness meditation can be seen as an anti-violence pedagogy. Firstly, I submit that philosophical reflections like that offered by Žižek and others can offer novel ways of conceiving the relationship between different types of violence, which may bring together research on how mindfulness might attenuate violence at different levels. In a sense, this melding is already being done in activist groups and by community workers in various spaces. Secondly, based on the historical studies of Thich Nhat Hanh and bell hooks, I propose that mindfulness and practices designed to cultivate it can be deployed as a powerful form of education against violence, especially insofar as they enable a capacity to subtract from ideologically saturated contexts of violence. This subtraction clears space, as it were, for the emergence of radical responses. For each of these points, I suggest avenues for further transdisciplinary study of contemplative pedagogies in a world that continues to be beset by violence of all kinds.

However, as anyone who has familiarity with Žižek's work might note, using him as an entry point into a study on mindfulness meditation as a type of education against violence presents with three immediate obstacles. Indeed, these obstacles arise from a collision between Žižek and the very terms of this study themselves—mindfulness, education, against violence—and hence to its entire underlying premise. So, it is to these that I now turn before commencing the study.

Mindfulness

First, on mindfulness. It is an open secret that mindfulness as it is popularly discussed—defined as 'the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally' (Kabat-Zinn, 2017, p. 1127)—has its roots in Buddhist thought. And Žižek is well-known to be unabashedly disdainful of Buddhism, especially as it has been taken up in the West. His longstanding critique of Buddhism is that it functions as efficient ideology for covering over the vagaries of contemporary capitalism:

> it enables you fully to participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game, while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it, that you are well aware how worthless this spectacle really is—what really matters to you is

> the peace of the inner self to which you know you can always withdraw. (Žižek, 2007, p. 254)

If what Žižek (2007, p. 253) labels as 'Western Buddhism' is broadly pilloried as an opiate for capitalism—'the imaginary supplement of terrestrial misery'—then the career of 'mindfulness' as one of its specific elements must surely be considered its perfect distillation, a neoliberal fentanyl shorn of any Buddhist residue. Indeed, even amongst Western Buddhists, there has been a surge of critical reaction to the popular uptake of mindfulness. For Purser (2019), mindfulness today trades on the 'symbolic cachet of Buddhism can still be flaunted for commercial convenience, but only if the dharma [i.e. Buddhist teaching] is purged of its "foreignness" (though not its exoticness, which sells) by assimilating it under a scientific paradigm.' What Purser is pointing to is the historical process by which mindfulness—generally defined in Buddhist thought as the ethical virtue of awareness that leads to insight into reality and liberation from suffering (Garfield, 2012)—became the psychological trait of paying attention non-judgmentally to moment-to-moment experience, which is touted as a cure for a wide range of contemporary ills (Sharf, 2015). Drawing on Foucault's concept of 'biopower' as a means of managing populations, Walsh (2018, p. 110) extends this line of argument by positing that: 'Mindfulness techniques have likely garnered mainstream appeal, in part, because they allow people to privately manage their stress and well-being at little or no cost to state or corporate bodies, thus extending biopower's reach.' The sum total of such critiques—and they are growing within Western Buddhism itself whether inspired directly or indirectly by Žižek—is that: 'Reduced to a psychological technique, mindfulness can become another palliative to reduce symptoms of distress without sufficiently addressing the deep causes' (Turnbull & Dawson, 2006, p. 60).

A common concern that arises in this sub-genre of commentary on mindfulness, and one that is also particularly germane to the present study, is the mobilisation of mindfulness for military purposes (e.g., Stanley et al., 2011; Jha et al., 2015). Blame here is usually pinned to the extraction of mindfulness from its Buddhist ethical context. 'Had the ethical aspects of mindfulness not been removed,' argues Purser (2019), 'such forms of training would not be compatible with the mission of the military, whose soldiers are indoctrinated from boot camp to inflict harm and pain on the enemy'. Stanley (2013, p. 160) likewise points to the lack of ethical considerations in military mindfulness programs, urging as a redress

to this a 'remembering of the Buddhist roots of the present day use of the concept of mindfulness' (p. 160). In so doing, he argues, 'we may recover our historical memory, which in turn helps us to revision mindfulness as a more explicitly ethically sensitive practice' (Stanley, 2013, p. 160). While a laxity of purpose is certainly enabled by the untethering of modern mindfulness from normative Buddhist ethics, it is perhaps inaccurate to suggest that housing mindfulness within Buddhist discourse is sufficient to prevent its uses for violent ends. This is a point also noted by these perceptive commentators, especially with reference to Imperial Japan's deployment of Zen Buddhism for military purposes (e.g., Purser, 2014; Stanley, 2012). Drawing on similar scholarly sources (e.g., Victoria, 2006), Žižek also refers to this historical episode repeatedly in making his case against Buddhism. Unlike the commentators just mentioned, however, Žižek (2002, p. xliii) regards this episode as exemplifying the problem with Buddhism *en toto*—not merely a 'perversion' of its 'true' ethical core:

> There is no contradiction here, no manipulative perversion of the authentic compassionate insight: the attitude of total immersion in the selfless 'now' of instant Enlightenment, in which all reflexive distance is lost and 'I am what I do' … in short: in which absolute discipline coincides with total spontaneity – perfectly legitimizes subordination to the militaristic social machine.

While this is not the place for a forensic disentangling of Žižek's interpretation of Buddhist thought, his provocation does raise an important historical and socio-political point: that there is nothing about Buddhism—let alone mindfulness as an element extracted from it—that guarantees that it is anti-violence. As Stanley (2012, p. 639) rightly argues: 'It is not as straightforward as mindfulness simply and self-evidently being about non-violence… how mindfulness is understood changes according to its historical and especially political context.' *Pace* Žižek, however, there is also nothing that makes it necessarily inclined to legitimising militarism nor contemporary capitalism. As Hall (in Grossberg, 1986, p. 54) insightfully reminds us, a tradition like Buddhism 'exists historically in a particular formation, anchored very directly in relation to a number of different forces… Its meaning—political and ideological—comes precisely from its position within a formation. It comes with what else it is articulated to.'

I submit that it is precisely this historical and political contingency of Buddhist thought generally, and of mindfulness more specifically, that

makes the figures in the present study worthy of attention. If mindfulness can be articulated towards violent ends, then how has it been articulated against violence? And under what conditions? This path of inquiry, which Žižek himself has flagged in passing then disregarded (e.g., Žižek, 2012b, p. 135), is the one that will be taken here.

Mindfulness as Education

A second hurdle to be overcome in using Žižek's thought for the present study is my insistence on treating mindfulness meditation as a type of education. Idiosyncratic as it may sound, I am not the first person to suggest this way of approaching mindfulness. In his work, Oren Ergas (2019; also Ergas & Hadar 2019) has helpfully sorted the discourses surrounding mindfulness and education by distinguishing between mindfulness *in* education, mindfulness *of* education, and mindfulness *as* education. The first category encompasses most of the writings that seek to bring together mindfulness and education (Ergas & Hadar, 2019). These tend to treat 'education' as a pre-given thing—'a box made of certain ways of thinking and practice, rules, regulations, timetables and so forth' (Ergas, 2019, p. 346)—to which mindfulness is inserted as a palliative and/or performance enhancing supplement. Hence, the language of 'mindfulness-based intervention' that frames much of this rapidly proliferating body of work (Ergas & Hadar 2019, pp. 28–29). The second category—mindfulness of education—groups together writings that are a critical response to the first. The works contained here involve 'engaging in mindfulness for the purpose of critiquing education' (Ergas, 2019, p. 351), or more precisely, 'education' in its reified form as presupposed by the first category (e.g., Hsu, 2016; Reveley, 2016; Forbes, 2017).

What if mindfulness is regarded neither as a mere tool propping up status quo education nor its negation, but itself the education? Or, to put it differently, what if mindfulness 'taught not as a tool, but as a path', 'not a means to arrive at an end' but 'a way of living that we are always cultivating and deepening' (Plum Village Community, in Nhat Hanh & Weare, 2017, p. xxvii)? Ergas (2019, p. 348) groups those that take this position—regarding the practice as 'both serving educational aims and as an inherently worthwhile activity'—in the third category. He finds that this category, while featuring some rhetorically compelling and conceptually laudable works (e.g., Hyland, 2013; O'Donnell, 2015), is practically spare in terms of case studies of actual implementation in formal educational

institutions (Ergas, 2019, pp. 350–351). Ergas (2019, pp. 349, 251) notes two reasons for this: one is that those who write about mindfulness as education tend to insist on its Buddhist roots, which would 'raise concerns of proselytising a religion to students within some Western industrialised countries'; another reason is that to have mindfulness as an end in itself that 'undergirds all human interactions and permeates school life' would require 'huge commitment and deep understanding of the practice on behalf of the principal and school staff'—improbable in terms of recruitment and in the context of accountability pressures.

But what if we defined education more broadly, as per its etymological origins in the Latin *educere* ('to lead out') and *educare* ('to mould') (Trotman et al., 2017, p. 301)? This would denote education as a ubiquitous cultural phenomenon of teaching, learning, and unlearning that happens both within and beyond formal educational institutions like schools. This broader view of education has been studied under the theoretical construct of 'public pedagogy', which looks at 'various forms, processes, and sites of education and learning occurring beyond formal schooling' (Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 338). Education is here deinstitutionalised in its conceptualisation and uncoupled from its automatic associations with schools (O'Malley et al., 2020), especially insofar as it deals with 'the bigger, more pressing issues of cultivating a pedagogy of humanity, which ultimately has implications for schooling and non-school settings' (Sandlin et al., 2010, p. 1). As a popular cultural phenomenon in the present, mindfulness certainly fits this bill. For despite the differences between different discourses on mindfulness (Low, 2021), a commonality they share is that mindfulness—whether defined as an ethical virtue or a psychological trait—can be cultivated through a range of practices. In other words, it is learnable. This implies an educative process whereby mindfulness can be developed through pedagogical practices like sitting meditation, movement-based meditation, exercising meditative awareness in daily life, chanting and singing, and so on.

None of these fine-grained distinctions about education would matter to Žižek, of course. Alongside his disdain for Buddhism, Žižek has also openly expressed distaste for education whether within institutional bounds or in the broader public sphere. 'Students,' he has openly declared, 'they're like other people, the majority are boring idiots' (Žižek, 2014a). Yet Žižek's very influence is derived from those students and the broader public audiences that he dismisses so contemptuously—they are the main consumers of his numerous publications, and their institutions are his

main platforms (La Berge, 2007, p. 23). This fetishistic disavowal suggests that like his take on Buddhism and mindfulness, it is possible to take Žižek's thought to places he would rather not go.

Mindfulness Against Violence

It is not only on Buddhism and education that Žižek presents as an ambivalent figure. On violence too his position appears as slippery at best. As will be discussed more fully in the following chapter, Žižek reads most forms of violence to be ethically and politically regressive—from interpersonal acts to systemic inequalities that cause harm, as well as violent reactions to the latter by means of the former (e.g., Žižek, 2011b). On this he aligns with most of the literature on mindfulness and violence, which can be sorted into two broad types. The first Žižek (2008a, p. 10) calls 'subjective violence' that is 'enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds'. Research on this type of violence tends to be concentrated at the interpersonal level and is focused on how the trait of mindfulness may attenuate both its expression amongst those prone to violent aggression (Gillons et al., 2019, Morley et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2017) and its effects on those who survive it (Esper & da Silva Gherardi-Donato, 2019; Hilton et al., 2017; Kelly, 2015; Taylor et al., 2020). This body of research appears to share three related premises: a working definition of violence as entailing the intentional use of force or power—whether actual or threatened—that causes harm to another; that aggression is a core component of such violence; and that violence is likely to have a traumatic effect on its survivors. This focus on intention, aggression, and trauma owes to the fact that much of the work done on interpersonal violence has historically come from the discipline of psychology, joined more recently by neuroscience, which are concerned with mapping the cognitive and biological mechanisms underlying violent behaviour amongst aggressors and long-term health impacts amongst survivors. The cultivation of mindfulness through certain prescribed practices—for example, sitting and walking meditation (e.g., Wongtongkam et al., 2014; Dutton et al., 2013)—is thus looked upon as potential interventions into those mechanisms. A key point of note is the hypothesised mechanism by which mindfulness is thought to be effective: that is, by enhancing the regulation of emotions and behaviour through non-reactive awareness of aggressive impulses and trauma triggers, it can lessen the propensity to violence amongst aggressors (e.g., Gillons et al., 2019, pp. 111–112;

Gillespie et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2017, pp. 2–3), as well as decrease the ongoing effects trauma on survivors (e.g., Fyre & Spates, 2012; Gallegos et al., 2015; Hinton et al., 2013).

This body of work on mindfulness has been extended to address violence of another type—what has been termed systemic or structural violence. This type of violence draws attention to 'the harm people suffer from the social structure and the institutions sustaining and reproducing it' (Ruggiero, 2019, p. 11). What distinguishes this type of violence from the interpersonal type is that it does not necessarily require intention or aggression, nor even an identifiable aggressor, for harm and trauma to be perpetrated and experienced. It is violence that is built into the structure of societies and 'shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances' (Galtung, 1969, p. 171). Hence Žižek's (2008a, p. 2) use of the term 'objective violence' to describe it 'precisely the violence inherent to [the] "normal" state of things'. Yet it is no less violent for being the status quo insofar as it 'prevents its victims from satisfying their basic needs, and is an avoidable impairment of the fundamental means necessary for human existence' (Ruggiero, 2019, p. 11). Against this type of violence, which is also referred to as oppression or marginalisation, work on mindfulness has been directed at the transformation of those who may be complicit in it, as well as the healing of those who most directly experience its effects. There is also an acknowledgement in this literature that because almost everyone lives within unjust social arrangements, most people are both complicit with harm to others, and recipients of harm by others (e.g., Berila, 2016a; Garran et al., 2015; Wong, 2004). That is, to different degrees, we are almost all both perpetuators and sufferers of systemic violence, and hence may be helped by mindfulness. Two noteworthy patterns that mark this body of work are worth highlighting for the purposes of the present study. One that is that although many scholar-practitioners of mindfulness against systemic violence come from fields outside of psychology and neuroscience, they nonetheless draw on neuropsychological discourse (e.g., stress, trauma) alongside social and political analysis to offer insights into the embodied effects of inequality and how mindfulness can attenuate them (e.g., Berila, 2016b; Duane et al., 2021; Kwah, 2019; Yellow Bird, 2013). The second point of note is that the trait of mindfulness is seen as a precursor—perhaps even a necessary precursor—to taking effective action against systemic violence (e.g., Berila 2016a; Hick & Furlotte, 2009; Magee, 2021). In other words, they insist on cultivating mindfulness for anti-oppressive praxis.

In the chapters that follow, I will draw on some studies of mindfulness that address both subjective and objective violence, to use Žižek's terminology. While Žižek also opposes these two forms of violence, unlike most of the aforementioned scholars and practitioners—not to mention the historical exemplars who will be featured in the chapters to come—he nevertheless extols some violence. In particular, drawing on Walter Benjamin (2007), Žižek (2008b, pp. 161–162) maintains faith in 'divine violence' that completely upends prevailing social orders founded by 'mythic violence', such as the Jacobin Terror of 1792–1794 in France and the Red Terror of 1919 in Hungary. According to Žižek (2012, p. 115), such divine violence cannot be judged by the moral standards of the very world and worldview it seeks to destroy:

> Although we are dealing with what, to an ordinary moral consciousness, cannot but appear as 'immoral' acts of killing, one has no right to condemn them, since they replied to years—centuries even—of systematic state and economic violence and exploitation.

There is no way to square Žižek's valorisation of these events with this project on mindfulness as a form of education against violence, which presents as the third hurdle. Again, as with the foregoing reflections on Buddhism, mindfulness, and education, the approach I have taken here is to drag Žižek's thought beyond Žižek. For while he is unabashed about lauding certain bloody historical events as divine violence, Žižek (2013) has also used that label to describe Gandhi's nonviolent civil disobedience. What makes an act divine violence in his reckoning, then, is not the quantity or even necessity of killing and maiming, but whether it qualifies as an 'ethical act'—'an intervention into social reality that changes the very coordinates of what is perceived to be possible; it is not simply beyond the good, it redefines what counts as good' (Žižek, 2000, pp. 671–672). Such acts, even if nonviolent, cannot but be interpreted by those with a stake in the status quo as threatening. This is why, in the manner of Orwellian doublespeak, those in positions of dominance often regard these nonviolent acts and actors as 'violent' (e.g., Hauck et al., 2020; 'Myanmar junta blames protesters,' 2021). I will pick up on this thread in the following chapter when considering how within contexts of violence, the subtraction and refusal to react counselled by contemplative practices can function as precursors to such ethical acts.

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CHAPTER 2

'I Would Prefer Not to': Violence, Subtraction, and Contemplative Pedagogy

Abstract In this chapter, I draw on Slavoj Žižek's philosophical mapping of violence alongside others who have also offered unique perspectives on this topic. Particularly pertinent is the relationship between different types of violence: 'subjective violence' where there is an identifiable perpetrator-victim dyad and the 'objective violence' of social systems that do harm in more indirect ways. In addition, philosophers have also emphasised the ways language and meaning shape our perceptions of violence—what Žižek calls 'symbolic violence'. Contemplative practices like mindfulness meditation are then linked to Žižek's seemingly ludicrous counsel to 'do nothing' in the face of these types of violence.

Keywords Violence • Anti-violence • Mindfulness • Contemplative Pedagogy • Neurodecolonisation

Klamath, California, 2009/2010

Over a decade ago, in a public charter high school on the lands of the Yurok People on Turtle Island (Northern California, United States of America), around thirty students and a few of their teachers listened to a visitor explain in clear terms what mindfulness is, how it works, and some basic meditative practices for cultivating mindfulness. From the perspective of the present day, this scene may not strike us as being remarkable. In

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the United States, as in many other countries of the wealthy Global North, the past decade has seen a surge of mindfulness programs introduced into schools to help students (and their teachers) cope with stresses and anxieties (Kamenetz, 2020; Siganto, 2019; Magra, 2019). Many popular programs in school settings follow the format described above: introduced by an experienced mindfulness practitioner-instructor conversant with its theoretical bases and the empirical evidence for its impacts on psychosocial health and well-being (Weare, 2019), plus the introduction of some age-appropriate practices that seek to cultivate mindful awareness such as focused attention on breathing and sensory experiences, awareness of thoughts and emotions, and movement practices (Meiklejohn et al., 2012, p. 298). But this school in Klamath, California, was unlike most, as was the visiting mindfulness instructor and the way he talked about what it might do.

'I also discussed its connections to neurodecolonization', recalls Michael Yellow Bird (2013, p. 304), 'explaining how colonialism has created intense stressors and negative outcomes for many Indigenous Peoples, and that mindfulness practices could help one heal from the effects of colonialism and discover new ways to overcome it.' A citizen and enrolled member of the Three Affiliated Tribes (Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara) (Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2021, p. 16), Yellow Bird was invited by the staff of the Klamath River Early College of the Redwoods to offer teachings on mindfulness not long after his appointment at the Humboldt State University as a social work educator in late 2009. He would drive to the school located a little under ninety kilometres north from his place of work, initially once or twice a week to train teachers who had volunteered to facilitate mindfulness practices with the students, then once every two to three weeks to offer students hour-long coaching in mindfulness practices (Yellow Bird, 2013, pp. 303–304).

The Klamath River Early College of the Redwoods (KRECR) was established in September 2005 by Geneva Wiki—a member of the Yurok Tribe and then-member of the Yurok Tribal Council—in the backroom of a highway convenience store (Ellison, 2007). Its goal at inception was to 'increase high school graduation and college completion rates of Native American and other underserved students in the Yurok reservation area' (Native Times, 2008). In addition to the standard academic subjects one might find in every other school, the students of KRECR also studied the Yurok language and skills handed down by tribal elders such as carving redwood canoes, catching eels, and making acorn soup—this braiding of

standard academic with Indigenous knowledge keys in Wiki's vision for keeping young Native Americans invested in education (Ellison, 2007). 'I believe that education is my generation's fight to fight for equality,' she asserted in a 2007 interview, 'Our native young people are underrepresented in educational achievement stats [and] we won't be able to break out of poverty unless we're able to reclaim education' (Weeks, 2007). The social indicators underlying her impassioned mission were stark indeed. In the decade prior to the establishment of the KRECR, the unemployment rate on the Yurok Reservation was approximately 90% and many families lived below the poverty line, while on other indicators they mirrored what was found in other Native American communities where rates of unemployment, alcoholism, suicides, and chronic illness were two-to-threefold that of Anglo-Americans (Ferreira, 1996, p. 121).

This overall social environment bears the historical signature of settler-colonial violence. Despite the US government's signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 that carried terms for the recognition of Native American land and cultural rights (Fenelon & Trafzer, 2014, p. 8), as well as the 18 treaties negotiated with the Native American tribes of California in 1851–1852 (Miller, 2013), California's first Governor Peter Burnett nevertheless declared in January 1851 on behalf of Anglo settlers that 'a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the two races until the Indian race becomes extinct' (in Sousa, 2004, p. 193). The ensuing years would see the attempted extermination of Native Americans in California. From the time of Burnett's declaration to 1900, the Indigenous population in that region would be reduced from somewhere between 150-300,000 to 15,377 (Jaimes, 1992, pp. 35–36; Lindsay, 2012, p. 128). Along the Klamath River and Redwood Coast of Northwestern California, 75% of the Yurok People were killed by white settlers and militias (Walter, 2021, p. 4). Criminal violence against Native American peoples continues to be a feature of the national landscape, which at 2.5 times the US rate represents 'the highest victimization rates for both women and men and across all ages, locations (urban, suburban, and rural), and household incomes' (Rosay, 2021, p. 94). Notably, 70% of reported perpetrators of such violence were identified as not Native American (Rosay, 2021)—a pattern that when placed within a longer historical arc appears as a devolution of violence from 'collective forms of genocide to ethnocide and individualized acts of ethnoviolence' (Perry, 2002, p. 243).

For those who were not murdered under the injunction of authorities in the nineteenth century, policies were enacted to assimilate the distinct cultures of Native American peoples into the dominant white agrarian culture while segregating them into reservations—usually a tiny fraction of their ancestral lands—which allowed for the expansion of white settlement and the control of Native American peoples by local agents of the state (Carmesin, 2007). By the 1990s, in a matter of one hundred and thirty years, the Yurok people would lose over 1.49 million acres of their ancestral lands (James, 2019, p. 2). Institutional education introduced by settler authorities abetted this process. It entailed the suppression of Native languages, conversion to Christianity and prohibition of Indigenous religions, the training of Native American children for menial and manual labour, and removal of children from communities to off-reservation boarding schools and non-Native American foster homes—though not without regular resistance and rebellion from students (Lomawaima, 2004, p. 422). While the experiences of children subjected to these institutions were mixed, their overall effect was to degrade Indigenous languages, cultures, and identities (Reyhner, 2018; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997).

Under the weight of privation caused by violence, territorial and cultural dispossession, lateral violence would take hold in many communities. According to Whyman et al. (2021, p. 1), lateral violence 'is the tendency of peoples from oppressed groups to direct their frustration and anger from their experiences of oppression at members of their own group'. While violence faced by Native American peoples is far more likely to be interracial than intraracial, as mentioned above, many Native American communities face disproportionately high rates of suicide, homicide, accidental deaths, domestic violence, and child abuse (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998, p. 60). '[T]his indicates that some communities exist in such a state of despair and deprivation that destructive acts directed both toward others and toward the self appear to flourish', Bachman (1992, p. 120) concludes in her extensive quantitative and qualitative study of reservation violence. That such despair and deprivation can be extended across bodies and periods of time has more lately been understood as 'historical trauma'—defined as the 'cumulative emotional and psychological wounding felt across generations, including the lifespan, which emanates from massive group trauma' (Brave Heart et al., 2011, p. 283). Recent research in epigenetics has also begun to delve into the ways in which environmental influences such as collective trauma can affect gene expression intergenerationally, leading to adverse changes in the function of

stress-response systems and consequently, to health and social disparities (Brockie et al., 2013; Conching & Thayer, 2019).

For Native American students, the effects of all this manifest in school completion rates that range from below one-third to two-thirds of non-Native students, depending on region (Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2010), and 'the highest expulsion, absenteeism, and suspension rates of any student group' (Tribal Education Departments National Assembly, 2011, p. 2). According to Masta (2018, p. 21): 'Beginning in middle school … many Native American students start to withdraw and become sullen, resistant, and frustrated by their experiences in mainstream schools.' This can be attributed to the '[l]ack of awareness and inclusion of the needs of Native American students in schools by peers, teachers, and school personnel' (Masta, 2018, p. 21), as well as the high rates of bullying faced by Native American students (Campbell & Smalling, 2013).

This history of the educational present was clear to Wiki when she established KRECR as part of a communal dream of a school rooted in local (Yurok) culture (Ewing & Ferrick, 2012, p. 16). Her educational project can be understood as part of a long line of what Lomawaima (2004, pp. 422–423) calls 'education *by* Indians'—the 'history of Indian people trying, through whatever means possible, to control the education of their children'—in contrast to 'education *for* Indians' that has been 'dedicated to eradicating Native knowledge and values, and substituting values and knowledge judged to be "civilized"'. Indeed, Wiki declared in no uncertain terms that educational efforts such as that of the KRECR are 'the front line of our civil rights movement… Past generations struggled first over rights to fish and hunt, and then to govern ourselves. Now we need to work on reclaiming ourselves through education' (in Ellison, 2007).

This history would also have been clear to Yellow Bird when he turned up to introduce mindfulness practices to the staff and students of KRECR, which had by that time moved out of the back room of the convenience store into a space next to the Yurok Tribal headquarters ('Klamath Charter School Receives Accreditation', 2007). Yellow Bird's life, as he reflects in a recent work, indexes the shared experience of many Native American peoples of his generation: born in the 1950s during the time when 'the US Army Corps of Engineers, with the blessing of the US Congress but in violation of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851, illegally confiscated and flooded over 152,000 acres of our lands to build the Garrison Dam', his years growing up on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation were marked by 'many beautiful and happy moments with friends and relatives', as well

as witnessing 'high rates of alcoholism, violence, rage, trauma, and many sad, untimely deaths' (in Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2021, p. 17). Hence, when learning that two-thirds of the forty students at the KRECR lived on the reservation, Yellow Bird (2013, p. 303) was aware of its benefits (e.g., 'healthy, vibrant cultural relationships, language, practices and identities'), as well as costs (e.g., 'disproportionate rates of family and community breakdown, family violence, child welfare troubles, poverty, substance abuse and compromised mental and physical health'). To him, there is little doubt as to the reason for this situation for Native American peoples: 'the stealing of our lands devastated our tribes and left us with a legacy of loss, disruption, high rates of mortality, sickness, and cultural collapse' (in Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2021, p. 17).

So, while clearly on board with the more immediate goals of retention and success of Native American students in institutional education, Yellow Bird was also cognisant of the historical trauma written in the minds, bodies, and living environments of the young people he would encounter at KRECR. And it was to this that he directed his instruction on mindfulness: 'I believed mindfulness is important for Indigenous communities in their decolonizing processes in order to recover traditional practices that can heal minds and brains from the oppressions of colonialism' (Yellow Bird, 2013, p. 302). At the KRECR, this was put into action through the teaching of meditative practices like 'mindfulness of breathing', 'sitting meditation', 'mindfulness of the body', and 'mindfulness of sight and sound' (plus optional 'mindful eating' and 'mindful walking') to students, as well as 'strategies for recognizing and changing their relationship to distracting, wandering thoughts, memories, body sensations and emotional states that interfered with their practice' (Yellow Bird, 2013, p. 304). The success of Yellow Bird's project for improving the wellbeing of students at the KRECR was affirmed when his mindfulness program, scheduled to last for one academic semester, was by another year, then 'eventually incorporated into the school's health and social wellness curriculum' (Yellow Bird, 2013, p. 304).

Crucially for Yellow Bird—and for those committed to the movement of Native American community-led education—many students also began to link the mindfulness practices he had introduced to traditional cultural practices they had learnt in their communities. 'Midway through the project, during informal discussions', he recounts, 'a number of students began to identify how the awareness and concentration aspects of mindfulness paralleled mindfulness skills practised in tribal activities, such as

fishing, basket making, prayer, storytelling and the singing of tribal songs' (Yellow Bird, 2013, p. 306). Some would then connect these practices to decolonisation:

> one student said that a colonized mind would not allow him to be aware of sacredness in what he was doing when he was fishing or listening to a traditional story. Another said she felt that mindfulness helped her become more peaceful and aware of what she was doing when she listened to her elders pray in her Indigenous language.

For Yellow Bird, this first project has set the tone for his ongoing work in neurodecolonisation—'where colonised peoples successfully transform their neural networks in positive ways so as to free up the personal resources, strengths, talents, and abilities we need to overcome the oppressions of colonialism' (Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird, 2012, p. 7). Mindfulness practices such as the ones he introduced to the KRECR students are, for him, key in at least two respects. Firstly, they allow for the healing of some of the ongoing effects of historical trauma and the constant stresses of colonialism experienced in the daily lives of Indigenous peoples. While practices like mindfulness of breathing or sitting meditation alone cannot alter the colonial social structure, mindful awareness once cultivated can open up the possibility of 'shedding unconstructive negative thinking, feelings, and behaviors' and 'reverse the negative effects of past trauma and harms', which 'strengthens our capacity to create additional positive change in all aspects of our lives, including challenging colonialism more forcefully and effectively' (Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird, 2012, p. 7). This leads to the second function of mindfulness practices in neurodecolonisation: as the students at KRECR demonstrated, it can create a bridge for the retrieval of Indigenous contemplative practices that also sought to cultivate mindfulness. Yellow Bird (2013, p. 302) argues that when colonisers worked to suppress and devalue 'important ceremonial songs, dances and other ceremonies, many Indigenous Peoples' neural networks of hope, happiness and purpose associated with these practices were undoubtedly negatively affected', and over time 'as people's awareness of the importance of ceremonial activities faded, and these mindfulness-engendering activities lost their importance and appeal'. What currently popular mindfulness practices can thus also do, he points out with reference to the Native American students from that first project at the KRECR, is function as 'a springboard… to get us back to who we really are and to

our contemplative ceremonies and to our own forms of awareness and connection' (Yellow Bird, in Dawson, 2021). This then opens up new possibilities for radical social change. As he summarises in a recent exhortation to social workers who are also committed to such change, the healing and retrieval emphasised by neurodecolonisation point to how:

> We must go outside the social services industrial complex and think creatively, revisiting the older cultural and environmental philosophies and practices of our ancestors and with this knowledge mindfully challenge the oppressive structures and thinking confronting and being reproduced in social work. It may be that we no longer have to occupy small spaces with protest signs and march down the streets and ask the system for change. Social workers are part of the system, and perhaps the most successful and subversive act in creating change could be for them to be actively engaged with the decolonized practices of our ancestors… Decolonizing pathways to holistic thinking and integrative healing are often untraveled, forgotten, and avoided but are as relevant today as they were many generations ago. We also believe that if you heal the person, you can heal the planet. (Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2021, p. 3)

Violence

We will return further below to Yellow Bird's project of neurodecolonisation and how it exemplifies the use of contemplative practices like mindfulness as pedagogical devices against violence. For now, let us take a detour to the other side of Turtle Island, on the land of what its original inhabitants—the Lenape People—called Manahatta ('hilly island' or today called 'Manhattan'). About a year prior to Yellow Bird's appointment at Humboldt State University, Slavoj Žižek was at the Google headquarters promoting his recently published book *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008a). In a typically elliptical talk that did not address the contents of the book, Žižek looped through familiar examples like horseshoe superstitions, hardcore pornography, the structure of toilets in Western civilisation, canned laughter on TV, and the like. Through these amusing and titillating analogies, what the employees of Google were treated to during their lunch hour was a typically Žižekian lesson on understanding the function of ideology in contemporary society. In fact, uncovering the way ideology works is the key point of his book on violence, as well as his treatments of the topic in his other works. Perhaps a good way into what is most salient about his thoughts on violence for this chapter is given by his

oft-repeated example of former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's reasoning for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, with which Žižek opened his talk at the Google HQ. According to Rumsfeld (2002):

> Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns — the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tends to be the difficult ones.

For Žižek, this paranoid line of reasoning betrays a 'missing fourth term' that he considers the most interesting category: the 'unknown knowns'—'what we think we don't know that we know' (Žižek, 2008b). This is precisely how ideology functions, 'all those silent prejudices, which determine how we act, how we react… they are so much the texture into which we are embedded that we literally don't even know that we know them' (Žižek, 2008b). The subsequent debacle which unfolded in Iraq from 2003 occurred, according to Žižek (2008b), because of ideology: 'The US Army and administration basically didn't know what they already know. All the unconscious political and military prejudices as it where which determined their activity.'

Just as ideology conditioned how the US government and military acted and reacted in Iraq, so too does it condition our actions and reactions in relation to violence. In a clear and programmatic passage at the beginning of his book *Violence*, Žižek (2008a, p. 1) argues that while the mere mention of the word inevitably brings to mind 'obvious signals of violence [like] crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict', we should nevertheless 'learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible "subjective" violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent'. This stepping back implies learning to 'perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts', which 'enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance' (Žižek, 2008a, p. 1). In other words, what he is exhorting is not to act or react immediately to what we perceive as violence, but to take time to consider how our perceptions themselves might be shaped by the 'unknown knowns' of ideology—'the disavowed beliefs, suppositions, and obscene practices we pretend not

to know about, although they form the background of our public values' (Žižek, 2006a, p. 137). Ideology, he suggests, is itself a form of violence.

There is much to unpack in Žižek's diagnosis and prescription, which will concern this and the following section of this chapter. We can begin with what Žižek calls 'subjective violence', which denotes those most visible forms of violence that can be attributed to an identifiable perpetrator. This type of violence is distinguished from 'objective violence' that is not attributable to specific individuals and their 'evil' intentions, but is 'purely "objective," systemic, anonymous' (Žižek, 2008a, p. 13). This distinction is drawn from the French political philosopher Étienne Balibar, who first introduced the terms in his 1996 Wellek Lectures on the question of violence and civility at the University of California, Irvine (Low, 2019). In Balibar's analysis, subjective forms of violence are described as 'undoubtedly intentional' with definitive goals, as well as a face—'that of persecutors who are all too human, cruel and cowardly, cunning and stupid' (Balibar, 2002, p. 25)—while objective forms of violence are irreducible to a single malevolent agent with harmful intent. It is 'cruelty without a face' (Balibar, 2002, p. 143). As Žižek points out, examples of subjective violence are unfortunately all too readily available to us—ranging from assaults to homicides to mass killings and war. Subjective violence so defined echoes to some degree with what preeminent peace and conflict scholar Johan Galtung (1969, pp. 170–172) calls 'personal violence' or 'direct violence', where identifiable subjects act to cause harm, demonstrably intend to do so, and where the act and harm are visible. This perpetrator-victim model of violence is the predominant frame news media cover violent incidents, such as terrorism and violence against women (Norris et al., 2004; Sutherland et al., 2019).

Beyond popular media, subjective violence is also the only sort recognised in 'minimalist conceptions' of violence (Bufacchi, 2005), which remains paradigmatic in research and policymaking across fields as wide as the military, economics, health, and education (Bufacchi, 2013). With all the attention paid to it, it is also worth mentioning that because of its attributability to intentional agents and the visibility of its effects—hence its quantifiability—this conception of violence also underlies whiggish historical accounts that 'violence has declined over long stretches of time, and today we may be living in the most peaceable era in our species' existence', which is attributed to the combination of 'democracy, prosperity, decent government, peacekeeping, open economies, and the decline of antihuman ideologies' (Pinker, 2011, p. xxi, 377).

Less recognised in such accounts, if at all, is what Balibar and Žižek refer to as objective violence, or what is more commonly referred to as 'structural' or 'systemic' violence. If violence can be said to be present 'when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realisations are below their potential realisations', according to Galtung (1969, pp. 168, 171), then structural violence points at those social, economic, and political arrangements that hinder the realisation of some human potentialities in favour of others: 'There may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure. The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances.' The historical ravages of capitalist globalisation present as a prime example of such objective violence because millions have died for its abstract and impersonal imperatives like 'development' and 'progress'—from genocides and diseases due to European imperialism in the 'long sixteenth century' to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, to colonialism and settler colonialism (Horne, 2020), up to the devastation and conflicts caused by resource mining due to the present passion for 'green technology' (Prause, 2020). As Žižek (2008a, p. 14) puts it: 'All this seems to have happened as the result of an "objective" process, which nobody planned and executed for and for which there was no "Capitalist Manifesto".' To capitalist exploitation we might add interlocking systems of oppression that serve to devalue people based on race, caste, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, age, and so on (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Rawlings & Low, 2020a). Such devaluation through oppression renders some lives as 'cheap', which in turn allows for even more exploitation so that wealth and privilege can be accumulated by dominant fractions of society (Patel & Moore, 2017). Consider, for instance, who it is that does the 'dirty' or hazardous jobs in our workplaces, cities, and towns. We might also think about their relative health and wellbeing outcomes, as well as life expectancy, and from these discern a pattern of how objective violence operates to render some people more vulnerable than others.

Further, as Balibar (2002, p. 142) points out, recent times have witnessed the phenomenon of 'disposable human beings' whose lives are superfluous even for such uses—that is, there are those whose lives and deaths are regarded as inconsequential to the maintenance and reproduction of structurally violent social relations. Being an 'absolute surplus population', they can be eliminated by a variety of means: 'ecological, biological, terrorist/counterterrorist, and genocidal—whose common denominator is that they reduce human beings to the condition of things,

beginning by suppressing their individuality and treating them as quantities of residual "pieces"' (Balibar, 2015, p. 69). To Balibar's list of means of elimination we might also add wilful indifference and neglect, which are evident in the case of refugees and those disproportionately given over to death during the COVID-19 pandemic (Davies et al., 2017; Sandset 2021). Unsurprisingly, such disposable human beings tend to be those devalued along one or more of the vectors of oppression abovementioned. When alive, they are consigned to what Achille Mbembe (2019, p. 92) calls 'death worlds'—those 'new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead'. In death, they are, in the words of Judith Butler (2009, p. 31):

> cast as 'destructible' and 'ungrievable.' Such populations are 'lose-able,' or can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as being already lost or forfeited; they are cast as threats human life as we know it rather than as living populations in need of protection from illegitimate state violence, famine, or pandemics.

Butler's use of the words 'cast' and 'framed' is key for understanding why objective violence may not trigger the popular outrage and action that subjective violence does, even if the toll of the former type far exceeds the latter. For Butler, paying attention to the ways in which our perceptions of violence are framed is important because they give rise to our experience of violence, and hence how (or if) we respond to it. For instance, consider the differences when framing civil unrest as 'protests', 'riots', or 'terrorism'. The frame thus decides 'what we can hear' because it 'works both to preclude certain kinds of questions, certain kinds of historical inquiries, and to function as a moral justification for retaliation' (Butler, 2004, pp. 4–5). In short, 'violence is always interpreted' (Butler, 2020, p. 14). As such, 'we cannot race to the phenomenon itself without passing through the conceptual schemes that dispose the use of the term in various directions, and without an analysis of how those dispositions work' (Butler, 2020, p. 14).

Butler's point about the frames and conceptual schemes that guide our interpretations and reactions to violence, and the dispositions that incline us to them, brings us back to Žižek's point about ideology itself as a type of violence. He labels this 'symbolic violence', which 'pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning' (Žižek, 2008a,

p. 2). More specifically, symbolic violence refers to the imposition of an ideology—or frame/conceptual scheme in Butler's terms—that renders some types of violence visible (i.e., subjective violence) while obscuring others (i.e., objective violence) that appear to us as 'normal'. Because language is the means by which such ideologies/frames/conceptual schemes are taught and learnt, Žižek (2008a, pp. 64–65) cautions against treating received names, labels, and categories as neutral media:

> [W]hen we perceive something as an act of violence, we measure it by a presupposed standard of what the 'normal' non-violent situation is – and the highest form of violence is the imposition of this standard with reference to which some events appear as 'violent.' This is why language itself, the very medium of non-violence, of mutual recognition, involves unconditional violence.

To illustrate his point, recall how the very definition of violence—or at least what comes to mind most immediately at the mere mention of the word—will typically be focused on subjective violence. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2022), for instance, defines it as: 'The deliberate exercise of physical force against a person, property, etc.; physically violent behaviour or treatment.' Within this frame, instances of objective violence will tend not be recognised as violence, regardless of the harm inflicted. Indeed, what Žižek asserts is that many situations, such as the prevailing social order of exploitation and oppression, are seen as non-violent; it is the norm and background upon which acts of subjective violence are made visible: 'Social-symbolic violence at its purest appears as… the spontaneity of the milieu in which we dwell, of the air we breathe' (Žižek, 2008a, p. 36).

To be sure, Žižek is not the first or only person to label as violence the ways that language and conceptual schemes can obscure or even abet harm. We have already touched on Butler's references to framing and interpretation. In a rejoinder more than two decades after introducing his influential dyad of personal-direct/structural-indirect violence in the late-1960s, Galtung (1990, p. 291) also adds a third concept of 'cultural violence', by which he denotes 'those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence—exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics)—that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence'. Synonymous with Žižek's characterisation of symbolic violence, for Galtung (1990, p. 291, 294) cultural violence functions as a third corner

in a 'violence triangle' such that it 'makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right—or at least not wrong'. Like Galtung, Žižek also sees the role of symbolic violence as prefiguring both subjective and objective violence. So, while on the one hand symbolic violence normalises objective violence and renders it unremarkable, on the other hand it shapes the ways that subjective violence is enacted: subjective, direct, physical violence 'always-already hinges on the way these physical features are inscribed into the symbolic economy' (Žižek, 1996, p. 16). To exemplify this, Žižek points to anti-Semitic pogroms, which for him are archetypal of all racist violence: 'What the perpetrators of pogroms find intolerable and rage-provoking, what they react to, is not the immediate reality of Jews, but the image/figure of the "Jew" which circulates and has been constructed in their tradition' (Žižek, 2008a, p. 66). Mbembe (2007, p. 67) echoes this point in his analysis of geopolitics: 'In all relations in which one of the parties is not free nor equal enough, the act of violation often begins with language.'

The picture painted so far by Žižek and others presents us with a suffocating conundrum. For if our very perception of what counts as violence is so steeped in ideology, running as deep as the languages and conceptual schemes through which we make sense of the world, then it follows that our reactions to violence (or lack thereof) are also likely to be enframed by it. This is indeed Žižek's argument and coming to terms with it is key to understanding his unique take on anti-violence.

Subtraction

When confronted with incidents of subjective violence that our perceptions are trained to fixate on, it is no surprise that our immediate reaction is to try and do something, anything, to stop it. One common response is to retaliate through counterviolence. Balibar (2015, p. 24) defines counterviolence as 'the act of returning violence or paying it back in kind', and which presents such violence 'as second and as such a legitimate reaction to a "first violence," generally presented as illegitimate"'. While this may seem intuitive, consider that the main purveyors of this are modern nation-states, who use this very logic to justify their use of violence against other nations (e.g., Fisk & Ramos, 2014; Dreyer 2018), as well as segments of their own populations (e.g., Roberts, 2020; Bakali, 2021). Whether couched as 'self-defence' or 'counter-terrorism', there is an insatiability that accompanies such preventative counterviolence enacted by state

power: territorially, it is manifest in the simultaneous erection of walls, expansionism, and occupations for the purpose of establishing 'security zones' against potential aggressors (Brown, 2010); populationally, it relies on threat or use of force to hold at bay the allegedly repressed 'natural' violence of people (Balibar, 2015, p. 32). Of course, this type of violence by the state—distributed through its various agencies like the military and police, as well as bureaucracies and educational institutions (Rawlings & Low, 2020b)—is likely to trigger its own counterviolence in response (e.g., outbursts, riots, terrorism), thus generating an intensifying spiral of counterviolence (Low, 2019, p. 645). Each reproduces the other: 'violence and counter-violence are caught up in a deadly vicious cycle, each generating the very forces it tries to combat' (Žižek, 2008a, p. 80). Hence, whether carried out by the state, groups, or individuals, Žižek (2008a, pp. 80–81) labels such tit-for-tat counterviolence 'blind *passage a l'acte* [acting out], where violence is an implicit admission of impotence'. By this he means that such violence is a display of cynicism, which for all its sound and fury poses no meaningful challenge to the way the social order is arranged.

Another common response to the hypervisibility of subjective violence is humanitarian and political activism: fundraising, petitions, protests, clicktivism, and so on. Renouncing military interventionism and armed struggle, this is usually the type of response lauded by many contemporary social justice thinkers, commentators, and organisations (e.g., Drake & Love, 2010; Myers-Lipton, 2017; Extinction Rebellion, 2019). 'Civil resistance' is the usual term used by those who advance this approach to denote any 'form of collective action that seeks to affect the political, social, or economic status quo without using violence against people to do so' (Chenoweth, 2021, p. 1). Butler (2020, p. 27) calls this type of action 'aggressive nonviolence'. She means to register by the use of this phrase 'that there are enormously forceful and aggressive forms of nonviolence that can be used to oppose state violence and police violence', and that nonviolence 'can be raging and in fact it might be defined as a way of cultivating or redirecting rage in such a way that it does not reproduce the violence it opposes' (Doherty & Butler, 2020).

While I must declare that I too favour this second type of response to violence over the first, Žižek offers a riposte to it that is worth considering. Recall the role that ideology—woven as it is through the language and conceptual schemes that we use—plays in our perception of violence, and hence how we react to it. Hence Žižek's (2008a, p. 1) exhortation to

'learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible "subjective" violence'. This is because 'the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking', according to him (Žižek, 2008a, p. 4). Apart from inducing impotent acting out in the form of counterviolence, overfocusing on subjective violence can also breed a sense of frenetic urgency to do something, anything, to make things better. Žižek (2008a, p. 6), perhaps uncharitably, labels this 'the fake sense of urgency that pervades the left-liberal humanitarian discourse on violence'. His opposition to such activism stems from his conviction that it does two things. Firstly, as mentioned above, it inhibits clear thinking about the objective and symbolic violence that have given rise to the eruptions of subjective violence: 'There is a fundamental anti-theoretical edge to these urgent injunctions. There is no time to reflect: we have to act now' (Žižek, 2008a, p. 6). As such, and this is the second and more cutting point, Žižek posits that the relentless urgency and activity serve to mask our impotence at best and at worst, implicitly sustains the status quo. Ideology has, as it were, already predetermined our stock standard reactions in what he calls the 'strange symbiotic relationship between power and resistance' (Žižek, 2007). An example he offers is the large global demonstrations against the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 where the 'paradoxical outcome was that both sides were satisfied': protestors 'saved their beautiful souls' by making their dissatisfaction publicly known, while those in power accepted protestors' right to demonstrate, then cynically used it as legitimation to forcefully bring such democratic freedoms to Iraq (Žižek, 2007). This is not just Žižek being facetious as he can sometimes be. Those in the field of 'critical peace education' have also noted this type of interaction between power and resistance (e.g., Bajaj & Brantmeier, 2011; Bajaj & Hantzopoulos, 2016). Monisha Bajaj (2019, p. 68), a leading scholar in the field, warns that: 'Ahistorical and short-term projects that do not attend to the roots of conflict offer band-aid "solutions" that may actually exacerbate violence rather than contribute to its mitigation.'

Rather than play up to ideologically scripted roles in the face of violence, then, Žižek counsels the counter-intuitive opposite: to withdraw and do nothing. He calls this the 'politics of subtraction' (Žižek, 2006b), with debts to philosopher Alain Badiou's (2003) thesis that '[it] is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent.' The implication of this is to recognise that '[t]here are situations when the only

truly "practical" thing to do is to resist the temptation to engage immediately and to "wait and see" by means of a patient, critical analysis' (Žižek, 2008a, p. 7). Counterposed to Butler's type of 'aggressive nonviolence' that Žižek (2006b, p. 342) dismisses as 'the standard "interpassive" mode of our participation in socio-ideological life in which we are active all the time in order to make sure that nothing will happen, that nothing will really change', he instead recommends 'passive aggressivity' as the proper radical political gesture. With reference to Herman Melville's enigmatic short story 'Bartleby, the Scrivener', he asserts that:

> the first truly critical ('aggressive,' violent) step is to withdraw into passivity, to refuse to participate—Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to' is the necessary first step which, as it were, clears the ground, opens up the place, for true activity, for an act that will actually change the coordinates of the constellation. (Žižek, 2006b, p. 342)

It is through such a Bartleby politics of subtraction that we pass from the politics of 'resistance' or 'protestation' that still operates within the symbolic coordinates of ideology to a politics which 'opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation' (Žižek, 2006b, pp. 381–382). Yet the question arises: if ideology has already done its job to the extent that Žižek and others claim—permeating our conscious perceptions via the cultural frames and languages through which we come to know ourselves and the world—then how can we muster up a refusal like Bartleby's?

Contemplative Pedagogy

With this we now return to the work of Yellow Bird on neurodecolonisation. For notwithstanding Žižek's own antipathies towards Buddhist-inspired practices (see Chap. 1), Indigenous traditions (Žižek, in Steinbauer, 2017), and much contemporary neuroscience (Žižek, 2006b), we can discern in the project of neurodecolonisation the development of a proper politics of subtraction against violence. For if Žižek's trademark insight is that ideology is more visible in how we act/react than in what we claim to 'know very well' (Žižek, 1989, p. 12), then rhetoric alone will not enable us to say 'I prefer not to' when up against our most ingrained social habits. To be anti-violent—to extricate ourselves from the symbolic violence that underwrites the ever-proliferating manifestations of

subjective and objective violence—requires difficult re-education of the self against its social conditioning (Vinthagen, 2015, pp. 265–277). Hence Žižek's frequent reminder that 'liberation hurts' (in Rasmussen, 2004). And it is here that neurodecolonisation is exemplary because it offers a theoretical framework for seeing both subjective and objective violence, as well as practices that cultivate the ability to 'step back' against the symbolic violence that has shaped our perceptions and impulses.

Refusing the narrow view of the issues besetting Native American students and their communities, a consistent feature of Yellow Bird's diagnosis is to situate these as symptomatic of the historical trauma of attempted genocide and systemic marginalisation of Native American peoples in the United States, as well as globally (Gray et al., 2018). What is noteworthy about Yellow Bird's approach to decolonisation is his attention to the embodied effects on Indigenous peoples of living in a colonised society, how these may lead to forms of unhealthy counterviolence whether directed laterally or towards oneself, and how contemplative practices may help to decolonise the mind and body from these effects. This is key because 'a healthy, well-balanced mind and brain are essential to helping one to engage in proactive, creative and successful decolonization activities', but due to colonialism's symbolic violence, 'unconstructive, negative thinking, feelings and behaviours dampen and short-circuit our brain's creativity and optimism networks and increase our susceptibility to the many stresses that arise in everyday life' (Yellow Bird, 2013, p. 293).

To undo this, Yellow Bird (2013, p. 293) draws on research on neuroscience and mindfulness to examine how 'the human brain is affected by the colonial situation', and to explore 'mind-brain activities that change neural networks and enable individuals to overcome the myriad effects of trauma and oppression inherent in colonialism'. He first links epigenetic studies of transgenerational trauma (e.g., Dias & Ressler, 2014) and social disadvantage (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2014) with neuroscience research on persistent social defeat (e.g., Der-Avakian et al., 2014) and stress-induced breakdown of dendritic spines in the prefrontal cortex (e.g., Chen et al., 2009) to the chronic stress, depression, suicidal behaviour, terminal illness, and reduced memory and learning that has marked many Native American peoples' experiences under settler colonialism. All this has led to 'a "hardwiring" of anxiety, fear, trauma, hopelessness, and disorganization', he surmises (Yellow Bird, 2016). Against this colonial 'hardwiring', Yellow Bird raises the possibility of transformation offered by

neuroplasticity (Doidge, 2007) alongside research on the positive effects of mindfulness on negativity and chronic stress (e.g., Lazar et al., 2005; Holzel et al., 2011). He marshals these to posit a pathway for attenuating and transforming the mind-body afflictions of colonisation through mindfulness meditation, as well as through the retrieval of Indigenous contemplative practices like singing, ceremonies, and sacred object meditation (Yellow Bird, 2018). This transformation—a deep decolonisation of the mind and body—then becomes the basis for constructing positive, healthy alternatives to an oppressive and toxic social order.

Conclusion

Sitting and paying attention to one's breathing, walking meditatively, engaging in rituals—do these actually accomplish anything when facing the manifold types of violence discussed in this chapter? In the two chapters that follow, we will look at exemplars who have demonstrated that under historical conditions of heightened subjective and objective violence, mindfulness meditation practices like these do make a difference. No doubt engaging in such contemplative practices may appear as tantamount to withdrawal and doing nothing in the face of violence. Yet in Žižek's reckoning, as in Yellow Bird's, it is precisely our instinctive reactions to violence that is the problem, especially given how deeply ideology is inscribed into our minds and bodies. Thus, what these two admittedly divergent scholars share is the counsel to stop and contemplate first before doing anything. Only then can we begin to discern how visible subjective violence is tied up with less visible objective violence, as well as how symbolic violence exerts its force on us by obscuring this connection—not least by inducing us to frenetically carry out actions like impotent counter-violence or predictable acts of protest.

This is not to say that to 'occupy small spaces with protest signs' or 'march down the streets and ask the system for change' is pointless; it is to say that immediate recourse to these predictable options may obscure more creative, radical approaches like '[d]ecolonizing pathways to holistic thinking and integrative healing' (Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2021, p. 3). Where Yellow Bird develops Žižek's insights further are in his deployment of mindfulness meditation alongside other contemplative practices as a *pedagogy of subtraction* that allows for unlearning ideology and relearning alternative ways of being that the existing social order has sought to erase.

Indeed, as we shall see in Chap. 3, it is such practices that have allowed many to resist violence—to say 'I would prefer not to'—and open a space for different possibilities, even in the most intensely polarising of environments.

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CHAPTER 3

‘Don’t Just Do Something, Sit There’: Thich Nhat Hanh and the School of Youth for Social Service

Abstract In this chapter, I focus on the Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh and his students during the period of the Second Indochina War (1955–1975). Based on an interpretation of the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of ‘True Self or ‘True Mind’, mindfulness for Nhat Hanh entails the combination of stopping of discursive thought and habitual reactions, and seeing the interdependent relational nature of reality beyond dominant discourses and concepts. To cultivate this mindfulness, he insists that his students take regular ‘days of mindfulness’ where they withdraw from their usual activism for meditative practices. Practitioners are then able to take action that does not recycle violence. These are the hallmarks of Nhat Hanh’s ‘engaged Buddhism’—a pedagogical program for resisting the perpetuation and effects of militarised violence.

Keywords Mindfulness • Violence • Vietnam • War • Militarisation

New Delhi, 2008

Just after 6 pm on 13 September 2008, five bombs were detonated across the Indian capital city of New Delhi within minutes: two of them in the major business district of Connaught Place (Rajiv Chowk), two at the upscale Greater Kailash M Block Market in the city’s south, and one in the busy Ghaffar Market—named after Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the

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Pashtun-Muslim anticolonial activist and advocate of nonviolence (Wadwha, n.d.)—which claimed a large proportion of over 20 killed and 100 injured that day (Yadav & Bhatia, 2008). Exactly four months prior to the Delhi bombings, eight serial bomb blasts in busy markets and outside Hindu temples rocked the city of Jaipur, Rajasthan, killing 71 and wounding 185; then a little more than a month later, on 25 July, eight bombs were set off in the city of Bangalore and a day later, at least 16 bombs exploded in Ahmedabad, the largest city in Gujarat, with a two-day toll of 46 dead and 176 injured (Subramaniam et al., 2013, pp. 89–90). All these, including the Delhi bombings, would become overshadowed by the 26–29 November 2008 terror attacks on Mumbai, whose imprint was deepened by the mixture of its scale, audacity, loss of lives and injuries, plus the nonstop 72-hour televised spectacle of explosions, dead bodies, and real-time testimonies from hapless hostages (Kumar, 2012). In retrospect, the Delhi blasts can be situated mid-stream in a terrorising year for India.

The responsibility for the abovementioned incidents was claimed by the hitherto little-known outfit known as the 'Indian Mujahideen', whose statements released after each attack were apparently intended to sow panic, inflict civilian casualties, and inflame tensions between Hindus and Muslims, according to Indian officials (Kumar & Sengupta, 2008). These officials may have neglected to add, as subsequently stated in a live television interview with a Mumbai attacker, that the terrorist acts were claimed to be a response to historical 'terrorism' perpetuated by the Indian state, including the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya by Hindutva militants, the persecution of Indian Muslims in Kashmir and elsewhere, and the 'unpunished' killing of 3000 mostly Muslim people in Gujarat in 2002 (Kolås, 2010, p. 86). In other words, these acts of terroristic violence were conceived by its perpetrators as legitimate counter-violence. Notwithstanding their sheer horror, they are the type of counter-violence that Žižek (2008, pp. 80–81) calls 'blind *passage a l'acte* [acting out], where violence is an implicit admission of impotence' (see Chap. 2). This impotence is evident in their ambition, which was to intensify tensions in the existing social and political order rather than seeking their radical reconfiguration. Reflecting on the statements made by the Mumbai attacker in his television interview, author Arundhati Roy (2009, p. 134) notes that: 'He didn't seem to want to change the world. He just seemed to want to take it down with him.' And the way that he and the Indian Mujahideen would take the world down was by escalating the already bloody cycles of violence between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in India, and between India and neighbouring Pakistan (both nuclear-armed).

In this, they were helped in no small part by the Indian news media, who were quick to equate the terrorist attacks on Mumbai and others that led up to it as 'India's 9/11', thus framing both the attacks and the expected response within the 'us and them' discourse of the US-led 'war on terror' (Mannathukkaren, 2010). As writer Amitav Ghosh (2008, p. 35) cautioned at the time, the 9/11 metaphor is invested not only with the memory of what occurred in Manhattan and the Pentagon in 2001, but also with 'the penumbra of emotions that surround the events' and 'its aftermath, particular to an utterly misconceived military and judicial response'. In a nation where communal violence had for decades almost always followed publicised terrorist acts in a bloody tit-for-tat (Jaishankar, 2007), as well as dialling up cross-border tensions with Pakistan (Noor, 2007), the social climate by late-2008 can only be described as tense. The Pew Global Attitudes Survey from December that year found that the historical grooves of conflict had hardened: 72% of Indians cited terrorism as a very big problem in their country—more than Palestinians (50%) and Israelis (70%)—accompanied by a marked rise in antipathy towards Muslims in the predominantly Hindu country with 56% voicing negative opinions and 73% declaring an unfavourable view of Pakistan (Pew Research Centre, 2008).

Meena Srinivasan was a teacher in an international school in New Delhi when the bombs went off in 2008. Born and raised in the United States to Indian migrant parents, she was in her words 'inspired to spend five years living in my ancestral homeland of India to deepen my study of Indian philosophy, yoga and contemplative practices' (in Hwang et al., 2022). In addition to the stresses of teaching a middle school academic support class with 'students from all over the world, all of whom had varying special needs' and feeling 'charged with supporting all of them', Srinivasan (2014, pp. 20, 28) found the security situation in the Indian capital intensifying her stress: 'constant security alerts had consumed me in fear… We were living under lockdown.' Amidst this heightened state of anxiety, as well as the ongoing demands of being a teacher, she 'was desperate for a sense of harmony and stillness' (Srinivasan, 2014, p. 20). And it was this desperation that brought her into contact with a soft-spoken Vietnamese Zen master, who was on a high-profile visit to India at the time. 'In a matter of minutes,' she recalls, 'this tiny Vietnamese monk's simple instructions on bringing awareness to my breathing quickly brought me to a profound sense of calm and peace inside of myself that I had only ever touched before after a lengthy yoga practice' (Srinivasan, 2014,

p. 20). In the context of the stresses gripping her body—a busy teacher saturated by the ambient social tensions and polarisation in India at the time—this is no insignificant experience. Later reflecting on her experiences in her book *Teach, Breathe, Learn* (Srinivasan 2014, p. 56), using the language of neuroscience, she explains that:

> If I'm stressed out, fearful, or filled with anger my amygdala reacts, bypassing my conscious awareness, resulting in a 'fight, flight, or freeze' response. However, if I can learn to stop and breathe when I recognize I'm experiencing a strong emotion, I'll be able to access my prefrontal cortex, the part of my brain that can make thoughtful decisions.

While recent neuroscience has nuanced the view that the brain can be partitioned into 'emotional' and 'rational' parts—cautioning against rebadging Western philosophy's division of the psyche into emotions ('our inner beast') versus cognitions ('evolution's crowning achievement') as amygdala versus prefrontal cortex (Barrett, 2017)—Srinivasan's point still stands. Exposure to sustained and uncontrollable stress heightens 'wear and tear' on the body (i.e., allostatic load) due to the extended hyperexcitability of the amygdala, which in concert with other brain regions responsible for complex representation of sensory stimuli (i.e., cognition) is associated with increased vigilance and fearful responses to ambiguous or mild stressors (Ganzel et al., 2010). The result is heightened sensitivity to social triggers of aggression (Sapolsky, 2017, pp. 124–134). Thus, to 'stop and breathe' in a highly charged context may have been a helpful lesson to have learnt from the diminutive Vietnamese monk.

With press conferences, television coverage, editorial engagements at large national newspapers, audiences with stalwarts of the Indian National Congress, and an address in the Indian Parliament, Thich Nhat Hanh's third visit to India in September 2008 was accompanied by some fanfare (Chan Khong, 2009; Ray & Mishra, 2010, pp. 168–171). Yet this very much remained a teaching trip for Nhat Hanh and his Plum Village monastic team, with meditation sessions, retreats, and public lectures occupying most of the itinerary. The first of these was a four-day retreat for educators held in Dehradun at the foot of Himalayas, on the grounds of the elite Doon School, that was attended by 550 teachers and educational leaders from across India—including Srinivasan (Ahimsa Trust, 2022). Entitled 'Towards a Compassionate and Healthy Society', she described the aim of the retreat as 'to help teachers transform—through

the energy of mindfulness—their classrooms into communities of mutual understanding and compassion' (Ahimsa Trust, n.d., p. 1). This would be her first substantive encounter with mindfulness meditation, and she describes it as 'transformational for both my teaching practice and my own personal spiritual journey', helping her to realise the role that teachers can play in social transformation:

> Through mindfulness, I've learned how to be the strong yet kind teacher that I know my students deserve… I've always felt that teachers are the vital link in helping individuals realize Gandhi's vision that 'if we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change'; this is why I teach – to touch lives and help make the world a better place in some small way. (Srinivasan, 2014, p. 21)

We shall return to Srinivasan in the closing section of this chapter to see how she continues in her latest projects to 'touch lives and help make the world a better place in some small way'. The focus of this chapter is on the life and work of the teacher that taught her to cultivate mindfulness by stopping and breathing, leading to understanding and compassion, and then transformative action. The combination of these three elements, as we shall see, is characteristic of what has come to be known as 'engaged Buddhism'.

Stopping

'We do so much, we run so quickly, the situation is difficult, and many people say, "Don't just sit there, do something"', Nhat Hanh (1987, p. 113) points out in a talk delivered to social and environmental activists of the US-based Buddhist Peace Fellowship in 1985. In a way that prefigures Žižek's prescription for not immediately reacting to violence (see Chap. 2), what Nhat Hanh said next might have seemed counterintuitive to many members of an organisation founded on a call to action amongst Buddhists: 'But doing more things may make the situation worse. So you should say, "Don't just do something, sit there." Sit there, stop, be yourself first, and begin from there. That is the meaning of meditation' (Nhat Hanh, 1987, p. 113).

At first blush, it might appear that Nhat Hanh's exhortation to 'sit there' is a call to self-absorbed passivity—an Orientalist trope found in Hegel's characterisation of Indian and Chinese philosophy, including

Buddhism, and recycled by his intellectual progeny like Žižek (Morton, 2007). But it was not. As he went on to point out, stopping is of a pair with 'seeing': 'Stopping and seeing are very close… Stop and look, that's meditation, insight meditation. Insight means you have a vision, an insight into reality. Stopping is also to see, and seeing helps to stop. The two are one' (Nhat Hanh, 1987, pp. 112–113). What Nhat Hanh is arguing, in other words, is that stopping by 'just sitting there' is a requisite first step to seeing a situation more clearly, and that stopping and seeing together constitute meditation proper. Meditating as such cultivates the quality of mindfulness, which he defines concisely as 'keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality' (Nhat Hanh, 1976, p. 12).

To be sure, Nhat Hanh is not by any means the first person to sum up the purpose of meditation in this way. In 594, the Chinese monk Zhiyi (538–597) gave a series of lectures on Buddhist practice that would come to be very influential in all schools of Chinese Buddhism, including the school of *Chán* (Japanese/English: Zen) (Swanson, 2007; Hershock, 2005, pp. 59–60). Recorded as the *Móhē Zhǐguān* ('Great treatise on Concentration and Insight'), it has been more popularly known in English by the catchier title rendered by prolific translator Thomas Cleary: *Stopping and seeing: a comprehensive course in Buddhist meditation* (Chi-i, 1997). 'Stopping' (Sanskrit [S]: *śamatha*) and 'seeing' (S: *vipaśyanā*) are complementary halves of a unified whole of Buddhist meditation, according to Cleary (1997), whose fundamental meanings are stopping delusion and seeing truth. All Buddhist principles and practices can be summed up under these two imperatives, he argues.

By the time of Zhiyi's death, there was already a localised *Thiền* (Vietnamese for the Chinese *Chán*) school of Buddhism in Vietnam, the paths of which were laid by Chinese imperial and cultural influence (Nguyen & Hoang, 2008, p. 15). The 16-year-old Nguyễn Xuàn Báo—later Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022)—entered this tradition as a novice monk in 1942 (Plum Village, n.d.). Like Zhiyi, Nhat Hanh (e.g., 1987, 1998a) would also come to be known as a synthesiser who would organise meditation practices from different Buddhist traditions under the twin imperatives of stopping and seeing (or 'looking deeply', as he would later prefer). As he summarises in the first three of his fourteen verses on meditation written for his disciples (Nhat Hanh, 2007, p. 43):

> Just as a bird has two wings,
> the practice of meditation has 'stopping' and 'deep looking.'

The two wings depend on each other.
Stopping and deep looking go in tandem.

Stopping means to be still,
in order to recognize, to be in contact,
to nourish, to heal,
to calm, to soothe, and to focus the mind.

Deep looking means to regard in depth
the true nature of the Five Skandhas,[1]
so that understanding may arise
to transform all sadness and pain.

These three verses crystallise the pedagogical function of meditation for the cultivation of mindfulness according to Nhat Hanh: they teach the practitioner to settle the mind and to perceive more clearly. The words 'transform all sadness and pain' also hint at how stopping and seeing lead to a third imperative—action—which Nhat Hanh (e.g., 2008) has asserted as a necessary component of Buddhist practice since the 1950s. The three elements of stopping, seeing, and acting mark 'engaged Buddhism'—a term coined by Nhat Hanh to describe Buddhist-inspired activism during the tumultuous years of the Second Indochina War in Vietnam (DeVido, 2014). We will begin with a consideration of stopping and why this is the initial step according to his teachings as they emerged in that context.

On 5 February 1966, Nhat Hanh established a new Buddhist order in Saigon: the Order of Interbeing (Vietnamese [V]: *Tiếp Hiện*). Although just shy of forty years old, Nhat Hanh was already well-known as a Vietnamese Buddhist nationalist and reformer (Main & Lai, 2013), university teacher and public intellectual (Gadkar-Wilcox, 2014), and prolific poet (Nhat Hanh, 1966). The first six members of his new order—aged between twenty-two and thirty-two—were board members of the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS; V: *Thanh Niên Phụng Sự Xã Hội*): a

[1] A Sanskrit term literally meaning 'heaps' or 'aggregates', which are the constituent components of everything. The Five Skandhas are material form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saṃjñā*), mental formations (*saṃskāra*), and consciousness (*vijñāna*). According to Nhat Hanh (1998a, p. 176): 'The Five Aggregates contain everything—both inside us and outside of us, in nature and in society.'

grassroots peace organisation co-founded in 1964 by Nhat Hanh, botany professor Cao Ngoc Phuong (later Sister Chan Khong), and other professors and students. The SYSS were dedicated to training, then coordinating young Vietnamese volunteers to set up schools and medical centres, resettle and aid displaced families, and form agricultural co-ops in rural villages (Hassler, 1967; Dekar, 2020). Core to the Order of Interbeing (OI) were the study, practice, and observation of fourteen precepts formulated by Nhat Hanh (1998b), which 'he felt carried the deepest teachings of the Buddha and would be fit for our time' (Chan Khong, 2007, p. 77). Another condition for those ordained in this new order was to practice at least sixty 'Days of Mindfulness' a year and 'to practice with a community of friends' (Chan Khong, 2007, p. 79). The stipulations for such days of mindfulness—usually one day per week—were to deliberately not engage with the work they did during the other days with the SYSS. Rather, they were to only do tasks like house cleaning, cooking, eating, and washing clothes, then take a slow bath, prepare and drink tea, take a walk while focusing on breathing, read a Sutra, and finally sit in meditation for an hour before bed (Nhat Hanh, 1976, pp. 84–85). The modus operandi was that: 'Every movement during this day should be at least two times slower than usual' (Nhat Hanh, 1976, p. 85).

For one who by that point had built a decade-long reputation for being 'something of a revolutionary monk' in Vietnam (Nhat Hanh, 2016, p. 40)—enough to be tagged by the US Central Intelligence Agency (1967, pp. 5, 11) as a 'brains truster' of the 'Buddhist dissident movement as a political force'—this instruction to the members of the OI strikes us as being quite odd. How might a slow-motion day spent dusting, cooking, eating, bathing, sipping, walking, sitting, and breathing be a practice 'fit for our time'? Perhaps a consideration of the 'time' in question, as well as the work of the SYSS led by Nhat Hanh and members of the OI, might furnish us with some clarity.

By the time the inaugural six members of the OI were ordained, the country known today simply as Vietnam had been through more than two decades of war (Logevall, 2010). Unbeknownst to them at the time, the people of Vietnam would have to endure close to a decade more. What was known to Nhat Hanh and members of his new order were the turmoil of foreign occupation and conflict, including the Japanese imperial occupation from 1940 to 1945, and then the First Indochina War against French colonial rule from 1946 to 1954. While relatively shielded from the Japanese occupation and the devastating 1944–1945 famine that

caused the death of approximately one million (Plum Village, n.d.), Nhat Hanh (2015, pp. 28–29) recalls his time as a twenty-something year-old monk that the 'walls of our temple in Huế were riddled with bullet holes' during the eight-year war between French forces and the nationalist Viet Minh led by Ho Chi Minh. Also well-known to Nhat Hanh and the OI members was that by 1966, the civil war between the two postcolonial visions of Vietnamese sovereignty that had emerged in the aftermath of the First Indochina War was escalating: on one side, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) centred in Hanoi plus their supporters in the south; on the other, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) centred in Saigon. This escalation was in large part enabled by the inflow of foreign troops, weapons, funds, and propaganda machinery on both sides from the mid-1960s onwards.

On the DRV side, a stream of Soviet arms shipments and troops from the People's Republic of China buttressed its territorial defence in the north. This position of security amplified the more aggressive voices pushing for direct military intervention in the south to topple the RVN (Jian, 1995; Gaiduk, 2021). By early-1964, those voices—most notably Vietnamese Workers Party leader Le Duan and politburo member Le Duc Tho—had successfully gained the ascendancy in Hanoi and sidelined an earlier generation of leaders like Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap, who were reticent about provoking direct intervention by the United States (Turley, 2008, pp. 95–96; Goscha, 2016, pp. 347–350). Buoyed by Mao Zedong's assurances that the struggle against 'the common enemy of the people of the whole world' (i.e., US imperialism) tied the fates of China and Vietnam, and hence that China would offer 'unconditional support' to the Vietnamese Communists (Jian, 1995, p. 360), the DRV dispatched General Nguyen Chi Thanh, veteran of the First Indochina War, southward for the 'sacred task' of unifying the two Vietnams cleaved at the 17th parallel after the 1954 Geneva Accord (Chen, 1975, p. 249). Thanh brought with him arms and supplies for the DRV's southern allies—the National Liberation Front (NLF) and its People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF)—as well as a steady stream of People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) soldiers from the north, which by May 1965 would number 10,000 (Goscha, 2016, p. 354).

For the RVN side, 1964 would also be a momentous year. In August, on the basis of questionable reports of DRV aggression against the USS Maddox (Cherwitz, 1978), the US Congress would vote near-unanimously for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorising then-president

Lyndon B. Johnson as Commander-in-Chief 'to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression' (cited in Bracknell, 2007, pp. 202–203). This initially entailed retaliatory air raids on the DRV, but from 1965 the United States would begin to pour in ground troops to bolster the RVN army (ARVN). Beginning with the 3500 marines that landed in Da Nang on 8 March 1965, the numbers of US troops would swell to 543,000 by 1969 largely at the behest of General William Westmoreland—the chief of the US Military Assistance Command in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968—with an additional 68,889 soldiers from US allies Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, South Korea, Spain, and Taiwan (Turley, 2008, pp. 98–99).

So, in the years that followed up to the 1966 ordination of the first OI members, southern Vietnam would be host to ceaseless battles between 225,000 combined DRV and PLAF versus 350,000 US and 315,000 ARVN fighters (Goscha, 2016, p. 354), 358,914 tons of aerial munitions dropped (Turley, 2008, p. 124), plus more than 12 million litres of dioxin-laced herbicides sprayed (Stellman et al., 2003, pp. 684–685). By 1975, 5.3 million Vietnamese lives were lost (of whom 4 million were civilians) and millions more were wounded or maimed, while the United States would face troop deaths of over 58,000, plus 313,616 wounded (Allukian & Atwood, 2008, p. 314). These numbers suggest two dimensions of this conflict worth keeping in mind: firstly, while any loss of life is a tragedy, at 98.9% of the total number of casualties, death was a profoundly Vietnamese experience; and secondly, while large supplies of weapons were given to the DRV by Soviet and Chinese Communist allies, they were never in a position to match the violence that the United States unleashed on Vietnamese soldiers, civilians, and environment in the form of napalm, carpet bombing, and carcinogenic toxicants (Goscha, 2016, pp. 356–358). 'This disproportionate deployment of firepower meant that Vietnamese soldiers and civilians from north to south experienced levels of terror and death unknown to the American combat soldiers, let alone the American civilian population,' Goscha (2016, p. 356) underscores.

It was in t"is context that the "YSS did their work. Housed initially in three pagodas in Saigon, then moving in 1966 to the outskirts of the city where dormitories and classrooms were built by its students on four acres of land (School of Youth for Social Service, ca. 1966–1975, p. 6), the school's two-year training curriculum stressed four main areas of study: education, health and sanitation, agriculture and animal husbandry, and

community cooperation (Yamanouchi, 1969). Undergirding their education and work, SYSS volunteers practiced basic foundations for right living according to Buddhist principles. This meant that in the face of horrifying subjective violence—including torture, murders, and regular attacks on their compound (Nhat Hanh, 2003, pp. 103–108)—SYSS volunteers were able to maintain their own inner peace and resolve. 'Many times we social workers felt afraid, and with good reason: our fellow workers were getting kidnapped, hurt, killed', one former member recalls, 'but we kept moving… we always believed we were doing the right thing' (in Valente, 2016).

It is in this context that the day of mindfulness prescribed to the members of the OI as leaders of the SYSS should be understood—as part of an educational program designed for the leaders of a peace-cum-social activist youth movement in a time of ubiquitous bombing, shooting, strafing, shelling, spraying, and slaying. The slow-motion activities of dusting, bathing, sipping, walking, sitting—all done in a calm and relaxing way while focusing on the breath—can be understood as pedagogical practices aimed at quelling the stressful effects of violence on each SYSS leader's inner life—'to recover, to be once more in good shape, to become whole again' (Nhat Hanh & Berrigan, 1975/2001, p. 2). For Nhat Hanh (1998a, pp. 24–25), practices like meditative sitting, walking, tea drinking, and so on that make up the day of mindfulness are designed in the first place to teach 'the art of stopping', that is, 'stopping our thinking, our habit energies, our forgetfulness, the strong emotions that rule us'.

On one level, then, the injunction to engage in various forms of meditation—and to dedicate an entire day each week to practice them—was a way of teaching SYSS leaders and volunteers how to calm themselves amidst the frenetic busyness as they struggled against a tidal wave of death and misery. In a 1974 letter to an SYSS leader that would become the bestselling book *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (1987), Nhat Hanh puts it simply (1976, p. 41): 'Why should a worker meditate? First of all, to be able to realise total rest.' Thus, five years into the war's fratricidal 'Vietnamisation' phase at the time of that letter's writing (Asselin, 2002), he instructs the SYSS leader to make the day of mindfulness available to all SYSS workers: 'Every worker in our community of service must also have the right to such a day, for if we do not, we will lose ourselves quickly in a life full of worry and action' (Nhat Hanh, 1976, p. 36). This function of the day of mindfulness for realising 'total rest' is attested to by inaugural OI member Cao. Summing up her activities in the rapidly escalating

1964–1968 period as 'the busiest of my life', she describes dividing up her thinning slices of time as a teacher at both the Saigon and Hue Universities 1000 kilometres apart, a student and student union president at Van Hanh Buddhist University, a coordinator of SYSS donations and distributions, and a marshal of food and supplies to villagers in the heavily bombed Quảng Nam province (Chan Khong, 2007, p. 76). Cao recounts:

> I was not unique. Vietnamese and others around the world were also shouldering great responsibilities to try to help alleviate the suffering in Vietnam, but many of them became exhausted – today we call it 'burnout.' I never felt that way. […] Only later did I realize that my fuel was living simply and practicing one Day of Mindfulness each week. (Chan Khong, 2009, pp. 76–77)

More recently, studies of mindfulness programs incorporating meditative practices like those specified by Nhat Hanh concur with Cao's testimony. For example, in 2014 a mindfulness-based program was offered to 100 Lebanese social and fieldworkers who worked with refugees from the conflict in Syria. In such a high-stakes and demanding environment, those participating 'took a great risk in actively setting aside time for mindfulness' (Chemali et al., 2017, p. 157). Yet it appears to have been a well-calculated risk: The program's participants found a clear decrease in perceived stress, depression, anger, hostility, and a significant decrease in blood pressure amongst the workers, which 'demonstrates the physiological importance of mind body approaches' (Chemali et al., 2017, p. 157). Studies of mindfulness-based programs more broadly correlate with these findings, suggesting they lead to improvements in the brain regions responsible for perception, memory, and response flexibility—translating to decreased stress reactivity—which in turn appears to influence the body's stress response, resulting in less taxing autonomic, immune, inflammatory, and endocrine responses in the body (Reive, 2019). When applied to their stressful work environments, the social and fieldworkers reported that these practices allowed them 'to be more aware of their negative emotions and think more positively' (Chemali et al., 2018, p. 3). This is noteworthy because if one of the functions of violence as a social and political tool is that it induces stress in the bodies of targets for the purpose of eroding the will and enforcing compliance (Smail, 2012), then to be able to attenuate stress through programs like the one for Lebanese aid workers and the OI's day of mindfulness may be considered a curriculum for

resisting violence. Nhat Hanh (in Nhat Hanh & Berrigan, 1975/2001, p. 128) suggests as much:

> So perhaps, first of all, resistance means opposition to being invaded, occupied, assaulted, and destroyed by the system. The purpose of resistance, here, is to seek the healing of yourself in order to be able to see clearly. This may sound as though it falls short of a positive act of resistance. Nevertheless, it's very basic.

Seeing

Nhat Hanh's point about resisting and healing 'in order to be able to see clearly' also hints at the second pedagogical function of meditation: seeing. This is well-illustrated by another finding from the mindfulness program for Lebanese social and fieldworkers. In the later stages of that program, participants began to report 'increased patience and positivity to increased problem-solving skills', specifically citing 'positivity, stability, logic and understanding as benefits', with some noting that mindfulness practices gave them 'the strength to control reaction and to deal with issues in a calmer and more focused way', as well as 'the capacity to deal positively with the severe cases we deal with' (Chemali et al., 2017, p. 153). While 'attentional control' and 'cognitive flexibility' may be more favoured neurocognitive terms used to describe these effects of mindfulness meditation (e.g., Raffone & Srinivasan, 2017), in Nhat Hanh's (1976, pp. 45–46) Buddhist terms the strength and capacity experienced by the Lebanese aid workers point to a second 'deeper' goal of meditation: 'While relaxation is the necessary point of departure, once one has realised relaxation, it is possible to realise a tranquil heart and clear mind.' It is important at this point to note that what Nhat Hanh means by having a 'tranquil heart and clear mind' certainly encompasses the less reactive, calmer, more focused, and more positive approach to working in crisis situations, but also exceeds it. To be more specific, these strengths and capacities emanate from a state of equanimity and clarity that he calls the 'True Self' and 'True Mind' (Nhat Hanh, 1976, pp. 48–57). A brief consideration of the philosophical background to this is helpful for understanding how practices for stopping are understood by him to enable seeing, and how they work in tandem.

By invoking notions of 'True Self' and 'True Mind', Nhat Hanh is drawing upon the distinctively East Asian Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of

'Buddha-nature'—also heavily relied upon by well-known Chinese Buddhist modernisers like Taixu (1890–1947) and Liang Qichao (1873–1929) who were keenly studied in Vietnam at the time (Tarocco, 2008; DeVido, 2007). It states that each person has the universal potential to realise Buddhahood (i.e., awakening) because Buddha-nature is primordially present in all beings, except that it is concealed by delusions and vices (King, 1998, p. 11). To illustrate with an analogy commonly used by Chinese and Vietnamese Buddhist reformers, including Nhat Hanh (1976, p. 51), the True Mind/True Self of sentient beings is inherently pure like open waters stirred by the 'winds of ignorance': it moves not because of its inherent nature, but because it is stirred by the wind; thus 'once the wind of ignorance ceases so does the production of delusional thoughts' (Tarocco, 2008, p. 331). This underlying state of being—variously referred to as the 'True Self', 'True Mind', and 'True Nature'—is awakened when the practitioner, through learning to calm the mind from flurries of discursive thinking, (re)discovers within themselves and the world an ontological purity and goodness that exist prior to the travails wrought by ignorance (Williams, 2009, pp. 117–118). The awakened/aware (i.e., mindful[2]) practitioner may pragmatically use familiar discourses and concepts to be effective in society, but they are perfectly aware of the 'non-discriminative nature of everything' and 'sees things perfectly in their interdependent relational nature' (Nhat Hanh, 1974, p. 88). By contrast, to be ignorant (i.e., unmindful) is to be caught up in discursive thought with all its conceptualisations that carve up reality into self/other, good/bad, friend/enemy, and so on, betraying its true non-discriminative and interrelated nature. What meditation does is cultivate a mindfulness that reveals the deeper reality:

> When reality is revealed in the light of awareness of being [i.e., mindfulness], Mind is revealed as True Mind; Matter as True Matter… Reality [itself] is the *dharmakaya*, the *tathata*, the *nirvana* (the perfection, the totality, the unconditioned), that transcend all mental categories and all concepts. (Nhat Hanh, 1974, p. 86)

[2] In earlier English translations of Nhat Hanh's writings (e.g., Nhat Hanh, 1974, 1976, 1988), 'awareness', 'awareness of being', and 'full awareness' were the most common renderings of the Vietnamese term *tỉnh thức*. This would later be translated as 'mindfulness'.

While this discussion of 'True Self' and 'True Mind' as transcending discursive thought and concepts may seem esoteric, especially in the context of the fiery conflict engulfing Vietnam at the time, keep in mind the function of ideology and its discursive frames in shaping responses to violence as highlighted by political philosophers like Žižek and others outlined in Chap. 2. Then consider not only the sheer brutality of deaths and injuries in Vietnam from 1964 to 1975 given by the figures cited above (i.e., the subjective violence), but also the ideological climate of that time that fuelled it (i.e., the symbolic violence).

As both Washington and Hanoi chose all-out war from 1964, they also expected their southern allies—respectively, the RVN and its military (ARVN), and the NLF and its military (PLAF)—as well as the entire population of southern Vietnam, to fall into line (Goscha, 2016, p. 352). Beyond the spectacle of battles, a less considered dimension of this (and any) military conflict is how institutions, social subjectivities, and everyday life become intensively channelled into the Manichean structure of war. This is a material and discursive process that scholars term 'militarisation'—'the contradictory and tense social process in which civil society organizes itself for the production of violence' (Geyer, 1989, p. 79). The term draws attention to symbolic violence, 'the step-by-step social, political, and psychological process by which any person, any group, or any society absorbs the ideas and resultant practices of militarism' (Enloe, 2016, p. 11). Saturated by militaristic ideology in this way, the wielding of violence gets distributed to multiple agents and its effects percolate into every strata of society. Goscha (2016, p. 359) vividly depicts how this played out in the rural villages of southern Vietnam in this period:

> Both sides adopted campaigns to rally the enemy soldiers, administrators, and civilians. The [DRV/PLAF] had long perfected the Maoist proselytising propaganda campaigns toward the enemy (*'dich van'*), while the republic imported methods used in Malaya and the Philippines to set up the Open Arms (*'Chieu Hoi'*) program to achieve the same goal. However, in doing so, each side provoked violent reactions from the other as it tried to stop people from going over to the 'other side'… Villagers did what they could to stay alive in this ocean of violence and the waves of hate, vengeance, and raw emotions surging all around them.

In such a polarised environment of conflicting sovereignties, Nhat Hanh's teachings on mindfulness as expressing the True Self and True Mind beyond discursive thought and concepts can be seen as an attempt to interrupt the bloody logics of symbolic violence, which 'constructs the experiences of a few as the norm and erases the experiences of others' (Dowler, 2012, p. 491). Far from mere obscure metaphysical speculation, True Self and True Mind were core to the work of anti-violence practiced by Nhat Hanh and the SYSS. To work for peace on this basis means learning to quell the violence inside us first because the practice of killing arises out of our discriminative minds (Hattam, 2008, p. 120). As Nhat Hanh (1993, p. 65) states: 'If we divide reality into two camps… and stand in one camp while attacking the other, the world will never have peace.' This discriminative mind obscures the interdependent relational nature of all phenomena, including our implication in the violence we so oppose: 'We will always blame and condemn those we feel are responsible for wars and social injustice, without recognizing the degree of violence in ourselves' (Nhat Hanh, 1993, p. 65). For SYSS leaders and volunteers, what meditative practices thus facilitated were, firstly through stopping, the calming of stress, anger, and frustration; then secondly, seeing beyond the impulse to discursively categorise some people as enemies deserving of counter-violence, but rather as 'someone suffering a great deal who needs our compassion' (Nhat Hanh, 1993, p. 77). In short, they facilitate 'keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality'—what Nhat Hanh (1976, p. 12) means by mindfulness.

This ability to stop and see—to exercise mindfulness—was surely tested in February 1967 when grenades were thrown into the dormitory of the SYSS at night. A female teacher and student were killed while they slept, with a dozen more seriously wounded. One young woman was wounded by three hundred pieces of shrapnel that had lodged themselves in her body; years and numerous surgeries later she would still carry more than a hundred pieces in her body (Nhat Hanh, 2003, p. 107). 'It was difficult to remain calm with so much hatred and anger directed toward us,' Cao remembers (Chan Khong, 2007, p. 89). This is an honest and unsurprising admission by an SYSS leader given the situation they faced. 'During sustained stress, the amygdala processes emotional sensory information more rapidly and less accurately, dominates hippocampal function, and disrupts frontocortical function,' Sapolsky (2017, p. 131) explains in neurobiological parlance, meaning 'we're more fearful, our thinking is muddled, and we assess risks poorly and act impulsively out of habit, rather than incorporating new data. This is a recipe for rapid, reactive

aggression.' But after a day of mindfulness, Cao wrote this eulogy that was read at the funeral for those killed, demonstrating how stopping enabled seeing interdependence beyond reactive aggression:

> We cannot hate you, you who have thrown grenades and killed our friends, because we know that men are not our enemies. Our only enemies are the misunderstanding, hatred, jealousy, and ignorance that lead to such acts of violence. Please allow us to remove all misunderstanding so we can work together for the happiness of the Vietnamese people. Our aim is to remove ignorance and illiteracy from the countryside of Vietnam. Social change must start in our hearts with the will to transform our own egotism, greed, and lust into understanding, love, commitment, and sharing responsibility for the poverty and injustice in our country. (Chan Khong, 2007, pp. 89–90)

Engaged Buddhism

This grenade attack on the SYSS compound was by no means the first direct encounter with violence faced by the volunteer youth organisation. In May 1966, a group of masked men had also thrown grenades into various dormitory rooms, paralysing a student (Chan Khong, 2007, p. 89). Then on 4 July 1966, a group of armed men kidnapped six young SYSS volunteers from a village where they had been working, bound their hands, marched them to a riverbank, and shot them—with one remarkably surviving (Nhat Hanh, 2003, p. 107). 'Because we won the hearts of the people so easily,' Nhat Hanh (2003, p. 103) reasons of the hostility the SYSS received, 'each warring party suspected us of belonging to the other side and wanted to eliminate us. Both sides were afraid of us. In a situation of war, practitioners of peace do not take sides.' This refusal to take sides meant that Nhat Hanh was denounced as a traitor by the US-backed government in Saigon and exiled in 1966; he was simultaneously accused of being a CIA operative and 'adapting religion to the American puppet policy' by the DRV authorities and refused the right to return after Hanoi's victory in 1975[3] (Forest, 2021, p. 92).

[3] Confusion around Nhat Hanh's position on the war can also be seen in varied left-wing academic and activist treatments of him. For example, a 1977 pro-Hanoi editorial in the *Journal of Contemporary Asia* named Nhat Hanh as one of the US's 'secret foreign puppets and agents', claiming that he 'has been openly linked with well-known former CIA-sponsored Saigonese' and 'was himself considered to be someone deserving of US political support by US policy planners during the late 1960s' (Caldwell et al., 1977, p. 128). At the time alleged, Nhat Hanh—already exiled from the US-backed RVN—spoke at the famed 'International Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation' in London in July 1967, alongside Stokely Carmichael, Herbert Marcuse, and other radical leftists.

With their teacher and figurehead in exile, the SYSS persisted. Their refusal to take sides despite the strongest urge to do so was most remarkably demonstrated the village of Trà Lộc in the district of Quảng Trị in central Vietnam in 1969. For months, SYSS workers had stayed in that recently bombed village to rebuild houses, schools, medical facilities, and an agricultural cooperative, despite the deep polarisation that prevailed there and the deep suspicion with which they were initially met (Chan Khong, 2007, p. 85). The village was then bombed again, destroying all their efforts and setting off a wave of despair and fear. Within a few weeks, the SYSS workers and villagers mustered up the morale and courage to rebuild, but again, the village was comprehensively bombed. Again, they rebuilt, and again the bombs came. The horror of this account is correlative to what, with retrospect and distance, appears as coldly unsurprising given the historical evidence now available: Quảng Tri—a province under six square kilometres—received over 3000 bombs per square kilometre from 1964 to 1973, with the result that of its 3500 villages, only 11 were left un-bombed in this period (Miguel & Roland, 2011). For the SYSS workers on the ground at the time, peace was wearing thin after the fourth bombardment:

> Everyone felt like picking up a gun and fighting. But by practicing meditation, looking deeply, they could see that using guns would only make things worse, so they did the work of rebuilding yet again in order to demonstrate their support, love, and care for those who suffered so intensely. (Chan Khong, 2007, p. 85)

To build, rebuild, rebuild again, then to stop and see, and yet again rebuild—all while resisting being swept into the 'cycle of violence' that is a tragic feature of traumatic stress in conflict zones (Hecker et al., 2015). This exemplifies the spirit and practice of 'engaged Buddhism', a term coined by Nhat Hanh in the 1960s to describe the 'Buddhist Struggle Movement' (1964–1966) and Buddhist activism during the Second Indochina War in Vietnam (DeVido, 2014). For him, engaged Buddhism is of a piece with mindfulness practice—that is, stopping and seeing. As he explains in a tidy passage:

> During the Vietnam War, so many of our villages were bombed. My monastic brothers and sisters and I had to decide what to do. Should we continue to practice in our monasteries, or should we leave the meditation halls in

> order to offer spiritual and practical help to the people who were suffering under the bombs? After careful reflection, we decided to do both – to go out and help people and to do so in mindfulness. We called it engaged Buddhism. Mindfulness must be *engaged*. Once we see something needs to be done, we must take action. Seeing and acting go together. Otherwise, what is the use of seeing? (Nhat Hanh, 1990, p. 91)

While engaged Buddhism has now come to be expanded to include 'Buddhists of whatever sect [applying] the values and teachings of Buddhism to the problems of society in a nonviolent way, motivated by concern for the welfare of others and as an expression of their own Buddhist practices' (King, 2009, p. 2), it is important to note that engaged Buddhism as conceived by Nhat Hanh denotes not only the quantity of action (i.e., that Buddhists should be more active in social causes), but also to the particular quality of such action. This quality of action that arises from mindfulness is given in the peculiar choice of the word 'engaged'. For while Nhat Hanh insists that engaged Buddhism is just a necessary outworking of Buddhist principles in a situation of social suffering, the term 'engaged' (V: *dấn than*) was not one used by Buddhists prior to him—not even the Chinese or Vietnamese reformers pushing since the early-twentieth century for social change, who preferred the label 'Buddhism for the human world' (C: *rénjiān fójiào*; V: *Nhân Gian Phật Giáo*) (DeVido, 2009).

The term 'engaged', according to Buddhist studies scholar DeVido (2009, pp. 436–437), most likely originated with French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre because 'by the 1960s, existentialism was a frequently discussed topic in the Buddhist journals and books of South Vietnam, including those of Nhat Hanh, Thich'. Scholars like Gadkar-Wilcox (2014, p. 378) echo this, pointing out that existentialist authors like Sartre had such a following in South Vietnam during this time that issues of major journals were devoted to them: 'Even the journal of Buddhist thought *Tu tuong* ("Thought") devoted a volume to the relationship between Western philosophy and Buddhism.' Nhat Hanh himself had edited and penned articles that brought together Vietnamese history, Buddhist philosophy, and international existentialist literature in this period (Plum Village, n.d.). This was an unsurprising historical feature of French colonialism in Vietnam, which by promoting a standardised Roman script (*Quốc ngữ*, or 'national language') through educational institutions and introducing

modern print media, facilitated the circulation of texts and ideas between the metropole and the colonies (2016, pp. 371–406).

Sartre most prominently lays out his case for being engaged in his essays on literature—collected in the volume *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948/1993) and widely circulated in Vietnamese intellectual circles (Luong, 2009)—where he argues for 'engaged literature' (*littérature engagé*). In these writings, Sartre rails against the aesthetic tendency of French authors to devote themselves to a 'higher calling' beyond the temporal circumstances of their time. This doctrine of 'Art for Art's Sake', which holds that the author 'should deal with what is of eternal interest to mankind, not the ephemeral, the flaws of the world in his own time' (Manser, 1966, p. 251), was for Sartre an unacceptable evasion of responsibility. The proper place of the writer is to write for oppressed peoples against the conditions that prevail. 'We write for our own time, not for posterity', he declares in a 1947 essay, asserting that: 'We want the man [*sic*] and the artist to be redeemed together, the work to be an act as well, conceived expressly as a weapon in the struggle men are waging against evil' (in Judaken, 2006, p. 147).

But in what sense can literature be a 'weapon' in the struggle? For Sartre (1948/1993, p. 14), literature serves as a form of 'secondary action', which he describes as 'action by disclosure'. By this he means that the writer, by choosing to write about something, also decides what should be revealed. And having revealed something, s/he also implies that action should be taken: 'The "committed" [*engage*] writer knows that words are action. He [*sic*] knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change' (Sartre, 1948/1993, p. 14). This argument preserves the importance of the writer because they mediate social change by offering a moment of reflection through literature. As Goldthorpe (1992, p. 142) notes, Sartre makes a clear distinction between mere involvement (*embarquement*) and engagement, the latter being action informed by reflection; the writer's role is to raise engagement for themselves and others 'from the level of immediate spontaneity to the level of reflection'.

From this detour into Sartre's theory of engagement, it is possible to map its influence on Nhat Hanh's initial conception of engaged Buddhism. For example, invited to say something about writers and artists as a co-founder of La Boi Press, a small book company he established with other likeminded Buddhist activists in Vietnam in 1964, he said: 'they must both reveal and heal. To reveal means to show the true situation of people

and society. To heal means to show ways to cure them' (Nhat Hanh, 1988, p. 38). Transposing this rationale into Buddhist practice, Nhat Hanh takes aim at the notion that Buddhist practice can exist for its own sake in isolation from social struggle. Echoing Sartre's critique of 'Art for Art's Sake', he argues: 'If in many monastic communities people are praying and meditating but do not resist, maybe it's because they do not pray and meditate properly' (in Nhat Hanh & Berrigan, 1975/2001, p. 134). And just as Sartre preserves the import of literature as 'secondary action'—a crucial mediation between mere spontaneity and reflective action—so Nhat Hanh presents Buddhist meditation as serving an analogous function in relation to action. Recalling the turmoil of the war in Vietnam, he writes that for the SYSS and engaged Buddhists:

> Taking action against injustice is not enough. We believed action must embody mindfulness. If there is no awareness, action will only cause more harm. Our group believed it must be possible to combine meditation and action to create mindful action. (Nhat Hanh, 2016, p. 41)

Meditative practices, entailing stopping and seeing, are thus rendered as pedagogical practices that foster a unique form of awareness about situations of injustice and violence—mindfulness—that leads to an enhanced response ('mindful action'). In this way, Nhat Hanh's conceptualisation of engaged Buddhism not only implicates adherents to practically respond to the circumstances of violence and suffering, but also serves to secure the necessity of Buddhist practices as 'secondary action' in times of turmoil. It is this dialectic of reflection-action—or 'inner' and 'outer' work—that continues to mark engaged Buddhism in the present.

Conclusion

Back in the United States in 2019, Meena Srinivasan co-founded Transformative Educational Leadership (TEL)—an organisation dedicated to fostering 'the inner transformation of educational leaders who create outer transformative change in the field of education' for the sake of 'a world where educational systems are supported by leaders with mindful awareness practices, critical reflection, ethical and courageous action' (TEL, n.d.). TEL programs, which tackle issues from racial healing to ecological justice to systems change, are founded on a theory of transformation that holds that '[d]eep inner shifts in attitudes, beliefs, and

thinking are necessary for the positive changes in actions and behaviors that empower leaders to envision and support organizational and systems changes' (TEL, 2002). And core to this is mindfulness defined as 'both a practice and a way of being with which we compassionately attend to the unfolding reality of the present moment within and without', and which allows for insight into 'interbeing'—a portmanteau derived from the Vietnamese *Tiếp Hiện* that Nhat Hanh uses to signify 'the interdependence of every person with all other persons, beings, and elements of nature' (Srinivasan, 2021). Being able to see interbeing, 'we are better able bear witness to suffering in its many forms, and act to create a more compassionate and just world through healing-centered engagement' (Srinivasan, 2021).

While TEL makes no explicit mention of Buddhism, preferring to use the term 'spiritual', the influence of Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism is nonetheless visible in its program. Note, for instance, how the key elements of engaged Buddhism as discussed in this chapter—the inner work of stopping and seeing (i.e., mindfulness), and then the outer work of acting (i.e., mindful action)—can be seen in the TEL's mission, vision, and programs, including the meditative practices that are designed to cultivate these three elements. Unlike many contemporary popularisers of mindfulness and meditation in education, Srinivasan—ordained into the OI two years after her first encounter with Nhat Hanh in 2008 (Srinivasan, n.d.)—has no qualms declaring that Nhat Hanh's teachings 'are the foundation of the healing-centered, liberatory work I'm engaged in with schools and school leaders' (in Hwang et al., 2022). Hers is an example of how engaged Buddhism and its practices for cultivating mindfulness, initially forged by Nhat Hanh and the SYSS in the face of the overwhelming subjective violence that was the Second Indochina War in Vietnam, have been taken up in recent times to confront violence of different kinds. In the next chapter, we will focus on one who can be considered her predecessor in this regard.

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CHAPTER 4

'There Is No Change Without Contemplation': bell hooks and the Sisters of the Yam

Abstract In this chapter, I look at how mindfulness practices like 'days of mindfulness' were taken up by African American studies professor and feminist cultural critic bell hooks in the United States in the 1980s—a decade that saw a concerted conservative backlash against the modest gains of the civil rights era. Combining mindfulness with Black feminist thought and the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, hooks offered her students a unique path to navigating the oppressive social environment of the United States at the time: taking contemplative time out for self-recovery as a political act. Her work in this period gave rise to 'engaged pedagogy'—an educational philosophy that insists on enhancing both critical consciousness and wellbeing for students and teachers, especially amidst the struggle against systemic oppression.

Keywords Mindfulness • Violence • United States • Black Feminism • Oppression

San Francisco, 2011

'Mindfulness would also help me heal myself and treat myself with more compassion instead of constantly trying so hard not to fit a certain mold or expectation of myself,' a student in the 'Contemplative Lawyering' course at the University of San Francisco (USF) declared in 2011 (in

R. Y. S. Low, *Learning to Stop*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-28722-0_4

Magee, 2016, p. 278). By itself, this statement is an encouraging affirmation of the commonly proposed link between mindfulness programs and self-compassion (Neff, 2003; Shaprio et al., 2005; Baer et al., 2012), and hence of the usefulness of teaching mindfulness to pre-professional students who are about to enter high-stress, emotionally demanding work situations (Birchinall et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2021; Scott, 2018). Given the flood of research now available extolling the positive psychological effects of mindfulness in educational contexts (Ergas & Hadar, 2019), as well as its significant uptake in higher education (Chiodelli et al., 2022), this student's comment on the course is also unexceptional. But when situated in its time and place, it stands out for three reasons. Firstly, while such a statement and course may appear familiar from the perspective of the 2020s, it is worth remembering that in 2011—much less in 2008 when the course was first planned (Magee, 2013, p. 34)—the boom in scholarly fervour for bringing mindfulness into higher education had not yet begun in earnest. According to Ergas and Hadar's (2019, p. 16) comprehensive map of peer-reviewed publications on mindfulness in education from 2002 to 2017, there were 87 English-language publications on the topic in the decade up to 2011; in the five years following, there were 360. From 2016 to 2021, 677 mindfulness in education publications were added—more than double the amount (328) in the preceding five decades (Baminiwatta & Solangaarachchi, 2021, p. 2102). No wonder that in 2011, one of the teachers and designers of the USF 'Contemplative Lawyering' course (who I will return to shortly) still had to make the case, through a 61-page journal article, 'that the implications of educating lawyers in contemplative practice [e.g., mindfulness meditation] are much more profound than have yet been articulated' (Magee, 2011, pp. 536–537).

A second reason the law student's statement is worth noting is the way they identified themselves: as a 'self-identified Latina' who wanted to speak 'of the benefits to her of dealing with her identity challenges mindfully' (Magee, 2016, p. 278). This is no minor detail. Historically, the legal profession in the United States has been demographically dominated by White men. In 2011, male-identifying lawyers made up 66.9% of the profession, while 88.3% of lawyers identified as White (American Bar Association, 2020, p. 109). Latinas, who in 2009 made up 7% of the total US population and are part of the largest and fastest-growing demographic group, represented only 1.3% of lawyers, 'the lowest representation of any racial or ethnic group as compared to their overall presence in

the nation' (Hispanic National Bar Association, 2009, p. 7). Those considering entering the legal profession confront 'a career path filled with race, class, and gender-based obstacles' such as a lack of role models and financial resources, as well as hardships involved 'when assimilating and fitting into the law school culture, being tokenized, and being afraid to be labeled as either too passive, or as a "fiery" or "hot-headed" Latina' (Hernandez, 2018). Once in the profession, they have to navigate complex expectations: to be accountable to White, middle-class femininities in legal settings, and also 'to adhere to distinct values and perform culturally gendered behaviors by their Chicano/Latino clients' (García-López & Segura, 2008, p. 230).

In the face of such social pressures, it is no small matter that the Latina student in the 'Contemplative Lawyering' course found the teaching of mindfulness helpful for healing and self-compassion, a counter to 'constantly trying so hard not to fit a certain mold or expectation of myself'. What she describes as 'trying so hard *not* to fit a certain mold or expectation' is one response to what is known as 'stereotype threat'—'a form of identity threat that occurs when a negative group stereotype exists, and the possibility exists that an individual member of a stereotyped group can be devalued by a stereotype because of membership in the group' (Manning, 2018, p. 99). While 'fight' responses to the stereotype, as suggested by this student, is one approach—albeit one that creates 'an additional cognitive burden, which does not exist for nonstereotyped individuals' (Manning, 2018, p. 106)—others can be categorised as 'flight' responses. In an educational environment perceived as hostile to one's group identity, this commonly manifests as 'disengagement', which can include 'failure to seek help, truancy, detached attitude, and distraction' (Lain, 2016, p. 305). However, like the 'fight' response, this response also saps energy. 'Similar to the fight coping mechanisms, those who disengaged through flight also expended additional energy into avoiding law school, as opposed to attempting to gain the knowledge that they needed to be successful,' Lain (2016, p. 305) points out in her study of minoritised students who had been academically dismissed from law schools. That mindfulness meditation might offer relief to students facing such pressures is significant. Another self-identified Latina student from the 2011 'Contemplative Lawyering' course at the USF concurred, articulating in her own words the 'stopping' and 'seeing' that mindfulness enables according to engaged Buddhists (see Chap. 3):

> I think that the meditation has really put things in perspective because I feel like I can remove myself from a situation and really think about what's going on… Mindfulness has helped me see the big picture. I don't feel the need to sweat everything. And when I do worry I think about things in a more positive/optimistic manner. (In Magee, 2016, p. 278)

The potential of mindfulness-based practices to ameliorate the pernicious effects of stereotype threat on the academic achievement of minoritised students is a key reason that it should be incorporated into all law school classrooms, according to USF law professor Rhonda Magee—one of the teachers and architects of the USF's 'Contemplative Lawyering' course. The biographical and scholarly background that she brought to the teaching of this course is the third noteworthy point to be drawn from the students' statements. For this was not a mindfulness-based 'intervention' whereby 'that which intervenes, is not the thing in which it intervenes' (Ergas, 2019, p. 347). Drawing from her own experiences 'as a Black woman from the South, whose own family had experienced the reality of racial segregation and systemic subordination for generations', and who was taught 'race-blindness and the irrelevance of minority perspectives' in her own legal education, Magee (2016, pp. 259–260) recognises that 'for me and similar students, managing the threat of such stereotypical outcomes was an additional psychological burden that we managed throughout law school, and, indeed, throughout our careers in the profession'. It is from this shared experience that she posits that 'mindfulness may play an important role in giving potentially stereotyped and stigmatized students the capacity to protect against or minimize the harm from stereotype threat', specifically by assisting affected students and their peers 'in maintaining composure during unfortunate (and probably inevitable) instances of insensitivity and incivility in our classrooms' (Magee, 2016, p. 275). This is particularly important for students who have survived traumatic experiences in their lives—reportedly 66 to 85% of US college students (Carello & Butler, 2014)—including those coping with racism-related stress and racial trauma from both within and beyond the institution (Hernández & Harris, 2022). What practices like mindfulness meditation and self-compassion meditation can do for such students, according to Magee (2016, p. 276), is support '[i]nterpersonal healing' and 'pro-social transformations of experience' by 'creating space for sitting with suffering around social identity differences'.

To be sure, Magee neither suggests that mindfulness is the only response to such circumstances, nor that the students themselves—particularly those who are minoritised on the basis of their race, gender, class, and other identity markers—are primarily responsible for finding ways to deal personally with the injustices they face in law school and the legal profession. She has for decades been an advocate for radical society-wide solutions to the seemingly intractable problem of racism in US institutions, arguing for reparations beyond Black integration and separatism (e.g., Magee, 1993), and for 'humanity consciousness' as a sublation of hyper-individualistic 'colourblind constitutionalism' on the one hand, and the tendency towards reification in 'race consciousness' approaches on the other (e.g., Magee Andrews, 2003). This reparative, humanity consciousness project entails radical reforms in legal education that seek 'to place the full development of free human beings at its center', specifically through 'an approach to the study of law and its institutions that incorporates aspects of critical legal theory and critical race theory with spiritual humanism to develop human beings' capacities for sustained engagement with dignity and community' (Magee, 2007, p. 471). It is within the ambit of this broader project that Magee enlists mindfulness meditation and other contemplative practices in her teaching: 'It counteracts the alienating dynamics inherent in legal education generally, and directly supports students in reconnecting with a sense of self, meaningfulness in their work, and interconnectedness with others' (Magee, 2013, p. 37).

From the foregoing sketch of Magee's work with her students at the USF School of Law, we can identify her affinities with the work of Nhat Hanh and the SYSS in Vietnam as discussed in Chap. 3: that mindfulness practice creates a space for students to pause from identity pressures and stigmatisation—often conditioned by dominant ideologies (i.e., symbolic violence; see Chap. 2)—which enables personal healing, as well as insight into interrelatedness with others. This insight then opens up possibilities for creative engagement to address causes of suffering: 'Practices of mindfulness and compassion prepare us to meet the patterns of oppression in our midst without becoming mired in them' (Magee, 2019, p. 244). A key difference between Magee and her students on the one hand, and Nhat Hanh and his students on the other, is context. While for the latter mindfulness practices are addressed towards the direct (subjective) violence of war, for the former they are directed towards a more diffuse form of violence: the systemic (objective) violence of racism, sexism, class, and so on. Hence Magee's (2016, p. 283) insistence on 'the need to work on

these issues on at least three dimensions—personally, interpersonally, and systemically, since any ultimate healing or transformative justice around such matters will require not merely individual but also collective, systemic change'.

In the expansiveness of her overall project and the different types of violence it addresses, Magee's framing of mindfulness as a contemplative pedagogy is remarkable. She is not overstating the case by declaring that: 'My own experimental work with like-minded others at USF mirrors similar work being done by others in what might be called the vanguard in the academy across the country' (Magee, 2013, p. 36). To move this 'vanguard in the academy' forward in her work, Magee weaves her life and teaching experiences together with an extensive range of sources from disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and neuroscience. In what follows, I suggest one more source: a historical exemplar whose biography, political commitments, and introduction of contemplative practices like mindfulness meditation into higher education prefigure Magee's own.

Recovery

In the 1980s, a thirty-something assistant professor of African American studies and English at Yale University would run a regular support group for her Black female students. Decades before trauma-informed teaching became common coin in higher education, she realised that for many of her students, encountering Black women's fiction 'that emphasized various forms of trauma in black women's lives' was 'an emotional trigger which stirred up lots of repressed, unspoken pain and emotion' (hooks, 1994/2015, p. 155). 'Hearing these women describe their sense of estrangement and loneliness,' she reminisces, 'I felt that a support group was needed and helped organize it' (hooks, 1994/2015, p. 5). On the elite gothic campus of Yale where 'the preponderance of wealthy, White families has not changed from 1952 to the present' (Soares, 2007, p. 114), this Black teacher opened up a safe space where Black women could speak freely and critically examine the controlling images and expectations of the broader culture—'the dominant ideology promulgated not only outside Black civil society but [also] within African-American institutions' (Collins, 1991, p. 101). Amongst a trove of counsel this teacher offers at the time and later documents, one that recurs is the need for Black women to find occasion to subtract themselves from the pressures and expectations of ordinary life in order to 'be with ourselves in a spirit of acceptance and

peace' (hooks, 1994/2015, p. 143). One way to do this, she instructs, is to meditate in solitude and silence by marking out days dedicated to doing so:

> It is helpful to have days of silence, times that allow us to practice what Thich Nhat Hanh calls 'the miracle of mindfulness.' He uses the term mindfulness to 'refer to keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality.' Worry and stress often keep us fixated on the future, so that we lose sight of the present, of what it means to be here and now. Mindfulness helps us find a way back to the present. Black women's lives are enriched when we are able to be fully aware, to be mindful. Meditation enhances our capacity to practice mindfulness and should not be dismissed. (hooks, 1994/2015, p. 144)

To understand the significance of this passage, it is necessary to place it within the historical context in which it was delivered, as well as in the specific life of the teacher that delivered it. To bring this exhortation about taking days of mindfulness to the elite chambers of Yale, Gloria Jean Watkins (1952–2021) had to travel a long way. She began her formal educational journey at Booker T. Washington Elementary School and Crispus Attucks High School—segregated Black schools in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. Despite the broader marginalising effects of segregated schooling buttressed by White bureaucratic surveillance and murderous violence (Givens, 2021, p. 7), it was in these Black schools that she 'witnessed the transformative power of teaching, of pedagogy' from the almost exclusively Black female teaching staff, who 'gave to their work a passion, a devotion that made it seem a true calling, a true vocation' (hooks, 1989, p. 50). Importantly for Watkins, they were teachers 'who conceptualized oppositional world views, who taught us young Black women to exult and glory in the power and beauty of our intellect', and in so doing 'offered to us a legacy of liberatory pedagogy that demanded active resistance and rebellion against sexism and racism' (hooks, 1989, p. 50). This legacy she describes is the unique heritage of Black education in the United States—a heritage that Givens (2021, p. 230) terms 'fugitive pedagogy', which 'encapsulates the enslaved and their descendants engaging in the process of thinking the world anew and building an educational protocol with this curricular object at the center'. For Watkins, this heritage was embodied in her favourite junior high school teacher—Miss Annie Mae Moore:

> Miss Moore knew that if we were to be fully self-realized, then her work, and the work of all our progressive teachers, was not to teach us solely the knowledge in books, but to teach us an oppositional world view—different from that of our exploiters and oppressors, a world view that would enable us to see ourselves not through the lens of racism or racist stereotypes but one that would enable us to focus clearly and succinctly, to look at ourselves, at the world around us, critically – analytically – to see ourselves first and foremost as striving for wholeness, for unity of heart, mind, body, and spirit. (hooks, 1989, p. 49)

There are two reasons why this recollection is important for this chapter. Firstly, it offers a summary through personification of the key marks of what would come to be Watkins's philosophy of 'engaged pedagogy' as articulated across her works in the following decades: that education for freedom should cultivate both 'critical consciousness' and 'wholeness'—the latter dimension strongly connected to her introduction of Thich Nhat Hanh's thought into educational contexts (Low, 2021). We will return to engaged pedagogy below. A second reason for paying attention to this recollection is that it illustrates a key feature of her educational criticism: her early schooling experiences are frequently raised as an ideal referent against which she will come to evaluate all her subsequent experiences of education and teaching—from busing into a White neighbourhood for senior high school where almost all her teachers were White and 'did not really believe we were as capable of learning as white children' (hooks, 2003, pp. 68–69), to her disheartening years as an undergraduate at Stanford University 'spent struggling to find meaning and significance in education' (hooks, 1989, p. 100), to graduate school at the University of California Santa Cruz where 'university and the classroom began to feel more like a prison, a place of punishment and confinement rather than a place of promise and possibility' (hooks, 1994a, p. 4). By the time she arrived at Yale, she was already gaining visibility under her pen name bell hooks, author of the landmark *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism* (1981)—much of its material generated while she was still an undergraduate student at Stanford as a response to 'the dearth of material by and about black women' in women's studies classes and mainstream feminist circles in the early-1970s (hooks, 2015, p. xviii; also 1981, pp. 12–13). In accord with her valorisation of Black people's voices—especially those of Black women—hooks (1989, p. 65) describes her transcontinental move from California to Connecticut as motivated by a belief that with a

joint appointment in African American studies at Yale, she would find 'a place within the university wherein scholarship focussing on black people would be unequivocally deemed valuable'.

From a superficial reading of US history and society, hooks could easily be regarded as emblematic of the supposedly nascent 'Black middle-class' emerging from the dissolution of Jim Crow laws and affirmative action in white-collar workplaces like Ivy League universities. According to a much-debated treatise from the time, the combination of US economic expansion from the 1950s to 1970s, union recognition of Black demands, legislative provisions for union representation and civil rights, and affirmative action policies in educational and professional spheres had led to the formation of a distinct Black middle class (Wilson, 1978). No doubt, as Manning Marable (1984, p. 169) argues, the fading of Jim Crow laws and federally sponsored affirmative action programs had by the mid-1970s 'brought tens of thousands of blacks into middle-class jobs in both the public and private sectors'. Desegregation thus allowed 'the most gifted black intellectuals, athletes, artists and musicians to leave black colleges to accept higher-paying positions within white institutions' (Marable, 1984, p. 173). Yet, if there was a narrative about a burgeoning Black middle class that would eventually take in a majority of African Americans—a narrative that chimes with the optimistic, triumphalist, progressivist grand narrative of American historiography (Ross, 1995)—it would be fleeting and chimerical. Marable (1984, p. 171) points out that in the early-1980s: 'Considered as a socio-economic group, the black elite—in the fields of banking, commerce, law, education, and medicine—comprised only 7 to 10 per cent of the total Afro-American population.' By the time hooks began teaching at Yale in the mid-1980s, the 'unprecedented optimism and confidence about their future' expressed by this Black middle class in the mid-1970s would be severely challenged (Landry, 1987, p. 133).

While liberal commitments to civil rights reforms such as affirmative action and *de jure* desegregation in the 1970s had scratched the surface of power in a deeply racialised capitalist society, even this had begun to wane in the 1980s. 'For whites of all income levels, the emergence of thousands of well-educated, articulate and aggressive black professionals seemed to require a political "white backlash"' (Marable, 1984, p. 172). This political backlash came with the 1980 landslide election of Ronald Reagan, whose candidacy for the White House rode on the wave of a backlash to affirmative action, court-ordered busing, and equal opportunity policies for African Americans, as well as women and other minoritised

populations (Marable, 1984, p. 194). This foretold the decade that had dawned. In his two terms in office, Reagan would oversee the reassertion of White dominance and Black deprivation that has marked US history, albeit newly couched in the cold language of economic rationalism. This was tagged as 'economic racism' by a scholar writing at the time, marked as it was by a reduction of all social problems to 'matters of national economic welfare' and the reframing of minority dissent from a social issue to a 'law-and-order' problem (Kinloch, 1987, p. 9). This discourse is archetypal of how the relationship between race, culture, and economic interests in the United States 'is modified over time as the racial elite adapts to its changing economic interests, needs, and response to minority reactions, maintaining the racial status quo on a differential basis as situations change' (Kinloch, 1987, p. 9). And the patterns that emerged from the 1980s bear this out: in the absolute increase of those living in poverty to the tune of over 3 million (Plotnick, 1993, p. 353), with Black people 33% more likely to be working below the poverty line than Whites (Harrison & Gorham, 1992, p. 243); in the decline of Black workers in well-paid positions such that there were two and a half times as many White high-wage earners (Harrison & Gorham, 1992, p. 243); in the steady erosion of Black living standards so that for every $1 in wealth held by a White family a comparable Black family had just 9 cents (Cotton, 1989, p. 815); in the funnelling of Black professionals primarily into sales-clerical and operative roles rather than professional or managerial ones (Kinloch, 1987, p. 5); and in the drastic evisceration through defunding of institutions like hospitals, schools, colleges, and public facilities that had catered to historically Black communities and neighbourhoods (Jefferson, 1986, p. 7; Feagin, 1986, p. 198). 'From bare human necessities to basic civil rights, the status of Black America is, worse in the 1980s than it was in the 1960s. Even gone are the futile promises of a bankrupt national agenda promoting racial equality,' a Black scholar lamented at the time (Jefferson, 1986, p. 2).

The sum effect of all this would be the deterioration of the overall social environment for African Americans. Those who could leave Black neighbourhoods and workplaces often did so, compounding the socioeconomic decline of these areas: 'In large cities, where ghetto life had always retained a degree of vitality and an atmosphere of extended families at the neighborhood level, the environment turned increasingly ugly. The specter of violence and death became frighteningly familiar' (Marable, 2007, p. 188). Prejudice and discrimination in the US housing market produced segregated urban residential environments along racial lines that, when

compounded with declining socioeconomic fortunes and the defunding of local services, meant that Black neighbourhoods were marked by higher levels of unemployment, welfare dependency, dilapidated housing, poorer schools, and crime (Peterson & Krivo, 1993). Disaffected communities would be beset by what might today be termed 'lateral violence' under oppressive forces (Whyman et al., 2021; see Chap. 2): throughout the 1980s, murder was the fourth leading cause of death for all African American males and the leading cause of death for Black males aged 20–29; Black males were robbed at 2.5 times the rate of White males; Black women had a 30–60% higher chance of being sexually assaulted than White women; Black children were far more likely to live in a household that was burglarised than Whites; and by 1986, one out of every 25 African Americans annually became the victim of a crime (Marable, 2007, pp. 190–193). The US Federal Government's response, as mentioned above, was to reframe underlying social issues as problems of law-and-order. This came into view most prominently in Reagan's turbocharged 'War on Drugs' in October 1982 (originally initiated by President Richard Nixon on 17 June 1971; see Farber, 2022). Large amounts of funding and resources were poured into this 'war'—including the transfer of military technology to civilian police—which saw heavy-handed law enforcement campaigns launched in neighbourhoods featuring advanced tactical units such as SWAT, armoured cars, tear gas, and military-grade weapons (Hinton & Cook, 2021, p. 275). In the early-1980s, for every White person killed by the police in the United States in any year, 22 Black persons were killed (Marable, 1984, pp. 189–190). And by the end of the 1980s, Black Americans were incarcerated at nearly seven times the rate for Whites, and one out of four Black American males would go to prison at some point in their lifetimes (Marable, 2007, p. 193). Black youth aged between 15 and 19 were four times as likely as White children to be incarcerated (Davis & Davis, 1986, p. 34). No wonder the Reagan-initiated War on Drugs has been labelled 'the New Jim Crow' on account of its removal of generations of young Black men from communities (Alexander, 2012).

Under the weight of all this, many Black families would splinter (Marable, 1984, pp. 175–177; 2005, p. 208). For Black women—historically the sinews that held African American communities and families together through their care work in the face of oppressive forces (Davis, 1981; Jones, 2009)—the 1980s cannot but be regarded as decade of assault on their collective lives and livelihoods. 'The communal child-care

networks of the slave era, the extended family arrangements of the rural South, and the cooperative family networks of prior eras of Black urban migration have eroded,' Patricia Hill Collins (1991, p. 64) observed, and these shifts 'portend major problems for African American women and point to a continuation of Black women's oppression, but structured through new institutional arrangements'. At work, Black women's fortunes appeared to be better, but even here the 1980s were an ambivalent time: while those of working age enjoyed a 33% increase in the incidence of high-wage employment (compared to an 88% increase for White women), there was also a 37% increase in poverty-level employment among the same age-race-gender group (Harrison & Gorham, 1992, pp. 244–245). Overall, while relative wages for Black people rose in the 1970s along with the unprecedented class optimism mentioned above, they stagnated and declined in the 1980s (Blau & Beller, 1991, p. 17). Notably, younger Black people experienced declining relative wages compared to Whites and older Black people in this decade, casting a pall over their future (Blau & Beller, 1991, pp. 17–18).

Despite all this, White majoritarian opinion in the United States in that period arrived at the view that 'any further government efforts on behalf of Blacks is undeserved special treatment and amounts to reverse discrimination against whites' (Cotton, 1989, p. 817). All things considered, the 1980s can be described as a decade of conservative backlash against the modest gains of African Americans in the 1960s and 1970s (Huckfeldt & Kohfeld, 1989; Edsall & Edsall, 1992; Hughey, 2014). Or, to put it starkly, it was a doubling-down on systemic racial oppression—an objective violence historically institutionalised in the United States, albeit in mutating ways: 'The oppressed Black majority is generally more subject to the violence of American capitalism than whites [because] America is not simply a capitalist state, but a racist state, a governmental apparatus which usually denies access and power to most Blacks solely on the basis of racial background' (Marable, 2015).

It is important to note that this objective violence reasserted in the 1980s was also accompanied by 'backlash' forms of symbolic violence and subjective violence, as alluded to above. Ideological rationalisation for Black inferiority was manifest in 'the adamant white opposition to any nationwide government program aimed at aggressively desegregating jobs, housing, and schools' (Feagin, 1986, p. 177). And as tragically not unforeseen in US history, the backlash saw both concerted and sporadic outbursts of physical violence against Black people: concertedly through

the deployment of militarised law enforcement into Black neighbourhoods often called 'combat areas' by police (Feagin, 1986, p. 198), 'shooting first and asking questions later' (Marable, 1984, p. 189); sporadically through 'hangings, castrations, shootings, and other acts of racially motivated random violence' (Marable, 1984, p. 190), especially in the early-1980s. For Black women, objective, subjective, and symbolic violence threaded everyday life under a blanket of racialised hostility—at school, at home, at work, on the long commute home from school or work (Collins, 1998, pp. 11–43; Small, 1994, pp. 80–109).

Even in the cloistered world of higher education, African American staff and students were not immune from the times. Enrolments of African American students nationally had plummeted by nearly one hundred thousand in the five years to 1986 (Marable, 2007, p. 183). This was, in large part, a direct outcome of Reagan-era policies. Indeed, one of Reagan's first proposals to the US Congress was to cut Federal student assistance and eliminate other special compensatory programs that aimed to recruit African American students (Harper, 2019, p. 114). Compounding this were societal signals being delivered to them. For instance, only slightly over one in eight Black graduates with four or more years of higher education were earning a middle income in 1987; their White counterparts with equivalent education were twice as likely to be paid this much (Harrison & Gorham, 1992, p. 246). Indeed, the number of well-educated African American men receiving low wages actually grew so that the fraction of all Black male graduates who had a middle income actually fell from 23.4% in 1979 to 19.5% in 1987; for Black women graduates—including the additional 407,000 who joined their ranks from 1979 to 1987—there was an absolute decline in those receiving middle incomes from 12.4% in 1979 to 7.6% (Harrison & Gorham, 1992, p. 246). When combined with the economic penalties of not having a higher education from the 1980s onward and sharply rising tuition costs, a picture of a three-pronged offensive against Black students emerges: narrowing options for higher education, declining incentives for pursuing it, and rising costs of not doing so. Surveying the landscape at the time, it is no wonder that Jefferson (1986, p. 3) surmised that: 'America's commitment to education as a way of creating political equality and social as well as economic opportunity has never been applied to Black America.'

Apart from the degradation of social conditions that supported Black students' participation in higher education, there was also a concerted targeting of African American Studies programs such as the one that

convinced hooks to move from California to Connecticut. A fruit of Black students' activism in the 1960s and 1970s to carve out an intellectual and social space within historically White institutions, African American Studies programs increasingly came under ideological attack for promoting alleged 'racial separatism' (Marable, 2005, p. 12). In the 1980s, ugly incidents of racial discrimination also erupted across US campuses as racist remarks, anonymous hate notes, racist graffiti, pro-racist demonstrations, cross burnings, physical assaults against minority students, and 'White student unions' popped up regularly to oppose affirmative action recruitment of students and staff (Farrell & Jones, 1988; Webb, 1990). The racial tensions in US higher education had gotten so severe in that period that a special two-day conference was convened in October 1989 for presidents of 32 public and private institutions to discuss short-term responses to racial tensions and violence prevention ('College Presidents Discuss Dealing With Racial Incidents', 1989). At Yale where hooks and her students were caucusing, the decade was bookended with its own high-profile racist incidents. In 1980, collegians plastered campus boards with posters advertising a 'Bring a Slave' party (Maslin, 2013). In 1990, a hate letter signed by 'Yale Students for Racism' was sent to Black law students, coming two weeks after racial slurs against Black, Jewish, and Asian-American students were found scrawled on four carrels in a library (Yale Students to Protest Racist Acts on Campus, 1990).

It is in this broader setting—and the devastating stress it would wreak on bodies—that hooks's teachings on mindfulness should be situated. We can draw from recent studies of like cohorts and contexts to furnish us with a deeper sense of this. For instance, a study of 262 Black women in higher education who had encountered racism found a moderate, significant correlation between racist stress events and depression; a significant, positive association between racist stress appraisals and depression; and a significant link between racist stress appraisals and attitudes of racial self-hatred (Jones et al., 2007). Another study of 218 Black students (157 females, 61 males) found that minority status stress—a descriptor for the unique stressors experienced by minority students like racism and discrimination, insensitive comments, and questioning of belonging—was a negative predictor of mental health (McClain et al., 2016). These negative outcomes were especially heightened for Black students in predominantly White universities (McClain et al., 2016). Interestingly, affirming hooks's valuation of Black Studies, the latter study also found that 'ethnic identity (i.e., positive increases in one's attitudes and feelings about a group of

people with shared ancestry, history, and experiences) at higher levels was related to increased mental health', suggesting that 'an added layer of self-reflection and cultural learning… may enhance mental health and help students make sense of their identity in a [predominantly White university] environment' (McClain et al., 2016, pp. 111–112).

Resistance

In light of these more recent findings, and in the context of the 1980s backlash that sought to conserve a 'system of oppressions related to race, gender, class, and sexual preference', it is no surprise that hooks (1994/2015, p. 157) was alarmed by how ill-equipped many of her young Black female students were to face the situation they were in. 'I was amazed by their lack of self-awareness and understanding, their lack of knowledge of black history and culture, and the profound anxiety and despair that was so pervasive in their lives' (hooks, 1994/2015, p. 5). Other scholars have also noted this inability of those who grew up after the 1960s-1970s wave of Black activism to identify the conditions of oppression while suffering its acute effects. 'Many young Black people,' Lowy (1991, p. 450) noted, 'like their young White counterparts, have either lost sight of the protest politics and activism of the 1960s, or remain completely ignorant of such recent historical events and how they may relate to contemporary demands for social justice.' Marable (2005, pp. 187–188) likewise lamented of African Americans coming to maturity in the 1980s and 1990s: 'the absence of a personal background of struggle casts a troubled shadow over the current generation of black Americans who are poorly equipped to grapple with the present complexities of racial and class domination.' hooks's pedagogical innovations at Yale can be seen as a response to this. Placing the distress of her students within a longer historical arc not only of racial oppression in the United States, but also of Black resistance through spiritual practices and community-building, hooks (1994/2015, p. 6) initiated a support group called 'Sisters of the Yam' at Yale in the late-1980s in the hopes that 'it would be a space where black women could name their pain and find ways of healing'. It would be underpinned by 'each individual's desire to recover, to find a space within and without, where she could sustain the will to be well and create affirming habits of being' (hooks, 1994/2015, p. 6). And it is within this context that she recommended mindfulness cultivated through meditation practice as a way for healing 'the wounded parts of ourselves' (hooks,

1994/2015, p. 95). Citing Nhat Hanh's teaching on 'the need to restore the self to a condition of wholeness' against 'the way forces of domination fragment, estrange, and assault our innermost beings, breaking us apart', hooks (1989, p. 29) echoes the former's insistence that this is the first step of resistance against violence.

Recall that for Nhat Hanh, this restoration of wholeness is possible when one cuts through discursive thinking to realise one's True Self and Mind (see Chap. 3). hooks (1989, p. 29) credits him for bringing this emphasis on 'self-recovery' into her consciousness 'at a time in life when I had not fully developed critical consciousness, when I was lost yet still seeking, trying to understand myself and the world around me'. She echoes Nhat Hanh's interpretation of Buddhist enlightenment as 'the recovery of oneself, of one's integrity' (Nhat Hanh & Berrigan, 1975/2001, p. 128). However, in contrast to Nhat Hanh's modernist interpretation of mindfulness as a way of returning to one's unsullied Buddha-nature amidst the symbolic and subjective violence of a polarising war in Vietnam, for hooks the self-recovery that mindfulness abets is linked to a decidedly dialectical theory of social change in the face of the symbolic and objective violence of systemic oppression in the United States. She states:

> In my thinking, I linked self-recovery again and again with the overall effort of the oppressed, the dominated, to develop awareness of those forces which exploit and oppress; with efforts to educate for critical consciousness, to create effective and meaningful resistance, to make revolutionary transformation. (hooks, 1989, p. 30)

It may not be immediately obvious how mindfulness meditation connects with 'critical consciousness' or 'revolutionary transformation'. It is easier to see how for the Sisters of the Yam in the context of the 1980s, such practices may be soothing, even healing. hooks (1994/2015, p. 95) suggests as much in offering a range of meditative practices to the group:

> Singing, dancing, walking, or sitting meditation can all be used as a practice to bring us back in touch with our bodies. Learning to be still, in sitting meditation, is one way we can be one with our bodies. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that living in awareness, living mindfully, enables us to heal the wounded parts of ourselves.

To understand how meditation practices for cultivating mindfulness like singing, dancing, walking, or sitting can be of a piece with critical consciousness and revolutionary transformation, it is necessary to situate hooks's pedagogy within the broader tradition of US Black feminist thought. While undoubtedly change happens and is most visible at the level of community and society, Collins (1991, p. 111) explains that:

> change can also occur in the private, personal space of an individual woman's consciousness. Equally fundamental, this type of change is also personally empowering. Any individual Black woman who is forced to remain 'motionless on the outside,' can develop the 'inside' of a changed consciousness as a sphere of freedom. Becoming personally empowered through self-knowledge, even within conditions that severely limit one's ability to act, is essential.

The quotation marks around 'motionless on the outside' and 'inside' are a direct reference to the writer and playwright Marita Bonner, who in the stifling confines of both her Black middle-class world and a racist White society wrote in 1925:

> So—being a woman—you can wait. You must sit quietly without a chip. Not sodden—and weighted as if your feet were cast in the iron of your soul. Not wasting strength in enervating gestures as if two hundred years of bonds and whips had really tricked you into nervous uncertainty. But quiet; quiet. Like Buddha—who brown like I am—sat entirely at ease, entirely sure of himself; motionless and knowing… Motionless on the outside. But inside? (in Collins, 1991, p. 92)

Now note how hooks's (1996, pp. 289, 292) reflections on her adoption of Buddhist-inspired contemplative practices—including those of Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism where 'we find an integration of contemplation and political activism'—sit squarely within this tradition:

> A fundamental shift in consciousness is the only way to transform a culture of domination and oppression into one of love. Contemplation is the key to this shift. There is no change without contemplation. The image of Buddha under the Bodhi tree illustrates this—here is an action taking place that may not appear to be a meaningful action. Yet it transforms.

The key point from the foregoing discussion is that mindfulness and the contemplative practices designed to cultivate it are, for hooks in the context of her work with her students at Yale, not separate from critical consciousness and pedagogies for raising it. They are two sides of the coin in the realm of social transformation. Moeller (2019, p. 186), a student of hooks in the late-1980s after the latter had left Yale to teach at Oberlin College, recalls how hooks 'explicitly focused on her notion of self-recovery' and so 'helped cultivate our thirst for theory and praxis that transforms us and that did not divorce spiritual, political, ethical, emotional issues or aspects of life'. hooks thus concurs with Nhat Hanh that to be mindfully aware is to first stop and recover one's True Self and Mind beyond oppressive ideological scripts (see Chap. 3), which is the foundational form of resistance. This is especially important in 'a society that socializes everyone to believe that black women were put here on this earth to be little worker bees who never stop', which she postulates as the cause of stress-related illnesses like 'heart disease, depression, ulcers, hypertension, and addiction' afflicting Black women (hooks, 1994/2015, p. 41). Recent studies have confirmed her suspicions on this (Harrell et al., 2011; Kalinowski et al., 2019; Erving et al., 2021), putting paid to the notion that systemic oppression—symbolic plus objective violence—is somehow less 'real' because of its lack of physical or bodily impacts. They have also affirmed her pedagogical interventions. Emerging findings indicate that while specific biomarkers of acute and chronic stress reactivity in relation to racial discrimination (e.g., increased catecholamine activity and greater overall cortisol output) have been found amongst Black women (and men and children), 'greater mindfulness among Black Americans may be a relevant protective factor against the deleterious effects of chronic race-related stress' (Brownlow et al., 2019, p. 7). For example, a study of 223 adult Black women found that mindfulness—specifically greater self-awareness and non-reactivity to inner experience—when combined with individual resilience to stressors that is cultivated by social and community support, led to increased self-care, which in turn is crucial to disrupting the negative influence of stress on self-rated health (Adkins-Jackson et al., 2019). From this baseline of recovery as resistance to what the authors of this latter study call 'a macrosystem of societal practices around of race, class, and gender' (Adkins-Jackson, 2019, p. 2), stopping then facilitates what Nhat Hanh calls 'seeing' or 'deep looking' (see Chap. 3)—or what hooks following Freire (1970) prefers to call critical consciousness: 'learning about the myriad ways racism, sexism, class exploitation, homophobia,

and various other structures of domination operate in our daily lives to undermine our capacity to be self-determining' (hooks, 1994/2015, pp. 6–7).

Engaged Pedagogy

As might be apparent from this point, there is a strong homology between the dialectic of 'inner' and 'outer' work of Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism as discussed in the previous chapter, and what hooks teaches the Sisters of the Yam. Indeed, her group at Yale can be seen as a redress to what she perceives to be lacking in higher education. As she writes:

> We must envision the university as a central site for revolutionary struggle, a site where we can work to educate for critical consciousness, where we can have a pedagogy of liberation. Yet how can we transform others if our habits of being reinforce and perpetuate domination in all its forms: racism, sexism, class exploitation? This returns us to the issue of self-recovery, extending it to include models of personal transformation that address both the oppressor and oppressed. (hooks, 1989, pp. 31–32)

Addressing this gap in higher education goes to the heart of hooks's lasting contribution to the philosophy of education: her conception of 'engaged pedagogy' that combines self-recovery with critical consciousness. Recall the impact that the Black women teachers of her childhood—like Miss Annie Mae Moore—had on her understanding of what an ideal education should entail: 'one that would enable us to focus clearly and succinctly, to look at ourselves, at the world around us, critically—analytically—to see ourselves first and foremost as striving for wholeness, for unity of heart, mind, body, and spirit' (hooks, 1989, p. 49). By contrast, reflecting on her teaching experience in higher education, hooks (1994a, p. 15) describes 'a grave sense of dis-ease among professors (irrespective of their politics) when students want us to see them as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge'. To this situation, no doubt inspired by her own Black women teachers and drawing from her experiences with the Sisters of the Yam, she proposes engaged pedagogy—a fusion of a few core but distinct elements that had been swirling influences in her life: the critical pedagogy of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire; feminist pedagogy from a broad swathe of sources, but especially those of US Black women

educators in the tradition of Anna Cooper, Frances Ellen Harper, Mary Church Terrell, and her own Miss Moore; and the engaged Buddhism of Nhat Hanh born in the fires of the Second Indochina War in Vietnam (hooks, 1989). To see how these threads are woven together by her into this novel theory and practice of teaching, it is worth citing her original formulation in full:

> Progressive, holistic education, 'engaged pedagogy' is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes wellbeing. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own wellbeing if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students. Thich Nhat Hanh emphasized that 'the practice of a healer, therapist, teacher or any helping professional should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people.' In the United States it is rare that anyone talks about teachers in university settings as healers. And it is even more rare to hear anyone suggest that teachers have any responsibility to be self-actualized individuals. (hooks, 1994a, pp. 15–16)

In the space remaining in this chapter, there is no way in to offer an adequate account of the different expressions of engaged pedagogy that hooks offers as the outworking of this foundational principle – most prominently in her 'teaching trilogy' books (hooks, 1994a, 2003, 2010). Even where her works are not directly addressing education, it is difficult to ignore teaching as a key site where values are put into practice for her (e.g., hooks, 1994b, 2015; hooks & West, 2017). There are deep considerations of engaged pedagogy in scholarly circulation (e.g., Davidson & Yancy, 2009, pp. 17–94; Wisneski, 2013; Troutman, 2020) – testimonies of hooks's impact that I have made a minor contribution to (Low, 2021). For present purposes, I will highlight how the imperative that she calls 'self-actualization that promotes their own wellbeing'—what she states as the key difference of engaged pedagogy compared to critical and feminist pedagogies—is linked to the self-recovery and healing for wholeness that mindfulness practices abet. While we can simply point to her explicit declarations as above about teachers as 'healers', and that 'I have heard Thay [Nhat Hanh] teach about engaged Buddhism, and I have applied many of these ideas to engaged pedagogy' (hooks, 2003, p. 173), this link can be more substantively demonstrated by the ways she emphasises the

importance of mindfulness to the self-actualisation and wellbeing of both teachers and students.

Firstly, teachers, for it is they who must first 'be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own wellbeing if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students', according to hooks's formulation of engaged pedagogy. While hooks does not offer a definition of self-actualisation per se in her initial work on engaged pedagogy or the sequels that make up her teaching trilogy, it nonetheless features frequently in them as an exhortation for teachers to embark on a process of healing the psychic wounds wrought by an oppressive status quo and restore their wholeness of mind, body, and spirit (hooks, 1994a, pp. 18–19, 165, 199; 2010, pp. 52, 183). hooks treats this process of healing—or 'self-recovery'—as synonymous with self-actualisation, which is in turn the basis for socio-political resistance. Reflecting on her first use of the term in the preface to the 2015 reissue *Sisters of the Yam*, she writes:

> When wounded individuals come together in groups to make change our collective struggle is often undermined by all that has not been dealt with emotionally… Many of us have longed to see the union of our political efforts to change society and our efforts to be individually self-actualized. We have wanted to politicize movements for self-recovery. (hooks, 1994/2015, pp. xi–xii)

This passage is revealing because it fleshes out how self-actualisation understood as self-recovery fits in as a key plank in engaged pedagogy. While hooks is specifically referring to the original Sisters of the Yam here, it is not difficult to see how engaged pedagogy's exhortation to teachers is an extension of this – 'collective struggle' in this case involving teachers subverting the 'politics of domination, the impact of racism, sexism, class exploitation, and the kind of domestic colonization that takes place in the United States', which 'are often reproduced in the educational setting' (hooks, 1994a, pp. 39, 46). And as she argues in analogous ways in her landmark *Teaching to Transgress*, teachers who are 'wounded, damaged individuals, people who are not self-actualized' are not in a position to undertake such work but will instead 'seek asylum in the academy rather than seek to make the academy a place of challenge, dialectical interchange, and growth' (hooks, 1994a, p. 165). By contrast, those who 'embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of

knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply' (hooks, 1994a, p. 22). Although it should be evident by this point, it is important to state that this understanding of self-actualisation is quite different from its more popular usage, which refers to a 'person's desire for self-fulfilment' as defined by humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow (1943, p. 382). For hooks, self-actualisation entails 'not only the idea of someone who is engaged in autocritique, self-exploration, and interior healing,' Yancy (2009, p. 36) clarifies, 'but someone engaged in outward movement toward the other, someone willing and eager to transform the other and be transformed by the other in rich and positive ways'.

Mindfulness helps with such self-actualisation for teachers because, in the first instance, it reminds teachers to pause their discursive thought so that the mind and body can be reunited with the realities of the present moment. Citing Nhat Hanh (1992, pp. 1–2) about finding peace and healing through practicing 'ways to bring our body and mind back to the present moment', hooks (2003, p. 172) reflects on how these words 'challenge me, and teachers like me, at the core of our being, even as we are obsessed with thinking, analyzing, critiquing'. While not obviating the need for critical thinking, for her the 'practice of mindfulness has helped me balance my passion for thinking, for processing… with a passion for silence, for the present moment' (hooks, 2003, p. 173). After stopping, teachers will be better able to see their interrelatedness with others, which enhances their sense of the classroom as a community: 'This state [of mindful awareness] evokes in us an awareness of interbeing. When we practice interbeing in the classroom we are transformed not just by one individual's presence but by our collective presence' (hooks, 2003, p. 173). As for engaged Buddhism, so also for engaged pedagogy, this mindful awareness is the basis for 'praxis'—'action and reflection upon the world in order to change it' (hooks, 1994a, p. 14). As with engaged Buddhism, so also with engaged pedagogy, 'this inward-outward movement is not contradictory, but harmoniously interdependent' (Yancy, 2009, p. 36).

This ability to see interrelatedness and community that mindfulness enables extends also to the way teachers treat one another. Describing a situation where she was enraged with a White female colleague who she perceived to 'ignore the critical feedback of myself and other black female colleagues if it did not support her perspective or proposed course of action', hooks (2013, pp. 145–146) recalls that: 'Throughout this conflict I was mindfully aware of the many moments when I had a choice either to

be compassionate and hold onto our bond or to allow anger and blame to sever meaningful ties.' In such a heated situation, mindfulness helps teachers by keeping visible their 'interbeing'—the portmanteau introduced by Nhat Hanh (1987, p. 88) as a translation of the Vietnamese *Tiếp Hiện* meaning 'mutual' and 'to be' (see Chap. 3)—which inevitably entails facing relational challenges amongst people of different races, genders, socio-economic backgrounds, and so on, especially in the context of a broader politics of domination. 'Bringing the mindful awareness to bonding across differences keeps us ever cognizant of the reality that conflicts will happen,' hooks (2013, p. 146) points out, but 'even when we fear them we can and do learn to handle them. Most importantly, as in any relationship, we learn to grow and change'.

For teachers who are committed to self-actualisation, entailing mindful awareness cultivated through practice, they will then be able to 'to teach in a manner that empowers students' as per engaged pedagogy—'better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply' (hooks, 1994a, p. 22). Mindfulness practices—like the meditative sitting, walking, singing, and dancing taught to the Sisters of the Yam—can help by teaching students to 'be fully present, enjoying the moment, the Now in the classroom without fearing that this places the future in jeopardy' (hooks, 2003, p. 173). For hooks (2003, p. 173), this is important because with such present moment awareness, 'we can do the work of educating in such way that we draw out all that is exquisite in our classroom', which in turn 'brings us into greater community within the classroom because it sharpens our awareness [so that] we are better able to respond to one another and to our subject matter'. This is 'nurturing, life-sustaining' (hooks, 2003, p. 173), especially in a context where the symbolic violence of ideology permeates societal institutions like education and the media, underwriting the objective violence of systemic injustice. Mindfulness enables students and teachers to exercise critical consciousness of such violence without being unduly degraded by it. When looking deeply at race and racism, for instance, hooks (2013, p. 153) emphasises that:

> One can be mindful of the impact of white supremacy while working consciously with mindful awareness to create a life where wholeness of self and identity stand as the powerful counter-hegemonic resistance to engulfment by racialized identity. Black folks, young and old, who are swept away by the idea of race and its concomitant anti-black racist agenda tend to end up

> seeing themselves as victims, living with depleting psychological states of fear and paranoia, states of mind that make coping in a predominately white world difficult, if not downright impossible.

In engaged pedagogy, then, classrooms should be places that are both 'life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership' (hooks, 2003, p. xv). And this requires teachers— like hooks's favourite Miss Moore and hooks herself—'who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students', that to 'teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin' (hooks, 1994a, p. 13). In the face of the objective violence of racialised and gendered capitalism, and the symbolic violence of ideologies that sustain it by working their way into the psyches and bodies of all people but especially those most cruelled by it, contemplative practices like mindfulness mediation becomes in hooks's hands a pedagogy 'that respects and cares for the souls of our students', and way for mindful teachers to share in the 'intellectual and spiritual growth of our students'.

Conclusion

In her penetrating study of how mindfulness has been taken up and advanced across a range of social institutions in the United States by a 'contemplative elite' that occupy privileged, high-status social positions, Kucinskas (2018, p. 176) observes: 'In many ways, the contemplative community is a social bubble… the core membership of the movement was far more likely to be affluent, educated, and white than the typical American.' Hence the attention she paid during her fieldwork to the presence of Rhonda Magee at the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society's 2015 annual conference. Prefacing her presentation with mindfulness practices like pausing, breathing, and bringing 'benevolent awareness' to experiences of emotional distress, Magee began by showing confronting video footage of Eric Garner's brutal killing by New York police in 2014 'to raise awareness of racial injustice in the United States and the lack of attention to racial inequality within the mindfulness movement' (Kucinskas, 2020, p. 189). As Kucinskas notes (2018, p. 178), Magee did so to raise the question of 'how mindfulness

interventions could be used to bring people's attention to issues that were morally and socially important', delivering to the audience the provocation that there are 'a large set of issues that we often don't take mindfulness to', and a question: 'How can we bring these [mindfulness] practices to bear?' (in Kucinskas, 2018, p. 179)

Magee herself, in her work, has come to answer this challenge she set out for the contemplative elite. In *The Inner Work of Racial Justice*—a summa of her mindfulness-based contemplative pedagogy (called 'ColorInsight') drawn from 'more than twenty years as a law professor practicing mindfulness and ten years teaching mindfulness to others as a support for understanding race, racism, and justice'—she posits that mindfulness 'often starts the process of healing for the speaker' of painful race stories (Magee, 2019, pp. 24–25). It also 'serves to soften and encourage the listener to respond by sharing his or her own stories, a process that ultimately leads to healing in the broader community' (Magee, 2019, p. 25). This healing then becomes the basis for seeking radical social change because 'it can strengthen the inner justice advocate in us' (Magee, 2019, p. 25). In explaining her rationale for writing the book, Magee (2019, pp. 19–20) echoes Kucinskas's observations plainly:

Mindfulness helps us understand and expand our notions of self. And yet, talking about race and racism and examining these through the lens of mindfulness is uncommon. This is not to say that it is not being done at all. But many practitioners of mindfulness have been taught, whether explicitly or implicitly, that looking at racism and exploring efforts to address it—or to otherwise engage in talk of 'justice' or 'politics'—go against the core commitments of mindfulness.

In her confident affirmation that the healing, understanding, and political action needed to confront race and racism can be helpfully abetted by mindfulness—and that this route while 'uncommon' is not unheard of—Magee hints that she stands within a longer legacy. This legacy can be understood, most broadly, as continuous with the historical struggle for racial justice waged by Black Americans against slavery, Jim Crow, and the systemic devaluation of Black lives through various societal institutions (Magee Andrews, 1993; Magee, 2003) —resistance to the shifting shapes of symbolic and systemic violence in the United States. Specifically, she can also be situated in the legacy of 'fugitive pedagogy', a 'metanarrative of black educational history' and 'a social and rhetorical frame by which we might interpret black Americans' pursuit to enact humanizing and affirming practices of teaching and learning' (Givens, 2021, p. 11). And even

more precisely, she can be seen to be an inheritor of bell hooks's engaged pedagogy—Magee has acknowledged hooks as the innovator of 'a progressive pedagogy that goes beyond traditional critiques and emphasizes "well-being"' (Magee Andrews, 2004, p. 922n106). As discussed in this chapter, hooks has since the 1980s made the 'uncommon' move of approaching race and racism through mindfulness for the healing and insight it offers to both students and teachers, and in the same breath unabashedly engaging in talk of 'justice' and 'politics'. Magee (2019, p. 332) defines justice and politics as 'compassionate action to reconnect what has been artificially separated and to maintain those connections throughout our days', buttressed by 'a deep and revolutionary mindfulness with the capacity to awaken us to our role in the suffering of others and support us in enacting transformative justice—again and again, wherever we are'. hooks would no doubt wholeheartedly agree.

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CHAPTER 5

‘I Will Not Run’: Mindfulness in Contexts of Violence

Abstract In this chapter, I conclude by briefly surveying some recent examples from activist and community-based initiatives that underscore the argument of this book: that mindfulness meditation can be deployed as a type of anti-violence pedagogy. It does so, as I have suggested from the foregoing philosophical reflection on violence and historical study of exemplary teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh and bell hooks, because they enable a capacity to subtract from ideologically saturated contexts of violence. On this basis, I raise possibilities for further transdisciplinary studies of contemplative pedagogies in a world that continues to be beset by violence of all kinds.

Keywords Mindfulness • Education • Contemplative pedagogy • Violence • Anti-violence

Various Locations, 2011-

‘I kept thinking about my own place in all of this. A young, well-educated white male, with a full time job, and supportive family. Why am I here in this occupation?’ (Groneman, 2011). It was Sunday 16 October 2011 and a large contingent of around 80 protesters encamped at Zuccotti Park in New York’s financial district were sitting cross-legged in a radial formation, eyes shut or cast downward, palms on knees. They were meditating.

R. Y. S. Low, *Learning to Stop*,
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'Then I noticed my habit of over-thinking, and let my thoughts float away and returned to the feeling of my breath,' Patrick Groneman (2011) of the New York-based Interdependence Project recalled, 'This wasn't about me—I came to this sit to listen, to let the energy of the occupation infuse my presence.' Not that the energy of the Occupy Wall Street was necessarily blissful or harmonious. As the occupation wore on, acrimony bubbled up at its much-lauded participatory assemblies. 'I had been to almost every general assembly… and they could be really violent and aggressive', yoga and meditation teacher Leslie Booker explained (in Rowe, 2015). So she instructed the facilitators how to start all assemblies with brief meditations on the breath, followed by collective intention setting for each meeting. This—along with other practices like dancing, singing, and 'vibe checking'—lessened horizontal aggression and promoted conciliatory dialogue amongst the occupiers as they challenged obscene wealth inequality and the rule of money in US politics (Min, 2015, p. 83).

'As the rebellion week builds, our stress and adrenaline may be rising. It is vital that we stay calm and connected to our inner well-being. Sometimes this means pausing the treadmill of activity and simply resting in silence,' the invitation explained (Extinction Rebellion UK, 2019a). A mass meditation gathering was conducted at the symbolically significant Horse Guards Parade ground in London—adjacent to the Cabinet Office and No. 10 Downing Street—one week into Extinction Rebellion's second International Rebellion to deliver 'a cosmic climate and ecological wake-up call' in 2019 (Extinction Rebellion, 2019). The London activist-meditators were in solidarity with a worldwide network of likeminded practitioners, who engaged in a 'Daily Global Rebel Meditation' for 30 minutes each day during the International Rebellion so that 'We can get in touch with our breath, our bodies, come home to ourselves and then generate a loving compassionate energy to all rebels and all life around us' (Extinction Rebellion Buddhists, 2019). They were supported in this by allied Buddhists, including Thich Nhat Hanh's Plum Village monastics. Sister True Dedication, for instance, shares with rebels how she practices 'regenerative action' through mindful walking in everyday life, exercising awareness of each step against social preoccupations and pressures: 'every step I resist. So every step can be part of the rebellion. I will not run, I will not be a victim of my fears, my despair, my urgency, my struggle in this moment' (in Extinction Rebellion UK, 2019b). Such practices have become a part of Extinction Rebellion's attempt to develop a movement

culture built on an ethics of care—care of self, others, and the planet—termed 'regenerative culture' (Westwell & Bunting, 2020).

'I wanted to sit with it through meditation, learning that you have to sit with the feels. You can't exercise them away… They're not going to go away', Brittany Micek recounted of June 2020 as Black Lives Matter protestors hit the streets throughout the United States and New York City was put under nightly curfew (in Nathanson, 2021). She expected a few friends to join her after making a flyer for a meditative community sit-in amidst all the tension; 2000 turned up and thus 'Meditating for Black Lives' as an activist group was born in New York (Nathanson, 2021). As they sat for the first time on 7 June in a Brooklyn park for 'collective healing and action' ('Like An Activist: Brittany Micek', 2021), they were in affinity with others who had also tapped into their meditative practices in response to the more recent spate of high-profile police killings of unarmed Black people. Examples include Zenju Earthlyn Manuel's (2015) 'meditation on surviving acts of hatred' titled 'I Can Breathe' in response to the choking to death of Eric Garner in 2014, and Candice Hargons's (2017) 'Black Lives Matter Meditation for Healing Racial Trauma' developed in the wake of the 2016 traffic stop shooting of Philando Castile by police in Minnesota. 'Mindfulness is not over matter, such that simply shifting one's mindset without action is superficial and costly', the latter explains, and while meditating may be 'only one step in the movement toward critical action', still 'it is a necessary step in a world that seeks to denigrate, dispossess, and disempower Blackness and Black people' (Hargons, 2022, p. 107).

'[W]hen I start getting a bit anxious and stuff', said an older Gumbaynggirr First Nations person, 'I kind of start doing breathing exercises and say you know, it's okay and calm down and you'll feel your feet and all the way up your body and then just let it go!' (Lavrencic et al., 2021, p. 8). They were a participant in a pilot study of the Ngarraanga Giinganay program—culturally grounded mindfulness-based stress reduction program for older First Nations peoples carefully co-designed with Aboriginal community members on Gumbaynggirr Country, in the mid-north coast region of New South Wales, Australia (Lavrencic & Donovan, 2021). For a population disproportionately impacted by health conditions from the continued impacts of settler colonisation, intergenerational trauma from physical violence and the forced removal of children from families, and ongoing racism and material dispossession, this recovery of mindfulness yielded early promise: 'Benefits were reported for

psychological wellbeing in terms of reduced stress and improved feelings of relaxation and connection. Findings also revealed additional benefits of the program including improved eating habits, falls prevention, and reduced chronic pain' (Lavrencic et al., 2021, p. 9). It is important to say 'recovery of mindfulness' because of the diversity of long-held practices that cultivated such careful awareness (e.g., Thomas & Jones, 2015; Ungunmerr, 2017)—many elements of which were fused into the program. As Gumbayngirr/Biripai man and program co-lead Terry Donovan points out: 'all the elements within this program, Aboriginal people were doing for thousands and thousands of years anyway' (Older Persons Advocacy Network, 2021).

In these and numerous other situations, mindfulness meditation is being deployed against violence of all kinds. Often, they are led by teachers who are themselves in geographical, cultural, and social proximity to those contexts of violence. And always, these meditative practices are designed as pedagogies that seek to interrupt the circulation of violence—within and between bodies, produced by identifiable agents and reproduced by institutional arrangements, perpetuated and legitimated by hardened conceptions.

It has been the burden of the foregoing chapters to situate these more recent efforts to address violence through mindfulness-based practices philosophically and historically. As intimated in the justifications offered by all the teachers abovementioned, as well as the ones spotlighted in the chapters up to this one, this is necessary because of how counter-intuitive it may appear at first blush. Carving time out from taking action to sit, focus attention on one's breathing, notice one's thought patterns without judgment, train awareness to consider the broader causes and conditions that have brought on one's present state and that of others in the world—do these actually *do* anything in the face of injury and untimely death? Maybe not. But if the provocative and circuitous philosophical musings on violence by Slavoj Žižek and others laid out in the opening chapters serve a function, it is precisely to counsel a pause—do nothing—before reacting to violence. This is important not only because the most apparent forms of violence (i.e., subjective violence) tend to draw our attention away from the more subtle forms of violence that organise our everyday lives (i.e., objective violence), but also because our apparently instinctive reactions are themselves likely to be conditioned by the very socially constructed realities (i.e., symbolic violence) that organise our perceptions of harm—including our unnoticed implication in it. Without opening a Pandora's

box at this late stage of the book, such a pause may be able us to ask, say: whether reflexive 'self-defence' is unambiguously protective against violent threats (e.g., see Cheng & Hoekstra, 2013; Yakubovich et al., 2021); whether uniformly harsh sentencing is the way to end reprehensible acts of domestic violence (e.g., see Western & Wildeman, 2009; Fitzgerald et al., 2021); whether flooding the 'good guys' with weapons is the way to bring peace to regions of conflict (e.g., see Thrall & Caroline, 2018; Marcetic, 2022); or whether what Nixon (2011) calls the 'slow violence' of climate change is best resolved by 'sustainable' or 'green' solutions (e.g., see Banerjee, 2003; Huff & Orengo, 2020). Pausing also allows us to reflect on what kind of world we contribute to constructing by so acting. Perhaps the difficulty is not with knowing that such a pause may be necessary for critical insight, especially when one has the time, space, and security to read philosophical expositions (or for that matter, philosophical-historical expositions of mindfulness and violence like this). The difficulty may be with actually stepping away from our instinctive reactions when confronted with violence. As Žižek (1989, p. 12) famously highlights, ideologies find carriage more in our habitual behaviours than in our consciousness: 'I know very well, but still….'

This is where mindfulness and practices designed to cultivate it come in. The argument of this book—borne by the exemplary lives of the teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh and bell hooks, and those who continue their work like Michael Yellow Bird, Meena Srinivasan, and Rhonda Magee—is that it can be effective in fostering the capacity to pause, to subtract oneself from the action, which is necessary for insights to arise even in contexts of heightened violence. Such insights may then lead to possibilities for anti-violence action that may not be immediately apparent. Note the tentative language I have used in the above statements. By suggesting that mindfulness 'can be' effective as such, I also mean that it is not so in every instance (e.g., Poulin et al., 2021; Hafenbrack et al., 2022), and certainly that it is not the only way to conceive and practice non-reactiveness and awareness. One of the exciting prospects enabled by the recent enthusiasm for mindfulness is the renewed interest in how contemplative practices from a range of traditions might serve as anti-violence pedagogies (e.g., Flores, 2012; Miller, 2019; Keddie et al., 2021).

Before closing, a word on what I mean by 'effective' in the statement above. In contemporary scholarly discourse on mindfulness, effectiveness is most often understood in two senses: firstly, clinical effectiveness, which is proven by the measurement of the change it makes to a specific problem

(i.e., 'treatment efficacy'), plus its 'clinical utility' to effect such measurable change both in particular types of contexts and/or across contexts; and secondly, consistent neural correlates of particular desired states based on laboratory studies of neuroimaging and/or biomarkers like salivary cortisol, blood pressure, heart rate, and so on (Low, 2021, pp. 73–74). These are important ways to establish effectiveness and I have drawn on such studies throughout this book. What I have offered in the preceding chapters is another (not mutually exclusive) way of considering the effectiveness of mindfulness meditation: namely, its effects as a *pedagogy* on people in particular historical contexts of heightened violence. As with any pedagogy, variability, and flexibility according to the unique needs of individuals in their context—those very confounders of accurate measurement in clinical and laboratory settings—is precisely how skilful teachers make a significant impact in the lives of students (Biesta, 2015; Scholes et al., 2017).

Again, what is being advanced here is not tired disciplinary battles, but a transdisciplinary approach to education that seeks to go beyond the presentism and compartmentalisation of predominant psychological and neuroscience frameworks on the one hand and the instinctive suspicion of psychological and biological 'reductionism' amongst many philosophers, historians, and social scientists on the other. It takes its inspiration from attempts at thinking more dialectically about the relations between human subjects—as irreducibly biological, psychological, social, and spiritual beings—and their environment. These include Tyson Yunkaporta's (2019; Bilton et al., 2020) linking of Indigenous thought and pedagogy with the sciences, Catherine Malabou's (2009, 2019) continental philosophy of neuroplasticity and epigenetics, Daniel Smail's (2007) 'new neurohistory', and the 'biosocial' approach to education studies of Deborah Youdell and Martin Lindley (2018).

All of this suggests that a dose of humility is needed: as is often the case, scholarly attention lags behind what communities have already been practicing, testing, iterating, historicising, theorising, and teaching—sometimes for a very long time. This is especially the case for communities facing violence of different kinds, as embodied by the exemplary teachers and their students profiled in this book. There are many more teachers we can learn from. But we must first learn to stop and see.

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Index[1]

[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

R. Y. S. Low, *Learning to Stop*,
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