

Matthew O'Connell

BUDDHISM, MINDFULNESS, AND NEOLIBERALISM

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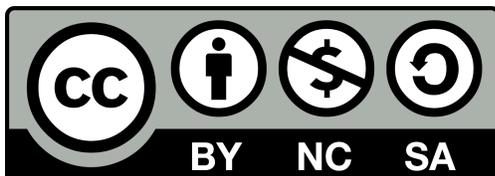
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Buddhism, Mindfulness, and Neoliberalism

[Concerning the alliance of x-buddhism, mindfulness, and neoliberalism the genie is out of the bottle. But what, exactly, does this alliance entail, and what might some of its ramifications be? Matthew O'Connell wrote the following article as an introduction to an upcoming interview with professor of management and Zen teacher Ronald Purser. The interview can be heard on O'Connell's podcast [The Imperfect Buddha](#). You can join the online discussion at the podcast's blog, [Post-traditional Buddhism](#). —Glenn Wallis]

Mindfulness is big business with a value reaching more than \$1 billion in the USA alone! There are well over thirteen hundred apps that will teach you it along with books on Mindful everything: from Mindful parenting to Mindful Leadership, from Mindful sex to the recently released Mindful Shoplifting and Mindful Adultery. Ok, I invented the last two but you get the picture. There are Mindfulness t-shirts, CDs, DVDs, coffee cups...all guaranteed to make you more mindful, apparently. It's a veritable Mindful fest and needless to say, a wonderful money making opportunity for many a Buddhist teacher and poorly qualified healthcare professional. If a few cents could be squeezed out of Mindful Sneezing, no doubt some budding entrepreneur would be ready to market it. There's no denying Mindfulness is a genuine Capitalist success story in the 21st century and in a world in which efficiency and productivity are key to survival, Mindfulness has been increasingly sold as a low cost solution for fixing a whole host of problems from stress to penile dysfunction, with, of course, the ubiquitous dab of ancient wisdom™ added on the side.

There are those who have begun to notice the co-option of Buddhist practice for the benefit of a dysfunctional status quo in the form of the dominant ideology of our time: neoliberalism. This is an ideology

which, if you don't know already, is one in which all of you dear folks are partially or wholly embedded. McM mindfulness is one term used to describe the commercialization of Mindfulness into a fast food practice designed to fill the neoliberal hole. By pacifying angst, feelings of hopelessness and frustration, depression and anger, or making monotony and boredom more tolerable, folks get equipped with the ability to carry on as if everything was just fine, and to passively accept conditions of exploitation, mind-numbing routine, and the dehumanization of the work place and erosions of democracy. Some critique has gone further to highlight the usage of mindfulness to ensure greater conformity to the neoliberal view of the individual in society. One that is wholly self-reliant, responsible for all her emotional turmoil and mental angst, and made to believe that she is un-needing of any form of collective action or resistance to the madness of unbridled neoliberal capitalism, its by-product in the form of environmental destruction, and the corporatisation of all aspects of human life. The message, which no doubt you will all be familiar with, is look within and never without. The Neoliberal fantasy of absolute autonomy and self-reliance means that all of our problems are always of our own making and the solution to fixing them, well isn't it obvious, is to look to and within yourself.

Neoliberalism is a word that has only really recently begun to pop up in public discourse although the term has actually been around for well over a century. It became prominent in the work of a number of economists with the Austrian Friedrich Von Hayek perhaps being the most well-known, and gained predominance as the ideological force driving Britain and the USA in the 1970s and 80s when it was adopted by Margaret Thatcher and later Ronald Reagan. Ever since, it has gained centrality in global politics and finance. There are different ways of understanding the term; one is that it's a return to 19th century classical liberalism and the idea that the market should be dominant with the state being relegated to a minimum with "less government more private business" as one of its tag lines. Another, if we accept David Harvey's analysis, is that neoliberalism originally functioned as a means for the West's upper classes, rich and wealthy

to claw back the money and power they had lost due to the dramatic economic policies and social contract established after the Second World War. Harvey is not the only one to claim that neoliberalism is deeply undemocratic, for at its heart, as an ideological system neoliberalism despises any form of collectivism and therefore works to undermine any collective effort to resist the market and the rights of the wealthy to be free of democratic governmental controls or limitations. Examples of this can be seen in off-shore banking, the skill of multinationals in avoiding taxation, the shifting of financial risk and consequences from private companies onto tax payers through bail outs and subsidies, and the expanding riches of the 0.1% at the expense of the middle classes and public services. It can also be seen at play in the rhetoric of self-sufficiency and the marginalization of the weak, who are painted as being unwilling and incapable of pulling their own weight.

Neoliberalism pushes for privatization and the shrinking of state power but it also reifies the individual, pushing it to the forefront of society as an atomized unit that must be self sustained, self-realized, and independent of any form of government intervention, which is to say, so thoroughly alienated from others in the world that all human relations become transactional and navigated through monetary exchange. Although many of you may feel you successfully avoid being sucked into this idea of self-hood, I would hazard a guess that some aspects of it have infiltrated your thinking and will be visible in many of the social dynamics you see daily. Neoliberalism desires for the market to dominate literally everything you encounter from healthcare to education and it invades private spheres through spreading its ideological norms into public and private discourse and relations, including our sex lives, parenting, and of course, religious practices such as meditation. What's more, neoliberalism turns the market into an invisible God (and therefore a suitable character for Neil Gaiman's book on the subject), with all of the mystique and power that such opaqueness ensures with never ending economic growth being the great motor pushing it forwards as it consumes increasingly finite resources in a global sacrifice for the short-term satisfaction of the

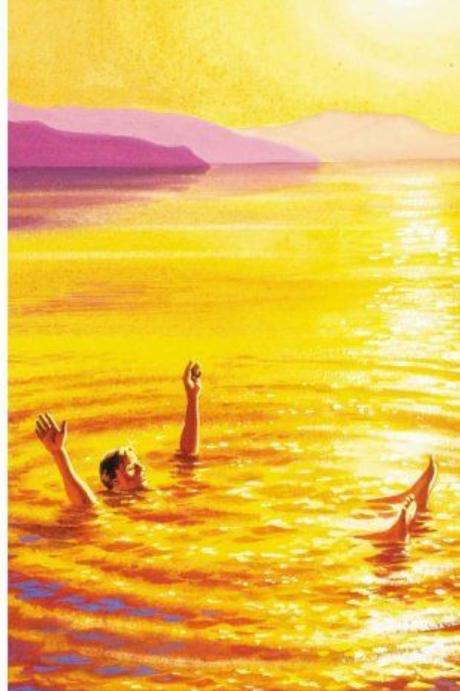
very few. In this regard, neoliberalism as an ideology is incredibly irresponsible: it holds no duty to others, no commitment to the welfare of others, it dismisses all social contracts for the collective good, and it despises social connectivity, unless it is in service to the market.

Neoliberalism has also infiltrated contemporary spirituality and self-growth. In its grossest form we have the wonderful new-age movement and its selling of all things mystical, and then there are the attempts of states to make dysfunctional citizens fit back into the system as efficiently and as quickly as possible under the banner of well-being. Whether it is psychotherapy or physiotherapy, the objective is not to heal the person but speed up their efficient and cost effective return to the workplace. This has been seen in the application of cognitive behavioral therapy in the workplace or the NHS as a short-term, low-cost fix for psychological fragility and dysfunction. Now mindfulness is seen as an extremely cost effective cure for every ill, and, as a by-product, to make us better servants to global Capitalism and more effective and functional in what is a profoundly dysfunctional system. Our hidden role is to be receptive to infiltration by market forces in every aspect of our consciousness and being, and to feel guilty if we fail to be productive enough and successful enough at playing the game of success. Although the USA has been at the forefront of this wave of history, signs of it are everywhere in the increasing monetization of all public space and the commercialization of anything that moves.

Wendell achieves a state of mindfulness by imagining he is floating in a beautiful lake until his mind empties of everyday worries.

Soon he is aware of himself, but no longer worried about money, work, family, or whether he left the faucet on.

Many home insurance policies now cover Acts of Mindfulness.



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The project here is not, however, to trace in detail the history of this ideological force or to look at the incredibly damaging consequences that have come about from its adoption by developed countries. In part, this piece is a companion to an upcoming interview with Ronald Purser on Buddhism and neoliberalism, so I want to slowly head towards the implications of their relationship, but there are a couple more things to say before arriving there.

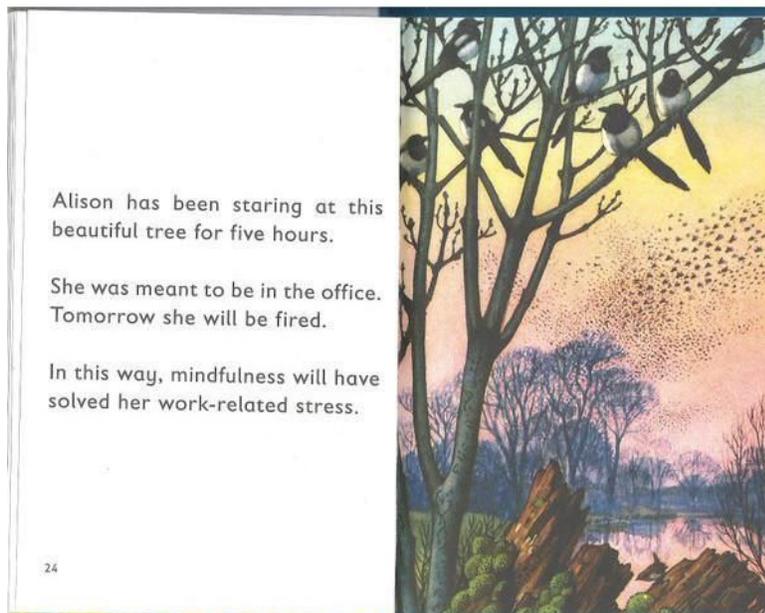
Like all complex phenomena, neoliberalism requires careful unpacking and analysis. It should be more widely understood and it should also be resisted for the sake of our collective future for without understanding it, we are merely puppets in a far grander game that relies on our ignorance to keep functioning as it does. The rich and powerful as always benefit from unsuspecting public resignation to the status quo. Neoliberalism has snuck up on most of us and hidden behind much of what most of us despise. It has arguably been the core set of ideas pushing for privatization of services from trains to utilities, reduction of taxation for the rich, the introduction of tuition fees in the UK, the selling off of public land for construction, and the global rich

who have no ties and therefore democratic or monetary duty to any country. It is also arguably behind the pessimism and sense of inevitability that many of the western middle-class currently feel, as if chronic decline were a given (of course, this decline is only for we plebs, the rich are fine thank you very much). We should then all be more aware of this complex phenomenon and better educated on its consequences and its role within the real world that each of us inhabits for its real world consequences are immense and risk becoming chronic. This applies also to its insipid presence in contemporary spirituality, whether in Buddhism, or in the pressures that so many of us feel to be better, to perform better, to achieve endless goals, and produce results. These unconscious compulsions felt by many spiritual practitioners are arguably a result of neoliberal drives and they need unpacking too in the deepest darkest spaces of our own practice.

It would be easy to cast neoliberalism out as the bogeyman. Read a few more articles on it or listen to Noam Chomsky and you will likely start to feel rather uncomfortable. This is right. This is an appropriate reaction, but there is a but. Resistance to neoliberalism, or any other perceived evil for that matter is an ethical necessity for any sane human but it can also be illustrative of one's intellectual limits and a lack of criticality within one's own views and practices. A sign of this can be seen clearly in outrage culture or in your colleague who loves to moan but would hate to get her hands dirty by actually attempting to bring about effective change. We need to think as well as act, right? First there needs to be understanding, then balance in approach in order to avoid becoming a mere reactive subject; one who is still fully captured by the ideological machine and incapable of imagining a different order. In critiquing a form, we always have the opportunity to understand ourselves as a species better and not simply adopt a stance of unthinking opposition. If critique does not merely serve the purpose of asserting our own pre-existing position or indulging in reactivity, it can become a creative ground for understanding the human condition more fully. What's more, if we unthinkingly dehumanize the players within a given ideological force, then we lose

our capacity to understand the drives that push them to create, sustain, or promote such a force. This is not to say that we should somehow be compassionate and forgiving towards figures such as Reagan, Thatcher, Pinochet, or the 0.1%, but rather that recognizing the human side of something like neoliberalism robs it of its alienating power to remain as that big, evil other. Neoliberalism was birthed from the idea of a fellow human being after all, not from an alien. And, by being birthed from a fellow human being, other human beings, like us, can give birth to new and different ideas. We are actually capable of bringing about change.

Neoliberalism arose in part as an attempt to avoid the collectivist projects of Nazism, Fascism and Communism, so in that sense it is not wholly evil: it is rather the highly dysfunctional outcome of an attempt to answer questions about how societies should relate to the world of economics and finance whilst guaranteeing maximum freedom to the individual. Ultimately, neoliberalism, like all ideologies, produces subjects and societies that are molded into forms of ignorance and entrapment that must eventually be superseded and if managed badly end up producing only their dark potential. We might argue that Trump, Brexit, the Lega Nord, and all the other reactionary, populist forms of political turmoil we're seeing presently are just another symptom of our struggle with core ideas of what society is and should be and what the individual is and should be within those societies. These are complex and fascinating questions with few simple answers but one thing is for certain, if you are engaged meaningfully in any form of contemplative practice, you do need to understand the forces shaping the world around you and you do need to find a functional approach to engaging with those forces as they play out within you and those around you. Placating the anxiety that usually comes about from looking into something like neoliberalism should only be met with a retreat into spiritual land by the very, very few.



Neoliberal ideology hanging out in you mindfulness practice

Ideology, understood in its most general sense as a social, symbolic, linguistic field of human behaviors and principles is always present in the human social world in which we are forever participants. Although we can continue to debate what it means to experience radically liberated subjective experience, and to discuss concepts such as freedom, awakening, liberation, universal love, spontaneous compassion, and so on and so on, such ideas, and I would argue experience itself only ever find value within the shared, participatory space of being in the world. This may seem obvious said in this way but the implications of such an observation are rarely thought through and they sit in the heart of the debate about the individual and the collective, and their role as ideas in the formation of the experience of self, and non-self for that matter. I've argued elsewhere that the language we have adopted for discussing such topics is still insufficient for more accurately capturing what takes place in profoundly

transformative spiritual practices and experience of a radical break from the suffocation of our historical selves. In fact, even the words in this last sentence are problematic for what is assumed by the use of such terms. What's more this need for better descriptions and definitions shows up even when academics critique mindfulness as they themselves tend to fall back on buzz words such as wisdom, awakening, and liberation, and one is left wondering what they are actually referring to. Could such words too often end up as empty, lazy signifiers?

Figures like Slavoj Žižek, Glenn Wallis and Tom Pepper have continuously made it clear that there is no escaping ideology. As soon as you take any profound personal and subjective experience into the world, it meets ideology as a linguistic, ideational ecology in which it must find a relationship to pre-existing forms of meaning. Interpretation thus, is a constant feature of the personal. We must frame our subjective experience, eventually; otherwise it remains a highly personal, even secretive practice. Yet, even in those secret spaces, movement in terms of language, perception, and relationship contain the whisper of ideology. One way of understanding this is as the value that is assigned to what has occurred or the implicit assumptions that govern what is right or wrong, what is felt as good or bad. Think about how certain emotions and ideas are considered sublime by Buddhism and yet not seen as such by other belief systems. Think about how belief systems universalize some qualities and traits over others and assume that they are simply that way. The only way we can come to know whether our subjective personal experience, intuitions and ideas are what we claim them to be is to bring them out into the open into relationship with other human beings, other ideas, and other value systems and it is preferable in this day and age to do so with more than one ideology. Otherwise, we enclose our beliefs, experiences and opinions in a single system for evaluating and making sense of our inner world with all of its inevitable imperfections, biases, and subjectification quirks. This is especially important for religious ideologies and spiritual belief systems, which tend to view themselves

as universally true even when evidence highlights inconsistencies and anti-factual characteristics. Buddhists generally evaluate their experiences within a Buddhist framework, but the wider world may consider such evaluation as meaningless and even prove it to be so. This is not to lazily condemn Buddhism, but rather to patiently remind us all that Buddhist principles and beliefs are very much man made and therefore imperfect too even in their best attempts to provoke insight or the generation of wisdom. Of course there are many Buddhisms and many of them have wildly different value systems in spite of the attempt on the part of some Buddhists to universalize their own brand of Buddhist practice and theory but each one is flawed and ideologically formed and forming.

Mindfulness is, in part, the product of an idea: The idea that meditation can be value neutral and free of ideology. It is a popular idea among Western Buddhists and spiritual folks in general. If mindfulness is presented as ideologically free when it cannot possibly be, then it necessarily becomes a practice which is subordinated to the ideologies which are dominant in the spaces in which it is practiced. If neoliberalism is the underlying ideology of our time in the West, then it is the foundational ideology upon which mindfulness sits. Thus neoliberalism provides the context in which mindfulness finds its value/s. Stripped of its Buddhist context, metaphysics, and the eight-fold path, mindfulness in its secular form, wittingly or unwittingly, picks up the values of the meta-system in which it is situated. This explains why, even when intentions are good, mindfulness becomes subordinated to the meta-project of forming subjects within a neoliberal purview. The internalization of neoliberal values means we may unconsciously be acting out neoliberal values in even our most private spheres and this inevitably includes the meditation cushion. Well-being, present state awareness, emotional calm, and equanimity all sound good, but for what purpose do such experiences end up being cultivated towards?

Mindfulness has taught Leanne to accept things as they are: rubbish, expensive, unfair and out-of-date every six months.

It has also taught her to accept things like cake.

Leanne likes cake.



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So, are you a neoliberal Buddhist? Are you engaged in neoliberal mindfulness? Have you secularized meditation so that it appears to be value neutral? Have you taken the ethics out of Buddhism? As a playful end to this piece, you might wonder if any of these behaviors seep into your relationship with Mindfulness or Buddhism. Although they were once more common, they still haunt Buddhist groups and meditation halls across the West.

- Selling yourself as a Buddhist: *I'm a highest tantric Buddhist yogi bro'. Hey, did you see my Sanskrit tats?*
- Seeing Buddhism as a social badge signalling your role in a story of goodness: *Yeah, I'm like really compassionate and just love cockroaches bro'. I'm practicing loving kindness towards my ex-history teacher. It's been profoundly moving.*
- Using Buddhist practices to make yourself more productive: *I am always more productive after meditating man. I flip them burgers in union with emptiness and I've never been better at rolling joints!*

- Using Buddhism to connect to your true self: *I like get one with the universe and know who I am at my deepest. It's profound. There's like nothing there apart from white noise. I think that's a good sign.*
- Focusing on achievement and goals and outcomes: *I got second path this morning guy. I'm going for third path next weekend! Who knows, I might be awakened before my graduation next month.*
- Marketing yourself as an awakened person: *I'm basically a Buddha man, come to me for wisdom: I'll give you a discount.*

Author

Matthew Joseph O'Connell is founder of the blog [*Post-traditional Buddhism*](#) and co-founder, along with Stuart Baldwin, of the SoundCloud podcast [*Imperfect Buddha*](#) (“going where other Buddhist podcasts fear to tread”). [Twitter](#). [Facebook](#).

