Tonight I want to draw your attention to a new dharma book, *McMindfulness: how mindfulness became the new capitalist spirituality*, by Ronald Purser (London: Reader Books, 2019). It’s a critique of the mindfulness industry, with Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) as its main focus. Purser is an ordained teacher in the Taego branch of Korean Sŏn Buddhism and a professor of management at San Francisco State University. The book is cheeky, but also well-written, serious and erudite, so well worth reading. I’ll try to summarise his argument while adding some tidbits of my own.

Commercialised mindfulness meditation is to Buddhist meditation what McDonalds offerings are to real cooking, the book’s title infers. But there’s more to that title – it has antecedents. In 1993, George Ritzer – one of the great living sociologists – published his book *The McDonaldization of society*. Neoliberal globalisation diffuses the McDonalds model of production and product design to many other socioeconomic functions in the west, Ritzer wrote. It enforces bare-minimum worker inputs and wages; strict ‘calculability’ of costs and sales; predictability and standardisation of products and services; and enforcement of behavioural uniformity and appearance among staff, including scripted speech when dealing with customers.

(Some of us in the room have worked in McUniversities, so we know what McDonaldisation feels like. Those of us old enough to have once worked in the pre-existing real universities find the current experience particularly emetic.)

The diffusion of books, courses and rhetoric about mindfulness meditation (and other ‘mindfulness-based’ interventions) attracts this sort of analysis because it exhibits the same McCharacteristics, and because of its remarkable commercial success. As Purser points out, it has now grown into a four billion US Dollar industry (p.13).
Mindfulness is venerated and demonstrated at the annual neoliberal holy-of-holies, the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where the world’s most powerful corporate and (mainly right-wing) political leaders congregate, schmooze, and showcase their pretensions to progressiveness. For its part, Amazon offers over 100,000 books for sale that mention ‘mindfulness’ in their titles – how-to-be-mindful manuals for parents, eaters, teachers, therapists, leaders, nation-builders, financiers, dog owners, colouring-in children, and so on (p.13).

According to the hype, mindfulness – an ancient Buddhist practice now helpfully stripped of its religious mumbo-jumbo and bedecked with would-be scientific credentials instead – promises to make everybody happier and more compassionate, employees more enthusiastic, leaders wiser, soldiers better at fighting and managing their post-traumatic stress, and productivity and sales ever higher. All this attracts the reference to ‘the new capitalist spirituality’ in Purser’s subtitle.

This sort of western commercial appropriation of an ancient eastern wisdom tradition is hardly new. Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, in their book $elling spirituality (2005) analysed various examples of this process, including yoga, before the mindfulness industry attracted attention. They also make the connection to McDonaldisation, including in corporatised universities. Some of Purser’s key terms, such as capitalist spirituality, are from this book.

**Two immediate issues for dharma wallahs**

The most immediate question for us is whether mindfulness training in psychotherapy actually works to alleviate suffering, especially depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and perhaps other mental ills. The clinical evidence suggests that it does work, while also obviating pharmaceuticals and maybe imparting a life skill to clients. Self-evidently, then, we should welcome its therapeutic application, as Purser suggests (p.83). We can do that, while noting that the ‘scientific’ evidence for the more general efficacy of standardised mindfulness in promoting human wellbeing is shaky (pp.121–130), notwithstanding the messianic claims of its spruikers, its promoters.
The other immediate issue for us as dharma practitioners is this: what is the relationship between this mindfulness and the dharma, including actual dharmic meditation practices? MBSR practices draw on modernist Theravādin vipassanā techniques that themselves vulgarise the Buddha’s central teaching on ‘mindfulness’, the Satipatthāna sutta. Among other things, the Buddha used a wider concept of awareness (sati) than the ‘bare attention’ at the heart of both vipassanā and standardised mindfulness. Unlike them, he didn’t reduce meditation to technique, and didn’t drastically reduce the range of appropriate awareness in meditation.

More significantly, dharmic meditation finds its place and due proportion in a wider and demanding ethical path, one to be cultivated in a communal setting (sangha). But the mindfulness industry eschews ethics, and upholds the hyper-individualism at the core of neoliberalism. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defines neoliberalism succinctly as ‘a program for destroying collective structures which may impede the pure market logic’ (p.27). It thus mandates and enthrones the isolated, self-actualising individual, who is also the hero of the mindfulness spruikers’ narrative.

As the principal spruiker, Jon Kabat-Zinn simultaneously approbates and reprobates the dharma.

**YES!** His MBSR represents a new, western Buddhist lineage, of which he himself is the founder. To succeed in MBSR practices is to receive all the wisdom and benefits of the dharma as a whole. By becoming mindful one embodies dharmic ethics as a job lot, and can even awaken.

**BUT NO!** MBSR owes nothing to the dharma, and everything to modern-day science. You can receive its benefits without coming within a country mile of Buddhism. Snappy formulations of this on-again off-again relationship include ‘stealth Buddhism’, ‘de-Buddhification’, and ‘Buddhism without the Buddhism’.

‘McDonaldised Buddhism’, however, would trump all these other terms.

What is at stake here? ‘The issue isn’t one of intellectual property, but of truth in advertising,’ Purser writes (p.154). Both versions of the hype are false: the mindfulness industry certainly doesn’t pass muster as dharma, though it just as
indubitably sources much of its stock-in-trade from Buddhism, as well as its claim to
draw on ancient wisdom. For its part, therapeutic mindfulness passes muster as
therapy, but not as Buddhism.

**The darker angels of mindfulness**

Beyond the realms of therapy, the mindfulness industry might, at first blush, be
passed off just another harmless fad, the likes of which we’ve seen before. It goes
hand-in-hand with two anodyne ‘nice little earners’ – the happiness industry and the
wellness industry. And in almost all respects it replicates the TM (transcendental
meditation) movement of the 1970s and 1980s, which also touted ancient eastern
wisdom and techniques to western moderns, promising the same benefits and
parading the same sort of frontman (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in TM’s case) who’d fed
on the honeydew and drunk the milk of paradise from the east. But who also boasted
a swag of ‘science-y’ western studies to back up his claims to herald a ‘revolutionary’
leap forward for human wellbeing.

TM came and went without anyone getting hurt. The same, alas, can’t be said for the
mindfulness industry. Its contribution to neoliberalism’s global regime of domination
and subordination precludes its innocence. That contribution works on the cultural,
organisational and operational levels.

**Cultural level**

*On the cultural level* its spiel hones in on western humanity’s ubiquitous **stress** – a
disorder that, oddly enough, only surfaced in the postwar era (p.136). And this stress
is due to the individual’s ‘thinking disease’ – dwelling on scary thoughts – that
mindfulness can cure. This story deflects attention from the contribution neoliberal
governance makes to **stress** in the form of *deliberately generated* socioeconomic
insecurity (by eroding welfare provisions, busting unions, creating a precarious
labour market and gig economy, for instance), as well as spiralling social injustice and
marginalisation in the way it distributes wealth, income and life chances. That’s an
impressive list of **stressors** right there!

Were we to take stress seriously, we’d mobilise to wind back the neoliberal
programme, restore socioeconomic security, and work towards social justice and
inclusion, rather than just retreat into the private panic rooms of our own minds à la McMIndfulness. So long as each individual takes personal responsible for her/his misery, neoliberalism gets off the hook, and people don’t challenge it.

Thirteen years ago, two Sydney dharma teachers cum psychotherapists, Geoff Dawson and Liz Turnbull, presciently published an article in the journal *Psychotherapy in Australia* entitled ‘Is mindfulness the new opiate of the masses? Critical reflections from a Buddhist perspective’. Their question has added poignancy today.

**Organisational level**

The lion’s share of the mindfulness industry’s four billion US Dollar annual turnover comes from its contributions to corporatised *organisation* in the form of ‘corporate mindfulness’. One of its spruikers defined it for Purser as ‘evidence-based forms of mental conditioning for resilience, wellbeing and sustainable high performance’ (p. 156). Large companies want to give their managers and employees the ‘gift’ of mindfulness to make them happier and more enthusiastic at work (*read*: more productive).

We’ve seen this ploy before too, as Purser reminds us. In the 1930s, the ‘human relations’ school of industrial relations sought to neutralise worker resentment towards the inhuman pace, drudgery and monotony of assembly lines by creating a sense of belonging, corporate identification, and human warmth on the job – thereby boosting productivity. Smart corporations should not only provide their workers with money wages, but also with ‘meaning’, the human relations folk preached.

Purser provides his readers with some laugh-out-loud moments in his discussion of corporate mindfulness, not least in the annals of its flagship, Google, one of the great money spinners today. Google bestowed an enormous salary and the official title of Jolly Good Fellow on software engineer Chade-Meng Tan to inculcate mindfulness in its workforce. He called his program ‘Search Inside Yourself’ (*SIY*), and co-founded the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute. He made so much money he could retire in 2015 aged 45. ‘My mission is to democratize enlightenment,’ Tan confided, ‘and bring one million people to stream entry before I die’ (p.176).
Operational level

The most notorious application of McMindfulness to operational matters occurs in the military, where its mission is to ‘optimise warrior performance’ in pre-deployment troops. Once again, an ominous Buddhist precedent from the 1930s and 1940s looms: the role some prominent Japanese Zen hierarchs played in debauching the dharma in order to psych up troops to commit mass murder, as described well in Brian Victoria’s books *Zen at war* and *Zen war stories*.

As is common in military discourse, a plethora of high-sounding euphemisms, such as ‘surgical strike’ and ‘collateral damage’ cover very nasty realities, and this is true of military mindfulness, which is all about ‘Mindfulness-Based Mental Fitness Training’ (MMFT) – the title of a widely used program in the US military. Its creator, Elizabeth Stanley, isn’t a gifted weasel-words smith though, and describes what she aspired to in these words (quoted on p.209):

> A true warrior must be able to still her body and mind and to call forth strength; exhibit endurance during harsh environmental conditions; have awareness of herself, others and the wider environment so she can make discerning choices; access compassion for herself, her compatriots, her adversary and the locals where she is deployed; and show self-control during provocation so that she doesn’t overreact. And yet, if the moment demands, she must have the capacity to kill, cleanly, without hesitation and without remorse.

On that note, I rest Purser’s case.

– This dharma talk was given to Kookaburra Sangha, Sydney, Australia on 7 October 2019. 
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