The McMindfulness Craze: The Shadow Side of the Mindfulness Revolution

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| Op-Ed |

In case we had any doubt after watching Anderson Cooper on "60 Minutes," mindfulness is the new yoga - and we are in the midst of a mindfulness revolution. It's been embraced by celebrities, business leaders, politicians and athletes; and recommended by doctors, clergy, psychotherapists and prison wardens. Apps and bestselling books touting the benefits of meditation proliferate. Google "mindfulness" and you'll get over 24 million hits.

It's not surprising that with unbridled enthusiasm about mindfulness come exaggerated claims and problems that are eclipsed. Jon Kabat-Zinn, one of the architects of the mindfulness revolution, claims mindfulness "has the potential to ignite a universal or global renaissance that . . . would put even the European and Italian Renaissance into the shade . . . [and] that may actually be the only promise the species and the planet have for making it through the next couple hundred years."

Backlash was inevitable. Critics are beginning to highlight the shaky foundations of the scientific claims of meditation's seemingly miraculous efficacy. After reviewing 18,000 scientific articles on meditation, the Association for Health and Research Quality at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), a governmental organization that manages standards of research, declared in 2007 that future studies must be "more rigorous." In other words, the scientific evidence for the efficacy of meditation has been overstated and does not support the claims from evangelists of mindfulness about its benefits.

Buddhists have also pushed back, arguing that the mindfulness vogue has divorced meditation from its grounding in traditional Buddhist teachings.

But focusing on these problems with the McMindfulness craze obscures a more profound one - meditation neglects meaning. This not only opens the door to grave dangers, but also compromises meditation's radical potential.

I'm both a psychoanalyst and a long-time student - and now a teacher - of meditation. Over the years, I've witnessed the capacity of meditation to increase awareness, deepen compassion and cultivate wisdom. This is an immense gift for Western culture in general and psychotherapy in particular. But I've also seen how students and teachers of meditation alike grapple with unresolved emotional and interpersonal conflicts that meditation by itself sometimes doesn't touch, and in some cases hides.

The research of Jack Kornfield, a psychologist and one of the United States' most beloved Buddhist teachers, who interviewed nearly a hundred Buddhist teachers from a variety of traditions, supports this. He discovered that a significant number used psychotherapy to deal with psychological issues that meditation could not resolve. "Even the best meditators have old wounds to heal," Kornfield wrote in *Bringing the Dharma Home: Awakening Right Where You Are.* What he noticed in other Buddhist teachers, himself and his students, in over 40 years of teaching and practice, was that "meditation practice doesn't 'do it all.'" While wonderful,
it often left untouched childhood wounds, unconscious fears, loneliness, poor self-care, troubles at work, and difficulties handling feelings and intimate relationships.

Meditation can transform our lives in powerful ways. But even after years of meditating, we may still be saddled with many of the same conflicts and inhibitions that plagued us before we began meditating. We may still be attracted to what is not good for us. We may still not have compassion for ourselves. We may still fear intimacy.

One explanation for this is that we are to blame. If only we would increase our dedication to meditation, learn to focus, and overcome our personal inadequacies, then perhaps we could change those things about ourselves that disturb us. Could this self-blaming explanation have reinforced the sense of inferiority that may have brought us to meditate in the first place - a troubling irony that perhaps too few Buddhists may contemplate?

A more accurate explanation for why meditators remain trapped within the same psychological conflicts after years of dedicated practice is that Buddhist meditation, like all techniques, is a tool that arose in particular contexts designed to handle specific challenges and not other ones. "I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering," the Buddha is reputed to have said. Buddhist meditation was the technique the Buddha developed to handle the existential suffering he encountered when he escaped from his sheltered life within the palace compound in his mid-20s and witnessed, for the first time, old age, suffering and death. Profoundly distressed, even haunted, by the reality and inevitability of aging, misery and mortality, he abandoned his wife and child and initiated a spiritual quest that produced a set of teachings and practices whose central focus was eliminating the agonizing suffering that traumatized him.

We like to believe that the Buddha's teachings are timeless truths. Suffering seems like a universal aspect of the human condition, rather than a relic of a particular cultural or historical age. But anthropologists and cross-cultural psychologists teach us that there are fundamental differences as well as similarities in individuals and cultures. His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama was shocked to hear that Americans suffered from "self-directed contempt," as Daniel Goleman wrote in Healing Emotions: Conversations with the Dalai Lama on Mindfulness, Emotions, and Health. The Dalai Lama told a group of US scientists and mental health professionals that this experience was absent from Tibetan culture.

We believe, without sufficient evidence, that mindfulness is good for everything from stress to sleep. And we ignore that it originated in a particular sociocultural context very different than our own - 5th century BCE India - with purposes often at odds with the way most people in the contemporary world use it. No one seems to ask whether meditation techniques designed to eliminate the misery of monks in ancient India would be wholly sufficient for cognitively oversaturated lay people in the West in the 21st century who want to raise self-esteem, heal emotional traumas or be more productive in a frenzied world.

Meditation can lessen distractedness, quiet the inner pandemonium, reduce self-criticism and cultivate the capacity to tolerate a greater range of feelings. But emotions such as greed and hatred are viewed in some meditative traditions, such as classical Buddhism, as "defilements" and obstacles that interfere with experiencing a deeper reality. Meditators often try to quiet their minds so as to transcend or get rid of upsetting thoughts and feelings, rather than learn what they might teach us. Peter, a long-term practitioner of Buddhist meditation, was raised by highly critical, perfectionist
parents, who pushed him to be the sort of person they needed him to be. He felt essentially unloved for who he actually was, yet highly critical of himself. When he first discovered Buddhist teachings on "purifying" the mind of "defilements," he felt right at home. Some years later in psychoanalysis, he realized that the whole project of purification created an unconscious judgment and aversion toward parts of himself that needed to be embraced, explored and understood - not eliminated.

At the first meditation retreat that I ever attended, in the late 1970s, I asked one of the teachers in an interview what to do with the wealth of unconscious perceptions and insights that arose during my meditations. "Don't do anything," he advised me, "just let go of it." I later learned this was a central dimension of the Buddhist method. This can be tremendously useful advice. Most people spend an inordinate amount of time obsessing about the past and fearfully anticipating the future. Letting go has value when someone is hyper-vigilant and over controlled, or caught in obsessive thinking or excessive worrying. But there can be negative consequences when we "let go" of experience.

A well-known writer on meditation told me some years ago that after his divorce, meditation helped him anesthetize his pain and grief. Concentrating his mind during meditation kept his loss and sadness at bay, which he recognized unnecessarily prolonged the mourning process; because he never grieved his loss, it took longer to get over it.

If the way meditation is ordinarily practiced can lead to numbing detachment and self-avoidance, what would a meditation that valued self-engagement and self-discovery look like?

Emancipatory meditation - which involves intimacy with oneself - is an extraordinarily vital and alive activity in which one attends to whatever one is experiencing without any preconceived conclusions about it and without trying to get rid of it. To return to the example of the meditator who was undergoing a painful divorce: In emancipatory meditation, he would be more interested in truly experiencing and learning from his sadness, loneliness and fear, rather than anesthetizing himself or getting rid of his feelings by prematurely detaching from them.

We need to investigate the content and meaning of what we become aware of in meditation instead of attempting to transcend it or reduce it to what we already believe based on Buddhism, psychotherapy or any doctrine. Practicing meditation in an emancipatory way could be a powerful ally in our efforts in the 21st century to live with greater awareness and sanity, intimacy and passion.

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