Meditations on Mindfulness:
Cultivating Selves in and Beyond Neoliberalism

by

Kate Nicolette Gilbert
Class of 2018

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Anthropology

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2018
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prologue: Slowing-Down</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situating Meditation: An Introduction</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.  Marketing Mindfulness and Meditating to Cope</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Finding and Losing the Self</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue: Moving Forward</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

Sending gratitude to the staff of Inward Bound Mindfulness Education, for introducing me to meditation and supporting me through the early stages of my practice.

To Professor Anu Sharma, my advisor, thank you for your unconditional support through this process, for trusting in my commitment to the project, and for your inspiring intellect and abundant ideas.

To the Anthropology Department, both professors and students, for opening my mind and always providing a supportive community of learning. And to Professor Rosario, for introducing me to J.K-Gibson-Graham and practices of radical self-making.

To my readers, Professor Weiss and Professor Quijada. Thank you for agreeing to read and critique my work. My experiences in both of your classes have been central to crafting this thesis.

To Professor Sigalow for sharing your work on Jewish-Buddhism.

To Sarah, for being a source of endless support and humor. I could not imagine a better friend in the Anthropology Department.

To Alexis, Eva, and Joe, for taking the time to read my work and provide thoughtful feedback. Your honesty and generosity has meant so much to me.

To Emmye, for so many wonderful conversations, and for your patience. I look forward to working together in the future.

To my family, thank you for being there, always.

To the fellows at Urban Adamah. I love you all. May you all be happy and free.
My own photographs from the retreat center in Ojai, California, 2013.
Stop. Sit down. Become aware of your breathing. Let go into full acceptance of the present moment.

-Jon Kabat-Zinn
Prologue: Slowing-Down

As I arrived in Ojai, California, after a six-hour drive south from San Francisco, the uneasy feeling that had been building throughout my journey turned to dread. Why had I come here? I could just turn around and drive straight back to San Francisco and spend a comfortable week at home. When I walked over to the registration desk, I was asked to give up my phone. The air in Ojai was hot and dry, exacerbating a nervous sweat as I unpacked my things in a canvas tent and reluctantly joined a group of teenagers to mingle before we entered into retreat mode – a way of life that I would grow accustomed to during the course of that week. I had not come to the meditation retreat with the intention of making friends. I anticipated that it would be a fairly isolating and inwardly-focused experience, since I knew meditation primarily through media portrayals of Buddhist monks sitting alone in the lotus position. It was jarring to be immediately thrown into a social situation. I was preoccupied with how I looked, dressed casually in yoga pants and a t-shirt while standing next to a bunch of LA scene kids with neon hair, Dr. Martens and attitude.

The facilitators gave us a brief orientation, and soon after we moved to an outdoor kitchen and seating area for dinner. We began our evening meal with a gratitude practice, singing along with two middle-aged women who donned loosely-fitted earth-toned dresses and wore their graying hair long. These women would prepare us fresh, organic, vegetarian food for the duration of the retreat. We started eating in silence, which gave me a moment to pause and reflect on the beauty of the meal, full of delicious vegetables. I was surprised at how satisfied I was by the food. By the time the bell rang, demarcating the end of the silent eating period, I felt at ease and ready to converse with
the people seated around me. Mere hours earlier, I had been nervous, self-conscious, and judgmental. Now I was pleasantly surprised by my peers’ openness and curiosity, relieved by their friendliness. I knew that I had come to the right place.

Colloquially called IBME, Inward Bound Mindfulness Education is a non-profit organization that leads meditation retreats for teenagers and young adults. I had decided to join their retreat on a whim after a representative of the organization came to my high school to promote their programs. Rather than showing the usual, monotonous PowerPoint, he had asked our entire high school to sit in silence for one minute. I was struck by the way that brief practice transformed both my own mental state and the feeling of the entire theater, filled to the brim with antsy teenagers. It felt as though a wave of calm had rushed over all of us. I remember opening my eyes and smiling. I instantly felt more relaxed and conscious of my body, of my breathing in particular. That afternoon, when I returned home from school, I researched IBME online. I asked my parents for permission to attend a retreat that summer.

Over the course of the five retreat days, I was provided with an in-depth introduction to meditation. Entering into retreat mode meant agreeing to five precepts, tenets of conduct that were central to creating a comfortable community of practice: to protect life, to speak truthfully and kindly, to take only what is offered, to abstain from drugs and alcohol, and to remain celibate. We meditated for 4-5 hours daily. By the final day, I was able to sit for many consecutive 30-minute periods uninterrupted. I had delved into the depths of my mind, uncovering glimpses and memories that had remained unperturbed for years. The practice of turning inward to observe the functioning of my own mind enabled me to become better attuned to my regular thought-processes. Whereas these processes had become normalized, and even
unconscious, over time, when I began practicing meditation I started to realize which ideas I thought about the most and how I thought about them.

At one point during the retreat, a teacher mentioned the word “equanimity,” defined roughly as mental calmness and composure, even amidst a difficult situation. This word stuck with me as a quality to strive for. Equanimity describes the soothing capacity of meditation practice, which induces an evenness of temper. There is power in the ability to pause, think, feel, and then react. Over the course of the retreat, many of the instructors reiterated how fortunate we were to be getting an education in mindfulness at such a young age. Without a solid grounding in their personal experiences, I would have doubted these claims. However, I found my guarded skepticism falling away as I listened to my teachers. Some reflected on past experiences, situations where they had grown angry and lashed out immediately. Had they taken a moment to stop and gather themselves, they may have caused less harm to the people they came into contact with. A consistent meditation practice had helped these teachers cultivate equanimity. Those that spoke about their previous experiences expressed that, had they began practicing meditation earlier on, they could have made past choices more thoughtfully.

Mindfulness meditation can be understood as a form of what is referred to as positive psychology in Western medicine. Meditation practice focuses on shifting the internal workings of one’s brain and body, rather than attempting to alter external conditions. Positive psychology maintains that individuals should accept their current conditions and make peace with them (Binkley 2011, 378). This type of approach is often viewed as a way to empower individuals who may lack control over their external circumstances. As a teenager, I found comfort in this approach, since many of my life
circumstances felt out of my control. I was in close proximity to people struggling with mental health problems and was afraid of losing touch with my own mind and emotions. In essence, the equanimity cultivated through meditation practice enables peacemaking between an individual and the world.

Prior to beginning my meditation practice, I had a tendency to make harsh judgements about myself and the people around me and was convinced that these habits were fundamental aspects of my personality. However, as I began meditating more consistently, even over the period of a few days, I started to notice when I was having certain kinds of judgmental thoughts. I was in the habit of pointing out flaws in other people’s thinking, rather than giving them the chance to explain themselves and trying to understand their perspective. Now, I felt a growing sense of spaciousness between thinking and speaking. The teachers at IBME guided us to explore the relationship between our thinking mind and our modes of expression. They helped me realize that it was possible to think through my ideas more carefully before blurting them out. Through my practice, I was granted time to determine whether my thoughts were worth articulating. This made communication much easier, and I began to feel like my speech was truer to my actual self, rather than to the snap judgements that I was accustomed to expressing, and often regretting a few moments later.

As I, and other teenagers at IBME, had the opportunity to practice this inward turn, we were also given the chance to shift outwards and be in community with one another. There was something especially magical about our twice-daily small group meetings, which occurred for the duration of the retreat. During those sessions, I felt deeply connected to my peers in a way I had not before. I understood myself as trusting and caring in ways that were new and beautiful. In some respect, my interactions with
my small group felt like a fresh start, where I had the chance to test out my renewed communication skills with a clean slate. I bared my soul to members of my small group in an activity called “hot seat,” which involved answering a series of deeply personal questions. Not only was I coming into our conversations with a freshness, but my peers were also invested in creating a supportive community of care. In that context, I felt totally open, loved, and accepting. I had grown to know myself better, and as a result, I was able to connect with others, and to lose my ego, anxieties and judgments – aspects of my “self” – in the process. Meditation practice is not only about focusing on one’s own mental state, but also about tuning-in, mindfully, to understand how the self functions in social interactions. There is power in this kind of reflexive practice, particularly when it is used to generate shifts in relationality.

Whereas I had decided to attend the retreat on my own terms, many of my peers had been recommended to attend by their parents or therapists. Some individuals had to leave early, oftentimes because they found the meditation practice too intense. A retreat setting is meant to be disciplinary. Of course, meditation is an inherently disciplinary practice, both mentally and physically. It requires an immense amount of focus to maintain a seated posture for extended periods of time; and inaction is not an easy task, especially for young people. Therefore, meditation practice can feel frustrating, confining, or even impossible. Retreat facilitators were kind and supportive to participants who were struggling, and there was no explicit pressure to remain on retreat. In fact, most participants encountered some sort of road block during the course of their retreat, myself included. During one meditation session I burst into tears and could not stop crying for a couple hours, utterly distraught as repressed memories flooded my mind. However, with the help of a facilitator, I was able to calm down and continue
meditating the next morning, having felt opened and ultimately strengthened by the experience.

Most participants experienced the retreats positively, even if they encountered moments of distress. While maintaining mental and physical stillness can feel daunting, the discipline of meditation can ultimately be liberatory. To be granted the chance to pause, observe, and reflect is a blessing. The practice enables a spaciousness that would not be possible without eliminating mental and physical movement. Mental and physical actions allow us to perform our daily lives, but they can also serve to distract from the most basic elements of our human experience.

By the end of the retreat, I was certain that meditation would be central to my life. During the closing ritual, the retreat’s facilitators warned us that our transition back into the real world might prove difficult. Meditating for many hours over consecutive days had opened us, not only to our internal experiences, but also rendered us more sensitive to external circumstances.

Perhaps retreat mode can be best characterized by what it is not. Whereas, during the beginning of my week in Ojai, the transition into a slower way of life felt gradual, shifting out of it was abrupt. Driving up Highway 1 back towards San Francisco, I was agitated by aggressive drivers. Though my typical pre-retreat response would be to meet their road-rage with an equally aggressive reaction, I could no longer muster that sentiment. In the coming days, post-retreat, I felt myself more often on the brink of tears, shocked by the sound of loud voices, by any blatant harshness.

Simple habits that I had previously not questioned took on more weight. Upon returning home, my mom surprised me with a prosciutto panini. The smell of the hot meat, melting cheese and oily bread nauseated me. When I bit in, all I could think about
was the pig that had been killed for that sandwich. I could not bring myself to eat more. For a kid whose favorite meal was a rare piece of meat, blood still oozing, vegetarianism had never seemed so appealing.

Part of me wanted to return back to the serenity and warmth of the retreat setting, even though I had felt ready to leave it by the end. However, as time passed, I was able to integrate what I had learned into my life. I was more attuned to the inner-workings of my body, better able to identify the physical sensations that corresponded to a particular emotion, and cognizant of a negative inner-dialogue. I recognized the possibility for emotional and behavioral shifts, and felt a greater capacity for patience, compassion and care for myself and others.

Curiously, my experiences with IBME were the subject of research for multiple academics, who wanted to explore the effects of the retreats on teenagers’ well-being. One such study, in which I participated, describes the focus of IBME retreats as promoting, “the cultivation of mindfulness, loving-kindness, and other positive mental capacities (e.g., self-compassion, gratitude)” (Galla 2016, 207). I felt, wholeheartedly, that I had in fact achieved these objectives during my retreat. However, because I had not even recognized these principles as intentions from the outset, they seemed closer to a byproduct of a novel experience, rather than objectives checked-off on a list. I viewed these emotional shifts as being perhaps the most valuable outcome of that initial retreat, and likely the determining factor in my continuation of a meditation practice. Many of my peers also expressed a renewed capacity for interpersonal connection, and the relationships we developed on retreat were deep. Though most of us did not live in physical proximity, making it difficult to keep in regular contact afterwards, just knowing that those kinds of relationships were possible was enough to sustain me. Our care for
each other, cultivated over such a short period of time, provided me with a restored sense of compassion and optimism.

Furthermore, this type of sociality and openness was not relegated to an intensive retreat setting. After my second IBME retreat, in which I participated during the following summer, I began attending the Teen Sangha at the East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC) in Oakland, California. At those sessions, we also formed relationships that extended beyond the meditation cushion, and we developed a social framework for our practice. There, I felt better able to articulate my experience of practice and to get feedback from others about how I could strengthen my meditation experience. At both IBME and EBMC, I was not only committed to deepening my own practice, but also to supporting my peers in their respective journeys.

These inward and outward turns, therefore, were inextricably linked and co-constitutive of one another. My first experiences with meditation taught me about integrating practice with community. I learned how mindfulness could produce a transformed sociality. These initial experiences with meditation prompted me to dig deeper into the mainstreaming of mindfulness – both its upsides and downsides. I realized that mindfulness could be the subject of serious study, not just a personal spiritual pursuit. I wanted to explore these complexities in writing, but from an anthropological rather than psychological perspective.
Bring the awareness to the sense of touch of the air as it passes in and passes out.
- Noah Levine
Situating Meditation: An Introduction

“Everybody is talking about mindfulness… but nobody seems to be able to explain clearly what the heck it really is. Ask people and you’ll hear, “Umm, be in the moment and SOMETHING SOMETHING, uh, meditation.”

-Eric Barker, TIME Magazine

Defining Mindfulness

Today, mindfulness is everywhere, and meditation is commonplace. CEOs can be found meditating at their desks, schoolchildren sit cross-legged on the floor observing their breath, and activists come together to meditate before heading out into the streets to protest. In this thesis, I explore mindfulness meditation as a popular movement in the contemporary United States. Mindfulness holds multiple potentials: the practice can support the reproduction of the self-helping neoliberal subject, but it can also serve as a form of radical self-cultivation.

I have practiced mindfulness meditation for more than five years, and realize the sustained commitment of time, energy and focus it entails, and the tremendous potential it holds. And yet, I witness the recent surge of mindfulness with a dose of skepticism. I am supportive of more widespread access to mindfulness teachings, which long remained confined to small sub-cultures and unattainable for most Americans. But, over the last several years, I have observed a marked shift in the way mindfulness is presented. The widespread mainstream version that is advertised today is quick and easy, palatable for the average American consumer. I cannot help but wonder if something has been lost in this process of dispersion and dilution.
I was initially drawn to meditation because I noticed that when I meditated regularly, I felt happier, more in touch with my emotional state, and better able to act thoughtfully and intentionally in social settings. While I still recognize these benefits, and continue to sustain a practice, I have grown increasingly wary of the way mindfulness is advertised, commodified and corporatized in the US today. Mindfulness may leave me feeling spiritually fulfilled, but my academic brain questions the way this practice is being implemented currently. I reject the notion that simply opting to meditate is a radical act, but I do believe that meditation maintains the potential to be politically transformative. Unfortunately, the recent corporatization of mindfulness has rendered this transformative potential muddled, if not opaque. My goal in this thesis is to bring this potential back into focus, while providing a critique of the neoliberal aspects of mainstream meditation practices.

When I first learned about mindfulness as a high school student, meditation was still a relatively niche category at the national scale, slowly gaining popularity. With the exception of a few kids with off-beat hippie parents, few of my peers had been exposed to mindfulness, and when I told people that I was interested in meditation, they typically responded with a confused look. However, as I progressed through college at Wesleyan, mindfulness became more commonplace. On weekend trips to New York City, I noticed billboards in subway cars advertising the meditation app Headspace, termed “a gym membership for your mind,” which featured cross-legged meditation practitioners smiling contentedly. MNDFL, a boutique meditation studio which now has multiple locations, opened in Greenwich Village, mirroring the earlier trend in yoga studios. The word “mindful” had entered the media, and soon enough slipped into colloquial language. Suddenly, eating, conversing, even exercising, could all be done mindfully.
So then, what is mindfulness? One of my informants, Emmye Vernet, a young woman who has been practicing mindfulness for a few years, confessed that:

when someone says “mindfulness” to me, I don’t even know what they’re talking about. Are they talking about coloring a mandala or…? The word mindfulness: “remembering and coming back to the present” [originates] in a set of ethics, morality, and philosophy, which is much broader than just feeling good for one second.

Emmye pointed to the ambiguity that has accompanied the surge in corporatized mindfulness, which has dislocated the word from a Buddhist worldview and reapplied it to numerous contexts, without clear delineation or boundaries. Today, anyone can enter a bookstore and buy a copy of the bestseller, *The Mindfulness Coloring Book: Anti-Stress Art Therapy for Busy People*; but how is sitting down to color fastidiously with crayons the same thing as seated meditation? Can they be equated?

For the sake of clarity, I will work primarily with Thich Nhat Hanh’s and Jon Kabat-Zinn’s definitions of mindfulness. Their teachings represent the roots of a movement that has spread and diversified over time. Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist, understands mindfulness to be “the continuous awareness of our bodies, emotions, and thoughts” (Nhat Hanh 2013, 11). Nhat Hanh explains:

Mindfulness is the energy of being aware and awake to the present moment. It is the continuous practice of touching life deeply in every moment of daily life. To be mindful is to be truly alive, present and at one with those around you and with what you are doing [Plum Village 2018].

Here, Nhat Hanh expresses that mindfulness pervades all facets of our life. For him, seated meditation is “like returning home to give full attention to and care for our self” (Plum Village 2018). This is the core of mindfulness practice, the practice that allows us to become most aware of our interior thoughts and emotions.

Kabat-Zinn was a student of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and is regarded by many teachers as a key leader in the movement; his creation of Mindfulness Based Stress
Reduction (MBSR) in the 1970s was central to the secularization of meditation. In essence, MSBR, was a “re-tailoring of meditation as a nonsectarian, universal practice, divorced from its Buddhist-roots and linked instead to stress reduction and management” (Sigalow 2017, 104). According to Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness is “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn 1994, 4). Kabat-Zinn understands seated meditation to be the practice that cultivates mindfulness. When we let the mind be, and observe its functioning in the present moment, we are able to shift our relationship to our thoughts and emotions.

The key difference between Nhat Hanh and Kabat-Zinn lies in their respective relationships to Buddhism. Whereas Nhat Hanh identifies as a Buddhist monk, Kabat-Zinn, a former molecular biologist, is not Buddhist. This does not mean Kabat-Zinn’s teachings are not derived from Buddhism, but rather that he has not labeled them as such. This shift between the ideas of Nhat Hanh – Vietnamese teacher – and Kabat-Zinn – American student – is emblematic of the passage of mindfulness from East to West. As Buddhist teachings have been translated cross-culturally, some elements have been, as the saying goes, lost. However, “lost” is a judgement call; perhaps a more mindful expression would be “changed.” Historical meanings particular to time and place have been altered.

When he designed MSBR, Kabat-Zinn made a concerted effort to distance his teachings from Buddhism in order to render them more appealing to an American audience. He "intentionally downplayed any connection between mindfulness and Buddhism” (Sigalow 2017, 103) so as not to alienate people who would see it as “Buddhist, ‘New Age,’ ‘Eastern Mysticism’ or just plain ‘flakey’” (Kabat-Zinn 2011, 282).

---

1 See Heffernan 2015.
Kabat-Zinn was instrumental in shifting meditation practice in the US toward stress management (Sigalow 2017). He wanted to render mindfulness teachings widely accessible, so that even Americans who were skeptical of religion would be able to benefit from meditation practice. Of course, one could also argue that this served his interest in securing capital, since a more accessible version of mindfulness made his teachings more marketable. Many contemporary mindfulness teachings have been based in Kabat-Zinn’s secularized ideas.

While meditative practices are common to nearly all religious traditions, the link between mindfulness and Buddhism cannot be denied. That being said, the word “mindfulness” itself has no direct correlate in Buddhist texts, and is instead a product of rough translation. Mindfulness attempts to describe the Buddhist concept of sati, which means “memory of the present” and is the first of seven factors in the path to enlightenment (Heffernan 2015). This phrase, “memory of the present,” is a reminder that there can be spaciousness between our thoughts and actions, because it implies that even our experience of the present moment is multi-layered. When we recognize this complexity, then we can become attuned to preexisting spaciousness.

In recent years, the word “meditation” has nearly disappeared from popular mindfulness discourses. “The word ‘meditation,’ with all of its New Age and Orientalist baggage, has been dropped in favor of ‘mindfulness,’ the prevailing lingo among scientists and a growing cadre of meditation teachers” (Salguero 2014). Mindfulness has no religious undertones and can be easily incorporated into self-help discourses. People

---

2 In the late 19th century, a British magistrate by the name of Thomas William Rhys Davids was the first person to translate the Buddhist concept of sati into “mindfulness” or “attention” (Heffernan 2015).
who are exposed to mindfulness may have vague notions of its Buddhist roots, but all too often this history is erased.

Despite the marketing of mindfulness as a secular practice, however, it is practiced in religious settings as well. For example, many American Jews have taken up mindfulness and integrated it with their own religious traditions. Jewish-Buddhist meditation teachers, such as Green Gulch’s founder, Zen priest Norman Fischer, understood that Buddhist practices could add depth and dimension to existing Jewish practices, and could ultimately serve as a form of “spiritual renewal” for Jewish communities (Sigalow 2017, 114).

I comprehend these phenomena through Buddhist scholar Jeff Wilson’s idea of “mystification” (Wilson 2014), which involves the obscuring of the roots of mindfulness practice (Sigalow 2017, 89). This process can also be understood through the lens of cultural appropriation, which is valuable, but also tricky, because when Buddhism spread from the Indian subcontinent across the globe, it changed significantly as it adapted to new cultural contexts (Zahn 2016). Nonetheless, much of the information I have encountered on Buddhism in the US has been clouded by Orientalist thinking. To use Edward Said’s terms, Buddhism here is a Western construction – a practice based in a particular imagination of the East “as a place of pure human culture with no necessary evil in the society” (Nagar 2013, 4).

Ironically, although meditation is commodified in the US today, it is still presented as a purer alternative to modern society, an antidote to modern evils used to “defeat the materialism and mechanism of Occidental culture” (Said 1978, 115). That being said, my project is not about comparing “pure” meditation to a corporatized version. To define a “pure” Buddhism would merely serve to reproduce Orientalist
logics, which define Eastern traditions, rendering them “charmingly exotic” but also “deficient in … rationality and rigor” (Wright 2017). Rather, I intend to explore the complex, even divergent manifestations of a lineage and practice in the contemporary US. In the same way that meditation is a vastly different practice when used for radical self-making versus self-help, it also exists differently in the US than in other political geographies.

**Literature**

With the understanding that I cannot possibly synthesize Buddhist ideology in my work, I have still aimed to incorporate sources from a range of temporal and physical locations. In my research I have drawn on three primary bodies of work: writing on mindfulness practice; critical histories of neoliberalism; and scholarship on social change that reimagines alternatives to capitalism. My work brings ethnographic depth into studies of mindfulness, most of which approach the subject through the lens of psychology. It also puts into conversation academic critiques of neoliberalism with radical imaginations of change, and further bridges these ideas with popular texts on mindfulness. I write with the understanding that mindfulness practices, as a mode of inciting personal transformations, are ways of constructing new versions of people that are, *political* – not only do they clash with dominant versions of subjectivity but they also sustain new ways of being in the world, including the transformation of interpersonal relationships, human/nonhuman couplings and supporting particular social/political projects [Carvalho 2013, 29].

Though mindfulness is practiced on an individual level, its impacts are linked to a social body – and, in that, it is or can be “political.” In order to distinguish a counterhegemonic
politics from a mainstream one, I use the term “radical,” which I take to imply a politics that contests oppression and marginalization.

The rising popularity of mindfulness has been met with a recent surge of writing on the subject. Psychologists have aimed to prove the benefits of mindfulness through studies that claim to empirically evaluate practitioners’ experiences. Although important, I view these studies as problematic, since they encourage us to view mindfulness as a consumable solution, rather than as a way-of-being. Few of these studies critically evaluate mindfulness as a technique of neoliberal governance, that produces individuals suited to the capitalist market. Anthropologists and critical theorists (Falcone 2010; Cook 2016; Reveley 2016) have engaged in meta-critiques of this type of psychological research, wherein experts – in this case psychologists – reify the claims of the self-help industry rather than interrogating it as part of a broader project of discipline, regulation, and government (Rose 1999).

In addition to academic scholarship on meditation, I also draw on literature aimed at the broader public. Thich Nhat Hanh, Lama Rod Owens and Noah Levine are contemporary meditation teachers whose ideas have contributed to the development of my own mindfulness practice. Though Nhat Hanh is Vietnamese, and does most of his work in Vietnam, his ideas have been influential in the US. Owens and Levine are both American-born and came to Buddhism in their adult lives. I have incorporated their work into my writing in attempt to deepen my ethnographic context and analysis.

\[3\] Titles of recent studies include: “What are the benefits of mindfulness? A practice review of psychotherapy-related research,” “Meta-analytic evidence for effects of mindfulness training on dimensions of self-reported dispositional mindfulness” and “The impact of mindfulness on emotion dysregulation and psychophysiological reactivity under emotional provocation.”
I engage with academic critiques of neoliberalism in order to situate meditation as a self-help technique in Chapter 1. Neoliberalism is the currently dominant political economic formation that locates the market as the center of society and reorients politics, individuality, and social relations in that direction (Harvey 2005; Brown 2015). Consumption is the primary means by which individuals construct their identities and exercise their rights as liberal subjects (Grewal 2005); political freedom, then, gets routed through economic action and freedom. Individuals are expected to cultivate appropriate practices of self-governance, self-esteem and empowerment in order to access the market and not rely on state welfare (Cruikshank 1996; Sharma 2008). Meditation is now sold as one such technique of self-improvement.

However, mindfulness practices can also resist neoliberal self-help and contribute to radical self-making that challenges neoliberal individualization. Using J.K. Gibson-Graham as a point of entry, I frame my exploration of radical alternatives to self-making through the work of radical activists and feminists (Hanisch 1969; Sandoval 2000; Nash 2011) who have brought together the self and the social, and the personal and political in projects of transformation. I bring in writings about Gandhi, for example, for whom personal bodily practices, such as fasting, were central to his political praxis. Gandhi engaged in a critique of modern consumption habits and transcended his individual experience (Alter 2000); this body served as a site of political transformation (Sharma 2014). Other projects of social change, like feminism, the Black Panthers and the Zapatistas have also centered the self and the personal in their strivings for change. Even as they link the individual and the social, they also refute the dominant capitalist idea of competitive individualism and offer different understandings of a collectively shaped and accountable selfhood. I use their ideas to contest mindfulness as merely a mode of
neoliberal governance and to point to the corporatized mindfulness as a co-optation of a practice that has the potential to incite social transformation. My hope is to explore the place of the meditative “self” in social transformation and the potential of meditation as a force of radical change.

Methodology

Because mindfulness is hard to avoid these days, during the course of my research, I encountered information in unexpected places, often when I was unprepared to take extensive field notes or conduct formal interviews. Therefore, as I have maintained the principles of ethnography in my work, I have extended the bounds of my research beyond a specific site. Furthermore, although I did not officially begin this project until my junior year of college, my involvement in meditation and thus research began prior to my college education, as I was already reading books on the topic, attending classes, and participating in retreats. Thus, my project rejects firm temporal bounds as well as physical ones.

For this thesis I performed long-term participant-observation at multiple field sites. Over the past year, specifically, I have conducted fieldwork as part of a fellowship at Urban Adamah (a Jewish nonprofit organization that prioritizes mindfulness practice in its mission to increase access to healthy food); at Mindfulness at Wesleyan (an on-campus group where I interned); at the Green Gulch Zen Center, as part of a work-exchange and through engaging in Buddhist practice. In most of these settings, I had no difficulty accessing information. As a young, white, Jewish woman, people were willing to talk to me, and often eager to share their experiences. I rarely appeared out-of-place at meditation retreats and talks, which tend to be populated primarily by white men and
secondarily by white women. Because American Jews have played a central role in bringing Buddhist meditation to the US, I often felt comforted by references to Judaism which resonated with my own experience growing up in a culturally Jewish family.

While in the field, I relied on participant-observation and interview techniques. I conducted seven structured interviews and spoke with upwards of twenty-five people in unstructured conversation. In order to protect the identities of some of my informants, I have used pseudonyms in place of their real names. In certain cases, with their permission, I have used my informants’ full names, in order to give them proper credit for their ideas. I have also drawn on publicly available interviews with meditation practitioners. This approach allowed me to access a broader range of perspectives on mindfulness, including the ideas of prominent teachers who I would otherwise not have access to.

In addition to conducting research, I have also served as a research subject. My experiences on retreat with IBME were included in the research of multiple academics who wanted to explore the effects of the retreats on teenagers’ well-being, as mentioned in the Preface.\(^4\) In my work as the Mindfulness Intern at Wesleyan I was interviewed by fellow student, Shoko Yamada, as part of her project for “Ethnography of Religion.” Initially, when mindfulness was presented to me as something exceptional and worth studying, I was skeptical of its worth. It seemed to me to be yet another empty promise of improved health, which, of course, could be verified by a psychological study performed under specific conditions. However, my own personal experiences were

\(^4\) Brian M. Galla, “Within-Person Changes in Mindfulness and Self-Compassion Predict Enhanced Emotional Well-Being in Healthy, But Stressed Adolescents”; Susan Catherine Lockman, “A Qualitative Phenomenological Study of Young Adults’ Lived Experiences Related to Their Mindfulness Practice and How Their Practice Informed Their Social and Emotional Skills.”
powerful enough to override these suspicions. To serve as a research subject, to be interviewed, and to read other scholars’ interpretation of my experiences with meditation gave me a compassionate eye in my own work; in the pages that follow, I try my best to honor my informants through my writing.

There is a fundamental tension between Buddhist modes of learning and those of the American education system, and this discrepancy has influenced my research. Modern Western common sense tells us that learning is about crossing a boundary. Once we have passed the threshold, we have obtained knowledge. In the US, learning is goal-oriented and focused on specific outcomes and skillsets. This understanding is demonstrated through educational structures, like standardized testing, which measure a successful learning experience by a student’s performance on a multiple-choice test. This model suggests that “once you’ve learned it you know it, and then you will always know it until you forget it (or maybe repress it)” (Sedgwick 2003, 167). Here, there is no reason for information to be mulled-over and repeatedly engaged. A fast-pace is prioritized in lieu of slow, deep learning. I view this as a failure of the American education system, especially its more recent neoliberal restructuring. No matter how much knowledge we may possess, if we do not know ourselves, and lack the ability to integrate concepts into lived experience, then what purpose does this knowledge have?

By contrast, Buddhist learning is a process that involves a repeated returning to the same ideas:

In Buddhist pedagogical thought … the apparent tautology of learning what you already know does not seem to constitute a paradox, nor an impasse, nor scandal. It is not even a problem. If anything, it is a deliberate and defining practice [Sedgwick 2003, 167].

Meditation, as a repeated practice of observing the self, can be understood as fundamental to a Buddhist model of learning. Practitioners engage in a pursuit of
spiritual wisdom and seek to uncover the truth of “the nature of mind … as not other than oneself” (168). Even while a practitioner may possess an intellectual understanding of this idea, it may take decades to realize it. Buddhist practice is “deliberate” and “defining” to this mode of learning, and physical form is of immense importance. It is the stillness of the body that permits certain understandings to arise, to come to the forefront of consciousness.

Anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis explores stillness as a vehicle for uncovering historical truths. She writes that “stillness is the moment when the buried, the discarded, and the forgotten escape to the social surface of awareness like life-supporting oxygen” (Seremetakis 1996, 12). In Buddhist thought, when we embrace stillness and observe our simplest everyday experiences, we cultivate wisdom about the world we inhabit. The self is privileged as a site of meaningful learning. Nothing in particular needs to be happening in order for us to learn. We must simply develop a deeper attunement to what already exists in our consciousness.

My education in Anthropology – albeit an unconventional one provided by activist-scholars who engaged us in critical histories of the discipline – challenged American pedagogic principles. As a student of Anthropology, I not only engaged in reading and writing exercises, but also performed fieldwork. In essence, I practiced Anthropology. Fieldwork requires the ethnographer to sit with and observe a field, just as meditation practitioners sit and watch their thoughts. As a participant observer, I have been prompted to abandon any notion of a desired end goal in my research. I have explored the intricacies of a certain social world. To try and manipulate the field and contrive particular results would constitute a failure on my part as ethnographer. I am not attempting to solve a problem in concrete terms. Of course, academic Anthropology
takes this observation a step further. As an ethnographer, I make sense of what I have observed, maintaining its lived complexity and shed light on particular aspects, without simplifying. I have integrated meditation instructions into my text as a provocation to the reader, in hopes of encouraging a more engaged form of learning. I encourage the reader to pause and practice meditation in order to become more familiar with the experiences that I discuss on a personal level.

What does it mean to meditate? My personal practice is simple. When I am meditating alone, I place my zafu (meditation cushion) on the floor, sit atop it with my legs crossed, set a timer, and close my eyes. Nothing specific happens when I meditate. Rather, I am just sitting. I like to start by focusing on my breath, tracing the flow of air in and out of my body, noticing the sensation as it passes through my nostrils, down my throat, and expands my lungs to reach my belly. As I continue to pay attention to these sensations, sometimes my mind quiets, and I feel a sense of calmness. However, often this peaceful feeling is merely momentary, and I lose sight of my breath as numerous thoughts bombard my mind. Rather than letting myself get absorbed in these thoughts, I try to observe them, then let them drift out of my mind like a cloud passing effortlessly through the sky.

Two words that are central to my description of meditation are “sit” and “practice,” both of which take on different meanings in my writing than they do in colloquial language. To sit in meditation is to place the body in an active, upright position, a physical structure which is conducive to mental focus. To practice is to engage consistently in meditation, yet to do so without an end goal or a given trajectory. To sit and practice is simply to sit and practice.
The word “meditation” has two primary meanings in the English language. The first signifies the action or practice of meditating, and the second denotes a discourse expressing thoughts on a given subject. In this thesis, I meditate – think profoundly and carefully – on meditation. I play with the idea of thinking “meditatively” when I engage in “deep, often reflexive, analytical thinking” (Falcone 2010, 404).

Because my own journey through mindfulness has been central to my research process, I have endeavored to write reflexively about my meditation practice. Throughout my writing, I have integrated vignettes that reflect my experiences as a meditation practitioner. Given that meditation is a deeply internal experience, writing field notes about my own practice was difficult. My attempts to articulate the actual, embodied experience of meditation proved mostly unsuccessful. While traditional fieldwork calls for participant-observation and the writing of field notes, realistically I could not perform either of these tasks while meditating. In my field notes, I was often inclined to evaluate the success of my practice, rather than focusing on the particularities of my meditative consciousness. I would evaluate my ability to control my thoughts and empty my mind, writing things like: could not focus during my sit today, mind was wandering. I fell into the habits of self-judgement and critique that are antithetical to the ethos of mindfulness meditation, which advocates non-judgmental attention and a detachment from specific ends.

My difficulty in rendering my mind-body experiences legible in writing reflects the problem of using my own memory to recall past perceptions of bygone sensations. Other anthropologists have struggled with this same tension between experience and writing. The field of sensory ethnography approaches research as a reflexive and experiential process, rather than as purely observational (Pink 2009). Sensory
ethnographers recognize that traditional anthropological methods cannot grasp “the most profound type of knowledge [which] is not spoken of at all and thus inaccessible to ethnographic observation or interview” (Bloch 1998, 46).

For the duration of the spring semester of my junior year, I remained fixated on the problem of written representation of meditative practice. I experimented with different writing methods. At one point, I sat on a zafu in the corner of my dorm room, practiced for a given amount of time, and then recorded myself speaking immediately after the timer went off.

To meditate, I must suspend all action and center my focus on my present moment experience.

**Attempting the seemingly unfeasible task that is writing about an entirely internal experience.** I record myself after meditating and reconstruct the dialogue with text.

**Perhaps speech will penetrate the barrier between my individual mental state and my writing.**

Thinking about the difficulty of writing

Commenting on the consistency of my practice

Describing the physical scene

Describing my physical body

Characterizing my mental state

My actual thoughts

While traditional fieldwork calls for participant-observation and the writing of field notes, realistically I cannot perform either of these tasks while meditating.

Um,

Well,

I was definitely thinking about what I would say in this recording while I was meditating, which I feel like, altered my practice a bit.

But,
I was also meditating for the first time since Monday…

I haven’t been practicing so consistently.

It’s bright in here right now.

Um, I noticed, when I first started sitting, that

my heart was beating really fast,

and I think, this morning has been kind of stressful.

I just feel like I have a lot of tasks to check-off right now, so my mind was kind of

drifting to, like,

what I was going to do today, and when to do certain things that I could do at different

parts of the day, and what work I’m going to get done,

so lots of planning thoughts.

And, I was trying to kind of distance myself from those, but they kept on coming back.

Um, I was also listening to the noise of the traffic outside, which, I think, sometimes, I

forget about, even though it’s really loud.

Whenever I meditate, the traffic noise seems to be really present, or whenever I meditate

in this room, my room, rather.

To engage in participant-observation within my own mental experience seems an existential impossibility.

I think this sit felt a little bit more settled.

It was the second fifteen-minute sit of this Friday morning period.

Um,

I sat facing towards the window, which was nice I think, and a little bit invigorating.

The first bit was very grounded feeling,
like all I could feel was my body, and my hands contacting my legs, and my feet on the floor, but everything was all one, and all the parts were kind of indistinguishable from one another.

Then I started kind of getting caught up in thoughts again.

Like, less so planning about the day, more like memories and reflecting on the past. I feel good though, now.

Like, definitely calmer than when I first sat, like half an hour ago.

It almost feels like no times has passed at all…

I cannot simultaneously sit, motionless, in a cross-legged position and write in my notebook.

So, I just finished my meditation early, because I wasn’t feeling like I could sit for longer…

But, I was thinking a lot about, like, what it actually feels like to meditate.

And,

it feels like I’m disembodied in some way, like, my hands just melt into my legs,

and the way – when my eyes are open – I conceive of my body, as having all of these distinct parts, and each part having its own sensations, all of those things…

That kind of fades away when I’m practicing meditation.

• • •

One psychologist, whose work interrogates non-Western understandings of the mind, understands our experience of consciousness as being rooted in five core components: the physical body, feelings, perception, volition, and sensory consciousness
(Karunamuni 2015). In our habitual experience, we not only analyze the world around us, but also our internal experiences, which can be understood as the “mind stream,” a continuously changing cycle of mental experience (5). In Buddhist meditation, “it is this mind stream itself that is extensively investigated and analyzed from a first-person perspective (5). Therefore, there is a certain distance between the sensations that arise in our body and our perceptions of those sensations. This is yet another displacement, which makes writing about embodied experience more challenging. Typically, we experience the past and the future as thoughts in the present moment. However, in meditation, we develop a more acute awareness of these temporal separations. We sit with the distance between our consciousness and the inner-workings of our mind and cultivate an awareness of this spaciousness.

When we meditate, we achieve deeper insight into the experience of consciousness and come to realize that all moments are impermanent (Karunamuni 2015). In daily life, I might grasp onto a particular emotion, like fear, and let it take over my entire mind-body experience. This could happen without conscious thought on my part and could feel automatic. However, when I sit in meditation and a thought enters my mind that conjures fear, I attempt to maintain a distance from it. I realize that the thought can pass through my mind without affecting me in a serious way. This is not to say that I ignore its existence, but rather than I notice its presence without allowing it to become all-consuming. In this way, I acknowledge the multiple layers of my mind-body experience, which are ever-changing, no matter how permanent they may feel at times. I write with attention to the complexity of the meditative experience while also recognizing limitations of the written word.
Structure

I have organized my thesis into two chapters. The first critiques corporatized mindfulness and the second explores the transformative potential of meditation practice. I follow an atypical two-chapter structure in order to examine the dialectical relationship between corporatized mindfulness as neoliberal strategy for self-improvement and mindfulness as a radical political practice. I examine the complex interplay between these two modes of meditation, while emphasizing their oppositions. These two chapters work together to illustrate the intricate web that constitutes the contemporary mindfulness movement.

In the first chapter, I show how corporatized mindfulness is used as a tool to bolster worker productivity and how this can enable thoughtlessness and complacency, and isolate practitioners without a supportive community. I use ethnographic vignettes drawn from Wesleyan, my personal experiences at Green Gulch, examples of popular media, including Oprah’s presence as a meditation guru, and interviews with practitioners to explore the potential pitfalls of a disengaged and commodified meditation practice. Finally, I look at the Mindful Life Project, a program that brings mindfulness to underserved public schools, to explore the tensions between mindfulness as a packaged, bureaucratized practice in institutional settings and its potential as a strategy of transformation.

In the second chapter, I delve fully into mindfulness as a potentially radical practice of self and social transformation. I integrate theories of affective politics and Buddhist ideas of the “no-self” to explore meditation as a practice that promotes interconnectedness and compassion that is quite opposed to capitalist individualism. I use ethnographic vignettes from Urban Adamah, excerpts from ongoing conversations
with Emmye Vernet, and the ideas of radical meditation teachers like Lama Rod Owens to form a connection between mindfulness and broader social change.
Listen to the sounds around you. Rather than trying to identify each one, just listen.

-Oprah
Marketing Mindfulness and Meditating to Cope

“I like to call it my morning dish meditation. As I’m unloading the dishwasher in the morning, putting each cup, plate, spoon in its place, I’m meditating. Maybe I’ll do a yoga pose here and there too. It’s my special moment. I look forward to it every day.”

-Aunt Roberta

Merely weeks before my thesis was due, I received a haunting email in my inbox with the subject line: “Have we gone mindfulness-mad?” By that point, I certainly felt like I had, given that all of my waking thoughts seemed to relate to meditation. The message was sent by LinkedIn, and it provided me with a link to an online forum, which urged viewers to respond to a prompt:

It’s not surprising that meditation apps are now a notable trend – it’s been a stressful year. The self-care apps cater to a variety of illnesses and ailments: Mend helps you get over relationship breakups; Calm is a mindfulness app; Moodnotes, a mood tracker; and Shine, a motivational service. Headspace is probably the most popular app right now – the company, founded in 2010 by a British-born Buddhist monk, started as a meditation-focused events startup. Today, the company counts 25 million users and has raised $75 million in venture funding. What’s your opinion: Do meditation apps really live up to the hype? Or have we gone mindfulness-mad? [LinkedIn 2018]

This post, which points to the plethora of mindfulness apps currently available in the marketplace, is geared towards professionals seeking career advancement. It urges us to question whether or not mindfulness is truly helpful, and if so, for what? Today, mindfulness is omnipresent, and its purported benefits seem to increase at an exponential rate. What recent advertisements for mindfulness have in common is their pronouncement of meditation as a tool of self-improvement. Meditation will make us better. Better workers, better friends, better lovers, better selves.
In this chapter, I explore neoliberal applications of mindfulness, which I call corporatized mindfulness, and maintain that we must be wary of these practices. I use the term “corporatized” to encompass a version of mindfulness that originated in corporate settings and has since been commodified for the general public. I begin by examining mindfulness as used in corporate settings to produce a more efficient workforce. This type of commodified mindfulness originated in the corporate realm but has pervaded society at large, as it has been popularized by self-help gurus, like Oprah. I use ethnographic vignettes from Wesleyan to explore how corporatized mindfulness has seeped into popular and institutional cultures more broadly. I end with a discussion of meditation at the Mindful Life Project, pointing to the dangers of a bureaucratization of meditation as well as to the moments of excess that remain open.

Framing Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a political economic ideology and set of practices that places economic logics at the center of society and ties personal and political freedom to the market. It locates individual liberty as the source of our collective well-being and prioritizes entrepreneurial freedom above all else (Harvey 2005), thus tying ideal citizenship to accessing the market as consumers and producers (Grewal 2005). Neoliberal ideas have brought economic logic to the center of democracy (Brown 2015). In the neoliberal US, rights and market relations are synthesized, and consumer choice, entrepreneurialism, and self-help are integral to a liberated subject.

Neoliberalism is a mode of government that reshapes the state and its relationship to individuals and citizens (Barry et al. 1996). In order to downsize government, neoliberalism “frees” individuals to hold themselves responsible for their
own welfare and social uplift, rather than depend on state welfare. Freedom, here, as Nikolas Rose (1999) clarifies, becomes a technique of neoliberal governance, through which the conduct of individuals is directed and disciplined. Rose uses the language of “responsibilization” to explain this shift towards self-governance.

Neoliberal governmentality not only places responsibility on individuals for their own well-being, but also promotes their psychological liberation as the key to social stability (Cruikshank 1996). Rather than targeting systemic issues, what Barbara Cruikshank calls the “self-esteem movement” locates widespread dissatisfaction with life in the individual. Within this framework, citizens who fail to empower themselves and raise their self-esteem are deemed problems. The self-esteem movement is at once politicized – because it is used as a technique to manage populations – and apolitical – as it denies that widespread inequality is a systemic problem and individualizes social problems.

I situate mindfulness within a neoliberal framework to caution against what may initially appear a benign technique of self-improvement. Corporatized mindfulness tells us to meditate for our own good; thus, when we choose to meditate we are also consenting to a form of self-governance. To opt-in to mindfulness is to empower ourselves, we are told, but this empowerment also aligns us with neoliberal values. As a disciplinary technique, mindfulness can be used to generate particular kinds of individual subjects who are more suited to success in neoliberal terms.

There are many ways in which corporatized mindfulness fits in with this neoliberal worldview. As a mainstream self-help technique, mindfulness locates transformation at the level of the individual (Rose 1999). The individual who chooses to practice mindfulness is, according to popular discourse, the one who chooses to live
productively, in all senses of the word. This individual is better apt to perform well in all realms of their life, most notably in the economic sphere. Mindfulness entered the corporate realm as a technology of the self that enabled workers to cultivate focus and thereby improve their efficiency in the workplace. In other words, it served to regulate the conduct of workers, making them economically useful and compliant, and ultimately more governable (Foucault 1975 and 1988). Mindfulness, as a biopolitical technique, serves what Foucault calls “the question of the government of oneself” or “the ritualization of the problem of personal conduct” (Foucault 2006, 131). Though mindfulness is applied as a disciplinary technique at the level of the individual, its widespread effects are also “massifying” (Foucault 1997, 242). A disciplinary technique like mindfulness serves the “reproduction of the skills of labour power” (Althusser 2006, 88). I use these ideas to frame mindfulness as a disciplinary technique under neoliberalism.

Mindfulness can be utilized in institutional settings as a tool to reform “abnormal” individuals and promote compliance. “Those who [are] to be civilized … have to achieve normality through working on themselves, controlling their impulses in their everyday conduct and habits,”⁵ (Rose 1999, 76) and mindfulness can be a perfect tool for achieving this. Mindfulness helps create individuals who are responsible subjects and who engage politically by governing themselves (Sharma 2008, 17). Within this schema, addressing poverty and other social ills becomes the job of individuals, rather than the state (18). Moreover, there exists an assumption that the transformation of individual selves, through empowerment, will inherently lead to the transformation of

---
⁵ Within the context of Anthropology, this claim is especially potent, because the discipline has a violent history of promoting scientific racism and colonialism.
society at large (17). For example, in the case of the Mindful Life Project, administrators in underserved public schools recognize mindfulness as a regulatory technique which instills discipline in students. Rather than addressing the roots of students’ restlessness, perhaps through therapeutic techniques, mindfulness can serve to placate them.

Even as we are told that success is attainable through self-improvement, the structural forces of neoliberal capitalism produce deep inequalities and make it impossible for the majority to obtain what only a small minority actually possesses. Whereas techniques of self-improvement are theoretically available to all, realistically the economy does not permit everyone’s advancement. Furthermore, success is narrowly defined in terms of the market (Cruikshank 1996). Therefore, this narrative of self-improvement creates a false sense of accessibility, another iteration of the American Dream that is only attainable for those who already possess economic and social capital.

In the US, capitalism seems to have taken the place of religion (Benjamin 1921); in our secular society, it feels like the world is ordered by economic rationalities (Martin 2014). This synthesis between religiosity and the market can be traced back to the rise of Protestantism. As social theorist Max Weber argues, the ethos of ascetic Protestantism – with its emphasis on calculated rationality and bureaucratic organization – promoted success in business, industry and skilled labor (Weber 1958). For the Protestants, the moral pursuit of economic gain was God’s calling, and labor was no longer a means of survival but a value of independent utility. The perpetuation of the capitalist system, therefore, was rendered a religious matter by the Protestants. Capitalism is pervasive not

---

6 “The gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ is widening … The rich are money-making machines. Today, the top mega wealthy - the top 1% - earn an average of $1.3 million a year. Meanwhile, the bottom 50% of the American population earned an average of $16,000 in pre-tax income in 1980. This hasn’t changed in over three decades” (Long 2016).
in spite of religion, but because of it: religion, conventionally a collective endeavor, underwent individualization during the Protestant revolution. Just as Protestantism prioritized the individual’s relationship with God by providing hard work as the means to salvation, in our current era individual success is achieved through personal perfection, which is defined in market terms.

Furthermore, in recent decades market metaphors have been used increasingly to explain American religious phenomena (Redden 2016). Spirituality has been rendered yet another category for personal choice, even as religious identities have also become increasingly "rooted in … family memories, ethnic pride, and cultural heritage" (Sigalow 2017, 124). Religion can now be understood as merely another marketplace where individuals seek fulfillment (Redden 2016). New Age – which can be understood in broad strokes as a movement characterized by alternative approaches to traditional Western culture, with an interest in spirituality – has been qualified as a “spiritual supermarket” because of the pick-and-choose approach (232). Though mindfulness may well be derided by New Age purists as too mainstream and secular, these logics of religious choice help inform the way people relate to it as a practice of self-improvement.

Today, as a neoliberally-inflicted mindfulness spreads, we must be attentive to the ways it works to reproduce compliant subjects. A market-driven mindfulness works to reproduce the status quo, a phenomenon that is especially clear in corporate settings.

---

7 The Protestant revolution, when it “spiritualize[d] church and society through the systematic transfer of ethical disciplines from the priesthood to the lay population,” introduced Americans “into a practice of ethical life that made them 'personally' responsible for their own salvation” (Powell 1996, 159).

8 Religion “is not just a matter of individual commitment, nor can it be fully comprehended on the basis of individuals and their membership in various religious groups. Religion is always embedded in societies and is greatly shaped by the conditions imposed on religious expression and organization by the state. To encompass this reality fully, the term 'religious economy’ was introduced. A religious economy consists of all the religious activity going on in any society: a ‘market’ of current and potential religious adherents, a set of one or more organizations seeking to attract or retain adherents and the religious culture offered by the organizations” (Stark 2005, 198).
Corporate Mindfulness

Following the 2008 financial crisis, numerous theories abounded about the roots of the market crash. Critics of neoliberalism pointed to banks’ lobbying against financial regulation, and the so-called “revolving door” between the White House and Goldman Sachs (Davies 2015, 68). However, some proponents of the existing financial system located the source of the meltdown in the minds and practices of individual traders. They proposed meditation as a tool that traders could implement to calm themselves to “a state of better calculated risk-taking” (68).

Highlander is a consulting firm that claims to be a “mindful finance company” (Highlander 2017). Its website defines its mission as “the joining of non-judgmental awareness of personal experience, with matters relating to money, in the present moment” (Highlander 2017). The company’s employees use mindfulness practice to improve their investment strategies. Its promotional information explains that, even though money can cause stress, Highlander can help customers “become empowered” by their financial lives (Highlander 2017). According to Highlander, “mindful finance is meaningful change” and mindfulness can be used to “honestly look at the emotions around our finances” (Highlander 2017).

The example of Highlander is no anomaly in the contemporary mindfulness movement. Caitlin Zaloom also explores the sphere of finance and looks at how analysts view the market as a God-like force. To succeed professionally, Wall Street traders must leave their full self behind and enter a Zen-like spiritual “flow” to be fully immersed in the present moment (Zaloom 2005, 262). A trader’s success depends on their ability to focus solely on the inner workings of the market in the moment, leaving past successes
and losses behind (Zaloom 2005). They must also leave their own hopes, desires, and expectations behind before entering the trading room.

Both wishing and praying break discipline’s cardinal rule. They bring personal desires and convictions into market judgements. Without discipline, traders’ own assessments cloud their view of the objective movements of the market. These desires then mediate between the trader’s actions and his reactions to the constantly changing information before him. To structure the self as an instrument of perception and reaction, traders must give up their desires [Zaloom 2005, 260].

In fact, these descriptions of traders’ mental states bear strong resemblance to meditation instructions, which ask the practitioner to sit and observe their thoughts rather than to react. As such, they can be understood as “Zen-like aphorisms” (261).

Corporate America has co-opted the mindfulness movement and harnessed meditation as a tool to generate a stronger workforce. As the lines between rest and work have become increasingly blurred, neoliberal logics posit work as an “essential element in the path to self-fulfillment” (Rose 1989, 119). Bay Area Twitter employees now go on off-sites at Zen Buddhist retreat centers, taking advantage of peace and serenity to develop business strategy and improve working relationships. Google’s workers are offered respite in meditation rooms, dedicated spaces for reflection and contemplation. Mindfulness, when used to help workers de-stress, refocus, and improve their emotional intelligence and efficiency, is intended to benefit employees’ professional lives. Following this logic, a more grounded employee is better able to complete tasks effectively, and also to cooperate with coworkers in collaborative work.

While these programs may have noble goals of worker improvement, they do not always serve their intended purpose. One of my informants, a former employee of Google, who began practicing meditation as a teenager, shared with me that each time he visited the meditation rooms, nobody was meditating. Instead, people were asleep on the
floors, snoring. He overheard his younger co-workers, mostly millennials who still enjoyed partying, talking about the meditation rooms as the perfect places to sleep off their hangovers without their supervisors finding out they were not doing their work. Their naps certainly were doing nothing to develop their “emotional intelligence” along the dictates of Google’s mindfulness guru Chade-Meng Tan (Tan 2012, 18).

Self-help techniques can be used to “responsibilize” (Barry et al. 1996) individuals in the face of the “risk and uncertainty” that results from a rapidly changing capitalist economy (Cook 2016, 142). Mindfulness, because it helps people cope with stress, can enable individuals to live more successfully in a state of economic precarity. In corporate settings, mindfulness techniques are provided to employees who are over-worked or stressed. Therefore, mindfulness can allow for the perpetuation of exploitative corporate practices for the service of capitalism while obscuring the social and political causes of the mental health issues that may initially lead people to seek out help (Cook 2016).

Theoretically, to “humanize” the workforce is not to create a conflict with “the pursuit of productivity, efficiency and competitiveness” (Rose 1989, 56), when success in and outside of the workplace is intertwined. In fact, in an era where self-fulfillment is paramount, work is yet another domain that can provide individuals with personal satisfaction. As a result, “difficulties at work are not an impediment to spirituality, but an opportunity to exercise reflexive meditation or awareness practice” (Martin 2014, 128). To be happy at work is to be fulfilled. When spiritual practices like mindfulness are integrated into the workplace, they enable workers to be happier in professional settings and beyond, and improve these workers’ general quality of life. And happiness, as Sarah Ahmed (2010) reminds us, is a political feeling. The happy life is the productive life.
But what happens to questions of ethics when religious practices and perspectives are re-spun in the interest of late capitalism? Mindfulness can be seen as an appropriation of Buddhist worldviews, where some practices and elements are selectively retained in order to become palatable for Westerners but tend to be divorced from a Buddhist ethical framework. Neoliberal co-optation of mindfulness scrambles this appropriation of Buddhism further. By the time that mindfulness reaches corporate America, some argue, its Buddhist elements are irrelevant, if not altogether erased, except, of course, for branding purposes (Heffernan 2015; Pinsker 2015).

But others, like Chade-Meng Tan – the former software engineer who brought mindfulness to Google, would disagree. He construed corporate mindfulness as the truest form of Buddhist practice when he claimed that the dharma you see in America is “pure” (Zahn 2016) because it extends beyond the traditional Buddhist ritual practice and distills “foundational mental qualities in meditation practice … and therefore serves to promote the purest Buddhist teachings” (Religion Dispatches 2017). Tan claims that even though he was raised in East Asia, it was not until he came to America that he became a “real” Buddhist. He says this in order to appeal to an American audience concerned about the authenticity of the Buddhism on offer.

Mindfulness has become a buzzword that encompasses a wide-range of activities, including seated meditation. “[A]t times, mindfulness seems like this year’s kale – a hipster buzzword on the brink of wearing out its welcome” (Williams 2018). Divorced from a system of Buddhist principles – including non-harming and the condemnation of oppressive behavior – mindfulness can be seamlessly adopted into a corporate context.

Despite its long history of Zen Buddhism, Japan, for example, has embraced capitalism, white collar work, and neoliberalism every bit as much as the West, albeit in its own way (Allison 2013). In other words, there is no clear locus of “pure” Buddhist ethics located elsewhere.
As a buzzword and a hot commodity, without its sociohistorical context, it is rendered a mere trend. And public cultural figures in the US help popularize this trend.

**Mindfulness Icons: Personal Uplift and (Dis)Empowerment**

Cultural icons, like Oprah and her guru Deepak Chopra, as well as Chade-Meng Tan, solidify the apparent “religiosity” of self-help culture, underplaying its entanglement with profit, the market, and competitive individualism. As figureheads and experts in this redefined spiritual realm and spokespeople of well-being, they advise the general population about how to use self-help techniques without offering a critique of the larger inequality and stress-producing system.

Oprah is one of a new group of elite storytellers who present practical solutions to society’s problems that can be found within the logic of existing profit-driven structures of production and consumption. They promote market-based solutions to the problems of corporate power, technology, gender divides, environmental degradation, alienation and inequality [Aschoff 2015].

Oprah claims that “we attract into our lives the things that we want … we create our own circumstances by the choices that we make … [and] the choices that we make are fueled by our thoughts” (Peck 2008, 212). In other words, she empowers individuals to be in control of their own destiny. Her ideas cater to the bourgeoisie, offering “peace of mind and emotional tranquility to those already on the way up” (216). Oprah and Chopra routinely co-lead 21-Day meditation experiences online that are free and promise virtual participants the path to “perfect health,” “expanding your happiness” and “manifesting true success” (Chopra Center Meditation 2018). By offering meditation as a means for personal fulfillment, these icons ironically reiterate the narrative of capitalist success that holds individuals accountable for their own prosperity. This is certainly not a challenge to neoliberal capitalism. Rather it is a call to fare better within the system.
Oprah exemplifies the synthesis of spirituality, commodity, and corporatism (Lofton 2011, 10). She professes to operate “with no strategy, no bureaucracy, and no spreadsheets” and works “with the people in mind, not for the corporations or the money” (11). Though Oprah claims to work outside of a neoliberal framework, she profits greatly from her promotion of self-help, and she owns one of the most successful businesses in America: her net worth is estimated at 2.7 billion dollars (Forbes 2018).10 She caters to her audience by espousing a sense of hopefulness. “Oprah is appealing because her stories hide the role of political, economic and social structures in our lives. They make the American dream seem attainable” through market-based solutions, which promise that cultural and social capital are the means to prosperity and happiness (Aschoff 2015). Oprah’s ideas promote depoliticized and compliant subjects who seek happiness, not structural change.

Another cultural icon who promotes meditation is David Lynch. I attended an event in San Francisco where Lynch was interviewed about the benefits of meditation. Famous for his haunting thrillers and the cult-classic television series, Twin Peaks, Lynch certainly does not represent the stereotype of “peaceful Buddhist.” But he has meditated for forty minutes daily since he was 27 years old and swears by this practice. His interviewer jokingly calculated that Lynch had spent 1.4 years in seated meditation.

Lynch’s discussion of meditation was refreshing. Unlike many adherents of self-help discourses, who can claim to have achieved a state of perfection, Lynch maintained a raw and confessional tone. At one point, he proclaimed that meditation is “not good for marriage, because I’ve been married four times,” and the audience erupted in laughter. He also offered that “meditation is good because [when you practice it you]

---

10 Chopra’s net worth is estimated at 80 million dollars (Sawyer and Jarvis 2015).
look better, and you don’t wake up and want to kill people.” How did this sentiment square with the subject matter of his films? I wondered. He went on to claim that meditation “turns dark clouds to gold” and that it creates “universal love, which feeds personal love.” As Lynch, ironically, extolled the non-violent force of meditation, he also referenced the conventional capitalist self-help narrative.

He positioned meditation as commodity with utilitarian value, construing it as the key to success. He explained that his sister had introduced him to meditation, and because he noticed a clear shift in her behavior toward patience and compassion, he decided to try it. “I wanted this thing,” Lynch emphasized, “and I went and got it.” He also noted his initial ambivalence and worry that meditation would stunt his creative “edge.” But he was wrong, he told the audience reassuringly, because his practice only helped him to cultivate his creative capacities; it was, in fact, central to his artistic success. Lynch clarified that meditation was good for everyone – the white-collar office-workers tied to their desk and creative geniuses alike. It seemed to me that Lynch wanted us to take away one message: we should commit to meditation, because meditation will promote personal happiness and ensure success in any professional field. He downplayed an audience member’s proclamation that, “we all know that meditation is good for us, but it’s hard to actually sit down and do it.” Lynch claimed that once you start, and realize the benefits of the practice, you’ll just keep on doing it. Evidently, he views meditation as a product to be consumed.

Lynch’s account is one among many popular self-help stories that stress the essential good of techniques like meditation. But there are downsides to these stories as well. English columnist Laurie Penny explains that even as the US economic outlook becomes increasingly bleak, as climate-change intensifies, and there is an ominous threat
of nuclear war, “the public conversation is turning toward individual fulfillment as if in a desperate attempt to make us feel like we still have control over our lives” (Penny 2016).

As members of CrimethInc. Workers’ Collective – a rebel alliance and network for collective action – write: “in contemporary capitalism, the dominant reactive affect is anxiety” (CrimethInc. 2014). They refer to anxiety as a “public secret,” something whose true source is hidden, and explain that, “when discussed at all, [excessive stress and anxiety] are understood as individual psychological problems, often blamed on faulty thought patterns or poor adaptation” (CrimethInc. 2014). In the face of daunting sociopolitical issues, we are told that the self – an inwardly-focused and self-improving one – is what continues to have potential.

Penny brings in an especially prescient example of this phenomenon in the British political sphere:11

Months after being elected leader of the most right-wing government in recent British history … David Cameron launched an ill-fated “happiness agenda.” The scheme may have been better received if the former prime minister were not simultaneously engaged in decimating health care, welfare, and higher education – the very social structures that make life manageable for ordinary British people. As part of Cameron’s changes to the welfare system, unemployment was rebranded as a psychological disorder [Penny 2016].

Under Cameron’s leadership, individuals were blamed for their own economic failures. This example speaks to the American context as well. As social supports are taken away, we are told that we need to be more self-reliant – that is the key to our happiness and fulfilment. For example, the California Task Force (1990) reported that:

Self-esteem is the likeliest candidate for a social vaccine, something that empowers us to live responsibly and that inoculates us against the lures of crime, violence, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, child abuse, chronic welfare dependency, and

---

11 In fact, members of British government even created a Mindfulness Initiative, intended to work with parliamentarians, media and policy makers to integrate mindfulness into public life (The Mindfulness Initiative 2016).
educational failure. The lack of self-esteem is central to most personal and social ills plaguing our state and nation [California Task Force 1990, 232].

This narrative fits seamlessly within neoliberal ideology, which tells us to be responsible for our own well-being in the name of our freedom (Rose 1999). However, this discourse can be incredibly disempowering, as it eliminates from view structural hierarchies as the cause of people’s oppression. Instead, we are told, in a manner of tough love, that “if you are miserable or angry because your life is a constant struggle … the problem is always and only with you … society is not messed up: you are” (Penny 2016). Ultimately, these narratives are dangerous to individuals who are lacking social supports, as they can perpetuate feelings of isolation.

**Mindfulness as Isolating**

How does the pervasiveness of corporatized, standardized mindfulness impact individuals? I now turn to the story of one of my informants, a close childhood friend, Dakota, who suffers from repeated bouts of anxiety that can be severe and debilitating. Because the symptoms were initially caused by a bad experience with drugs, she has developed a fear of ingesting foreign foods and substances. In order to ensure that she is physically okay after consuming something, she goes through a series of steps, namely checking her pupils and pulse, in order to ensure that she is behaving normally. Although she is uncertain about the exact terminology she should use to describe these coping mechanisms, she is concerned that she has developed obsessive compulsive disorder.

Recently, she sought professional help from a licensed therapist, a decision she discussed with her parents. Dakota’s mother’s first response was to say: “well, whatever you need to take care of yourself, but also, I think it’s a good idea for you to meditate.” Her mom is a yoga teacher who has begun practicing meditation. Dakota expressed
frustration at her mother’s suggestion. She explained that it was similar to telling someone who is trying to lose weight to eat less; that may not be the root of the problem or the solution. When she is anxious, she is past the point where she can sit calmly and observe the inner workings of her mind. The issue she has with meditation is that it is not something you can just pick-up and it will solve your problems. At the height of anxiety, when you are just left with your own thoughts, it makes them worse. Dakota told me that, “With meditation, you are confronted directly with yourself when sometimes you need to be able to deconstruct thoughts first.” Since meditation is an observational practice, and does not explicitly break-down anxious thoughts, it could heighten Dakota’s worries.

Dakota’s mother offered her meditation as a packaged, readily available medical tool, rather than a practice developed over time. She presented it as an antidote to anxiety. For Dakota’s mother, meditation was practically a panacea. However, when meditation is applied as a reactionary technique to combat stress, rather than as a process, ongoing and reflexive, then its value is dampened if not lost. As one practitioner points out:

I think it’s interesting to reflect on the extent to which meditation is being promoted as … kind of therapy, if you like, for our modern world, as opposed to meditation as an integral part of a spiritual path of insight development … really getting to understand the nature of reality. So I think there’s a big distinction to be drawn between meditation as a therapy and meditation as a spiritual path, [and] it’s important [Carvalho 2013, 227].

Mindfulness can be understood as a spiritual path or a medical tool, or perhaps as a synthesis of the two. When it is applied solely as therapy, there is less space for the gradual development of practice. However, even within a medicalizing discourse, there is a difference between the cultivation of a healthy lifestyle and a targeted cure for mental affliction. The former is a preventative method of care and happens over time. It
encompasses a departure from an unhealthy way of life, rather than an accommodation to it. The latter responds to a specific problem and serves as a temporary adjustment that lets you work more and harder with less anxiety. However, it does not address a person’s overall well-being.

Dakota’s mother’s suggestion that meditation can be used as an antidote for anxiety is hardly unusual: it is tied up with broader discourse around mindfulness. This medicalized mindfulness presumes that the practice itself can be treated as a pill that mitigates symptoms but does not necessarily get at the root cause of the problem. This approach reinforces the problems that meditation is supposed to “fix.”

The neoliberal paradigm is reproduced here. When an individual is told to meditate to cure their ailments, they are implicitly made responsible for their own treatment and are left to combat illness alone. This can be very isolating. As one social theorist wrote in response to Jon Kabat-Zinn:

mindfulness overemphasize[s] the individual and underemphasize the social … I am not suggesting that Kabat-Zinn denies the role social inequalities play in well-being. Rather it is the ambiguities found in mindfulness, including the tension between the vastness of what ails us and the internal process by which we are healed, which result in foregrounding the role of the individual. Additionally, and perhaps unlike mindfulness in a clinical context, the tendency to explicitly emphasize conditions over which individuals have immediate control reflects the very ethos of the self-help genre in which [Kabat-Zinn’s] books and recordings are situated [Barker 2014, 174].

Mindfulness is presented as an alternative healing practice, which has the potential to augment orthodox forms of healing. However, when a sustained relationship between teacher and student is lacking, and when it is treated as a Band-Aid or a quick fix to medicalized “problems,” there is a danger in this contextual shift; this is when mindfulness loses its liberatory potential.
The Neoliberal University: Mindfulness at Wesleyan

The inculcation of subjects with self-improvement discourse begins before adulthood, prior to people entering professional settings. Schools and universities serve as a site of ideological interpellation (Althusser 2006), which prepares students for entrance into the adult world of inequality; and these sites are increasingly involved in “educating” mindfulness. At Wesleyan, I witnessed a type of mindfulness that connects with the corporate model and serves to shape compliant subjects, in this case, students fit to meet the demands of a competitive university and ultimately, a competitive, professional workplace. In this section I draw on my experiences of mindfulness at Wesleyan to explore the reproduction of neoliberal self-improvement discourses in the university.

The summer before I moved across the country for college, I learned about a themed house at Wesleyan – then called Buddhist House – whose mission was to facilitate “a spiritual or mindful way of living that can coexist with life in a bustling university” and whose residents were said to possess “an interest in meditation or Buddhism” (Lotus House 2017). I took this as indication that students at Wesleyan would be invested in practicing meditation, like I was. However, I did not consider that these dual principles of “mindful living” and “life in a bustling university” might not easily coexist.

Upon arrival on campus the fall of my freshman year, I searched for a meditation community, and enrolled in six-week Mindfulness Class, co-taught by the campus rabbi, a meditation teacher, and a yoga teacher. The description for the class was as follows:

During this non-credit course, students will be introduced to various techniques of mindfulness practice and spiritual awareness, including sitting meditation and yoga. These modalities are designed to aid in stress and anxiety reduction, and when practiced diligently, may also offer opportunities for greater self-awareness
and personal development. The goal is to give students a spiritual toolbox that is portable, replicable, and sustainable. Students will gain an understanding of the roles these practices can play in leading a happier, healthier and more fulfilling life.

I had high hopes for the class and anticipated that it would be great place to meet other students interested in meditation. Even though I had already been exposed to introductory mindfulness teachings, meditation is an iterative practice that develops over time, and I desired further exposure to the same teachings to deepen my practice.

Within the first couple weeks I grew disappointed with the class, which I found to be individually-focused and lacking in community. In previous learning experiences, like the retreats I attended with Inward Bound Mindfulness Education, a social framework was essential to the development of my personal practice. In contrast to Green Gulch, where individuals’ identities seemed not to matter, at IBME our self-expression was encouraged. In that environment, I was committed to supporting my peers in their respective journeys through meditation. Wesleyan’s class prioritized the individual “download” of information (“toolbox”) that occurred in a single course session, rather than a sustained interrogation of the self who is communally-situated and shaped.

There were attempts on behalf of the instructors to generate social ties between students. We were divided into small groups on the first day and encouraged to meet outside of class on a weekly basis. However, most groups, like mine, hardly met. Furthermore, learning with the whole class felt alienating. When we were asked personal questions about the mental and emotional experiences of meditation, students were reluctant to answer. I, for one, felt alone and exposed. Whereas on IBME retreats I felt held by my peers in a state of vulnerability, at Wesleyan this was not the case. The classroom dynamics mirrored those of an academic environment, where students are
performing to impress one another and the professor. This dynamic made it difficult for
the class to be a space of care and collaborative growth. Ultimately, the class offered no
respite from a competitive university environment and instead served as a microcosm of
those same tendencies. When it ended, most students did not even know each other’s
names.

Mindfulness was taught to us as a means to improve our abilities as students by
diminishing anxiety. Our teachers’ approach was not holistic, but rather focused on our
intellectual and productive capacities. Repeatedly, they reminded us that mindfulness
practice would serve our busy lives, and that meditation would make it easier to focus in
our classes and help us succeed in school. This coincides with neoliberal values. Scholars
critical of contemporary higher education, like the Edu-factory Collective, note that
instead of functioning as “a place where ethically-guided, community-centered
individuals are produced” (The Edu-factory Collective 2009, 34), the university “is
becoming immediately productive” (2). In the modern university “every class, every
extracurricular activity … becomes a possible line on a résumé, becomes an investment
in human capital” (152) as higher education prepares students “for the obedience …
required in most US workplaces” (77).

The meditation teachers at Wesleyan were well-intentioned. But they were also
complicit in perpetuating the notion that individual students must be responsible for
their own well-being, and that a simple transfer of self-help skills is enough to sustain a
young-adult’s development into a productive human being who is able to cope with the
stresses of collegiate, professional, and capitalist life. In the neoliberal era “personal
failure is generally attributed to personal failings, and the victim is all too often blamed”
(Harvey 2005). Therefore, messages that tell students that they can truly control their
own destinies promote a self-reliant individualism that can ultimately be isolating (Rose 1998). These techniques encourage individualized solutions over community-based support.

It should come as no surprise that the type of mindfulness taught in a university setting is so focused on the individual student. As Zen priest Rev. angel Kyodo williams explains, “rather than using the practice to go into it and connect we’re furthering … neurosis” (Williams, Owens and Syedullah 2016, 165). Ultimately, in these settings, there is an emphasis on “non-relational” ways of practice (164). As such, meditation taught and practiced in this manner can easily serve to perpetuate the individualizing forces emphasized under neoliberal capitalism.

At Wesleyan, the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life also offered a weekly meditation group, at that point run by a PhD student. Ironically, this PhD student regularly killed small animals in a lab in the name of “science.” However, he seemed able to reconcile this violence when he sat down to breathe deeply with our small group. This was the cause of some controversy amongst attendants concerned with animal rights. I attended the group regularly during the spring of my freshman year, and I was eventually asked by the rabbi to come on board as a Mindfulness Intern. This entailed running the weekly meditation group in the campus meditation room, facilitating meditation events, and bringing speakers to campus.

As the Mindfulness Intern, I felt pressured by my supervisor, the rabbi, to push my peers into meditation practice.

“What we really need, Kate, is to have this entire campus meditating.”
“If everyone meditated, then this place would be so much better.”
“Numbers, numbers, numbers.”
I was uncomfortable taking a mildly coercive approach, especially when I was not even sure that I was qualified to facilitate meditation sessions for new practitioners. I accepted the rabbi’s ideas, and reluctantly complied, encouraging people to join my meditation group at student club fairs. However, during the evening sits, I made sure to express to participants that ambivalence was fine, and that nobody should feel pressured to meditate if they did not want to.

In the spring of my sophomore year, I was interviewed by a student who was using my weekly meditation group as a field site for a research project. During our conversation, I expressed my ambivalence about my job:

A lot of what’s being said on this campus is, “meditate, because it will make you less stressed-out; meditate, because what is happening in your brain will change with this practice,” and I don’t really think that’s the way this practice should be approached.

At the time of this interview, I did not yet have the critical academic tools to break-down the phenomenon I was a part of and, to some degree, complicit in. However, I now see these narratives fitting seamlessly into a neoliberally-inflected conversation about self-help and the responsibilization of the subject (Barry et al. 1996). Here, inner-peace is rendered a commodity, which is exchanged in the academic marketplace and beyond. Neoliberal capitalism permits something even so private as our spiritual experience to be commodified.

Although I was never explicitly told by my supervisor that I was going to be providing a mental health service, at times I felt like I was acting as a pseudo-therapist in my position as Intern. It was common knowledge to students that the school’s mental health services are extremely under resourced. Not infrequently, students would become anxious or upset during meditation, one of the few times all week that they would be given the opportunity to sit with their thoughts in silence. Sometimes, I would stay after
the session with an individual student, talking them through their experience with meditation. Occasionally, the conversation would veer towards their busy schedule, their issues with time management, and even their feelings of instability or unhappiness. I was working through these issues as well and resented being treated as a talk-therapist at times. However, I did my best not to let my true feelings show through and to maintain a professional appearance in my role as Intern.

There was a certain irony in this position. Whereas I was instructed to promote a self-care technique for students, my work did not always permit me to properly care for myself. While at Wesleyan, I rarely made time to meditate, given the amount of assignments I had to complete and deadlines to meet. And yet, in my position as facilitator, I had to “market” meditation. In fact, I often felt like I had to perform a kind of calmness and clarity that I did not necessarily feel inside. My mindfulness practice was packaged and advertised to my peers, who looked to me as an experienced resource.

**Zen Buddhism in California: Green Gulch**

Even at a Zen Buddhist monastery buried deep in the woods of the Northern California Coast, I encountered ideas about meditation that were troubling. During the spring break of my junior year, I spent a week living as a guest student at Green Gulch,

12 a temple for Buddhist practice in the Japanese Soto Zen tradition located in Muir Beach, California. I sought out the monastery hoping for solace from the stresses of school. However, my habits of analytical criticism and persistent questioning made it difficult to

---

12 Green Gulch was started by Norman Fischer, “one of the most influential American-born teachers of Zen,” who was ordained by Shunryu Suzuki, the first Zen monk to found a monastery outside of Asia (Sigalow 2017, 74). Although American Zen Buddhist practitioners would certainly distinguish themselves from mindfulness practitioners, there is overlap between the two movements. While these communities should not be equated, both have engaged in the translation of Buddhism from East to West.
feel at peace there. I grew increasingly disturbed by this isolated community, seemingly cut-off from political realities.13

Practice at Green Gulch was taken very seriously. I was expected to adapt to the intensity of the monastery and participate fully in its activity. I rose at 4:25 AM each day. In preparation for the morning service, I dressed myself in simple, dark clothing and stretched my body in attempt to relieve the physical tension that comes through hours of sitting. I left my dormitory room and entered the zendo (meditation hall), a spacious room with high ceilings, blank walls, an altar, and a platform lined methodically with zafus (meditation cushions), frigid due to a lack of heat. The morning service involved a two-hour period of seated meditation, walking meditation, and chanting in ancient Japanese. The particularities of our meditation posture were emphasized by the teachers, who instructed us to sit cross-legged, with our hands interlaced, and to keep our eyes slightly open, so that we would remain aware of the physical world and not drift off into our thoughts.

I spent the remainder of the day performing domestic and physical labor – such as landscaping, farming, and cleaning the industrial kitchen, and returned to the zendo for a second and sometimes third service later in the day. At Green Gulch, seated meditation was a core component of practice. Our work on the cushion was meant to transcend that allotted time and impact the activities of our everyday life there. I was reminded regularly that doing dishes in the kitchen and repeatedly scraping vegetarian food off of community members’ plates was also a part of my practice. I could not help

13 Whereas traditionally, Zen Buddhist monasteries were integrated in Japanese society as designated places of refuge, in an American context they are outliers and hard to come by. One historian explained that, “though our image of Zen often evokes a serene monastery” temples could be “world[s] inhabited by unique local deities, rowdy pilgrims, Zen priests, and charismatic lay leaders” and furthermore that not all community-members even engaged in meditation (Williams 2005, 59).
but think that the guest-student arrangement was convenient for Green Gulch, since it provided them with free labor and we covered our own living expenses through a small monetary contribution.

The terms of my participation there extended beyond physical and mental presence, as I was also encouraged to adopt some of the broader conceptual frames of Zen Buddhism. Many of these values fundamentally contradict those in an American society oriented around achievement. Zen Master Suzuki proclaims that “if you think you will get something from practicing zazen, already you are involved in impure practice” (Suzuki 1970, 60). Therefore, to engage in Zen practice one must leave behind expectations of clear outcomes. Many residents had sought out Green Gulch after growing disenchanted with American society, and in some sense, had chosen to pursue of an alternative life path. People described that they felt purposeless in a society that emphasized consumption. I heard residents speak of the value of being immersed completely in the present moment while at Green Gulch, a pleasure which they rarely found in their lives beforehand. Generally speaking, the residents were peaceful and kind, but some also seemed tired and worn-down from the busy schedule of practice and work.

Whereas residents engaged in seated meditation and ritual with the utmost seriousness, I noticed that some people’s understandings of the Zen Buddhism framework lacked depth. At Green Gulch, intellectual understanding was stifled in favor of practice, a principle which was quite difficult for me to grasp. When I asked questions of the teachers, I was met with vague responses, such as: “you will find the answers through your own practice.” These replies felt empty to me, and I was left craving a deeper knowledge of the Zen Buddhist tradition. I was uncomfortable reciting Japanese
prayers each morning whose meaning I did not know, and I wondered if other people shared my concern. As I grew increasingly frustrated with life at Green Gulch, I became curious about what was keeping residents there.

During mealtimes, which were the primary time for socializing, I overheard a number of interesting conversations among residents and guests alike. One evening, while eating dinner in the dining hall, I witnessed a few residents discussing their decisions to stay at the monastery. A man offered that he found liberation through rigidity, that the strict schedule freed him up to pursue a more meaningful life where he was not forced to make numerous choices about how to spend his time; he could therefore be fully present. A woman, an ex-resident who had come back to visit, said that while she lived at the monastery, she did not feel like her full self because she was unable to express core parts of her identity, like her sexuality. Her comment sparked argument from one man, rather than compassion, who promptly responded by asserting that there is no self, that the residents were all operating as one unit at Green Gulch, and therefore that a person’s individual identity did not matter. He explained that he was practicing Zen to be more attuned to others and to be more compassionate.

The man proceeded to recount a story that exemplified the purpose of his practice. He told us that a few months prior, he had visited his hometown on a brief break from living at the monastery. He spent an afternoon at a local homeless shelter, where he had previously volunteered, and he overheard a conversation between an adult and child that began to escalate. He recalled that the adult was screaming horrible things at the child. But, rather than intervening in the situation, to prevent further abuse, he just sat there, doing absolutely nothing. He claimed that this was the best thing he could have done under the circumstances: just existing and projecting his calm energy was enough.
Hearing such ideas, I grew agitated and increasingly disenchanted. Even though I knew that not all residents would agree that simply existing as a meditation practitioner was an adequate response to injustice, that even one person was thinking that way frightened me. The Green Gulch community seemed to downplay disagreement and controversy in favor of a more peaceful sociality. Conversations remained pleasant and not political. The man who offered that story was met with little resistance from the people he was talking to, though, as evidenced by their contorted facial expressions, they seemed uncomfortable.

This particular interpretation of meditation practice ignores the Buddhist principle of right action, which is encompassed in the *sila* (ethics) portion of the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path. *Sila*, which is interlaced with *samadhi* (meditation) and *prajna* (wisdom), encourages “a particular way of ‘being’ out of which ‘doing the right thing’ emerges from one’s state of being or one’s mindfulness” (Seyfried et al. 2014). Buddhist principles of the interconnectedness of all beings should serve to promote social responsibility. As Thich Nhat Hanh offers:

> Mindfulness must be engaged. Once there is seeing, there must be acting. We must be aware of the real problems of the world. Then, with mindfulness, we will know what to do and what not to do to be of help [Nhat Hanh 1992, 91].

Meditation should provide a lens through which to develop a more nuanced understanding of how we engage in society, rather than a means to escape or abstain from social responsibility. The conversation I overheard at Green Gulch still haunts me. It reveals that mindfulness, as an enabler of complacency, extends far beyond the corporate realm; it can serve as an excuse for a lack of political engagement. Mindfulness can easily be misconstrued by adults, as I witnessed at Green Gulch, so what happens when it enters the public school system and is taught to children?
Mindfulness in Public Schools: The Mindful Life Project

“Your kids will meditate in school.
Your kids will meditate in school.”

-The Dead Kennedy’s, “California Über Alles”

Mindfulness education today has extended beyond corporations, higher education institutions, and retreats, and is increasingly being taught to young children. The Mindful Life Project or MLP, for instance, is a nonprofit organization based in Richmond, California, which aims to “empower underserved children through mindfulness and other transformation skills to gain self-awareness, confidence, self-regulation, and resilience” (Mission and Vision 2016). It seeks to teach children from marginalized backgrounds a mindfulness practice so that they can achieve social and academic success. Beyond reaching individual students, it also attempts to transform the greater school community through its work. MLP’s mission is clearly oriented toward equality and justice, and it faces the contradictions of doing this sort of work in a context where meditation has been coopted and tainted by dominant capitalist forces.

Melanie is an MLP employee. I met her on a clear, bright day in early August in Richmond. We sat outside on her back deck, sipping herbal tea and soaking in the sunshine, and spoke about her work and personal meditation practice, as well as about recent developments in corporate mindfulness in the Bay Area. During our conversation, I could not help but think about the differences in how I had first encountered mindfulness and how her students had been presented with it. At my private school in San Francisco, IBME marketed mindfulness to students as potential consumers. However, in the case of MLP, students were being required to practice mindfulness in a more obviously disciplinary manner.
Speaking to Melanie helped me see the humanity in MLP’s work. She expressed what appeared like a genuine care for the students she was working with, many of whom are living in poverty and have experienced trauma. She noted that meditation seemed to be helping many students feel better. Throughout the interview, Melanie emphasized the link between the individual practices that MLP taught and the type of conviviality that was produced as a result. Students were engaged in numerous collective activities, like performance and creative projects. She fondly recalled some kindergarteners, who were eager to think about who they wanted to send love to in a “heartfulness” practice. These techniques, when integrated properly, would not only work to promote interconnectedness, but also to generate forms of sociality that encourage mutual support and aid.

However, the tension between the transformative impact of the organization’s work and the potential for its mission to be co-opted remains potent. Since its founding, MLP has gained a great deal of attention in the media, including being featured on NPR, KQED, and news anchor Katie Couric’s talk show, “Katie.” During an interview with Couric, Founder and Executive Director of the organization, JG LaRoche, described his work as such:

JG: “I taught third grade in Richmond California in a very, very low-income community with a lot of violence and drugs, and a lot of dysfunction … We’re teaching kids, empowering children, through mindfulness … so that they can have wise responses to their challenging life situations they might find themselves in. Our kids are just amazing. They’re just absorbing it … Teachers come to us and say, ‘I’ve been teaching for 20 years, and I’ve never had my class as focused, as still, as on-task, as when you guys come in and teach mindfulness.’”

Katie: “… It certainly would be wonderful to spread this everywhere, wouldn’t it? Do you see that happening in other schools?”

JG: “There’s [sic] some amazing programs out there now, Katie, that are doing phenomenal work. It’s got to be out there for everyone, and we’re excited to be a part of that movement. It’s called the ‘Quiet Revolution’, so join us!”
In this interview, Katie and JG seem to present meditation as a utilitarian practice, which has the capacity to instill a discipline in students that can extend into all aspects of their lives. On one hand, MLP’s proposition resists the status quo, because they aim to help children who are typically abandoned by state-run social support. On the other hand, their work also plays into a narrative of self-improvement that ultimately renders the children responsible for their own well-being.

During the course of our interview, Melanie admitted the dangers inherent in the work of MLP: “when [I’m] working within the school system, it’s so geared towards a product.” Public schools are preparing students for success within particular criteria, namely standardized testing. A mindfulness initiative, therefore, is evaluated in terms of its capacity to make students sit still, internalize material without disruption, and perform better. The bureaucracy of the classroom thrives on a “culture of complicity” where students adhere to the norms set forth for them by teachers (Graeber 2015, 26). The public education system effectively maintains the socio-political status quo by educating its young people in respectable citizenship, by cultivating subjects to adhere to norms (Althusser 2006).

Because meditation practice requires stillness, it also implicitly cultivates students’ ability to maintain physical composure. Within our school system, where student-teacher ratios are increasing, and resources are ever scarcer, this skill is valuable to teachers who must maintain a functioning classroom (U.S. Department of Education 2018). Listening to the interview between Katie and JG, I was reminded of Wesleyan’s mindfulness class, and the rabbi’s claim that practicing meditation would make us better students.

In the case of the public school, success necessitates the ability to comply with bureaucracy. At first glance, bureaucracy and mindfulness may appear contradictory.
Graeber reminds us that bureaucracy is about “rational efficiency” (Graber 2015, 39). Bureaucratic systems require compliant subjects, not thoughtful ones who are in touch with their emotional states and pondering the existence and suffering of all living beings. The practice of meditation is, in itself, inefficient, because it requires stillness, time, and contemplation rather than production, in conventional terms.

However, there is a potent tension here. When people mediate, they refine their attention to each passing moment. If mindfulness is being used to regulate subjects, then it can bring “the level of required therapeutic surveillance down to an ever-smaller increment of time: moment-to-moment or breath to breath” (Barker 2007, 172). In other words, meditation itself can be understood as a bureaucratic practice, because the practitioner is made to regulate their own physical and mental experience toward more productive, and efficient, ends.

Melanie spoke directly to this point, saying:

I think, just the way the public-school system has our kids sitting the whole day, the way our public system has a serious lack of resources, and students who should be getting therapy, and should be getting wraparound services, aren’t. Because, maybe there isn’t a therapist at the school. Maybe, the therapist has their quota and can’t take any more kids. So, I think when you see it as: “this is another help,” and we’re not trying … I’m not trying to convert all of my students to be mindful stars, and they all are obsessed with it, and it’s amazing! But, it’s like, the reality is, they’re not getting the social and emotional skills they should be getting at that age, and it’s another way to support them in that.

Here, Melanie points to the potential for her mindfulness teachings to be misconstrued as therapy, when, in fact, they should only be supplemental to a preexisting therapy program in public schools. Once again, I was reminded of my own experiences as the Mindfulness Intern at Wesleyan, when students who came to my meditation group sought me out for psychological support. In both instances, students need resources that they are not getting.
Melanie also discussed the potential for their work to be co-opted:

There is also a risk … Like, administrators saying, “these students’ behavior has completely changed, and now they’re sitting perfectly in their desks and everything’s fine.” And, I think … “we’re not actually trying to make these students into robots so they’ll sit and listen and be still for you 100% of the time - that’s actually not our job.”

Whereas Melanie intends to help her students develop habits that will ensure their own well-being within a system that is not serving them, these same techniques are potentially causing them to also exist more acceptably within that same system; and to, perhaps, accept that system. For it is these techniques, which students are exposed to at an early age, that will ultimately allow them to function in a corporate workplace, sitting for long hours at desks performing presumably mindless labor.
Wish for yourself to be happy, to be free from suffering, to experience kindness and love.

-Lama Rod Owens
Finding and Losing the Self

“Mindfulness, or present-time awareness, is essential to finding our way on the eightfold path. In fact, all of the other factors of the path depend on mindfulness of the present moment. Present-time awareness is the experience of knowing what will happen as it happens. The revolution is dependent on the rebel forces being present in mind as well as in body. That is the only way to overthrow the oppression of greed, hatred, and delusion.”

- Noah Levine, *Against the Stream*

Seated in a lecture hall brimming with people, relieved at the large turnout of students and professors yet still running-through a final to-do list for the event I had planned, I eagerly awaited Lama Rod Owens’ wise words. By this point, midway through my senior year, I already had plenty of experience planning events at Wesleyan as the Mindfulness Intern. However, Owens’ work has played a pivotal role in my shifting understandings of mindfulness, and, as such, I was especially invested in the success of Owens’ talk. In that moment bureaucratic measures and institutional priorities loomed over me as I also desired to hear and meditate with a man I had long admired. This mindfulness event was giving me anxiety.

A renowned Buddhist teacher, and co-author of Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation, Owens began by reminding us: “I am an activist before a Buddhist.” Mindfulness, for him, is a practice of remembering our own goodness, which has permitted him to reach a deeper awareness of his basic human experience. Through his personal meditation practice, Owens has come to understand his interconnections with other beings and has cultivated compassion for others. For him, “radical” is remembering and returning to a simple and basic way of being in the world, one that reduces the violence to oneself and others; it honors one’s own passions and aspirations.
and relates to the world from a place of equanimity” (Lama Rod Owens 2017). To be radical is to understand the complexities of our lives and truly sit with our experience, while also maintaining a social consciousness. He has bridged his political radicalism with spiritual practice, and as a political actor he operates from a place of love to confront injustice.

• • •

In this chapter, I explore mindfulness as a practice of radical self-cultivation in service of political transformation. I contextualize my analysis against a selective history of radical projects of self-making and the construction of the political subjectivity through bodily practices. These radical histories reveal the existence of thriving forms of social and political life in particular times and places; they help me imagine and construct life beyond the individualistic and competitive selves and the market-focused “economized” politics of neoliberalism (Brown 2015). I then interweave the ideas of popular meditation teachers with activist-meditators who seek out mindfulness as a resource for recuperation. Meditation, here, can be understood as the process of coming into one’s body, and thereby awakening a bodily consciousness … to repeatedly reassemble one’s sense of self, fragmented by intersubjective life and mental excess, thus, re-creating and forging a “wholeness of being” [Persson 2007, 48].

When this wholeness is reconstituted, the self is endowed with a renewed potential for a different kind of social and political life.

**Radical Histories of the Self-Social Dialectic**

Political transformation is at once a large-scale process that challenges and alters structures of inequality and a small-scale process that reshapes selves and intimate
relations. Many political activists have highlighted the innate link between self and social change, and the constant shifting of the gaze inward and outward, such that one component without the other is impossible. As I begin to examine the place of the meditative “self” in social transformation and the potential of mindfulness as a force of change, it is this history of activism that I turn to. Recalling this history is especially important given the liberal separation of the private and public realms – the former a natural sphere of love and emotion and the latter a political sphere of reason and rights. Neoliberal logics, which promise individuals freedom through the market (Harvey 2005) and place responsibility on individuals for their own market-based well-being (Cruikshank 1996), have narrowed the public sphere to exclude the complexity of the full human experience.

Radical imaginaries offer us alternative visions of individuals and societies, thus opening up possibilities. I do not offer an exhaustive history of such imaginaries in this chapter, but instead focus on more recent movements and activists that emphasize the inextricable link between self and social transformation and refuse the personal-political divide. Additionally, these thinkers link the individual body to the body politic, as they emphasize that a healthy society must be comprised of healthy individuals. In this chapter, I borrow from the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, the Black Panther Party, US feminists, and other theorists of social movements, all of whom place people’s individual and collective well-being at the center of large-scale transformation. The selves of these activists and theorists sit uncomfortably with the isolated, productive selves of neoliberalism. Their work reminds us of the important distinction between “neoliberal self-care” – which merely reproduces the current system – (Kinnamon 2017, 184) and “care of the self” – which contributes to a renewed sociality (184).
Mahatma Gandhi viewed bodily health as being central to the cultivation of a political consciousness. He critiqued an indulgent modern society focused on pleasure and consumption through close regimentation of his own bodily functions as well as by taking a vow of poverty.

In reading Gandhi’s autobiography, among any number of other primary texts, one is immediately struck by the fact that a distinction cannot be made between his personal experiments with dietetics, celibacy, hygiene, and nature cure and his search for Truth; between his virtual obsession with health, his faith in nonviolence, and his program of sociopolitical reform [Alter 1996, 302].

For Gandhi, bodily health was spiritual as well as political, especially in the context of colonialism (Alter 1996). “His body became an important site for political transformation, physical strengthening and moral regeneration, where truths could be worked upon” (Sharma 2014, 6). Through experimenting with rituals that were embedded in religious worldviews, Gandhi also challenged modern secular reason (Sharma 2014).

Gandhi gave special attention to his diet as a source of well-being and space of spiritual potential. He enacted non-violence through vegetarianism, as his diet did not require the death of animals in service of his own consumption. He also engaged in ritual fasting, frequently abstaining from the pleasures of eating, thereby eliminating excessive sensory stimulation in order to cleanse himself. Fasting sent a political message as well: Gandhi put his health on the line in order to gain the attention of the public. Furthermore, his fasting was a process of transformation, which symbolized “physical and moral cleansing and overcoming the self” (Sharma 2014, 7). He abstained from indulging his worldly desires as a way to suspend egotism and greed. Through engaging self-based practices, Gandhi explored his own impermanence and interconnectedness with all beings. Gandhi’s fasting can be understood as “a radical form of service to
others” and a “complete dissolution of self” (Alter 2000, 164). Similarly, in Buddhist meditation, the self is deprioritized as the apparent permanence of our everyday experience is thrown into question.

Gandhi’s work provides an opening into possibilities for resistance against notions of totalizing power. Foucault has explained how people’s selves and bodies are produced by and exist in a matrix of power, but Gandhi’s habits point to one mode of untangling (Alter 2004). Disciplinary practices – and Gandhi was certainly an epitome of those – do not necessarily maintain the status quo. They can also provide us with new avenues for understanding our experience and enacting change. Gandhi demonstrates how the implementation of disciplinary techniques can in fact imbue the body with meaning, rather than merely improving its utility in service of reproduction of the status quo (Alter 2004).

The Black Panther Party also placed the body at the heart of social transformation, and their political ideology could not be separated from the lived experiences of its members. Indeed, they politicized the black body, as one of resistance and strength. They instituted a series of survival programs “designed to help the people survive until their consciousness is raised” (Newton 2009). Among the most notable was a free breakfast program that provided schoolchildren with sustenance: “the free breakfast programs highlighted the fact that hunger impeded a child’s ability to learn” (Bloom and Martin 2013, 186). Party leaders presumed that, without proper nutrition, an individual would not be able to participate politically. The free breakfast program, as a means to produce healthy bodies, was central to the cultivation of political consciousness. It was intended to nourish individual bodies and to illuminate the failure of the government to resolve poverty and hunger, while also providing a physical space
for conversation and the exchange of political ideas (Bloom and Martin 2013). Such initiatives make clear that revolutionary politics cannot ignore care of individual bodies and consciousness. As a political practice, meditation can cultivate a particular mind-body in service of political transformation; while individualized, this practice need not be individualistic.

Carol Hanisch, a second-wave feminist, popularized the term: “the personal is political” in her 1969 essay on the subject. Responding to critiques that groups constituted by women to reflect on political issues were simply “therapy” groups, Hanisch wrote:

the reason I participate in these meetings is not to solve any personal problem. One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution. I went and I continue to go to these meetings because I have gotten a political understanding which all my reading, all my “political discussion,” all my “political action,” all my four-odd years in the movement never gave me. I am getting a gut understanding of everything as opposed to the esoteric, intellectual understandings and noblesse oblige feelings I had in “other people’s” struggles [Hanisch 1969].

Hanisch recognized that reflecting on one’s lived experiences is central to the development of political ideas. She pointed to the interrelatedness of multiple forms of knowledge – intuitive, experiential and academic – thus deconstructing an implicit hierarchy, and lent authority to individual experiences. She articulated then what Judith Butler later qualified as, “a commitment to grounding theory in lived experience” (Butler 1988, 522) where subjective experience is influenced by “existing political arrangements,” and that it also “affects and structures those arrangements in turn” (522). Hanisch proposed that personal problems are inherently political because they reflect social realities, and that these issues must be addressed through collective action. Ultimately, her call to legitimize the experiences of individuals was geared towards collective well-
being and change. Her work helps us understand how mindfulness, as a personal practice that explores our everyday experiences, can inform collective action.

A political self extends beyond the physical body and into the emotional realm. Black feminist “love-politics” places love, as a deeply personal and human experience, at the center of political work. Marginalized from mainstream white feminism, black women, argues Jennifer Nash, articulated a “black feminist love-politics” which is simultaneously “a practice of the self and a nonidentitarian strategy for constructing political communities” (Nash 2011, 1). She locates the roots of love politics in the Combahee River Collective, which declared: “our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue to struggle and work” (Combahee River Collective 1983, 267). The Collective recognized not only that the personal is political, but also that political liberation comes through cultivating loving relationships with the self and others. Black feminist love-politics, argues Nash, “requires subjects to work on their selves in order to transcend their selves” (Nash 2011, 10), to acknowledge and embrace the struggles of life. Self-love opens the individual’s capacities to love, and therefore enables a political consciousness that stems from the heart and is more inclusive. Chicana Studies Professor Chela Sandoval writes that love has the capacity to generate a “differential consciousness” (Sandoval 2000, 140.0). Love, though rooted in the individual, is also intersubjective in nature. Similarly, a mindfulness practice that is rooted in individuals can expand out to be inclusive and be integral to collective change.

Love, as simultaneously internal and external, individual and shared, has been used as a powerful political strategy by contemporary anti-capitalist autonomous movements, such as the Zapatistas and the Argentinian horizontalists to create new
modes of subjectivity and relationships. These movements arose in response to neoliberal globalization policies, including the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which signaled a global increase in wealth and political disparities between rich and poor. These groups are fighting for autonomy, *autogestión* (autonomous self-organized projects), sovereignty and justice. The Zapatistas have served as an inspiration for anti-neoliberal movements around the globe. These movements ask us to question the separation between the self and social. I explore this relationship to develop an understanding of how mindfulness can be used to generate collective transformation.

The Zapatistas challenge this dichotomous relationship by proposing the inherent unity of self and collective through the phrase: “yo soy nosotros.”14 This phrase poses a “challenge to the figure of the individual author, the individual subject” (El Kilombo 2007, 24). While they reject competitive individualism, the Zapatistas highlight unconditional respect for individuality, as radical uniqueness. They believe that “the only real guarantee of individuality, of subjectivity, is the collective” (24). They argue for a recognition of individuality and difference which “embraces the individual, with [their] faults and [their] strengths and [their] defects” and this amounts to love (24). They call for an extension of this mutual respect beyond the human realm to the earth as well, mandating that a care for the land is essential to sustaining just relationships and inciting political transformation.

In Argentina, horizontalism, which draws inspiration from the Zapatistas, is about shifting people’s ways of being in the world. Horizontalism arose in Argentina in

---

14 In an interview between artists Caleb Duarte – who works with Zapatista communities, and Emory Douglas – a former member of the Black Panther Party – Huey Newton is recognized as having coined the term, “I am we” in English, which has its roots as an old African saying. Therefore, there is a potent connection between these two revolutionary movements, which locate the ‘I’ as being inextricable from the ‘we’ (Marino).
response to a devastating collapse of the Argentine economy in 2001, which left many
people with frozen bank accounts and no help from the state (Sitrin 2012). In the face of
systemic, political-economic failure, people turned to each other for mutual aid and
support.

Land and workplace were recuperated, a barter network of millions of people
developed, and the movements linked with one another. The state and forms of
representation were the problem; *autogestión*, autonomy, and horizontalism were
the tools for creating new subjectivities and dignity [Sitrin 2012, xiii].

Horizontalism is not only about new forms of collective organization, but also about
shifting how people relate on an interpersonal level. Integral to their political revolution
has been the creation of a renewed sociality which prioritizes relationships of care over
consumption.

Love, as the core of interpersonal relationality, is central to the horizontalist
movement, whose members believe that “if you begin with loving yourself first and if
you can love those in your immediate surrounding, you have the greatest potential for
transformation” and that “everything depends on how far one wishes to go in creating a
new society” (Sitrin 2012, 8). The power of love to transform relationality renders it a
powerful tool for social transformation, for inciting a rupture in relationships that have
been “deeply affected by capitalism and hierarchy” (9). A politics of love ultimately
serves to connect us and enables collective struggles against relationships of oppression
and exploitation.

If the emotional realm is in fact contiguous between bodies, rather than
contained to individual bodies, then there is greater possibility to harness it in service of
political change, as these various movements I have described above tell us. Perhaps the
self is “a dreamy, hovering, not-quite-there thing. A fabulation that enfolds the
intensities it finds itself in” (Stewart 2007, 58). An affective politics relies on the
relationships between bodies, in ways that extend beyond intellect. The affective subject is not isolated but “a collection of trajectories and circuits” (59). The challenge is to discover and nurture interconnections with other beings.

These examples are instructive of alternative imaginations of sociality and already-existing radical and holistic practices of self-care and social change. They offer us something different from a corporatized version of self-care whose purpose is merely self-improvement in order to better fit or cope with the contemporary market economy.

I finally turn to the work of feminist geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham, who have made remarkable contributions to research on alternative economies. They locate the root of social strife and inequality in the capitalist economy, which, by discouraging collectivity and collaborative consumption, isolates individuals. Their work seeks to dismantle capitalism as an impenetrable force, and to recognize actually existing anti-capitalist economic activity. In *A Postcapitalist Politics*, they address “the discursive imaginings and practical enactments we associate with building a different economy” in order to make space for transformation (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxii). They inspire a new political imaginary based in cooperation.

Like others I have discussed above, they present the concept of “revolutionary self-cultivation” as a tool of resistance that functions at the level of the individual but is also inherently tied to the collective (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxxv). The authors recognize that, in order for individuals to be effective producers of capitalism, they must be educated to serve the market; revolutionary and transgressive self-cultivation ruptures this reproduction of capitalist bodies. Certain practices undertaken by the individual, “[cultivate] the positive capacities of the self to be virtuous – loving, compassionate, [and] happy in the happiness of others,” and consequently permit “less investment in the
self of ego and identity, greater openness to change (in the self and world), and enlarged capacities for joy and connection” (130).

They cite ‘lovingkindness’ meditation – a traditionally Buddhist technique that is commonly taught in mindfulness meditation – as having the potential to generate and sustain movement toward a world beyond capitalism: “As a discipline of the mind-body the practice of lovingkindness requires consciously abiding by the heart, extending friendly feelings first to oneself and then radiating them outward in ever widening circles to eventually embrace all sentient beings” (Gibson-Graham 2006, 130). Lovingkindness transforms the self and opens possibilities for collective action and liberation that extend beyond the self. This practice, then, produces a sentiment of interconnectedness similar to the “yo soy nosotros” that is expressed by the Zapatistas. Their proposition is exciting, as meditation can be a technique that, “promote[s] new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of [the] kind of individuality that has been imposed on us for centuries” (Foucault 1997, 336). In other words, lovingkindness has the potential to intervene in a capitalist sociality and create a break in the system.

**Meditation as an Intervention**

I look to lovingkindness and related techniques to explore the radical potential of mindfulness. These techniques, when integrated properly into a sustained meditation practice, would not only work to promote interconnectedness, but also to generate forms of sociality that encourage mutual support and aid. A ‘lovingkindness’ practice – which exemplifies a common format that I have encountered numerous times – instructs the meditator to engage in a practice that is “the softening of the mind and heart, an opening to deeper and deeper levels of the feeling of kindness, of pure love” (Loving-
Kindness Meditation 2015). Ideally, this meditation would be practiced in a room full of people, with a facilitator, so that there is a clearly simultaneous individual and collective experience. The practice makes use of a progression from the cultivation of self-love to the love of all beings as a continuum. It concludes with the phrase: “May all beings in the air, on land, and in the water be safe, happy, healthy, and free from suffering” (Loving-Kindness Meditation 2015). Throughout the meditation, the practitioners remain seated on their cushions, and though they have focused their attention on their heart-center, they have not taken any tangible actions. However, they ideally conclude the practice with feelings of warmth and love that will affect their interactions once they return to the activities of daily life.

Perhaps, to cultivate an ethical self is also to forget the self, and to deprioritize the ego. In the teachings of the Buddha, the human self does not exist. Meditation practices are intended to “suspend habitual ways of experiencing the self” (Carvalho 2013, 18). To forget the self is to enable openings to other realms of experiences. When an individual is more attuned to the experiences of interconnectedness with other beings, both human and nonhuman, they can exhibit a greater capacity for compassion for diverse life forms and their environment.

I focus on Buddhism in particular because it is a spiritual tradition that places meditation – the individual’s “mystical” experience – at its center (Ataria 2018, 45). In Buddhist meditation “one loses the first-personal bodily egocentric perceptive upon the world” (Ataria 2018, 44). The meditative consciousness breaks down boundaries between self and other. Buddhist meditation is meant to subdue the practitioner’s ego,

---

15 Siddhartha Gautama lived in North India in the 6th century BC is often referred to as Buddha, and his teachings as “Buddhism” (Carvalho 2013, 18).
and ultimately, to absolve it altogether. In Buddhism the self is merely an illusion that impedes the path towards enlightenment.

A central insight of the Buddha, also directly realized by generations of meditation practitioners over the centuries, is that our common experience of an independent and permanent self is an illusion. In deep meditation practice, this sense of self is directly observed to be constructed out of the constantly changing mental continuum of form, sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness. An aspect of this experiential deconstruction of the self is the realization of interconnection, or what Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has termed “interbeing.” This insight appears contrary to a sense of separateness and independence that may seem fundamental to Western culture and modern life [Kasznia 2010].

Buddhist understandings of selfhood present a challenge to “the foundational Western notion of an enduring, unitary subject” (Panaïoti 2015, 502), separate from other such subjects. At the core of Buddhism is a denial of the ontological existence of the self (Ho 1995, 121). Buddhist philosophy elicits a connection between our ties to distinctive selfhood and the experience of suffering. Therefore, “self-renunciation” is the key to liberation from suffering. Through an abandonment of the self, we attain interdependence.

Buddhism has worked out an elaborate system of practice to enable one to attain transcendence. Meditation is an instrumentality central to this system. In a state of transcendent consciousness, the subject-object distinction disappears. Cognition is suspended; the self is absent [Ho 1995, 122]. Through this dissolution of self and human cravings, the path to enlightenment becomes clear.

Buddhism also proposes a relationship between the concept of “no self” and a spirit of altruism.

The cultivation of mindfulness and other meditation practices, combined with sustained changes in behavior – following vows, acting according to strict moral principles, etcetera – are strongly recommended with a view to cultivating good moral character and attaining genuine insight in the truth of no self [Panaïoti 2015, 504].
A conceptual understanding alone cannot facilitate true detachment from ego, as meditation practice is what enables us to embody “good and moral character.” In some practitioners’ opinions, mindfulness practice could be the key to transcending the investment in a rigid and corrosive sense of self.

Thich Nhat Hanh describes meditation as being fundamental to uncovering our truest selves or “non selves.” Nhat Hanh’s definition of “true self” is based in Buddhist conceptions of selfhood, and may be a misnomer, because it actually implies an erasure of the concept of self altogether. He understands the term to mean non-self, the awareness that the self is made only of non-self elements. There’s no separation between self and other, and everything is interconnected. Once you are aware of that you are no longer caught in the idea that you are a separate entity [McLeod 2006].

In other words, for Nhat Hanh, “true self” is the means to move beyond the ego, and to recognize the interconnections between all beings. Nhat Hanh’s ideas sit well with Butler’s theory of performativity, because he also denies the notion of a fixed self (Butler 1988). For Nhat Hanh, meditation is a means to practice this radical interconnectedness.

Lovingkindness, as a repeated practice of mindfulness, is performative (Butler 1988) in that the meditative self is remade through repeated meditation practice. The repetitive cultivation of compassion, which initially might seem forced or contrived, ultimately has the potential to shift a practitioner’s experience of reality.

Lovingkindness practice is also inextricable from a simpler seated meditation practice. Noah Levine, founder of Dharma Punx – a meditation group based in Los Angeles, California that synthesizes punk ideologies with Buddhism – describes his own path to lovingkindness practice:

In the beginning I thought that meditation was just mindfulness, and that all this compassion and love shit was something extra … As my practice developed over the years, I began to see through my own direct experience how these qualities of
love and compassion were in fact a natural by-product of mindfulness … And the more I paid attention, the more I began to see that underneath the fear-based mentality of judging and clinging, there was a purity of caring and kindness. I have come to believe that these states of generosity, compassion, loving-kindness, appreciation, and equanimity are natural by-products of the meditative path. I’ve also come to see the real importance of cultivating these qualities, of putting energy into a systematic and intentional cultivation of these five heart-mind states. Why wait till they arise spontaneously if some intentional uncovering will allow access to freedom more quickly? That intentional uncovering through meditation is facilitated by the process of cultivation and abandonment and by an appreciation of our interconnectedness with others [Levine 2007, 66].

As Levine points out, lovingkindness, and its root, compassion, already exists within us; meditation practice is a means of drawing it out. Within a Buddhist framework, learning is a process of uncovering our preexisting knowledge (Sedgewick 2003). Lovingkindness practice, as an approach to self-cultivation, assumes that it takes time to uncover this fundamental compassion, and also presumes that as humans we all have the ability to be compassionate. As a performative practice, lovingkindness has the potential to be deeply impactful as a means to come into ourselves as compassionate beings. Many mindfulness practitioners, including Emmye Vernet, incorporate lovingkindness into their practice.

**The Radical Potential of Mindfulness**

Emmye Vernet and I share a mutual interest in meditation. I met her through a mutual friend, my roommate at Urban Adamah, about half a year ago. Since our first phone call at the end of last summer, Emmye and I have engaged in numerous conversations about the importance of meditation practice in justice work. We have also spoken with a number of meditation teachers, such as Lama Rod Owens. More recently, we have been collaborating with staff at IBME – of which she is also an alumna – on various projects. Emmye is currently in her junior year at Clark University, where she is
working on a thesis on Buddhism and activism. An organizer and a meditation practitioner, she is devoted to melding the realms of justice and mindfulness.

Emmye began her organizing work as a student at Clark University. During her first year, she did labor organizing for the custodial union. She has participated in and supported racial justice initiatives. Lately, her efforts have been focused on climate justice with Divest Clark, a student organization working to push the university to divest its assets from the fossil fuel industry. Additionally, she has served as a member of the Activist Coordinating Coalition, a committee working to unite and enhance communication between activist groups on campus. In this past year, Emmye has moved her work off campus, and has started a “radical sangha,” a community-based group in Worcester, Massachusetts that explores the intersections of meditation practices, dharma, and social justice.

Emmye grew up in the midst of mindfulness. Both of her parents practice meditation, and her aunt teaches mindfulness. Despite their encouragement, Emmye remained uninterested in meditation for the first eighteen years of her life. She did attend a retreat with IBME prior to beginning college, and though she had a positive experience there, she did not directly incorporate meditation practice into her life post-retreat. However, when she began experiencing what she described as “debilitating anxiety” during her freshman year of college, she rediscovered mindfulness teachings. Through her personal meditation practice, Emmye developed methods to cope with her anxiety, and now no longer suffers from serious anxiety. Unlike Dakota, who was instructed to meditate to ameliorate her anxiety (see Chapter 1), Emmye decided to do it on her own terms, drawing on preexisting knowledge that she had developed when she was younger. Her commitment to her practice has remained strong. Her practice is simple: she sits for
thirty minutes every morning when she wakes up, focusing on the breath. A few times
each week, she engages in an additional practice of lovingkindness, after her sitting
period. She also makes it a point to read mindfulness or dharma-related books as often
as possible, because they help her comprehend her practice at an intellectual level and
integrate it into her life off-the-cushion.

Emmye describes her meditation practice as “truly transformational.” Once we
have a chance to sit with ourselves, we may begin to realize that many of the things we
have been conditioned to care about – like material pleasures – are of little importance to
our inner selves, and that our core experiences are in fact rich and complex. Meditation
practice has permitted Emmye to witness the functioning of her mind with a distance
that permits her to act more thoughtfully. Simple actions, like breathing, take on a new
significance when we pay attention. Moreover, Emmye’s relationship to her own
emotions has changed drastically during the course of her practice. She recognizes that
her practice has transformed the way that she views her mind, as an observable entity,
rather than as having the power to dictate her lived experience. Meditation has given her
distance from her mind and has taught her that she does not have to believe her
thoughts. She notices when her mind is merely creating torment. Therefore, she is more
able to trust her own heart, and accept herself as she is.

Emmye recognizes that, in her own practice, she has become adept at noticing
distracting thought-patterns and therefore come to realize what is at the core of her
mind. In our current era, distractions are omnipresent, as Nhat Hanh reminds us:

Practicing meditation in this kind of society is very difficult. Everything seems to
work in concert to try to take us away from our true self. We have thousands of
things, like videotapes and music, which help us be away from ourselves.
Practicing meditation is to be aware, to smile, to breathe. These are on the
opposite side. We go back to ourselves in order to see what is going on, because
to meditate means to be aware of what is going on [Nhat Hanh 1987, 17].
At its core meditation is a practice that begins with a focus on the self. However, this does not mean that the practice is selfish, as I have discussed above. As Emmye explained:

The idea of not really having a self, or not really being a fixed self, this understanding of inherent interconnectedness of all energy and life and beings, is also fundamental to a lot of what I believe. In physical, material reality ... yes, I am Emmye. But, in a broader reality, I’m not one fixed entity. I’m comprised of everything I’ve ever seen or felt or touched or said, and those things form my connections with other beings. This house that I live in was built by people. The idea of me being an isolated self is not even real. I am part of everything, and I believe that we’re all inherently interconnected. I think that coming to understand our interconnectedness comes from being able to quiet our minds, and to, theoretically, see the true nature of reality.

Although she regularly practices alone, she enjoys group meditation and the beautiful collective energy it gives rise to. She feels joy in being with others silently, and notes that we do not have to verbally or physically engage in order to feel connected to others. For Emmye, to meditate with others is to remember that all beings are always interconnected, even when we feel lonely or isolated.

Emmye further cultivates these sentiments in her own lovingkindness practice:

It’s the lovingkindness and compassion practices that are really important for my organizing and justice work. When I’m practicing metta – lovingkindness meditation – and I say, “may all beings everywhere be safe and protected from harm; may all beings everywhere be at ease,” in my meditation, I feel them so deeply. It’s that deep sense of compassion that is almost heartbreakingly. In my meditation practice I am able to see how this oppressive world, how much knowing that exists, hurts my heart. It’s from that place of lovingkindness and compassion that I want to do my organizing. It’s really hard because there’s a lot of anger and ego in organizing. When I first started organizing, I felt like I had to take on everything – from lots of logistical labor and coordination, to the critiques and pushback that our group would get. The ways that I felt personally responsible were really rooted in ego for me – feeling like I needed to be validated as a "rad organizer," and then getting down on myself when I wasn't living up to that standard. While some of those feelings were self-inflicted, I also see them as part of the larger cultures of the student groups that I was a part of, where organizers would often argue for the sake of arguing, love to take credit for ideas or success, etc. I felt like everything was my personal responsibility and that was a big factor that lead to the intense burnout that I ended up feeling only
a year later. Since stepping into my mindfulness practice more seriously, I have been able to develop a completely different understanding of self and ego. I am able to have more clarity and less clinging to being right or wrong about things, which often makes it feel like I move a lot more slowly than I did before. I have more balance in understanding that not everything is my individual responsibility, and that means I am able to dedicate myself to things that I really care about, rather than taking on everything. Something that I’m constantly juggling is, “how do I balance this real urge and desire and pain that I have for the state of this world, which is so unjust, with remembering to have compassion for all beings everywhere?” And, that really means all beings everywhere, not just some.

Her lovingkindness practice reflects a deep sense of compassion, which Nhat Hanh describes as a “vow [undertaken] in order to love and protect the life of people, animals, plants, and minerals … and to live in harmony [with all beings]” (Nhat Hanh 1987, 89). Emmye uses meditation to learn about herself, but also to develop a deeper connection to the world she inhabits. Her meditation practice has allowed her to approach justice work more thoughtfully.

Emmye’s own interpretations of Buddhist texts align with a radical politics. When asked by a younger practitioner at a recent retreat whether or not dharma has a moral imperative to be an activist, Emmye responded:

Mindfulness, or meditation, came out of the East, out of a society that is extremely different than the society that we know now. When it’s been brought to the West, and the context we live in here, it’s not the same world. So, of course original Buddhist texts weren’t saying, “organize, and mobilize, and overthrow the bourgeoisie.” I get worried that it’s just used as a way to cope with the way things are now and become really complicit.

Here, Emmye points to potential pitfalls of a disengaged practice, like the one I observed at Green Gulch (see Chapter 1). Mindfulness should not be a means to accept the status quo when the existing state of affairs is unjust. Emmye maintains a faith in mindfulness as a method to heal a broken world:

If people were able to see mindfulness for being the source of a turn back to compassion and basic goodness, then I think that … we would be able to actually move towards some social change. Because, these practices are about presence, and basic goodness, and interconnectedness. I especially worry about
the idea that meditation and mindfulness could be used to cope with oppression. Or, on the other hand, to cope with being oppressive. And, we all partake in both being oppressed and being oppressors, so that’s a false dichotomy. But, I really don’t believe that mindfulness and meditation is designed so that we can feel okay with our decisions about exploiting people, or about being exploited. In my mind, meditation and mindfulness is a practice of liberation, and that’s liberation, not just from our minds, but true liberation. These systems that we have – white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, etc. – these are all also systems that we have created, socially. So, if we’re going to deconstruct our minds, and realize “no-self” or “impermanence,” then we also have to realize that these social systems are keeping us from liberation.

Emmye is inspired especially by the work of Lama Rod Owens and Rev. angel Kyodo williams, co-authors of Radical Dharma, the book that made her “feel like it was okay to want to meditate.” She recalls:

Before I read Radical Dharma, I thought that meditation was selfish, and that mindfulness was appropriative, which are questions that I still think about. But, that was the book that was like: “no, you can be a radical and practice mindfulness.” So, that book is really important to me, and also, having seen both of them speak a few times, just the way they take up the room … They are so unapologetic, fierce, and rad, and have an amazing political analysis and meditation teachings, that’s so inspirational. I feel really impacted by being in their presence.

Neither Emmye nor Lama Rod Owens ignore the way that Buddhism has been altered and potentially appropriated in the US. Rather, they recognize this reality and also choose not to disengage with these traditions, which have much to offer. Meditation provides Owens with a means to understand the truth of our reality, and to confront the difficult facets of our human experience. As an anti-capitalist and anarchist, Owens sees numbness as dangerous in that it allows us to be complicit in systems of oppression without feeling. He finds value in sitting with discomfort and letting the fullness of our human experience unfold. Moreover, he is invested in maintaining a compassion practice. Love and “the wish for [himself] and others to be happy” is the core of his compassion work (Owens 2016, 64). He looks to compassion, which he understands as
“a wish for all people to be free from suffering,” as a guide for ethical conduct (Lama Rod Owens 2017) and centers a lovingkindness practice in his own meditation.

However, even as a Buddhist, Owens warns against a Buddhism that is retracted rather than engaged. Buddhism should not be an escape from our social world. He is wary of

A kind of entitled solipsism and air of self-righteousness that can accompany the dharma talk that romanticizes the merits of meditation as a priority and thus as justification for withdrawing from direct forms of engagement with things as they are - with injustice, inequity, pain, injury, disease, violence, apathy, ignorance, neglect [Owens 2016, 81].

While he recognizes the importance of peaceful practice, he also upholds the importance of political action. For him, the collectivity experienced in the meditation hall is the same as that felt out on the streets during protest, and each informs the other. Practicing together is about learning that we are truly interconnected so that we can have trust in one another and unite more powerfully in the fact of injustice.

Although lovingkindness practice provides a clear example of meditation’s potential to incite compassion, this is not the only type of meditation that promotes interconnectedness. Meditation can also be understood similarly to Gandhi’s fasting, as a practice that prepares the subject for political engagement. Nhat Hanh writes on this subject and says that “meditation is not to get out of society, to escape from society, but to prepare for a reentry into society,” and he advocates an “engaged Buddhism” (1987, 51). In other words, meditation is not meant to serve as a respite, or distraction, but is meant to help us clarify our intentions so we can engage in society with more thoughtfulness and compassion. When a meditation practitioner sits still, closes their eyes, and quiets the mind, they resist action and make space for transformation. Even Classical Greek philosophers, such as Plato, held that “only when the self is fully
balanced … that it can act virtuously,” and understood the importance of self-work in the political sphere (Plato 1992).

Meditation practice, because it asks us to pause, sit still, and come into deeper awareness, can also be used to restore the activist whose work is emotionally taxing. One prisoner rights advocate explains:

For those of us on the front lines of advocacy, social justice, and movement-building, if we don't practice mindfulness, we will undoubtedly burn out. We will no longer be in service to the work, to our communities, to creating change and cultivating communities that are accountable to one another with compassion, rigor, and fierce vulnerability. We lose our capacity to listen deeply and appropriately respond [Punjabi 2017].

Justice work is difficult, and mindfulness can not only help sustain connectedness and community, it can also serve as a form of decompression, which is ultimately restorative for someone fighting on the front lines. As a transgender rights activist offers:

People who work to liberate marginalized people, they see – personally and often – the effects that oppressive systems and discrimination have on people in real life and they see the suffering surrounding them – especially when it's groups that share the same identity or situations. Not being able to shield yourself from the harsh realities can be very taxing, and it's really easy to get burned out. Without having some way to stay grounded and to stay sane, you won't make it [Punjabi 2017].

Mindfulness can sustain individual activists, but it helps maintains communities as well.

**Jewish Mindfulness**

One of my field sites for thesis research was the Urban Adamah Fellowship, a three month-long “residential leadership training program that combines urban organic farming, mindfulness practice, social action training and progressive Jewish learning and living” based in Berkeley, California (Fellowship 2017). The fellowship simultaneously encouraged personal development and community-building for young adults 20-30 years of age, At Urban Adamah, my self-work was inseparable from my involvement in the
community. During my time in Berkeley, I developed close friendships and deep care for the people I lived and worked with. I consider Urban Adamah to be a home.

At Urban Adamah, mindfulness practice was a part of our daily life. Mindfulness encompassed a wide range of activities, including our Jewish morning service, *Avodat Lev* (Service of the Heart), community listening circle,\(^{16}\) and fellowship meetings.\(^{17}\) *Avodat Lev* made practices of love and compassion central to our everyday experiences. The morning service, which was frequently facilitated by members of the broader Bay Area Jewish community, often included a seated meditation practice, and also integrated Jewish prayer, music, and movement exercises. Although some of the fellows had tried meditation before, most were new to the practice, and certainly had not engaged in regular meditation practice. However, many members of the staff, including the head of the organization, were committed practitioners.

Most of the practices we engaged in – morning prayer, the singing of *nigunim* (religious melodies), and observing *Shabbat* (Sabbath) – were Jewish and religious in origin. Mindfulness practice was more ambiguous, though, and some of the fellows took issue with this ambiguity. At Urban Adamah, we were taught that mindfulness was derived from Buddhism. But the specific history of mindfulness was not traced, and it was grouped together with other Eastern practices like Qigong. One fellow, Gwen, who was especially attached to her family’s Jewish traditions, wondered why we, as Jews, practiced seated meditation.

\(^{16}\) During our community listening circles, which occurred on a biweekly basis, we spent a couple hours doing a listening practice, wherein each community member had a chance to voice their internal monologue without response. According to a description on Urban Adamah’s website, these circles permitted, “us to practice deep listening, empathy and compassion, and authentic sharing” (Fellowship 2017).

\(^{17}\) During fellowship meetings, we were meant to engage with one another mindfully, in order to create, “conscious, kind community” (Fellowship 2017).
In the past few decades, especially in places like Berkeley, Jews have increasingly practiced mindfulness meditation. Many contemporary Jewish teachers of meditation have reconstituted Buddhist meditation within a Jewish framework (Sigalow 2017). Still, mindfulness can be disruptive to some Jews’ sense of cultural tradition because it was not integrated into Jewish communities until recently. Therefore, people like Gwen can experience these practices – which some would qualify as New Age – not only as unrooted from a specific history, but also as uprooting them from the Jewish community of practice they were accustomed to. Most people at Urban Adamah, however, found value in meditative practices as they were integrated with Jewish ritual.

One of my informants, Ilana, a staff member, described mindfulness as being threaded through so much stuff we do here. Certainly, in the fellowship, you see it explicitly through meditation in Lev. And you see it in singing, which we don’t talk about much, but to me feels like the primary mindfulness practice of the fellowship. You see it in Nonviolent Communication. You see it in the sit-spots at the end of Sadeh (field). You see it in our welcoming Shabbat ritual. In one-word breath Shema (morning prayer), in the trust-walk the first day, in listening circle, all sorts of ways.

For Ilana, a dedicated meditation practitioner of mindfulness meditation who sits daily, attends a weekly meditation group in Berkeley, and also attends multiple retreats each year, mindfulness was a way of being at Urban Adamah. Furthermore, she clarified that mindfulness is not confined to seated meditation practice. In fact, the organization described mindfulness as encompassing “meditation, singing, and other grounding practices” (Fellowship 2017).

Ilana explained to me that for her:

---

18 A core aspect of the community-building portion of the fellowship was our training in Nonviolent Communication, which is an approach to nonviolent living that is designed to enable harmony and peaceful coexistence.

19 Sadeh was our name for the time we spent working on the farm at Urban Adamah.
meditation at Urban Adamah was about practicing kindness. Because you’re seeing stuff that bothers you, or that is unpleasant, and you’re having to respond to it with some equanimity and some kindness. You practice that over and over again, every time that you bring the mind back. You don’t, like, jerk the mind back. And, I think that that can really inform your interactions [with] and reactions to people. People are so much harder because it’s fast, and it’s complicated, and the story has such a pull. But, it’s just advanced practice to [be] still and [be] kind. I definitely see that as helpful.

She meditated with a focus on the self, but in service of a broader community of people.

Like Ilana, I experienced our Shabbat rituals as an extension of mindfulness practice. Most weeks, we gathered together just before sundown on Friday night for an evening meal and ritual. We lit the Shabbat candles, recited the Kiddush (Sanctification), blessed the challah (bread), and concluded our meal with song. This marked the beginning of a daylong period of rest, during which some of us kept our phones off, left our emails unchecked, and set the intention of spending quality time with one another. Shabbat was a period of pause, an inward-turn, similar to meditation. We concluded our rest on Saturday evenings with a Havdalah, a farewell ceremony to honor the passing of Shabbat, during which we used wine, spices, and a candle as we recited blessings and wished for the holiness of Shabbat to remain with us in the coming week.

Much of our experience at Urban Adamah was communal. Even our process of meal preparation was collectivized, from our shared grocery budget, to tag-teamed expeditions to the co-op, to cooking and eating each meal together. With the exclusion of weekend days, some of which we had off from scheduled activity, we spent hardly any time alone. Usually, the only time we had to ourselves, in complete silence, was when we sat in meditation. During interviews, many of the fellows agreed that this time was central to the success of the experience, that meditation was not only a much-needed pause from a busy schedule, but also provided us with space to look internally.
Seated meditation was also integrally connected to Jewish prayer and song.

During our conversation, Ilana made this connection:

I think the primary mindfulness practice, or the primary meditation practice we do is noticing what’s going on around and not adding anything. Right? Like, you don’t add judgement, you don’t try to amplify good feelings, or minimize bad feelings, you’re just totally noticing what’s happening. Singing is not like that. You are trying to do something. And, also, singing could be just the same as praying, for me – that’s my own personal bias … So, singing is not like that, because you’re being creative and you’re doing a lot of responding. You hear something, and you copy it. And, I think for a lot of people, it amplifies positive feelings, instead of just nothing. But, it feels to me like metta practice, like lovingkindness practice … They’re things that feel the same to me, that aren’t mindfulness practice, but are like it, because there’s some content there, instead of just listening. Or, “may we all be happy” is like our little version of metta, that feels good, because you’re engaging … People feel really present when they sing.

Ilana connected singing with mindfulness. She referenced one particular song, not a Hebrew prayer but one with English words, that we sang regularly. The lyrics went: “may we all be happy, may we all be free, may we all be loved, all of us as one.” This song also harkens back to the Zapatista phrase “yo so nosotros.” Each time we sang, we would move through each member of the circle, singing their name in place of “we” and sending them love. Often, singing this would bring tears to our eyes. We had cultivated such a deep care for one another that these words held weight.

Another informant, Josh, also expressed the centrality of singing and prayer:

Early on this experience, someone told us this story about minyans, and about how, when you have the same minyan every day – you know, it’s just ten people coming together to recite the same prayers every day – you kind of get into a groove with it, and people start to be able to do all kinds of crazy things with the harmony, and it becomes this really grounding and creative space. But, also, this very communal thing. And, I remember before I came here I read this book by Aryeh Kaplan, who is Orthodox, but is really into what he calls “Jewish meditation,” and he has this whole spiel about how there are actually indigenous meditative practices in Judaism, especially in Kabbalah, but he really conflates prayer and meditation a lot. He kind of drives at the same thing, talking about how powerful it is to be with a consistent group that is doing the same thing every day. And, I think I’ve definitely experienced that here, in our group. There

---

20 A minyan is a group of at least ten Jews who come together to pray.
are definitely the hits, the ones we all like to sing, and the hits we’ve kind of invented … And somebody can just start it, and everyone else will come in. It’s really beautiful. A lot of us have had experiences where we’ve felt really swept away while we’re all singing together … I think that doing those practices together has been a really, really, really crucial part of how we’ve managed to come together as a community. I think, in a lot of ways, it feels like those practices are kind of the glue that binds all of us together. And, I feel like we’d all be a little lost in this experience if we didn’t start our day with Lev, and if we didn’t come together to meditate, and to pray, and to sing. I think … you have the meditative practices that ground us all here and ground us all in this context where we’re together.

For Josh, too, meditation and prayer were at times inextricable. He used the minyan as an analogy for our mindfulness practice that summer, one which required a sustained commitment to practice and to one another.

At Urban Adamah, the work we did on and off the cushion enabled us to form a community that encouraged mutual aid that persisted through more difficult moments. Given that we spent so much time together, conflicts, even over small things like laundry and house cleanliness, were inevitable. There were certainly moments of tension during the summer, but we engaged conflict in a way that enabled resolution and concluded our time together with feelings of love. The task of developing an intentional community is certainly difficult and requires each member’s sustained commitment to other members and the group as a whole.

As a group of young Jews, we represented a diversity of class background, sexual identity, religiosity, and political views. For American Jews, Israel tends to be the most divisive and central political issue. Our group included individuals with a range of perspectives on Israel, ranging from a self-proclaimed “post-structuralist” who eagerly shard their pro-Palestinian views with me on numerous occasions, to a member who spoke lovingly about their time in Israel and equated pro-Israel sentiment with being Jewish. Multiple members planned to go on to do peacebuilding in the Israel-Palestine
conflict. Whereas in other contexts, these divisions could have led our community to selfimplode, at Urban Adamah there was space for compassionate disagreement. Rather than ignoring our dissonant political ideas, we were encouraged to bring them into conversation.

At one point, we spent an entire evening engaging in a facilitated conversation on Israel-Palestine that began with a seated meditation practice and concluded with song. When I began the fellowship, I was filled with dread, certain that I would alienate someone with my own views on Israel that were too far to the left. Other people had similar feelings of anticipation. During those few hours, the heterogeneity of our group was evident, and yet we made space for each member to speak their mind. Some expressed uncertainty and others espoused clearly held values. Lots of ideas were offered. Over the course of a few hours, we took breaks to meditate and reflect on what we had heard and said. At the end, we came together in a circle, tightly-knit, our bodies pressed close, and sang nignim.

We emerged from the conversation with a sense of harmony that had been lacking prior, almost as if we had finally been able to release a collective burden. I was not alone in feeling this way. During breakfast the next morning, we all sat around the kitchen table, and we exchanged our feelings of relief and happiness. This was not to say that we left the conversation resolved. In fact, after this initial talk, I engaged in numerous conversations with other fellows about the conflict, with far more eagerness and trust than I had before. I developed compassion for those with opposing views to my own, began to sit with the complexities of the issue, and humanized all of my peers. This process allowed me to engage thoughtfully and critically with the subject matter, rather than completely closing myself off to opposing viewpoints.
Here, mindfulness was powerful because it enabled me to approach a difficult conversation with compassion at the center. I withheld judgments on other community members and attended to listening. These practices have possibility outside of a uniform Jewish community as well. Meditation enables us to sit with the hardships and hurt of the world and truly feel all of it. They enable activism rooted in love and compassion.

During the conversation about Israel and Palestine at Urban Adamah, we did not alleviate any actual suffering through tangible work. However, this dialogue opened many of us to new ways of engaging with the conflict, which informed future action.

As fellows at Urban Adamah, our relationships continued beyond the span of the summer. Many of us live in the Bay Area and see one another often. Beyond our cohort, there is an active email listserv that provides updates on community members with information about various trainings, jobs and events. We all keep in touch and support each other even when we are not living in the same physical location.

Though the activities of the fellowship occupied nearly all of our time, some of us also engaged in activism outside of the context of Urban Adamah. Along with a few other fellows, I attended meetings with IfNotNow, an organization comprised of young American Jews that opposes the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. At these gatherings, we encountered other young Jews who were also invested in Israel-Palestine activism.

After the conclusion of the fellowship, one fellow moved to Israel to pursue work with an organization that supports women who are currently engaged in or working their way out of prostitution. During her time there, she has come to understand more deeply the systemic violence that affects Arabs living in Israel. Whereas previously, including during our time in the fellowship, she may have been more
attached to maintaining a Jewish state, her recent time in Israel has caused her views to shift. She shared with me that our conversations during the summer played a role in her changing ideas.

Rabbi Deborah, one of the guest-facilitators of *Lev*, told me of her own experiences on interfaith retreats, which are especially potent in light of political conflict between religious groups:

In the times that we’re living in right now, every tool in the toolbox is needed … Every tradition has its own strengths and its own kernels of wisdom, and we need all of them. I feel like the work I do that’s the most gratifying is in environments where that is known and cultivated. Like this retreat I just did, we had a Buddhist teacher, me, a Christian teacher, and a Muslim teacher. And, we were completing each other’s sentences, as it were. Thinking, “what is the essence of this in your tradition, and how is that talked about in my tradition? What do you have that I don’t have in my tradition, or that I haven’t found yet?” That, to me, seems like what’s really going to be able to get us through spiritually, to be able to do the actions that we need. And, I’m terrified, actually. At some essential level, I’m not. But, there are levels at which I’m really terrified about what’s going to happen. And, at the same time, just to be able to go to this retreat center in the redwoods for three days, I feel like a different person. We did sitting meditation, prayers, we did chanting, we conversed with each other about how spirituality helps us with the uncertainty of our lives.

Rabbi Deborah recalled one especially potent experience from that retreat, when all of the participants reflected collectively on the then recent Orlando shootings. She, along with other religious leaders, read excerpts from newspaper articles talking about the shootings at the nightclub in Orlando. Afterwards, everyone meditated together, as a group. For her, that was a powerful experience, because she had the space to process on an individual level but was also supported by all of the people seated around her, as she supported them, in turn. These people, and their mutual commitment to grieving, served as a container for the meditation practice. Through their physical presence, and willingness to listen to one another, they created a space that fostered compassion for the suffering of individuals they had never come to know.
Rabbi Deborah’s work has extended off-the-cushion as well. She facilitates workshops to train activists in spiritual practice, following Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s idea that “prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive” (Heschel 1996, 263). Every second Sunday, she leads a meditation group at the local Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Detention Center. Participants meditate publicly in protest of the incarceration of undocumented residents. They take to the streets in solidarity with family members and use their bodies to contest unjust policies. These practitioners perform resistance through a meditation practice that is at once personal and political.
To take this posture itself is to have the right state of mind. There is no need to obtain a special state.

- Shunryu Suzuki
Epilogue: Moving Forward

“We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable – but then, so did the divine right of kings.”

-Ursula Le Guin

During my sophomore year of college, a teacher of mine at Wesleyan, Professor Rosario, led a workshop for our “Anthropology of Social Movements” class that provoked my interest in meditation as a radical practice. She gathered class members together in the campus meditation room and read passages from J.K. Gibson-Graham’s *A Postcapitalist Politics*. We then sat together in silence and meditated. Next, she led us in an exercise to imagine post-capitalism. We were encouraged to brainstorm ways of shifting our social interactions to be more caring and collective, even amidst a competitive university. She urged each of us to make a simple shift in our lives, to experiment with a new way of being. I came away from the workshop feeling inspired to dig deeper into my meditation practice, to think about it as a political practice, rather than merely a personal one.

Neoliberal capitalism may seem impenetrable, but, as Professor Rosario once reminded me, there is always a possibility for breaks in the system. Activists have long used the imagination as a powerful tool to reconceive our world and generate social change. When we cannot find solace in our current moment it helps to look ahead, reimagine, and build a different future. Right now, this means creating a future rich with compassion, rather than rife with alienation. Mindfulness can be used to facilitate this process.
We should move forward with a version of mindfulness that encourages us to explore our interconnectedness, not one that reproduces neoliberal narratives. The popular media continues to spread corporatized mindfulness, bursting with buzzwords and promises of self-improvement. In the September 2016 edition of TIME Magazine, there are articles on: “stress-busting techniques,” a “mindfulness diet,” and gadgets that give you “a daily dose of Zen.” These ideas merely reiterate our role as “productive” selves. They perpetuate the status quo, and we should continue to be cautious of them.

Of course, I do not intend to write-off all corporatized mindfulness as inherently harmful. Doing so would merely reproduce problematic notions of a “pure” meditation. Through the example of the Mindful Life Project, I explored the tensions between mindfulness as a bureaucratic practice and as a transformative one. We should consider the complexity of that instance as we look to the future. Mindfulness can provide an avenue to social change regardless of the context in which it is taught. It is possible that the most important work is the imagining that we do in conjunction with our practice, the other worlds we dream of and work to create.

As corporatized mindfulness spreads, it reinforces the notion that capitalism is totality. But, all hope is not lost. Graeber (2015) challenges this narrative of capitalism when he argues that the imagination is used to construct our contemporary reality, as well as the future. His ideas parallel Buddhist impermanence, which throws the permanence of our material reality into question. Perhaps dreams of radical social transformation will seem less “unrealistic” if we recognize that “we are used to imagining ourselves primarily as consumers,” but that there is room for this understanding to shift and change (Graber 2015 510; 531). Imagination is not only a tool for radical reconstructions of our world; it informs our everyday existence.
It is from this point that we can build utopia. As queer theorist Ann Cvetkovich reminds us, simple daily habits, like meditation, can be central to our construction of new worlds. These practices constitute what she calls the “utopia of ordinary habit” (Cvetkovich 2012, 202). For example, lovingkindness meditation can be integrated into our lives as we strive for a renewed sociality. While our dreams for social transformation may be grand, our path towards it can be built through simple changes. As we try to move away from habits of competitiveness and greed, we can establish new ones of compassion and care. We will craft ourselves differently.

Ultimately, I hope to inspire readers with the radical potential of meditation, which I have held close while engaging in this research. I encourage readers to try the practice, perhaps on their own at first, or even to venture to a local meditation group. Needless to say, meditation is not the only option; there are numerous personal practices that people can use to incite change. Most importantly, the political power of personal practices should not be overlooked, as social transformation can begin with simple shifts in our ways of being.

• • •

The conclusion of this thesis marks the end of only one facet of my involvement with mindfulness, an ending that in itself feels incomplete. Still, there are many ideas that I would like to investigate further. I hope to do some of this exploring alongside other young adult meditation practitioners this upcoming summer. In August, I will return to Southern California with IBME to attend a retreat that I have helped plan. The retreat will be a space for young adults to come together to meditate, explore holistic ways of being, and to experience interconnectedness with nature. A central focus will be a curriculum that explores the intersections of justice and mindfulness, which Emmye
Vernet and I are currently working with IBME staff members to create. The retreat is intended to generate a community of practitioners who will convene to discuss the current state of mindfulness in the US and return back to their own communities with new insights.

My involvement with IBME has been a continuous source of inspiration in this process. As a new member of IBME’s Equity and Interdependence Committee, I have participated in discussions with staff members who are committed to making IBME a just, inclusive, and anti-racist organization. In rethinking IBME’s own structure, we have discussed modes of collaborative leadership and mutual support. IBME strives to cultivate young people who are heart-centered, resilient and compassionate through its retreat programs. Mindfulness can provide youth with a lens to understand our interconnections with all beings and the earth, and to create new patterns of individual and social habits.

As we work to deconstruct oppressive institutions and transform our world, intellectual practices play an important role. However, thinking alone will not incite change. Practices rooted in the body, like mindfulness, can radically transform our modes of relating to ourselves and to one another.
Works Cited


Hanisch, Carol. 1959. *The Personal is Political*.


Penny, Laurie. 2016. "Life-Hacks of the Poor and Aimless." *The Baffler*.


