Mindful Calculations:

Mindfulness and Neoliberal Selfhood in North America and Beyond

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July, 2014

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts

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Abstract

The last several decades have been marked by an explosion of popular interest in mindfulness meditation. Presented as a technique for increasing cognitive capacity, treating mental illness, and even boosting corporate profits, mindfulness has generated a huge amount of optimistic excitement, all crystallized around an apparently heart-felt need to get back in touch with the present moment. Often portrayed as a process of deconditioning, mindfulness promises to free practitioners from the negative influence of rampant consumer capitalism and its attendant stressors. But what if the opposite is true? What if mindfulness is actually a kind of reconditioning—a technique of the self—that seeks to remake the subject according to a neoliberal logic of personal responsibility, rational choice, and unfettered agency. Drawing on ethnographic work carried out with young westerners participating in Woodenfish, a month long meditation retreat-*cum*-Buddhist summer school in Southern China, I try to untangle the logic of mindfulness as it is currently constituted in North America: I contend that mindfulness in North America might best be understood in terms of a particular form of self-governance built around the core neoliberal fantasy of unfettered agency; and I comb through cultural theory and contemporary Buddhist philosophy as I seek an understanding of Buddhist practice that might escape the instrumentalizing logic of neoliberal life.

Résumé

Au cours des dernières décennies, la méditation de la pleine conscience n'a cessé de conquérir l'intérêt populaire. Présentée comme une technique pour augmenter les capacités cognitives, soigner les maladies mentales, et même stimuler les profits, la pratique de la pleine conscience génère un enthousiasme grandissant, encouragé d'autant plus par une volonté d'être en phase et ancré dans le moment présent. De par sa réputation en tant que source de «déconditionnement», la pleine conscience offre, à ceux qui la pratiquent, la promesse de les libérer d'un capitalisme effréné et des facteurs de stress qui y sont associés. Et si le contraire était vrai? Et si la pleine conscience était elle-même une forme de conditionnement – une technique de soi – qui vise à reconfigurer le sujet selon une logique néolibérale qui avance la responsabilité personnelle, l'idée du choix rationnel, et une «agentivité» sans limite? Ce travail est le résultat d'un terrain ethnographique entrepris au sein de jeunes occidentaux qui participaient à un mois de retraite de méditation dans une école d'été Bouddhiste en Chine du Sud. L'analyse de ce terrain vise à définir la logique de la pleine conscience telle qu'elle est comprise, pratiquée, et constituée en Amérique du Nord. Dans ce mémoire, je soutiens que la pleine conscience en Amérique du Nord doit être comprise comme une forme du gouvernement de soi construite autour du rêve fondamentalement libéral de l'agentivité sans limite. J'examine donc diverses théories culturelles et la philosophie Bouddhiste contemporaine afin d'engendrer une compréhension de la pratique Bouddhiste qui puisse échapper la logique instrumentaliste de la vie néolibérale.

Acknowledgements

In China: My sincere gratitude to all the students and staff of Woodenfish, without whose openness and insight this project would not have been possible (and who were just generally wonderful people to get to know and spend time with). Thanks also goes to the Woodenfish Foundation and Venerable Yifa, whose generosity made the field component of this research possible. And finally to the monastics at *Shen Shou Shi*, who let us into their lives, fed us, and put up with us, in spite of everything.

Back Home: A huge thank you to Lisa Stevenson, my supervisor, who provided indispensable feedback and direction, and who assured me again and again that everything would be alright. And also to Allan Young, Eduardo Kohn, Sandra Hyde, and Josh Moses, who provided useful feedback, recommendations, and support along the way.

The thesis writing process can be long and circuitous. Long hours spent alone in the echo chamber of one's own mind can lead to losses of perspective and flighty fears of failure ("this is non-sensical garbage!") or fantasies of grandeur ("this is possibly the best thing anyone has ever written!"). I am extremely indebted to Lisa's Tuesday writing group; your own writing was a source of inspiration, and your feedback kept me grounded and on track and made me realize that writing can actually be fun, sometimes. Those weekly meetings kept me sane and productive. A shout out also to the various peeps in anthro, especially Shika (!), Dorte, Darcie, Monica, and Nicole. And thanks to Fiona Gideon Ache and Quentin Stoeffler for translating my abstract and just being generally lovely people.

Finally, thanks goes out to all my friends and family, who put up with me through this sometimes excruciating process. Mum, Dad, Alex, Matt, Kelsey—I couldn't have done it without you. And to SSHRC, whose generous fellowship kept me in food and heat through the long Montreal winter.

[1]

Introduction:

Another Kettle of (Wooden)fish: Expectations of Mindfulness

A budding anthropologist sits on a bench in Victoria Park, on Hong Kong Island. It's morning, 6 AM, the first morning of the trip that will constitute the 'fieldwork' portion of his MA thesis, and the jet lag means that he's already been up for at least an hour. He should be tired, but the mania of beginnings and the mania of exhaustion have combined with the kinetic energy of this dense, electric city; he feels lucid, awake, senses sharp, taking it all in. There's something about the quality of the light, in this place, at this time of day.

6 AM, and even though the streets are still mostly empty, he's already seen so much – garbage piled high outside rundown Cantonese restaurants; businessmen chattering to each other as they wait to catch minibuses to places with names like Happy Valley, Kowloon, Central; A pretty girl walking a husky (!) through Wan Chai's steamy streets; market stalls selling live-but-not-for-long fish that thrash around in the open air, hungry for water. The smells are novel and intoxicating, wet, dank, and

1 A footnote on footnotes: Parts of this text use footnotes in an unusual way. Instead of using them merely to expand on some matter secondary to the 'point' of the text, footnotes are here meant to be read as an essential part of the text itself. In using footnotes in this way, I am influenced by the late american writer of fiction and literary journalism David Foster Wallace. In a letter from 1994, Wallace defends his heavy use of footnotes and endnotes, arguing that footnotes:

> Allow me to make the primary-text an easier read while at once 1) allowing a discursive, authorial intrusive style w/o Finneganizing the story, 2) mimic the information-flood and data-triage I expect'd be an even bigger part of US life 15 years hence, 3) have a lot more technical/medical verisimilitude 4) allow/make the reader go literally physically 'back and forth' in a way that perhaps cutely mimics some of the story's thematic concerns . . . 5) feel emotionally like I'm satisfying your request for compression of text without sacrificing enormous amounts of stuff (Max 2009).

Like Wallace, I hope that my use of footnotes can help develop my argument by consubstantially representing the scatter-brained consequences of the "US life" that eastern religion is so often positioned as a response to.

pungent. And the tastes! Diesel exhaust, cement dust, a bun with something called “pork floss,” all washed down with astringent Kirin™ brand milk tea.

In the park, he watches a group of old ladies doing something like Tai-chi, or maybe some sort of choreographed dance. From tinny speakers the sounds of what he's decided, provisionally, to call “traditional Chinese music” blasts into the morning air. Hong Kong is a hot, wet mess. You can almost see the steam rising from the concrete. A million air conditioners whir in unison, condensation dripping down on unwary passersby. The occasional jogger runs past. Given that his shirt is already soaked through with sweat, he's impressed. Later, a friend of a friend will tell him that in Hong Kong foreigners don't just sweat, they ripen.

He sits on the bench, taking it all in, scribbling it down, trying to note all the little details. Birds screeching in the trees. The swish of old straw brooms on a concrete path. the musty-dank smell of tropical vegetation. Thick description. This is what anthropology is all about, right?

In the summer of 2013, I came to China to do an ethnography about people who come to China. More precisely, I came to study Woodenfish, a month long summer camp *cum* field-school *cum* meditation retreat for 'Westerners' interested in learning about Chinese Buddhism. My decision to choose Woodenfish as a research site came out of a broader interest in mindfulness and other emergent forms of spirituality and their relationship to the changing religious landscape of contemporary North America. What, I wondered, accounts for the massive popularity in North America of beliefs and practices derived from Buddhist spiritualities?

Today, it has become commonplace to hear mental health professionals expound on the benefits of spiritual practices culled from subaltern religious traditions in treating a range of decidedly modern psychiatric disorders. Over-stressed urbanites looking to unwind close their yoga classes with a chant of *Om,* the sacred hindu syllable symbolizing the divine genesis of the phenomenal world. Burnt out

derivatives traders take a week off work to jet down to the amazon and participate in Shamanic rituals. Euroamerican university students travel to the other side of the world to experience a slice of life as celibate Buddhist monastics. What does all this mean? What are the impulses, hopes, and imaginaries that propel people towards "exotic" forms of spiritual practice? How might these spiritualities, rooted in radically different metaphysical and epistemological frameworks, be transforming us? How might we be transforming them? What happens when meditation becomes about "training the brain?" What does it mean to "practice mindfulness" or "be a Buddhist" in a neoliberal techno-modernity played out against a backdrop of economic decline and impending environmental catastrophe? I wonder...

In my thesis proposal, presented to my supervisor a month before my departure for the field, I wrote the following:

> *Every summer for the last thirteen years, a group of mostly North American undergraduate students gathers in the mountains of Southern China to take part in the Woodenfish Humanistic Buddhism Monastic Life Program[1]. Named for the percussive wooden block used in the Mahayana tradition to keep time during the ritual recitation of sacred texts, Woodenfish offers young people the opportunity to experience life at a "traditional" Chinese monastery. Held this year at the historic Fuyan temple in the Heng Shan mountains of Hunan province, the month-long program – a cross between a meditation retreat, an academic field-school, and a summer camp – is designed "to immerse Westerners[2] in Buddhist monastic life and give them a first-hand experience of Chinese Buddhism."*

1 It is not exactly true that Woodenfish has been run in Southern China for the last decade, but I say so for brevity's sake. From the programs founding in 2001 until last year, 2012, Woodenfish has been organized under the auspices of Fo Guang Shan (Buddha's Light Mountain), an international Buddhist organization based out of Taiwan but with branch temples in over 30 countries. A product of the East Asian Buddhist revival movements of the early 20th century, FGS teaches Humanistic Buddhism, a stripped down and distinctly modern version of the dharma that advocates a return to the original teachings of the Buddha and puts a strong emphasis on charity and social engagement. Up to 2012, Woodenfish was held at FGS's sprawling monastic headquarters outside Kaoshiung, in Southern Taiwan. This is where I did the program in 2008. However, because of complex monastic politics—politics that never became completely clear to me—the program's charismatic founder, Venerable Yifa, moved the program to China in 2013, purportedly to capitalize on what she saw as "the growth of China's economy and its opportunities to Buddhism."

In China, Woodenfish was initially to be held at Fuyan, a Ch'an and Pureland monastery in the mountains of Hunan. However, the program quickly ran into obstacles; while it was never entirely clear to me what was going on, the Abbot asked us to leave after apparently failing to get permission from local officials. At the last minute, Yifa managed to find another host, a 13th century Ch'an-Pureland temple called *Shen Shou Shi* just outside of Wenzhou, in Zhejiang province. This became the home of Woodenfish 2013.

2 "Western" and "Eastern" are fraught terms with a complicated history; emerging out of the colonial encounter, they may obscure as much as they reveal, especially in a rapidly globalizing world. Still, because they are regularly used in cross-cultural discussions of Buddhism, and because I think they might still be useful in pointing to a hard-to-get-at

The participants—mostly but not entirely college age americans—spend the month-long program in a flurry of activity. From the moment they arrive and don their beige and green uniforms, the students enter into a radically different form of life. Following a highly regimented schedule, students are required to adhere to a complex code of monastic etiquette, including prohibitions against sex, smoking, and the consumption of alcohol. From the 5:30 AM wake up to the moment their heads hit the pillow, days are spent performing temple chores, studying Buddhist philosophy or traditional Chinese calligraphy, practicing meditation and tai chi, and engaging in sutra chanting and other Buddhist rituals. All meals – prepared according to Buddhist dietary prohibitions which exclude meat, dairy, garlic, and other spices – are taken communally and in silence, in accordance with Chinese monastic tradition. Students sleep four-to-a-room in sparse, simple quarters. The program culminates in a seven-day silent meditation retreat, followed by a "cultural tour" of southern china, which includes a special ceremony in which students are offered the chance to take refuge in the three jewels of Buddha, Dharma (Buddhist teachings), and Sangha (the community of Buddhist practitioners) in a ritual that traditionally marks Buddhist conversion.

Woodenfish is a study in culture shock; it offers a unique opportunity to study the frictions and little acts of translation that emerge out of the encounter between Western Buddhism and an actually existing—if not exactly traditional—Asian Buddhist other. When I participated in the program as a student in summer 2008, I was left feeling disoriented by the radical newness of the experience, by the way it challenged my expectations. Completing an undergraduate degree in religious studies with a focus on East Asian Buddhism, I had signed up for Woodenfish with a desire to experience the "real thing"; an authentic, living Buddhism that went beyond the mere "words and letters" of academic study, so scorned by Zen Buddhists. Familiar with decidedly North American representations of Buddhism, I went into the program expecting to spend my time in an oriental fantasy world – an isolated, serene, mist-shrouded temple where dignified and diligent monks scorned mindless rituals as they passed their time in the austere quietude of deep meditation. What I got was another kettle of fish; gift shops selling Buddhist curios, monks chatting on cell phones, hordes of tourists queueing for a chance to donate money and walk through an underground tunnel where

something, I've chosen to use them here.

animatronic figures acted out the the life of the buddha under the glow of spinning disco balls. Where was the "authentic" Buddhism I knew and loved?

Full Disclosure:
When the personal gets professional

The budding anthropologist had, for a number of years, nurtured a keen interest in Buddhism. This interest was not strictly professional, and was therefore fraught with all the messy complication that characterizes the world as it is lived outside the more-or-less neat, circumscribed lines of the academic text. This keen interest, which was first sparked when he encountered an illustrated 'Intro to Buddhism' during the winter break of his first year of university, had manifested itself in several different ways; Apart from travelling to Asia to study the 'real thing', the budding anthropologist had, for a number of years, and with varying degrees of success, attempted to keep up a regular meditation practice, going so far as to purchase a red, cotton-poly blend *Zafu* meditation cushion set from Samadhi Cushions, based out of Vermont, USA ($112 + tax). He had also, sporadically, attended a local Montreal Zen centre where once, during an extended period of meditation, he had had an extremely profound experience where he had briefly glimpsed what he felt to be the underlying stillness and luminosity of consciousness.

Perhaps most significantly, his interest in Buddhism caused the budding anthropologist to seriously rethink his academic trajectory. For he had not always been a budding anthropologist—had in fact entered university with plans to become a neuroscientist. But after a time, all the talk of axonal myelination and synaptic clefts, of neuropeptides and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, started to wear, leaving him feeling alienated, an automated "meat robot" in a mechanistic world. He sought a way of engaging with life which was more-or-less rational and empirical but which might allow space for certain mysterious qualities that he felt were essential to the world but that science, with its replicability and its positivism and its ho-hum reductionism, seemed to miss completely. Buddhism fit

the bill nicely.

Generally speaking, the budding anthropologist came to Buddhism in a way that was typical of many budding Buddhists inhabiting his particular geotemporal milieu. In his exhaustive *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, David McMahan studies how forms of Buddhism familiar in the modern west took shape amidst the resonances and tensions of various "non-negotiable elements of modernity"—individualism, egalitarianism, an emphasis on interiority, a 'this-worldly' orientation. McMahan points especially to the way in which modern Buddhism has been formed amidst the "constitutive tension" of two often-conflicting discourses of modernity: on the one hand, rationalism and scientific naturalism; on the other, what he calls a "romantic expressivism" whose origins he traces back to various critical responses to the industrial revolution and the rise of scientism. He notes that"

> Part of the way that Buddhism has engaged with modernity is in attempting to combat the particularly modern sense of nihilism and disenchantment, refashioning the dharma as a way of re-enchanting and ushering escaped meaning back into the world while at the same time remaining within a broadly naturalistic cosmological framework and aligning itself with rationalistic and scientific sensibilities (McMahan 2008:13).

For the budding anthropologist, one of the most attractive features of Buddhism was its emphasis on meditation. While he knew that somewhere out there people calling themselves Buddhists practiced things like self-immolation or relic worship, these required some serious mental gymnastics before they could be incorporated into his more-or-less rational-secular view of things. Meditation, on the other hand, cohered nicely with his beliefs. For him, meditation was first-and-foremost an empirical technique for taking control of one's own mind, something that would allow him to cut through mundane mental chatter in order to get in touch with a deeper and more meaningful level of consciousness. Inspired by the latest neuroscientific studies and spiritual books depicting it as a "science of happiness," he hoped that meditation could also bring about more general improvements in his day-to-day experience, making him happier, calmer, and more clear-headed. In a nutshell, he saw meditation as a possible solution to the toxic freneticism of modern life.

Many scholars have commented on the enthusiasm with which westerners have embraced meditative practices. In *Buddhism and Science*, Donald Lopez demonstrates how meditation, once the purview of a small sub-section of Buddhist monastics, became central to western understandings of Buddhism (Lopez 2008). This is due in large part to the modern representation of meditation as simultaneously the heart of Buddhism and a more-or-less secular practice detachable from the less palatable elements of 'traditional' Buddhist cosmology. With this framing, David McMahan argues, meditation takes on a new significance: "No longer just a technique of transcendence for ascetics who have renounced the worldly life, meditation has acquired the purpose of fostering deeper appreciation of everyday activities and of cultivating skilful, robust, and mindful engagement in life" (McMahan 2008:184). Meditation thus comes into view as a secular technique for this-worldly affirmation that nonetheless embodies the mystical essence of Buddhist practice in all its diverse forms, from Theravada to Vajrayana to Pure land to Zen.

At times, the budding anthropologist felt as though meditation performed exactly as advertised —he would emerge from a session with a renewed sense of calm or a fresh insight about his life. At other times, he wasn't so sure—he sometimes felt like he was forcing it, his beatific smile transformed into a rictus, veins popping from his forehead, eyeballs bulging. "Be Calmer! Shut up, I'm trying to meditate!!!" As books on spirituality started to pile up on his desk, he began to worry that maybe meditation was just a another self-help trend, another trick of consumer capitalism, a kind of "spiritual materialism." As he schooled himself in the intellectual conventions of anthropology and read up on his Marx and his poststructuralism and his critical theory, he started to wonder about the relationship of Buddhism, mindfulness, and meditation to what folks like Foucault call "structures of domination" and the ideological elements of capitalism.

All this to say that the budding anthropologist was personally enmeshed in, and a product of, the various forces, tendencies, and trends that he sought to untangle in his research. He, like his

informants, was a westerner curious about Buddhism, optimistic about the new-and-improved ways of being in the world it might engender but skeptical about the various ways it had been taken up in capitalist modernity. His project was thus as much about his own coming to terms with Buddhism – and with the neoliberal techno-modernity within which it was nested—as it was about saying anything "real" or "true" about the world.

On the Non-duality of Informant and Anthropologist

> *C'mon! How are you going to "anthropologize" Buddhism when the one doing the anthropologizing is actually, in fact, a Buddhist?!?! Or at least a sorta buddhist, a kinda Buddhist, a demi-Buddhist, one interested in and influenced by Buddhism?!? And what is a Buddhist, by the way[3]? But seriously, where does the anthropologist end and the Buddhist begin? And where in the world are these stable, neat-and-*

3 What is a Buddhist, by the way? One of the questions hovering at the margins of this thesis is "is contemporary mindfulness practice *real* Buddhism?" This question raises some sticky issues. Many anthropologists, influenced by social constructionist critiques, would probably argue that such a question is unintelligible – they might point out that there is no abstract entity called Buddhism, only particular instantiations, and that each is meaningful only when read against its particular historical and social context. And as scholars of religion are fond of pointing out, is it really accurate to assume that the term Buddhism has a single referent? What Buddhism are we talking about? Mahayana? Theravada? Vajrayana? Japan? Tibet? Cambodia? Is early Indian Buddhism really essentially the same as the Buddhism of the medieval Chinese State or of world war II Japan? This skepticism would seem to be supported by certain strands of Buddhist philosophy which assert that all things (including, one would assume, any particular historical variation of Buddhism) are empty of any intrinsic self-nature, and are instead constituted by various causal conditions. And let's not forget that even within circumscribed temporal and geographical boundaries, there has always been lively debate within the Buddhist tradition about what, exactly, constitutes *real* Buddhism. With all this in mind, wouldn't it be more accurate to speak of Buddhism*s*?

In the standard anthropological analysis, determining what real Buddhism is would ultimately be a question of authority and politics. Who has the authority to determine what real Buddhism is, and how is it that they come to have that authority? Such a framing, which depends on social construction and on Foucauldian notions of power-knoweldge, would not, I sense, sit well with many Buddhists. For despite a great deal of contestation over what, exactly Buddhism is, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that for many Buddhists Buddhism is *something*, and that something persists over time and space. This might seem counter-intuitive to some. On the surface, Buddhism's central claim seems to be that things lack intrinsic existence, *svabhava,* and are instead constituted by various causal factors, which are themselves contingent; as such, how can something inherent called Buddhism exist? And yet one might argue that it is the Buddhist insight that all things are contingent and come into being only due to the confluence of particular conditions which are also themselves contingent, that forms the non-contingent "heart" of Buddhist insight. This argument has a good deal of doctrinal support; the Mahayana Buddhist notion of *upaya*, skilful means, argues that while the external trappings of Buddhist doctrine might vary from place to place depending on social convention and the capacities and predilections of the audience , there is some fundamental core of Buddhist insight that is transcendent and universal. This idea resonates with the "wheat-chaff' model of buddhism employed by FGS (the the Taiwanese organization originally behind Woodenfish), which argues that there is a kernel of transcendent Buddhist wisdom—the kernel of wheat—that can be separated from any particularistic cultural "chaff."

All this is enough to give one an aneurism. Is Buddhism one thing or many? Is it a useful term, or should it be disregarded? I recognize that I, a 26 year old more-or-less agnostic Canadian graduate student, do not have the knowledge or authority (as much as I sometimes think I do, or at least wish I did) to sort this out. As such, I try to avoid, or at least bracket, the question of whether mindfulness is *real* Buddhism. Instead, I look at the ways in which Mindfulness is configured by a variety of different forces, and try to show different ways of being in the world, and the different kinds of affective experiences, that are generated by and attached to the promise of mindfulness. I do however, seek to create space to think beyond certain representations of Buddhism. I do this in part by offering critiques of mindfulness from some other Buddhist perspectives. When I refer to Buddhists, I recognize that what I'm saying doesn't capture the views of all Buddhists and should always be prefaced with "some" or "many." I also knowledge that my readings of certain Buddhist authors may be misreadings. But I hope, at least, they are productive.

tidy, self-enclosed referents "Buddhism" and "anthropology" anyways?
-- Anon

In her *Surfacing the Body Interior* (2005), Janelle Taylor takes up the problem of anthropological dualism, gesturing towards the possibility of new forms of anthropology that might avoid the kind of dualistic reification implicit in what she calls "anthropologies of." She points out that while actual ethnographic work often tries to de-reify established categories and ways of thinking, "anthropologists tend to organize knowledge production practices in ways that serve to solidify and entrench the same objects that individual anthropologists in their ethnographic work seek to dismantle and contest" (Taylor 2005:742). Anthropologists fall back on reified categories like science and religion even as ethnographic work calls these bounded categories into question. Anthropological analyses are thus "limited in scope because objects of anthropological study continued to be framed as just that – as objects... Rather than pursue the "anthropology of" any object that preexists ethnography," Taylor calls on anthropologists to develop "more labile and refractory framing devices that can help guide ethnographic explorations to discover just what are the relevant contours of that which we study" (Taylor 2005:742).

The limitations of the "anthropologies of" approach comes into particularly sharp relief when one considers the anthropology of Buddhism. Such an approach would seem to place us squarely in the realm of dualism, for it suggests that there are bounded and discrete objects or bodies of practice/knowledge called *B*uddhism and *A*nthropology that exist out there in the world, and that they are distinct and separate, one from the other, each locked in its own particular world of meaning, with its own limited scope of relevance. Yet it is precisely this distinction, the sharp delineation between closed and solid subject and reified and circumscribed object – with corresponding distinctions between self and other, inside and outside – that Buddhism seeks to trouble. In its earliest North Indian iterations, Buddhist philosophy sought to destabilize any picture of the universe based on independent and atomized subjects and objects; early Buddhist notions like *pratityasamutpada* (dependant

origination) and *anatman* (no-self) called into question essentializing or totalizing visions of selves, objects, or realities, while meditative practices like *smirti,* mindful awareness, were aimed at revealing the contingent, constructed nature of bodies, feelings, and thoughts (Williams 2008). As Buddhism moved into East Asia at the beginning of the first millennium CE, it absorbed a local Taoist abhorrence of dualism, giving birth to Ch'an/Zen (Dumoulin 1979). Today, as Buddhism establishes itself in North America, cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind draw on Buddhist insights to refute established Cartesian distinctions between mind and body (Dreyfus and Thompson 2007).

What happens if we as anthropologists open ourselves to this possibility, if we are willing to render the sharp border we tend to draw between anthropological subject and ethnographic object more porous, to engage in a kind of epistemic promiscuity that acknowledges the blurriness of familiar boundaries between us and them? What is at stake as these boundaries blur? And how might such a blurring trouble often unexamined but fraught delineations between the personal and the professional that hover at the margins of anthropological experience?

Katherine Ewing takes up these questions in her thought provoking *Dreams from a Saint: Anthropological Atheism and the Temptation to Believe*. Ewing opens her essay with a meditation on what she calls "the anthropological taboo against going native," noting that anthropologists "are far more comfortable embracing the idea of "difference," an epistemological abyss between anthropologist and informant, than seriously entertaining the possibility of entering or believing in the world of the people they meet during fieldwork" (Ewing 1994:571). Ewing goes on to argue that the perception of an abyss rests on notions of cultural difference and social construction – central analytics in "anthropologies of" – which assume that "all experience is semiotically constituted and historically contingent and that anthropologists, embedded in projects fundamentally different from those of their informants, cannot penetrate the language games of the 'Other'" (Ewing 1994:571). Bucking this trend, Ewing argues that the epistemic abyss "results from a refusal to acknowledge that the subjects of one's

research might actually know something about the human condition that is personally valid for the anthropologist." Further, such refusal "constitutes a hegemonic act, an implicit insistence that the relationship between anthropologist and "informant" be shaped by the parameters of western discourse" (Ewing 1994:571). She argues that, if the anthropologist is ever really going to understand anything, they must abandon their default atheistic position and take seriously the possibility that they might be made over by both what and how the Other knows (Ewing 1994:571).

This meditation on epistemic openness leads Ewing to reflect on field work experience, commenting on the "threats to identity" that the anthropologist experiences as they begin to entwine their own subjectivity with that of their informants (Ewing 1994:571). The notion that the other might constitute a "threat" to one's identity is particularly interesting to me. Going back to Taylor's critique of "anthropologies of," the question I—and I think Ewing as well—want to raise is how might "anthropologies of" implicitly seek to neutralize or contain the contaminating threat the knowledge of the "other" might pose to the identity of the anthropological (or the rational-secular) self? Especially, as is the case with Buddhism, when that other knowledge contends that there is no such thing as a self to begin with?

Importantly, my goal here is not to reassert a fundamental dualism by suggesting that their is some reified thing out there called Buddhism which can act on or make over a similarly solid thing called anthropology. Rather, I want to draw attention to the fact that "Buddhism" and "anthropology" are both unstable and shifting categories, and because of this, there is no fundamental separation between them. With this in mind, and against accounts that might give pride of place to rupture, difference, and context, I want to gesture to the possibility—a possibility that Buddhism itself suggests—that Buddhism and anthropology come out of worlds that are not fundamentally different, and for this reason, that they might converge and overlap in interesting and unexpected ways.

It is this notion of unexpected convergence that Unni Wikan gestures to in *Beyond Words,* her

attempt to grapple with certian uncanny experiences she encountered during fieldwork in Bali. Pointing to her sense of discomfort with the fact that anthropological theory still relies so heavily on "European great thinkers" to explain (and explain away) "native systems of meaning," Wikan argues that anthropologists "must be willing to learn general lessons from [the other's] insights and analysis of the human condition" (Wikan 1992:471) To do so, she argues that it is necessary to look "beyond the words," to avoid getting stuck in the surgical dissection of the precise and context-dependent meaning of discourse, and instead to "attend to the effect people are trying to make and the relevance of their words in terms of how they are positioned and where they seem to want to go, rather than the message their words might seem to encase" (Wikan 1992: 467). Critical for Wikan here is what she calls "resonance;" noting the ways in which an over-emphasis on the precise meaning of words can lead the anthropologist astray, she defines resonance as "an effort at feeling-thought; a willingness to engage with another world, life, or idea; an ability to use one's experience to try to grasp, or convey, meanings that reside neither in words, "facts," nor text but are evoked in the meeting of one experiencing subject with another or with a text" (Wikan 1992: 463). By taking what Wikan calls a "charitable stance," she argues that we can learn to "dip into the wellsprings of ourselves for something to use as a bridge to others," so that we might be able to better attend to the ways that their thoughts, gestures, words, and experience might resonate or overlap with our own in uncanny way (Wikan 1992:471).

All this talk of resonance might raise some warning flags for the social constructionists among us: How do we take the other seriously without solidifying or reifying them and thereby reinstating the anthropological dualism from which we are trying to escape? How do we open ourselves to another mode of knowing while still holding on to the anthropological project? How and where do we draw the line between professional rigour and the charged, emotional messiness of our personal worlds? These are big questions, and the answer is, quite simply, that I don't know. And neither does anyone, really.

I would, however, like to allow the uncertainty these questions generate to inform my writing. And to acknowledge that the world—or the subject—isn't divided into discrete compartments like Buddhist/anthropologist, public/private, or personal/professional. Things are messier than that. And

more exciting, too. And the language of “different hats” doesn't quite cut it. Because it's not that one day I'm a Buddhist, and the next an anthropologist, and the next a 26 year old white Canadian male ambivalent about academia but trying to make a go of it. It's more that things bleed into each other; that moments and thoughts and conversations and affects and sensations get all jumbled together as the subject traverses multiple public and private worlds. Radically different things, both discursive and embodied, interpenetrate, perfume each other, get tangled up. It's funhouse logic. Indra, with his multidimensional net of infinitely reflecting cosmic jewels, might have something to say about this.

Great Expectations

A familiar anthropological narrative tells of entering the field, that singular, we’re-not-in-Kansas-anymore moment when the anthropologist suddenly becomes aware that they have entered another world. I have no such stories to share. I suppose I could tell you about zooming across southern China on the high-speed train from Guangzhou, on the way to my field site, lamenting how the Chinese mastery of the railroad tunnel meant that there was never more than seven seconds of uninterrupted view of what looked like it might be beautiful green countryside. But this moment didn't feel especially significant or meaningful to me. Just another moment in a life that may or may not add up to something, depending on the day. And maybe there's a clue there, a Buddhist lesson, something about expectations, about how the things we experience often don't feel like how we imagine they'll feel, how we want them to feel. And about how our expectations can sometimes pull the wool over our eyes, prevent us from being satisfied with, or even seeing, what's actually happening as we crane our necks to look around the next bend, where it, whatever 'it' is, must surely be waiting for us, in all its shining glory.

This thesis is about expectations. It's about our expectations about mindfulness meditation, and the various discursive strands in which such expectations take shape. It's about the expectation that certain

things might make us happy, and about the affective[4] dialectic of hope and disappointment that inevitably undergirds this expectation. More obliquely, it's about our expectations about what anthropological writing should look like.[5]

This thesis is also about the anthropologist's own expectations—about fieldwork, for instance, and its relation to what Kathleen Stewart calls "totalized systems" (Stewart 2007:1). In what follows, I construct narratives about the ways in which different seemingly coherent and self-enclosed structural entities with names like "Buddhism," "Mindfulness," "neuroscience," and "neoliberal capitalism" come to imbue the hopes, dreams, and desires of everyday folks like my informants and me. But I also

4 This thesis uses the word affect a lot. But what, exactly, is affect (aside from a trendy word!), and why do I think it is so important? In his essay *On the Emotional Terrain of Neoliberalism*, Tim Jensen distinguishes between affect—"bodily sensations of relation"—and emotion—the "narrativized accounts" of those sensations (2008). Here affect seems to be about the prereflective embodied sensations that come from being a being in a world; we are affected by things, and whose affects are registered by are bodies and fuel our various projects of world-making. Elsewhere, and drawing on Raymond Williams, Kathleen Stewart makes a similar claim, arguing that affects "do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressure" (Williams 1977:133) Here affects seem to be a kind of collective, prereflective emotional experience, one that gives an emotional sense—of hope, fear, excitement, or malaise—to a particular time and place.

Stewart speaks about affect in terminology borrowed from electrical engineering; affects are "intensities" that "give circuits and flows to the forms of life" (Stewart 2007:2). They are "the things that happen... in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating" (Stewart 2007:2). Affects "are a kind of contact zone" where the myriad phenomena that (over)determine daily life play out, and their "significance lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible" (Stewart 2007:3) They are both "public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation" and also "the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of" (Stewart 2007:2).

The affective register is not semantic meaning, but rather intensity. As Stewart has it, affects "are immanent, obtuse, and erratic" and "work not through meanings *per se*, but rather in the way they pick up density and texture in the way they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings" (Stewart 2007:3). When I speak, about the "affective life" of mindfulness, this is exactly what I am talking about. I seek to understand the affective colouration mindfulness takes on, and the kinds of experiences it makes possible, as it circulates through the various discursive and personal worlds that are the subjects of this text. What kinds of affects get magnetized to mindfulness? What kinds of hopes and dreams does it keep alive or transmute? What kinds of habits or impulses does it shape, break, or reenforce?

5 Parts of this thesis are written funny. They switch between narrative view points; They include personal anecdotes and strange tangents; They're full of long and winding footnotes that maybe seem like they should be put in the text; They might even include some fiction. Why did I choose to write like this? The truth is, I'm not sure if I could have written it any other way. I tried for a more conventional academic style, but things kept spilling out, moments of contradiction and confusion and ambiguity, and when I tried to reign them in, I started to feel like I wasn't quite being... honest. So I started using anecdotes, stories, anonymous quotes, and rants, trying to create something that reflects, in a consubstantial way, what it's like to think, do fieldwork, and be a confused and inconsistent human being in a confusing and inconsistent world. This approach is not without precedents. For an example of the slippages between personal and professional that can occur in anthropological work, see for instance Stewart 2007. For a compelling argument for why fiction can sometimes be truer, or at least more evocative, than fact, see Das (2006).

try to recognize that the moments that make up a life (or an ethnography) are not exhausted by the stories we tell about them. As Stewart points out in *Ordinary Affects*, "the notion of a totalized system, of which everything is always already somehow a part, is not helpful (to say the least) in the effort to approach a weighted and reeling present" (Stewart 2007:1). Life always exceeds the discursive determinants or "conditions of possibility" that anthropologists and others often call upon to explain (away) the significance of an utterance, scene, or life. This thesis thus tries to maintain at least some fealty to what Stewart calls "rogue intensities:" "all the lived, yet unassimilated, impacts of things, all the fragments of experience left hanging. Everything left unframed by the stories of what makes a life" (Stewart 2007:44).

I originally set out to do an ethnography of the Woodenfish program itself. I planned to do interviews with monastics, students, and laypeople, and to paint a picture of life at the monastery over the month of the program, one that would illuminate the small acts of cultural translation and the tiny moments of rupture that characterized life as a Woodenfish. However, I quickly came to realize that my ability, and my interest, lay elsewhere. Constrained by the brevity and hectic pace of the program, by my lack of language skills, and by my dual role as both anthropologist and Woodenfish staffer, I found it difficult to fully grasp the complex monastic politics and that made the program tick. Time was a precious commodity, and most of mine was spent facilitating student activities, shepherding students around the temple, and dealing with the various emergencies and contingencies that formed a large part of program life.

What I did have time for was a good deal of conversation with students. In group discussions, casual conversations, and more formal interviews, students spoke to me about the the moments of excitement, hope, frustration, and confusion they experienced as they navigated through their month as Woodenfish. Much of this discussion shed light on the diverse expectations students brought to the study of Buddhism, and especially to the practice of meditation, and how those expectations were

challenged, modified, or upended as they engaged more deeply with a particular form of meditative mindfulness practice. These expectations, and the moments of frustration and confusion that came along with them, resonated with my own experiences as a western Buddhism enthusiast. In time, I came to appreciate the way they illuminated the sometimes unexpected logics at play as Buddhist thought and practice is embraced by individuals, scientists, and corporations in North America.

It is these conversations that form the bulk of my ethnographic work. While the Woodenfish program and the forms of East Asian Buddhist monasticism that it emerges out of comprise the omnipresent background to my research, these are not central focus of my research. In what follows, I attempt instead to reflect on my conversations with my informants as I try to think through the kinds of logics and affective dynamics that undergird the "mindfulness revolution." I try to show the unique confluence of Buddhism, orientalism, positivist science, and neoliberal capitalism that I argue constitutes the contemporary mindfulness movement. I attempt to articulate how these forces might lead us to reimagine human beings, and how they come together to shape contemporary understandings of the sources of and solutions to what the Buddha identified as *dukkha*, suffering, and what we might today gloss as anxiety, depression, or stress. And I gesture to the unexpected ways in which such a framing resonates with and perhaps reinscribes the hegemonic logics of neoliberal capitalism.

The Majesty of the Present: Mindfulness and the neoliberal moment

This thesis takes as its central object not Buddhism, but rather what various folks have called the "mindfulness revolution." What is mindfulness[6]? According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, the American

6 And how does it relate to Buddhism? Many proponents of Mindfulness trace its origins back to the *Anapanasati* and *Satipathana Suttas* of the Pali Cannon, the collection of texts scholars think most accurately represent the actual utterances of the historical Buddha (See for instance Kabat-Zinn, 2005). In these texts, which can be seen as some of the earliest Buddhist meditation manuals, the Buddha encourages his followers to take up the practice of "mindfulness of breathing" and outlines the four "foundations of mindfulness" for meditating monks – contemplation of the body, contemplation of feelings, contemplation of consciousness, and contemplation of mental objects. But despite its origins in religious texts, contemporary mindfulness meditation is usually described as a secular practice, distinct from Buddhism *qua* religion. Indeed, Kabat-Zinn

researcher who is perhaps its most well-known advocate, mindfulness is simply "awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way – on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn 2006:145). More broadly, "mindfulness" is a loosely related set of ideas and practices based around the central claim that there is some kind of value – therapeutic, economic, spiritual – in learning to let go of intellectualization—mental time travel, discrimination and judgment, emotional rumination—and increase one's awareness of moment-to-moment experience in the here-and-now. This is to be accomplished through various mindfulness practices, most often some form of meditation involving sustained attention to one's breathing or some other object. By maintaining one's attention on a particular object, one learns to dissolve the frenetic stress of modern

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has argued that "mindfulness... is necessarily universal. There is nothing particularly Buddhist about it" (Kabat-Zinn 2005:145).

At the same time, proponents of mindfulness often argue that mindfulness meditation forms the true "heart" of Buddhism. Kabat-Zinn, for instance, says that "mindfulness is the fundamental attentional stance underlying all streams of Buddhist meditative practice: the Theravada tradition of the countries of Southeast Asia (Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, and Vietnam); the Mahayana (Zen) schools of Vietnam, China, Japan, and Korea; and the Vajrayana tradition of Tibetan Buddhism found in Tibet itself, Mongolia, Nepal, Bhutan, Ladakh, and now large parts of India in the Tibetan community in exile" (Kabat-Zinn 2005:146).

This seems like a paradox. How can mindfulness be secular and yet embody the fundamental or essential common denominator that makes Buddhist traditions Buddhist? Proponents of mindfulness explain this by arguing that the Buddha was himself a kind of proto-scientist, "a born scientist and physician who had nothing in the way of instrumentation other than his own mind and body and experience, yet managed to use these native resources to great effect to delve into the nature of suffering and the human condition." Similarly, the Dharma, the Buddha's teachings, are "an innate set of empirically testable rules that govern and describe the generation of the inward, first-person experiences of suffering and happiness in human beings." Thus, Kabat-Zinn can make the claim that "the Buddha was not a Buddhist" and that "the dharma is at its core truly universal, not exclusively Buddhist" (Kabat-Zinn 2005:145).

How is the term Buddhism being deployed here? What does it mean to say that "the Buddha was not a Buddhist?" For Kabat-Zinn, 'Buddhism' seems to refer to "religious, ideological, or cultural forms" that are not integral to the Buddha's message. 'Buddhism' is often superstitious extraneous beliefs. In such a formulation, the actual claim is that mindfulness, far from being separate from Buddhism, is actually the *real* Buddhism, in-so-far as it most closely resembles the teaching and practice of the original Buddha, before these were the supposedly "cultural forms" of superstitious folk religion. Claims of this nature have a long pedigree.

Within the Buddhist tradition, the appeal to 'what the Buddha really meant' is a classical rhetorical strategy, often used to legitimate a heterodox teaching or incorporate some local religious tradition. Perhaps the most widely cited instance of this occurs with the rise of Mahayana Buddhism in the early centuries of the common era, when proponents of the Mahayana (the great vehicle) claimed that the original words of the Buddha were merely contingent teachings for the small minds of the Hinayana (the narrow vehicle) But such claims also have precedent in, for instance, the rhetorical strategies of Kukai, the founder of the Shingon school of Japanese esoteric Buddhism. Kabat-Zinn's attempt to position mindfulness as simultaneously the heart of Buddhism and as distinct from Buddhism *qua* religious or cultural entity also strongly echoes earlier colonial engagement with Buddhism, where "real" Buddhism was located in ancient textual sources, which were distinguished from the"bastardized" Buddhism of the natives (See Lopez 2008).

life and abide peacefully and effortlessly in the present moment.

Fuelled by glossy fMRI images of meditating brains and photos of beatific Tibetan monks covered in electrodes, mindfulness—along with positive psychology and affective neuroscience—has become a central part of an emerging "science of happiness" which seeks to establish empirical principles for living well (Paulson et al. 2013:98). This newly 'scientized' mindfulness has gained tractions with politicians, educators, and business leaders, who see it as a potential solution to a host of modern problems; from information overload to political inertia to corporate burnout mindfulness is widely viewed as a potent tool for busting stress and ushering in a new era of "human flourishing." Today, mindfulness and other secularized formulations of meditation have largely supplanted the Buddhist traditions from which they are drawn.

Clearly, there is something vital about mindfulness's promise of the revitalizing nature of simple presence in the here-and-now. But how has mindfulness, a practice which traces its origins back to the renunciatory traditions of early Buddhism, come into view as a technique for bringing about happiness in this world? And what is the nature of the happiness it promises to bring about? In what follows, I try to untangle the subjective, spiritual, and political consequences of a "mindfulness revolution" based on a utopian-positivistic science of happiness. My concern is less with what mindfulness is—whether it really works—than with what it does; how does the promise of mindfulness work in the world? What does it mean for us to think of meditation as something that "works" in the first place?

This thesis is built around an intuition that at first glance might strike the reader as strange; that mindfulness meditation, and the interpretations of Buddhism upon which it is based, might intersect, recapitulate, or otherwise interact with the logics of neoliberal capitalism, especially as these pertain to the subjectification of actual people. On the face of things, this might sound strange; neoliberalism, a radical free-market economic rational, is a term most often invoked with reference to its devastating social, political, and environmental consequences (See for instance Brown 2005, Harvey 2005,

Wacquant 2012). From analyses of its economization of everyday life to critiques of its deleterious effect on the political landscape, commentaries on neoliberalism portray the social and psychological stresses of living in a social order characterized by the ceaseless jockeying for "advantageous competitive positioning" that accompanies the frenetic pace of global capitalism (Brown 2013:2).

Mindfulness, for it's part, is most often viewed as an antidote to these very stresses, a way of getting in touch with oneself and finding relief from the neoliberal "rat race" of endless deadlines, traffic jams, emails, and performance evaluations that characterizes life for so many in the world today. As one proponent has it, mindfulness is about "waking up and living in harmony with oneself and with the world" by letting go of mental chatter and quotidian concerns and getting back in touch with "the bloom of the present moment" (Kabat-Zinn 1994:1).

On the surface then, mindfulness and neoliberalism could not be more different. One is about speeding up, lifting oneself up by ones bootstraps, surging forward, or else holding on for dear life; the other is about easing up, sitting down, and letting go. While neoliberalism is associated with social and environmental destruction, advocates of mindfulness tend to be politically liberal individuals who support conservation efforts. And yet mindfulness now enjoys massive popularity in the Euroamerican world where a neoliberal ethos has, many commentators agree, reached its high water mark. Today, meditation is being embraced by the corporate world: the Dalai Lama speaks at conferences on economic freedom, Fortune 500 CEOs extoll the virtues of mindful living, and companies like Google, Proctor & Gamble, and Apple now offer meditation classes for employees. What's going on here?

In his work on the genealogy of the modern subject, Michel Foucault theorizes the connection between what he calls "techniques of domination" and "techniques of the self," which he believes together constitute the modern subject. Any theory of the subject, Foucault argues, must "take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, he has to take into account the

points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion and domination. The contact point, where the way individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves, is what we can call government" (Foucault 1993: 203).

Through a careful theorization of the close relationship between power and knowledge, Foucault develops the polysemous concept of governmentality: here government with a G, the hegemonic political force which employs "techniques of domination," is linked to government in a broader, more diffuse sense, referring to the "techniques of the self" by which individuals govern, discipline, and reform their own conduct. According to Thomas Lemke, "Foucault uses the concept of government in a comprehensive sense" that emphasizes "the close link between forms of power and processes of subjectification" (Lemke 2001:191). For Foucault the term government includes both the political machinations of the governor and "the problems of self-control, guidance for the family and for children, management of the household, directing the soul, etc" that comprise the quotidian concerns of the governed (Lemke 2001:191). Through his focus on governmentality and his linking of "techniques of domination" and "techniques of the self," Foucault thus "endeavours to show how the modern sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual co-determine each other's emergence" (Lemke 2001: 191).

This thesis is divided into two chapters. In the first, I pick up Foucault's concerns with governmentality as I explore the contact points where mindfulness, an increasingly popular technique of the self, rubs up against neoliberal techniques of domination. By tracing the rise of mindfulness in North America, I try to show how mindfulness can be understood as a particular technique of the self geared towards the construction of an ideal neoliberal subject, one equipped with the emotional resources to survive and thrive in a neoliberal world. How does the logic of mindfulness as it is increasingly presented in scientific discussions, newspaper articles, and corporate seminars resonate with hegemonic neoliberal logic, even as it purports to oppose or subvert it? How do the hopes,

aspirations, and fantasies of regular people get caught up in and carried by these broader discursive process?

In the second, I attempt to offer an analysis of mindfulness in terms of what cultural theorist Lauren Berlant has called cruel optimism (Berlant 2011). Berlant uses the notion of cruel optimism to try and understand why it is that so many of us have trouble relinquishing attachments to normative fantasies—about things like home ownership, durable intimacy, or fulfilling, stable employment—despite the fact that in a neoliberal world, such fantasies are increasingly out of reach. I wonder the same thing about the neoliberal fantasies of unfettered agency, rational choice, and personal responsibility that form the core constituents of neoliberal subjectification. To me, these fantasies—about taking control of our own emotional well-being and cultivating our own happiness—seem to form the heart of mindfulness's promise. But how is it that mindfulness promises us release from the embodied stresses of a neoliberal life of ceaseless jockeying while simultaneously reasserting a distinctly neoliberal vision of human subjectivity? How might mindfulness as it is currently constituted in North America be understood to follow the cruelly optimistic logic that Berlant gestures to? And how does the idea of cruel optimism resonate with a more historically Buddhist vision of the existential condition of human beings? How might it serve as a starting point for thinking beyond meditation as neoliberal technique?

In my account, I privilege notions of resonance and intersection over those of erasure and rupture. My contention is not that somewhere out there a group of cynical neoliberal plutocrats have crafted mindfulness as a technology for constructing and controlling the neoliberal subject.

As Foucault puts it "government is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself" (Foucault 1993:204). While I do see strong resonances between the self as it is conceived and crafted in mindfulness discourse and practice and the ideal neoliberal self, there is

always something else going on. I want to leave room for the messy bits, for the possibility that the logics and practices of mindfulness are not entirely subsumed or exhausted by neoliberal rationality.

Chapter One:
Mindful Calculations

> *We have come here to learn about spirituality. I trust the genuine quality of this search, but we must question its nature. The problem is that ego can convert anything to its own use, even spirituality. Ego is constantly attempting to acquire and apply the teachings of spirituality for it's own benefit.*
> -- Chogyam Trungpa, Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism

Of all the aspects of the Woodenfish program – the philosophy classes, the Chinese calligraphy, the tai-chi – the thing that generated the most excitement among students was the meditation retreat. Held towards the end of the program, after everyone has begun to settle into the rhythms of life at the the temple, the retreat lasts for seven days, during which time students spend roughly six hours per day alternating between sitting and walking meditation, interspersed with meals, chores, and periods of self-reflection. All of this is done in complete silence.

In many ways, Woodenfish is designed with the silent meditation retreat at its centre – it gets top billing in the programs promotional material, and the program is structured so that the students spend the first several weeks of the program deepening their meditation practice and developing their ability to physically and mentally endure the seven days of silent sitting. As such, the retreat generates much anticipation, anxiety, and excitement among students; would they be able to maintain silence for such a long period of time? What would they experience? Would they go crazy? Become enlightened? Wouldn't it hurt to sit cross legged for so long? More than anything, students expressed

their excitement about finally having the opportunity to focus on what many of them view as the essence of the Buddhist tradition.

Much of this excitement centred on the students' view of meditation as a tool for self-transformation. Repeatedly, in casual conversation, written statements, and more formal interviews, students spoke of their excitement about the transformations they hoped to undergo as a result of what was for many their first experience of prolonged meditation practice. What exactly this transformation might entail varied. For many, the hope was that meditation might help them overcome the quotidian obstacles and annoyances of their day-to-day and serve as a tool to take control or restore balance. For others, meditation offered a possible solution to emotional or cognitive issues, easing depression or focusing a scattered mind. Or perhaps it provided the key to an enhanced way of being in the world characterized by a deeper engagement with life. Across the board though, students talked about their hope that meditation would allow them to develop a certain something that they felt they lacked. This was put most poignantly by Alex, a 28 year old substitute teacher from San Francisco, who told me that he hoped meditation would help him to "find what I'm looking for."

Space to Think

I spoke to Alex one afternoon during a brief lull in the program's frantic daily activity. The air was heavy with humidity and the temple was quiet but for the intermittent shrieks of cicadas. Most of the students had wisely chosen to use this precious period of downtime to grab a quick nap before the evening whirl of activities – chores, chanting, meditation, a dharma talk. Looking to escape the heat, Alex and I headed to the relative cool of my room – the staff quarters were among the few in the temple that, thanks to intermittently functional air conditioning units, offered some respite from the oppressive afternoon sun.

Sitting on my bed, Alex matter-of-factly listed off the factors that drew him to Woodenfish: "*Improved mental health through meditation. Definitely. Less depressed and more resilient. And*

space to think." In a quiet voice, his eyes trained on the floor, he spoke of his struggle with depression, which he characterized as a strong sense of "disappointment" with the trajectory of his life, as well as loneliness and a "strong longing for relationships." "*I felt like I couldn't handle teaching,*" he told me, "*I felt like during the school year I didn't have space to think.*" He mentioned his youthful ambitions, which included plans to join the U.S. State department, but said that lately he is struggling just to get by, feeling overwhelmed and exhausted: "*I wanted to feel like I want a fun career, rather than just wanting to rest. So my interest that I had before in maybe like a state department career has turned to just teaching, but lately that's been so stressful that I haven't wanted to teach as much.*"

In the face of this depressive exhaustion, Alex hoped that meditation at a Buddhist monastery might help him to "clear out the negative thoughts" that make his daily life a struggle. He saw meditation as a tool that would enable him to "internalize positive practices" that would help him "live life more fully," and hoped that this might allow him to "care for myself, build better relationships, and work beyond my insecurities." Most importantly, he said that beginning meditation practice made him "hopeful that I can simply enjoy life."

For Jessica, a 22 year old philosophy major from Georgia, to "simply enjoy life" probably wouldn't be enough. Brimming with enthusiasm, her voice running a mile-a-minute, Jessica explained to me her conviction that meditation could lead to a more open, free, and exciting way of being in the world. She sees Buddhism as a path to liberation from mundane differences, one that allows practitioners to see the cosmic unity that undergirds our ordinary feelings of separation and isolation: *"It opens up the mind... the epistemology of Buddhism allows you to freely look at the world and then judge what is real and what is not real, instead of drawing all these lines, all these boundaries and these fears that are preventing you from experiencing it. I think meditation is supposed to do the same thing."* For Jessica, meditation is a tool for expanding consciousness, one that she hoped might lead to a more satisfying, intuitive, and meaningful kind of existence.

One of the things Jessica hoped to gain from her meditation practice was the ability to listen more deeply: *"I've been talking since I was a baby, even when I was a baby I just babbled. And I know that there is a lot I can learn by listening, their is a lot that I don't pay attention to, or I miss because I wasn't listening, I was talking. It's the story of my life. I'm getting a lot better, I've been working on it, consciously working on it in college and high school, where I realized that it was really a problem. So I figured that listening, when I'm on the silent meditation retreat will be fantastic. I know that since I've been listening, my mind has opened up a lot more. And I don't want it to stop."*

Like Jessica, Zach, a 19 year old philosophy student from Virginia, hoped that a month at a monastery might open up his mind, helping him to find something solid and "pure" beyond his ruminations, judgements, and anxieties. Sitting on a low concrete wall abutting the temple's main parking lot, Zach talked to me about his reasons for coming to China and his hopes for the month. "*I was becoming... not depressed, but a lot less content with life itself. By analyzing things too much and kind of overcomplicating things*." He mentioned feeling constrained by social expectations and tangled up in the anxious calculations they generated, a process that often left him feeling frustrated, lonely, and dissociated: "*Until now, I've been really constrained by a projection of what I think I should be. Even now I still have large remnants of that where… often subconsciously I feel like I am engaging in that projection. Not being that natural entity, but instead being what I think I am, or what I think I need to be. Making conversation. I hate when I catch myself doing this, but when I'm thinking to reply and how my reply will make them think about me, and then projecting what they will say after my reply, and thinking about how I will reply to that. I dunno, it just creates this scenario where there is no presence of yourself, there's just a false projection of yourself."*

Worn out by this ceaseless mental calculation, Zach hoped that Buddhist meditation would bring him into contact with a more grounded, authentic version of himself: "*I started taking this class on eastern philosophy, where we meditated, and it taught me simplicity and acceptance, and that*

things are just as they are. Meditation itself gave me a pause in this constant contemplation of all these different things, and allowed me to be as minimal as possible and kind of experience life purely rather than as an observer or someone who is just examining life. I want to find a centre of presence that I've experienced for fleeing moments since I've been experiencing eastern thought and meditating... I know that I'm not going to come out of this program totally enlightened, but just being able to not be constantly reacting to stimulation."

Through meditation, Zach hoped to enact his own version of the good life, one in which he was able to escape the constraints of social expectations and "see things as they are": *"A good life for me is one in which I feel natural. Where all of my actions, all of my thoughts, all my interactions, every entity of my life is pure from some type of an essence within me. Nothing is altered by societal norms, or by considerations of what people are thinking of me. I guess a life without 'shoulds' itself would be a good life. Where I'm never trying to meet an expectation or reach a destination.*

While distinct, Alex, Jessica, and Zach's stories share a similar thread – an optimism that meditation will, as Alex put it, "help me find what I'm looking for." Though what, exactly, is being sought might differ—emotional stability, authenticity, expanded consciousness—each of these accounts shares an optimistic faith that sustained mindful presence in the here-and-now might bring about a transformation, a new-and-improved state of being. This was linked with a desire to go beyond what in mindfulness literature is often called "mental chatter"—the ceaseless process of projecting, judging, calculating, and ruminating that many of my informants identified as a major obstacle to their flourishing. This desire was often expressed to me in terms of spaciousness—Woodenfish students longed for space to think, an open mind.

The hopeful optimism expressed by the Woodenfish students reflects a broader North American fascination with meditation and its attendant mode, mindfulness. More than any other feature of Buddhist religiosity, meditation and mindfulness have captured western imaginations. Backed up with

the latest evidence from neuroscientific studies which show its salubrious affect on the brain, mindfulness has taken on a life of its own, breaking out of more traditional Buddhist circles and challenging any easy distinctions between the religious and the secular (Holzel et al., 2011). Today, "mindfulness" seems to be on everybody's lips, and the meditative practices meant to cultivate it have become a common feature of the everyday landscape – from yoga classes to hospitals to corporate boardrooms.

In this chapter, I turn my attention to the affectively charged promise of the mindfulness revolution—the emotions, fantasies, wishes, and values enfolded into the dream of mindful presence in the here and now. Following the cultural critic Lauren Berlant, I'm interested in the ways in which 'mindfulness' has become an object of desire constituted by a cluster of promises about things like emotional resilience, self-control, happiness, and personal agency. In Berlant's words, I wonder how meditation has become invested with "that satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, concept, or scene" (Berlant 2011:4). Or, to paraphrase Alex, I'm curious about how meditation has become linked to the ubiquitous promise that some*thing* might finally help us find "what we're looking for." Why is it that mindfulness has gained so much popularity today? What is it about the promises it makes to us that is so appealing? And how do the promises relate to the dominant structural forces of neoliberal capitalism?

By emphasizing promise, I highlight my interest in exploring the culturally mediated affective qualities we come to associate with, and expect from, mindfulness. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed notes that "it is possible that the evocation of an object can be pleasurable even if we have not yet experienced an object as pleasing: this is the power after all of the human imagination as well as the social world to bestow things that have yet to be encountered with an affective life" (Ahmed 2010:27). Ahmed gestures to the future-oriented temporality of the promise; mindfulness-as-promise is

affectively laden not only for the many things it actually is or does (whatever those may be), but for what it *might* do, the affects it manages to mobilize around it, the fantasies—about things like agency or self control or personal transformation—that it keeps alive. Here I attempt to elucidate the various discursive strands that lend the promise of mindfulness its particular affective potency. I explore the imaginary that takes shape amongst these discursive strands, an imaginary through which happiness comes to be seen as the natural product of a mindful engagement with the world. And I wonder about the ways in which such an imaginary—and the images of the human being and the good life that it offers—might resonate with, and perhaps reaffirm, the hegemonic logics of neoliberal capitalism that it often purports to subvert.

The Promise of Mindfulness

> *I had always assumed that meditation was for robed gurus, acid-droppers, and people who keep yurts in their backyard. But then I heard about the explosion of scientific research that shows the practice has an almost laughably long list of health benefits, from lowering your blood pressure to boosting your immune system to essentially rewiring your brain for happiness. I started with five minutes a day, and very quickly noticed three benefits: 1. Increased focus, 2. A greater sense of calm, and 3. A vastly improved ability to jolt myself out of rumination and fantasies about the past or the future, and back to whatever was happening right in front of my face... the practice has definitely made me happier, calmer, and nicer.*
> -- Dan Harris, in an interview with Gretchen Rubin

What kinds of promises does mindfulness make? How might we transform ourselves by simply paying attention to the moment-by-moment flow of our breath, or to the ever changing stream of sensations, feelings, and thoughts that comprise our phenomenological experience of life? In the *Anapanasati Sutta*[1], the Buddha lays out the benefits of mindfulness practice:

> When mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it is of great fruit and great benefit. When mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it fulfils the four foundations of mindfulness. When the four foundations of

1 The *Anapanasati* Sutta is a text from the Pali Cannon, the set of texts that many Buddhists ascribe to the historical Buddha. The *Anapanasati* Sutta is thought to contain one of the earliest Buddhist discussions of *sati*, the pali term for mindfulness.

> mindfulness are developed and cultivated, they fulfil the seven enlightenment factors. When the seven enlightenment factors are developed and cultivated, they fulfil true knowledge and deliverance (Thanisaro Bikkhu 2013).

Here the practice of mindfulness is directly linked to the Buddha's soteriological prescription, a way of letting go of worldly attachments and escaping Samsara. By learning to direct ones attention to the breath, mindfulness practitioners become aware of the reality of suffering and the ultimately transitory nature of feelings, thoughts, and sensations. They realize the fruitlessness of clinging to an impermanent body "enveloped by the skin and full of manifold impurity," one constituted by "feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, urine" (Thanissaro Bikkhu 2013). Such realizations bring an emancipatory insight into the transitory nature of all phenomena.

Today the benefits of mindfulness are portrayed as decidedly this-worldly. Freedom is still important, but it is now reconceived as freedom from the limitations of ones habits and impulses or from the haphazard fetters of social conditioning. It is first and foremost the freedom to be oneself. Mindfulness today represents the possibility of self-transformation, of taking control of ones life, and getting in touch with something both fundamental and life affirming. This was often expressed to me in terms of a desire to reach beyond looping mental chatter and habitual worries, anxieties, and calculations in order to touch something real and vital. As Zach imagined it, mindfulness might bring *"an ineffable feeling of trueness that you get by actually showing yourself to life, being part of life, being a member of this grand cosmos because you're actually there, you're not just what your brain is simulating."*

This vision rests on the back of a mountain of popular books and scholarly articles which trumpet the many benefits of mindfulness. Today Mindfulness practice is linked to everything from increased attentional capacity to a a deeper sense of spirituality to improved physical health. Courses in mindfulness promise to leave practitioners with more self confidence, increased emotional intelligence, and improved listening skills. Popular writers on spirituality and Buddhism talk about

"the power of now," the transformative power of "waking up" to the "bloom" or "majesty" of the present moment (Kabat-Zinn 1994, Tolle 1997, Saron 2012). As one author puts it, "mindfulness is about wakefulness... our mind holds the deep innate capacity to help us awaken to our moments and use them to advantage for ourselves, for others, and for the world we inhabit" (Kabat-Zinn 1994:2).

These benefits have been measured and quantified. The American Psychological Association lists the many empirically proven benefits of mindfulness: "reduced rumination, stress reduction, boosts to working memory, improved focus, less emotional reactivity, more cognitive flexibility, and increased relationship satisfaction" (Davis and Hayes 2011: 200). Elsewhere, mindfulness has been linked to improved "positive affect," increased compassion, reduced loneliness, and enhanced "emotional regulation" (Creswell et al. 2011). In Psychiatry, a suite of therapies derived from mindfulness meditation is now being used to treat a wide variety of mental disorders, from depression to PTSD to OCD (Williams et al. 2007, Smith et al. 2011, Hale et al. 2013). A recent study published in the journal *Psychoneuroendocrinology* argues that experienced meditators even have increased levels of telomerase, an enzyme associated with slowed cellular aging and longer life (Jacobs et al. 2011). Taken together, these claims present mindfulness as a powerful science-approved technique for letting go of negative emotional habits and taking responsibility for our own mental and physical health.

The promise of mindfulness has been widely celebrated in the popular media, and has caught the imaginations of everyday people: A 2007 NIH study found that 9.4 percent of americans practice some form of meditation, up nearly 2 percent from 2002 (NIH 2010). The cover of the January 2014 issue of Time Magazine features an image of a woman deep in meditation, along with the caption "The Mindfulness Revolution: Finding peace in a stressed-out, digitally dependent culture may just be a matter of thinking differently" (Pickert 2014). Books like ABC news anchor Dan Harris's *10% Happier: How I Tamed the Voice in My Head, Reduced Stress Without Losing My Edge, and Found*

Self-Help That Actually Works--A True Story offer powerful narratives of the transformative power of neuroscience certified mindfulness meditation. JWT Worldwide, one of the world's largest market communications companies, has identified "Mindful Living" as one of ten consumer trends to watch in 2014[2]. A recent Huffington Post article explains "Why 2014 Will Be The Year Of Mindful Living" (Gregoire 2014). Everywhere you look, people seem enchanted with the possibility and promise of mindful presence in the here-and-now.

Meditation has long been an object of fascination in the west, going back to the colonial encounter, when exotic stories of meditating Asian monks captured western imaginations and helped fuel the emergence of new spiritual movements, from the 19th century theosophists and transcendentalists to the spiritual seekers of the 1960s. However, it is only within the last three decades that excitement about the potentialities embedded in meditation and its attendant mode, mindfulness, has become a real fixture in the North American cultural imaginary. Here I attempt to trace one possible genealogy—there could be many—of how meditation and mindfulness burst into north American popular consciousness.

The North American fascination with mindfulness meditation can be traced back to the late seventies and the work of a number of researchers who published papers on the possible medical benefits of meditation. Foremost among them was Jon Kabat-Zinn. In 1979 Kabat-Zinn founded the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program at the University of Western Massachusetts. Influenced by his own personal Buddhist practice, as well as by his engagement with western Zen teachers like Phillip Kapleau, Kabat-Zinn envisioned MBSR as a way of incorporating Buddhist practices into medical care as a corrective for the entrenched mind-body dualism of the medical establishment. The eight week program he developed involves teaching a version of the Buddhist

2 According to JWT's 2014 trend report "Consumers are developing a quasi-Zen desire to experience everything in a more present, conscious way. Once the domain of the spiritual set, mindful living is filtering into the mainstream, with more people drawn to the idea of shutting out distractions and focusing on the moment" (JWT Worldwide 2013).

meditative practice of *sati,* mindful awareness, which he defined as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (Kabat-Zinn 2003:145). Through such awareness of the present moment, Kabat-Zinn believed patients could learn to manage the stresses and symptoms associated with a variety of illness – MBSR was conceived primarily as a "a compliment to medical treatment" for treating "medical patients with a wide range of diagnoses and conditions who were not responding completely to more traditional treatments" (Kabat-Zinn 2003:149). Originally, MBSR focused especially on the management of chronic pain and its attendant stresses, but its applications have expanded exponentially in the last few decades; today, the program has been replicated at hospitals and universities around the world, and it is viewed as a potential treatment for a vast range of medical conditions, from psoriasis and fibromyalgia to PTSD, OCD, and generalized anxiety disorder.

In his work on mindfulness in early Ch'an Buddhism, Robert Sharf identifies the Asian predecessors to contemporary formulations of mindfulness. While Kabat-Zinn asserts that mindfulness forms the transhistorical core of Buddhist spirituality, Sharf argues that the origins of contemporary ideas about mindfulness can be traced back to the Theravadan revival movement of the 20th century, and especially to the Burmese meditation teacher Mahasi Sayadaw (Sharf 2014:13). Historically, Sharf argues that *sati,* the pali term translated as mindfulness, was associated more with "recollection" or "remembering" (of doctrinal teachings or the traits of the Buddha) than with the non-discriminatory awareness with which it is today synonymous (Sharf 2013). It is only with the work of Sayadaw, as well as that of Nyanaponika Thera, the influential 20th century German-Sri Lankan Theravadan monk, that we see the rise of the vision of mindfulness that is familiar to us today. Concerned with popularizing meditation among the laity, who did not have the time or patience for deep immersion in Buddhist doctrine, these teachers taught a stripped down version of Buddhist meditation that promised quick results and could be practiced without serious engagement with Buddhist teachings. The meditation practice they taught was built around what Nyanaponika called "bare awareness," a "clear

and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us, at the successive moments of perception" which "attends just to the bare facts of a perception as presented either through the five physical senses or through the mind... without reacting to them by deed, speech or by mental comment which may be one of self reference (like, dislike, etc.), judgement or reflection" (Nyanaponika 1970:30).

It is the vision of mindfulness as non-reactive bare awareness that Kabat-Zinn picks up in MBSR. Echoing Nyanaponika, Kabat-Zinn asserts that mindfulness is the "heart" of meditation, and that it works by "refining our innate capacity for paying attention and for a deep, penetrative seeing/sensing of the interconnectedness of apparently separate aspects of experience" (Kabat-Zinn 2003:146). Through such sustained attention in the present moment, patient-practitioners learn to distinguish between the primary sensations of bodily or mental pain, and the secondary 'psychological' suffering that comes from reacting to or interpreting that pain. Importantly, for Kabat-Zinn practicing mindfulness involves a suspension of a conventional understanding of means, wherein one practices in order to improve a skill or bring about a goal. In contrast to this, mindfulness practice is "practice without attachment to outcome" (Kabat-Zinn 2003:148). Mindfulness meditation works by allowing patients "to let go of their expectations, goals, and aspirations, even though they are very real and valid, to let go—momentarily, at least—even of their goal to feel better or to be relaxed, and to simply "drop in" on the actuality of their lived experience and then to sustain it as best they can moment by moment, with intentional openhearted presence and suspension of judgment and distraction, to whatever degree possible" (Kabat-Zinn 2003:148). Quoting Borkovec (2002), Kabat-Zinn argues that mindfulness meditation thus allows patients "to let go of the illusory future and past and to focus on the non-illusory present," with its "intrinsic meaning and pleasure" (Kabat-Zinn 2003:148).

As MBSR grew in popularity throughout the 1980s, other scientists and researchers, many of

whom drew inspiration from their involvement with the counter culture of the 1960s, began to take an interest in the science of meditation and mindfulness. This trend crystallized in 1987, when Chilean neuroscientist Francisco Varela and American entrepreneur R. Adam Engle organized the first of a series of dialogues with the current Dalai Lama under the auspices of the Mind and Life Institute; Held in the Dalai Lama's own residence in Dharmasala, India, Mind and Life sought to bring cognitive scientists into conversation with "contemplatives," the belief being that "well-refined contemplative practices and introspective methods could be used as instruments of investigation" in the quest to understand consciousness (Mind and Life n.d.). Like Kabat-Zinn, Mind and Life saw Buddhism as an inherently scientific tradition. Varela sought to use the 'data' gathered from the first-person observation practiced by "the world's most seasoned experts in introspection and mental training" in order to expand the scope of normally objectivist, third-person scientific methodology. All of this was done with "the guiding conviction... that such collaboration would be constructive for modern science and beneficial for humanity in general[3]" (Mind and Life n.d.).

Over the next several years, the Mind and Life Institute grew, holding small semi-annual dialogues with the Dalai Lama and serving as a social hub for researchers interested in the science of meditation and consciousness. Things began to accelerate for Mind and Life in 2003, when it held its first public dialogue at MIT, which drew lots of attention and established the organization as a leader in the emerging field of "contemplative science," a term which refers both to the empirical study of meditation and related contemplative practices and to a push to expand science's epistemic criteria in order to incorporate information generated by such practices. Today, the Mind and Life Institute is a multimillion dollar organization involved in organizing conferences, funding research, and disseminating findings, and its annual Summer Research Institute – a scientific conference *cum* meditation retreat – has become a key social event for people interested in contemplative science and

3 The vision of Buddhism as a supplement to the cold reductionist objectivism of science has a long history (see Lopez 2008).

related fields.

The research that has generated the most excitement has tended to focus on the neuroscience of meditation and mindfulness practice. Today this is a rapidly growing field, with major research projects underway at a number of large North American universities. Drawing heavily on research into neuroplasticity – the notion that an individual's experience and behaviour can lead to measurable changes in brain structure and function – and with close links to the broader field of affective neuroscience which seeks to explain the neurobiological underpinnings of emotion, this research examines the transformative potential of contemplative practice. To date, this has taken a number of forms; fMRI imaging of the brains of meditating Tibetan Buddhist monks showing short and long term neurological changes associated with subjective reports of increased compassion and happiness; studies linking even relatively brief stints of meditative practice with changes in the brain connected with improved attentional control, reduced stress and anxiety, and increased "positive affect;" and studies linking meditation practice to increased immune function and better physical health (Davidson et al. 2003, Begley 2004, Lutz et al. 2009). Taken as a whole, this research provides powerful scientific support to the promise that the regular practice of mindfulness meditation will greatly improve one's quality of life.

Happier, Healthier, More Productive: Contemplative Neuroscience and the Happiness Turn

Scientific research on mindfulness must be read against the context of what cultural critic Sarah Ahmed has called the "the happiness turn," a term she uses to describe an intensifying interest in the art and science of happiness and well-being over the last decade or so:

> It is certainly the case that numerous books have been published on the science and economics of happiness, especially from 2005 onward. The popularity of therapeutic cultures and discourses of self-help have also meant a turn to

> happiness: many books and courses now exist that provide instructions on how to be happy, drawing on a variety of knowledges, including the field of positive psychology, as well as on (often Orientalist) readings of eastern traditions, especially Buddhism (Ahmed 2010:3).

Broadly speaking, the happiness turn can be divided into a series of related projects and discourses, tied together by a set of shared assumptions and values that see happiness and positive affect as a) measurable/quantifiable, b) empirically reproducible, and c) under the "intentional" control of the individual, and normatively linked to certain ways of being in the world but not others.

This vision of happiness has resonated widely, influencing everything from government policy to development to economics (a fact evidenced by the rise of various happiness metrics over the last several decades). But perhaps the most influential dimension of the happiness turn is an increasing focus on positive affective states like gratitude, resilience, and compassion in psychology and the psychiatric sciences. This trend is clearly embodied in the closely aligned disciplines of positive psychology and affective neuroscience where, weary of the traditional psychiatric focus on pathological states of mind (characteristic of psychoanalysis, for instance), researchers have sought to explain the science and psychology of happiness, emotional stability, etc. As one volume on positive psychology puts it "psychology has been preoccupied less with the conditions of well-being, than with the opposite: the determination of human unhappiness" (Strack, Argyle, and Schwarz 1991:1).

The science and psychology of happiness seek to remedy this by studying the psychological and neural underpinnings of positive affective states, and by developing a "happiness formula," a series of empirically validated rules for living well and being happy. A central contention of this new science is that happiness is a matter of choice and will—an influential book by UC Psychologist Sonja Lyubomirski claims that up to 40 percent of happiness is not subject to genetic or environmental influence but is instead determined by "intentional activity" (Lyubomirski 2008). At the popular level, such studies usually result in a list of happiness do's and don'ts, a series of traits and activities to be cultivated or avoided if one wishes to achieve lasting happiness (happy people tend to be married, or

happy people tend to lead "purposive" lives). Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology, has even released a "handbook of character strengths and virtues," a kind of sunny counterpart to the DSM which attempts to categorize positive human emotions and provides "guideposts" for the good life (Peterson & Seligman 2004). Taken together, this represents an attempt to bring the previously intangible concept of happiness firmly into the realm of quantification and reproducibility.

Scientific research on mindfulness represents a major component of the happiness turn, one which fuses concepts drawn from positive psychology with eastern religion and cutting edge neuroscience in order to articulate a powerful vision of positive self-transformation grounded in scientific fact. In much of the neuroscientific literature, meditation is presented as a kind of empirical approach to wellbeing – Mathieu Ricard, a former molecular biologist turned Tibetan Monk who has emerged as a key spokesman for this kind of research has been described as "the happiest man in the world," and research on meditation is often positioned at the core of an emerging "science of happiness" (Paulson et al. 2013). This research, which often draws on the symbolic power of fMRI imagery of meditating brains to establish its authority, has proliferated widely over the last several years. At the Centre for Investigating Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, neuroscientist Richard Davidson has shown that mindfulness is linked to neuronal changes associated with decreased stress, increased compassion, and boosted immune function, and higher levels of positive affect (Davidson et al. 2003). Similar studies carried out at Harvard by Britta Hölzel have shown changes in the brain that correlate with less stress after only eight weeks of MBSR (Hölzel et al. 2012). The Shamata Project, a longterm study of experienced meditators carried out by researchers from UC Davis, showed that mindfulness and other meditative practices were linked with neural changes associated with increased empathy, and better "response inhibition" (Fraser 2011).

As with MBSR, much of the research on mindfulness tends to bracket the extraneous "religious or cultural forms" traditionally associated with meditation. While there is certainly a Buddhist

orientation to this research – most of the meditation techniques studied come out of the Buddhist tradition, and Buddhist monks are often used as research subjects – in the neuroscientific literature, mindfulness meditation comes into view as a more-or-less secular technique for training ourselves—or more accurately, our brains—to be happy.

Here happiness is viewed as a trait firmly within the control of the individual. In the words of Richard Davidson "it is best to think of happiness as a skill," one that can be trained through the diligent practice of meditation and the corresponding neurological changes such practice engenders (Paulson et al. 2013:98). Self-development is premised on actual structural changes in neural architecture—mindfulness practice works by expanding the prefrontal cortex (the region of the brain responsible for decision making and other "executive functions") and shrinking the amygdala (the brain's "primitive" fear centre). As such, mindfulness is often described in terms of mental gymnastics or a "workout" for the brain (See for instance Stanley & Jha 2009, Shachtman 2013). By framing happiness as a skill, it is no longer conceived of as dependent on external factors, but is instead increasingly viewed as the product of individual effort. This vision established a strong link between happiness and freedom; Happiness here is both equated with freedom (we are happy when we are free from conditioned impulses and habits) and seen as its product (once we are free from our habitual ways of responding to things, we can be truly happy). As Davidson puts it "We need a different conception of happiness, more enduring and more genuine, not dependent on external circumstances" (Paulson et al. 2013).

The Politics of Bare Awareness

What does this enduring, genuine happiness look like? Zach imagined it as a kind of pure consciousness, a direct experience of things as they really are, unmediated by thought, language, and social conditioning: "*There's nothing internal, nothing going on within your head, just pure feeling*

and taste and scent. All of those sensations, and the raw emotions they inspire. But no effable thought, nothing that gets translated into words. Everything is as it is." For Zach, happiness means first and foremost freedom from thought, from the endless rounds of calculation that pull him out of himself and cuts him off from the flow of "raw" life. This notion of freedom is echoed by popular western proponents of mindfulness; Jon Kabat-Zinn describes the fruits of mindfulness practice in terms of a "*non-conceptual* seeing into the nature of mind and world" (Kabat-Zinn 2003:146, italics mine). Often this idea is couched in terms of the ability to transcend the corrupting influence of conceptual thought and dualistic language in order to "see things as they are."

But why should seeing things as they are lead to happiness? After all, isn't it possible that things as they are are miserable, unjust, or terrifying? In mindfulness, seeing things as they are brings happiness because both things and selves are seen as fundamentally good. Kabat-Zinn speaks of the "intrinsic meaning and pleasure of the present moment," arguing that if we can only let go of our attachment to egotistical calculations and our "robot-like way of seeing and thinking and doing," we will experience something sublime (Kabat-Zinn 2004:xiii). Richard Davidson makes a similar argument in reference to human nature: "it turns out that young infants have an innate propensity to express kindness toward others. But then, stuff happens that mucks it up for us as we grow older" (Paulson et al. 2013:98). In these formulations, a link is established between happiness and freedom. Mindfulness makes us happy and kind because we are already, at our cores, happy and kind. By freeing us from the corrupting influence of social conditioning—Davidson's "stuff that happens to us"—mindfulness allows us to get back in touch with who we really are.

These visions of mindfulness implicitly draw on a "pure consciousness" or "bare awareness" model of meditation which many scholars argue has heavily coloured western interpretations of Buddhism (Hori 2000, McMahan 2008, Sharf 2014). As David McMahan describes it, this model assumes that:

> ...the purpose of meditation is a *deconditioning* of the mind; that is, to strip a person of all psychological, social, and cultural conditioning—the false ego. This ego is an artificial sense of selfhood constructed from cravings and delusions based on the often unconscious residue of past impressions, thoughts, feelings, social roles, and self-images, as well as cultural assumptions and presuppositions (2008:195).

By freeing practitioners from the corrupting influences of social conditioning, meditation puts us back in touch with a pure, unmeditated state of consciousness, from which happiness, compassion, and wisdom naturally flow.

The vision of reality that animates this model of meditation pits a fundamentally good individual against the corrupting influence of social conditioning, which prevents us from seeing things as they really are. As Erich Fromm puts it in a now famous essay on Zen and Psychoanalysis, "most of what is in our consciousness is "false consciousness" and it is essentially society that fills us with these fictitious and unreal notions. But the effect of society is not only to funnel fictions into our consciousness, [it is] also to prevent awareness of reality" (Fromm, in Wright 1992:114). Such a vision has a long history, going back to the Enlightenment. Rousseau built his particular political program around a vision of natural man, uncorrupted by social influence; while he certainly differed in his valuation of it, Thomas Hobbes also assumed the existence of a presocial "state of nature" (Hobbes 1985, Ritter and Bondanella 1988). These theories find their echo in contemporary understandings of mindfulness meditation which employ a model of pure consciousness. Here, the juxtaposition of nature and culture/society is replaced by terms like "experience" versus "conceptual thought," but the essential logic is the same: there is an experience that precedes the dualistic influence of the social world, and that experience is our true home.

In an article on the use of *koan* in Zen Buddhism, Victor Hori argues that the notions of a "state of nature" and of "pure consciousness" both function as political concepts that do not refer to any actual state of affairs, but rather index fundamental beliefs about society and human nature (Hori 2000:308). According to Hori:

> the belief in pure consciousness is often an expression of a vision of human freedom. Society has conditioned us, so it is said, so that the very concepts and vocabulary we use encapsulate society's stereotypes and prejudices. Society is thus depicted as the source of suffering to the individual. To the extent that this is so, the breakthrough to pure consciousness is the psychological version of a return to the innocence of a state of a nature before dehumanizing society got started (2000:308).

Such a view, Hori argues, "seems self evident because it is given within a society much dominated by modern notions of individualism, but it is not Buddhism" (2000:309). Hori is critical of such a view of meditation, which he argues is predicated on bad logic: "in pure consciousness without conceptual activity, we 'see things as they are' but 'seeing things as they are' is possible only after conceptual activity gets started; it arises epistemologically at the same level as 'seeing things as they are not'" (2000:308). Similarly, Dale Wright argues that it is conceptually incoherent to think of enlightenment experiences as preceding cultural or linguistic conditioning. The subject and object of consciousness arise simultaneously; consciousness is always consciousness of something, and is therefore necessarily linked to discrimination, conceptualization, thought, and language. The idea of pure consciousness is therefore more dualistic, rather than less; it juxtaposes an individual realm of freedom, bliss, and joy with a social world characterized by constraint, delusion, and suffering. Rather than describing any actually existing state, pure consciousness becomes a political notion that expresses a particular vision of what human beings are—fully autonomous individuals who must struggle for happiness against the corrupting influence of the collective. The source of individual happiness is freedom from the oppressive norms of society.

These criticisms are echoed by Robert Sharf. Drawing on research into Buddhist modernism, Sharf argues that while mindfulness is often presented as a process of deconditioning that frees us from idle intellectual attachment to socially conditioned views and allows us to "see things as they are," such a view in fact is based on its own set of philosophical assumptions that Sharf identifies with "perennialism" (Sharf 2013). For Sharf, formulations of mindfulness that draw on notions of pure

consciousness—what he calls "bare awareness"—assume the existence of an experiential common denominator in religious experience of all kinds:

> There is indeed a metaphysical commitment that undergirds [the mindfulness] approach to meditation. Namely an uncritical commitment to what scholars of religion call perennialism. Perennialism is the notion that there is some singular, transcultural, transhistorical experience common to many mystics around the globe. This experience is, in itself, unconstructed. That is, it is free of local cultural, linguistic, or social inflections, although such inflections invariable colour any description or analyses of such a state (2013).

Sharf notes that, in North America at least, the philosophical perennialism that undergirds mindfulness links it to a set of ethical and political commitments that "so resemble those of mainstream consumer culture that they go largely unspoken" (2013). While Buddhism in its more traditional forms was often articulated as a renunciatory critique of normative forms of social and economic life, he argues that mindfulness today is touted as a way to survive and even thrive amidst the stresses of modern life. By emphasizing individualism experience and personal fulfillment, while deriding the corrupting or distorting influence of the social, perennialism links mindfulness to the "socially conservative ideology" that drives contemporary forms of capitalism.

Deconditioning or Reconditioning?: Mindfulness and the neoliberal subject

If, as Sharf and Hori argue, mindfulness is linked to an individualistic sociopolitical ideology, and if the vision of bare awareness on which it is based demonstrates perennialist philosophical commitments, than perhaps it is best to understand it in terms of reconditioning rather than deconditioning. But then what is the nature of this reconditioning? In mindfulness, happiness is presented as a skill, a set of habits we can learn to cultivate regardless of the external conditions in which we find ourselves. As Davidson has it "through conscious volitional mental training the brain can actually change, and the changes may be beneficial and useful. This is giving us a new way to think about how the brain can

reorganize itself" (Paulson et al. 2013). What are the consequences—personal, social, political, of such a view?

Here emotional experience becomes a matter of self-control, discipline, and will, while the social and political world take a back seat. Happiness is a choice, something that anyone can achieve so long as they choose diligently and strive hard enough. Such a view of human happiness resonates with the self as imagined in neoliberal discourse. Neoliberalism, a contemporary form of capitalism with roots in the thought of Chicago School economists like Milton Friedman and Gary Becker, consists of a well-analyzed set of macro-economic and juridical principles based around the core assumption that free markets are the best ways to secure human freedom, happiness, and prosperity (Harvey 2005, Brown 2005, Wacquant 2012). But neoliberalism is more than simply a set of macroeconomic policy suggestions and their social consequences. Starting with Michel Foucault, theorists have sought to understand the ways in which neoliberalism reconfigures human beings in terms of *homo oeconomicus*, a fundamentally individualized creature animated first and foremost by economic self-interest and a rationalized calculus of cost and benefit (Brown 2005, Foucault 2008).

Expanding on the notion of *homo oeconomicus*, theorists like Foucault and Wendy Brown argue that neoliberals extend an economic analysis to domains traditionally outside the purview of the economy—everything from sexuality to crime to child rearing (Foucault 2008). In his lectures on the birth of biopolitics, Foucault argues that "the generalization of the economic form of the market beyond monetary exchanges functions in American neoliberalism as a principle of intelligibility and a principle of decipherment of social relationships and individual behaviour" (Foucault 2008:243). In neoliberal discourse, economic logic becomes the root metaphor for explaining all phenomena: parents "invest" in their children's futures; a recently married celebrity is "off the market." Even supposedly objective scientific knowledge comes to be framed in economic terms: popular presentations of neo-Darwinian theory cast all biological organisms as rational choice makers vying for success according to a

utilitarian logic of cost and benefit (See for instance Walter 1990, Terborgh 2005; for an insightful analysis of this phenomenon, see Martin 2000).

The generalization of the market form necessitates shifts in the way we understand human behaviour. Through the lens of *homo oeconomicus*, all human activity is framed in terms of a rational self-investment in human capital—the bundles of abilities, skills, and attributes that serve as the basis for our participation in the economy and determine our potency as economic actors. The relationship of human beings to themselves takes shape along similar lines. People are called upon to become entrepreneurs of themselves; here the self is a business, "a collection of assets that must be continually invested in, nurtured, managed, and developed" (Brown 2013). The neoliberal orientation thus requires "a reflexive stance in which people are subjects for themselves—a collection of processes to be managed" (Gershon 2011).

It is precisely this attitude—"a collection of processes to be managed"—that mindfulness science takes towards affective life. Through the practice of mindfulness meditation, practitioners are taught to "let go" of habitual ways of perceiving and instinctual emotional reactions, thereby "creating space" and allowing them to choose more skilful, positive, or creative ways of responding to events and circumstances. This is often framed in terms of "strategies of emotional regulation" (which includes things like "selective inattention to emotional stimuli" and "the performance of distracting secondary tasks") and processes of "reappraisal" and "reperception" (which involve "reinterpreting the meaning of a stimulus to change one's emotional response to it") (Hölzel et al. 2011:544). By fostering these various abilities, mindfulness teaches practitioners to develop control over their own minds, managing their reactions, reframing their perceptions, and fostering the emotional qualities—gratitude, positivity, resilience—that are thought to lead to happiness.

This approach to emotion leads to a kind of economic instrumentalization of affective life in which human behaviour and subjectivity are framed in terms of maximization of certain emotional

traits, especially happiness. This framework implies a particular way of relating to emotions; on the one hand, certain emotions are seen as troublesome insofar as they disturb ones affective equilibrium and threaten ones happiness. Emotions like anger, sadness, and hopelessness are to be acknowledged, but only so that they may be managed and eventually let go—they become the undesirables in a regime of emotional regulation. On the flip side, emotions like gratitude or love are seen as key to developing ones "happiness skills." As such, they become instrumentalized—we choose to cultivate them in order to experience the deeper sense of happiness or spiritual fulfillment that they are thought to generate. Here mindfulness comes into view as a technology of the self based upon governing one's emotional life according to a rationalized calculus of cost and benefit. In the political economy of affect, emotions become means towards particular ends. Emotions deemed positive come to comprise our assets, slices of what could be described as emotional capital, to be deployed towards the achievement of happiness, the ultimate performance indicator.[4]

4 That neuroscientific research into mindfulness applies a neoliberal calculus of cost and benefit to affective life is not a mere coincidence. Rather, it is a matter of scientific research conforming to the discursive norms of an increasingly neoliberal society where the economy become the root metaphor for everything, including internal experience. This is accomplished in part through the complex financial ties that link mindfulness science to organizations like the John Templeton Foundation, which works to enact a vision of the world built around free markets, individual agency, and personal responsibility Founded by billionaire philanthropist John Templeton Sr., the Templeton Foundation provides billions of dollars in funding to research projects that grapple with "the Big Questions of human purpose and ultimate reality," especially as they pertain to areas like "freedom and free enterprise" and "character virtue development." Among its many projects, the foundation has given large amounts of money to research investigating the science and psychology of mindfulness. The Mind and Life institute has received several million dollars in funds from Templeton, and the foundation recently donated $2.3 million to the Shamata project, a long term study of the neurological effects of Buddhist meditation run out of U.C. Davis (U.C. Davis 2012).

In a summary on the its web page, the Templeton Foundation presents the vision of radical free market utopianism which underlies its philanthropy:

> For Sir John Templeton, wealth creation was no accident of history. Human societies could experience general prosperity, he believed, only when they recognized and established broad principles of freedom, competition, and personal responsibility. For him, individual freedom was the indispensable foundation of economic, social, and spiritual progress (John Templeton Foundation, n.d.)

This vision extends to the John Templeton Foundation's conceptualization of individual human beings:

> Wherever we find ourselves in life, whatever the circumstances, whatever habits may be influencing our decisions, we can transform each situation into a learning and growing experience. We can determine how to be the masters of our habits so that our habits can be useful servants to us. When you rule your mind, you rule your world (John Templeton Foundation, n.d.)

This kind of "if life gives you lemons/pull yourself up by your bootstraps" rhetoric is taken directly from the neoliberal playbook. Here we see a reconfiguration of the subject in terms of a neoliberal fantasy of self-

Mindful Calculations:
The instrumentalization of the present moment

Many of my informants turned to mindfulness in the hope of finding happiness amidst seemingly unending mental chatter and anxious strings of thoughts, projections, and calculations. Will, a friendly, soft-spoken drummer from North Carolina, hoped that mindfulness would help him control "*incessant and seemingly unstoppable thoughts*" about future plans that made his daily life frustrating. For Zach meanwhile, the reflexive stance required by neoliberal modes of life produced a kind of "dissociation" borne of constantly trying to control how others interpreted him. He was frustrated to find that his conversations often felt like calculated pitches for himself: "*I feel really accomplishment oriented, where I'm always emphasizing what I've accomplished, and usually I know that those accomplishments will please others or will interest others. When I'm talking to people about myself, I'm focusing on the things I have done, and not really where I am at that moment… a perfect example was leading up to this program. I really wanted to make this a personal thing, so I tried as much as possible not to off-the-bat tell people that I'm going to China. But I knew that certain people would say 'wow, you're doing this amazing Woodenfish program' and really approve of it, and I knew the people who would be like 'oh that's weird.' So I chose to emphasize the program to some people, who I knew would think it was cool, and kinda downplay it to others."*

Here Zach's experience as a Woodenfish participant literally becomes part of his collection of assets, a component of his human capital to be deployed and managed as he trucks and barters his way towards some projected vision of "success." But by turning the experience into a means towards some future goal, it loses its special meaning and significance Such a way of relating to oneself, in which experiences are merely means towards some ever-receding end, can be toxic; *"You can talk to some*

regulation, unfettered agency, and personal responsibility, a vision that clearly resonates with the individual as constituted in scientific conceptions of mindfulness, where individuals are called upon to become "managers" of their emotions, and success, measured in happiness, becomes the ultimate end in an instrumentalized economy of affect.

people, and they can tell you what there next step is, and there next step, until they're retired, until death. Everything seems like a means to an end, but where is the actual end? Where does it stop?" For Zach, this orientation towards life produced confusion, separation, and a haunting sense of inauthenticity.

This kind of calculating attitude—accompanied for Zach by a sense of dissociation—is central to the experience of neoliberal subjectivity. As Ilana Gershon argues in an an article on the neoliberal conception of agency, for the neoliberal subject:

> There is always already a presumed distance to oneself as an actor. One is never 'in the moment'; rather, one is always faced with one's self as a project that must be consciously steered through various possible alliances and obstacles... neoliberal markets require participants to be reflexive managers of their abilities and alliances" (Gershon 2011: 539).

In Zach's habitual tendency to make his experiences work for him—to turn his life story into a kind of symbolic capital—we see the "reflexive stance" of the well disciplined neoliberal subject.

It is from this ceaseless calculating of cost and benefit—and from attendant feelings of stress, disconnection, and inauthenticity—that mindfulness offers freedom. For Zach, mindfulness seems to "work" by subverting an instrumental logic in which everything is reduced to a mere means, allowing him to escape from seemingly endless calculation and get back in touch with something vital. By being fully present with every experience as it arises from moment to moment, Zach imagined that mindfulness would allow him to restore the meaning that he felt was diminished by an overly instrumental orientation towards life.

Yet paradoxically, mindfulness is increasingly being viewed in terms of an instrumental logic of investment, whether it be an investment in happiness or, as we shall see, an investment in one's personal economic viability. This trend towards the "instrumental utility" of mindfulness practice has been noted by Lauren Leve in her work on vipassana in the Kathmandu Valley (Leve 2013). A form of mindfulness meditation popularized by S.N. Goenka, a former Burmese-Indian Businessman, vipassana

purports to teach a stripped down, scientized version of Buddhist meditation practice. Pondering the rapid popularization of vipassana in Nepal, which was previously dominated by more traditional forms of Buddhism, Leve argues that vipassana's appeal must be understood against the backdrop of Nepal's increasingly intense encounter with the forces of global capitalism. For Leve, vipassana's growing popularity is due to the fact that it frames itself as a rational technique for investment in the self, one geared towards creating the kinds of selves particularly well-suited to riding the roller coaster of neoliberal modernity. Leve's informants speak about vipassana using an economic language of cost and benefit; as one nepali businessman puts it "I have received many practical benefits from vipassana... I do not waste time... I am more effective as a manager... When you realize that vipassana can give you so much benefit and also save time, it becomes easier to find time to sit for meditation every day" (Leve 2013). In response to the ascent of entrepreneurial capitalism in Nepal, and the corresponding erosion of traditional social forms, Leve argues that Nepalis see vipassana as "the best dharma for today" because it teaches how to become a more effective manager of oneself (Leve 2013).

This instrumentalized vision of mindfulness has also found traction in Corporate board rooms in North America. Drawn by promises of increased attentional control, enhanced productivity, and improved decision making and "executive function," meditation and mindfulness have been met with enthusiasm by America's corporate elite. Earlier this year, Mind and Life cosponsored an event with the conservative American Enterprise Institute called "Happiness, Free Enterprise, and Human Flourishing" where the Dalai Lama, an avowed marxist, participated in a dialogue with hedge fund managers and business leaders about the benefits of free-market capitalism (American Enterprise Institute 2014). Today, mindfulness meditation is increasingly being employed by major corporations like Procter & Gamble and General Mills, who use it to cut health expenditures, increase productivity, and boost the bottom line.

In an article on mindfulness and corporate America, Arianna Huffington argues that

mindfulness, and the peace of mind it generates, lead to increased business success. "I do want to talk about maximizing profits and beating expectations -- by emphasizing the notion that what's good for us as individuals is also good for corporate America's bottom line" (Huffington 2013). Mindfulness, by boosting wellbeing and happiness, leads to more balanced employees better able to tackle the challenges of corporate life. Here the line between happiness and productivity—the bottom line—becomes blurry. Citing a study from the iOpener Institute showing that increased employee happiness correlates with fewer sick days and boosted productivity, Huffington claims that "happiness and productivity are not only related, they're practically indistinguishable" (Huffington 2013). Mindfulness, a technique for developing the 'skill of happiness,' becomes a potent tool for maximizing profits.

Mindfulness has enjoyed particular popularity in Silicon Valley; companies like Apple and Facebook offer meditation classes to combat burnout and foster creativity; Google encourages employees to meditate in the hopes of boosting productivity and wellbeing, and there popular Search Inside Yourself program promises to use "proven techniques" to "boost peak-performance" and develop "effective, innovative leaders using science backed mindfulness and emotional intelligence training" (Search Inside Yourself, n.d.). Taught as a multi-day workshop which is now being exported to other companies via the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute, the program uses mindfulness meditation to teach employees to "easily access an optimal state of mind that is well-adapted for working with a sense of well-being, confidence and clarity in complex environments" (Search Inside Yourself n.d.). Corporate enthusiasm for meditation is also evident in events like Wisdom 2.0, which brings together business leaders from companies like Facebook, Twitter, and Google and experts on mindfulness and yoga to discuss the relationship between business, technology, and spirituality.

The corporate formulation of mindfulness is characterized by a number of unique features. First, as in the picture painted by neuroscience and MBSR, mindfulness is linked to an ethic of

compassion, but here this is articulated in terms of corporate social responsibility; balanced and mindful employees are productive ones, and compassion, social responsibility, and even "world peace" are not at odds with the bottom line (Tan 2012). In the words of one commentator "goodness is good for business. If you, as the boss, are nice to your employees, they are happy, they treat their customers well, the customers are happy to spend more money, so everybody wins" (Confino 2014). By training in mindfulness companies will boost the emotional capabilities employees need to both de-stress *and* successfully navigate the world of business.

Second, in corporate treatments of mindfulness, emphasis is put on the fact that mindfulness is "proven," that the efficacy of meditation is backed by the latest fMRI images of meditating brains (Dumit 2004). Here mindfulness is firmly separated from anything cultural or religious; it becomes a simple and universal technique, a kind of mental workout. This corresponds to a shift in how the effect and mechanisms of meditation are understood; meditators are first and foremost neurological (non) selves, and meditation is understood squarely in terms of the neuroscientific vision of malleable brains, and shrinking amygdalas (Rose 2003). In the words of Kenneth Folk, a popular San Francisco meditation teacher known for teaching a stripped down version of the dharma that draws on computer analogies, "All that woo-woo mystical stuff is so retrograde. This is training the brain" (Shachtman 2013).

Finally, the corporate vision of mindfulness explicitly links it to a discourse about the appropriate relationship to technology in an age of digital frenzy. Part of mindfulness's appeal lies in the hope that it might temper our heavy reliance on technology. As the world becomes increasingly plugged in and people are more and more reliant on electronic devices, discussions about frayed attention spans, technological alienation, and the costs and stresses of perennial multi- tasking have proliferated (See for instance Carr 2011). While smartphones and tablets have become an inescapable part of modern life, people are obviously anxious about the ways in which technological hyper-

stimulation is reshaping our political lives, our social worlds, and even our brains.

Many Woodenfish students expressed to me their own anxieties about their growing technological dependence. Alex told me that while technology has become indispensable to him, he was uncomfortable about how he often felt "chained" to his computer, which he used to distract himself when feeling low. Zach was less equivocal; when I spoke with him he articulated deep misgivings about the way gadgets have impacted his life: "*It's kind of disgusting actually. At what point during people's days are they just there, and not there with a device. When are we ever just unstimulated? I view it as almost a drug, kinda like caffeine, or something like that, where you have to consistently have it or you don't feel right. And technology is just that way, where if I'm feeling lonely and theirs nothing going on, I'll whip out my phone and that will be what's going on. Any opportunity that you do have to draw your attention inward is demolished by the presence of your phone or TV or computer... I've gone days when there's not a moment where I'm not either on my computer, watching TV, on my phone, just doing something that's stimulating me. And that leave's me with this feeling of almost of a technological hangover, where I'm like 'where am I? Where has my life been?.*" Mindfulness is increasingly understood as an important tool for managing our technological dependence. On the one hand, technology is viewed as a potential tool for fostering mindfulness—tech companies like Apple have begun marketing an array of apps with names like "GPS for the Soul" and "Simply Being" that use biometric data to track stress levels and enhance meditation practice. At the same time, Mindfulness is seen to answer the problem of "living wisely in [a] digital age" in which the hyper-connection and distractibility fostered by omnipresent communications technology makes mindful presence in the here and now a real challenge (Wisdom 2.0 n.d.). At Wisdom 2.0, a conference that brings together mindfulness teachers and business leaders from the tech sector, is organized around the problem of how to "live connected to one another through technology, but to do so in ways that are beneficial to our own well-being, effective in our work, and useful to the world" (Wisdom 2.0 n.d.).

Speakers offer tips how to manage ones relationship to technology, and sessions focus on things like "mindful schedule scanning" and "the digital now" (Wisdom 2.0 n.d.). Google's Search Inside Yourself program offers advice on "mindful emailing" (Search Inside Yourself n.d.).

Key to corporate mindfulness is the notion of emotional intelligence. In a neoliberal economy characterized by increased emphasis on flexible, informal, or part time labour, as well as rapid technological shifts and increasingly brief cycles of obsolescence, workers must develop new emotional, social, and relational skills in order to survive—characteristics like resilience, adaptability, positivity, and even compassion. Such skills are not only key to the emotional survival of workers, but also become potent economic tools for businesses as they navigate the dynamics of affective capitalism. As Chade-Meng Tan, the founder of Search Inside Yourself and a mindfulness expert and "personal growth pioneer" at Google puts it: "everybody knows this [emotional intelligence] thing is good for their career. And every company knows that if their people have EI, they're gonna make a shitload of money" (Shachtman 2013).

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri refer to the growing emphasis on emotional intelligence in terms of a kind of "feminization" of the labour market: "the feminization of work indicates how qualities that have traditionally been associated with 'women's work,' such as affective, emotional, and relationship tasks, are becoming increasingly central in all sectors of labor" (Hardt and Negri 2009:133). This trend, linked to a loss of manufacturing jobs and the exponential expansion of the service sector in Euroamerican economies, has reshaped the labour landscape, which favours new suites of skills and particular affective dispositions.

In a similar vein, Richard Sennett points to several challenges facing workers as they navigate the "fragmentary social conditions" of neoliberal capitalism (Sennett 2007). First, in the face of the erosion of steady, long term employment and the frame of reference such employment provides, the individual must learn to constantly "improvise his or her own life narrative, or even do without any

sustained sense of self" (Sennett 2007:4). Second, the ideal neoliberal subject must become an entrepreneur who constantly retrains and updates their skills in the face of rapid technological and scientific change (Sennett 2007:5).

Here happiness and other emotional traits are doubly economized. First, they becomes the ultimate goals of affective life; emotions are managed or regulated according to an instrumental calculus of cost and benefit that sees maximization of certain emotional traits as the ultimate end. Second, they becomes a means to an end, a kind of "emotional capital" that allows one to survive and thrive in the neoliberal economy. As Sara Ahmed puts it "happiness become an individual responsibility, a redescription of life as a project, but it also becomes an instrument, as a means to an end, as well as an end. We make ourselves happy, as an acquisition of capital that allows us to be or to do this or that, or even to get this or that" (Ahmed 2010:10). This process "involves the instrumentalization of happiness as a technique. Happiness becomes a means to an end, as well as the end of the means. Happiness becomes, then, a way of maximizing your potential of getting what you want, as well as being what you want to get" (Ahmed 2010:10).

Against this backdrop, where characteristics like happiness, intuition, positivity, and resilience take on unprecedented economic value, mindfulness comes into view as a powerful tool for boosting emotional intelligence. As part of a science of happiness that promises to let individuals take control of and manipulate their own emotional well being, mindfulness becomes instrumentalized as a means of boosting one's emotional capital—the bundle of emotional traits and dispositions that serve as the basis for engagement in the new global economy. Here practicing mindfulness literally becomes a way of investing in ones entrepreneurial self project. By taking responsibility for and learning to manage our emotions, we become happier people, and that happiness makes us more effective economic actors.

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Letting go of Negativity:
Mindfulness, neoliberalism, and the politics of emotion

The day before the official start of the Woodenfish program, and I'm sitting with a jet-lagged and slightly giddy Juliette. Or maybe I'm the one who's jet-lagged and slightly giddy, it's difficult to tell. The last few days have been a whirl of activity. After receiving news that we are being kicked out of our original temple, Fuyan, for having failed to secure permission from local government officials, the Woodenfish staff have spent the last several days scrambling to make alternative arrangements. It looks as though we've finally secured a new site for the program, a temple outside of Wenzhou, in coastal Zhejiang province, but things are still up in the air. We've yet to figure out how we'll transport the 55 freshly arrived students the 1000 km to the new temple, and the makeshift staff office is abuzz with frantic stress. The sight of Yifa, the program's coordinator and an ordained Buddhist nun, shouting into a cell phone in staccato Mandarin, her saffron robes trailing behind her as she paces back and forth, is causing some serious cognitive dissonance—*this* is authentic Buddhism? I'm thankful to slip away for a few minutes to get down to the relatively stress-free business of interviews.

Juliette is French-American, but she studies at McGill. She's in her 3rd year, majoring in cultural studies, with a special interest in Buddhism. As we sit on the low concrete wall that runs alongside the temple's main parking lot, we talk about Montreal and McGill; the cheapest neighbourhood to live, the best place to get a late-night snack, our favourite profs. I want to steer the conversation towards more "anthropological" topics, but I'm new to this and not quite sure how to proceed. Eventually talk shifts to China, and from there I clumsily segue into my prepared questions about her experiences with Buddhism and her reasons for 'doing' Woodenfish: *"My parents were inspired a lot by Buddhist philosophies, and I was raised with a lot of ideas that I later recognized as Buddhist. I also just more personally came to it a few summers ago after studying it academically, and started feeling it more personally, it sounds so silly actually, but after reading Dharma Bums by Jack Kerouac. I was staying in one of my favourite places, Yosemite national park. We had been, like*

backpacking for five days and, I don't know, I started feeling really great and really personal and a lot of stuff was coming up naturally, and meditating felt really great."

For Juliette, this experience marked the beginning of a period of excitement about Buddhism, but this excitement was short lived. "*A few years ago I definitely identified as a Buddhist and would read about buddhism, and did meditate for like half a year, and I identified with all the categories and stuff like that, and I actually disagreed with all the people who were like 'oh well, I'll just check it out and see what I like.' I didn't really think that was a very brave way of going about things. But I wasn't ready or didn't have enough to do that by myself, so now its just me again, and it was me before also, and now its me, and I don't want to trick myself into thinking that I can be a Buddhist if I don't know what a Buddhist is."*

Juliette's ambivalence – she can't be a Buddhist if she doesn't know what a Buddhist is – stands in sharp contrast to the certainty with which Buddhism is presented in mindfulness discourse, where it is simultaneously an extraneous set of "cultural" beliefs (summed up pithily in the phrase "the Buddha was not a Buddhist") and a universal and more-or-less secular technique, one that is both fundamentally scientific and which forms the real "heart" of Buddhist practice. Such an understanding leaves little space for ambiguity – Buddhism is meditation, meditation is mindfulness, and mindfulness is a technique for living a happier, more successful, more fulfilling life. For me, the uncertainty Juliette's words open up offers room to think beyond the picture of Buddhist practice that emerges in contemporary discussions of mindfulness.

I ask Juliette what prompted her shift from optimism to ambivalence: *"Well, maybe a lot of realizing that that stuff is already in me and that things that I was like hoping Buddhism would bring to me, like clarity, I could grow towards that just by being honest to what was already there."* She also pointed to a growing political consciousness: "*I was trying to find in life the different ways of being in this material world, this palpable world, where there are people being oppressed, and political powers*

oppressing people, so I was in a lot of protests and thinking a lot about these things, and wanting to engage my body in this, and wanting to do so with love, but also really feeling that there is a place for anger in the world, and I didn't want to let go of that anger, because that anger was true and legitimate and making things move in the world."

Reflecting back on Juliette's words, I'm left wondering: how should we understand her ambivalence about 'letting go' of the anger that she sees as both personally potent and politically generative? In mindfulness, negative affect is often portrayed as something to be let go or managed, the idea being that such emotions keep practitioners locked in their own heads and unable to experience "the intrinsic meaning and pleasure of the present moment." And yet for Juliette, there's something vital about anger. It marks something "true and legitimate" about her experience of the world and "makes things move." Given this vitality, how are we to understand mindfulness's injunction to let go of or manage negative affective states—anger, sadness, attachment, hopelessness? What are the consequences—psychological, ethical, political—of letting go?

A differentiation between positive and negative emotion, with a subsequent wariness of the latter, is present in the earliest instantiations of Buddhist thought. In the *Kakacupama Sutta*, one of texts that comprises the Pali cannon, the Buddha exhorts his followers to let go of anger, even under the most extreme conditions: "Suppose some bandits catch one of you and sever his body limb from limb with a two-handed saw, if he should feel angry thereby even at that moment, he is no follower of my teaching" (Access to Insight 2013). Similarly, the *Jataka* tales, which recount the virtuous deeds performed by the Buddha in various past lives, contain stories of the Buddha's equanimity and patient forbearance in the face of horrendous suffering being inflicted on him by others.

Perhaps the most systematic outline of the Buddhist attitude towards emotion is laid out in the *Abidharma*, the collection of early texts that that provide a detailed and list-heavy overview of buddhist cosmology and psychology (Ronkin 2014). Here there is a distinction drawn between various

"virtuous" and "afflictive" mental factors. According to Georges Dreyfus:

> the virtuous factors are the ones that lead to long lasting piece and happiness. They are the excellencies, such as compassion and detachment, that are conducive to and constitute the good. The afflictive factors, on the other hand, disturb the mind, creating frustration, restlessness, and the like. They are the main obstacles to the life of the good as understood by the Buddhist tradition (Dreyfus 2003:130-31).

Quoting Asanga, a 4th century CE Buddhist thinker, Dreyfus notes that "the characteristic of affliction is that, when it arises, it has the characteristic of disturbance and renders the mind and body troubled" Dreyfus (2003:131).

This wariness of afflictive states jives nicely with contemporary formulations of mindfulness, and it is these Buddhists texts that are often cited by contemporary mindfulness practitioners. Both seem to be premised on a particular model of emotion. In mindfulness, as in the science of happiness more generally, emotions are understood as transparent and fully accessible to consciousness—we always know how we feel. Emotions are also distinct and discernible, and there is an assumed correlation between the subjective experience of an emotion and its moral quality (things that feel good are good for us and good for the world). As Sara Ahmed puts it, this model "relies on a very specific model of subjectivity where one knows how one feels, and where the distinction between good and bad feelings is secure, forming the basis of subjective as well as social wellbeing" (Ahmed 2010:6). Ahmed contrasts this approach with models of emotion employed in cultural studies and psychoanalysis, which stress the opacity of emotion and allow for "the confusion rather than separation of good and bad feelings" (Ahmed 2010:6).

Predicated on this straight forward model of emotion, mindfulness is focused on the question of how to foster positive affective states–characterized by happiness, resilience, and equanimity—while mitigating or managing negative emotions like anger, sadness, and frustration. This literature frames emotion in terms of freedom and choice. In everyday life, controlled by our impulses, we embody and act out all kinds of negative feelings without consciously choosing to do so. This unconscious acting

out hurts others and ourselves. Through mindfulness training we become free by building our capacity for self-restraint and learning to make the right emotional choices. Chade-Meng Tan, the google mindfulness expert, describes training in mindfulness as a journey from "compulsion to choice" (Search Inside Yourself, n.d.). Alan Wallace, the Dalai Lama's translator and a Mind and Life board member, argues that through mindfulness, we become "free to make wise choices at all times" (Harrington and Zajonc 2003:156).

Managing Emotions: Responsibility and choice in affective life

Freedom and choice also play a central role in neoliberalism. As Ilana Gershon points out, "neoliberal agency emerges as conscious choices that balance alliances, responsibility and risk using a means-ends calculus. The freedom that neoliberalism provides is to be an autonomous agent negotiating for goods and services in a context where every other agent should ideally be also acting like a business partner and competitor" (Gershon 2011:540). What happens when this view of freedom and choice is extended to the inner life of human beings? What happens when we think of emotions in terms of good and bad choices within an affective economy in which happiness maximization is the ultimate end?

A common critique of neoliberalism is that it "responsiblizes" individuals; as Wendy Brown notes, neoliberalism "carries responsibility for the self to new heights: the rationally calculating individual bears full responsibility for the consequences of his or her action no matter how severe the constraints on this action" (Brown 2005:42). Responsibility is the price one pays for the neoliberal freedom to choose. You are poor and unhealthy because you lack self-control, entrepreneurial spirit, and gumption, not because of the vagaries of birth, economics, or class politics. Here responsibility for the self becomes the supreme moral virtue. Such a view is the inevitable outflow of the neoliberal conception of freedom, in which freedom is reduced to a question of individual choice.

In mindfulness, we see this neoliberal responsibilization extended into the realm of the

emotions. As Richard Davidson argues "our brain is continuously being shaped - we can take more responsibility for our own brain by cultivating positive influences" (Davidson, in Tippet 2012). But with the freedom to choose come new ways of conceptualizing suffering and framing and calculating morality. If happiness is a choice, than so must be suffering. Because happiness is in the control of the individual and can be achieved through the diligent practice of mindful "emotional regulation," suffering becomes the natural result of failing to properly discipline oneself. If you suffer, if you are unhappy, it is because you have 'mismanaged' your emotions. As mindfulness becomes instrumentalized as a happiness technique, suffering takes on a moral valence—it becomes a matter of a failure of will. One deserves one's emotional state because of good or bad choices; one suffers because one has failed to perceive an event appropriately, not because of anything intrinsic to the event or (even the person).

Such logic is not confined to scientific presentations of mindfulness, but is apparent in western treatments of Buddhist meditation more generally. In her best selling book on Buddhist *mettā* meditation *Loving Kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*, Sharon Salzberg details a conversation between the Dalai Lama and a novice meditator:

> When the Dalai Lama visited Insight Meditation Society in 1979, somebody asked him "I am a beginning meditation student and I feel quite worthless as a person. What can you say about that?" The Dalai Lama replied "you should never think like that, that is completely wrong thinking. You have the power of thought, and therefore the power of mind, and that is all you need" (Salzberg 1995:65).

Here suffering is configured in terms of an error of thought. The individual's sense of worthlessness is a matter of thinking the wrong thoughts, of failing to exercise their "power of thought." Suffering is to be overcome by learning to direct ones attention and regulate ones emotions in order to 'reperceive' the circumstances of ones life.

Such a framing necessitates a reconceptualization of suffering in which individual choice is foregrounded and the social and political recede into the background. As Brown has it, "a

'mismanaged life', the neoliberal appellation for failure to navigate impediments to prosperity, becomes a new mode of depoliticizing social and economic powers and at the same time reduces political citizenship to an unprecedented degree of passivity and political complacency" (2005:42). Neoliberalism thus engenders a flattening of the political landscape:

> ...as economic parameters become the only parameters, the *rationality* of what Aristotle and later Arendt called "mere life"—the life of endeavouring to survive—becomes ubiquitous and hegemonic, saturating every activity and every sphere. The good life, the domain where ethical and political freedom pertains, is vanquished by this rationality (Brown 2013:33).

The neoliberal subject thus finds herself in a radically depoliticized milieu; As Ilana Gershon puts it, in neoliberalism "decisions are made on a prestructured terrain, [where] people's choices are between limited possibilities, with the structural reasons for the limitations systematically overlooked" (Gershon 2011:540). Here the conditions of life are accepted as already given, and politics is reduced to the ceaseless jockeying for what Brown calls "advantageous competitive positioning" (Brown 2013:2).

Mindfulness practice is often couched in terms of freedom, but here it is merely the freedom to choose ones reactions and perceptions; instead of striving with others to alter social conditions, one is called upon to manage oneself to the best of ones ability within parameters that are already given. If one is made unhappy by the conditions of ones life, it is the individual's responsibility to "reperceive" those conditions through the sustained work of self cultivation. As one article puts it, "Today, stress is commonly understood to mean external events or circumstances, and as a result, we tend to think of stress as something *external* to us. However, stress is actually a *perceived*, *internal* response" (Stanley and Jha 2009:145). The problem does not lie in the conditions themselves, but rather in how one has "chosen" to perceive those conditions. Even physical health, which is linked to happiness, becomes a matter of choice. As Kabat-Zinn has it "the ways in which an individual *chooses* to be in relationship with his/her stress and stressful conditions can actually reduce the rate of telomere shortening," a physiological change associated with reduced risk of cancer (Paulson et al. 2013:97, italics mine).

Here emotion and physical health are cut loose from social and economic constraints, accidents of birth, and external conditions as a whole. Instead, emotional wellbeing is wholly the concern of the individual. By seeking a "different conception of happiness not dependant on external circumstances" mindfulness science implies a world in which happiness is largely divorced from anything out there in the world. This radically desocialized vision of individual happiness was echoed in the words of my informants. Zach sought a happiness in which *"nothing was altered by societal norms"* but instead flowed *"from some type of an essence within me."*

Against this backdrop, affective life is highly individualized; emotions mark nothing about the world, and suffering becomes a matter of failing to jockey ceaselessly enough. If you are unhappy, you have nobody to blame but yourself; if you are happy, good for you, you've earned it. This view of things is built in part on the particular temporality of "the present moment," a temporality which obscures historical contingencies and social embededness—what Juliette describes as "*this material world, this palpable world, where there are people being oppressed, and political powers oppressing people"*—and makes everything a matter of a radically decontextualized Here and Now. By encouraging people to "let go of the illusory past and the illusory future" and experience "the present moment, with its intrinsic meaning and pleasure," mindfulness not only wipes out the very particular contingencies of actual lives, but assumes that the present will always be pleasurable, as long as one strives hard enough to let go.

What happens here to Juliette's anger? Recall that Juliette did not want to let go of anger because for her it registered something vital about her experience of the world: " *I didn't want to let go of anger, because that anger was true and legitimate and making things move in the world."* For Juliette, anger indexes something about the world, tying her to broader forms of sociality and politics and making things happen. It springs from the injustices and oppression she witnessed and experienced while working as an activist in Montreal, and it continues to fuel her as she struggles to enact her

version of a better world. For her, anger was both personally potent and politically generative.

In his essay "Depression, Buddhism, and the Work of Culture" Gananath Obeyesekere discusses the diverse ways in which what he calls "depressive affects" are dealt with in different cultural milieus (Obeyesekere 1985). Beginning with the peculiar observation that the "generalization of hopelessness" that characterizes depression in the West would, in Sri Lanka, be considered a central feature of a proper Buddhist understanding of the world, Obeyesekere urges readers to pay attention to the culturally mediated meanings we assign to things like sadness, anger, and negative affect:

> My contention is that what is called depression in the west is a painful series of affects pertaining to sorrow and is caused by a variety of antecedent conditions—genetic, sociocultural, and psychological. These affects exist in Western society in a relatively free-floating manner: they are not anchored to an ideology and are therefore identifiable and conducive to labelling as illness. But this need not be the case in other societies where these affects do not exist free-floating but instead are intrinsically locked into larger cultural and philosophical issues of existence and problems of meaning (Obeyesekere 1985:135).

Obeyesekere argues that negative affect in the west is cut loose from any kind of ideological grounding. Left "free-floating," feelings of hopelessness are robbed of their meaning. Such emotions say nothing about the world, but are instead reduced to the status of pathologies that must be managed.

This kind of desocializing logic is a central part of neoliberal formulations of subjectivity. It is also a central element in many popular formulations of mindfulness. When negative emotions are seen as things that must be acknowledged and let go, but never engaged, they lose their significance. This has the effect of neutering the politically generative potential of emotions by consigning feelings of anger, sadness, or disappointment to the realm of personal pathology. Negative emotions no longer index anything vital about the world, and they certainly cannot serve as the impetus for engagement with it. Instead they become mere matters of personal idiosyncrasy that must be managed as one finds ones way in a politically flat neoliberal order.

The alternative to this is to take negative emotions seriously. This does not mean wallowing in anger or sorrow or hopelessness, but rather acknowledging that emotions have a social life and are not

simply a matter of individual responsibility. They come from somewhere and index something. In Sri Lankan Buddhism, hopelessness is a sane and meaningful response to a world characterized by *dukkha*, suffering. For Juliette, anger marks something real about the world, and becomes the ground for meaningful action in it.

"Change your mind, change the world": Individualism and the politics of mindfulness

Linked to the idea of mindfulness as part of a science of happiness is a vision of the socially transformative potential of the neuroscience-backed mindfulness project – according to its proponents, mindfulness stands uniquely poised to solve a host of human problems, dispelling suffering and ushering in a new era of "human flourishing." But if mindfulness includes a vision of social change, such a vision is highly individualized and rests ultimately on personal choice; as the slogan of the Centre for the Investigation of Healthy Minds[5] has it, "change your mind, change the world." Indeed, research into mindfulness has generated seemingly utopian excitement about the role that personal development might play in the revitalization of political life, the transformation of educational practices, and the reversal of economic decline. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, researchers have shown mindfulness practice to be effective in reducing teacher stress and producing calmer and more focused pupils (Flook et al. 2013). Building on these discoveries, the Hawn Foundation's MindUP™ program, founded by actress Goldie Hawn, has begun teaching mindfulness meditation in schools across the United States in the hopes of boosting the performance, well-being, and emotional literacy of students.

In a similar vein, Democratic congressman Tim Ryan recently secured nearly a million dollars of federal funding to initiate pilot programs in mindfulness training at two Ohio elementary schools.

5 a leading laboratory for research in contemplative neuroscience, of which Richard Davidson is the founder and lead researcher.

Ryan, whose 2012 book *A Mindful Nation* advocates mindfulness meditation as a way to "recapture the american spirit" in the face of political entropy and economic decline, also sees mindfulness as the key to overcoming the political partisanship and cynicism that characterize American politics:

> What do we do all the time? Digest negative information, from Syria and Iran to veterans and suicides to the economy. Then there's all the political fighting on the news. Why wouldn't members of Congress be stressed out and have active amygdalas? And these are the same people that need to be saying, 'O.K., what's the long-term vision for the country? We don't need to move to the left or to the right. We all need to go a little deeper (Tim Ryan, in Hruby 2012).

Ryan's words demonstrate the flattening effect that mindfulness discourse has on social and political life. As with neoliberal accounts of political economy which foreground individual choice and personal responsibility, mindfulness depoliticizes politics by presenting it as a tired out and ultimately futile struggle between different narrow minded interest groups (left and right). Instead of politics as a coming together with others to debate, define, and work towards some kind of common good, we are told to let go of antiquated attachment to political labels and "go a little deeper" by working on ourselves. Here the assumption is that if "we all go a little deeper," political antipathy will naturally resolve itself as we develop our compassion and shrink our fearful amygdalas.

By downplaying political difference and debate in favour of an ambiguous politics of "depth," such a message nestles snugly into the neoliberal political landscape. As Wendy Brown notes, neoliberal rationality "exceeds particular positions on particular issues and... undergirds important features of the Clinton decade as well as the Reagan-Bush years" (Brown 2005:37). Neoliberal political rational unfolds along two related lines. On the one hand, we see a consumeristic emphasis on "cultural" issues pertaining to matters of personal identity and individual freedom—abortion, gay marriage, gun ownership, etc. On the other hand, we see the withering of more substantive critiques of broader social and economic structures. Here politics becomes a matter of making consumer-like lifestyle choices within relatively narrow economic and social parameters which are taken as inevitable. Mindfulness signals a move from a substantive politics based on articulating and enacting alternative

visions of social life to an ambiguous politics of depth, which increasingly seems to involve management within parameters that are assumed to be "just the way things are."

This kind of logic can be seen, for instance, in the militarization of mindfulness. In the last several years the American Defence Department, working with an organization called the Mind Fitness Training Institute, has initiated a number of pilot programs which aim to study the impact of "Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training" (M-Fit for short) on american military personnel. Designed "to give warriors skills that optimize performance and protect against the stressors of deployment," M-fit "may protect against the cognitive degradation that often accompanies pre-deployment training" (Stanley and Jha 2009:146). Studies have shown that it leads to improved battlefield resilience, enhanced cognitive functioning, and decreased stress and negative affect, even in the face of "an objective increase in stressors." Currently, and in light of spikes in combat induced trauma and veteran suicide in the wake of the Iraq and Afghan wars, there is ongoing research into the use of mindfulness as a post-deployment tool to smooth troop reintegration and heal traumatized veterans (Ambo 2012).

Here we see mindfulness come into view as an instrumentalized technique, a malleable efficiency boosting tool cut loose from any substantive ethical orientation, one that can be deployed towards a range of unspecified ends. Importantly though, militarized mindfulness is rarely articulated in terms of creating better killers; instead, mindfulness becomes about creating more "grounded" soldiers who can avoid the costly killing of innocents that plagued the US military throughout its Iraq and Afghan campaigns. As Jon Kabat-Zinn puts it, "if a soldier or Marine has undergone some kind of mental training that can keep him or her grounded, it may make the difference between killing a whole bunch of innocent people and holding fire appropriately" (Paulson et al. 2013:98). Similarly, mindfulness is increasingly used as a (cost-effective) treatment for PTSD. While both these might seem like worthwhile goals, it is worth noting that in both the political recedes entirely into the

background; mindfulness has nothing to say about whether war is a good idea in the first place, but rather works to manage and streamline the consequences of war. It makes warriors who are more efficient at targeting "the bad guys" and better able to deal with the traumatic consequences of battle, rather than calling into question the complex grid of politics, economy, and emotion in which bad guys are constituted and wars declared.

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Contemporary understanding of mindfulness meditation is thus constituted by a heterogeneous and at times counter-intuitive constellation of discursive streams which link Buddhism to medicine, psychology, neuroscience, education, politics, military research, technology, and business. Out of this constellation emerges a particular picture of mindfulness meditation as an ancient Asian but more-or-less secular and universal technique for letting go through mindful presence in the here-and-now. Attached to this picture are a number of affectively laden promises: of an optimistic and transformative 'science of happiness' poised to give us control of our neurological hardware and our emotional well-being as we learn to train our minds and transform our brains; of "optimal states of mind" available on command through the simple and ancient technique of attention to the breath. Of balance, wisdom, and equanimity in the face of the stresses and demands of our fast paced, techno-saturated modern lives. And of a new and optimistic vision of capitalism, in which profits, stress-free employees, and a healthy planet are not mutually exclusive propositions. Such promises are saturated with excitement, hope, and optimism about "the change that's gonna come," the transformative potential of mindfulness meditation, the new science of living well.

Chapter Two:

Cruel Optimism, Liberating Disappointment: Beyond the Dream of the Unfettered Agent

> *Straight talk about willpower and positive thinking claims that agency is just a matter of getting on track, as if all the messy business of real selves could be left behind like a bad habit or a hangover. But things are always backfiring. Self-making projects proliferate at exactly the same rate as the epidemics of addictions and the self-help shelves at the bookstore. The figure of a beefed up agency becomes a breeding ground for all kinds of strategies or complaint, self-destruction, flight, reinvention, redemption, and experimentation. As if everything rests on agency's shoulders. But there's always more to it than that.*
>
> -- Kathleen Stewart, Ordinary Affects

Cruel Optimism

Mindfulness as a contemporary discourse is affectively charged with a profound sense of optimism premised on promises about things like self-control and personal growth. But what is the nature of this optimism? Let's return for a moment to Alex and Jessica, two of the Woodenfish students whose stories we began with. Both expressed to me an optimistic hope that Buddhist meditation practice might help them find 'what they were looking for' – be it space to think or expanded consciousness. Though their hopes are singular and unique, they are fed by the discursive streams outlined above, wherein the promise of mindful presence in the here-and-now comes into view as an emotional management technique; a solution to the emotional, cognitive, and social issues emerging out of the frenzied pace of capitalist techno-modernity, from eroded attentional capacity to corporate stress to political stagnation.

But what were their experiences of meditation actually like? While hopeful, both Alex and Jessica expressed an ambivalence about meditation as they began to practice it during Woodenfish:

While Alex was optimistic that meditation practice might help him dispel his depression, "*clear out negative thoughts*" and "*simply enjoy life,*" he found himself feeling frustrated: "*I guess because I haven't felt immediate effects, I get really annoyed... I dunno, I feel like maybe my expectations were wrong, and [meditation] will be less immediately gratifying than I originally expected. Maybe I'll learn to like it... but I have yet to feel... to find what I'm looking for.*" While Jessica expected to expand her consciousness and learn to listen, she noted with a hint of disappointment that she'd had "*different experiences meditating here...*"

My informants words index a kind of ambivalence about their experience as meditators, an uncertainty that accompanies fraying expectations about what it is that meditation is and does. Sitting for hours a day, in brutal heat, on uncomfortable cushions, they found their hopes turning into frustration as, to their surprise, nothing much happened. In this next section, I take up the uncertainty generated by these fraying expectations as I try to tease out those things that might escape the triumphalist narrative of meditation as presented in mindfulness discourse.

I have argued that mindfulness as it is commonly formulated can be read as an attempt to resuscitate the vision of a self-contained autonomous individual that rests at the core of (neo)liberal characterizations of the human in the wake of gloomy stressed out talk about things like economic devastation, rising inequality, environmental collapse and just the general priciness of modernity in terms of things like social cost and human well being. Worn out, like Zach, by incessant calculation, many of us turn to mindfulness as a way of finding our own little slice of serenity. But mindfulness becomes a way of learning to survive, to keep going, to wheel and deal, to secure one's own happiness in the face of the generally hostile but seemingly inevitable social, political, and economic conditions of neoliberal techno-modernity. By framing human beings in terms of a politically passive individual agent responsible for managing his or her own thoughts, emotions, and desires, mindfulness reasserts

the neoliberal vision of the subject while promising respite from the stresses of neoliberal life.

This process evokes what Lauren Berlant has called "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011). Writing against the backdrop of neoliberal economic reform and the retrenchment of the welfare state, Berlant wonders about what happens when normative good life fantasies about things like durable or lasting intimacy, stable employment, and home ownership become increasingly unhinged from social and economic realities. In her words, she is interested in understanding how people feel and react to "the blow of discovering that the world can no longer sustain one's organizing fantasies of the good life" (Berlant 2012). For Berlant, these fantasies are rarely the way things actually are, but instead represent aspirational "placeholders" that magnetize and ground a wide variety of affective projects in the face of the increasing strain of neoliberal life. While "people think of norms and conventions as the unfair discipline of free people's desires or as unimaginative clichés, norms and conventions are not maps toward an easy way of life: they're aspirational anchors: especially for so many people whose tethers to the world are loose or unreliable" (Berlant 2012). Our good-life fantasies are never the way things actually are, but rather bind us to specific projects of world making that shape our sense of what it is to be happy, successful, or even alive.

Berlant identifies an impasse at the heart of contemporary affective life: we continue to cling to conventional good life fantasies despite the increasing erosion of their conditions of possibility. Given the failure of reality to live up to all kinds of fantasies about "intimacy and sexuality to things like voting, or the belief that capitalism is a meritocracy that rewards active competence," what keeps these dreams alive? To understand this, she turns to the notion of cruel optimism. For Berlant, cruel optimism represents a situation in which "the object that you thought would bring happiness becomes an object that deteriorates the conditions for happiness. But its presence represents *the possibility of happiness as such*" (Berlant 2012). Cruel optimism is a kind of affective double bind, in which "massive loss is inevitable if you stay or if you go." Berlant articulates this with the example of the

love-affair-gone-sour: "A destructive love affair is my favourite example: if I leave you I am not only leaving you (which would be a good thing if your love destroys my confidence) but also I am leaving an anchor for my optimism about life (which is why I want to stay with you even though I'm unhappy, because I am afraid of losing the scene of my fantasy itself)" (Berlant 2012).

Sara Ahmed, in *The Promise of Happiness*, articulates this idea of cruel optimism in a slightly different way. Writing in reference to a "crisis of happiness" she argues is behind the contemporary turn to happiness, Ahmed wonders at how our longing for happiness ends up putting the onus on individuals to follow the rules while failing to call the rules themselves into question:

> What is striking is that the crisis in happiness has not put social ideals into question and if anything has reinvigorated their hold over both psychic and political life. The demand for happiness is increasingly articulated as a demand to return to social ideals, as if what explains the crisis of happiness is not the failure of these ideals, but our failure to follow them (Ahmed 2010:7).

In these formulations, optimism is cruel because the object of ones optimistic attachment stifles the hopeful impulses that drew one to it in the first place, while simultaneously representing our sense of what life is and can be. For both Berlant and Ahmed, our attachment to unsustainable good life fantasies is damaging us, yet we continue to cling to them because they represent to us the very possibility of success, happiness, a life that adds up. They become sites where we invest our hope that life might finally come together for us. As Berlant points out, "objects of desire are placeholders for a desire to more-than-survive. Being hooked to a norm or a convention is also an attempt to maintain a stable enough orientation so that life might be moved through flourishingly" (Berlant 2012).

This idea of cruel optimism captures something crucial about mindfulness as it is broadly presented, understood, and talked about in North America today. Because all this talk of mindful living seems to represent a kind of fed-up-ness with the stress, the strain, the ceaseless jockeying of neoliberal life. Zach longed to shake off his "technological hangover" and find some peace amidst the ceaseless instrumental calculation that he felt cut him off from "real life." Or as Alex put it to me "I want to feel

like I want a fun career, rather than just wanting to rest. I want space to think." Mindfulness offers that space, that ease, the possibility of that fun. But at the same time, mindfulness is so often presented in terms of a neoliberal dream of unfettered agency, of complete control, something akin to what Freud called "the omnipotence of thoughts" (Freud 1998; 198). Chade-Meng Tan, the google mindfulness guru, describes this fantasy succinctly:

> [in ordinary life] we allow our emotions to take us wherever they are going to take us. We have no control. We live our life that way. But we can gain mastery, like a rider gaining mastery over a horse, so that we can go wherever we want to go. We can gain mastery over our emotional life, so that we can bring it where we want it to be, rather than it taking us where it wants (Search Inside Yourself n.d.).

For Allan Wallace, the Dalai Lama's translator and a popular meditation teacher, it is a kind "complete sanity" where "you are free to make wise choices at all times" (Harrington & Zajonc 2003:156). Zach spoke to me about a state of pure freedom in which "*nothing was altered by societal norms.*" These notions link mindfulness to a neoliberal configuration of the human being as a highly individualized rational choice-maker possessed of unfettered agency. If we can just discipline ourselves enough, if we can manage ourselves in just the right way, than we can finally take control of our lives and be our true selves.

Like kale, açaí berries, gym memberships, vitamin water, and other "new-years-resolution-things," mindfulness indexes a profound desire to change, but one premised on a fundamental reassertion of neoliberal fantasies of self-control and unfettered agency. These things point to what Katherine Stewart describes as "the twisted, all-pervasive ways that compulsions permeate freedoms and are reborn in the very surge to get free of them once and for all" (2007:75). Within the ambient uncertainty of neoliberal life, we strain to hold onto the present moment as a space of "intrinsic meaning and pleasure" where we might finally "find what we're looking for." But rather than presenting us with new ways of being in the world, mindfulness has become a cultural object that anchors us to normative visions of a self based on a neoliberal dream of self-control and unfettered

agency. Robert Sharf describes the situation poignantly:

> In the early period at least, the Buddhist institution embodied a critique of mainstream social and cultural values. It held that liberation was not possible without a radical change in the way one lived. It enjoined renunciation, or monasticism—opting out of family ties and worldly pursuits, and opting into an alternative communal, celibate, and highly regulated lifestyle. Modern teachers of mindfulness rarely make such demands of their students. Rather than enjoining renunciation of carnal and sensual pleasures, mindfulness is touted as a way to more fulfilling sensual experiences. Rather than enjoining turning away from mainstream American culture, mindfulness is seen as a way to better cope with it (Sharf 2013).

In mindfulness, the more revolutionary dimension of Buddhism is effectively neutered, and meditation is reduced to an apolitical self-management technique that pulls practitioners back into neoliberal modes of subjectification. Mindfulness is cruelly optimistic because it becomes a site for investing in a fantasy of "more-than-surviving," but at the same time reasserts the hegemony of the "mere life" of ceaseless jockeying that theorists like Wendy Brown identify as the hallmark of neoliberal existence (Brown 2013).

Liberating Disappointment

Cruel optimism is not a new idea. Indeed, the Buddha was one of the earliest theorists of cruel optimism, and the analysis of the relationship between delusion (*avijja)*, attachment (*upadana***)**, and suffering (*dukkha*) that is presented in the Pali Cannon represents a thorough explication of the phenomena's complex dynamics. For the Buddha, cruel optimism was not merely a historical phenomena, related to the particular conditions of "late" or "neo" liberalism. Rather, it was an ontological issue, a fundamental condition of existence. The Buddha preached the doctrine of *anatta*, according to which suffering was caused by delusional attachment to a self that does not ultimately exist. Such delusion was not the product of social conditioning or personal habit, but rather of a "beginningless ignorance" which stretched back over eons.

For early Buddhists, we suffer because we think and act based on our investment in a self that has no reality. But to give up attachment to delusory self-nature is difficult and painful—the 4th century Theravada scholar Buddhaghosa compares it to the experience of a mother who must watch her sons being beheaded—because having a self seems to be that which orients us and defines what it is to be a being in the world. Believing in selves but feeling a gnawing and omnipresent sense of lack, we go about the world driven by thirst and desire, optimistically hoping that some*thing* somewhere will fulfill us (The sanskrit term for a thing, something with a solid intrinsic existence, is *svabhav*a. In Buddhist cosmology, *svabhava* don't exist). When we do find a small island of satisfaction, we cling to it desperately, hoping against hope that we can stave off the inevitable change that will wash it away. Hope and optimism are cruel because they are premised on a delusional attachment to the self which is itself the ultimate source of our suffering.

The flip side of optimism is disappointment, and it is here that we might find space to think beyond cruel optimism. If existence is, as the Buddha taught, characterized by suffering, then disappointment seems a reasonable response. Rather than seeing disappointment as an afflictive state to be managed, perhaps we can think of it as a profoundly real state that in itself points to something important about the world. Lauren Berlant articulates this idea in terms of "the need for a realism that embeds trauma and suffering in the ordinary rather than in a space of exception, given that the crises of exhaustion and knowing how to live are problems saturating ordinary life" (Berlant 2012). Likewise, Gananath Obeyesekere identifies the "generalization of hopelessness" as a key feature of Sri Lankan Buddhism. In these various examples, it is only by acknowledging that life is in fact permeated by suffering, failure, disappointment, and the various other short-circuits of personal agency that human beings can begin to open up to alternative ways of being in the world that might escape the instrumental logic of means and ends.

Disappointment is the shadow of optimism, and it follows wherever optimism might go. This is

true not just because we often don't get what we optimistically hope for, but because the very act of hoping for something indexes an underlying dissatisfaction. We fantasize about something else because on some level we are dissatisfied with the way things are now. The psychoanalyst and Buddhist teacher Robert Unger poignantly describes how this process played out in his own life: "After several years of meditation practice... I found myself thinking that if I continued to meditate, 'sometime, after more meditation, I'll become as smart as my meditation instructor,' or 'a better athlete,' or 'a more desirable lover'" (Unger 2008:348). By treating meditation as a means through which he might achieve the goal of becoming a better X or a happier Y, Unger found that he was subverting the very logic through which meditation works (although the very idea that meditation 'works' in any conventional sense of the word is premised on an inherently instrumental logic). While he expected some kind of transformation to follow from his meditative endeavours, he was distressed to find that no matter how long he sat there, nothing happened:

> I realized that over time, neither psychoanalysis nor Buddhist meditation had offered any particular cure for disappointment. I was spending just as much time fantasizing about the future now as I had when I began following the paths of analysis and meditation. It was hard to acknowledge that it had taken so many years to understand and face this seemingly simple truth (Unger 2008:348).

The Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa points to the emancipatory nature of disappointment. Trungpa's analysis is concerned with how to circumvent "spiritual materialism," the self-deceptive redeployment of spiritual technologies for the benefit of the individual ego:

> As long as we follow a spiritual approach promising salvation, miracles, liberation, then we are bound by the 'golden chain of spirituality.' People think they can wear the golden chain for decoration without being imprisoned by it, but they are deceiving themselves. As long as one's approach to spirituality is based upon enriching ego, then it is spiritual materialism, a suicidal process rather than a creative one (Trungpa 1976:5).

For Trungpa , it is only when Buddhist practitioners relinquish there hopes and fantasies about what meditation might bring them that true "progress" is possible, but such progress might be extremely painful.

> All the promises we have heard are pure seduction. We must allow ourselves to be disappointed. We expect the teachings to solve all our problems; we expect to be provided with magical means to deal with our depressions, our aggressions, our sexual hangups. But to our surprise we begin to realize that this is not going to happen. It is very disappointing to realize that we must work on ourselves and our suffering rather than depend on a saviour or the magical power of yogic techniques. The attainment of enlightenment from ego's point of view is extreme death, the death of self, death of me and mine, the death of the watcher. It is the ultimate and final disappointment (Trungpa 1976:5-6).

Disappointment is important because it allows the logic of Buddhist practice to manifest outside the limitations of a goal-oriented calculus of means and ends. As Jon Kabat-Zinn asserts, mindfulness "works" only when it is practiced without attachment to outcome. But mindfulness is presented as though it were a means to an end, a 'scientific' technique backed up by empirical studies that can be used to bring about specific outcomes that can be known in advance. Even in its more sophisticated iterations, we are promised that if we let go of our desire to gain something great—happiness, serenity, superior cognitive skills—something great will be ours for the taking. Here hope and optimism enact a fundamentally economic logic of exchange; optimism about mindfulness indexes an expectation that mindfulness will bring us something pleasant (or take something unpleasant away). Such an understanding necessarily must proceed from a belief in a stable, intrinsically existing self—an ego—the ultimate locus of rational calculation. In Buddhism hope and optimism—that this time, this particular thing will relieve my sense of lack—are the axle that turns the wheel of *samsara*.

This problem—that optimism about what practice will bring you undermines the mechanism through which practice is supposed to "work"—is underlined by the Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki, who notes that:

> When there is no gaining idea in what you do, then you do something. In [Zen meditation] what you are doing is not for the sake of anything... As long as you think you are practicing zazen for the sake of something, that is not true practice (Suzuki 1970:77).

For Chogyam Trungpa meanwhile, it is the very notion of spiritual practice or spiritual experience,

with its attendant logic of progress, goals, means, and ends, that is the problem. "Quite possibly there is no such thing as spiritual practice except stepping out of self-deception, stopping our struggle to get ahold of spiritual states. Just give that up. Other than that there is no spirituality" (Trungpa 76:9). This kind of logic was summed up by Juliette, who told me that although she was initially excited about the changes Buddhist practice might allow her to make in her life, she grew more ambivalent as her expectations went unmet and she began to relate to Buddhism as an external tool. Although her first forays into meditation while hiking in Yosemite left her feeling good, *"I wasn't able to feel that once I started my daily life in the city again. And their was actually a lot of frustration I was having against myself for not maintaing something that made me happy, and a lot of guilt and a lot of negativity."* This culminated in the realization that "*now its just me again, and it was me before also, and now its me, and I don't want to trick myself into thinking that I can be a Buddhist if I don't know what a Buddhist is."* Instead, Juliette realized "*that the things that I was hoping Buddhism would bring to me, like clarity, I could grow towards that just by being honest to what was already there."*

What is Enlightenment?: Reconceptualizing Freedom

> *To carry yourself forward and experience the many things is delusion. That the many* things *come forth and experience the self is awakening.*
> -- Dogen Zenji, Genjōkōan

I have argued that the popularity of mindfulness as it is commonly understood and spoken about is based on a dream of unfettered individual agency. But I also contend that this vision of unfettered agency is a myth, both in the colloquial sense of something untrue, and in the more anthropological sense of a story we tell ourselves in order to make sense of and justify the ways in which our worlds are organized. This myth has a certain tenacity; it find echoes not only in the Rousseauian vision of natural man, but all the way back in the unmoved mover of Aristotelian metaphysics. Today, myths of unfettered agency are more-or-less hegemonic, serving as the ideological core of a neoliberal discourse

of self-management and responsibilization. They've gotten into our bones, and they find expression in affectively charged objects and practices that embody the promise of "the change that's gonna come."

In mindfulness discourse, this myth finds its most pointed expression in the dream of a "pure consciousness" or "bare awareness" in which the practitioner breaks free from social conditioning and achieves "a happiness not dependant on external conditions." Here the goal of meditation is understood as a non-dual state where one is able to step outside socially engrained ways of seeing in order to see things as they really are, moment by moment. But, as Victor Hori notes, such a vision, while apparently non-dual, actually reasserts duality at a higher level by dualistically juxtaposing a conventional state of socially engrained false perception with a non-dual state of pure consciousness. In order to circumvent this, Hori points out that much of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy emphasizes what he waggishly describes as "the non-duality of duality and non-duality," which calls on practitioners to recognize that non dual emptiness, the fundamental ground of existence and the "point" of meditative experience, is always expressed through and embodied in dualistic form (Hori 2000:299). This logic is most famously captured in the Heart Sutra, the early common era text that forms the basis of much Mahayana philosophizing, where the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara tells Sariputra, a disciple of the Buddha, that "Form is no different from emptiness, emptiness no different from form" (Redpine 2004).

To me the idea of the non-duality of duality and non-duality is useful because it forces us to reconceptualize freedom. Just as emptiness, the non-dual ideal of Mahayana Buddhism, is always caught up in form, personal agency, the dream at the core of the neoliberal subject, is always tangled up with multiple other agencies that inhibit, constrain, and shape it. Freedom, whatever that might mean, is always embedded in a social world constituted by a complex web of agencies, impulses, and compulsions played out at multiple levels of embodiment and abstraction. Kathleen Stewart puts it best:

> Agency can be strange, twisted, caught up in things, passive, or exhausted. Not the way we like to think about it. Not usually a simple projection toward a future... It's lived through a series of dilemmas: that action is always a reaction; that the potential to act always includes the potential to be acted on, or submit; that the move to gather a self to act is also a move to lose the self; that one choice precludes others; that actions can have unintended and disastrous consequence; and that all agency is frustrated and unstable and attracted to the potential in things. It's not really about willpower but rather about something much more complicated and much more rooted in things (2007:86).

But this lack of unfettered agency is not necessarily a bad thing. As Hori points out:

> At one time, humans imagined that if they could free themselves of gravity, they would be free, able to fly like the birds. Now that we have rockets that can actually put us in space beyond the reach of gravity, we find that humans free-floating beyond gravity are not free at all. Instead they float helpless and out of control. Gravity, we find, does not deprive us of freedom, but on the contrary gravity is what gives human beings control over their movements and thus freedom (2000:309).

Like gravity, it is the social world that holds us and constrains us. We are not as in control of ourselves as we might hope or imagine, and a realization of this—experienced as the blow of a disappointment—might open us up to the world. Opening to the world, acknowledging the productive constraint of other kinds of agencies, might put us on new and unexpected trajectories, or lead to abrupt breaks in played out narratives or self projects built around a progress oriented dream of finally being "fitter, happier, and more productive."

Epilogue

Closing scene: A not quite still life

This thesis is about expectations, about the hopes and fantasies that westerners bring to the study and practice of Buddhism and Mindfulness. writing this has been a process of coming to grips with my own expectations about what academic work looks like, and what counts as research. While I feel that I have produced a neat little argument that makes sense, that resonates in important ways with the experience of my informants and myself, and that reveals something new about the world we live in, some ends are left untied. Life is never as tidy as we might like it to be, and while abstraction is always useful, it sometimes misses out on the ways in which theoretical concepts and structural forces are always embedded in the singularity of actual things. Form is emptiness, emptiness form.

I hope to have illuminated where western expectations about mindfulness come from, and how they animate the complex relationship between modern conceptions of mindfulness and the hegemonic logic of neoliberal capitalism. At times I have felt dangerously close to tossing out the baby along with the bathwater. But my goal has never been to explain mindfulness away as something terrible—many of the people I've spoken with, both during my "official" field work and since returning from the field, have told me about the positive changes they and their loved ones have experienced from meditation. I recognize that mindfulness is a site for the magnetization of many different projects, affects, and hopes, and I understand that it can spin off in many different directions. I do not wish to explain it away. Rather, I seek to understand how it is that mindfulness practice, often advertised as a way of stripping down to something essential and vital, can end up reenforcing those ways of being in the world that practitioners hope to escape from in the first place. This peculiar contradiction, which is woven into the everyday experience of my informants and myself, is built upon a dialectic of optimism and

disappointment that I suspect is familiar to many. It is also central to a certain Buddhist analysis of the dynamics of desire and fantasy that propel and maintain both selves and the world day by day, moment by moment.

I end this thesis with a final anecdote. My hope here is that this can serve as a kind of snapshot, something that gestures to an elusive logic that I've tried to capture in my thesis while at the same time acknowledging the messiness of life as actually lived. Something about the way that ordinary life—with all its sense of contingency, all its forward-looking, all its "if only's," all its little disappointments, all its slippages between self and other, or clarity and confusion—is still shot through with a powerful affective charge that in itself is "what's happening" at any given moment, even as it seems oriented to what must be just around the corner.

In *Ordinary Affects*, Kathleen Stewart presents us with the notion of the still life, "a static state filled with vibratory motion, or resonance...[a] quivering in the stability of a category or a trajectory, it gives the ordinary the charge of an unfolding" (2007:19). Stewart articulates the idea of a still life through a series of examples:

> the living room strewn with ribbons and wine glasses after a party, the kids or dogs asleep in the back seat of the car after a great (or not so great) day at the lake, the collection of sticks and rocks resting on the dashboard after a hike in the mountains, the old love letters stuffed in a box in the closet, the moments of humiliation or shock that suddenly lurch into view without warning, the odd moments of spacing out when a strange malaise comes over you, the fragments of experience that pull at ordinary awareness but rarely come into full frame (2007:19).

These experiential fragments can pull us, momentarily, out of our little self-projects and personal trajectories and make us wonder if maybe something else is going on. And they might illuminate, obliquely, some elusive logic or idea that a head on attack would be too blunt to nail down. They are "the intensity born of a momentary suspension of narrative, or a glitch in the projects we call things like the self agency, home, or a life" (Stewart 2007:19). One can't really go out like a photographer, prowling around, looking to capture a still life. Like a moment of clarity glimpsed in meditation, they

just happen.

~ ~ ~

You recall the taste of mango ice cream, the smell of spilt whiskey, stale cigarettes....

Downtown Changsha, Hunan Province, China. The last night of the Woodenfish Program.

Interior shot, a club called Le Nest. flashing neon lights, smoke machines, a stage. Pounding electronic music. A typical club, more or less, but where in North America you'd have a dance floor, here there are little tables, surrounded by clusters of immaculately dressed Chinese snacking on watermelon and lotus root, sharing bottles of Johnny Walker Black Label and Grey Goose Vodka. The music is deafening, the room thick with smoke.

You see students, some almost unrecognizable in the closest thing to clubbing finery they could pull together. Standing around, drinking, laughing. We're suddenly a long way from the monastery. Manic energy fills the room, things feel intense…

At the bar, R and W share a cigar, looking relaxed, pleased with themselves. They call you over, offer a puff, and you snap their pictures as they pose. At another table, a businessman buys a group of woodenfishies a round of shots. You try to snap a photo with your cell phone—it's blurry but you can still make it out: him round, sweating, a huge grin plastered across his face. The students, bemused but excited, jostling to make sure they aren't left out of the fun.

Outside, ears ringing, Changsha is hot and steamy. Neon everywhere. Traffic, shouting, smells. You're trying to keep track of everyone, still caught up in your role as program coordinator. It's ok, lighten up, Woodenfish is over. You run into C, who's drinking a beer on the curb; he offers you one, and you chat about how strange this all is, after the monastery, after the meditation.

Suddenly there's a group of you and you're moving, who knows where, neon starting to blur a little, spirits high, boisterous, almost overwhelmingly so. Careening past old women begging, their

gnarled hands shaking cups at you as you pass, eyes beyond hope, yet still hoping for a couple of *Yuan*. Sorry ladies, not today, your eyes say, or try to. "Not very Buddhist of us" you half-think off in some corner of your mind.

Too surreal. You hear retching and look over—T's throwing up in a gutter. "That's what a month without drinking will do to you" someone says. You ask if he's Ok. He mumbles what sounds like yes as he totters off. You're not so sure, hope he gets back to the hotel ok. Not your responsibility anymore. "The program is over."

Inside again, packed into booths, bodies pressed tight, sweating. Somebody's bought sheesha, and the air is filled with thick, fragrant tobacco smoke. Lots of laughing, lots of chatter, lots of reminiscing. "Do you remember do you remember do you remember..." People are taking photos, we've made some local friends. It goes on and on.

Outside again. Everything's blurry now, the streets quiet. Maybe 2 am, you're not sure. You look down an alley, a Chinese couple, pressed up against a wall, in the shadows. You look away, keep walking.

Inside, another club, too drunk now to note the name, to care about ethnography. Too drunk for mindfulness. The club is packed, no room to dance but a small stage, and it's jammed, mostly with woodenfish, and a few adventurous Chinese who seem titillated but bemused by these rowdy westerners. In the frenzied environment of the club, social rules that have been established over the last month are turned on their heads. The toned down communal decorum of the monastery washes away in a flood of booze and smoke and adrenaline. Now it's clear who the wall flowers are, and who the movers-and-shakers. You catch students making eyes, sideways glances and whispered words exchanged on the dance floor. Sexual tension that's been building over a month finally bubbling over. Tomorrow this might all end in tears, but hey, we've come to China to live in the moment.

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