Critique of modern instrumental mindfulness as neoliberal narcissism

by

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Abstract

Mindfulness is exploding in the western mainstream. Its growth is exemplified by, among many things, the number of books with ‘mindfulness’ in the title, as well as the proliferation of trademarked mindfulness products. Mindfulness is also being introduced into diverse fields, including health care, education, business, sports, and the military, as well as finding its way into public arenas such as in-flight entertainment systems and hotel rooms. As mindfulness is increasingly applied in wide-ranging contexts, it has been redefined and ascribed new values, departing from Buddhist mindfulness from which it originates.

Mindfulness has been appropriated, instrumentalized, commodified, and watered-down in the service of neoliberal corporate capitalist aims. The commodification of mindfulness decontextualizes and separates it from its religious, historical, and cultural context, while reorienting it toward consumer capitalism. What results is a nebulous hodgepodge of Eastern spirituality, both real and imagined—a cacophony of tokenized Buddhist, Vedic, and yogic elements. This process merges Eastern spiritual traditions with equal parts exotic mysticism and neuroscience, turning mindfulness into a cultural commodity fueled by pop-psychology and the self-help industry. I refer to these commodified forms of mindfulness as Modern Instrumental Mindfulness or MIM—synonymous to the more pejorative McMindfulness.

The purpose of this inquiry is to describe the damaging effects of neoliberal corporate capitalism on education, and how MIM in schools unwittingly props up problematic dominant hegemonic norms. I critique neoliberal corporate capitalism vis-à-vis a critique of commercialized, commodified, and instrumentalized forms of mindfulness and its encroachment into education and illustrate how the two are causally connected. The rise in the application of MIM in education is influenced by the corporatization of education and thus, I will illustrate this relationship and problematize it.

Keywords: Neoliberal corporate capitalism; Mindfulness; Academic capitalism; Cultural appropriation; Corporatized spirituality

Dedicated to my family

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List of Acronyms

MBSR	Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction
MIM	Modern Instrumental Mindfulness
PP	Positive Psychology
SEL	Social Emotional Learning

Glossary

Modern Instrumental Mindfulness (MIM)	A commodified, instrumentalized, and corporatized form of Buddhist mindfulness. Influenced heavily by neoliberal corporate capitalism.
Neoliberal corporate capitalism	Neoliberal corporate capitalism is a specific form of neoliberalism which affords vast power to corporations and is defined by profit-seeking behaviour that is primarily concerned with the 'bottom line' and maximizing returns. It therefore prioritizes competitive, individualist, self-centered traits over socially integrative ones.
Neoliberal spirituality	Neoliberal spirituality implores people to be successful and happy by purchasing and consuming commodities and services while neglecting systemic, structural, and institutional forms of oppression. This poses a significant obstacle to the realization of a less individualistic society.

Chapter 1. Introduction

> *I am often struck by the dangerous narcissism fostered by spiritual rhetoric that pays so much attention to individual self-improvement and so little to the practice of love within the context of community. Packaged as a commodity, spirituality becomes no different from an exercise program.* (hooks, 2001, p. 76).

Mindfulness is exploding in the western mainstream. Its growth is exemplified by, among many things, the number of books with 'mindfulness' in the title, as well as the proliferation of trademarked mindfulness products (Wilson, 2014, p. 40). Mindfulness is also being introduced into diverse fields, including health care, education, business, sports, and the military, as well as finding its way into public arenas such as in-flight entertainment systems and hotel rooms (Arthington, 2016, p. 90; Stanley, Purser, & Singh, 2018, p. 6; Wilson, 2017, p. 70). As mindfulness is increasingly applied in wide-ranging contexts, it has been redefined and ascribed new values, departing from Buddhist mindfulness from which it originates (Ditrich, 2016, p. 209; Forbes, 2019, p. 144).

Over the past thirty years, mindfulness has transformed from an Asian religious practice to a cure-all panacea and a growing money-making industry. A whole industry has emerged around mindfulness, with conferences, educational programs, meditation apps, business and life coaches, and consumer products all cashing in. That is to say, modern mindfulness is a tool for supporting modern lifestyles and for managing middle- and upper-class concerns including self-image, health, relationships, work, and family. This results in the obscuration of mindfulness' roots in Buddhism in order to make it accessible to a wider audience (Wilson, 2014, pp. 73-77).

As mindfulness grows in popularity, instrumental forms of mindfulness proliferate in the western mainstream, flooding into popular culture as a commodity for stress-reduction and attention-training, which resultingly denatures its ethical foundation (Dawson & Turnbull, 2006, p. 64). Here, commodified forms of mindfulness are promoted as a treatment for a whole range of problems including addiction and depression, as well as for maximizing pleasure in daily life. As alluded to above, mindfulness promoters' fervour in making mindfulness accessible for mainstream consumption has led to the subsequent obscuration and erasure of Buddhism

(O'Connell, 2018, p. 2; Kucinskas, 2018, p. 163; Purser & Loy, 2013, p. 1; Scherer & Waistell, 2018, p. 128; Walsh, 2017a, p. 6).

Mindfulness is now clearly part of the popular zeitgeist in North America, folding into the vernacular of self-help. Legitimated by science, marketed by self-help entrepreneurs, and endorsed by celebrities and 'influencers,' it appears that everyone is doing mindfulness. Coverage in mainstream media includes ABC News, CBS Sunday Morning, CNN, *Cosmopolitan, Elle,* Fox News, *Good Housekeeping, Huffington Post,* MSNBC, National Public Radio, the *New York Times, O: The Oprah Magazine, Psychology Today, Reader's Digest, Time,* the *Wall Street Journal*, and WebMD, just to name a few (Wilson, 2014, p. 3). Mindfulness has become so ubiquitous that non-Buddhist authors appropriate it for a plethora of projects, and it is now another instrumental tool that *anyone* can use for *anything* (Wilson, 2014, p. 41). Wilson (2017) observes: "Mindfulness has become a multi-billion-dollar industry…. Denatured, allegedly scientific, medicalized mindfulness has seen a rapid rise in public schools, universities, the military, medical institutions, corporate workshops, and the popular marketplace" (pp. 70-71). There appears to be no end to the applications for mindfulness in the market.

There is a great deal of research circulating in the media expounding the supposed benefits of mindfulness. Promoters of mindfulness claim that it can reduce cancer symptoms, prevent drug and alcohol relapse, manage ADHD, anxiety, fatigue, anger, headaches, high blood pressure, sleep problems, decrease chronic pain, minimize depression, as well as make you more charismatic (Furedi, 2014, p. 1). In many cases, mindfulness promoters claim that mindfulness has been scientifically proven to be good for you, similar to working out at the gym. Mindfulness is thus transformed into a user-friendly commodity promising fitness, stress relief, increased productivity and happiness (Cooper & Purser, 2014, pp. 3-6; Edelglass, 2017, pp. 4-23; Munir, Ansari, & Brown, 2021, p. 2; Purser, 2019a, p. 119). Resultingly, 'mindfulness' is applied as a marketing buzzword signaling tranquility and peace, promoted as a feel-good cure-all for the ills of modern-day life (Moloney, 2016, p. 271; Smallen, 2019, p. 138).

Going forward, I will refer to these commodified forms of mindfulness as Modern Instrumental Mindfulness or MIM—synonymous with the pejorative 'McMindfulness,' a

term originally coined by Miles Neale and later popularized by Ron Purser and David Loy in a 2013 article—referring to instrumental, commodified, commercialized, and secularized forms of mindfulness (Purser & Loy, 2013). To elaborate, MIM is a mix of Eastern spirituality, meditation, self-help, neuroscience, psychology, corporate managerialism, and neoliberal corporate capitalism (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 24; Fisher, 2010, p. 4; Nisbet, 2019, p. 35; Purser, 2019a, p. 15; Wilson, 2014, p. 127; Schedneck, 2013, p. 46). In this sense, MIM is the result of reframing Buddhism toward acquiring happiness through a framework of self-improvement by redirecting spiritual aims toward self-enhancement (Carvalho, 2017, p. 296; Dawson & Turnbull, 2006, p. 63; Winston, 2015, p. 3). Put simply, MIM is the colonization and commodification of Asian wisdom traditions by secular wellness culture—a highly individualistic spirituality aligning with dominant western cultural values (Badr, 2022, p. 5).

A defining feature of MIM is its malleability to fit into almost any context by transcending cultural borders, made possible by the processes of de-essentialization, de-culturalization, de-traditionalization, and psychologization, explained later (Borup, 2020; Stanley, 2012, p. 633; Sun, 2014a, p. 4). In other words, MIM shed its Buddhist roots and ethical obligations in favour of a more streamlined and secular framework to meet the needs of neoliberal self-formation. These denatured and commodified forms of mindfulness are popular precisely because they do not require adherence to the ethical demands of Buddhism and are marketed to appeal to a broad audience. Simplified, non-religious, ahistorical mindfulness is easier to package and sell. In this regard, a critique is that MIM lacks ethical, moral, and long-term discipline to effect lasting change (Neale, 2011, p. 1; Spellmeyer, 2018, p. 5).

MIM has been alternatively called ‘psychotherapeutic Buddhism’ (Borup, 2020, p. 232), ‘crypto-Buddhist libertarianism’ (Purser, 2019a, p. 161), ‘self-improvement Buddhism’ (Payne, 2016, p. 125), and ‘neurodharma’ (Eklöf, 2016, p. 323; Eklöf, 2017), along with the more well-known ‘Protestant Buddhism’ and ‘Buddhist Modernism,’ which will be described later. The above terms refer to how MIM is perpetuated largely by liberal white Americans who pass down increasingly commodified forms of mindfulness. At this juncture, a question that can be asked is: ‘How did it come to be that mindfulness could exist outside of Buddhism, where non-Buddhists teach mindfulness without Buddhist ethics, ostensibly to achieve self-fulfillment?’ (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 19; Wilson, 2014, p. 14, p. 74).

1.1. Problem Statement

While mindfulness has gained widespread popularity and acceptance as a practical practice for supporting well-being, it is not beyond critique. There are many problematic outcomes that result from the haphazard and indiscriminate insertion of MIM into organizations such as schools, and critics are starting to point out that MIM is not universally beneficial as it is advertised to be. A central critique is that in MIM, mindfulness has been commercialized and simplified, stripped of its deeper philosophical and cultural roots. This commodification can lead to a superficial understanding of mindfulness, where it is presented as a quick fix or a trendy lifestyle choice. In effect, MIM is a market-driven product rather than a transformative practice.

To reiterate, MIM is mindfulness that has been appropriated, instrumentalized, commodified, and watered-down in the service of neoliberal corporate capitalist aims. The commodification of mindfulness decontextualizes and separates it from its religious, historical, and cultural context, while reorienting it toward consumer capitalism (Purser, Ng, & Walsh, 2017, p. 53). What results is a nebulous hodgepodge of Eastern spirituality, both real and imagined—a cacophony of tokenized Buddhist, Vedic, and yogic elements. This process merges Eastern spiritual traditions with equal parts exotic mysticism and neuroscience, turning mindfulness into a cultural commodity fueled by pop-psychology and the self-help industry (Poceski, 2020, p. 11).

The transformation of Buddhist mindfulness into MIM is achieved by reducing Asian cultural knowledge into the positivist framework of science and erasing its cultural and religious foundations through secularization and scientization. While there have been other agents and historical events which mediated this process, including Asian Buddhist reformers changing mindfulness to suit modern needs, the transformation of mindfulness into MIM has largely been brought about and accelerated by modern spiritual entrepreneurs. By erasing Buddhism, mindfulness is refashioned as a value-free, ethically neutral, free-standing technique that is compatible with dominant norms and values (Brazier, 2016, p. 65; Forbes, 2019, p. 10; Hsu, 2016, p. 375; Payne, 2019, p. 80; Poceski, 2020, p. 5; Purser, 2019c, p. 1; Walsh, 2017a, p. 9; Walsh, 2017b, pp. 3-4). In the modern western context, removing Buddhist elements from mindfulness and applying it as a therapeutic tool merely perpetuates the status quo and entrenches white supremacist, ableist, Western, and settler-colonial hegemony (Cosantino, 2021, p. 1).

Secularizing, commodifying, and reframing mindfulness as a technique to reduce stress and increase happiness seriously limits its transformative potential because the soteriological aims of Buddhist mindfulness take a backseat to utilitarian goals concerned with productivity and efficiency to serve corporate, capitalist, and militarized agendas (Buddhist Peace Fellowship, 2016, p. 9; Ergas & Hadar, 2019a, p. 2; Hyland, 2016a, p. 177; Titmuss, 2016a, p. 184).

Given the supposed benefits of mindfulness in the areas of attention-training and behaviour-management, MIM is now beginning to be applied in schools. It is at this point where I locate my inquiry. I believe there are grave consequences to implementing MIM in education, as MIM may actually cause harm and intensify systemic and institutional oppression in schools by further entrenching racism, colonialism, sexism, heteronormativity, ableism, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression by promoting therapeutic 'coping' and 'resilience' techniques, diverting attention away from the social, structural, and institutional causes of stress (Purser, 2019a, pp. 184-188). In other words, MIM may support neoliberal aims in education and implore students to tolerate oppression (Hsu, 2016, p. 378). Critical theorists counter that reducing individual discomfort using individualized coping mechanisms such as MIM merely dulls practitioners into complacency instead of cultivating resistance to oppression (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 136). This illustrates one characteristic of neoliberalism—to decontextualize and individualize all problems as personal problems.

In many classrooms, 'well-meaning' teachers with 'good intentions' teach mindfulness under the pretense of helping their students, claiming that a little MIM in the classroom is better than none at all. However, in some instances, teachers introduce MIM without understanding the problematic nature of commodified forms of spirituality (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 60). In other cases, mindfulness is prescribed by school officials as a top-down directive and is resultingly taught by disinterested, misinformed, or overloaded teachers, some of whom do not have a personal practice in mindfulness. Here, I wish to acknowledge that some teachers may have a sincere intentions in applying mindfulness to help students. While those who teach mindfulness may have 'good intentions,' their efforts may be questioned if the mindfulness they teach merely teaches people to endure exploitative conditions (Brito, Joseph, & Sellman, 2021, p. 262).

One of the gravest deceptions of MIM is that it speaks the language of transformation and emancipation without offering any actual change (Cohen, 2017, pp. 8-11; Purser, 2019a, p. 18, p. 45, p. 247). MIM promoters frequently claim that MIM leads to societal change, yet there is little evidence to suggest that that is the case. In fact, it is reasonable to posit that focusing myopically on individual happiness and stress-reduction does little to affect change, and practicing MIM does not automatically lead to more ethical behaviour, especially without direct instruction on Buddhist ethics. In this sense, MIM is neoliberal training masquerading as a transformational movement by promoting political conservatism cloaked as something revolutionary (Carrette & King, 2013, pp. 44-49; Ergas & Hadar, 2019b, p. 31). While MIM promoters claim that MIM offers reprieve from stress, this is merely temporary as MIM does not addresses underlying social problems and injustice and thus is simply a palliative for the ills of a modern consumer society (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 56, p. 77).

If MIM merely helps individuals cope with systemic stressors and maintains harmful and oppressive systems, is it not part of the problem? If this is the case, it would be difficult to claim that MIM is transformational in any substantive way. On this, MIM supporters often claim that helping individuals cope is an important first step towards cultivating a capacity to critique and to change oppressive systems *later*. While this may be plausible, again, there is no substantive evidence that focusing on individual happiness supports collective liberation in any meaningful way.

1.2. My Intention

When I tell people about my research, a common question I am asked is ‘What kind of mindfulness program are you working on?’ Here, it is important to clarify that I have no intention of creating a mindfulness program. Instead, my motivations are subtractive rather than additive; that is, I do not want to create a mindfulness program (an additive move), but rather the opposite, I argue for it to be taken out of classrooms (a subtractive move). Replacing a neoliberal corporate capitalist relic with another similar practice gains nothing and in fact may exacerbate or create new problems. In the same way, when I attend conferences to present my research, people often ask ‘What’s wrong with a little mindfulness?’ It is precisely this ‘What’s wrong with a little mindfulness?’ sentiment that I critically interrogate.

The purpose of this inquiry is to describe the damaging effects of neoliberal corporate capitalism on education and how MIM acts as its proxy in schools and unwittingly props up problematic dominant hegemonic norms. The rise in the application of MIM in education is rooted in the corporatization of education and thus, I will illustrate this relationship and problematize it. I critique neoliberal corporate capitalism vis-à-vis a critique of commercialized, commodified, and instrumentalized forms of mindfulness and its encroachment into education, and illustrate how the two are causally connected. It is here I position my research: to inform people of the dangers of uncritically accepting MIM and incorporating it in schooling.

To clarify, my critique of MIM serves as a ***proxy*** for my critique of neoliberal corporate capitalism colonizing education. In other words, mindfulness in education is the ***vehicle***, the ***example***, the ***site of analysis*** where I locate this critique. I formulate my argument against MIM by exposing and problematizing its association with neoliberal corporate capitalism—driven by and further entrenching individualism and commodification in society.

I am against mainstreaming mindfulness in commodified, corporatized, and instrumental ways, irrespective of good intentions. To that end, I have several recommendations:

1) End the use of MIM in education.

2) For teachers to stop calling what they are doing ‘mindfulness,’ and instead call it by what they are actually doing, i.e., attention training, breathwork, etc.

3) If mindfulness continues to be applied in education, it should be rooted in Buddhist ethics to guide practitioners toward collective liberation rather than relief from stress.

At this juncture, it is important to note that my appeal for mindfulness to remain rooted in Buddhism is not meant to protect or to preserve any kind of ‘pure’ Buddhism or mindfulness per se, although it may be interpreted as such. My intention is not to claim that I have a privileged understanding of ‘authentic’ mindfulness, as that would merely replicate the tact of orientalists who sought a ‘pure’ form of Buddhism through texts, explained later. To reiterate, the basis of this dissertation is first and foremost a critique of neoliberal corporate capitalism’s encroachment into educational spaces, with mindfulness as the vehicle for this inquiry.

Another important point to state at the outset is that while some mindfulness promoters allude to the notion that mindfulness has corollaries in other religions, for the purposes of this dissertation, I will be proceeding under the premise that mindfulness is a Buddhist practice. There are now a plethora of practices that are associated with mindfulness, some rooted in cultural and religious traditions, while others are new innovations, all of which get conflated with mindfulness. Examples of this include various forms of prayer, various cultural practices that emphasize silence or stillness, and communing with nature. For this reason, I find it useful to ground my inquiry in specifically naming Buddhist mindfulness as the source from which MIM is originally derived. I feel the need to make this explicit because MIM promoters have gone to great lengths to obfuscate and blend many contemplative practices together under the flag of mindfulness in order to expand the catchment area of what is considered mindfulness.

To reiterate, my aim is to bring to light an undertheorized area of research, (i.e., a critique of MIM) and to ask better questions to further the discussion on critical analyses of mindfulness.

1.3. My Contribution

My contribution to this field is a critical analysis of the ways in which MIM causes harm and exacerbates systemic and institutional oppression. I aim to do so by naming and problematizing connections between MIM and neoliberal corporate capitalism. This research is important because the harmful aspects of MIM are undertheorized and currently not well understood by the public.

I envision the audience of this dissertation to include educational researchers, curriculum theorists, teachers, and administrators. It is my hope that this work can provide a theoretical foundation to support action-oriented researchers and activists to contest the neoliberal corporate capitalist encroachment into education and enact change against it (Koetting, 1984, pp. 3-4). One potential outcome of this research is to inform future policy recommendations.

1.4. Methodology

I locate this work in philosophy of education, and the methodology applied is conceptual analysis. Philosophy of education examines the underlying values that inform curricula and educational theory and thus "[c]an illuminate, inform, call into question, etc., the taken for granted notions that we have" (Koetting, 1996. p. 3). Naming the 'taken for granted notions that we have' is critical because schooling is a form of socialization into society and involves the institutionalization of norms and values.

Philosophy permeates all aspects of the educational experience and pushes educators and administrators to consider the implications of curriculum and articulate why we value the things we teach (Koetting & Combs, 2010, p. 226; Ornstein, 1991, p. 102). A crucial prerequisite to any educational endeavor is articulating its ontological and epistemological assumptions; here, philosophy analyzes concepts such as 'knowledge' by asking questions such as: 'What is knowledge?' and 'Whose knowledge counts?' (Apple, 2004, p. 6; Jickling, 2014, pp. 58-59). Koetting (1996) extrapolates: "[Philosophy of education allows] us to examine whose knowledge we are promoting, and even prior to that, what knowledge is of most worth. Questions of value ask us why we choose this particular knowledge, and leave all of the rest out" (p. 3). That is, in order to 'teach' anything, we must first decide *what* to teach, and what we teach reveals what we value. This is why philosophical theorizing is an important tool: to approach educational issues with intention and forethought instead of merely replicating the status quo (Koetting, 1996, p. 3; Koetting & Combs, 2010, pp. 226-227).

1.5. Conceptual And Thematic Analysis

My main method of analysis is an immersion into the academic literature on mindfulness. Here, I apply the principles of conceptual analysis and thematic analysis. Conceptual analysis and thematic analysis are useful in identifying salient themes and patterns because they are not bound to specific theoretical traditions. Both are tools to systematically appraise concepts as a prerequisite to understanding them (Carvalho & Gracio, 2022, p. 68). As explained by Jickling (2014):

> Analysis should … enable the researcher to better understand the concept—to get a better look at it. In turn, such analysis should enable researchers to make their positions increasingly clear, enabling

> subsequent readers to more easily weigh the merits of the claims provided. Further, seeking to understand and clarify one's central concepts is logically prior to commitment to implementation of a particular educational prescription. Failure to effectively do so can lead to a conceptual muddle. (pp. 52-53)

The 'evidence' or 'data' that inform my arguments in this thesis consists of academic journal articles, book chapters, and books, as well as my lived experience, which include attending conferences, observing MIM programs in action, and conversations with MIM leaders and researchers (Carvalho & Gracio, 2022, p. 68; Wilson, 2014, p. 12). The scholarship consulted was primarily derived from the period between 2000 to 2023, with some exceptions. With regard to my textual sources, I began with a broad scale overview of the field by using 'mindfulness' as the key search term in various databases, including the SFU library and Google Scholar, which are aggregate databases. To further hone in on my research question, I used the terms 'commodification' and 'appropriation' as secondary key terms. Additionally, the reference lists of articles I sourced served as resources illuminating further readings to explore in the field. After familiarizing myself with the discourse, I generated codes using NVivo software to identify recurring concepts, which then helped me to thematically organize the data. From there, I developed my chapters and heading sections.

By analyzing the language, semantics, logics, and themes of the research material on mindfulness, I was able to aggregate a dominant discourse about mindfulness. From there, I examined the substance of the dominant discourse and formed my thesis on the basis that there was a scarcity of critical research on mindfulness, particularly as it pertained to mindfulness programs applied in institutions such as schools. Thus, by identifying an undertheorized area of research on mindfulness, that is, a critical analysis of MIM in schools, I was able to select a positionality from which to root my research. This process afforded me the insight to connect MIM with neoliberal corporate capitalism, which then provided me with a clear direction in exploring the commodification of education writ large, in parallel with critiquing neoliberal corporate capitalism.

1.6. The Lenses: Critical Theory And Critical Pedagogy

I apply critical theory and critical pedagogy as the lenses through which I approach this inquiry. Critical theory is concerned with interrogating taken-for-granted

beliefs of society based on Marxist analyses of capitalist frameworks. It posits that many people, including teachers, unconsciously replicate social relations in a world defined by asymmetries of power and privilege, and thus may have difficulty recognizing patterns of oppression that arise from social and structural injustice (Kumar, 2019, p. 251). In this case, critical theory offers a framework and language with which to name, question, and problematize the unquestioned beliefs in a neoliberal corporate capitalist society and in neoliberal schooling.

Critical pedagogy, similar to critical theory, questions how and why knowledge is constructed in the way that it is, and why some views of reality are legitimated and replicated through schooling while others are not. In its original conceptualization, critical pedagogy analyzed systems of oppression by studying the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed as theorized by Brazilian scholar Paolo Freire (Freire, 2000). Critical pedagogy also postulates that curriculum encompasses more than just schooling—curriculum perpetuates a particular *reality* and prepares students for dominant or subordinate positions in a class-based society. As McLaren (2009) explains: "Social practices and representations … affirm the central values, interests, and concerns of the social class in control of the material and symbolic wealth of society" (p. 65). That is to say, the knowledge that is taught in schools represents a particular orientation to the world, and in the case of neoliberal education, it perpetuates and legitimates dominant forms of knowledge as unquestioned truths, some of which perpetuate oppression and oppressive systems. To elaborate, neoliberal education preserves behaviours, dispositions, values, and perspectives of the dominant class through mainstream schooling which functions as ideological state apparatus that teaches, directly and indirectly, conformity to and reproduction of the dominant social and cultural hegemony. More specifically, in the modern western context, dominant neoliberal education perpetuates whiteness and capitalist frameworks (Apple, 2004, pp. 2-12; Aronowitz, 2004, p. 16; Bai et al., 2009, p. 325; Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, p. 154; Hill, 2018, pp. 195-200; Koetting, 1994, p. 55; Kumashiro, 2009, p. XXXIV).

Critical theorists postulate that ideological reproduction in schools occurs, in part, through the perpetuation of so-called 'common sense,' reflecting the knowledge, norms, and values of the dominant group in society. Here, the notion of 'common sense' implies that some forms of knowledge and ways of being are valid while other forms of

knowledge and ways of being are not. Thus, ‘common sense’ is presented as self-evident, which disempowers ways of being that are different from the status quo—propping up a conservative conceptualization of the past, present, and future. What is not acknowledged by the school system and dominant culture is that common sense is itself a subjective social construction rooted in dominant hegemonic norms. Relatedly, dominant discourses are created by dominant culture, which, in schooling, manifests in the materials that are used, the ways in which schooling is organized, culminating in the values and beliefs that are transmitted to students. This includes the ‘hidden curriculum’ which refers to the ways in which norms and values are transmitted informally through institutional expectations and routines outside of the formal framework of schooling (McLaren, 2009, p. 75). Apple (2004) extrapolates:

> There is a process which I call the selective tradition: that which, within the terms of an effective dominant culture, is always passed off as ‘the tradition,’ the significant past. But always the selectivity is the point; the way in which from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded. (p. 5)

Thus, dominant culture imposes its norms, values, attitudes, assumptions, and expectations on society so as to render them normative and invisible; in other words, it is ontological and epistemological colonization (Kumashiro, 2009, pp. XXXIII-XXXVI).

Without an interrogation of ‘common sense’ and dominant hegemonic norms, the status quo will inevitably be reproduced and perpetuated. Critical pedagogy and critical theory are useful for this interrogation because they can reveal the underlying motivations of the various stakeholders influencing educational policy (Ergas, 2019a, p. 8; McLaren, 2009, p. 63). In other words, critical theory and critical pedagogy can analyze the everyday common-sense conceptualizations of subjectivity and ask how and why they are produced. More recently, critical theory and critical pedagogy have come to incorporate the intersectional perspectives of race, gender, sexual orientation, and other subjectivities, which has proven to be useful in furthering the scope to interrogate the status quo (Ergas, 2019a, p. 8; Giroux, 2019b, p. 150; Holohan, 2019, p. 355; Hyde & LaPrad, 2015, p. 2; Shah, 2019, p. 47; Tweed, 2011).

1.7. Importance Of Critique

Critique, in this project, is the practice of questioning normative beliefs, practices, ideologies, and so-called 'common sense' in order to expose dominant ideological systems. Identifying dominant norms is useful because it reveals the underlying ideologies guiding educational policy. In other words, examining the substance of schooling—its content and methods—reveals its latent cultural, economic, and political orientation (Forbes, 2016a, p. 358; Gruenewald, 2004, p. 83; Koetting, 1996. p. 4; Koetting, 1998, p. 5; Wallis, 2016, pp. 502-503). As Apple (2004) elucidates: "Critical scholarship would lay bare the political, social, ethical, and economic interests and commitments that are uncritically accepted as 'the way life really is'" (p. 12). This is important because identifying oppressive systems is a crucial first step in challenging the existing hegemony. This is why the daily activities that comprise schooling must be held up to scrutiny. Critique is essential in that without it, existing school practices and structures remain entrenched.

At this point, I would like to acknowledge that there are people who are suffering from various afflictions and ailments that benefit from practicing MIM, and I do not wish to minimize or denigrate those instances. Mindfulness for the purposes of stress-relief is, on the surface, a sensible endeavor. I acknowledge that MIM may help some people become 'happier' or 'calmer.' Nevertheless, I have concerns that teaching instrumental forms of mindfulness may be doing more harm than good, especially considering evidence suggesting MIM may perpetuate inequality and suffering. Likewise, in schools, I believe it is reasonable for teachers to desire a calm classroom to teach effectively. And yet, here too, the application of MIM to these ends is not neutral. In other words, while aspiring to reduce stress in young people is a worthwhile pursuit, applying MIM in the endeavor is not benign (Edelglass, 2017, p. 15). In a similar vein, while 'resilience' and 'grit' (described later, analogous to MIM) are useful in encouraging children to persevere, they are dangerous when used to hold children responsible for overcoming institutional barriers (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, p. 139). The concepts of resilience and grit are based on a latent belief in deficit orientations. For example, deficit/scarcity mindsets blames children and their families for issues like noncompliance with school norms with complete disregard to the effects of systemic racism and educators' implicit bias, arising from the dominant view of achievement as

meritocratic and the result of individual talent, grit, and hard work (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, p. 136, p. 149). Furthermore, teaching marginalized children decontextualized resilience and grit disregards the perseverance and bravery that they already possess and enact daily as they experience oppression in institutions like schools (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, p. 140). For many students, the difficulties they experience daily cannot be explained simply by poor emotional management; instead, they are symptoms of sociopolitical issues involving race, class, gender, etc. (Ng, 2016, p. 148). In this regard, teachers who implement mindfulness in schools should work to understand that stress has social, cultural, and systemic causes. On this, Ruppel (2024) comments:

> Therapeutic management has the potential to make client-workers 'happier in general,' but in doing so, it may also make them better workers. This claim is in line with prior [research] on therapeutic governance, which analyzes it as simultaneously an effort to reduce health disparities and empower poor people *and* a tool to regulate the poor. As labor process theory shows, individual workers may experience very real psychological benefits from specific management control strategies, but these psychological benefits are ultimately profit-generating if they increase worker productivity. (p. 18, emphasis in original).

With this in mind, I respectfully name, critique, and challenge the problematic instances of MIM that I observe.

1.8. Teachers With Good Intentions

A barrier to critical analysis of MIM is that critiques of mindfulness programs are often perceived as personal attacks against well-meaning teachers, since those who promote mindfulness position themselves as helping students in need, often citing evidence that mindfulness offers symptomatic relief from stress and other ailments. However, mindfulness promoters demonstrate great hubris in the name of 'doing good', in some cases going so far as to claim that they are 'saving the world' (Cannon, 2016; Cheah, 2011, p. 22; Brown, 2017, pp. 65-66; Purser, 2019b, p. 2; Purser, Forbes, and Burke, 2016, p. xxi; Wrenn, 2022, p. 166).

While some teachers may have 'good intentions' in applying mindfulness, good intentions do not absolve them of the harms caused by MIM. Teachers who implement mindfulness in schools and gloss over or are unaware of the neoliberal basis of modern

schooling further conceal inequitable school conditions and practices because they fail to consider the effects of racism, sexism, classism, and ableism, which subsequently obscures their ability to understand individual suffering in the larger historical and political context (Badr, 2022, p. 5; Forbes, 2016a, p. 358; Forbes, 2016b, p. 1265; Forbes, 2019, pp. 93-94). While I suppose that none of these people think that they are doing harm, the implementation of mindfulness in schools is not innocuous. Teachers may have good intentions but implementing mindfulness programs without understanding the underlying neoliberal basis of modern neoliberal education as well as the highly problematic nature of corporatized spirituality may unwittingly cause harm by perpetuating oppression and oppressive systems (Min & Lynn, 2019, p. 10; Purser, 2019b, p. 2; Reveley, 2016, p. 498). I suggest teachers and administrators stop and critically examine their motivations for implementing MIM. Furthermore, teachers should have a personal practice of mindfulness as a prerequisite before teaching it to others, otherwise their instruction may be devoid of any lived experience or understanding (Orr, 2014, p. 52; Thayer-Bacon, 2003, p. 36). However, even this suggestion is no guarantee that the mindfulness they teach will not be problematic, all of which illustrates the complexity of ascertaining the ethicality of any given practice. Furthermore, Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, and Sciuchetti (2022) warn us that:

> Despite moves to embrace 'trauma-informed' pedagogies, for BICOC [Black, Indigenous, Children of Color], it is regularly the schools that are inflicting, not healing, the trauma. That most of this occurs under the guise of 'good intentions' and 'niceness' is important to underscore as it demonstrates how deeply deficit ideologies and racism are internalized by educators. (pp. 148-149)

Deficit ideologies (as a patronizing and inherently prejudiced perspective, profiles some children as fundamentally lacking and without capability, often based on racist beliefs) forward the idea that it is the young person's responsibility to *choose* behaviours that align with the dominant educational culture, and if they do not, they are labelled as problematic and in need of fixing (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, p. 133). With MIM, along with other modern behaviour-control interventions such as Positive Psychology (PP) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL), students are taught to 'choose' emotional responses with a preference for responses that conform to dominant norms (Hailwood, Wannyn, & Choudhury, 2020, pp. 5-6).

1.9. Setting Up What Follows

In the chapters that follow, I will describe how MIM, as a proxy for neoliberal corporate capitalism, causes harm when implemented in institutions, specifically in education. I present this work as a provocation to interrogate MIM. My intention is to point out the Trojan Horse that conceals neoliberal ideologies hidden within practices such as MIM as they infiltrate the educational landscape.

Chapter 2: 'Neoliberalism Infecting Education' describes the neoliberal incursion into educational spaces through various initiatives that are often veiled as progressive and student-centered. This chapter describes the current state of neoliberal schooling and the reasons that administrators and teachers are applying MIM in classrooms. In this sense, chapter 2 lays the groundwork for describing the current application of MIM in education. Furthermore, chapter 2 describes the underlying problems in education that MIM is supposedly being implemented to address. The chapter also analyzes the neoliberal corporate capitalist influence on education and the subsequent use of MIM as a band-aid solution to quell behavioural problems.

Chapter 3: 'Modern Instrumental Mindfulness (MIM)' goes into detail on the origins and development of MIM. This chapter describes the contextual accelerants that led to the incredible growth of MIM in the west over the past twenty-plus years. Furthermore, this chapter describes some of the problematic and troubling outcomes that result from the aforementioned explosive growth in popularity of MIM in the west, including the overwhelming whiteness of MIM, as well as MIM's ties to other popular but problematic concepts applied in modern education, including PP and SEL. The 'scientification' of mindfulness is also examined in this chapter vis-à-vis an examination of the dominance of positivist scientific frameworks that legitimate mindfulness research in the west.

Chapter 4: 'Buddhism' provides the contextual background to explain what Buddhist mindfulness actually is, and differentiates it from MIM. This chapter examines foundational soteriological concepts of Buddhism and how they form the basis of Buddhist mindfulness, as opposed to MIM. To be clear, this chapter is not in any way meant to be a comprehensive review of Buddhism, Buddhist history, or Buddhist philosophy, as that is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Rather, the concepts,

principles, and tenets examined in this chapter are meant to help build out the reader's understanding of Buddhist mindfulness in order to support discernment between Buddhist mindfulness and MIM.

Chapter 5: 'Mindfulness was never meant for…' closes out this dissertation and summarizes the most salient points and ideas presented throughout. I begin by reiterating what Buddhist mindfulness is, in contrast to MIM, and how they are different. I present some ideas that could be implemented instead of MIM to alleviate the harms caused by neoliberal corporate capitalism in education. These ideas are examined in depth by other researchers in other fields, most notably equity and social justice-minded researchers. Following that, there is an admission of limitations, gaps, and areas for future research as a logical progression of this work.

Chapter 2. Neoliberalism Infecting Education

2.1. Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is an economic, social, and political ideology that elevates the free market, competition, and individualism above all else. Neoliberalism valorizes individual freedom, choice, and autonomy by employing classically liberal values in a specific way (Godrej, 2017, p. 777). Initially an offshoot of classical liberalism, as well as a response against movements such as Fascism, Nazism, Communism, and Keynesian economics after World War Two, neoliberalism came into prominence during the 1970s and 1980s, led by the U.S. and Britain, becoming the dominant social, political, and economic paradigm of the twenty first century (Harvey, 2007; Kumar, 2019, p. 237).

Under neoliberalism, individuals are fashioned into entrepreneurs of their own lives who must navigate the uncertainties of risk, change, and competition resulting from neoliberal policies that promote 'rugged individualism,' leaving many people without adequate social support (Arthington, 2016, p. 92; Barker, 2014, p. 172; Purser, 2019a, p. 30; Stanley, Purser, & Singh, 2018, p. 6; Vörös, 2016, p. 61). Rugged individualism is the belief in personal responsibility for one's circumstances, which characterizes poverty, illness, stress, etc. as individual failures, perpetuating the myth that people 'get what they deserve' (Januszewski & Koetting, 1998; Koetting, 1998, p. 6). As Wrenn (2022) elaborates:

> Neoliberalism embodies the ideological shift in the purpose of the state from one that has a responsibility to ensure full employment and protect its citizens against the exigencies of the market to one that has a responsibility to insure protection of the market itself. Under neoliberalism, the state is thus preoccupied with the unimpeded functioning and expansion of markets rather than the general welfare of society. Individuals are left responsible for their own welfare under neoliberalism…. Society is then comprised solely of self-interested, atomistic individuals seeking to forward their own agendas. (pp. 157-158)

As alluded to above, neoliberalism transfers the responsibility of societal problems from governments to citizens, who are recast as private consumers (Chachignon, Le Barbenchon, & Dany, 2024, p. 7).

Neoliberal corporate capitalism is a specific form of neoliberalism which affords vast power to corporations, which is problematic because corporations are amoral entities whose primary function is to maximize dividends for shareholders (Caring-Lobel, 2016, p. 204; Loy, 2013, pp. 418-419). Neoliberal corporate capitalism is defined by profit-seeking behaviour that is primarily concerned with the 'bottom line' and maximizing returns and therefore prioritizes competitive, individualist, self-centered traits over socially integrative ones (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 136; Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 105; Forbes, 2022, p. 2; Harvey, 2007; Wrenn, 2020, p. 503). At the individual level, neoliberal corporate capitalism implores people to be successful and happy by purchasing and consuming commodities and services which results in a willful ignorance towards systemic, structural, and institutional forms of oppression and poses a significant obstacle to the realization of a less individualistic society (Apple, 2004, p. 8; Forbes, 2019, pp. 119-124; Magill & Rodriguez, 2014, p. 207).

Today, neoliberal corporate capitalism is a dominant ideology to the point where it is viewed as 'common sense' and alternatives to it are considered naïve or just plain impossible. Neoliberal corporate capitalist ideology seeps into every aspect of our lives, including how we think (exemplified by social disconnection, competitiveness, and loneliness) to such an extent that it appears to be the nature of reality, and continues to spread through globalization and neocolonialism, reinforced by legacies of conquest and exploitation (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 170; Sefa Dei, 2019, p. 49). That is, neoliberal corporate capitalism permeates both public and private spheres, completely infiltrating all aspects of everyday life, including, through MIM, the inner world. In the context of this inquiry, neoliberal corporate capitalism, as the dominant cultural ideology, colonizes mindfulness and subdues its socially transformative potential (Forbes, 2022, p. 7).

2.2. Neoliberalism In Education

Education has not been spared from the privatizing forces of neoliberalism, as corporate interests heavily influence curriculum and pedagogy. Public education is now a contested site where market forces and democratic ideals compete as schooling becomes increasingly tied to profit-making, productivity, and consumption (Giroux, 2019a, p. 35; Gruenewald, 2004, p. 78; Hyland, 2015, p. 15; Purser, Forbes, & Burke, 2016, p. xx). The discourses of 'excellence' and 'efficiency' in education are emblematic of neoliberalism's incursion of into education (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 53). Training

productive and efficient workers has become a dominant policy driver in education over the past forty years, and the trend is intensifying (Apple, 2004, p. 17; Gruenewald, 2004, p. 78). Observe how modern frameworks of schooling based on technical rationality advance an input/output approach to education, conceptualizing education as a pipeline to the job market (Forbes, 2019, p. 146; Min & Lynn, 2019, pp. 2-4; Purser, 2019b, p. 4). The commodification and corporatization of education aligns schooling with the capitalist imperative of preparing young people to become economic agents in the global marketplace where technical skill, efficiency, and progress are valued (Apple, 2004, p. 17; Bai, 2006, p. 12; Bai et al., 2009, p. 332; Egan, 1999, p. 96; Gilead, 2012; Koetting, 1984, p. 14; Magill & Rodriguez, 2014, p. 216). This is illustrated by how multinational organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization, as well as corporations like Microsoft and Google are increasingly influencing educational policy (Gilead, 2012, p. 113; Gruenewald, 2004, p. 77; Smith, 2000, p. 15).

Critical theorists point out that modern mainstream education is driven by positivism, systems management, and structural-functionalism, evidenced by a results-obsessed curriculum centered around high-stakes standardized tests, all of which direct resources away from learning objectives that are concerned with civic duty and public knowledge generation toward short-term utilitarian goals such as labour skills development and job placement (Apple, 2004, p. 13; Magee, 2017, p. 119; Westheimer, 2018, p. 224). In other words, public education, through the influence of neoliberal corporatization, is losing its mission as a public and common good and becoming yet another commodity in the service of capital accumulation and market fundamentalism (Darder, 2019, p. 62; Giroux, 2010, p. 186; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000, p. 9). Neoliberalism in education is damaging precisely because it centers the logic of profit-making and cost-efficiency, which does nothing to enrich the educational experience (Hawkins, Manzi, & Ojeda, 2014, p. 336; Kumar, 2019, p. 242). Thus, the negative ramifications of neoliberalism in education cannot be understated—it effectively erodes holistic and community-oriented human development and incentivizes individualism and competition. Furthermore, the extreme individualism of neoliberalism, when applied to educational policies, obscures the structural and institutional conditions that perpetuate and normalize oppression by masking it as ‘the way things have always been’ (Kumashiro, 2009, p. XXXVI). Without analyzing the neoliberal context in which modern

education is situated, systemic and institutional contributors to stress will undoubtedly be obscured (Forbes, 2016a, p. 358).

In the Canadian context, successive governments have been restructuring schooling to align with the aims of corporate profitability and competitiveness in the global market through the creation of 'human capital' to drive economic growth (Brownlee, 2016, p. 11; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000, p. 9; Tudiver, 1999, pp. 155-168; Vokey, 2014, p. 259; Westheimer, 2018, p. 218). The resulting instrumental approach is infecting all levels of education from K-12 to university (Hawkins, Manzi, & Ojeda, 2014, p. 337; Westheimer, 2018, p. 224).

2.3. Governmentality And Self-Surveillance

Governmentality is the process by which the subordinate class voluntarily accepts and adopts the values of the dominant class. This is carried out through the process of self-surveillance and self-regulation, which involves a perpetual monitoring and regulation of the self through disciplinary regimes of the mind and body, reinforced by social institutions such as schools, mass media, and the state (Arthington, 2016, p. 99; Kirmayer, 2015, p. 459; McLaren, 2009, pp. 67-69; Purser, 2019c, p. 1; Qiu & Rooney, 2019, p. 726; Smallen, 2019, p. 134; Stanley & Longden, 2016, p. 320). Governmentality and self-surveillance have roots in Jeremy Bentham's panopticon concept from the eighteenth century. A panopticon is a prison designed specifically in a manner to facilitate the constant surveillance of inmates by guards, who were hidden from the view of the inmates. Bentham posited that the power of the panopticon design lied in the infiltration of the prisoners' minds and self-consciousness by the fact that they knew they were under surveillance. This notion of the panopticon, which exemplifies mental coercion, has been adopted by theorists such as Foucault in his commentary of social control. In Foucault's panoptic society, self-regulation works due to the sense of an 'other' who is watching. On this, Giddens (1987) claims: "Surveillance in the capitalist enterprise is the key to management" (p. 175). Ketelaar (2002) adds: "Entire societies may be imprisoned in what Foucault calls panopticism…. Big Brother is watching you, [but] not by keeping his eyes continually fixed on you necessarily" (228). In MIM, there is no one watching; instead, a constant self-surveillance internalizes the panoptic gaze. In this sense, self-care practices such as MIM are neoliberal modes of governmentality (Badr, 2022, p. 6; Leggett, 2021, p. 266; Sauerborn, Sokefeld, & Neckel, 2022, p. 4).

2.4. Neoliberal Schooling And The Fixation On Grades

We will now take some time to explore the characteristics of neoliberal schooling in order to develop the background knowledge to understand some of its defining features. We will also see how modern schooling has become intertwined with neoliberal corporate capitalism through its emphasis on control and standardization.

Modern western compulsory education beginning in the nineteenth century is, in part, influenced by two concurrent ideologies operating in North America and Europe. In North America, schooling was aimed to prepare immigrants and people of lower classes for the workforce, primarily in industrial factories and agriculture. Simultaneously, in Europe, education served as preparation for the military and industrial work (Chitpin and Portelli, 2019, p. 1). The link between schooling, industry, and worker training have been long theorized as transmitting norms and values that perpetuates free market capitalism (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, p. 145). More broadly speaking, neoliberal education, as an instantiation of neoliberal logic has a “tendency to reduce human behavior to market logics and to simplify society as the mere aggregation of predictably rational behaviors” (Chachignon, Le Barbenchon, & Dany, 2024, p. 8). As a legacy of this, education was directed toward short-term utilitarian outcomes, focused on control, predictability, and efficiency, sorting students with standardized tests in an achievements-obsessed curriculum (Ergas, 2014, p. 68; Forbes, 2019, p. 121; Koetting, 1988, pp. 5-6; Kumar, 2019, p. 236; Magill & Rodriguez, 2014, p. 217; McLaren, 2009, p. 64). Here, Koetting extrapolates: “[Terms such as] direct instruction, time on task, assignments, expectations, monitoring, pupil task involvement, seat work … [reflect] technical and political value bases. The metaphorical bases of these words are industrial, military, and disease (medical)” (Koetting, 1988, pp. 4-5). This conceptualization of education as an instrumental outcome-oriented economic activity severely limits its emancipatory potential (Koetting, 1984, pp. 8-9; Kumar, 2019, pp. 245-248). Critics theorize that the neoliberal project of education suppresses passion for learning and fossilizes curiosity as it relegates schooling to an endless array of hoop-jumping tasks, routines, and dogmatic instruction (Ferrin & Zurn, 2021, pp. 69-70). Furthermore, the myth of meritocracy and hyper-individualism are deeply entrenched in the neoliberal ethos of schooling (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, p. 133).

Corporatized schooling perpetuates structural inequalities and class divisions in a hierarchical and stratified society through the intergenerational reproduction of social class, which occurs by sorting students into ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, ranking them with grades and standardized testing (Apple, 2004, pp. 7-14; Koetting, 1998, p. 8; Magill & Rodriguez, 2014, p. 209; Min & Lynn, 2019, pp. 3-4). Here, teachers are unwittingly preparing students into class-segregated futures, where disparities among student achievement reflect a self-fulfilling prophecy in which privileged students perform ‘better’ due to their privileged access to resources, thus perpetuating the existing hierarchy. This occurs through differential access to social and cultural capital by segregating students based on class affiliation and teaching them different things, sometimes referred to as ‘streaming,’ which in some cases begins as early as elementary school (Aronowitz, 2004, p. 19; Egan, 1999, p. 97; Kumar, 2019, p. 244; Magill & Rodriguez, 2014, pp. 218-219; McLaren, 2009, p. 77; Purpel, 1993, p. 282; Smith, 2000, p. 10). As Kucinskas (2018) describes:

> Having a privileged racial and gendered position is also related to one’s ability to speak with people in powerful positions with ease…. Ease comes naturally to those who know they deserve to be in the room with those in more powerful positions. (pp. 143-144)

It stands to reason that young people from upper-class backgrounds are better prepared to succeed because they have learned upper-class cultural capital. Cultural capital includes the knowledge, language, and confidence to interact with people in positions of authority.

Neoliberal education is steeped in a legacy of Eurocentric cultural hegemony which reinforces the knowledge and values of white Euro-American culture while rejecting (or colonizing and appropriating) the knowledge of minoritized cultures (Hill, 2018, p. 196; Magill & Rodriguez, 2014, p. 211). The systemic privilege of dominant groups, propped up by generational wealth, manifests the ways in which schools are set up to allow some students to excel at the expense of others and uplifts privileged students to maintain political, economic, and racial hegemony (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, p. 133). Put simply, schooling privileges some groups while marginalizing others (Kumashiro, 2009, p. XXXVI). McLaren (2009) extrapolates: “The curriculum favors certain forms of knowledge over others and affirms the dreams, desires, and values of select groups of students over other groups, often discriminatorily

on the basis of race, class, and gender" (pp. 74-75). On this Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, and Sciuchetti (2022) comment: "Schooling has long been a violent endeavor, intended to forward the project of white supremacy…. Racism permeates all aspects of the system, from who the educators are, to curriculum" (pp. 148-149). George J. Sefa Dei (2009) adds:

> Our schools, colleges and universities reward Whiteness, and force racialized bodies to be enthralled by Whiteness. This seduction can be seen … to the extent that we do not always challenge the individualism, competition and corporate greed, as well as Eurocentric Whiteness, when it masquerades as universal…. The problem is that, when we become so accustomed to the agenda of neoliberalism, it becomes invisible and natural. (p. 44)

To expand on this argument, critics decry how academia has long been the domain of able-bodied cis-gendered heterosexual white men (Suh, 2020, p. 55). In many cases, 'good' research and scholarship is typically identified with masculine, white, and Anglo-centric norms (Hawkins, Manzi, & Ojeda, 2014, p. 342; Walsh, 2017b, p. 5).

All of the above are evidenced in the standardization of teaching, which, although initially introduced to ensure teaching criteria were being met, has refashioned teachers into classroom managers, particularly in neoliberal schooling, which is focused on content delivery, reframing teaching as test preparation, which in turn places an emphasis on conformity and restricts creative, critical, and divergent ways of thinking (Forbes, 2019, p. 95; Koetting, 1984, p. 7; Koetting, 1988, p. 8; Kumar, 2019, pp. 241-245; Magill & Rodriguez, 2014, p. 217; McLaren, 1999, p. 53). In contrast, McLaren argues:

> Knowledge acquired in classrooms should help students participate in vital issues that affect their experience on a daily level rather than simply enshrine the values of business pragmatism. School knowledge should have a more emancipatory goal than churning out workers (human capital) and helping schools become the citadel of corporate ideology. (2009, p. 74)

Teachers who do not follow the aforementioned dominant pedagogical style often suffer from burn-out more frequently because they lack social and psychological support from the school system (Koetting & Combs, 2005, p. 82; Kumar, 2019, p. 245; Magill & Rodriguez, 2014, p. 218; Westheimer, 2018, p. 224).

The emphasis on test scores in neoliberal education seems to be ill-placed as there is little evidence to suggest that test scores predict anything other than test scores—not happiness, caring, or honesty (Goodlad, 1999, p. 240). Therefore, it is questionable whether grade assessments are reliable to the extent that they claim to be (Kohn, 1999, p. 2). To this point, two equally qualified teachers may assign a different grade to the same student's work. Moreover, a teacher may grade the same assignment differently at two different times. This illustrates how grades are a subjective rating posing as objective evaluation. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that assigning grades decreases students' interest in learning, and decreases the quality of students' relationships with each other. This holds true across different cultures and across different levels of education (Kohn, 1999, pp. 1-3). Alarmingly, grades may encourage cheating: research has found that the more emphasis is placed on grades, the more students are likely to cheat, even if they believe that cheating is wrong (Kohn, 1999, pp. 2-3). In fact, students who cheat may actually be demonstrating rational behaviour that has been adapted to maximize a desirable outcome when high marks are valued over intellectual exploration.

2.5. So-Called 'Objective Knowledge'

The knowledge that is upheld by a society reflects the values of the dominant group who maintain their dominance through hegemony. Dominant hegemonic norms refers to the norms of the dominant class—so-called because they appear as 'the way reality is'—manifesting as morals, ethics, laws, and conventions in society (Forbes, 2019, p. 45; Ornstein, 1991, p. 103). Apple (2004) explains: "Hegemony acts to 'saturate' our very consciousness, so that the educational, economic and social world we see and interact with, and the commonsense interpretations we put on it, becomes the world tout court, the only world" (p. 4). Apple (2004) continues: "The structuring of knowledge and symbols in our educational institutions is intimately related to the principles of social and cultural control in a society" (p. 2). In other words, those who hold power possess the ability to set the terms of engagement (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, p. 141). This has obvious benefits for those in power as their power is contingent upon the continuation of these conditions.

The view of education as neutral and objective feeds into the myth that public schooling is apolitical (Forbes, 2019, p. 120; Hyde & LaPrad, 2015, p. 3; Koetting, 1984,

pp. 9-11). To the contrary, education is replete with values—that is, the knowledge taught in schools reflect specific social, political, and economic interests (McLaren, 2009, pp. 71-73; Koetting & Januszewski, 1991, pp. 6-7; Kumar, 2019, p. 51). As Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, and Simpson (2022) articulate: “Curriculum is political, reflective of the ideologies of those with the power to write, adopt, and enact it” (p. 150). Apple (2004) elaborates further: “The claim [of neutrality] ignores the fact that the knowledge that now gets into schools is already a choice from a much larger universe of possible social knowledge and principles…. It is repeatedly filtered through ideological and economic commitments” (p. 8). Put simply, there is no neutral or objective knowledge since knowledge is shaped by political interests as well as the cultural and historical context in which it is situated (Frank, Gleiser, & Thompson, 2019, p. 7; McLaren, 2009, pp. 63-72). Koetting and Januszewski (1991) adds: “Knowledge (truth) is socially constructed, culturally mediated, and historically situated…. Truth cannot be spoken in the absence of power relations” (pp. 9-10). Yet, neoliberal education separates knowledge from power, and thus conceals its own social constructed-ness (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 3; DiAngelo, 2012, p. 12; McLaren, 2009, p. 72). All of this is illustrative of the hidden manner in which ‘common sense’ perpetuates dominant hegemonic norms. In the context of my critique of MIM, this observation furthers identifies and problematizes the conceptualization of ‘objective knowledge.’

2.6. Academic Capitalism

Now we will turn our attention to higher education and examine the ways in which neoliberalism has affected universities and colleges. Critics of the neoliberal corporate takeover of universities posit that the core political and civic mission of higher education has shifted toward replicating corporate values (Giroux, 2010, pp. 186-188; Lincoln, 2018, p. 7; Smyth, 2019, pp. 30-31). In a society gripped by neoliberalism, higher education is reduced to a credentialing factory where degrees are granted in exchange for tuition—effectively a ‘pay as you go’ model that conceptualizes students as consumers, and shifts the cost of education onto individuals. Universities are refashioned into marketplaces, and students are turned into consumers of educational ‘products’ where they seek the best ‘deal’ for themselves and look for ‘value for money’ from their purchases (Giroux, 2010, p. 191; Giroux, 2019b, p. 149; Kohn, 1999, p. 7; Kumar, 2019, p. 247; Panayotidis, Lund, Smyth, 2020, p. 12; Towers, & Smits, 2016, p.

12; Westheimer, 2018, p. 227). The process of shifting the cost of education onto students demonstrates a political choice that represents neoliberal attitudes toward public services. The effects of such policies is evidenced by debt-ridden students who are increasingly concerned with a return on their investment, which fuels inward fear and anxiety, and outward competition (Brownlee, 2016, p. 6). Relatedly, critics theorize that student debt has a depoliticizing effect that pushes individuals to be less likely to engage in collective social activism as they are saddled with debt and financial anxiety, further accelerating the fragmentation of society, (Apple, 2004, p. 9; Aronowitz, 2004, p. 33; Brownlee, 2016, p. 7; Kumar, 2019, p. 249).

'Academic capitalism' is a term used to describe entrepreneurial initiatives in higher education where universities are forced to align their aims towards profit-making in order to survive in a competitive marketplace (Vokey, 2014, p. 260). As universities are increasingly driven by a profit-motive, they adopt corporate practices focused on maximizing profit and minimizing costs, bolstered by the hiring of administrators with corporate backgrounds, further decoupling university decision-making from faculty and student influence and reshaping them into profit-oriented businesses (Brownlee, 2016, p. 7; Giroux, 2010, p. 186; Kumar, 2019, p. 247; Westheimer, 2018, p. 228). Carrette and King (2013) describe this in detail:

> In certain sectors of higher education, where the market demands for survival are the greatest, there is a tendency to compromise academic values and standards as a means of survival in a competitive and under-funded marketplace…. The effect of neoliberalism on the educational ethos is such that it hardly matters now *what* you teach or even *how* you teach it, as long as you can provide the appropriate documentation to demonstrate that your courses can be mapped in terms of supposedly generic and transferable skills, deemed necessary for a flexible workforce. The subject being studied becomes reduced to its utilitarian basics, and degrees become little more than training courses for 'tooling up' the workforce to meet the competitive demands of global capitalism. (pp. 165-166, emphasis in original)

Examples of the above include:

1) 'Cost-recovery' programs, targeting professionals who pay higher tuition fees for flexible and accelerated courses. Cost-recovery in this case refers to institutions recovering their costs or making a profit by charging higher fees (Tudiver,1999, p. 162).

2) The proliferation of online or distance education, where universities expand their market base beyond traditional geographical and class-size limitations (Tudiver, 1999, p. 162).

3) Aggressive branding and recruitment strategies to capture a wider audience, specifically soliciting international students who pay higher tuition fees (Gill, 2018, p. 196).

4) Real estate development of university lands (historically stolen from Indigenous Communities), targeting research firms and for-profit market housing (Panayotidis, Lund, Towers, & Smits, 2016, p. 13).

5) Increased casualized and precarious academic labour in the form of limited term contracts (Hawkins, Manzi, & Ojeda, 2014, p. 334).

6) Increased expectations of research productivity (Purpel, 1993, p. 282).

7) Restrictions on the freedoms of researchers to publish work that critiques the university's corporate connections (Purpel, 1993, p. 282; Vokey, 2014, pp. 259-260).

As a result of the above, universities pressure faculty and students to align their work with corporate interests, recasting them as entrepreneurs in a climate of funding scarcity where 'success' is measured by how much funding is brought into the university (Giroux, 2010, p. 187; Panayotidis, Lund, Towers, & Smits, 2016, p. 13; Tudiver, 1999. p. 168; Vokey, 2014, p. 260; Westheimer, 2018, p. 217). Despite all of this, or perhaps because of it, academic capitalism persists, largely due to the pressure on researchers to publish, obtain research grants, and produce commercially viable 'products' in order to advance their academic careers, emblematic of the so-called meritocracy that academia is based upon, all of which curbs radical critiques and transformative initiatives (Vokey, 2014, p. 263). Needless to say, education that incorporates critique of capitalism does not garner corporate support (Brownlee, 2016, p. 10).

Related to all of this, a major trend that can be observed in universities are initiatives that forward 'innovation.' A closer look reveals how such initiatives are thinly veiled attempts to commercialize and commodify research (Brownlee, 2016, p. 9). To illustrate, the National Science and Engineering Research Council [NSERC] has mandated 'innovation' as a principal value. Here, government funds are directed to programs that partner universities with private companies to conduct research—which is tantamount to providing free labour and expertise to corporations (Brownlee, 2016, p. 10). In this case, 'innovation' is synonymous with privatization. Nevertheless, it is difficult

for universities to sever ties from corporate interests in a neoliberal society where economic anxiety is high, fueled by aggressive competition and resource scarcity. For example, in Canada, universities have seen a prolonged decrease in government funding since the 1990s, experiencing wave after wave of budget cuts and downsizing. It is important to note that such cuts to public education are *intentional* policy decisions by governments to allocate resources to certain areas and not to others (Giroux, 2019b, p. 149; Tudiver, 1999, p. 168; Westheimer, 2018, p. 222).

As illustrated throughout this chapter, neoliberal corporate capitalism is encroaching into educational policy and practice. As an organizing principle for society which prioritizes competition and individualism, neoliberal corporate capitalism has eroded the community-oriented and democratic ideals of public education for the common good. For this reason, neoliberalism, and more specifically, neoliberal corporate capitalism, is damaging to collective well-being and poses a challenge to forging a collective response to the growing encroachment of corporatization into all aspects of the public sphere. The damaging effects of valuing profit over socially integrative goals, both in education and in society, generally, is evidenced by institutions such as universities which are operating like for-profit corporations. In order to counteract the neoliberalization of education, schools must resist the framing of education as workforce preparation and instead redirect focus to critical thinking, civic engagement, and a concern for democracy (Giroux, 2019b, p. 149; Westheimer, 2018, p. 231). In order to do so, critical pedagogists posit that two strategies towards these ends include eliminating standardized tests and reconceptualizing universities away from their current incarnation as credential factories (Aronowitz, 2004, p. 32).

In the next chapter, I will examine Buddhism and the Buddhist roots of mindfulness. This level-setting exercise will help articulate what mindfulness is as conceptualized in a Buddhist framework, before we move forward. This will consequently help us distinguish between Buddhist mindfulness and MIM. The chapter will examine some Buddhist history as well as the central tenets that constitute its framework.

Chapter 3. Buddhism

In this chapter, I will explore the Buddhist roots of mindfulness by examining canonical teachings and principles that underpin Buddhism. The idea here is to level-set and form a baseline understanding of Buddhist mindfulness and the soteriological framework from which it arose. An understanding of Buddhism, and hence Buddhist mindfulness, is necessary because it provides the grounding from which to compare and contrast it with MIM. In order to understand that MIM is problematic and causes harm, it is first necessary to distinguish it from Buddhist mindfulness. In other words, it is useful to understand what Buddhist mindfulness is in order to understand that MIM is not actually mindfulness. This explication of Buddhist principles will bolster my critique of MIM by identifying how many foundational Buddhist principles are absent or outright disregarded in MIM, thus illustrating how MIM is not mindfulness in any substantive form that would be considered Buddhist mindfulness. While I engage in Buddhist history and philosophy to root my understanding of mindfulness, what follows in this chapter is a review of the main foundational concepts and principles in Buddhism. It is in no way meant to be a comprehensive examination of Buddhist history or philosophy, as that is outside of the scope of this dissertation.

To start, there are three pillars that comprise Buddhism:

1) The Buddha (the historical figure who lived in what is now northeast India in the fifth century BCE).
2) The *sangha* (community of Buddhist practitioners).
3) *Dharma* or *dhamma* (teachings of the Buddha) which includes canonical teachings, most notably the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path (Bodhi, 2011, p. 20; Zahn, 2016, p. 2).

3.1. Canonical Teachings: The Four Noble Truths And The Eightfold Path

Conceptually, the Four Noble Truths are the primary source of ontological and epistemological knowledge from which all subsequent Buddhist principles are informed by. The Four Noble Truths elucidate the nature of human existence, summarily described as:

1) The truth of suffering.
2) The origins of suffering.
3) The cessation of suffering.
4) The way to the cessation of suffering, explicated as the Eightfold Path.

Following from the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path is an ethical and soteriological framework that charts a path toward enlightenment and describes a systematic method of attitudinal and behavioural motivations required to cultivate wisdom and ethical conduct (Dawson & Turnbull, 2006, p. 60). The Eightfold Path is comprised of:

1) Right view
2) Right thinking
3) Right speech
4) Right action
5) Right livelihood
6) Right effort
7) Right mindfulness
8) Right meditation

The eight parts of the Eightfold Path are mutually reinforcing, and thus mindfulness is just *one part* of a multi-faceted approach to support ethical and moral behaviour (Bai, Beatch, Chang, & Cohen, 2017, p. 23; Daniels, 2007, p. 162; Ditrich, 2016, pp. 203-209; Doran, 2018, p. 1; Faure, 2017, p. 153; Goto-Jones, 2013, p. 12; Hyland, 2016a, p. 183; Khanna & Khanna, 2019, p. 184; Lomas, 2016, p. 1; Moloney, 2016, p. 286; Neale, 2011, p. 1; Purser, 2019a, p. 79; Purser & Milillo, 2015, p. 7; Qiu & Rooney, 2019, p. 720; Sullivan & Arat, 2018, p. 348; Zahn, 2016, p. 2). That is, mindfulness is inextricable from its ethical and philosophical framework and will not lead to liberation from suffering on its own. Thus, picking out mindfulness and practicing it separate from the full suite of the Eightfold Path is incomplete (Purser, Forbes, & Burke, 2016, p. xi).

In addition to the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, the Buddha expounded on the roots of suffering, commonly referred to as the three poisons, known as: greed, ill will, and delusion, which results in *dukkha* (suffering) (Chen, 2018, p. 67; Loy, 2013, p. 417). Articulating the roots of suffering forms another pillar of Buddhism and is crucial in informing subsequent Buddhist concepts, examined later. Alarmingly, these three poisons are no longer confined to individuals but instead institutionalized in modern society, as evidenced by neoliberal corporate capitalism, where greed is built into systems (Loy, 2013, p. 418; Purser, 2019d, p. 3; Purser, 2019e, p. 3).

3.2. Buddhist Mindfulness

In MIM, mindfulness is conceptualized as a psychological state, however, this is a gross misrepresentation. While there is variance in perspectives about what mindfulness is, according to traditional Buddhism, Buddhist mindfulness is:

1) An ethical practice to discern between wholesome and unwholesome mental states.
2) A practice to uproot habits of mind that perpetuate greed, ill will, and delusion.
3) A practice to increase moral awareness.
4) A soteriological path to realize enlightenment (as part of the Eightfold Path).

That is not to say that the above are always realized through Buddhist mindfulness practice. However, they are aspirational goals which root mindfulness to ethical behaviours.

Buddhist mindfulness is traditionally practiced within an integrated soteriological framework (most notably the Eightfold Path, as a constituent part of it) that is embedded in an ethical worldview concerned with socio-ethical qualities of compassion, decreasing self-focus, and minimizing attachment to self through practicing impermanence, interdependence, interconnectedness, and non-duality (Condon, Dunne, & Wilson-Mendenhall, 2019, p. 100; Ergas, 2019b, p. 343; Farb, 2014, p. 1073; Fordham, 2019, p. 3). That is to say, Buddhist mindfulness requires a framework of ethics and a socially rooted interpretive system to support the cultivation of wise, wholesome, and ethical

qualities (Bodhi, 2011, p. 26; Dahl & Davidson, 2019, p. 2; Grossman & Van Dam, 2011, p. 223).

Mindfulness is an integral part of the Buddhist spiritual path and was traditionally monastic. That is, Buddhist mindfulness was originally practiced by ordained monks and nuns

Traditionally, meditation practices were used to develop one's character by cultivating ethical ways of thinking, feeling, and acting in the world which requires a mutually reinforcing framework of Buddhist philosophical and soteriological concepts to support practice, usually involving some form of renunciation (Bodhi, 2011, p. 28; Bodhi, 2016, p. 5; Coleman, 2001, p. 21; Farb, 2014, p. 1066; Purser & Milillo, 2015, pp. 11-19; Qiu & Rooney, 2019, p. 720; Siegel, Germer, & Olendzki, 2009, p. 18; Wilson, 2014, p. 19, p. 45). Thus, an explicit moral framework for social justice, in the broad sense of the term, is fundamentally a part of any sort of meditation practice (Forbes, 2022, p. 9; Wilson, 2014, p. 53). Lomas (2016) explains: "In its original Buddhist context, sati [mindfulness] was nestled within a broader nexus of ideas and practices designed to help people become free of suffering. This included vital teachings around the importance of ethical behaviour" (p. 1). In stark contrast, MIM is often taught as a stand-alone practice, where people are encouraged to 'focus on their breath,' to maximize their own happiness, rather than living ethically responsive lives (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 9). MIM is subsequently promoted as a quick fix which can be learned after a single practice session (Purser, 2019e, p. 1; Wilson, 2014, p. 53). Here, MIM appeals to those who want to practice a spirituality that does not challenge their materialist lifestyles and individualistic focus (Schedneck, 2013, p. 39).

And so, Buddhist mindfulness includes setting intentions before undertaking practice and distinguishes between 'right' mindfulness (*sammã sati*) and 'wrong' mindfulness (*micchã sati*) (Qiu & Rooney, 2019, p. 716; Walsh, 2017a, p. 8). 'Right' mindfulness is characterized by self-restraint, ethical behaviour, and wholesome mental states while 'wrong' mindfulness is characterized by unskillful and unwholesome mental states, rooted in greed, ill will, and delusion (Drougge, 2016, p. 173; Monteiro, Musten, & Compson, 2015, p. 2; Walsh, 2017a, p. 8). Here, it may be theorized that reducing Buddhist mindfulness to stress-relief and attention-training may result in wrong mindfulness (Monteiro, Musten, & Compson, 2015, p. 6; Tomassini, 2016, p. 223).

3.3. Conceptualization Of 'Self' and 'Emptiness'

The notion of self, or rather, no-self, is an important concept in Buddhism which is often misunderstood, or worse, appropriated for instrumental ends. As a starting point, we must begin by examining fundamental differences between Buddhism and western Cartesian thought, particularly in their views on the 'self'—Cartesian thought being an ontological and epistemological antecedent to liberalism and neoliberalism. Buddhist and Cartesian approaches to self are based on totally different ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological frameworks (Purser, 2015, p. 33). It is useful to understand this difference in order to understand how MIM is irreconcilable to Buddhist mindfulness. These differing conceptualizations of self underpin much of the issues inherent in MIM (Bodhi, 2016, p. 5; Forbes, 2019, p. 6; Holohan, 2019, p. 359).

Cartesian dualism, which begat neoliberalism, is defined by a dualism of the mind and body, as well as a dualism between matter and mind. That is, Cartesian dualism separates mind from body, and further still, humans from nature—the very type of decontextualization that is enacted by neoliberalism. In this sense, western thought, as a legacy of Cartesian dualism, treats the self as fixed and permanent.

This legacy can be observed in modern science, which has greatly influenced western culture with positivist ontological and epistemological frameworks that, as mentioned above, divorce the mind from the body, self from others, and humans from nature. Here, the mind is complicit in creating an autonomous self which substantiates and reinforces its own existence (Condon, Dunne, & Wilson-Mendenhall, 2019, p. 99; DeMoss, 2011, p. 315; Shah, 2019, p. 49). As part of this legacy, science objectifies the world and reduces it into that which is quantifiable and thus perpetuates social and ecological crises by reinforcing cultural biases that value prediction and control (Ergas, 2014, pp. 65-66; Gruenewald, 2004, p. 86; Vokey, 2014, p. 262). This cultural inheritance, i.e. subject-object duality or Cartesian dualism, pervades neoliberal schooling (and modern western culture writ large) and presents a significant challenge in applying the concept of interconnectedness. On the other hand, Buddhism posits that there is no self. To extrapolate, Buddhism is concerned with dissolving attachment to self and ego, whereas modern western culture encourages the development of a strong sense of self as evidenced by cultural preferences for high self-confidence and self-esteem (Epstein, 2018, p. 3; Simpson, 2017, p. 49). For example, the Judeo-Christian

notion of an eternal soul or a permanent self, a legacy that permeates western culture, may be philosophically irreconcilable with Buddhist concepts of no-self (Brumett, 2021, p. 2138).

Emptiness is another important concept in Buddhism and is related to no-self. The notion of emptiness points to the idea that all beings exist in mutual interdependence, that is, nothing exists in isolation alone, but rather, only exists in relation to everything around it. Put simply, Buddhism rejects the idea of an individual separate from its context. Reinforcing the egoic self is a nonsensical proposition in Buddhism as there is no 'self' to speak of. Like no-self, emptiness is a complex and philosophically dense concept. To reiterate, the dominant modern western view of self as a fixed and independent entity is incoherent according to the Buddhist concept of emptiness which holds the self as being the result of myriad relations (Hyland, 2011, p. 36; Thayer-Bacon, 2003, p. 34). Inquiry into the nature of the 'self' within a Buddhist framework is meant to reveal its impermanence and non-substantiality (Stanley, 2015, p. 97; Stanley, Purser, & Singh, 2018, p. 1; Van Gordon, 2016, p. 94). Understanding emptiness, along with no-self, helps philosophically root the concept of mindfulness within a Buddhist framework.

One important point to note here is that emptiness refers not to an annihilation of the self, because, while the self may be empty, it does not deny one's socially constructed identity, lived experience, or the material world. Instead, emptiness refers to the acknowledgment of an interconnected self that arises from a matrix of interdependent causes and conditions (DeMoss, 2011, pp. 311-312; Neale, 2013, p. 4). Relatedly, emptiness posits that no one has an intrinsic self because the self is empty, and yet, these selves do suffer from delusions of their own self-ness (DeMoss, 2011, p. 309).

In Buddhism, the preoccupation with self and attachment to self-identify is said to be a cause of suffering (Ashton, 2013, p. 41; Coleman, 2001, p. 213; Hick & Furlotte, 2009, p. 14; Loy, 2013, p. 415; Marx, 2015, pp. 1157-1158; Smith, 2008, p. 29). Therefore, Buddhist practices are aimed to deconstruct the self and decrease the habit of constructing, maintaining, and protecting the self (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 84; Coleman, 2001, p. 21). Thus, Buddhism (and by extension, mindfulness) is comprised of

ethical precepts to cultivate selfless compassion for all sentient beings, which is, at its core, incompatible with modern individualism and neoliberal corporate capitalism.

MIM is characterized by the selective and often problematic adoption of the Buddhist concepts of 'no-self' and 'emptiness (Wilson, 2014, p. 119). Western audiences largely misunderstand these concepts by interpreting no-self as its exact opposite—the cultivation of self (Carrette & King, 2013, pp. 132-133). MIM promoters hijack Buddhist concepts that conveniently dovetail with neoliberal aims, such as using no-self and emptiness as a means to inculcate individuals into accepting the precarity of neoliberal corporate capitalism. Hence, Buddhist ideas such as 'no-self' are co-opted by neoliberal spirituality, particularly practices that emphasize 'inner growth' (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 104). The Buddhist concepts of 'nonattachment,' 'impermanence,' and 'no-self' are admittedly difficult to translate to a modern western culture which is steeped in individualism and neoliberalism. Critics argue that most Westerners either cannot or have great difficulty conceptualizing 'no-self' (Cox, 1977, p. 84).

3.4. Upaya And The Two Truths

Upaya and the Two Truths will be examined here to illustrate how Buddhist concepts are appropriated by MIM promoters to justify and legitimize their arrogations of mindfulness.

'Upaya,' a Sanskrit word and Buddhist concept, commonly translated as '*skillful means*,' is interpreted as 'changing Buddhism to fit the times.' Convert Buddhists often cite Upaya to justify their reconceptualization of mindfulness (Ruan, 2020, p. 39; Wilson, 2014, p. 90). When Jon Kabat-Zinn (analyzed later, along with Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction) and other mindfulness promoters claim Upaya in their motivations, they effectively authorize themselves to change mindfulness as they see fit, which include charging money for teachings traditionally provided for free (Nehring & Frawley, 2020, p. 1186; Wilson, 2014, p. 91).

Similar to Upaya, the Buddhist concept of the 'Two Truths' postulates that there is 1) a conventional reality in which we have subjective, lived experiences; and 2) an ultimate reality, in which the true nature of the universe exists beyond human subjectivity. This concept is meant to support the realization of emptiness and

dependent origination, another Buddhist concept related to emptiness, both of which illustrate the insubstantiality of a self, as well as the interconnectedness of all things in the universe. Practically speaking, the Two Truths articulates how one can have embodied experience of our lives in the material world, but how this experience of oneself is nonetheless mediated by all of the mutual interconnections that constitute it, and thus is not substantially *real*. Buddhist concepts such as the Two Truths and Upaya have been appropriated by MIM promoters to maintain white supremacy in MIM through the use of Buddhist concepts such as no-self, nonduality, and emptiness to prop up colour-blindness and colour-evasiveness, ostensibly by presenting whiteness as universal (Gleig, 2019, p. 22; Suh, 2019, pp. 3-4). The Two Truths teaching in particular has been appropriated by MIM promoters to assert universality among humans, often manifesting in instances of colour-blindness, which dismisses differences in identity location as illusory and insignificant. More specifically, the Two Truths concept is altered by convert Buddhists in ways that erase the lived experience of marginalized individuals experiencing systemic oppression (Gleig, 2019, p. 34).

3.5. Buddhism Is A Western Invention

European colonialism in Asia sparked interest in the exoticism of 'the Orient' throughout history (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 39). Asian philosophy and Eastern mind-body practices have long been the object of romanticization and appropriation by western interpreters who have applied them as part of a therapeutic paradigm to cope with political turmoil and rapid socioeconomic changes (Stanley, Purser, & Singh, 2018, p. 4). Therefore, the incorporation of Buddhism into the western context is part of pre-existing tensions between science and religion (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 96). Beginning in the late nineteenth century, orientalists encountered Buddhism in Asia just as they were becoming skeptical of Christianity in light of scientific developments. In this context, they found Buddhism to be more amenable to science (Schedneck, 2013, p. 47).

Edward Said's (2003) concept of Orientalism, which originally focused on the Islamic world, can be applied to critique imperialism and colonialism as it relates to the appropriation of mindfulness. The concept of 'positional superiority' explains how Asian Buddhism was supposedly 'discovered' by European colonizers, illustrating colonial attitudes towards Asian culture (Cheah, 2011a, pp. 19-24; Poceski, 2020, pp. 9-10; Vo, 2016, p. 2). On this, Bastian (2006) comments: "Orientalism also defines the line

between the oriental and the occidental—the Western and the Other—where the Orient is heathen, irrational, and exotic, the very antithesis of the Occidental which is rational, civilized and Christian" (p. 272). Conceptualizing mindfulness as a 'new' invention without an origin, existing as a neutral, ahistorical, and acultural practice waiting to be 'discovered' by Europeans erases Asian Buddhist history (Poceski, 2020, p. 12). Critical researchers observe that the proliferation of MIM involves the erasure of Asian Buddhist history while creating a new narrative that privileges white Euro-American perspectives (Cheah, 2011, p. 4; Flores, 2015, p. 3). Hsu (2016) explains:

> This erasure and the use of positivism and western science to 'discover' a new validity of non-white cosmologies is situated in a larger system of power and history of European colonialism…. In particular, the secularization of Asian and Buddhist mindfulness demonstrates a neoliberal tendency to commodify cultural and racial identities for white economic and personal profit. (p. 373)

Suffice it to say, the erasure of Asian and Buddhist history and supplanting that space with new mindfulness 'experts' who transmit mindfulness without the so-called 'cultural baggage' is highly problematic (Wilson, 2014, pp. 61-62). It is important to be aware of the baggage we bring to our interpretations of cultural traditions, in particular, the modern western tendency to essentialize and appropriate practices (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 93).

The appropriation of mindfulness, exemplified by MIM, is another example of the legacy of cultural appropriation of Buddhism wrought by orientalists in the nineteenth century. During the age of European colonial expansion from approximately the 15th century onwards, Eurocentric ideals of civilization spread around the world through imperialism, spurred on by the myth of manifest destiny (Dussel, 2002). Imperialist European hegemony appropriated not only the resources of the people and lands they colonized, but their histories and cultural practices as well. These knowledge traditions, such as Buddhism, were appropriated by orientalists, who then positioned themselves as experts and recontextualized these traditions to teach to other westerners.

The term 'Buddhism' was born in Europe, coined by orientalists applying a Eurocentric lens on the customs of peoples in Asia (Brown, 2016, p. 76; Cheah, 2011a, p. 34; Ng & Purser, 2015, p. 6). As Stanley (2012) explains: "There is no Asian language word for 'Buddhism' or 'Buddhist'; the words were creations of Victorian colonisers

attempting to control ‘Buddhism’ for their own ends” (p. 633). As orientalists proclaimed authority over Buddhist knowledge, they framed it as a world religion that transcended historical and cultural boundaries (McMahan, 2017, p. 122). Orientalism is thus imperialist at its heart (Iwamura, 2011, p. 161).

Orientalists were quick to assert their expertise on Buddhism by emphasizing its compatibility with scientific rationalism. According to orientalists, the scientific process with which they analyzed Buddhism was more legitimate and superior to the perspectives of Asian Buddhists, since they viewed the living Buddhism practiced throughout Asia as ‘degenerate’ deviations, revealing an implicit superiority complex over Asian practitioners who were seen as sullying their own traditions—an example of scientific colonization concealed as objectivist study. This discursive habit is a form of epistemic gatekeeping—a legacy of colonialism (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 22; Schedneck, 2013, p. 42; Wilson, 2014, p. 63). Orientalists came to see themselves as protecting ‘real’ Buddhism, contrasting it with the ‘superstitious’ and ritualistic practices of Asian Buddhists, by stripping away the ‘Asian trappings’ in order to access ‘real’ Buddhism (Wilson, 2014, p. 131). This racialized conceptualization of Buddhism positions Asian Buddhism as ‘uncivilized,’ ‘superstitious,’ and ‘corrupted’ as it is contrasted to white normative Protestant Buddhism and Buddhist Modernism as ‘pure’ (McNicholl, 2021, p. 2). And so, while they romanticized Asian religions, orientalists also believed western culture to be more rational and sophisticated (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 20).

3.6. Protestant Buddhism/Buddhist Modernism

Western meditation-based convert Buddhism is a new and distinct form of Buddhism that results from merging traditional Asian Buddhism with Western modernity (Gleig, 2019, p. 23). Most notably, ‘Protestant Buddhism’ and ‘Buddhist Modernism’ are hybrid traditions melding Buddhism with Christianity, psychology, science, empiricism, rationalism, pragmatism, materialism, and individualism, which projects Euro-American ideals over top of Asian spiritual wisdom (Cheah, 2011, pp. 30-31; Stanley, 2012, p. 633; Stanley, Purser, & Singh, 2018, p. 10). Protestant Buddhism and Buddhist Modernism are so-called because they are influenced by an Euro-American entrepreneurial ethos commensurate with a prosperity-obsessed neoliberal theology rooted in Protestant frameworks of salvation through piety, self-improvement, and wealth accumulation

(Borup, 2020, p. 230). In this dissertation I refer to Protestant Buddhism and Buddhist Modernism interchangeably.

To extrapolate further, Protestant Buddhism and Buddhist Modernism represent Buddhism reinterpreted by western folks to fit the ontology and epistemology of a western worldview, demonstrated by the selective integration of Buddhism with an entrepreneurial spirit as a utilitarian tool for enhancing well-being, personal happiness, and reducing stress—influenced by the individualizing logic of neoliberalism and rugged individualism (Carvalho, 2017, p. 296; Cheah, 2011, p. 35; Ng & Walsh, 2019, p. 2; Poceski, 2020, p. 5; Purser, 2019a, p. 73; Stanley, 2012, pp. 631-632; Sun, 2014b, p. 408).

3.7. Textual Focus

Orientalists attempted to discover ‘real’ Buddhism in Pali texts, which became a popular scholarly pursuit, spurred on by their self-proclaimed translation abilities and allegedly ‘superior’ scholarship. Here, orientalists claimed to extract ‘real’ Buddhism out of the rituals and ceremonies of Asian Buddhism and present it in its ‘true’ form. That is, the orientalist academic study of Buddhism focused on ancient texts to the neglect of lived Buddhism of Asian and Asian diaspora communities. This approach was based upon the belief that the Buddhism practiced in places such as Tibet, China, Japan, Burma, Thailand, and even India, were bastardized versions of ‘real’ Buddhism.

The textual focus on Buddhism by orientalists mirrors the Protestant preference for textual and individualized practices over institutionalized religious rituals (Schedneck, 2013, p. 41; Wilson, 2014, p. 51, p. 62). Through focus on textual study, orientalists created a discourse about Buddhism without including or acknowledging the people and places where it was practiced. Consequently, the orientalist study of Buddhism detached it from its sources in Asia and instead centered it in western libraries, western universities, and western museums—revising Buddhist history in the process (Cheah, 2011, pp. 22-35; McMahan, 2017, pp. 112-113; McMahan & Braun, 2017, p. 8; Payne, 2016, p. 129; Purser, 2019a, p. 90; Sherrell & Simmer-Brown, 2017, p. 79).

This Protestant Buddhist and Buddhist Modernist tendency to focus on text is perhaps misguided as historically, text-centric approaches privilege the elite,

disregarding the practices of the nonliterate majority of their times (Foltz, 2010, p. 21). Moreover, while orientalists believed that they were studying the 'original' teachings of the Buddha in texts, these accounts were actually written several hundreds of years after the death of the Buddha, which casts doubt on the 'purity' of the textual resources they reified (Foltz, 2010, p. 39).

3.8. Modern Appropriation

MIM was born out of a legacy of colonialism and appropriation in which mindfulness was adapted to fit into scientific and secular paradigms. This manifests today when self-proclaimed mindfulness 'experts' teach MIM, selling their adaptations as equivalent to, or better than traditional Buddhist forms of mindfulness, which they frame as superstitious, sexist, and hierarchical (Wilson, 2014, p. 71; Wilson, 2017, pp. 71-72). Some mindfulness entrepreneurs go as far as to *promote* the erasure of Buddhism from mindfulness, suggesting that its Buddhist foundation is unnecessary given that science has 'proven' its efficacy. For example, MIM entrepreneurs often claim that it is necessary to appeal to personalized moralities instead of traditional religious frameworks as religions loose their influence in increasingly secularized societies (Farb, 2014, p. 1064; Hasenkamp, 2019, p. 126; Ruan, 2020, p. 3; Wilson, 2018, p. 57). Illustrating this, Farb (2014) claims: "It may therefore be reasonable to expect classical teachings to retain their benefits *even in the absence of their traditional cultural contexts*" (p. 1064, emphasis added) and "Asserting that MSMT [modern secular mindfulness training] must retain a complete set of classical Buddhist principles may prove *impractical and ultimately unnecessary*" (p. 1063, emphasis added).

Other problematic claims by MIM promoters include the idea that Buddhists do not 'own' mindfulness. For example, Ruan (2020) claims: "Buddhists have no exclusive proprietary rights to mindfulness, and clinicians delivering MBIs should feel comfortable sharing Buddhism's pragmatic ethics as a potential resource with clients" (p. 2). Ruan (2020) continues:

> It can be argued that secular mindfulness is not necessarily less robust or less authentic but can be interpreted as yet another expression of the pragmatism of the Buddha's program…. Explicitly (re)infusing secular mindfulness with religious components may render problematic a therapy that otherwise appears to be highly effective and popular. (pp. 2-3)

Influential MIM figure Kabat-Zinn similarly claims that no one owns the dharma (Wilson, 2014, p. 86). These quotes also illustrate the appropriation of Upaya which are self-serving and justify the changes that MIM entrepreneurs make to mindfulness to serve their own ends. Comments such as these are damaging to the cultural communities that have preserved Buddhism over centuries while being marginalized for their beliefs, only to have their very beliefs and practices appropriated (Buddhist Peace Fellowship, 2016, p. 5; Sherrell & Simmer-Brown, 2017, p. 79; Zahn, 2016, p. 3). While it may be true that no one 'owns' mindfulness, it is also apparent that some people and organizations profit from it (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 99). These examples demonstrate how those who exert scientific, medical, and therapeutic authority over MIM downplay the Buddhist origins of mindfulness in order to wrest control of it (Wilson, 2014, pp. 57-58). In such cases, Buddhism is no longer connected to mindfulness to the point where it comes to be extraneous to it. As a result, mindfulness that is not psychotherapeutic or scientific is regarded as strange or even anathema (Wilson, 2014, p. 102).

Equating Buddhism to meditation, then reducing meditation to neural activity, and framing it as a quantifiable construct gives scientists authority to speak on meditation. Consequently, expertise shifts from Buddhist practitioners to scientists, clinicians, psychologists, then to self-help entrepreneurs, and corporate coaches, as it becomes increasingly watered-down (Ergas, 2014, p. 62; Hyland, 2015, p. 14; McMahan & Braun, 2017, p. 15; Sun, 2014b, p. 404; Wilson, 2014, p. 39; Wilson, 2016, p. 111). Moeller (2019) elaborates:

> Many use Buddhist teachings in service of their own egos. Many engage in cultural appropriation and 'other-izing' fascination with Eastern spiritual traditions, as with Native American/First Nations traditions, without treating people of those traditions with respect and without doing social justice work to challenge unjust conditions under which actual people connected to these traditions actually live. (p. 182)

In many of these cases, MIM is based on knowledge taken from Asian Buddhists without proper acknowledgment, altering them, and selling them as fee-based programs (Buddhist Peace Fellowship, 2016, p. 9; Møllegard, 2008, p. 176; Winston, 2015, p. 3). This appropriation of Buddhism, especially in the modern west, is often perpetrated by non-Buddhists promoting a product or personal ideology unrelated to Buddhism (Sugino, 2020, p. 33).

The colonization of Asian Buddhism by scientific materialism and its neurocentric bias legitimizes its application as a medical technology, which consequently minimizes its cultural rootedness in Buddhism (Brown, 2017, pp. 45-46; Kucinskas, 2018, p. 79; Walsh, 2016, p. 161). In this case, parts of Buddhism amenable with science are selectively appropriated to fit into psychological and therapeutic perspectives (Frisk, 2012, p. 54). That is, in MIM, Buddhism has been reinterpreted to conform to pre-existing western norms, as it is reduced to set of ideas and practices disconnected from Buddhism. As MIM spreads, it is infused (or fused) with western values, described by Bai, Beatch, Chang, and Cohen (2017): "[the] western adaptation of meditative practice, and its numerous variants, inevitably shifts the supposed goals and use of meditation in the direction of western values" (p. 26). Resultingly, mindfulness moves further away from Asian Buddhism to fit into western scientific frameworks (Wilson, 2014, p. 70).

As an English word, 'mindfulness' can be used easily without any suggestion of being Buddhist (Wilson, 2014, p. 89). There is also no expectation for people seeking mindfulness training to become Buddhist. For example, practitioners are encouraged to seek out professional counselors for their mindfulness instruction, not ordained Buddhist teachers. Furthermore, with the proliferation of books, blogs, and articles on mindfulness, it is no longer necessary to have a meditation instructor at all (Wilson, 2014, p. 52). In this sense, MIM is a new mythology that paints over prior history, and also erases the voices of the original practitioners (Cooper & Purser, 2014, p. 6; Hickey, 2010, p. 173; McMahan, 2017, pp. 112-113; Purser, 2019a, pp. 14-15; Purser, Ng, & Walsh, 2017, p. 59). Iwamura (2011) describes this process:

> The particular way in which Americans write themselves into the story is not a benign, nonideological act; rather, it constructs a *modernized cultural patriarchy* in which Anglo-Americans reimagine themselves as the protectors, innovators, and guardians of Asian religions and culture and wrest the authority to define these traditions from others. (p. 21)

This process demonstrates an exploitative extractivism that positions western colonizers at the top of a hierarchy of an imagined cultural evolution (Borup, 2020, pp. 226-229; Cooper & Purser, 2014, p. 7).

3.9. Post-World War Two

After the period of orientalists in the nineteenth century described earlier, the next big development in Buddhism in the west occurred in the mid-twentieth century. Beginning in the late 1950's, modern East-West cultural exchange coincided with the counterculture movement in North America and Western Europe. The beat generation engaged with Buddhism, particularly Zen, to challenge the status quo of the post-World War Two era, leading to a 'Zen boom' (Coleman, 2001, pp. 5-6). This process continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s with the hippie movement as they looked to Eastern spiritual traditions such as Tibetan Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, and yoga to quell the existential angst of their western lifestyles. As described by McLaren (2009):

> The hippie movement in the 1960s represented, in part, an exercise of petite-bourgeoisie socialism by middle-class radicals who were nurtured both by idealist principles and by a search for spiritual and life-style comfort. This often served to draw critical attention away from the structural inequalities of capitalist society. (p. 66)

In many of these cases, Eastern mind/body practices were molded to fit into a western psychological paradigm as a kind of therapy for alleviating stress, focused primarily on individual transformation (Coleman, 2001, p. 125; Kirmayer, 2015, p. 458; McMahan, 2017, p. 121; Miller, 2016, p. 348). Critical researchers thus theorize that MIM endorses moral ambiguity in order to help people feel better about themselves in an achievement-obsessed culture while avoiding inquiry into the root causes of suffering. More specifically, MIM may support privileged people become accepting of their anxieties, to manage stress and enhance self-esteem, and further their pursuit of wealth, power, and health (Hyland, 2016a, p. 185; Marx, 2015, p. 1159; Purser, 2019a, p. 242).

Historians posit that use of psychedelic drugs, along with an interest in Eastern martial arts was a common gateway for western people to Buddhism, particularly among young western men (Coleman, 2001, p. 152; Coleman, 2001, p. 200). Hippies sought blissful experiences through drug experimentation and some even came to see Buddhism and meditation as a means of approximating drug high experiences (Coleman, 2001, pp. 65-66; Harrington & Dunne, 2015, p. 625; Healey, 2015, p. 77). The legacy of the convergence of the hippie movement and Eastern spirituality reverberates today in commodified forms of spirituality, the new age movement, and the self-help industry (Payne, 2016, p. 129; Payne, 2019, p. 74). This is theorized to be part of the

reason why MIM is especially attractive to baby boomers: a generation of hippies who view consumption and wealth acquisition as legitimate paths for attaining enlightenment (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 148, p. 156; Wrenn, 2022, p. 165). Commodified religion caters not only to these yuppies (former hippies) but their children and grandchildren as well—a new generation of spiritual seekers (Iwamura, 2011, p. 163).

Disillusioned with institutionalized religious practice, many westerners formed a new movement of 'seeker spirituality', characterized by a focus on personal transformation (Iwamura, 2011, p. 7). A 'spiritual seeker' journeys in search of new experiences and practices for healing and/or self-confirmation. It is in this context in which wisdom traditions like Buddhism are commodified to be sold to 'spiritual consumers' in the contemporary New Age marketplace where the be-here-now, Eastern-influenced explorations of hippies have begat self-improvement regimes (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 87; Heffernan, 2015, p. 1). Carrette and King (2013) elaborate:

> The greatest shift towards private spirituality, however, can be seen in the work of Abraham Maslow, particularly as his work was picked up by the 1960s Hippie culture and dovetailed with the psychedelic world of Aldous Huxley and Timothy Leary. In this atmosphere, 'spirituality' became a product, like a drug, to change consciousness and lifestyle and provide happiness amidst the economic boom of North American life…. Maslow's psychology echoed the privileges of a wealthy culture, and his famous 'hierarchy of needs' was more a hierarchy of 'capitalist wants.' (pp. 75-76)

In this way, hippie culture is marked by unacknowledged privilege in being able to afford the time and resources to engage in in such endeavours.

Another way that Buddhism gained popularity in western culture was through the Human Potential Movement. Developed out of humanistic psychology, the movement emphasizes syncretism between science and religion. Promoters of this movement posit that where traditional religion has failed, new forms of spirituality are needed to unite people (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 82; Frisk, 2012, p. 54). As Healey (2015) describes:

> With the decline of institutional religion and the emergence of 'quest culture,' individuals turned to popular media in search of a more direct experience of the sacred. Here again, the logic of the marketplace has prevailed. An ever-expanding 'spiritual marketplace' has encouraged acquiescence to established power structures … while sidelining voices that employ anti-corporate rhetoric in their demands for social justice. (p. 77)

The wisdom traditions of Asia offered promise in this regard, through exoticized practices such as mindfulness. That is, Eastern philosophies have long been associated with a kind of 'counter-cultural' exoticism that makes them appear fashionable for those looking for 'alternative' philosophies in an increasingly crowded spiritual marketplace (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 145). Asian traditions are considered to have potential in this regard and are thus mined by 'New Age Capitalists' (Iwamura, 2011, p. 112).

3.10. No Such Thing as Pure Mindfulness

While I critique MIM, I acknowledge that it is dangerous to romanticize 'pure' forms of mindfulness, as if such a thing exists. I must make it clear that I am not arguing for mindfulness to return to a form which may have never existed in the first place. Appeals to revert back to an earlier, 'pure' mindfulness engages the notion of authenticity, which is highly contested and complex (Carrette & King, 2013, pp. 119-120; Healey, 2015, p. 71; Sugino, 2020, p. 35). To this end, theorists argue that it is not useful to cling to nostalgic notions of authenticity when it comes to cultures and traditions. Furthermore, some claim that tradition is actually created in the present and cast backwards into the past. That is, traditions are constantly being invented, forgotten, and revived, giving the illusion of permanence (Borup, 2020, p. 243; Chen, 2018, p. 25; Dunne, 2015, p. 253; Quli, 2009, pp. 5-10; Tweed, 2011, pp. 27-28; Wilson, 2017, p. 61).

It may be theorized that the instrumentalization of Buddhism (as in the case of MIM) is neither new, nor a solely modern western phenomenon. Wilson explains: "What at first seems like a development without precedent—the process of Americanizing mindfulness—actually reflects patterns within Buddhism's Asian history" (Wilson, 2014, p. 105). In this sense, capitalist spirituality is global, as described by Carrette and King (2013): "No religious tradition is immune to the 'free market' ideology of neoliberalism. Whatever parts of the 'old traditions' can be siphoned off for use in the market will be used" (p. 144). For example, Buddhism was used as a tool for state power in China, Korea, and Japan. And thus, the appropriation of Buddhism is historically unsurprising (Healey, 2015, p. 70; Purser, 2019a, pp. 85-86).

Religions are subject to global flows facilitated by migration and space-time compression, i.e., new ways of communicating and sharing ideas, spurred on by technologies such as air travel and the internet (Tweed, 2011). Additionally, economics

and trade have always played a part in the spread of religions. For instance, during the height of the Silk Road in Asia, people converted religions for various reasons, not only for salvation, but for survival, trade, and to gain competitive advantage (Foltz, 2010). Throughout the region of the historic Silk Road, Buddhism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Islam alternatingly gained and lost followers for practical reasons, such as favourable trade agreements and lower taxes, all of which demonstrate instrumental motives (Foltz, 2010). Buddhism in particular is known for its adaptability, transforming as it moved from India to Central Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and now the west (Dunne, 2015, p. 253; Littlefair, 2020, p. 10; Quli, 2009, p. 10; Tweed, 2011, p. 23). Wilson (2014) explains:

> Buddhism was aided in its penetration of new societies by long-term processes of creative adaptation, especially by reconceptualizations that allowed it to provide tangible benefits to each new culture. The changes taking place in the mindfulness movement today are a continuation of premodern practices of selective adaptation and modification that provide relevance to Buddhism for previously non-Buddhist societies. (p. 4)

For example, Vajrayana Buddhism is said to be an amalgam of Indian Buddhism and Tibetan Bon. Similarly, Zen Buddhism is said to be the result of merging Indian Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Japanese imperial court life (Winston, 2015, p. 1). This process of cross-pollination and co-evolution between religions and culture has been called ‘syncretism’ (Foltz, 2010). Now, researchers hypothesize that MIM results from merging Theravada Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Vipassana meditation, yoga, modern western psychology, and capitalism (Farb, 2014, p. 1068; Marx, 2015, p. 1154).

While there may be some truth to the claim that there is no such thing as a “pure” mindfulness, or that there is no single authority on mindfulness, these justifications erase the cultural and historical situatedness of mindfulness in Buddhism (Dahl & Davidson, 2019, p. 6; Dunne, 2015, p. 252). Furthermore, while mindfulness naturally undergoes change and adaptation, it is problematic to accept all forms of change as legitimate. Thus, the recent convergence of Buddhism, mindfulness, and neoliberal corporate capitalism cannot be accepted as merely innocuous.

In this chapter we explored the Buddhist roots of mindfulness by examining foundational Buddhist concepts. The aim was to build understanding in order to be able to distinguish Buddhist mindfulness from MIM. In the next chapter, we will dive into an

exploration of MIM—to understand its roots and its defining characteristics. Furthermore, I will articulate the neoliberal basis of MIM and why this connection is problematic.

Chapter 4. Modern Instrumental Mindfulness (MIM)

4.1. Burma and the Beginnings of Modern Mindfulness

We will now examine and unpack MIM—to ground my critique of commodified neoliberal spirituality. First, we will examine the history of MIM. The genesis of modern mindfulness can be traced back to the Buddhist reform movement in Burma during the British colonialization of Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century. To set the context: in classic Buddhist scriptures such as the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, meditation was intended for monastics, characterized by world renunciation (Wilson, 2017, p. 63). Over time, meditation waned, almost dying out in the 10th century C.E., except among ascetic monks in the forests of South East Asia (Caring-Lobel, 2016, p. 195; Forbes, 2019, p. 14; McMahan, 2017, p. 117; McMahan & Braun, 2017, p. 5; Munjee, 2019, p. 108; Purser, 2019a, p. 67; Samuel, 2016; Stanley, 2015, p. 96; Wilson, 2017, p. 63). In order to galvanize a national identity and to bolster an uprising against British imperialism and Christian missionization in the late nineteenth century, Burmese Buddhist leaders Mahasi Sayadaw and Ledi Sayadaw revived meditation by simplifying it and making it accessible to lay people (Gleig, 2019, p. 24). It was during this time that there was a major shift in approach to meditation. This style of meditation came to be known as *vipassana*, which emphasized focus on the breath and deemphasized or outright eliminated some of the more esoteric elements of meditation (Munjee, 2019, p. 108; Littlefair, 2020, p. 3; Samuel, 2016; Wilson, 2017, p. 63). Following Ledi Sayadaw and Mahasi Sayadaw, figures such as German monk Nyanaponika, Sri Lankan monk Walpola Rahula, and Indian lay teacher S.N. Goenka popularized the notion of meditation being a rational practice with material benefits. Rahula and Goenka in particular attributed practical benefits to mindfulness in helping achieve real-world goals such as being more productive (Somers, 2022b, p. 5; Wilson, 2014, pp. 25-27). Thus, Asian reform Buddhists played a part in creating new, hybridized forms of Buddhism in accommodation to, and, in opposition to, colonialism.

S. N. Goenka, in particular, continued to adapt meditation and mindfulness further in increasing its incorporation into secular contexts, setting the stage for MIM (King, 2016; McMahan, 2017, p. 121). For this reason, S.N. Goenka is a pivotal figure in reconceptualizing mindfulness, himself having learned from the aforementioned Ledi

Sayadaw and Mahasi Sayadaw. Goenka was a Hindu businessman from India and therefore could not teach Buddhism without fear of reprisal, which led him to teach mindfulness as the dharma; that is, Goenka taught mindfulness by claiming that it was not Buddhist, but that it was the dharma, since dharma was compatible with Hinduism (Frisk, 2012, p. 48). And so, Goenka was able to separate mindfulness from Buddhism and simplify the practice further, a legacy which reverberates today (Wilson, 2017, pp. 64-65). The notion of mindfulness as separate from Buddhism accelerated the dissemination of mindfulness to non-Buddhists and freed it from the control of Asian traditions (Brito, Joseph, & Sellman, 2021, p. 267; Wilson, 2014, p. 55; Ruan, 2020, p. 42; Wilson, 2014, p. 86). This crucial intermediary step in the development of modern mindfulness occurs with the separation of mindfulness from Buddhism and its subsequent connection to science (Ditrich, 2016, p. 203; Kirmayer, 2015, p. 458; McMahan, 2017, p. 119; Wilson, 2018, p. 56). Later on, figures like Kabat-Zinn pushed these ideas even further with Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). However, it should be noted that the separation of mindfulness and Buddhism is ontologically and epistemologically incoherent, because mindfulness is embedded in the framework of the Eightfold Path.

It was around the 1960s that the arrival of affordable air travel dramatically facilitated the movement of Eastern spirituality from Asia to North America and Europe (King, 2016). During this period, cross-cultural exchange between Asia and North America intensified as Asian Buddhist teachers travelled to North America (Frisk, 2012, p. 54; Gleig, 2019, p. 25). For example, the American *vipassana* movement, which begat MBSR, arose out of the above-mentioned Buddhist modernist teachings of Burmese monks Ledi Sayadaw, Mahasi Sayadaw, and Indian teacher S. N. Goenka. The cross-cultural movement also occurred in the opposite direction with westerners travelling to Asia in search of spiritual teachings (Bodhi, 2011, p. 20; Coleman, 2001, pp. 211-212). In particular, Americans Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, and Jack Kornfield travelled to Southeast Asia and India and brought their interpretations of Buddhism back to the west, eventually becoming influential in their own right. Kornfield and Goldstein, two former Peace Corps volunteers, were among the first westerners to teach in the United States, and in 1976, along with Sharon Salzberg and Jacqueline Schwartz, opened the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts (Gleig, 2019, p. 25; Kucinskas, 2018, pp. 26-27). The Insight Meditation movement was influential on figures

such as Kabat-Zinn, who would later develop MBSR, due to its emphasis on the compatibility of Buddhism and modern western psychology (Poceski, 2020, p. 5). Kornfield later moved to California, where he founded Spirit Rock Meditation Center in 1987. IMS and Spirit Rock became seminal centres for mindfulness and thus, a new archetype appeared: the western lay teacher, trained in traditional practices but teaching in a new setting, to a new demographic, in English, with the ability to relate to fellow westerners and their lifestyles (Wilson, 2014, p. 32, p. 49). As a result, two forms of Buddhism arose in America: one associated with Asian American immigrants and one associated with white Euro-American converts. Broadly speaking, the former diaspora Buddhism with Asian practitioners focused on devotional practices and cultural preservation. In contrast, white Euro-American converts downplayed the ritualistic and cosmological aspects of Buddhism and reconceptualized it through a psychologized lens (Frisk, 2012, p. 54; Gleig, 2019, pp. 25-26). This process is described by Chachignon, Le Barbenchon, and Dany (2024): MIM "provided … a rhetoric of secularization and universality to promote the spreading of mindfulness without contradicting the belief systems of the West" (p. 2). It is the framing of Buddhist mindfulness through a western Judeo-Christian framework that accelerated the spread of MIM apparent today.

The first generation of convert Buddhists were predominantly white and upper-middle-class. Resultantly, this demographic was not compelled to protect the Buddhist elements of mindfulness because they had no stake in remaining loyal to their ethnic and/or cultural heritage. It is no surprise then that they changed meditation to make it relevant to their needs (Gleig, 2019, p. 21; Kucinskas, 2018, p. 105). This movement was further bolstered by the growing popularity of yoga around the same time, which is another similar but different Asian spiritual practice, all of which coalesced into new forms of Buddhism, out of which Kabat-Zinn and MBSR arose (McMahan & Braun, 2017, p. 10; Purser, 2019a, p. 67; Stanley, 2015, p. 96; Sun, 2014b, p. 409). The following generations of lay teachers had only practiced Buddhism in America, and were taught by other convert Buddhists (Wilson, 2014, p. 50). Now, interest in MIM is overwhelmingly coming from laypeople since mindfulness can be practiced in English without giving up one's modern lifestyle. Curiously, mindfulness is being sold back to the East, albeit with very little that would be recognized as Buddhist mindfulness per se (McMahan, 2017, p. 122).

4.2. Modern Definition(s) of Mindfulness

Another pivotal figure in western mindfulness is Thomas William Rhys Davids. A British officer in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in the 19th century, Davids learned Pali, the language of Theravada Buddhism, and founded the Pali Text Society. Most importantly, in 1881, he selected 'mindfulness' as the translation for the Buddhist terms *sati* (Sanskrit) and *smrti* (Pali) (Heffernan, 2015, p. 1; Humphreys, 2019, p. 2; Stanley, 2015, p. 97; Sun, 2014b, p. 396). The Pali Text Society's translations were widely circulated and highly influential, and thus over time, 'mindfulness' became the preferred term (Wilson, 2014, pp. 15-18). It is telling that Davids chose the English word 'mindfulness,' since the etymology of the word has origins in the King James Bible from the fourteenth century, referring to being careful in God's presence (Sun, 2014b, p. 395). As such, it may be reasonable to posit that there is a Christian interpretation of mindfulness being inherently good and righteous (Stanley, Purser, & Singh, 2018, p. 11). In contrast, Buddhist scholars suggest a more accurate translation of *smrti* or *sati* is 'memory,' 'remembering,' 'recollection,' and 'alertness' (Bodhi, 2011, pp. 22-26; Brazier, 2016, pp. 63-64; Drougge, 2016; Kirmayer, 2015, p. 451; Sharf, 2015, p. 473; Tomassini, 2016, p. 222; Wilson, 2014, p. 15). That is, Buddhist mindfulness includes an evaluative dimension, requiring ethical discernment, intention, judgment, and the recollection of past events and their consequences to guide present and future behaviour towards ethical action (Bodhi, 2016, p. 11; Edelglass, 2017, p. 10; Greenberg & Mitra, 2015, p. 75; King, 2016; Kirmayer, 2015, pp. 451-452; Marx, 2015, p. 1153; Purser, 2019a, p. 93; Walsh, 2018, p. 117).

Davids, like other orientalists, was rooted in a Christian paradigm and thus his interpretations of Buddhism were inevitably influenced by Christianity. Consequently, orientalists constructed a trans-historical and trans-cultural form of Buddhism in the mold of Christianity (Cheah, 2011, p. 30; Vörös, 2016, p. 62). It therefore may be hypothesized that MIM represents the melding of Buddhist spirituality with a Christian worldview. To illustrate, a Christian saviour narrative is evident in the spiritual biographies of some western leaders of mindfulness. For example, Kabat-Zinn recounts of a 'dream vision' while on a meditation retreat which inspired him to create MBSR, claiming that it would change the world, even leading to world peace (Purser, 2019a, pp. 70-72; Wynne, 2018, p. 54). This belief in saving the world has its roots in Buddhist

Modernism, as explained by Chachignon, Le Barbenchon, and Dany (2024): “Buddhist modernism … nurtured the belief in a romantically idealized pacifist spirituality with the potential to address a wide range of contemporary societal challenges, such as war or environmental destruction” (p. 3).

Today, Kabat-Zinn’s definition of mindfulness: “awareness that arises from paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally” (Paulson et al., 2013, p. 91) has become enshrined as the de-facto definition of mindfulness, largely through the popularity of MBSR. However, this definition is problematic because it privileges nonelaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness above all else (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 232; Bodhi, 2016, p. 11; Dawson & Turnbull, 2006, p. 64; Titmuss, 2016a, p. 184). The conceptualization of mindfulness as the development of attention and awareness de-ethicises and reconceptualizes it as an attention training technique (Lomas, 2015, p. 2; Shaw-Smith, n.d., p. 5).

The framing of meditation as bare attention and nonjudgmental awareness without the ethical framework of the Eightfold Path may lead to outcomes that are anathema to Buddhist values. The term ‘bare awareness’ originates from vipassana meditation and is used to describe an unconditioned state of mind, free of preconceived bias. The term is attributed to Nyanaponika Thera, originally from Germany, who fled the Nazis and became a monk in Sri Lanka (King, 2016, p. 38; Sun, 2014b, p. 398). That is, MIM’s imperative to ‘be present’ casts aside awareness of one’s actions, their consequences, and a motivation to stop unwholesome behaviours. To extrapolate, ‘bare awareness’ is problematic because its myopic fixation on the present moment and its mantra of acceptance and non-judgment lacks critical analysis of social location, power, privilege, and one’s complicity in systems of oppression (Barnhill, 2004, p. 60; Bodhi, 2016, pp. 6-11; Forbes, 2019, p. 92; King, 2016, p. 43; Leggett, 2021, p. 264; McMahan & Braun, 2017, p. 12; Monteiro, Musten, & Compson, 2015, p. 6; Moses & Chouhury, 2016, p. 454; Purser, 2019a, p. 192, p. 244; Purser & Milillo, 2015, p. 14; Smyth, 2020, p. 16; Wrenn, 2020, p. 505, 160; Wynne, 2018, p. 50). While being present is a crucial aspect of mindfulness, critics argue that a myopic focus on the present might not adequately address issues related to systemic oppression or historical injustices. Instead, the emphasis on bare awareness may lead practitioners toward docility and submission in the face of oppression, which is precisely my critique against MIM in education. Learning to ‘just breathe’ and ‘accept things as they are, non-judgmentally’—

common phrases in MIM discourse—distracts one from examining the material conditions of neoliberal corporate capitalism that is fundamentally at odds with holistic well-being. For this reason, MIM is ineffectual at interrogating its own neoliberal corporate capitalist roots.

In contrast, mindfulness is *not* a value-free, non-judgmental form of awareness. Buddhist scholars posit that sati is more complex than mere 'bare awareness' (Frisk, 2012, p. 53). This is expanded upon by Harrington and Dunne (2015):

> Mindfulness practice … was developed to facilitate a path associated with renunciation and a stringent ethical code of right living. Simply teaching 'bare attention' without attending to the cultivation of wisdom and discernment risks making mindfulness training hostage to values that are tangential or even anathema to the traditions from which the practice arose. (p. 621)

Awareness alone does not lead to ethical behaviour. Even if bare awareness were possible, it would merely be a starting point as Buddhist mindfulness requires attention as a precondition, but is not limited to it (Farb, 2014, p. 1072). The desire to achieve bare awareness fails to consider how past actions impact present circumstances. Therefore, some critics describe MIM as supporting the opposite of critical thinking (Somers, 2022b, p. 11).

Today, MIM is promoted as relaxation, signaling tranquility and peace, altering the original intent of mindfulness further distancing it from its traditional Buddhist foundation (Frisk, 2012, p. 56; Godrej, 2020, p. 8; Schedneck, 2013, p. 44). On this, critics point out that MIM is applied as a palliative to soothe the ills of consumer-capitalist societies. Observe how the term 'mindful' is applied to imbue consumer products with a general sense of spirituality and health (Wilson, 2014, p. 157). As a vaguely positive but empty trope, MIM instills products with a healthful and life-affirming quality (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 46; Sauerborn, Sokefeld, & Neckel, 2022, p. 15). Wilson (2014) elaborates:

> Mindfulness has become so mainstream that it is used as a generic appellation for anything good, spiritual, healthy, liberal, and so forth. It is traveling the same pathway that Zen did a generation earlier, where Zen ceased to mean a specific meditation practice or Buddhist tradition and instead became a universal term for aesthetic, artistic, meaningful, cool, and/or spiritual. And in the process of achieving mainstream generality, mindfulness becomes a label for supposedly enlightened consumption,

> which is at root a tool for getting people to spend money and consume products that they otherwise might not purchase. (p. 156)

In this way, MIM is emblematic of the commodification and appropriation of diverse cultural traditions that result in homogenized, commodified, and pacifying conceptualizations of spirituality (Carrette & King, 2013, p. x). It is thus reasonable to posit that MIM is an empty-signifier.

Removing enlightenment as a goal of mindfulness practice and reconceptualizing it as a panacea for well-being in the here-and-now transforms mindfulness from an ethical practice to a self-help technique that results in watered-down and instrumental forms of mindfulness (Bodhi, 2011, p. 35; Wynne, 2018, p. 50). To reiterate, the simplification of Buddhist mindfulness was a strategic move to reframe it to be more suitable for mainstream consumption in which it is no longer focused on soteriological goals (Carvalho & Gracio, 2022, p. 64; Heffernan, 2015, p. 2; Ruan, 2020, p. 40).

The instrumentalization of mindfulness reconceptualizes it as an atomized, individualistic practice towards the pursuit of *self*-improvement and *personal* well-being, demonstrating a “move toward privatized spirituality” (Lavelle, 2016, p. 237). That is, MIM engages its therapeutic function to the advancement and protection of the self in a neoliberal, corporatized, and individualistic society (Forbes, 2016a, p. 357; Forbes, 2019, p. 188). And so, the secularization and psychologizing of Buddhism has facilitated the exploitation and transformation of mindfulness into a product for life-hacking optimization to increase productivity and efficiency (Dawson & Turnbull, 2006, p. 62; Edelglass, 2017, p 5; Edelglass, 2017, p. 23; Purser, 2019a, p. 11; Reveley, 2016, p. 502).

MIM’s focus on individual transformation undermines attempts at deeper institutional change. That is, MIM primarily focuses on transforming individuals rather than challenging problematic institutions and policies (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 186). Additionally, MIM suggests you can buy happiness through your own private spirituality, separated from all the suffering of the world (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 53). Put simply, MIM is a self-centered practice striving for bliss and avoiding pain in which class-privileged practitioners use MIM to optimize their own well-being, careers, and relationships (Nisbet, 2019, p. 33). As such, MIM is unresponsive to the economic, political, social, systemic, and institutional causes of suffering as well as the problematic

ways in which systems of oppression operate (Nightingale & Cromby, 2001; Purser, 2015, p. 42; Purser, 2019a, p. 98; Walsh, 2017a, p. 2). Here, MIM perpetuates social inequality by discouraging critical analysis of structural power and institutional contributors to stress (Bai, Beatch, Chang, & Cohen, 2017, p. 29; Dawson & Turnbull, 2006, p. 60; Ergas & Hadar, 2019b, p. 31; Ng & Purser, 2015, p. 2; Purser, 2019a, p. 10). This is precisely how, mindfulness without its ethical core turns into a technology of the self and perpetuates the status quo by reducing mindfulness to a psychological technique in the service of relieving individual stress which neglects socioeconomic forces that exacerbate suffering (Jain, 2020, pp. 889-890; Kram, 2019, pp. 3-4; Leggett, 2021, p. 261; Sherrell & Simmer-Brown, 2017, pp. 80-81; Winston, 2015, p. 3). This is problematic because using mindfulness as a technology for maximizing personal well-being may actually perpetuate oppressive dominant hegemonic norms by targeting individual behaviors, rather than addressing their structural contexts (Leggett, 2021, p. 264). Therefore, MIM remains limited, teaching people to accept inequality and oppression rather than challenge it—a band-aid solution for systemic dysfunction (Leggett, 2021, p. 272; Purser, 2015, p. 41).

Instead of cultivating a critical framework to challenge and interrogate oppression and challenging the self-interest and lifestyle of conspicuous consumption from which it arises, MIM promotes accommodation to the social, economic, and political status quo (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 5; Wilson, 2014, pp. 134). Similarly, instead of a practice to let go of the attachment to an illusory notion of self, MIM is taught as a goal-oriented therapeutic intervention that conditions people to neoliberal ideals of competition, individualism, and self-commodification (Forbes, 2022, p. 8).

4.3. MBSR

Western mindfulness teachers reconceptualize their programs to fit the materialistic and pragmatic leanings of western culture, ushered into the mainstream under the guise of self-help. That is to say, MIM is the adaptation of mindfulness towards practically relevant ends for a western demographic comprised of scholars, clinicians, self-help entrepreneurs, and lay consumers (Nehring & Frawley, 2020, p. 1186). Resultantly, MIM has become synonymous with stress-reduction, attention and focus training, and behavioural and emotional regulation. Thus, it may be said that MIM is a neoliberal therapeutic self-technology that operates by medicalizing, psychologizing, and

pathologizing individuals (Reveley, 2016, pp. 501-506; Stanley, Purser, & Singh, 2018, p. 6). Here, we cannot talk about MIM without discussing Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). Created by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a molecular biologist and researcher, Kabat-Zinn sought to help patients that were suffering from chronic pain. Influenced by a personal practice in Buddhism and yoga, and enthusiastic about the potential benefits that these practices could offer to a western audience, Kabat-Zinn devised a program that incorporated these elements into a therapeutic modality and in the process codified modern mindfulness. MBSR, now standardized into an 8-week program, has heavily shaped the perception of mindfulness in the west, and has become the template for subsequent mindfulness programs, of which there are many derivatives (Hyland, 2016a, pp. 182-183; Spellmeyer, 2018, p. 5).

Since its inception in 1979, MBSR has become the most recognized form of mindfulness in the west and is the first point of contact to mindfulness for many. The popularity of MBSR speaks to the reimagining of mindfulness as compatible with materialism, rationalism, and psychology (Stanley & Longden, 2016, p. 306). This is described by Wilson (2014):

> Reconceptualizing mindfulness as a biomedical or psychological technique moves expertise to scientists and aligns it with secular, modernist ideals. It legitimates mindfulness through the gatekeeping authority of science and institutionalized medicine. This allows it to infiltrate spaces that are usually off-limits to religions, such as hospitals and public schools. (p. 103)

To reiterate, MBSR reframes mindfulness as secular and scientific, which allows it to enter spaces it would otherwise not be able to, such as public education, and receive public funding for research, as well as qualify for health insurance (Brown, 2016, p. 76; McMahan & Braun, 2017, p. 13; Wilson, 2014, p. 103; Wilson, 2014, p. 77l; Wrenn, 2022, pp. 156-157).

Much like a fast-food chain (hence ‘McMindfulness’), MBSR simplified mindfulness to facilitate delivery and increase its profitability with new centers opening around the world (Wilson, 2014, p. 39). The success of MBSR has resulted in an exponential rise of similar mindfulness programs to treat an ever-growing list of ailments including Mindfulness-Based Eating Awareness Therapy (MB-EAT), Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy (MBAT), Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention (MBRP), and Mindfulness-Based Relationship Enhancement (MBRE) (Wilson, 2014, p. 77, p. 100). MBSR

eventually moved beyond hospitals and clinics and was introduced to the general public where it was advertised to not only decrease illness and stress, but to *increase* well-being and happiness (Bodhi, 2016, p. 7; Purser, 2019a, p. 78; Sun, 2014b, p. 405).

In the process of simplifying and secularizing Buddhist mindfulness to make it accessible to modern westerners, Kabat-Zinn cut Buddhism out and replaced it with a medical and therapeutic framework, where he claimed to "recontextualize [the dharma] within the frameworks of science, medicine (including psychiatry and psychology), and healthcare" (Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 288). Confusingly, Kabat-Zinn suggests that MBSR is not Buddhist at all, nor is tied to any belief system or ideology—a practice with no provenance, and thus is promoted as universal (Frisk, 2012, p. 48). To Kabat-Zinn, the Buddhist elements of mindfulness were considered 'cultural baggage' and discarded for fear of alienating westerners. Kabat-Zinn (2011) concedes: "I wanted it to articulate the dharma that underlies the curriculum, but without ever using the word 'Dharma' or invoking Buddhist thought or authority, *since for obvious reasons*, we do not teach MBSR in that way" (p. 282, emphasis added). By claiming that mindfulness is not Buddhist, Kabat-Zinn is able to separate it from its historical and cultural roots, appropriate it, then sell it (Forbes, 2019, p. 19). This strategic maneuver allows Kabat-Zinn to present MBSR as trans-religious, trans-cultural, and trans-historic—a common tactic amongst western convert Buddhist leaders and mindfulness entrepreneurs who claim to have extracted the 'authentic essence' of Buddhism out of the 'useless' 'cultural baggage' of Asian Buddhism in which it is nested. In such cases, Buddhism is framed as a culturally archaic vessel in which the 'scientifically proven' and pragmatic practice of mindfulness has been preserved (Cooper & Purser, 2014, pp. 3-4, p. 7; Brown, 2017, p. 61; Hickey, 2010, pp. 171-172; Poceski, 2020, p. 12; Purser, 2015, p. 356, Samuel, 2016). MIM entrepreneurs mine Buddhism for resources that fit into their frameworks and discard elements that are deemed inconvenient. This resultantly casts aside the core spiritual, philosophical, cultural, and ethical foundations of Buddhism (Patt, 2001, p. 5; Purser, 2019a, p. 71; Smallen, 2019, p. 145; Wilson, 2017, p. 68). MIM thus retains select aspects of Buddhism, while at the same time removing its threat of otherness (McMahan, 2017, p. 117; Misiewicz, 2020, p. 22; Sugino, 2020, p. 39; Wilson, 2016, p. 118). This process is articulated by Sugino 2020):

> This move to 'compartmentalize' and secularize a part of Buddhist practice in order to make it universal involves a strategy of appropriative

> synecdoche. Appropriation in this phrase refers to the process by which a traditional practice is de-linked from its roots to serve the interests of white, Western society, while synecdoche refers to the rhetorical process by which a part is used to stand in for the whole. (p. 40, emphasis in original)

Critics counter that MBSR is indeed heavily informed by Buddhism, and therefore is indebted to its religious and philosophical framework and therefore should be acknowledged explicitly as such (Ferrin & Zurn, 2021, p. 76). Another issue here is that Kabat-Zinn presumes to have authority and expertise to recontextualize Buddhism, illustrated by some of the claims he has made:

1) 'The Buddha was not a Buddhist'
2) MBSR is the 'essence of the dharma'
3) the Dharma is everyone's 'birthright'

The notion of birthright (to mindfulness, to the dharma) appears frequently in MIM literature, especially by Kabat-Zinn (Wilson, 2014, p. 170). Promoting the concept of birthright demonstrates the problematic belief among westerners that they have privileged access to the dharma without any need to learn about its cultural and historical origins (Ng & Purser, 2015, p. 6; Hickey, 2010, p. 171). Wilson (2014) elaborates:

> Mindfulness's roots in Buddhism are made less overt in order to further various agendas. These tactics have helped make Buddhist-derived mindfulness extremely popular in the West, increasing the audiences who can potentially benefit from mindfulness practice, as well as increasing the pool of Buddhists and non-Buddhists who can benefit financially and otherwise from teaching about mindfulness. The results are significant changes in how Buddhism is understood and represented, what mindfulness is held to be, and who is empowered to speak about and for Buddhism and its practices. (pp. 44-45)

This illustrates the manner in which Kabat-Zinn appropriates elements of Buddhism without consequence and continues the legacy of exploitation of Buddhism begun by orientalists (Bodhi, 2016, p. 7; Cooper & Purser, 2014, p. 7; Ng & Purser, 2015, p. 6; Purser, 2019a, p. 83, p. 89; Purser, Ng, & Walsh, 2017, p. 52).

Furthermore, Kabat-Zinn often likens mindfulness as equivalent to basic laws of the universe to make mindfulness appear scientific, which disconnects mindfulness from

Buddhism (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 95; Schedneck, 2013, p. 52; Wilson, 2014, p. 88). This process is described by Munir, Ansari, and Brown (2021):

> De-essentialization refers to the untethering of a movement from its meaning and historical context. We identify three components in the de-essentialization process: (a) selective desacralization, or selectively stripping a movement of its market-fettering "baggage"; (b) individualization or converting its collectivist ethos into an individualist one; and (c) decontextualization or obscuring its historical context to make it marketable. (p. 3)

'De-essentialization' is not limited to Buddhism and mindfulness, however, other traditions have been appropriated and commodified in modern western culture. For example, modern postural yoga is the appropriation of Hinduism—more on this later (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 43, p. 66; Wilson, 2014, pp. 61-62). In this way, Kabat-Zinn is demonstrative of this four-part de-essentialization process that mindfulness entrepreneurs frequently engage in, further articulated by Nehring and Frawley (2020):

1) They make claims to convince others of the importance of their discoveries.
2) They strongly emphasize the scientific basis of claims and credentials of claims-makers (even if the research does not support it).
3) They promote programs with their own adaptations.
4) They stand to gain financially from their promotion. (p. 1192)

That is to say, Kabat-Zinn is emblematic of "the use of academic knowledge and authority for commercial gain … highlight[ing] the fusion of scholar, writer, and entrepreneur" (Nehring & Frawley, 2020, p. 1187).

Kabat-Zinn's actions are exemplary of a pattern amongst promoters of mindfulness who appear to want it both ways: that is, on the one hand they claim that mindfulness is secular and free from the religious trappings and 'cultural baggage' of Asian Buddhism, while on the other hand, they claim that mindfulness contains the 'whole of the dharma' (Hsu, 2016, p. 369; Purser, 2019a, pp. 83-90; Walsh, 2017a, pp. 6-7). Another way that mindfulness leaders attempt to 'have it both ways' is to acknowledge that Buddhism is a religion on the one hand, while simultaneously framing it as a modern science on the other (Wilson, 2014, p. 82). This is a tactic used by mindfulness entrepreneurs who reject Asian Buddhism as being 'foreign' and

‘superstitious,’ while using its cultural cachet and aura of authenticity as a selling point (Sugino, 2020, p. 42).

4.4. Cultural Appropriation

Cultural appropriation refers to the misuse of cultural elements (symbols, artifacts, rituals, technologies) by people not of that culture (Spencer Rodgers, 2018, p. 3). While cross-cultural exchange, including hybridization, is not necessarily problematic per se, cultural appropriation occurs when cultural elements are taken without proper acknowledgement, or to the denigration of the source culture. Further harm is perpetrated when cultural appropriation is perpetrated for profit, replicating colonial attitudes of using other peoples’ cultural traditions for financial gain. (Brown, 2017, p. 65; Poceski, 2020, p. 11). For example, marketing products as ‘spiritual’ allows corporations to exoticize and appropriate cultural practices from around the world (Badr, 2022, p. 4; Carrette & King, 2013, p. 17). Cultural appropriation can also take the form of fetishization of Indigenous knowledge traditions. According to Rowland (2023): “Such practices have become commodities and are often rebranded to obscure their roots in brown, Black and Indigenous cultures” (p. 2).

In this regard, exploiting spiritual and cultural practices such as mindfulness without acknowledging or compensating the people who developed them is cultural appropriation. Commenting on the self-help industry, Rowland (2023) claims:

> The industry flaunts terms like authenticity, truth and meaning but .... these are at odds with the extractive practices it depends on. (For instance, one rarely hears of the culture behind your morning meditation ritual and almost never of the labor behind the turmeric brightening your latte.) (p. 2).

In another example, labour management psychology has a history of appropriating various traditions, such as Indigenous traditions, Buddhism, and other cultural spiritualities for corporate aims (Wrenn, 2022, p. 156). In the case of MIM, the secularization and detachment of mindfulness from its cultural and religious origins erases the diverse cultural and religious traditions from which mindfulness emerged and can thus be regarded as cultural appropriation.

4.5. ‘Just Focus On Your Breath’

MIM promoters often suggest that mindfulness training innately leads to ethical behaviour even without any instruction in Buddhist ethics (Forbes, 2019, p. 21; Purser, 2015, p. 37; Sullivan & Arat, 2018, p. 341). A common claim in MIM is that individuals merely paying attention to their breath (i.e., practicing mindfulness meditation) can change the world for the better (Forbes, 2017, p. 146; Walsh, 2017a, p. 1). To extrapolate, MIM promoters proclaim that people focusing on their breath (and thus, themselves) would expand awareness and consideration for others, automatically leading to greater insight and compassion (Kucinskas, 2018, pp. 37-39). Similarly, mindfulness promoters claim MIM transforms corporations into more ethical businesses, resulting in a kinder culture and a more compassionate society (Wilson, 2014, pp. 181-185; Wrenn, 2020, p. 508). This rhetoric is emblematic of the “neoliberal notion that personal transformation alone can lead to broader social and societal transformation" (Chachignon, Le Barbenchon, & Dany, 2024, p. 3). As an example, contemplative leaders such as Mirabai Bush believe that contemplative practice may lead to radical changes in people, which could lead them into activism (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 130). Not only is this wishful thinking, it is highly questionable, not to mention problematic, to claim that compassion and ethical conduct arises naturally from MIM practice despite lacking any ethical training based on ‘right’ mindfulness (Simpson, 2017, p. 59). In fact, as Forbes (2022) explains: “Even within Buddhist communities, adherence to Buddhist values and practices such as mindfulness does not guarantee that racism, patriarchy, and sexist gender inequality will be taken up and challenged, let alone overcome” (p. 8). Kucinskas (2018) adds: “It is insufficient to teach people that institutional change will naturally follow from individual personal transformations…. The only way to pursue true change is to hold institutions accountable for the structural problems they perpetuate” (p. 167). Carrette and King (2013) add: “What is being sold to us as radical, trendy and transformative spirituality in fact produces little in the way of a significant change in one’s lifestyle or fundamental behaviour patterns” (p. 5).

There is no conclusive evidence that MIM has any lasting structural impact or that it leads to people being kinder (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 136, p. 194). Fergusen (2016) posits: “Those who hope that mindfulness will unlock empathy, a sense of connectedness, and a desire to ease suffering for all are bound to be disappointed” (p.

204). In fact, there is evidence to suggest that focusing solely on individual transformation does not lead to systems change at all (Forbes, 2019, p. 41; Greenberg & Mitra, 2015, p. 75; Hyland, 2017, p. 1; Lavelle, 2016, p. 241; Purser & Ng, 2015, p. 5; Simpson, 2017, p. 49).

With its myopic focus on the 'now,' 'accepting things as they are,' as well as claiming utopian (but problematic) ideas of peace and love, MIM suppresses critical perspectives that challenge the status quo (Lavelle, 2016, pp. 233-240; Poceski, 2020, p. 9; Purser, 2019a, pp. 247-257; Purser & Loy, 2013, p. 1). On this Wilson (2014) posits: "A mindful America will still be a consumerist, capitalist nation" (p. 184). Furthermore, individual change does little to challenge structural violence and inequality (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 73). Without challenging social injustices, the status quo, and problematizing the extreme individualism of neoliberalism, MIM does not change the world, let alone save the world, as claimed by some MIM promoters. Rather than encouraging practitioners to renounce unwholesome behaviours and excessive indulging in ego-cherishing and self-absorption, MIM reinforces these very aims (Farb, 2014, p. 1071; Miller, 2016, p. 348; Sharf, 2015, pp. 478-479).

The removal of Buddhist ethics may be viewed as necessary for the acceptance of mindfulness in secular institutions; however, it leaves mindfulness susceptible to appropriation and is detrimental to the development of an authentic meditative practice because it turns mindfulness into yet another apparatus that reinforces the ego in the pursuit for *individual* well-being. Eliminating most of the ethical requirements of Buddhist mindfulness in MIM has turned it into a facile, self-centered, self-help technique. By eliminating mindfulness' ethical framework and Buddhist roots, MIM encourages practitioners to seek individualized lifestyle solutions to their anxiety and stress, rather than question the cultural and economic determinants of stress (Nisbet, 2019, p. 33). Without explicitly cultivating ethical awareness, MIM lacks critical examination into the causes and conditions of suffering at its roots. Thus, mindfulness as cognitive training or psychological intervention without instruction in Buddhist ethics amounts to nothing more than a banal self-help technique (Drougge, 2016, p. 169; Farb, 2014, p. 1071; Goto-Jones, 2013, pp. 1-3; Hyland, 2017, p. 12; Poceski, 2020, p. 11; Purser, 2019c, p. 1; Shaw-Smith, n.d., p. 5; Simpson, 2017, p. 65; Stanley, Purser, & Singh, 2018, p. 3).

4.6. The Illusion Of Universality

The growth of mindfulness in the modern west can be attributed to its conceptualization as a universal practice, devoid of context, history, or cultural rootedness, leaving it free to be used in any manner by anyone. This is largely due to mindfulness promoters framing it as a value-free, ethically neutral technique (Bodhi, 2011, p. 35; Payne, 2019, p. 78; Purser, Ng, & Walsh, 2017, p. 51). Schedneck (2013) elaborates:

> Universalism allows global religious practices to be lifted out of their religious, social, cosmological, and ritual contexts and into new templates. In this way religious others, in the form of global religious practices, instead of being understood from within their own frameworks, are molded to fit into modern discourses of science, health and wellness. (p. 53)

Furthermore, conceptualizing mindfulness as universal facilitates its appropriation into a variety of new representations that align with existing dominant ideologies revealing the process of whitewashing (Drougge, 2016, p. 169; Schedneck, 2013, p. 37; Sugino, 2020, p. 39; Walsh, 2016, p. 160).

In MIM, this kind of universalism is closely tied with white supremacy. Put simply, universalist views of MIM assume a false unity of human experience that centers whiteness. Gleig (2019) explains: “Cultural unconsciousness is to be unaware of its own cultural particularity, which results in white experience being conflated with ‘universal’ experience” (p. 30). Walsh (2016) adds:

> Mindfulness practitioners need to reflect on social and historical contexts and situate them within an identity politics, rather than claiming mindfulness to be a universal practice [positioning] the neoliberal … white male as the model individual…. Whether or not people are aware, mindfulness has always been political. It is inextricably linked to how one leads one’s life in relation to others. (p. 162)

Thus, naming the whiteness of MIM is crucial as a prerequisite to engage in meaningful critical analysis of MIM.

The rhetoric of oneness and universality are pervasive in MIM discourse, often evoking Eastern spiritual tropes of being ‘one with the universe’ and the supposed ‘universal’ nature of introspection, a maneuver which conceals the material reality of unjust systems, particularly when oneness and universality are used to avoid critical

analyses of structures of power (Biddlecombe Agsar, 2019, p. 4; Brito, Joseph, & Sellman, 2021, p. 277; Brumett, 2021, pp. 2132-2137). Critical researchers point to this 'illusion of oneness' as dangerous because it represents an invisible mode of social power, wielded both knowingly and unknowingly by those who benefit from it (Biddlecombe Agsar, 2019, p. 4; Borup, 2020, p. 226; Cheah, 2011, p. 5; Kram, 2019, p. 4; Magee, 2016b, p. 231; Ng & Purser, 2015, p. 8). That is, dominant group(s) benefit from the way society is structured and therefore benefit from the continuation of these conditions, and thus may not be aware of the oppression and marginalization that others face (Brown, 2016, p. 88; Edelglass, 2017, p 19; Magee, 2016a, p. 427; Sullivan & Arat, 2018, p. 350). This process further perpetuates dominant hegemonic norms and the entrenchment of systems of oppression.

MIM collapses whenever it is confronted with social issues, due to a lack of critical analysis that interrogates power (Cannon, 2016, p. 400; Poceski, 2020, p. 8; Walsh, 2016, p. 159; Walsh, 2017b, pp. 4-5). On this, Wilson (2014) comments: "race … is rarely tackled [in MIM]" (p. 65). Instead, MIM often invokes individual responsibility through its promotion of coping, resilience, and nonjudgmental awareness, all of which perpetuates neoliberal self-regulation along with a curriculum founded upon a racialized hegemony of white privilege (Hsu, 2016, p. 369; Purser, Forbes, & Burke, 2016, p. xxi). For example, when faced with issues of race, discrimination, and marginalization, some mindfulness leaders such as Kabat-Zinn fall back on rebuttals such as 'We are all human,' 'I don't see colour,' and 'Identity politics are unhelpful'—demonstrating 'colour-blindness,' or 'colour-evasiveness'—a tactic that obscures systemic inequalities (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, p. 143; Gleig, 2019, p. 22; McNicholl, 2021, p. 9; Purser, 2019a, p. 256; Sherrell & Simmer-Brown, 2017, pp. 80-81). On this very point, Gleig (2019) explains: "The problem with dominant culture is that it has a 'cultural unconsciousness,' heavily marked by white privilege, racism, and homophobia. Much of this is due to the overwhelming demographic whiteness of meditation-based convert communities" (p. 29). Furthermore, DiAngelo (2012) articulates why this is problematic: "White obliviousness is not benign; it has material consequences because it allows us to ignore the impact of racism on people of color while enjoying its benefits at their expense" (p. 9). With this in mind, the commodification of mindfulness, represented as MIM, is a political maneuver. Chachignon, Le Barbenchon, and Dany, 2024) explain: "Secularizing Mindfulness was political and served the neoliberal dominant ideology

which entailed a logic of race-neutral individualization and privatization of health. This produced an apparent dissolution of social and racial inequalities (i.e., post-racialism), which has widely penetrated Mindfulness programs" (p. 9). The authors continue: "Mindfulness curriculum discourses adopt a race-neutral perspective. Built upon the unquestioned notion of common humanity, Mindfulness' color-blind ideology systematically downplays the hardships faced by Black [and other marginalized] communities" (p. 9). The universalizing rhetoric of MIM leaders speaks to this process of dissolving social and racial inequalities by appropriating Buddhist concepts such as 'No Self,' 'Upaya,' and 'The Two Truths' to justify the 'We are all human' logic mentioned above.

Universalist thinking in MIM discourse postulates that people are able to attain enlightenment simply by 'waking up' and 'seeing things as they are,' illustrating cultural constructs that favour dominant and normative ways of viewing reality (Brown, 2016). On the other hand, if 'seeing things as they are' truly happened, practitioners would see how their privilege, wealth, and comfort are dependent on a global economic system based upon exploitation and inequality, since the leisure time and resources required to pursue mindfulness is reliant on an economic system that provides surplus value and time for class-privileged peoples (Patt, 2001, p. 9; Purser, 2019a, p. 253; von Bujdoss, 2019, p. 210-211). On this, Misiewicz (2020) elaborates:

> It is important to note that not everyone has access to a regular mindfulness practice…. Even if someone knows what it is, she also needs the required economic capital to practice it. Although there are free classes and apps available to practitioners, most workshops, books, yoga classes, and retreats are expensive.... The expense of these classes, apps, and services indicates that to be a participant of and gain access to these benefits, one must have already earned or inherited a certain level of economic capital. (pp. 17-18)

For example, many mindfulness retreats and conferences are expensive, particularly after factoring in registration, travel, and accommodation fees. The cost of attending these conferences can be prohibitive and a relatively high income is required to attend such exclusive events, which puts it out of reach of many people and skews the demographic toward white and class-privileged peoples (Buddhist Peace Fellowship, 2016, p. 9; Carlson, 2018, p. 3; Kucinskas, 2018, p. 139, p. 155; Piacenza, 2014, p. 5; Sauerborn, Sokefeld, & Neckel, 2022, p. 5). In this regard, elite-driven movements like MIM have an inherently limited viewpoint of the world due to their privileged positioning

(Kucinskas, 2018, p. 155). The elite have appropriated mindfulness to serve their interests, focused on goals such as living longer, greater productivity, and consolidating their power (Heffernan, 2015, p. 2; Kucinskas, 2018, p. 166). To illustrate, Kucinskas (2018) recounts their experience at a MIM conference: “It is striking how the contemplative base was composed of such a privileged, seemingly homogenous, group of people” (p. 193). To this point, Kucinskas (2018) found that MIM leaders were more likely to be men (60%), and mainly white (85%). Furthermore, only 9% of MIM leaders were Asian, despite Buddhism’s roots in Asia. On this, Kucinskas comments “Unsurprisingly—given these sociodemographics—what I encountered at contemplative conferences was a culture of privilege” (2018, pp. 142-143). Sugino (2020) adds: “As the self-help industry is increasingly dominated by white men, it is worth considering whether these discourses are accessible models for alleviating suffering since the ability to overcome barriers to success without confronting structural issues is a luxury seldom afforded to marginalized people” (p. 31). Similarly, Kucinskas (2018) observes: “Contemplative [elites] are lost in the navel-gazing world of self-help … focused on improving their own well-being and interpersonal relationships” (p. 156). Cannon (2016) further illustrates this:

> The level of unconscious racism and white privilege prevalent in these spaces [mindfulness conferences] left me feeling deeply troubled. The organizers of these mindfulness conferences were white, the keynote speakers were primarily white, conference participants were majority white, and perhaps most insidiously, the content and framework was steeped in a white dominant ideology…. When people of color were included, it was rarely from a position of power or leadership. (p. 401)

With so much money projected to be made in the mindfulness industry, conferences are also where business networking occurs, as health and wellness companies connect with researchers and scientists to develop their products and programs (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 10, pp. 148-150). It is reasonable to theorize then that elite-led mindfulness movements such as MIM do not challenge the status quo, but instead, reinforce it (Cassidy, 2019, p. 100).

4.7. Whiteness In MIM

Next, we will examine how white supremacy has shaped MIM, evidenced by the dominant orientation of MIM towards white normativity. Broadly speaking, white

supremacy involves the conscious and unconscious promotion of beliefs, practices, values, and ideals of European American white culture as normative (Cheah, 2011, pp. 3-22).

It is important to note here that calling out and naming white privilege and white supremacy in MIM does not negate or condone the oppression and harm perpetrated by individuals and groups of non-white identities, including lateral violence perpetrated by marginalized and/or minoritized groups against each other. Having said that, I root this dissertation in the present cultural and historical context of early twenty-first century North America where white supremacy prevails, and so white supremacy in MIM must be named. Critical theorists such as Drake (2019) confirm that “Whiteness is real…. Whiteness isn’t a figment of a fiction. Whiteness is key to understanding the way of the world” (p. 272). This is further elaborated on by DiAngelo (2012): “To name whiteness is to refer to a set of relations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced, and that are intrinsically linked to dynamic relations of white racial domination” (p. 3). Shaw-Smith (n.d.) adds: “The groups that have power in society control how the people in that society interpret and communicate. They project their experiences as representative of the society as a whole and neglect the experiences of others” (p. 7). The unquestioned nature of whiteness and the ways in which whiteness, structurally, obstructs its own self-interrogation further masks its presence (McRae & Yancy, 2019, p. xix; Willis, 2019, p. viii).

4.8. The Business Of Mindfulness

MIM has proven to be lucrative, so much so that marketing companies are taking notice: advertising agency JWT announced mindfulness as a top ten trend in 2014, while NielsenIQ Report announced that health and wellness is the single most powerful consumer force (Rowland, 2023). The global wellness industry is estimated to be worth between $3.5 to 4 billion USD (Badr, 2022, p. 1)—including mindfulness at approximately $1.5 billion (Fordham, 2019, p. 1; Nisbet, 2019, p. 33; O’Donnell, 2015, p. 188; Purser, 2019a, p. 151) with $1 billion in America alone (Doran, 2018, p. 1). Searching ‘mindfulness’ on google.com retrieved approximately 240 million results in August 2021 and Amazon.com lists 60,000 books with the term ‘mindfulness’ in the title (Purser, 2019a, p. 7; Simpson, 2017, p. 54). Furthermore, the mindfulness and meditation industry is projected to grow 11.4 percent annually (Kim, 2018, p. 3), spurred

on by corporate mindfulness coaches, mindfulness authors, mindfulness entrepreneurs, mindfulness conferences, as well as material commodities such as yoga mats, pillows, candles, singing bowls, crystals, etc. (Cooper & Purser, 2014, p. 5). As of 2017, there were 2,450 meditation studios in the U.S. with $659 million in revenues, in addition to 14 residential meditation retreat centers with $79 million in revenue, according to Marketdata Enterprises. Additionally, books, CDs, DVDs, and magazines on meditation generated $112 million in revenue, while apps, and online programs generate more than $100 million (Kim, 2018, p. 3; Nisbet, 2019, p. 33). The figures above are demonstrative of the exploitation of the term 'mindfulness' where it is applied as a buzzword to promote products and services that purport to fix almost any ailment and fulfill any need. That is, mindfulness is sold in every form: books, articles, magazines, blogs, CDs, film, apps, conferences—the possibilities for commodification are endless (Wilson, 2014, pp. 136-147).

As described earlier, the mindfulness movement dissociates itself from Buddhism in order to appeal to a broader audience to be profitable in the marketplace (Bao & Willis, 2022, p. 57; Carrette & King, 2013, p. 73; Schedneck, 2013, p. 37; Wilson, 2014, p. 73). In the business context, MIM promoters translated Buddhist concepts to fit a secular, masculine, militarized, sports culture where it takes part in the optimization of individuals to neoliberal corporate capitalism (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 65). In this sense, MIM has more in common with industrial psychology and scientific management than it does with Buddhist mindfulness. Programs such as MBSR provide emerging opportunities for therapists, authors, editors, and others to profit from commodified forms of mindfulness (Wilson, 2014, p. 101). For example, authors writing on mindfulness would limit book sales if they restricted their audience to Buddhists, and so mindfulness books are often partnered with self-help, psychology, psychotherapy, etc. in order to maximize reach (Wilson, 2014, p. 59). As the market saturates, a common strategy is to expand mindfulness into new pairings to differentiate oneself and appeal to new demographics. Thus, we see an explosion of subgenres: mindful chocolate, mindful hula-hooping, mindful guitar, mindful meals, mindful minerals, mindful beauty, and mindful software, all capitalizing on a growing market (Munir, Ansari, & Brown, 2021, p. 29). The increasingly crowded market for mindfulness, mixed with the American ethos of self-promotion and entrepreneurialism has also resulted in the rise of patented forms of

mindfulness like MBSR, Headspace, MindUP, etc. (Bao & Willis, 2022, p. 47; Somers, 2022a, p. 7; Wilson, 2014, p. 41, p. 148).

Buddha himself is appropriated in advertisements for a plethora of products in a rapidly evolving market (Bao & Willis, 2022, p. 46). Examples include products that use the word 'Buddha,' Buddhist terminology, or Buddha imagery: Buddha bowl, Buddha water, Buddha bar, Buddha coconut chips, etc. Buddha is used as a symbolic resource to add value to products and sell well-being through consumption (Bao & Willis, 2022, pp. 45-58). Bao and Willis (2022) explain: "While the cultural appropriation of meditation, mindfulness, and Buddha-branded advertisements vary, they are all compatible with American cultural fashions—individualism, psychology, science, and the pursuit of personal happiness. Collectively, these advertisements, in different configurations, impose American cultural principles and taste" (p. 48). This process converts the symbolic capital of the Buddha into actual material and economic capital.

4.9. Spiritual Bypassing

Some argue that individuals use MIM to detach from challenging emotions or social issues as a form of escapism rather than engaging with them constructively. Here, MIM may provide a temporary retreat through a phenomenon called 'spiritual bypassing.' 'Spiritual bypassing,' coined by Dr. John Welwood (1984), can be defined as using spiritual practices to engender a false sense of spiritual development that masks insecurities, problematic behaviours, unresolved emotional issues, and psychological problems (Cashwell, Glosoff, & Hammond, 2010; Fisher, 2010, p. 6; Fossella, 2011; Hyland, 2015, p. 16; Neale, 2013, p. 1; Kelly, 2022, p. 2). Spiritual bypassing can result in increased pride, arrogance, and other forms of maladaptive behaviours as a way to dissociate from painful thoughts or emotions. Spiritual bypassing is also evidenced by teachers engaging in inappropriate relationships with followers, which appears to be rampant in the new age movement, as commodified forms of spirituality have attributed mythical powers to mindfulness teachers which has enabled predatory behaviours by charismatic leaders (Schireson, 2020, pp. 350-351). In this regard, MIM is illustrative of how self-help culture is overrun by self-proclaimed experts, some of whom engage in abusive behaviours (Leggett, 2021, p. 265). When pressed about such instances, Kabat-Zinn shirks responsibility by blaming individual teachers as 'bad apples' (Purser, Forbes, & Burke, 2016, p. viii; Purser, Ng, & Walsh, 2017, p. 55; Schireson, 2020, p. 350).

Rather ironically, Kabat-Zinn himself complains about the appropriation of mindfulness by people who have 'dubious' motives with 'exploitative agendas' (Kabat-Zinn, 2017, p. 1126); and yet, he fails to acknowledge his complicity in facilitating and laying the groundwork for such appropriations (Forbes, 2019, p. 20; Walsh, 2018, p. 115). In parallel to spiritual bypassing, 'meditation sickness' is a term referring to people who practice meditation with a myopic fixation on inner peace, leading to a false sense of tranquility and superficial calm (Dawson & Turnbull, 2006, pp. 60-63; Greenberg & Mitra, 2015, p. 75; Neale, 2011, pp. 11-12; Sharf, 2015, p. 476; Sherrell & Simmer-Brown, 2017, p. 76; Simpson, 2017, p. 49).

4.10. Spiritual Buffet

Mindfulness is an example of a religious practice that has been commodified and repackaged for mass consumption through its conceptualization as a vague feel-good 'spirituality.' Unlike religion, 'spirituality' is not tainted with as much baggage and thus, spirituality functions as a positive but largely vacuous signifier for personal development (Carrette & King, 2013, pp. 134-136). As MIM is institutionalized in the guise of therapy, it is a form of neoliberal self-surveillance and thrives in a culture of self-help where it is promoted as a lifestyle choice (Fordham, 2019, p. 2; Purser, Forbes, & Burke, 2016, p. xiv; Reveley, 2016, p. 497). Carrette and King (2013) explain:

> The shift in interest from 'traditional religion' to 'private spirituality' has overwhelmingly been presented … as *consumer*-oriented … reflecting the concerns of the modern, 'liberated' individual to free themselves from the traditional constraints of religion, dogma and ecclesiastical forms of thought-control (p. 27, emphasis in original).

That is to say, neoliberalism conceptualizes healthy 'individuals' as those who affirm their identity as private, isolated consumers.

MIM appeals to the predilections of a materialistic society that is accustomed to consumer choice and thus replicates the materialism of mainstream culture by catering to individual tastes and preferences, resulting in performative expressions of spirituality (Schedneck, 2013, pp. 37-38). Here, individuals assemble a repertoire of practices by 'shopping' from an array of spiritual traditions from different cultures, like a buffet. This assemblage of performative spiritualities is exemplified by the meteoric growth of the wellness industry. The result is what Purser calls a "do-it-yourself, make-it-up-as-you-go-

along mentality" (Purser, 2019a, p. 82). Carrette and King (2013) elaborate: "The shift in interest from 'traditional religion' to 'private spirituality' has overwhelmingly been presented to us as *consumer-oriented*" (p. 27, emphasis in original). In this sense, it may be hypothesized that MIM takes part in spiritual libertarianism where the emphasis on personal choice mirrors the mechanisms of neoliberal self-formation through consumption (Badr, 2022, p. 2; Borup, 2020; Forbes, 2019, p. 15; Wagner & Accardo, 2015, pp. 142-143; Stanley, 2012, p. 632). As such, MIM has conflated well-being with consumer capitalism (Eaton, 2014, p. 4; Edelglass, 2017, p 23; Lavelle, 2016, p. 237; Marx, 2015, p. 1153; Ng, 2016, p. 136; Purser, 2019a, p. 248; Purser & Milillo, 2015, pp. 7-19; Saari & Pulkki, 2012, p. 15; Sherrell & Simmer-Brown, 2017, p. 75). Spirituality is conceptualized now as a private, psychological phenomenon representing a whole range of experiences on the periphery of religion (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 73). On this, Rowland (2023) explains: "Wellness … presents collective social ills as problems for the individual to solve through some alchemy of consumer behaviour" (p. 4). Similarly, neoliberal corporate capitalism promotes the idea that expressing our preferences and choices as consumers validates our sense of autonomy and agency, what Chachignon, Le Barbenchon, and Dany (2024) refer to as "expressive individualism" (p. 3). However, this freedom is illusory as we are merely exposing ourselves to voluntary self-exploitation (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2020, p. 14). Carrette and King (2013) explain how psychology imparts the illusion of freedom:

> Psychology controls individual consumers by giving them the illusion of unrestrained freedom. It offers the psychological product of 'spirituality' as an apparent cure for the isolation created by a materialistic, competitive and individualized social system. Paradoxically, such notions of spirituality only reinforce social isolation because they tend to be construed in terms of a privatized model of human reality. (p. 27)

This illusion of free choice, framed as a *consumer* choice, is largely ineffectual in effecting change because it is based in frameworks that merely perpetuate dominant hegemonic norms (Chachignon, Le Barbenchon, & Dany, 2024, p. 7).

Corporatized spiritualities like MIM appeal to those who see themselves as counter-cultural and free from traditional forms of social control associated with mainstream religion, and yet these new psychologized technologies merely replicate conformity, as Carrette and King (2013) explain: "The illusion of religious free expression in private spirituality is the prison of capitalism…. It restricts the individual to a unit of

consumption" (p. 78). Thus, psychological individualism, based on the primacy of consumer freedom is the new method of mass control, through which neoliberalism attempts to merge self-actualization with conformity (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 57; Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 108). This contradiction is explained by Carrette and King (2013): "In the very act of freeing the mind from the dogma of religion, consumers now entered the thought-control of individualism" (p. 77). This kind of 'spirituality' distorts the source origins of the practices they appropriate and replicates the exploitative logics of global capitalism. As MIM is promoted as an individualistic practice focused on personal well-being, critics argue that this emphasis on the self can distract from broader systemic issues and inequalities, while neglecting social responsibility and collective well-being. While mindfulness can enhance personal resilience, its individualistic framing may contribute to a lack of engagement with social and environmental challenges that require collective action.

4.11. Mindfulness Apps

Meditation apps such as Headspace, Calm, and Buddhify as well as MIM's presence on streaming services illustrate the reconceptualization of meditation as an on-demand subscription service (Chachignon, Le Bargenchon, & Dany, 2024, p. 2). For example, Headspace has been downloaded 11 million times with 400,000 subscribers and approximately $50 million in annual revenue (Jackson, 2020, p. 120; Nisbet, 2019, p. 35). The app market illustrates how products with high visibility, flashy marketing, and slick user interfaces are successful (Kim, 2018, p. 3). These forms of mindfulness 'outsell' traditional forms of mindfulness, and funnels people toward pay-per-use programs like MBSR and meditation apps rather than culturally embedded spiritual communities such as Buddhist temples (Wilson, 2016, p. 119). Not surprisingly, such commercialized products and programs may not provide comprehensive instruction in mindfulness from a Buddhist point of view. For example, *Buddify's* eponymic reference to Buddhism demonstrates the selective desacralization that acknowledges the sacred (for its cultural cachet) while simultaneously rejecting it (Sugino, 2020, p. 38).

Similar to meditation apps, there are initiatives to create an 'enlightenment machine' that tracks physiological responses to meditation, like a fitness tracker, in order to find the *fastest* and *most efficient* way to enlightenment—a ludicrous proposition that is counter to core tenets of holistic meditative practices (McMahan & Braun, 2017, p.

14). On this, Kelly (2022) comments: “There has always been a demand for shortcuts to enlightenment, such as through psychedelic drugs and the spiritual bypassing of ‘McMindfulness’” (p. 2). With the proliferation of technologies such as mindfulness apps and contemplative virtual reality, the commodification of mindfulness continues unabated (Wilson, 2016, p. 114).

4.12. Credentialling Mindfulness In Order To Profit From It

Presenting mindfulness as secular allows commodified forms of mindfulness to form their own authority independent of Buddhist organizations, thus ensuring no interference from them (McMahan & Braun, 2017, p. 8; Payne, 2019, pp. 80-81; Sullivan & Arat, 2018, p. 341). For example, the process of becoming a mindfulness instructor has been subsumed by fee-based certification, taught by self-proclaimed experts at for-profit organizations that claim authoritative status gained through cultural appropriation (Hsu, 2016, p. 376). In other words, credentialing mindfulness is a method of legitimizing cultural appropriation using status quo institutions as vetting agents. Kucinskas (2018) adds: “By moving Buddhist meditation into secular institutions, contemplative leaders were no longer accountable to traditional Buddhist languages, normative restrictions, and practices common in Buddhist temples and dharma centers” (p. 77). For example, the International Mindfulness Teachers Association (IMTA), which has no connection to any Buddhist organization, offers accreditation for mindfulness teachers and programs for an annual fee of $800 USD. There is an additional $500 fee for program certification, a $1500 fee to use the IMTA logo, and a $1500 annual renewal fee (Purser, 2017, p. 2). Similarly, the Center for Mindfulness offers MBSR teacher training for $8500 USD (Purser, 2017, p. 3), and Google’s in-house mindfulness leadership program entitled ‘Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute’ charges $8,000 USD a day per person (Purser, Ng, & Walsh, 2017, p. 54). Aside from credentialing, mindfulness entrepreneurs profit from appropriation in other ways: corporate mindfulness consultants charge up to $12,000 USD per day. This is part of the growing industry of life coaching, generating $2 billion a year (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 10; Kucinskas, 2018, p. 103). Not surprisingly, some mindfulness promoters are defensive to critiques of MIM as it is in their best interest to continue to hype the positive benefits of mindfulness for their financial gain (Forbes, 2019, p. 108). This may result in “Bias from researchers who are personally and financially invested in the outcomes of their work” (Nisbet, 2019, p. 35).

And yet, financial and professional incentives for specific outcomes from mindfulness research has no doubt driven the explosion of positive reviews of MIM in research.

4.13. Corporate Mindfulness

MIM has gained a foothold in business because it dovetails conveniently with psychological concepts that are congruent with corporate capitalism and management-friendly modalities such as Positive Psychology [PP]. Additionally, MIM has found a receptive audience in corporations because it presents a cost-effective method for self-regulation and performance enhancement. MIM is Buddhist mindfulness that is simplified, homogenized, repackaged, and then sold to promote work-efficiency and economic productivity. In this regard, MIM is, as explained by Chachignon, Le Bargenchon, and Dany (2024):

> The archetypal affect management practice. It enhances the constitution of special individual skills to overcome stress and an array of mental disorders via emotional and attentional regulation processes, decentering, acceptance to hardships and aches without judgment or reactivity, and cognitive flexibility. Second, Mindfulness involves an abstraction from context. It addresses stress issues at an individual and self-centered level, while preventing practitioners from being mindful of the external and systemic conditions that contributed to it in the first place. (p. 4)

Take for example how mindfulness is offered as part of corporate employee training under the pretense of being a health and wellness initiative, while ostensibly being used toward goals of increasing productivity and profits (Poceski, 2020, p. 7; Walsh, 2018, p. 116). In this sense, MIM is a form of psychological control that discourages political and socioeconomic analyses of stress (Arthington, 2016, pp. 87-88; Purser, 2019a, p. 251). To reiterate, MIM is a management-friendly version of mindfulness where employees are trained to be resilient and ‘transcend’ material discomfort, which merely perpetuates structural injustice (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 1, p. 52; Healey, 2015, p. 68).

Corporate mindfulness grew following the global financial crisis in 2008 when massive lay-offs, regression of wages, and increase in precarious work set the stage for corporations to implore their employees to do more with less. To corporations, disgruntled workers are regarded as threats, whether through direct labour action or through absenteeism, higher health care costs, attrition, turnover, and lower productivity, all leading to lost profits. This has prompted corporations to address these issues

(stress, sickness, etc.) by offering psy-technologies such as MIM to their employees under the pretense of supporting employee well-being (Marx, 2015, p. 1156; Purser, 2019a, p. 135). Here, a cogent critique of MIM is that it merely provides psycho-technical solutions to political problems; that is, MIM is not particularly invested in healing individuals but rather in speeding up their efficient and cost-effective return to work (Caring-Lobel, 2016, p. 211; O'Connell, 2018, p. 3). In this regard, corporate spirituality aims to create workers who are merely happy enough to continue working while still fearful they might lose their jobs (Wrenn, 2022, p. 157). As such, commodified forms of spirituality neutralize dissent and discourages critical inquiry by inculcating employees into a form of self-control. Here, MIM is a disciplinary tool with the aim of maximizing productivity through moment-to-moment management of emotions (Carvalho & Gracio, 2022, p. 63; Purser, 2019a, p. 141). To illustrate, Proctor & Gamble, Monsanto, Sun Life Financial, Target, Kaiser Permanente, Ford, General Mills, Google, and Facebook have all jumped on the mindfulness bandwagon, offering mindfulness training to their employees (Goldberg, 2015, p. 1; McMahan & Braun, 2017, p. 3; Stone, 2014, p. 1). The above list of corporations is indicative of attempts to glean operational benefits out of pseudo-medicalized interventions framed as supporting worker well-being.

Neoliberal spiritualities, like MIM, involve the altering of spiritual teachings toward business success. In this way, MIM appeals to corporations by promising stress-reduction without tackling structural causes of suffering, an example of the neoliberal ethos of bootstrapping (Carvalho & Gracio, 2022, p. 71; Murtola & Vallelly, 2022, p. 1). Thus, neoliberal spiritualities position the individual as a *consumer* and society as a *market* (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 83, pp. 121-122).

Mindfulness in Silicon Valley is emblematic of the amalgamation of Protestantism, Buddhism, New Age spirituality, and secular humanism (Healey, 2015, pp. 71-80). Corporate mindfulness leaders like Google's Chade-Mend Tan (a self-appointed 'Jolly Good Fellow') claim that merely focusing on your breath can bring about happiness (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 23; Healey, 2015, p. 80). Ruppel (2024) elaborates further: "therapeutic management produces consent to exploitation … these strategies have profit-generating potential for employers. Practices like mindfulness meditation, positive affirmations, self-esteem-building exercises, the regulation of sleep, therapy, and psychiatric medication strive to improve workers' attendance, punctuality, focus, and productivity" (p. 26). To this end, MIM is illustrative of a neoliberal shift

towards ‘psychometricity’ and ‘therapeutic hegemony’ (Chachignon, Le Bebe chon, & Dany, 2024, p. 4).

Business schools are a prime offender in this regard as they have a long tradition of repackaging neoliberal ideologies as scientific truth. Business management ideologies infiltrate wellness discourses through the application of resilience frameworks in the service of perpetuating neoliberal corporate capitalism. It is no surprise then that PP was engineered in business schools (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 72). This can be observed in mindfulness research in business and management studies that tout the utility of mindfulness in supporting corporate goals with its profit-maximizing and cost-saving capabilities (Wrenn, 2022, p. 155). Take for example how MIM promoters collaborated with business elites to reconceptualize meditation as a scientifically verified practice to increase success and performance (Kucinskas, 2018, pp. 68-69).

Corporate mindfulness today mirrors Corporate Zen and the Protestant Ethic in the way that they provide ideological and moral justifications for capitalism and wealth accumulation, with an emphasis individual freedom and personal growth (Somers, 2022a, p. 5). ‘Corporate Zen’ is a precursor to corporate mindfulness and traces its roots to Japanese companies in the 1950s who would send their employees to Zen temples to train in so-called traditional virtues of Zen, such as obedience and conformity, effectively redirecting soteriological goals towards instrumental ones (Sokol, 2008, p. 7). On this, Žižek (2001) comments: “If Max Weber were alive today, he would definitely write a second, supplementary, volume to his Protestant Ethic, entitled The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism” (pp. 1-2). Similarly, Carrette and King (2013) posit: “*Capitalism in effect is the new religion of the masses–the new opium of the people–and neoliberalism is the theological orthodoxy that is facilitating its spread*” (p. 138, emphasis in original).

Corporate mindfulness purports to support employees in managing stress, however, the true aim is to transform employees into disciplined, productive workers who preserve the status quo (Purser, 2019a, p. 140; Purser & Ng, 2015, p. 3; Wrenn, 2020, p. 505). Rather than cultivating awareness of the social and systemic causes of suffering, corporate mindfulness merely encourages individuals to align their well-being to corporate success. In this case, MIM lulls practitioners to be less critical of the status quo (Khanna & Khanna, 2019, p. 181; Spellmeyer, 2018, p. 2; Tomassini, 2016, p. 224;

Vörös, 2016, p. 61; Walsh, 2018, p. 113). On this, Ruppel (2024) states: “[a] central marker of ‘well-being’ is compliance…. The ‘positive affirmations’ exercise and others like it ask client-workers to filter their responses to exploitation, poverty, illness, and other social problems through a positive lens, potentially inhibiting individual-level resistance, let alone collective resistance” (19). To extrapolate, MIM is applied to quell worker dissatisfaction and deflect attention away from the political, economic, and social causes of their dissatisfaction (Caring-Lobel, 2016, p. 196).

Another driving force proliferating mindfulness in corporations is the degree to which it affords ideological credence to meritocracy and serves as a justification for exploitation (Forbes, 2019, p. 31; Purser, 2019a, p. 160). That is, through the promotion of self-regulation, corporations offering mindfulness programs condition workers to accept the precarity of neoliberal corporate capitalism while providing less actual social support, since offering MIM programming is more cost-effective than taking actual steps toward change, such as raising wages, providing better working conditions, benefits, healthcare, and time off. This suggests that corporations are not prepared to take real action toward reform of the underlying systems causing suffering, i.e., lengthy work hours, low pay, and lack of benefits (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 135, p. 194). The imperative to maximize productivity while also mitigating worker discontent in the cheapest way possible is thus representative of neoliberal corporate capitalism (Wrenn, 2022, p. 153).

MIM is a convenient way for corporations to individualize systemic stress and distract workers from their material conditions (Brito, Joseph, & Sellman, 2021, p. 277; Hsu, 2016, p. 378; Hyland, 2016a, p. 185; Walsh, 2018, p. 110). That is, instead of addressing social and structural issues, corporations offer personal therapies to offload responsibility for well-being onto individuals (Nehring & Frawley, 2020, p. 1188; Wrenn, 2020, p. 506; Wrenn, 2022, p. 167). Corporate mindfulness is emblematic of transferring stress from their origins onto the individual (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2020, pp. 13-17). Similarly, corporate mindfulness shifts criticisms about organizational problems onto employees where workers are told structural problems are actually a result of their inability to adapt and cope (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 107; Murtola & Vallelly, 2022, p. 2). Reframing stress and burnout as individual pathologies side-steps analysis of their socio-economic origins, such as high-pressure work environments and structural inequalities (Munir, Ansari, & Brown, 2021, p. 31). Carrette and King (2013) comment:

> What we find in [commodified spirituality] is an extreme *individualization* of suffering and oppression (it is always *your* problem, deal with yourself, not society) and the constant assertion of the power and freedom of the individual self to recreate the reality that they encounter. It is 'feel good' spirituality for the urban and the affluent and it has nothing to say to the poor and the marginalized in society, other than offering them a regime of compliance, a new 'opiate for the masses'. (p. 107)

In this sense, corporate spirituality transforms structural problems like poverty, low wages, and poor working conditions into individual problems to be solved through therapy, psychiatric medication, wellness practices, and changes to personal habits (Ruppel, 2024). Stress is thus blamed on individuals and their lack of positive emotions rather than systemic inequality (Sugino, 2020, p. 42; Carvalho & Gracio, 2022, p. 72). Corporate mindfulness offers methods to manage stress, but never questions the causes of stress since stress is regarded as a private and interior affair. And so, the individual is pathologized, not the organization (Purser, 2019e, p. 3; Sugino, 2020, p. 27; Wrenn, 2020, p. 505). Employees are encouraged to elicit behaviours that support profitability, productivity, and efficiency by focusing on being 'present in the moment' and observing the mind 'non-judgmentally' (Ditrich, 2016, p. 198; Tomassini, 2016). Therefore, corporate mindfulness offers few *real* opportunities to change the material circumstances of workers. This is why the façade of care by corporations in offering mindfulness programs to their employees should not be taken at face value (Caring-Lobel, 2016, p. 207; Cohen, 2017, p. 11; Forbes, 2019, p. 27; Sun, 2014b, p. 405; Wallis, 2016, p. 499). I must reiterate that Buddhist mindfulness is inherently at odds with conventional business values such as profit-maximization and unsustainable progress (Patt, 2001, p. 8; Purser & Milillo, 2015, p. 18; Qiu & Rooney, 2019, pp. 719-726; Sullivan & Arat, 2018, p. 348). Ultimately, corporate mindfulness is ineffectual in critiquing the causes and conditions of worker stress because corporations benefit from these very conditions (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 113).

The well-worn trope of corporate executives who practice mindfulness as being more compassionate leaders is a tired cliché. While executives may acknowledge the need to mitigate their employees' stress, they fall short of actually changing the systemic ways in which stress is exacerbated. The primary role of corporate executives is to maximize profits and therefore they have little incentive to consider worker well-being other than when it is beneficial to the bottom line. In this sense, corporations have no stake in the well-being of workers beyond their ability to create revenue (Bachkirova &

Borrington, 2020, p. 12; Wrenn, 2022, p. 164). Wrenn (2020) comments on the façade of MIM programs and the futility of trying to enact change through their implementation:

> Major corporations hire external consultants to lead mindfulness workshops or programs in order to help employees reduce stress. By hiring external teachers/speakers/experts, the corporation further cuts off critique of the workplace. Since an external mindfulness expert has no control over corporate practices or sense of the institutional history, the only "help" this mindfulness expert can provide is in assisting the individual to change herself… The problem is the worker, not the organization. (p. 504)

In other words, instead of addressing the root causes of problems, MIM is pacifying rather than being transformative (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 194).

While MIM promotes itself as a way to manage stress, its underlying motive is to produce an efficient yet passive workforce by diverting focus away from oppressive conditions and instituting an unpaid means of self-monitoring and self-regulation (Misiewicz, 2020, pp. 21-22; Wrenn, 2020, p. 505). The emphasis on focusing on the present moment non-judgmentally is merely teaching workers to comply and accept their circumstances, however oppressive (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 84; Kim, 2018, p. 5; Wrenn, 2020, p. 508). Corporate mindfulness thus fashions workers into supervisors of their own psychosomatic health and emphasizes their responsibility to manage their own emotional, psychological, and affective states to serve economic goals (Carvalho & Gracio, 2022, pp. 65-71). As a result, corporate mindfulness blurs the distinction between inner work and 'productivity' (Carvalho & Gracio, 2022, p. 63, pp. 71-72; Wrenn, 2022, p. 153).

Instead of challenging the status quo, MIM panders to corporate interests and furthers the narcissistic and destructive culture of utilitarian individualism by hijacking Buddhist concepts such as *impermanence* and *emptiness* and using them to rationalize and justify the precarity characteristic of neoliberal corporate capitalism (Poceski, 2020, p. 9; Purser, 2019a, p. 77). By pushing many of the structural insecurities of the economy onto the individual, corporations claim that precarity is a reflection of the basic nature of reality (illustrating 'impermanence') (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 25). And thus, MIM "unwittingly reinforce[s] rather than challenge[s] … neoliberal individualist practices, culture, and social structures" (Forbes, 2016a, p. 356). To that end, it is reasonable to posit that MIM and other similar 'wellness programs' are merely workplace governance regimes (Ruppel, 2024).

4.14. Individualizing Stress

Neoliberal spirituality is rooted in colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy, wrapped up in the discourse of self-care. On this, Wrenn (2022) posits: “Corporate mindfulness treats stress as pathologically interior to the mind. Potential external causes of stress are not addressed or even acknowledged as problematic” (p. 167). Neoliberal spiritualities such as MIM elicit neoliberal modes of governance that hold individuals responsible for their own health and happiness. Where social injustices are regarded as problems of the mind that can be overcome through individualistic coping practices (Badr, 2022, pp. 2-6; Sugino, 2020, pp. 29-36; Wrenn, 2022, p. 166).

Neoliberal frameworks reinforce the idea that stress, sickness, and poverty are the result of poor life choices and negative attitudes, unrelated to the economic, social, and political conditions that contribute to them, thus perpetuating the myth that individuals *choose* well-being or sickness. In other words, wellbeing is a choice, *your* choice, and therefore your responsibility (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 13; Forbes, 2017, p. 147; Purser, 2019a, p. 229; Purser & Ng, 2015, p. 9; Purser, Ng, & Walsh, 2017, p. 49; Wilson, 2014, p. 181). Accordingly, inequality and injustice are surmountable regardless of circumstances. Similarly, happiness is viewed as available to anyone who is ready to change their attitude through cognitive readjustment (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 70; Wrenn, 2022, p. 160). In MIM, individuals are encouraged to overcome adversity with no acknowledgment of systemic injustice and structural inequalities (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 81; Shaw-Smith, n.d., p. 9; Wrenn, 2022, p. 158). It is imperative to challenge these neoliberal ideologies and their derivatives (i.e., the myth of meritocracy, myth of objectivity, rugged individualism) because individuals cannot be isolated from their social contexts (Koetting, 1998, p. 7).

MIM in the service of personal well-being bolsters the neoliberal myth that individuals should overcome difficulties and obstacles, even when there is ample evidence to suggest that there are social, cultural, institutional, and structural forces affecting them that are often far beyond their control (Moses & Chouhury, 2016, p. 455). In MIM, societal problems involving racism, sexism, inequality, poverty, etc. are discussed without considering their systemic and institutional causes, if they are discussed at all (Hickey, 2010, p. 175; Jain, 2020, p. 889; Kirmayer, 2015, p. 452; Lavelle, 2016, p. 240; Munjee, 2019, p. 108; McLaren, 2009, p. 67; Ng & Purser, 2015,

p. 7; Purser, 2019c, p. 1; Purser, 2019a, p. 38, p. 139, p. 229; Purser, Forbes, & Burke, 2016, p. xvi-xvii). In stark contrast, stress should not be attributed solely to an individual's lack of self-regulation; stress also has systemic, institutional, organizational, historical, and socioeconomic origins (Purser, 2015, p. 41). Blaming individuals for their stress dovetails conveniently with the neoliberal ethos of bootstrapping and personal responsibility.

As MIM frames suffering as a private, internal experience—something to overcome—self-care practices conflate happiness with neoliberal conceptualizations of health, driven by the consumption of lifestyle products. MIM thus ignores social factors that influence health, such as access to food, medicine, and housing (Badr, 2022, p. 1). On this, Wrenn (2022) explains the roots of self-help culture in North America:

> Americans are deeply, culturally attached to the ideas of reinvention and redemption. This unrelenting enthusiasm underpins the American enthusiasm for self-help and self-improvement, for the idea that any obstacle, especially those addressed in isolation, can be overcome. The roots of this cultural mythos trace directly back to the stories of colonization into and pioneering across the North American continent…. Mixed with Puritan morality and Protestant dedication to hard work, labor and domination over the self were thus indelibly sewn into the early cultural tapestry of the United States. (p. 166)

An outcome of focusing on individual stress is that oppression remains hidden, and problems are never connected to political or socio-economic conditions, but instead are located in individuals. This process affects marginalized people the most, largely because neoliberalism frames poverty and stress as personal failures, bolstered by the myth of meritocracy, which conceals the social, systemic, institutional, historical, and political origins of stress (Forbes, 2019, p. 147; Hsu, 2016, p. 377; Januszewski & Koetting, 1998, p. 35; Marx, 2015, p. 1156; Purser, 2019a, p. 49; Purser, Forbes, and Burke, 2016, p. viii; Tomassini, 2016, p. 224). That is, MIM detaches personal troubles from public issues and teaches people to disregard systemic issues and instead focus on their inner world (Purser, 2019e, p. 3; Wrenn, 2022, p. 162). The focus on inner conditions distracts from outer conditions, thereby concealing structural inequality and the systemic causes of suffering (Arthington, 2016, p. 93; O'Donnell, 2015, pp. 187-188; Smallen, 2019, p. 138). Stress is located internally and conceptualized as reflections of our own inner consciousness and thus characterized as a form of self-victimization (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 99; Godrej, 2020, p. 4; Wrenn, 2022, p. 161). In this way, MIM

engages in victim-blaming by shifting structural insecurities onto individuals, concealing the ways in which systems and structures harm people. Thus, MIM is a band-aid solution at the individual level for what are actually systemic problems. This is a problem because the self-pacification and social control techniques of MIM lead to auto-exploitation, related to Foucauldian concepts of self-surveillance (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2020, p. 20; Purser, 2019e, pp. 2-3).

Both Positive Psychology (described later) and MIM are conflated together as part of wellness culture which promotes neoliberal self-reliance and salvation through consumption. Wellness culture posits that not only is health the absence of illness, but the maximization of happiness and wealth (Badr, 2022, p. 2). As alluded to above, wellness rhetoric functions on the belief that health and wellbeing is a *choice*, rather than being a privilege influenced by socio-economic realities (Badr, 2022, p. 3). Furthermore, MIM promoters frame happiness as being available and attainable by everyone, equally, as illustrated by the refrain: 'Happiness is an inside job'—completely ignoring the social and systemic determinants of suffering and lived reality of people who are oppressed and marginalized. On this, critical theorists counter that positive thinking alone does not translate to the improvement of material circumstances of individuals (Barker, 2014, p. 174). This is because, without naming and problematizing the underlying neoliberal basis of modern self-help and wellness culture, MIM is ineffectual, and in fact, detrimental, to the realization of collective well-being as it merely conceals the systemic causes of stress.

4.15. Mindfulness In Education

The introduction of MIM in classrooms is part of a neoliberal appeal for individuals to take control of their own well-being and illustrates a therapeutic turn in education, evidenced by buzzwords such as 'resilience' and 'grit', promoting the view that poverty, ill health, stress, social injustice, and inequality are an individual's *self-imposed* limitation, all of which can be overcome simply by *trying harder* (Hyland, 2017, p. 11; Koetting, 1998, p. 8; Matthiesen, 2018, pp. 2-3; Purser, Forbes, & Burke, 2016, p. xx; Smallen, 2019, p. 142). While it is useful to an extent to teach students how to control their emotions, there is little discussion about the sources of stress (Wong, 2021, p. 69). It may be said that teaching young people self-care practices coerces them to be happy, still, and docile in order to maintain what are often unjust and problematic

conditions (Jackson, 2020, p. 123). Put simply, MIM appeals to some teachers because it makes classroom management easier. Like resilience and grit, MIM in the classroom seeks to change people rather than change problematic institutions and systems (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, p. 149; Kucinskas, 2018, p. 88). Here, MIM in education may be training students to accept the inequitable conditions of neoliberalism by encouraging them to manage their inner selves rather than critically interrogating oppressive structures, institutions, and practices (Hsu, 2016, p. 378; Matthiesen, 2018, p. 6). As Bai, Beatch, Chang, and Cohen (2017) elaborate: “At its most limited application, mindfulness becomes just a temporary pacifier for stress-ridden individuals who have been and continue to be subject to increasing socioeconomic pressures and geopolitical oppression … especially in the way schools use mindfulness for self-regulation” (pp. 21-25). In schools, victim-blaming teaches students to see themselves as the problem, and they are encouraged to look inward and adjust to their environment, accepting their circumstance, no matter how oppressive (Hailwood, Wannyn, & Choudhury, 2020, p. 6; Jackson, 2020, p. 120). However, student resistance may actually be indicative of a corrupt and problematic system, rather than individual dysfunction.

MIM is applied in education for a plethora of reasons: for managing stress, to increase productivity and efficiency, in the service of classroom compliance, and to improve students’ performance on standardized tests. In all of these cases, the aim is for students to become successful, competitive, and productive individuals in a neoliberal society (Forbes, 2022, p. 8). MIM is often applied to coerce students to comply and conform to the behavioural requirements of schools in accordance with dominant norms, as well as to become more resilient in the face of mounting pressure to meet the demands of academic expectations, foreshadowing the demands that will be placed on them as they enter the workforce, which is part of the process of ‘schoolifying’ or ‘academicizing’ young people (Flores, 2015, p. 2; Flores, 2016, pp. 443-445; Forbes, 2012, p. 4; Forbes, 2016a, p. 361; Forbes, 2019, p. 104; Min & Lynn, 2019, p. 7; Reveley, 2016, p. 507).

While MIM has been introduced into education under the pretense of helping students cope with stress and pressure, in actuality, MIM practices instill a moral responsibility for personal well-being onto young people and signals the self-help industry’s entry into educational spaces, exposing young people to medical-therapeutic

subjugation as agents in need of self-surveillance, creating a new economy of disease that pathologizes and medicalizes students (Payne, 2019, p. 80; Reveley, 2016, p. 499). Students are told that the causes of their problems are their own emotions and feelings, rather than social, structural, and institutional drivers of inequality (Forbes, 2019, p. 147). In this way, MIM is used as a kind of immunization that inoculates against the stresses of modern life by 'pathology-proofing' young people so that they are able to survive in contemporary neoliberal society (Reveley, 2016, p. 507). And thus, teaching students mindfulness as a way to stave off anxiety and depression reinforces the notion of permanent 'therapeutic surveillance', alluding to the internalized panoptic gaze mentioned earlier (i.e. neoliberal self-surveillance), which encourages self-governance (Forbes, 2016b, p. 1265; Forbes, 2019, p. 153; Reveley, 2016, p. 505; Smallen, 2019, p. 134).

In many of these instances, teachers who implement MIM in their classrooms view themselves as helping students who are struggling by teaching them coping strategies and resilience techniques. Yet, the net result of using MIM as therapeutic coping remains the same—the perpetuation of the status quo. The humanistic terminology promoting MIM in schools conceals an authoritarian desire to control students (Purser, 2019a, p. 183). Put another way, MIM in education is a technology that fashions compliant students who can regulate themselves, focus more intently on their work, collaborate well with others, and perform under duress—incidentally all qualities that corporations look for in employees. An example of this includes guided meditations played to students before high-stakes tests with the aim of increasing academic performance (Brito, Joseph, & Sellman, 2021, p. 267). And thus, the implementation of MIM in schools is indicative of the growing medicalization of society and how biopolitics are deeply interwoven into educational discourse (Carvalho & Gracio, 2022, p. 66; Sauerborn, Sokefeld, & Neckel, 2022, p. 16).

MIM has taken root as a classroom management tool operating under a covert neoliberal agenda that maintains existing structural inequality by promoting a curriculum of conformity while conditioning students to practice self-management (Forbes, 2017, pp. 145-149; Ng & Purser, 2015, p. 2; Reveley, 2016, pp. 501-506). Given how much responsibility has been increasingly passed off onto teachers to support students in all aspects of their lives, exemplifying job-creep, it is not surprising that many are willing to try MIM. In the following quote, Ruppel (2024) was originally speaking about corporate

and professional institutions, however, it can just as easily be a commentary on what is happening in educational institutions: "'Softer therapeutic solutions included wellness practices like meditation, sleep hygiene, screentime restrictions, and the completion of self-help worksheets. This set of therapeutic interventions aimed to produce a disciplined labor force" (p. 14). For this reason, MIM is dangerous because it engages with diagnostic labeling and applies therapeutic methods of regulating students with meditation (Bai, 2017, p. 2; Titmuss, 2016a, p. 185). Thus, mindfulness in education teaches students to simply cope with problematic systems by placing responsibility for poor mental health on individuals rather than their institutional origins (Brito, Joseph, & Sellman, 2021, pp. 267-268).

Critics decry how emotional intelligence and compassion training in the form of MIM have been applied in schools as a curricular apparatus that promotes obedience and docility toward the preservation of the status quo (Forbes, 2015, pp. 1-2; Forbes, 2017, p. 148). Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, and Sciuchetti explain: "Rather than developing a collective and critical consciousness and solidarity, children are inculcated into the individualistic, 'meritocratic' ethos wherein they, alone, are responsible for their behaviors" (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, p. 162). Teaching students compassion and acceptance techniques to cope with stress without acknowledging its structural and institutional causes is tantamount to spiritual bypassing. In many such cases, MIM is presented as ethically neutral and beneficial to all students, illustrated by simplistic one-size-fits-all approach. However, presuming mindfulness programs to be universally beneficial is problematic. (Anālayo, 2021, p. 2890). While mindfulness *may* improve academic performance and reduce stress for *some*, for others it has no noticeable impact (Hailwood, Wannyn, & Choudhury, 2020, pp. 3-4). Thus, it is imperative to critically interrogate commodified forms of mindfulness that purport to lead to prescribed outcomes.

MIM for the purpose of calming students or helping them manage their increasingly stressful and competitive lives conceals awareness of inequality and sidesteps the difficult work of getting to the core of why their stress arises in the first place (Walsh, 2016, p. 161). The lack of inquiry into structural oppression perpetuates unjust institutional practices, and teaching MIM in schools as behaviour regulation limits critical analysis of oppression and inhibits students from developing subjectivities that challenge oppression, reinforcing a culture of passivity in the face of injustice (Flores,

2015, p. 3; Simpson, 2017, p. 66; Stanley, Purser, & Singh, 2018, p. 18). Rather than mobilizing for change, MIM pushes individuals to accept and adapt to the very conditions that cause the stress they are trying to reduce (Forbes, 2016a, p. 357; Forbes, 2019, p. 141; Purser, 2019a, p. 8). It is important to interrogate these assumptions, biases, and school practices in order to expose the underlying systemic and hegemonic values that mainstream education replicates. MIM lacks critical analysis of power structures, and as such, tacitly supports a problematic economic and social order by maintaining existing hierarchies (Forbes, 2016a, p. 360; Forbes, 2016b, p. 1258; Forbes, 2017, p. 149; Forbes, 2019, p. 118; Jain, 2020, p. 889; Purser & Petranker, 2018, p. 1; Walsh, 2018, p. 113). To extrapolate, MIM is individualistic and inward-focused and thus lacks the capacity to foster critical consciousness of sociopolitical and historical contexts. In this sense, MIM is pacifying and politically neutering (Forbes, 2019, p. 159; Godrej, 2020, p. 1).

MIM is seldom applied as a tool to name and problematize the socially constructed nature of neoliberal schooling and its harmful manifestations. Instead, MIM reinforces dominant hegemonic norms and indoctrinates students and teachers into the status quo where they are taught skills to replicate neoliberal governmentality, that is, to be present-centered, self-regulated neoliberal agents that repress ‘negative’ emotions and focus on their work in a dysfunctional system that is contributing to burnout and stress (Brito, Joseph, & Sellman, 2021, p. 267; Forbes, 2019, p. 31; Jackson, 2020, p. 121; Ng & Purser, 2015, pp. 2-4; Purser & Petranker, 2018, p. 1; Walsh, 2018, p. 112). The emotional-regulation function of MIM in schools obscures the discriminatory, anti-critical, inequitable structures and practices of education systems. To reiterate, students are taught to ‘choose’ their emotional responses to difficult situations with a strong emphasis on ‘rational’ reactions where docility is regarded as ‘good,’ while resistance to authority is regarded as irrational or ‘bad’—reinforcing moral hierarchies of good and bad behaviour, demonstrating a preference for conforming to dominant norms. In other words, MIM encourages young people to be calm and complacent (Hailwood, Wannyn, & Choudhury, 2020, pp. 5-6).

With the increased application of MIM in schools, some parents are raising concern over its implementation, claiming that it infringes on their rights against religious instruction in secular public education by pointing out the Buddhist basis of meditation and mindfulness (Brown, 2017; Ergas, 2014, p. 69; Ergas & Hadar, 2019b, p. 3; Wong,

2021, p. 68). In response to this challenge and to mitigate further resistance, mindfulness supporters have presented MIM as ethically neutral and value-free in order to circumvent the requirement of secularity in public education. Since public schools are sensitive to potential litigation, mindfulness promoters have gone to great lengths to frame mindfulness in scientific and secular terms to pass gatekeepers which include parents, teachers, and administrators (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 87; Wong, 2021, p. 68). Resultingly, MIM is divorced from its religious and cultural origins, recontextualized as a quasi-scientific and spiritual-but-not-religious technique to bolster focus and attention (Flores, 2016, p. 445). In this way, mindfulness has been defined so broadly in order to enter secular curriculum and applied so liberally to a range of ambiguous practices and mental states associated with a variety of religious, quasi-religious, and secular phenomena that it is increasingly difficult to discern what mindfulness is, how it should be practiced, and who has the authority to teach it (Cooper & Purser, 2014, p. 5; Van Dam et al., 2018, p. 3; Vokey, 2001, p.8). The vague nature of MIM also allows it to dodge criticism since it is difficult to pin down (Wilson, 2014, p. 121).

And yet, it must be stated noted that mindfulness cannot merely be added on to existing curricula like a band-aid and be expected to lead to magical results (O'Donnell, 2015, p. 198). As Vokey (2014) explains: "We cannot assume that introducing contemplative disciplines into higher education will necessarily promote transformative change. We must acknowledge the possibility that contemplative disciplines will be taken up in ways that serve existing priorities and leave the educational status quo intact" (p. 262). Without naming, exposing, and confronting the neoliberal and racist structures that undergird modern schooling and society, mindfulness programs in education merely perpetuate the status quo and hegemonic patterns by treating symptoms rather than the underlying structural, systemic, and institutional mechanisms that perpetuate suffering (Jain, 2020, p. 889; Moeller, 2019, p. 182; O'Donnell, 2015, p. 192; Poceski, 2020, p. 8; Purser, Ng, & Walsh, 2017, p. 58; Vokey, 2014, pp. 255-265; Wilson, 2017, pp. 70-71).

4.15.1. Positive Psychology

Another psychological paradigm that is often applied in education is Positive Psychology. PP promotes the belief that optimism and positivity can be cultivated regardless of the material conditions, lived experience, and class background of individuals (Reveley, 2016, pp. 498-502). In such cases, the structural, institutional, and

systemic causes of stress are obscured, and blame is placed on the individual experiencing it (Caring-Lobel, 2016; Koetting, 1998, p. 4; Purser, 2019e, p. 2; Stanley, Purser, & Singh, 2018, p. 5). As described by Cederström and Spicer (2015), PP "combines magical thinking (you can achieve anything with a positive attitude) with a harsh insistence on personal responsibility (if you fail, it's your fault)" (p. 64). Furthermore, PP associates mental health with qualities of a particular personality type, namely: extroverted, goal-driven, and status-seeking (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2020, p. 18; Miller, 2016).

Much like PP, MIM has become part of the new 'science of happiness' that implores individuals to 'be happy' through emotional self-management, all of which depoliticizes and privatizes stress, absolving institutions from accountability for their role in perpetuating stress (Caring-Lobel, 2016, p. 209; Moses & Chouhury, 2016, p. 455; Nisbet, 2019, p. 33; Purser, 2019d, p. 4; Walsh, 2016, p. 162). In this regard, PP and MIM run on parallel tracks toward similar ends. Depoliticizing stress is a common tactic that MIM shares with other new age metaphysical-adjacent concepts like PP, dubbed 'prosperity gospels.' To extrapolate, MIM and PP are part of a multi-billion-dollar industry that props up neoliberal capitalism by linking spiritual discipline with prosperity. Here, good health and wealth signal divine chosen-ness and moral superiority, while sickness and poverty are markers of weakness and lack of self-discipline (Jain, 2020, pp. 888-889; Payne, 2019, pp. 78-79; Smith, 2000, p. 7; Vörös, 2016, pp. 66-67). This medicalization and psychologization of daily life are part of a neoliberal movement called 'healthism' (Badr, 2022, p. 2; Barker, 2014, p. 169).

Practices such as MIM and PP act as regulatory mechanisms that are illustrative of how neoliberalism exerts its control over life processes, spurred on by the 'tyranny of happiness' in a modern western culture where being happy is a moral responsibility (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, pp. 5-8; Kirmayer, 2015, pp. 460-461; Ng, 2016, p. 148; Purser, 2015, p. 38; Stanley, 2012, p. 635; Walsh, 2018, p. 110). However, as Purser (2019a) points out, "A truly revolutionary mindfulness would challenge the western sense of entitlement to happiness irrespective of ethical conduct" (p. 20).

4.15.2. Social Emotional Learning

Social Emotional Learning [SEL] is another growing trend in the educational landscape, along with PP and MIM. Like PP, SEL has roots in business management psychology. As such, SEL teaches the regulation of emotion to produce ‘good’ workers, rooted in neoliberal concepts of being ‘productive’ (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, pp. 144-145).

In schools, SEL is framed as a ‘kinder’ form of classroom management, appealing to those who find overt discipline distasteful. However, SEL without any socio-political awareness has been described as ‘white supremacy with a hug’ (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022p. 135). Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, and Sciuchetti (2022) explain: “SEL is often seen as a ‘nice’ form of classroom management, perfect for a field dominated by ‘nice’ white women who see their work as apolitical and neutral rather than political and rooted in the maintenance of white supremacy” (p. 131). Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, and Sciuchetti (2022) continue:

> Although society views discipline as imperative to effective student learning, to many white educators, being viewed as ‘mean’ and ‘strict’ is often anathema to their construction of what it means to be a caring educator. Part of this explains the willing outsourcing of discipline to school resource officers, as well as the enthusiastic (superficial) embrace of practices to teach grit, meditation, and social-emotional development. (p. 149)

At its root, SEL is a coercive means of engendering compliance through the assimilation of young people into dominant norms; resultingly concealing inequity and the structures perpetrating it. In these cases, while being presented as neutral, SEL is anything but neutral. That is, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are not neutral concepts but are socially constructed, usually by the dominant group. While SEL presents itself as neutral and universal, terms such as ‘school readiness’ obscures the constructs that they are, perpetuating behavioral expectations that are presented as universal, but are, in fact, white, middle-class values (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, pp. 155-157).

Critical scholars suggest that SEL, like PP, is problematic as it stunts students’ emotional and social growth by encouraging them to meet normative expectations through suppression of negative emotions in favour of positive emotions. Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, and Sciuchetti (2022) describe this process: “SEL, as frequently

operationalized, is a dehumanizing process that seeks to assimilate non-dominant children into dominant ways of being while concurrently seeking to enforce compliance and normalize children to oppressive structures" (p. 131). Critics argue that teaching students to fit in with dominant norms may cause harm because it:

> Serves to protect and further instantiate privilege while simultaneously harming marginalized groups. By prioritizing niceness over doing the right thing, we teach children to not speak up and challenge their oppression while simultaneously reifying fragility and bystander tendencies in dominant groups (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, p. 154).

Despite espousing the *language* of social justice, SEL appears to reinforce the deficit ideologies of neoliberal education. Implicitly, deficit ideologies forward the idea that it is the young person's responsibility to *choose* behaviours that align with the dominant educational culture, and if they do not, they are characterized as problematic and in need of fixing (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, p. 133).

4.16. Problematic Examples

The purpose of this section is to illustrate problematic uses of mindfulness in different contexts, and to explicate why they are problematic. The aim is to analyze how MIM is promoted as a pragmatic technique, used in any context, including for violence and profit, exemplifying practicing mindfulness in ways that are counter to Buddhist ethics (Arthington, 2016, p. 88; Hyland, 2018, p. 4; Titmuss, 2016a, p. 185).

4.16.1. Mindfulness In The military

The U.S. military has spent $125 million on mindfulness research through its Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) initiative and Mindfulness-Based Fitness Training (MBFT) program (Purser, 2019a, p. 206; Wilson, 2014, p. 151). One of the aims of CFS research is to identify the 'active ingredient' in mindfulness as well as its 'optimal' dosage to maximize its benefits, emblematic of positivist and instrumental motives (Ergas, 2019b, p. 346; Lavelle, 2016, p. 237; Senauke & Gates, 2014, p. 3; Titmuss, 2016a, p. 185). Allegedly, mindfulness supports soldier's abilities to function during stressful combat scenarios, to better manage the stresses inherent in armed conflict, to maintain operational awareness, to return to action quicker after injury, as well as to reintegrate into civilian society after discharge (Badr, 2022, p. 5; Cederström & Spicer, 2015, pp. 23-

24; Wilson, 2014, p. 152). Furthermore, U.S. Army officials claim their interest in mindfulness is largely in the service of decreasing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among soldiers. MIM promoters such as Kabat-Zinn suggest that training soldiers in mindfulness may help save lives in combat situations by augmenting 'sustained attention response' skills (Humphreys, 2019, p. 3). These claims are highly questionable, and a counterargument could be made that anyone trained in mindfulness would actually refuse to participate in military activity altogether, especially considering the Buddhist tenets of non-harm and non-violence (Hyland, 2015, p. 14; Hyland, 2016a, p. 183; Kucinskas, 2018, p. 73; Paulson et al., 2013, pp. 97-98; Titmuss, 2016b, p. 5). The adoption of mindfulness in corporations and in the military provide evidence that MIM is not intrinsically progressive or liberatory (Ferguson, 2016, p. 204).

We must also consider the role that Buddhism has played in perpetuating violence historically. In Japan, Buddhism has been complicit in supporting military brutality and genocide in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, devastating large parts of East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands. Here, Buddhist concepts were applied by the military as moral justifications for violence and imperialism (Ashton, 2013, pp. 42-44; Dawson & Turnbull, 2006, p. 61; Goto-Jones, 2013, p. 15; Moloney, 2016; Purser, 2015, p. 39; Smith, 2008, p. 20; Sugino, 2020, p. 35; Wilson, 2014, p. 152). In another problematic example linked to the military, Heinrich Himmler, a leader of the Nazi SS, was an avid yoga and meditation practitioner who planned yoga retreats for elite SS officers, believing that yogic practice could benefit soldiers in combat situations and allow Nazi death camp guards to manage stress more effectively (Purser, 2019a, pp. 225-226). The point here is not that yoga and meditation are the problem per se, but that the appropriation of these practices in the service of militaristic aims are problematic and require further critical analysis.

In opposition to these uses, Bai, Beatch, Chang, and Cohen (2017) posit: "To apply mindfulness to exploitative profitmaking (as in business), killing (as in military), or competition (as in school) is completely misguided, destructive, and certainly shows ignorance of what mindfulness is about" (p. 28). If MIM actually has the effects that some mindfulness promoters (e.g. Kabat-Zinn) suggest it has, that is, that it leads to world peace, then instead of teaching mindfulness to soldiers, mindfulness teachers should first teach mindfulness to politicians and military leaders, as leaders and decision-makers are the ones who create policy and authorize war. This would be an example of

tackling the problem at the root (decision-makers) rather than later downstream (soldiers). Similarly, in educational contexts, mindfulness should be taught to teachers, administration, and staff before applying it to students, for the same reasons outlined above.

4.16.2. Yoga

Yoga in the west provides a cautionary tale for the future of mindfulness as it is increasingly subsumed into modern western culture, both having been detached from their ethical and philosophical frameworks and reduced to instrumental practices. Yoga has been marketed to secular audiences as a therapeutic and leisure activity (Frisk, 2012, p. 59; Godrej, 2020, p. 2). In this sense, modern yoga serves as a proverbial 'canary in the coalmine' for MIM in schools, exemplifying how movements are appropriated, commodified, and their transformational potential is blunted (Dawson & Turnbull, 2006, p. 61; Lomas, 2016, p. 2; Neale, 2011, pp. 1-2; Poceski, 2020, p. 5; Titmuss, 2016a, p. 187). Yoga's introduction in the west was bolstered by the emerging hippie and experimental drug culture of post World War Two, similar to Buddhism, and appealed to westerners through its exoticism and 'counter-cultural cachet' (Carrette & King, 2013, pp. 115-120).

In its original form, yoga is a holistic spiritual practice, whereas the yoga commonly practiced in the modern west focuses on *asana* (physical practice), which is *one* of the eight branches of yoga. Modern yoga is conceptualized as physical exercise, associated with performative displays of health and beauty, largely by able-bodied and class-privileged people (Cannon, 2016; Fisher, 2010, p. 3; Gregoire, 2013, p. 6; Munir, Ansari, & Brown, 2021, p. 7; Orr, 2014, pp. 42-43). In this modern postural yoga, the philosophical base of yoga is watered-down and thus, the metaphysical and ethical dimensions of ancient yoga are lost (Carrette & King, 2013, pp. 118-120). Bai, Beatch, Chang, and Cohen (2017) explain: "Consider what yoga has generally become in North America: a billion-dollar industry that proffers a homogenized version of the original intent of the practice and idealized and extreme images that consist of young and sexy bodies" (p. 22).

As yoga studios proliferated and demand for instructors grew, teacher training became a major source of revenue and subsequently, yoga practices began to be

copyrighted and franchised (Munir, Ansari, & Brown, 2021, p. 7). This is described by Godrej (2017):

> Yoga's popularity exploded as Euro-American practitioners began to invent their own yoga practices, commodifying, branding, and marketing their programs to global audiences. The growing array of yoga practices available in the West now includes aerial or flying yoga (performed on silk scarves suspended from the ceiling); acro-yoga (performed in acrobatic, circus-like style); Stand-Up Paddleboard (SUP) yoga, performed on a paddleboard on open water; "rock-n-roll yoga" (set to certain kinds of music); "yogalates" (a hybrid of yoga and Pilates). (p. 776)

Yoga went from a religious and meditative philosophy that took a lifetime to learn, to one where anyone could become a yoga instructor in a weekend. This process transformed yoga from a set of renunciatory practices for attaining liberation into an exercise routine and 'spirituality of the self' where it became fused with neoliberal consumerism (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 114-121; Godrej, 2017, p. 772; Munir, Ansari, & Brown, 2021, p. 34). Will mindfulness end up like yoga in this regard? All signs indicate that it already has (Kucinskas, 2018, pp. 191-192).

4.16.3. Environmental Education

Another example of a potential 'canary in the coalmine' for mindfulness in education is Environmental Education [E. E.]. E. E. exemplifies how a transformational pedagogy is diminished by its integration into neoliberal education. That is, E. E.'s ecologically transformational potential and political will is blunted as a result of being reconceptualized to fit into neoliberal education. E. E. in neoliberal education disregards the social, political, and economic aspects of environmental issues and does not interrogate the capitalist system which promotes an unsustainable economy based on endless consumption and resource exploitation (Gruenewald, 2004, pp. 71-88). Take for instance how Earth Day is often taught as a standalone, box-checking exercise, not connected to any other part of curriculum. In response, some scholars suggest that eliminating E. E. from curriculum may be the only way to save environmental ideals from becoming co-opted by the dominant discourse of neoliberal education.

Like commodified yoga and environmental education, mindfulness in education may itself become a cautionary tale for other emerging educational movements, exemplifying how emancipatory pedagogies lose their transformational potential as they

become integrated into neoliberal education (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 187). The examples of commodified yoga and environmental education illustrate the watering-down of potentially transformative pedagogy as it is molded to fit into neoliberal education. Naming and illustrating transformative practices being co-opted helps to illustrate the process of appropriation, commodification, and de-naturing.

In this chapter, we have taken an in-depth look at MIM, its origins, its development, its permutations, and various other connections, including its application in education and schools. In the next chapter, ‘Psy-health industry’, we will examine the processes by which MIM came to be accepted in modern western culture through its association with psychology and medical science.

Chapter 5. Psy-Health Industry

How is it that Buddhist practices such as mindfulness and meditation have come to be accepted in western secular culture? One answer lies in how Buddhism has been framed as a proto-science amenable to the study of the mind, emotions, and consciousness (Coleman, 2001, p. 4; Drougge, 2016, p. 170; Edelglass, 2017, p 23). Some MIM promoters view Buddhism as a form of psychology where Buddhist meditation is characterized as a scientific method of inquiry into one's mind (Brumett, 2021, p. 2135; Schedneck, 2013, p. 50). MIM fuses mindfulness with modern psychological interpretations about how the mind works. As a result, mindfulness is recast as a kind of mind science to fit into a western paradigm to fulfill western needs, as well as to side-step resistance against introducing Buddhist concepts in secular institutions. That is to say, MIM is attractive for westerners in part due to its compatibility with secular and psychological frameworks (Frisk, 2012, p. 54). The interaction of Buddhism with psychology has had a substantial impact on ascribing new meanings to Buddhism. Take for instance how many institutions and researchers often refer to mindfulness programs as Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs). The use of the word 'intervention' reveals the influence of medical science and how mindfulness is applied in a medical disease paradigm (Ergas, 2014, pp. 63-66; Ergas, 2019b, p. 346). Thus, mindfulness has been detached from Buddhism and is professionalized to become the realm of psychologists, doctors, scientists, and entrepreneurs. For this reason, MIM is emblematic of what some theorists have referred to as 'medical neoliberalism' (Chachignon, Le Barbenchon, & Dany, 2024, p. 6).

The popularity of MIM may indicate a thirst for new forms of self-help in an ever-growing market, as described by Rowland (2023): "Where conventional medicine shrugs its shoulders, the wellness industry brims with answers" (p. 1); however, the medical establishment still demands that treatments be validated by science (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 66). Thus, mindfulness is required to jump through the hoops of science to prove its efficacy since science serves as the gatekeeper through which a 'primitive' and 'foreign' mindfulness must pass in order to become legitimate (Brazier, 2016, p. 64; Frisk, 2012, p. 51; Marx, 2015, p. 1153; McMahan, 2017, p. 117; Smallen, 2019, p. 140; Somers, 2022b, p. 2; Walsh, 2016, p. 155; Walsh, 2017a, p. 9). It does this by replacing Buddhist language with scientific language, given that science is the common idiom of modern

secular societies (Goto-Jones, 2013, p. 6; Poceski, 2020, p. 5; Purser, 2019a, p. 117; Purser, Forbes, & Burke, 2016, p. ix; Vörös, 2016, p. 76). It is here where MIM with its aura of mystical exoticism, along with its association with neuroscience fulfils both criteria.

The blending of Buddhism and science has come into vogue over the past twenty years. For example, the Tibetan Buddhist leader the Dalai Lama professed the idea of Buddhism being beholden to the rigors of scientific testing and has claimed that should any Buddhist 'truth' be debunked by science, then Buddhism should change its position. Thus, even the Dalai Lama appears to suggest that Buddhism and science are compatible. In contrast, some Buddhist scholars suggest that the core frameworks between science and Buddhism may be incompatible, as science is concerned with naming, categorizing, and devising explanatory stories about things, whereas Buddhism attempt to avoid or extinguish such dualistic tendencies (Bao & Willis, 2022, p. 48; Edelglass, 2017, p. 1; Gopnik, 2017, p. 10). The merging of Buddhism with science has wrought some peculiar results, MIM being one of them. Thus, the blending of Buddhism with science should not be accepted as neutral.

5.1. The Influence Of Health Science On Mindfulness

The process of scientization ushered mindfulness into the medical/health paradigm, facilitated by the view of mindfulness as a quantifiable construct rather than an ethical practice, detaching it from Buddhism and its historical, cultural, and social context (Sun, 2014b, p. 400). The science of mindfulness promotes self-regulation and the calibration of individuals to enterprise culture in what has been called the 'mindfulness academic science complex' or the 'mindfulness industrial complex' (Carvalho & Gracio, 2022, p. 64; Ferguson, 2016, p. 202; Purser, 2019a, pp. 32-33; Schedneck, 2013, p. 36).The medicalization of mindfulness also confines the practice to symptomatic relief—a privatized and individualistic practice heavily influenced by neuropsychological and therapeutic approaches (Arthington, 2016, p. 92; Magee, 2016a, p. 426; Purser, Forbes, & Burke, 2016, p. x).

5.2. Modern Neoliberal Psychology

Critical theorists suggest that psychology and neoliberalism are close partners, as neoliberalism is interested in remodeling society in accordance with the free market, while psychology is applied to convince individuals that such ways are natural (Arthington, 2016, p. 91; Ash, 2007. p. 210; Thayer-Bacon, 2003, p. 34). The history of modern psychology is thus inextricably linked to the history of western capitalism (Arthington, 2016, p. 92; Carrette & King, 2013, p. 63; Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009). Carrette and King (2013) elaborate further:

> *Psychology as a modern discipline of the self is a political apparatus of modern society to develop and sustain consumers*. This is not to assume that psychology is part of direct government propaganda (although western governments support such research for military, educational and industrial purposes), but rather that psychology is a mechanism of a wider ideology of privatisation and individualization. (pp. 56-57, emphasis in original)

Furthermore, critics posit that psychology perpetuates the status quo through socialization of citizens to capitalist ideology (Chachignon, Le Barbenchon, & Dany, 2024, p. 9). In this sense, psychological theories are based on assumptions rooted in particular moral orientations which are themselves rooted in cultural and historical legacies. For example, critical theorists posit that modern psychology is heavily Euro-American-centric, based on individualistic, Cartesian, and Christian frameworks, developed to help people adjust to the demands of life under capitalism. It is in this context that MIM is becoming one of the preferred tools of mental health professionals in the production and management of subjectivity (Arthington, 2016, pp. 93-98; Ditrich, 2016, p. 205; Marx, 2015, p. 1157; Moloney, 2016, p. 284; Sun, 2014b, p. 405).

Psychology commands legitimacy through its framing as a science (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 60). That is, modern industrial psychology claims to provide the ‘truth’ about the human condition through methodical study, however, such truths are tenuous and subjective hypotheses at best. Carrette and King (2013) extrapolate:

> Psychological theories are shown to be full of inaccuracies, and new models are superimposed as corrections, only to be later discarded when the next fashionable, new theory emerges on the scene. This provisional nature of psychological ‘truth’ is not simply (as some psychologists would like to argue) a matter of improving techniques and accuracy, rather, it reflects the shifting political sense of what it is to be human and the adaptation of psychological ‘science’ to fit such shifts. Psychological

> theories, as we have noted, tend to mirror the political climate; for instance, cognitive 'science' mirrors the growing importance of information technology and the uniformity of global finance-based capitalism. (pp. 64-65)

In other words, psychological concepts are based on particular political regimes of knowledge where political ideologies mediate what is considered 'truth' (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 62). Thus, MIM promoters demonstrate a modernistic bias when they presume the modern worldview as universal, objective, and free from culture (Purser, 2015, p. 36). However, it is important to expose this supposedly 'objective' modern view as containing just as much cultural baggage (positivism, Cartesian dualism, Eurocentric white supremacy) as Asian Buddhism (Cheah & Suh, 2022; McNicholl, 2018, p. 226; McNicholl, 2021, p. 1). By becoming aware of such systems and relations, one can begin to recognize how social structures are reproduced (Hick & Furlotte, 2009, pp. 16-21).

5.3. Neoliberal Narcissism

The transformation of mindfulness into a self-help technique reifies the self and concretizes egoic identity attachment with its focus on *self*-improvement (Payne, 2016, p. 126). Critics argue that meditation practices applied toward self-improvement merely bolster egocentrism, further entrenching the individualistic and atomized notion of 'I', 'me', and 'mine' that reinforces the self in order to function in a competitive and individualistic society (Bazzano, 2016, p. 301; Ericson, Kjonstad, & Barstad, 2014, p. 77; Forbes, 2019, p. 17; Lavelle, 2016, p. 237). This is described by Carrette and King (2013):

> The kind of New Age teachings that we commonly find sold to us as 'Asian spirituality' reflect a very western cultural *obsession* with the individual self and a distinct lack of interest in compassion, the disciplining of desire, selfless service to others and questions of social justice. (p. 114)

This kind of mindfulness rooted in self-help and individualism gives license to individuals to engage in solipsism, hedonic bliss-seeking, and self-absorption, reinforcing the self rather than realizing its impermanence (Forbes, 2019, pp. 18-39; Frisk, 2012, p. 57; Hyland, 2018, p. 1; Joiner, 2017, August 25, pp. 1-3; Purser & Milillo, 2015, p. 8; Rockman & Collins, 2019, p. 2; Sharf, 2015, p. 479; Sugino, 2020, p. 31, Tomassini, 2016, p. 222). In this regard, MIM justifies excessive self-focus, distracts people from the

social causes of stress and oppression, and limits the cultivation of a critical political consciousness—all of which has been a boon to corporations that benefit from framing neoliberal precarity as natural (Caring-Lobel, 2016, p. 202; Moseson, 2018, p. 113; Purser, 2019a, p. 134; Walsh, 2018, p. 113). While people practicing MIM may report to be healthier, happier, and more productive, there is also evidence to suggest that they are inclined to be more narcissistic (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 10, p. 133). For instance, Faure (2017) has referred to MIM as 'compassionate narcissism' (p. 145), and Eklöf claims that MIM fosters "self-preoccupation and egocentrism" (Eklöf, 2016, p. 331).

5.4. Mindfulness Research

We will now explore how the popularity of MIM is based on flawed evidence, and is not as beneficial as MIM promoters claim it to be. Modern research on meditation began in the early 1970s, initially focusing on Transcendental Meditation [TM], largely due to the fact that TM was the first Asian meditation style that came to be widely known in the U.S. (Hickey, 2010, p. 170). TM never became as mainstream as mindfulness has today and theorists suggest that this can be attributed, in part, to the differing social locations of the respective leaders of each movement. To elaborate, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the leader of TM, was a traditional Indian spiritual leader, while on the other hand, Jon Kabat-Zinn, the leader of MBSR, was a doctor and professor. Despite Maharishi Mahesh Yogi promoting TM as a science, TM nevertheless had religious components that were difficult to conceal, especially compared with MBSR which had aligned itself with neuroscience (Frisk, 2012, p. 55; Kucinskas, 2018, p. 80; Wilson, 2014, p. 79). Additionally, access to TM was restricted, requiring special direct instruction from a teacher which kept authority of TM centralized and limited its ability to move into new contexts. MIM, on the other hand, disseminated quickly and widely, especially as it became increasingly commodified.

Beginning in the early 2000s, mindfulness became the dominant form of meditation being researched. Interest in mindfulness as a research and academic subject has exploded in the past forty years: peer-reviewed publications have grown from only a few in 1980 to over 700 in 2017 (Ergas, 2014, p. 62; Ergas, 2019b, p. 341; Ergas and Hadar, 2019b, p. 1; Hyland, 2015, p. 13; McMahan & Braun, 2017, p. 2; Moloney, 2016; Sun, 2014b, p. 402). To illustrate further, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the U.S. has spent more than $100 million on mindfulness research in

collaboration with the Departments of Defense and Veteran's Affairs (Ferguson, 2016, p. 201; Purser, 2019a, p. 121; Samuel, 2016, p. 58; Titmuss, 2016a, p. 185).

Yet, despite the exponential increase in the number of publications on mindfulness, there is still a paucity of research applying a critical lens, since most studies are concerned with 'proving' the efficacy of mindfulness which is indicative of the industry's aims to find proof to confirm the benefits and applicability of MIM into further contexts. Not surprisingly then, most mindfulness research focuses on outcomes such as individual well-being, cognitive and emotional management, and grades (Kucinskas, 2018, pp. 134-135). Resultingly, critical research on mindfulness only accounts for a mere 2 to 4% of academic papers published every year (Ergas and Hadar, 2019b, p. 18; Purser, 2019a, p. 192). There is very little analysis of how suffering results from the power structures and economics of neoliberal corporate capitalism. Suffice it to say, there is a lack of critical discourse in/on mindfulness research. Furthermore, there is very little research conducted on the potential negative consequences of MIM, such as mental breakdowns, dissociation, hallucinations, and paranoia (Chen, 2018, p. 67; Hickey, 2010, p. 176; Kucinskas, 2018, p. 75; Wilson, 2014, p. 83). Here, Chachignon, Le Barbenchon, and Dany (2024) comment: "The relative lack of attention towards these negative occurrences stems from the persistent scientific assumption that Mindfulness is universally beneficial" (p. 4).

5.5. Questionable Research

MIM, like other self-help fads, is plagued by overzealous claims about its capabilities and benefits. In all the media hype surrounding mindfulness, some of its benefits have been overstated, based on flawed data and questionable evidence (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 37; McMahan, 2017, p. 121; McMahan & Braun, 2017, p. 15; Sharf, 2015, p. 472; Sun, 2014b, p. 405; Stanley, Purser, & Singh, 2018, p. 2; Van Dam et al., 2018, p. 2). The field of contemplative neuroscience is prone to overly simplistic and reductive explanations of affective phenomena, leading to exaggerated claims (Nehring & Frawley, 2020, p. 1195; Van Dam et al., 2018, p. 15). In many cases, researchers look for evidence that mindfulness 'works' so that they can conduct further research, which in turn fosters overly positive findings, perpetuating a vicious cycle (Kucinskas, 2018, pp. 66-67, p. 147, p. 153; Nehring & Frawley, 2020, p. 1195). In light

of the often-inaccurate media accounts of mindfulness, critics are beginning to question the legitimacy of the scientific support for mindfulness (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 163).

The majority of mindfulness research is poorly designed with methodological flaws, including small sample sizes, biased selection of participants, demographic homogeneity, inadequate controls, inattention to gender, bias toward positive results, lack of replication, and post-hoc conclusions (Arthington, 2016, p. 90; Chen, 2018, p. 67; Eklöf, 2016, p. 327; Hickey, 2010, p. 176; McMahan & Braun, 2017, p. 15; Moloney, 2016, p. 280; Purser, 2019a, p. 63; Purser, 2019a, pp. 115-118; Purser, Forbes, & Burke, 2016, p. v; Ruan, 2020, p. 41). The danger of poor research is that it can mislead the public, which is a serious matter as it is unethical to make claims which exceed reasonable evidence (Brown, 2017, p. 55; Van Dam, van Vugt, Vago, Schmalzl, Saron, Olendzki, … Meyer, 2018, p. 1). Furthermore, scientists with more critical leanings are beginning to point out that mindfulness research is conducted primarily with W.E.I.R.D. participants, that is, people from: Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic nations, and therefore results from such studies cannot be generalized (Henrich, 2020). Moreover, some researchers concede that most positive findings are highly speculative and negligible (Jackson, 2020, p. 121; Purser, 2019a, p. 13). For example, a seminal 2014 study at Johns Hopkins University suggests mindfulness is no more effective in treating depression, anxiety, pain, and stress, than talk therapy, regular exercise, or placebo (Cooper & Purser, 2014, p. 9; Purser, 2019a, pp. 235-236). Chachignon, Le Barbenchon, and Dany (2024) add: “Some systematic reviews and meta-analyses indicate a low level of evidence supporting the improvement of stress and mental health-related quality of life through Mindfulness programs” (p. 7). This illustrates how the widespread enthusiasm of MIM promoters to insert MIM into evermore contexts based on empirical claims are tenuous at best.

In order to mitigate the proliferation of questionable research on mindfulness, it is imperative to critically interrogate the overly positive studies that circulate in the mainstream and reign in some of the more egregious claims. We must critically examine mindfulness research and ask questions such as ‘Who is funding this research?’ And ‘Who benefits from the outcomes?’ (Koetting, 1988, p. 4; Purser, 2019a, p. 117).

5.5.1. Quantifying Mindfulness With Medical Instruments

The majority of research on mindfulness is predicated on the belief that its effects can be empirically measured in a scientific manner (Wilson, 2014, p. 95). As Wilson (2014) reiterates: “Buddhism is reduced to meditation, meditation is reduced to mindfulness, and mindfulness is cast as a scientifically verified panacea” (p. 102). Research on mindfulness is predominantly quantitative, relying on medical instruments such as neurobiological imaging. Researchers also focus on aspects of meditation that they can validate, including participants’ self-reports on their perceived experience of mindfulness (Armstrong, 2019, November 25, p. 1; Hyland, 2015, p. 14; Kucinskas, 2018, p. 79; Purser, Forbes, & Burke, 2016, p. x; Stanley & Longden, 2016, p. 305). Thus, MIM immersed into the culture of measurement, utilizing functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), electroencephalograms (EEG), positron-emission tomography (PET) scans, and computerized tomography (CT) scans (Carrette & King, 2013, p. 52). Medical imaging technologies that record impacts of meditation on the brain activity of meditators are interpreted to mean that their brains respond in different ways from those of non-meditators—which some researchers claim to be evidence that meditation ‘works’ (Carvalho & Gracio, 2022, p. 65). However, Bennett et al. (2009), demonstrated that fMRI studies were not reliable in measuring mindfulness when they conducted a study in which fMRI readings supposedly recorded a *dead salmon* exhibiting mindfulness after being shown images of human suffering. And so, it is questionable whether these instruments could record the changes that MIM researchers claim (Brown, 2016, p. 77; Purser, Forbes, & Burke, 2016, p. v; Smallen, 2019, p. 140).

Applying quantitative research methods imbues mindfulness with the allure of scientific credibility, as does framing mindfulness as an academic discipline. For example, one of the most common claims by mindfulness promoters is that mindfulness practice increases brain functioning and brain development by invoking the terms ‘neuroplasticity’ and ‘neurogenesis’ (Sauerborn, Sokefeld, & Neckel, 2022, p. 15). In these cases, what is seldom acknowledged is that *any* activity done repeatedly over time changes brain functioning and brain development, not just mindfulness (Forbes, 2019, pp. 170-172). Much of this scientizing—measuring, quantifying, and categorizing is based on reductive explanations of meditation rooted in neuropsychological constructs.

The connection between neuroscience and mindfulness has created the mistaken perception that mindfulness is in the brain and head. As illustrated above, mindfulness practice is often conflated with neurophysiological changes in specific parts of the brain, and subsequently, MIM promoters define mindfulness as a neurocognitive skill that augments self-regulation, attention switching, and suppression of elaborative processing (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 233; Bodhi, 2011, p. 35; Purser, Ng, & Walsh, 2017, p. 48; Sharf, 2015, p. 477). This neuroscientific framing of mindfulness is refuted by concepts such as 4E Cognition, which postulates that consciousness is not merely 'in the head' or 'in the brain,' but is instead distributed in ways that are embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive, hence '4E' (Thompson, 2017, pp. 1-3). Relatedly, Buddhist mindfulness is rooted in a soteriological context and engages cognitive, physiological, and affective skills. Therefore, it is incoherent to equate changes in the brain solely to mindfulness. To reiterate, the inclination of western science to look exclusively at the brain to measure mindfulness is incomplete as it completely disregards ethical behaviour.

One problem with using medical instruments and scientific experiments to 'measure' mindfulness is that moral and ethical values cannot be measured by physiological or neurological changes alone (Forbes, 2012, p. 3). This is described by Carrette and King (2013): "You cannot, for example, measure the nature of human beings like you can measure the nature of minerals. You can measure the *biological* aspects of human beings, but not their thoughts, language and imagination (which by definition defy measurement)" (p. 59). The obsession with measurement and quantification of human experience reflects characteristics of positivism and neoliberal corporate capitalism. Precision and exactness may be useful when measuring things, but they are inadequate for understanding holistic human and ethical development (Koetting, 1988, p. 8; Koetting & Januszewski, 1991, p. 9). That the effects of mindfulness happen to correspond to neurophysiological changes as measured by medical instruments has been a convenient conflation of cause and effect for MIM promoters. By prioritizing results and valuing only that which can be measured, the scientific study of mindfulness puts it through inappropriate methods of evaluation (Forbes, 2019, p. 148; Hyland, 2016a, p. 183; Kumar, 2019, p. 249; O'Donnell, 2015, p. 196; Smyth, 2019, pp. 30-31; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000, p. 16; Westheimer, 2018, p. 224). It is due to the west's cultural fascination with brain imagery and medical

technologies that they are paraded as incontrovertible evidence of the efficacy of mindfulness. We also observe neuroscientific frameworks creep into education through the discourse of achievement. This is described by Bai, Beatch, Chang and Cohen (2017): “As neuroscientific knowledge garnered attention, coupled with empirical science’s current repute as epistemology par excellence, educators began to incorporate neuroscientific findings into discussions of pedagogical methods” p. 24). However, this too is problematic as a myopic and mechanical focus on neuroscience risks overlooking the social conditions of young people’s lives (Hailwood, Wannyn, & Choudhury, 2020, p. 11).

The reductive and instrumental logic of scientific positivism limits the scope of inquiry to observable and biological effects (Brazier, 2016, p. 77; Frank, Gleiser, & Thompson, 2019, p. 2; Walsh, 2017a, p. 11). Resultingly, validating mindfulness with neuroscientific experiments erases its social, cultural, and moral foundation in Buddhism (Forbes, 2019, p. 168). Put simply, studying meditation through a scientific lens with scientific instruments separates practice from context and turns it into an instrumental technique instead of an ethical practice (O’Donnell, 2015, p. 195).

5.5.2. Mindfulness Scales

Many mindfulness studies utilize self-reported mindfulness scales, and as of 2019, there are nine widely used mindfulness questionnaires, all of which measure and define mindfulness differently, with little congruence and replicability between them. On this, Grossman and Van Dam (2011) posit: “A person might easily be high in ‘mindfulness’ on one scale and low on another, [therefore] it is impossible to say what such findings actually mean” (p. 233). Given these discrepancies, there is doubt as to what these scales actually measure (Hickey, 2010, p. 170; Hyland, 2015, p. 15). Therein lies another problem with mindfulness research: self-assessments are not a reliable indicator of mindfulness because they are often biased and contradict actual behaviour (Grossman & Van Dam, 2011, p. 221; Purser, 2019a, p. 129; Van Dam et al., 2018, p. 4). Take this study for example:

> [Self-reported mindfulness] scores of binge-drinking … students … were compared with those of experienced meditators immediately following a multi-day meditation retreat…. Binge-drinking students scored significantly higher than experienced meditators on ‘mindfulness’ …. Hence,

> implications of this study should be clear: excessive alcohol intake is conducive to mindfulness, but mindfulness meditation is not. (Grossman & Van Dam, 2011, p. 230)

This example is demonstrative of how the scientific studies of mindfulness are not neutral but rooted in cultural assumptions replete with taken-for-granted beliefs about well-being, not to mention the widely varying conceptualizations of mindfulness among participants (Edelglass, 2017, p. 1). All of this speaks to the larger issue of conflating quantitative psychological and biological measurements as equivalent to mindfulness, as well as the problem with self-reporting, which is inherently biased (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 74; Hyland, 2016b, p. 109; Purser, 2019a, p. 128).

5.5.3. The Demographics Of Mindfulness Research

As discussed previously, the mindfulness movement is composed largely of economically privileged, educated, white professionals who use their social and financial resources to practice mindfulness and develop mindfulness programs. This demographic bias is reflected in mindfulness research writ large. According to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, the typical American meditator is middle-aged, white, college-educated and female (Chachignon, Le Barbenchon, & Dany, 2024, p. 6; Kim, 2018, p. 7; Kucinskas, 2018, p. 14, p. 144, p. 155, p. 176). Perhaps fittingly, when Time magazine highlighted the rise of mindfulness in a special edition on 'The Mindful Revolution,' the cover depicted a white, young, normatively attractive, woman. There are countless other similar examples, including another edition of *Time* magazine with another young, white, blonde woman on the cover (Borup, 2020, p. 233; Brazier, 2016, pp. 63-64; Brown, 2017, p. 65; Carlson, 2018, p. 1; Cassidy, 2019, p. 107; Cheah, 2011, p. 14; Coleman, 2001, p. 20; Iglesias, 2019, pp. 385-386; Min & Lynn, 2019, p. 6; Moseson, 2018, p. 28; Piacenza, 2014, pp. 2-4; Stanley, Purser, & Singh, 2018, p. 2; Wilson, 2016, p. 116). Similarly, searching 'meditation' on the internet yields hundreds of images of attractive, fit, white people meditating (Kucinskas, 2018, p. 30; Wilson, 2014, p. 64). Resultantly, there is critique that MIM is a designer drug for the elite, as well as an opiate used by the elite to control the masses. In this regard, it may be said that the mindfulness movement is a social bubble (Eaton, 2014, p. 3; Kucinskas, 2018, p. 142, p. 176).

All of this leads to questions such as: How is mindfulness material produced? By whom? For whom? (Apple, 2004, p. 6; Carrette & King, 2013, p. 3; Cheah, 2011, p. 3; Kucinskas, 2018, pp. 175-176; Walsh, 2017b, p. 4). Jeff Wilson (2014) answers: “The vast majority of information about mindfulness is disseminated by white people, in media venues controlled by white people, for the primary consumption of white people” (p. 64). Bao and Willis (2022) add: “Over 90 percent of the books about American Buddhism sold at bookstores focus on meditation and self-help were primarily written for educated white converts” (p. 46). This should be cause for concern, particularly as mindfulness programs designed by white people, taught by white people, for white people, will undoubtedly center whiteness (Koetting, 1988, pp. 1-5; Mindful Staff, 2017, p. 2; Vokey, 2014, p. 261; Wilson, 2014, p. 64). Centering whiteness in MIM marginalizes people of colour, most notably Asian and Asian American Buddhists, whose cultural heritage and practices are appropriated while they themselves remain relegated to the margins in a white supremacist society (Buddhist Peace Fellowship, 2016, p. 2; Gleig, 2019, p. 33; Hsu, 2016, p. 372; Ng & Walsh, 2019, p. 9).

Critical scholars posit that MIM programs are demonstrative of the appropriation, exoticization, and whitewashing of Asian Buddhist practices. For example, Sugino (2020) posits: “The Western appropriation of Buddhism occurs within a larger context of white supremacy and orientalism, and as a result rearticulates Buddhist ideas in ways that reinforce racial hierarchy” (p. 33). In such cases, white mindfulness promoters declare normative status for their views while denigrating Asian cultural forms of mindfulness (Cheah, 2011, p. 7; Sun, 2014b, p. 409; Brown, 2017, p. 66). This is precisely the tact of dominator culture operating in a colonial framework of conquest and appropriation, as discussed in the earlier section on orientalism.

MIM promoters often do not see the harmful effects of ‘modernizing’ Buddhism, where ‘modernizing’ is code for whitewashing (Biddlecombe Agsar, 2019, pp. 4-5). This process is described by Sherrell and Simmer-Brown (2017):

> Buddhist practice was introduced to white U.S. students without its Asian teachers of color, and students understood and practiced it through the lens of unacknowledged white privilege and supremacy. These white practitioners often have not self-identified as Buddhist and have felt free to appropriate mindfulness for their own privileged purposes. (p. 85)

Alarmingly, there have been instances where Buddhist modernists have attempted to connect Buddhism with white nationalism via Aryanism. Through their conceptualization of Buddhism as a universal world religion, orientalists and white Buddhist scholars attempted to frame Buddhism as “essentially Aryan” (McNicholl, 2021, p. 3), through the study of linguistics with race sciences, which, as a precursor to scientific racism, has been discredited. Conceptualizing the Buddha as Aryan allowed white Buddhists to connect him to an imagined European past, and thus gave license for Europeans to claim Buddhism for themselves (McNicholl, 2021, p. 3). This appears to be a small fringe subset of Buddhist Modernism, but it is nevertheless interesting to consider as we inquire into the appropriation of mindfulness and its formulation as a neutral, value-free therapeutic intervention.

Mindfulness was also made to appear familiar to westerners through the fabrication of narratives alluding to its presence in the west throughout history, such as in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau (Wilson, 2014, p. 66). This process is described by Carrette and King (2013): “Buddhism and Taoism has been remarkably popular as a philosophical source for various forms of New Age spirituality, from deep ecologists interested in environmental readings of early Taoist thought such as Thoreau and Emerson” (p. 91). Mindfulness is therefore framed as simultaneously foreign *and* part of western culture. Through this fabricated narrative, westerners can claim that they are practicing traditions long present in their culture, to which they have full right to—a nod to the notion of ‘birthright’ championed by Kabat-Zinn, mentioned earlier. This maneuver not only appropriates the practice of mindfulness, but also its history.

5.6. Science Is Not Neutral

The disciplinary dominance of science is the result of the pervasive modern influences of rationalism, positivism, and materialism. In the pursuit of knowledge, humans have created a view of science as reality in itself. It is theorized that this belief is a manifestation of an ancient monotheistic desire to know the world as God does, and so it may be said that the scientific pursuit of ‘objective reality’ is more of a theological concept than it is a scientific one (Frank, Gleiser, & Thompson, 2019, p. 7). In contrast, critical theorists posit that science is a social activity deeply steeped in subjectivity, rooted in particular cultural frameworks (McMahan, 2017, p. 126; Moses & Chouhury,

2016, p. 454). However, this is not to say that all science is useless and problematic, as science has brought forth many benefits to human life. Nevertheless, it is important to temper science's exclusive and exceptional claim to objectivity and acknowledge that it is fraught with subjectivity.

As illustrated throughout this chapter, the scientization of mindfulness transforms the practice to fit into a medical-therapeutic paradigm. This inevitably changes the nature of mindfulness as it becomes a therapeutic modality and intervention. Similarly, the research upon which the positive hype for mindfulness is built is unreliable. All of this alludes to the need to approach MIM with caution and more critical analysis to ensure that oppressive frameworks are not perpetuated. In the following chapter which concludes this dissertation, I will summarize the main themes in this thesis and suggest some possible ways forward.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

A prevalent assumption in MIM is that happiness is the absence of suffering (McMahan & Braun, 2017, p. 19). However, the fusing of Buddhism with the pursuit of hedonic happiness can be said to be contradictory to the aims of Buddhist mindfulness (Purser & Loy, 2013, p. 2; Purser, Ng, & Walsh, 2017, p. 48). According to Buddhist philosopher Śāntideva, the aim of meditative practice is to cultivate wisdom and ethical behaviour, not to maximize hedonic pleasure or fix ailments (Chen, 2018, p. 67; Dunne, 2016, p. 185; Kirmayer, 2015, pp. 460-461; Marx, 2015, p. 1154; Min & Lynn, 2019, p. 10; Purser & Loy, 2013, p. 1). That is, individual hedonic happiness is not the aim of Buddhist mindfulness practice. In fact, Buddhism does not hold happiness as a priority at all, at least not in the modern western conceptualization of happiness as positive affect (Chen, 2018, p. 67; McMahan & Braun, 2017, p. 19). This is described by Kirmayer (2015):

> It is the coupling of Buddhism and mindfulness … with the pursuit of happiness (defined in conventional terms [as] consumer capitalism or neoliberal personhood) that seems at odds with the origins and goals of mindfulness within Buddhism. Historically, monastic Buddhism was not directed toward mental health and well-being. The goals of happiness and self-efficacy that dominate current discussions in mental health are far from the original concerns. (pp. 451-452)

Similarly, Bai, Beatch, Chang, and Cohen (2017) add: “We do not deny that mindfulness can assuage stress, reduce anxiety, boost immunity, or even raise test scores. What we want to emphasize and highlight here, however, is that mindfulness is for a vastly more important and critical purposes than these incidental uses, however beneficial they are” (p. 28). It must be noted, again, that mindfulness was never intended for weight loss, stress reduction, attention training, to increase productivity, to help students perform better academically, or to ‘cure’ depression. These are all modern accretions (Carlson, 2018, p. 4; Harrington & Dunne, 2015, p. 621; Neale, 2011, p. 13; Patt, 2001, p. 5).

I believe that mindfulness is problematic when it remains a solitary, solipsistic activity in which a person remains stuck in the ‘me,’ unable to move beyond their ego-centric perspective. In a Buddhist framework, individual well-being is intimately tied to collective well-being, since individual suffering is connected to social suffering, and so mindfulness that is truly liberative acknowledges interconnectedness (Dawson &

Turnbull, 2006, p. 63; Forbes, 2019, pp. 35-41; Fordham, 2019, p. 2; Hick & Furlotte, 2009; Rockman & Collins, 2019, p. 2). Individual liberation, if such a thing is possible, is not sufficient to overcome collective suffering (Gleig, 2019, p. 36). On the contrary, mindfulness with ethics could challenge modern society's "self-centeredness: its individualism, commodification, materialism, and the maintaining of the status quo of inequitable power and privilege" (Forbes, 2016a, p. 356). As such, we must recognize suffering as a social-moral phenomenon perpetuated on a large scale by ideologies. Similarly, we must acknowledge that the causes of oppression are embedded in social structures and institutions, which requires political and social change, rather than individual transformation (Ashton, 2013, pp. 56-59; DeMoss, 2011, p. 319; Fordham, 2019, p. 3; Hyland, 2018, p. 26; King, 2016, p. 43; Purser, Ng, & Walsh, 2017, pp. 56-57; Stanley, 2015, p. 91). In this sense, MIM is ineffectual as long as it neglects analysis of social issues involved in suffering beyond the individual (Purser, 2019b, p. 2).

6.1. Alternatives To MIM

A UN report has found that mental health issues could be ameliorated by focusing on social justice rather than relying on pharmaceuticals and self-help regiments. In other words, tackling inequality in society is a better public policy solution for collective well-being than implementing self-help and wellness trends such as MIM (Purser, 2019d, p. 4). It follows then that rather than using MIM in education, there are a number of other options to support students. Many of them include bolstering social services, including:

1) Universal basic income
2) Implementing a 4-day workweek
3) Affordable childcare
4) Affordable housing
5) Student loan forgiveness
6) Affordable public transportation
7) Abolishing standardized testing
8) Abolishing grades

Instead of MIM in education, critics suggest that students can benefit from schooling which offers more social support as well as less emphasis on competition (Ng & Purser, 2015, p. 3). With this in mind, MIM in education should be stopped and resources redistributed to bolster social services such as before- and after- school programming and affirmative-action initiatives etc. (Hsu, 2016, p. 379).

6.2. Limitations

While I critique dominant hegemonic frameworks, I acknowledge that when applying critical theory, critical pedagogy, and other theoretical concepts, I have referenced many white male academics. Seeking out and centering scholarship written by people of colour and other marginalized voices would be beneficial for future research on this topic.

I acknowledge that there are increasingly more mindfulness programs that attempt to apply equity, diversity, and inclusion frameworks. This dissertation was primarily focused on critique of the current trends in MIM. Further research into these programs can be a possible next step.

I acknowledge that my use of the terms ‘east’ and ‘west’ throughout this dissertation may be critiqued as being facile in the manner in which it simplifies cultural differences and essentializes large groups of people. My aim in using these terms was not to create a false dichotomy or to erase intersectionality, but rather to refer to differences between cultures, particularly in earlier parts of their histories. To this end, I have applied Said’s concept of Orientalism to examine the relationship between Buddhist mindfulness and MIM. Orientalism, as described by McNicholl (2021): “refers to the colonial discursive power that reifies differences between East and West as essential, and as existing in a binary relationship, such that the West understands itself in contrast to the East” (p. 2). In this sense, Orientalism helped provide the framework with which to examine how MIM came to be an analogue for neoliberal spirituality.

6.3. Closing Thoughts

MIM has been stripped of ethics and its aims have been redirected to materialistic and individualistic goals. Furthermore, the instrumentalization,

commodification, and commercialization of mindfulness and its application in education mirrors the corporatization of education writ large. In this regard, Sugino (2020) cautions:

> In an era of neoliberal and racial violence, it is imperative that scholars be ever on the lookout for palliative strategies that essentially quell resistance or critical confrontation with the systemic causes of crises. These strategies may provide temporary reprieve but ultimately only produce an attachment to individual self-help mechanisms that maintain the status quo. (p. 43)

Likewise, Cosantino (2021) adds:

> [Mindfulness] is a practice that, if not rooted in an anti-oppressive praxis, can be used as an extension of the oppressive structures we seek to disrupt, especially when situated within white-supremacist U.S. academic settings. Therefore, when mindfulness and other contemplative practices are invited into dialogic spaces, their hauntings must be confronted because, otherwise, a practice intended for liberation will only ever be a weapon for harm (p. 8).

Unless we challenge modern corporatized education, schools will merely replicate problematic social dynamics and as we have seen, MIM does little to change these underlying issues (Forbes, 2016b, p. 1265; Forbes, 2017, p. 146; Purser, 2019c, p. 1). As such, we must imagine different ways of being—ways that are not tied to individualism, competitiveness, the market, and profit-maximization (Scherer & Waistell, 2018, p. 124). As Struhl (2017) describes: “Overcoming individual dukkha [suffering] requires that we overcome social dukkha, and this means that we must confront the economic, social and political causes of suffering as well as its fundamental ontological cause” (p. 108). Overcoming social suffering, as suggested by Struhl, requires an awareness of geopolitics and social justice in a modern globalized world (King, 2016, p.41; Stanley, 2012, p. 632). This cannot be achieved by MIM, as currently practiced, as it merely transfers the costs of structural and systemic problems from the state and organization-level onto individuals (Chachignon, Le Barbenchon, Dany, 2024).

A truly transformative education should challenge the assumptions and taken-for-granted beliefs that undergird existing educational practices and offer different possibilities (Gruenewald, 2004, p. 100). However, since schooling is the manifestation of sociocultural agendas that are promoted by the dominant class to maintain their power, change must come from elsewhere, rather than the existing system (Koetting, 1994, p. 55). Having said that, it is not the sole responsibility of marginalized people to educate others about oppression and injustice, because the emotional and physical

labour should not be borne by them alone (Suh, 2019, p. 12; Walsh, 2017b, p. 5). The onus is on administrators, educators, academics, researchers, and theorists to take shared responsibility to critique the 'way things are'. This will require, in the words of Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, and Sciuchetti (2022): "A radical rethinking of the purpose and function of education; an examination of current and historical systems of oppression and power; an unlearning of deficit ideologies, biases, and white supremacy" (p. 164). To support young people to self-actualize, educators need to acknowledge the effect of social location and systems of oppression that impact the lived experiences of young people (Cipollone, Brown Hoffman, & Sciuchetti, 2022, p. 156).

To reiterate, a central problem is how self-care practices such as MIM are primarily individualistic, self-centered, and inward-looking, deterring analyses of the institutional causes of suffering (Godrej, 2020, p. 11). While exploring one's interiority is important, the journey cannot end there. There must be an engagement with the outer life; this includes critically examining systems, institutions, and the society that we live and work in. The reflective lens must be applied both inward *and* outward, as social problems are not isolated phenomena but are a complex interplay between individuals and society (Forbes, 2019, p. 193; King, 2016, p.41; Koetting, 1998, p. 7; McLaren, 2009, p. 61). Analyzing outer conditions alongside 'inner work' may temper some of the more selfish and narcissistic tendencies endemic to MIM (McLeod, 2012, p. 3). In order to realize this, MIM must break free of its practice of internal self-management (Ferguson, 2016, p. 204; Kelly, 2022, p. 1). To change MIM from its current manifestation as a banal self-help technique, it must move away from individualistic and therapeutic approaches and incorporate more critical analyses that include intersectional perspectives such as gender, race, and class, among others (Magee, 2016a, p. 428; Ng, 2016, p. 148; Walsh, 2017a, p. 5). That is to say, real change from contemplative practices requires critical analysis of systemic oppression. Badr (2022) elaborates:

> Decolonizing wellness practices would involve decentering the white-settler-colonial-neoliberal notion of self-care that currently underpins mainstream wellness culture, wellness practitioners could start to honor the histories and creators of various wellness practices, and therefore reimburse the communities who have had their cultures and spiritualities appropriated and fetishized, and their labour subsequently exploited. (p. 7)

MIM should also include a critical dimension that questions dominant hegemonic norms, challenges entrenched systems of oppression, and engages in historical, political, and

cultural analyses of suffering (Barnhill, 2004, p. 56; Cannon, 2016; Hick & Furlotte, 2009, p. 9; Purser, 2019b, p. 5; Walsh, 2016, p. 162). Furthermore, MIM should reintegrate Buddhist ethics more explicitly to break free from the dominant biomedical emphasis on pathology (Purser, 2019b, p. 5; Purser, Ng, & Walsh, 2017, pp. 56-57). In this regard, mindfulness with explicit ethical instruction can present a corrective to the individualistic and therapeutic focus of current approaches (Hyland, 2015, p. 11; Somers, 2022a, pp. 2-3; Walsh, 2017a, p. 11).

Here, we revisit the recommendations from the beginning of this dissertation:

1) Ending the use of MIM in education.

2) For teachers to stop calling what they are doing 'mindfulness,' and instead call it by what they are actually doing, i.e., attention training, breathwork, etc.

3) If mindfulness continues to be applied in education, it should be rooted in Buddhist ethics to guide practitioners toward collective liberation rather than relief from stress.

The argument of whether mindfulness should be taken out of schools may actually be short-lived as it is only a matter of time before mindfulness loses its lustre and the next fad takes its place in a revolving door of educational technologies and commodities developed to reproduce capitalist hegemony through the institutionalization of social control and student behaviour management (Magill & Rodriguez, 2014, pp. 216-217). However, even after the educational landscape moves onto the next fad, critical researchers will continue to play a crucial role in naming and interrogating oppressive and problematic curricula and pedagogies and will be compelled to continue theorizing and enacting emancipatory change to meet the needs of future generations.

I conclude my inquiry into neoliberal corporate capitalism encroaching into educational spaces through MIM not with answers, but with more questions. I present this research as a resource for action-oriented researchers and activists to carry forward and enact this critical work. I am truly humbled to have had the opportunity to conduct this research, to educate myself on this very critical issue, and to be able to share it with the reader.

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