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## Introduction

Rick Repetti has written a lengthy, somewhat sprawling, rebuttal to four criticisms leveled against contemporary “mindfulness.” I offer here my reaction to his text in the form of reader response criticism. I’m not using “reader response” in its technical sense. I just mean to convey that I will not be commenting on each of his complicated meanderings or analyzing his copious analogies or dissecting his various examples. That would be too much. I will instead read through his text, pause at those points that strike me as salient, and then offer my more or less spontaneous response to them.

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## The [W]hole

To begin, I have some comments about the piece as a whole. As I read the synopsis, I found myself questioning the viability of Repetti’s overall argument. That is, I had to wonder whether he was making the right refutations. By “right”, I mean refutations that other defenders of contemporary mindfulness would find necessary and significant. To be more specific, would other refuters of the so-called McMindfulness critique

concur that the four objections that Repetti singles out for treatment are indeed the decisive issues to be addressed? If not, what would be the point of responding to his defense of these objections? Mindfulness proponents would simply dismiss my response as an irrelevant straw man argument, even if the straw man was fashioned by one of their own. On reflection, two things occurred to me. First, I have in fact come across these four objections elsewhere, in both formal and informal settings. So, I do think that Repetti is addressing criticisms that mindfulness proponents deem worthy of refutation. Second, it occurred to me that my response will all but certainly be accused of being a flimsy straw man attack *anyway*. Whether they are aware of it or not, mindfulness proponents are fast gaining the reputation of being people who are less than fully open to the full force of the criticism leveled against them. They employ various rhetorical strategies for evading the *brunt* of some critical point. It would be a useful project for someone to chart and analyze these strategies. I was considering whether I should take that approach here; namely, present a kind of rhetorical criticism of mindfulness. Then, it occurred to me: Repetti’s piece is valuable not because it defends mindfulness against certain objections, but because it exudes the very spirit of the mindfulness community’s engagement with criticism *tout court*. Along the way, Repetti’s piece exhibits two stock mindfulness rhetorical responses to criticism. I call these two responses, respectively,

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conceptual shape-shifting and covert idealism. I'll say more about each of these strategies below. The point I am making here is that Repetti's piece is instructive because it *performs* the rabbit hole that is "mindfulness."

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## The Definition

Repetti helpfully begins by defining the term "mindfulness." As this section's title, "To Be Mindful or Not To Be Mindful, That Is the Question," indicates, Repetti believes that we have a stark choice. We can either cultivate "the state of mind or quality of consciousness" that is mindfulness or can fail to do so and engage in mindlessness. The difference lies in whether or not one is "paying attention to what one is doing, thinking, perceiving, experiencing," via "metacognitive awareness." My first thought on reading Repetti's definition was that it conforms well to Jon Kabat-Zinn's wheel-turning utterance: "Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally. It's about knowing what is on your mind." (Kabat-Zinn 2016a). Repetti, finally, uses the analogy of bodily strength to convey two crucial facts about mindfulness: (i) it is a natural capacity and (ii) it exists independently of techniques for its development.

My additional thoughts on reading this definition were as follows. Repetti, like Jon Kabat-Zinn himself, is engaging in an equivocation of terms. The critique of mindfulness is not a critique of certain claims regarding cognition. Who would deny that the capacity of "paying attention" and so on is an important human trait? In the most substantive critiques of mindfulness, the term "mindfulness" itself refers to the ideological edifice that has been erected around Kabat-Zinn's founding statement. In offering the definition of mindfulness that he does, Repetti thus obscures and evades the real issue: the identity of mindfulness as a system of thought and practice, one that is, moreover: (i) implicated in a very specific social-economic-political context and (ii) productive of a

very particular subject and world. (From here on, lower-case "mindfulness" refers to the purported cognitive capacity and practice that trains that capacity while upper-case "Mindfulness" refers to the ideological system.) I will have an opportunity to say more about these points in the next section. The main point here is that Repetti's definition establishes at the outset a premise that infects his entire argument. That premise cannot, I believe, avoid the charge of either disingenuousness or obliviousness. Does Repetti really think that a critique is being leveled against the claim for an almost simple-minded quality of human awareness? Repetti is in any case in good company here, for Jon Kabat-Zinn and every other Mindfulness proponent whom I have read or listened to are engaged in the same obscurantism. Perhaps what we are seeing in this (willful?) confusion is a kind of genetic trait of Mindfulness. The trait is an inability to distinguish between mindfulness as a curative fantasy cloned from the existing social formation and Mindfulness as an ideological strategy for *engaging* the existing social formation. If so, that would go a long way in explaining Mindfulness followers' refusal to take criticism seriously. As an aside, Repetti's use of the term "Bandwagon" in his subtitle is symptomatic of this trait. The term suggests that critics are mindlessly mimicking one another's insubstantial talking points. It suggests that criticism is merely a passing fashionable trend, and thus need not be robustly engaged.

Repetti—inadvertently, I suppose—draws attention to a central feature of Mindfulness ideology that normally remains unacknowledged. I am referring to the fact that Mindfulness entails a covert idealism disguised as a materialist phenomenology. Repetti, for sure, is not explicit about this facet of Mindfulness. My impression is that Mindfulness believers, beginning with Jon Kabat-Zinn, are blissfully unaware of, or perhaps indifferent to, this aspect. In any case, we find Repetti ambling perilously close to this timeless Siren song of the spiritualist big Other, to, that is, the pure witnessing consciousness untouched by the contingencies of time, space, and matter. When Repetti speaks of "metacognitive states,"

“phenomenological self-mirroring,” and mindfulness as “a natural capacity,” he is marshaling the allies not of an immanent phenomenology, as he seems to believe, but of a transcendental idealism.

The final response that I’ll mention here is that Repetti’s definition—again, like Kabat-Zinn’s—is trivial. In proclaiming that each of us possesses a mental capacity for “being conscious that one is aware of what one is experiencing,” we have learned nothing new. That is, the statement, whatever it might mean and whatever profound import it is supposed to have, is tautological. Mindfulness proponents will likely take that comment as evidence of my lack of adeptness in mindfulness. In doing so, however, they are, like Repetti and Kabat-Zinn, confusing Mindfulness with mindfulness.

### The First Objection

Repetti next takes on what he terms the “‘Meditation Fails to Change the World’ Objection” of the so-called McMindfulness critique. His argument seems to boil down to this: It is no more a “shortcoming” of Mindfulness that it fails to change an unjust world into a just world than it is a shortcoming of countless other human activities—“gardening, karate, chess, poetry, art, hydraulics, Classical music, Zumba, dentistry,” etc.—that they fail to do so as well. Certainly, his argument continues, no one should blame a mindfulness meditator for seeking a strategy for coping in a stressful world. Indeed, mindfulness meditation is best understood “as a form of existential digestion: it facilitates the digesting of experience. Meditation typically helps individuals process the stresses that accompany encounters with the rough edges of reality, but it does not typically do so by chemically blocking them from cognitive processing.”

My first reaction as I read this section was that Mindfulness *does* claim for itself world-changing prowess. This prowess, moreover, comes precisely from the cultivation of mindfulness. The most recent evidence for these two claims comes from Jon Kabat-Zinn’s

conversation with Angela Davis in Oakland. The question driving the conversation was whether mindfulness practices can serve the advancement of social justice. Davis, for instance, pointedly asks: “In a racially unjust world, what good is mindfulness?” Kabat-Zinn clearly wants to claim that mindfulness and meditation possess world-changing potential. They are, he says, “transformative practices that are capable of moving the bell curve of the entire society toward a new way of understanding of what it means to be human.”<sup>1</sup> I also reflected on the large number of current books with “mindfulness” in their title, such as *Mindful Parenting*, *Mindful Teaching*, *Mindful Politics*, *Mindful Therapy*, and *Mindful Leadership*. I don’t think it is a stretch to suggest that the implicit claim of this conglomeration of books is that Mindfulness, and even mere mindfulness, has world-changing implications.

This disagreement of mine, however, was fleeting. What struck me most about Repetti’s argument in this section was its valorization of the neoliberal subject, and hence, his argument’s reactionary stance. I should add that this stance does not surprise me. Again, Repetti is proving himself to be a faithful Mindfulness subject here. In brief, Repetti seems to assume a subject that has no choice but to accept the “unjust world,” adapt to the “rough edges of reality,” and engage in practices that foster resilience. Repetti could not paint a clearer portrait of the diminished neoliberal subject. It is a subject that is perpetually vulnerable in the face of global, financial, environmental, political, ad infinitum insecurities. It is a subject that is racked by a

<sup>1</sup>“How Can we Bring Mindfulness to Social Justice Movements?” YouTube. <http://tinyurl.com/hyrajw>. Retrieved April 18, 2016. Kabat-Zinn’s overall answer in this conversation once again reveals the transcendental idealism of Mindfulness. He constantly makes overly simplistic affirmations about the world-altering power of, for instance, attending; being present; heightened awareness; uprooting greed, hatred and delusion, and so on. Davis responds with the anti-idealist argument that social injustices are not a matter of mere personal attitude, much less the lack of attention: Their roots dig deeply into the material structures of our social system.

degree of stress and tension that debilitates the real possibility of robust agency. These characteristics—vulnerability together with the necessity of acceptance, resilience, and adaptation—are classic neoliberal assertions about the human subject. This stance, of course, raises the possibility that Mindfulness is simply an unrepentant ally of neoliberalism. God knows the secret is out on “the long marriage of mindfulness and money.”<sup>2</sup> In that case, Repetti’s refutation of the “‘Meditation Fails to Change the World’ Objection” is justified. By all measures, it does indeed appear that Mindfulness is quite content being, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, “the perfect ideology supplement” of a rabid global corporate capitalism (Žižek 2001). So why in the world should we expect it to want to change anything?

My response to this sad conclusion is the following. When Repetti argues for the equivalence of the statements “Mindfulness Is All about Self-Help, It Does Nothing to Change an Unjust World” and “Brushing Teeth Is All about Hygiene, It Does Nothing to Change an Unjust World,” he reminds me of Donald Trump talking about abortion. As a recent *Huffington Post* headline put it, “Donald Trump Accidentally Articulates GOP Abortion Stance A Little Too Loudly.” In suggesting “that women should face legal sanctions for having abortions,” Trump inadvertently sailed “straight into ‘here be dragons’ territory.” Repetti, too, in linking Mindfulness with his “list of analogous things about which it is not a *shortcoming about those things* that they do not try to change an unjust world into a just world”—things like “embroidery, Pilates, hotel management, automotive mechanics, vinyl repair, bicycling, marathons, accounting, skydiving, fishing, deep sea diving”—is taking us into a Mindfulness “unauthorized personnel not allowed” zone. We can paraphrase the Trump article to fit our case: “Repetti was just saying bluntly what the actual implications of longstanding Mindfulness views on the diminished subject are.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>See, Goldberg (2015).

<sup>3</sup>See, Linkins (2016).

## The Second Objection

Repetti next tackles the “‘McMindfulness Is Divorced from Buddhist Ethics’ Objection.” Repetti’s point in this section seems to be: *so what? mindfulness is great!*

The section consists of two parts. The first part is simply a paean to mindfulness. It largely repeats and expands on the definitional section that opens the article. To repeat—and there is an awful lot of repetition here—what Repetti means by mindfulness is the capacity “to attend consciously to whatever one is doing or experiencing.” As in the earlier section, the supposedly obvious value of mindfulness is highlighted by contrasting it to mindlessness—“failing to attend consciously,” etc.—the source of “a great majority of all errors in judgment, decision, and action.” So, again, Repetti is not addressing the covertly ideological, subject-forming production that is Mindfulness. He is simply asserting the power and beauty of the *mana*-like quality of consciousness that is mindfulness.<sup>4</sup> What do ethics matter, Buddhist or otherwise, given this power? Then again, come to think of it—Repetti seems suddenly to realize—mindfulness *does* entail an ethics. But, in classic idealist fashion, it is an ethics that ensues naturally from the wondrous wellspring of metacognitive witnessing known as mindfulness. No prescribed ethics can trump the wholesomeness of that indigenous, natural effusion.

The Buddhist parable that Repetti cites to open this section says it all. By merely maintaining “mindful awareness” of the fact that he is stealing, this “incorrigible” thief finds himself incapable of further thievery. His mindfulness produces such an overwhelming gush of “compassion” for his victims that he just can’t go on with the thug life. So, critics of Mindfulness should stop already with their unfounded concern that mindfulness in the boardrooms of corporate capitalism and in the war councils of the military-industrial complex will turn out badly for the rest of us. For, as the mindful ex-thief makes irrefutably clear, we can be pretty sure that serious long-term mindfulness

<sup>4</sup>See Per Drougge’s contribution in the present volume.

practice, like the descent of the Holy Spirit, “will naturally foster the blossoming of...noble, altruistic imperatives.”

In the second part, Repetti brings up critiques by Allen Ginsberg and Slavoj Žižek. He doesn’t do anything substantial with these critiques. Again, it all seems to boil down to Repetti’s earlier argument, repeated here as a rebuttal to Ginsberg’s implied objection that “anything that fails to change the world may be thereby criticized.” But, Repetti repeats, that objection “undermines the force of the objection against any particular thing, since it applies to almost everything” (think: “theater, prestidigitation [magic tricks], photography, calligraphy, food trucks, method acting,” etc.). He lays out some interesting criticisms made by Žižek and seems to consider them important. For instance, Žižek’s contention, according to Repetti, that mindful meditation is the new opiate of the masses “is a chilling view, one that certainly merits serious reflection;” but Repetti doesn’t grant this, or any other of Žižek’s points, any reflection whatsoever. In fact, he simply employs the all-too-common Mindfulness tactic of facile dismissal of criticism. Žižek’s objection doesn’t really require refutation, Repetti concludes, because, after all, it “was already rebutted indirectly in my rebuttal of Moore’s non-world-changing objection.” No, it definitely was not.

My most general response to this section is that Repetti is right about his main contention. Critics’ objection that Mindfulness errs in not coupling its practices to Buddhist ethics is uninteresting. The objection also misses the point. Mindfulness certainly is a descendant of Buddhism. But, it is a descendant many, many times removed. It is, I would argue, even more closely related to, and bears closer resemblance to, American pop psychology, the 1960s human potential movement, Perennial Philosophy, positive-thinking spirituality, and apocalyptic New Age thought, just to name a few obvious blood relatives.<sup>5</sup> You don’t have to look too

closely to see that Mindfulness’s most recent progenitors are, of course, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. As I mentioned earlier, Mindfulness has the same DNA and was raised on the same values that undergirds today’s neoliberal, consumer capitalist social structure (acceptance, resilience, self-help, etc.). So, of course Jon Kabat-Zinn cozies up to corporate CEOs and American military generals.<sup>6</sup> And of course Rick Repetti wants to cancel the warrant on the claims of Buddhist ethics. When Žižek says that “meditation is the ideological form that best fits today’s global capitalism,” (Žižek and Milbank 2009) he is echoing the point that Repetti is making:

[Mindfulness meditation] in its abstraction from institutionalized religion, appears today as the zero-level undistorted core of religion: the complex institutional and dogmatic edifice which sustains every particular religion [can be] dismissed as a contingent secondary coating of this core.<sup>7</sup>

My point is that asking Mindfulness to conform to Buddhist ethics (whatever that is—*which* Buddhist ethics, for instance?) is like asking Prosperity Theology to reconcile its ethics with the Babylonian Talmud. So, I agree with Repetti when he rejects the notion that some sort of big fix “lies in the reconciliation of mindfulness with the ethical dimension of Buddhism.” The bigger problem for Repetti and his fellow Mindfulness believers, however, is that in invoking “ethics,” even as a negation, they inadvertently release the question-genie of just what kind of ethics Mindfulness itself *is* operating by. And, as far as I can make out, *there be dragons*.

### The Third Objection

“The ‘Unethical-Applications’ Objection” is next up for refutation. Strangely, Repetti does not actually present that objection. He certainly does

<sup>5</sup>By “apocalyptic New Age thought” I mean beliefs about the end times of the Old World and the coming of a New World, augured not by collective social action but by some sort of “shift in consciousness” from, in Repetti’s terms, pervasive mindlessness to widespread mindfulness.

<sup>6</sup>See “The Thousand-Year View: An Interview with Jon Kabat-Zinn,” *Inquiring Mind*, 30(2) Spring, 14–16.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid. “Spiritual meditation” stands in the original.

not present it in any of the relevant and strong forms with which I am familiar, such as William Davies's exemplary *The Happiness Industry* (Davies 2015). Instead, Repetti opines that the objection is a "misplaced criticism." The reason he thinks it is misplaced is that "It is those *uses* of mindfulness under those circumstances (by the military, Google, and so forth) that would be the problem, if they would be a problem at all, not mindfulness itself" (emphases in original). That's the core of Repetti's response to the "indictment of the ideology of happiness and its accompanying horrors of mindfulness and well-being"<sup>8</sup> that we find circulating in intelligent, philosophically astute critical circles today. Repetti's position on this issue boils down to a less consequential form of the NRA's dogma that "guns don't kill people—people kill people."

What Repetti does not seem to recognize is that in taking such a position, he is pulling back the curtain on the covertly ideological nature of Mindfulness. An ideology, recall, "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 2001). So, mindfulness, though presented as a basic natural capacity that, like strength, can be further developed (it is metacognitive awareness, the opposite of mindlessness, paying attention, etc.), in reality functions as a technical term in a discourse of self-actualization (as, in the NRA analogy, "guns" functions as a signifier in a discourse of liberty). "Being mindful" signifies one thing in an old "Leave it to Beaver" episode ("Be mindful of your brother, Wally!"), another in a Jon Kabat-Zinn text ("[being mindful] wakes us up to the fact that our lives unfold only in moments") (Kabat-Zinn 1994), and something altogether different in a Mindfulness-meets-scientism discussion ("being mindful leads to changes in the structural connectivity within the nervous system that would indicate an increase in interoceptive ability") (Siegel 2016). Repetti offers the analogy of "strength" in order to indicate the utter naturalness of "mindfulness." But this analogy is as sheer as the emperor's clothes since the term "strength" itself always occupies a specific

position within a particular chain of signifiers, a position which alone determines its linguistic meaning and ideological function.<sup>9</sup>

That we are dealing here with a central article of Mindfulness faith—with, that is, an ideologically encoded signifier that serves to inscribe the believer into the Mindfulness imaginary—is on full display in Repetti's contention that an "ethical perspective or framework in connection with the teaching of mindfulness" is unnecessary. In any other context, such a claim would sound bizarre at best and irresponsible at worst. In what sort of alien universe might some human action be devoid of ethical implications? Unlike Repetti, apparently, my imagination fails me here. To be mistaken about such a bizarre possibility is irresponsible because it enables the disavowal of the ethical framework that *is* in place when teaching and practicing Mindfulness.

This act of disavowal is bound up with what Žižek calls the "new age spiritual fetish."<sup>10</sup> Repetti's Mindfulness subject embodies the denial of the ethical implications of his or her beliefs and actions *as* interpellated Mindfulness subject. Briefly, a fetish, a used here, is "that which enables you to (pretend to) accept reality 'the way it is.'"<sup>11</sup> Making Mindfulness's ethics explicit is unnecessary because mindfulness is simply that which enables one to view metacognitively the "contents of one's own mental state," and, by implication, the contents of one's world.<sup>12</sup> It is this belief that permits the Mindfulness fetish to function. In

<sup>9</sup>For example, think of the different ways that "strength" functions in the following discourses: Rosy the Riveter; the American cult of masculinity; Alcoholics Anonymous recovery speak; the Catholic Mass (where weakness is strength); national security rhetoric, and so on. The point is not the obvious one about a term's requiring context for its sense. It is, rather, the idea that that sense functions within productive subject and social formations.

<sup>10</sup>See Butler (2014).

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Repetti's claim concerning metacognition and "phenomenological self-mirroring" is admittedly a weak, psychologized version of the old spiritualist quest for "things as they are." Jon Kabat-Zinn, however, offers us the strong version: "Coming to terms with things as they are is my definition of healing." See, Kabat-Zinn (2016b).

<sup>8</sup>Simon Critchley's blurb for Davies's book.

“practicing” metacognitive awareness (Repetti) or non-judgmental present-moment awareness (Kabat-Zinn), in, that is, simply seeing “things as they are,”<sup>13</sup> the practitioner is able to effectively keep at bay certain truths which, if acknowledged, would reveal Mindfulness to be but an ideological spectacle. Among these truths is, for instance, the fact that the believer’s thoughts, actions, and emotions are always inextricably implicated in the human symbolic collective known as society. When the Mindfulness believer is taught to view subjective iterations of the social collective with a putative “awareness” that is open, spacious, non-judgmental, non-reactive, metacognitive, phenomenologically reflective, and so on, he is in fact being taught to see the world through the ideological prism that is Mindfulness. Evidence of this fact is that despite Jon Kabat-Zinn’s grandiose proclamation that being thus mindfully present “actually does change the nature of our reality,”<sup>14</sup> the world remains unchanged. The only change that occurs is in the practitioner’s perception. The same can be said, of course, for an hallucination. This fact sheds light on another terrible truth that the Mindfulness fetish enables the believer to ignore; namely, the truth that the believer is complicit in sustaining the very social collective that compels him or her to employ the mindfulness remedy in the first place. The Mindfulness fetish fosters the illusion that the believer can live in an ethically neutral, or indeed superior, relation to social reality.

## The Fourth Objection

Repetti ends his piece by refuting “The ‘Meditation Doesn’t Matter Much to Buddhists’ Objection.” The objection is not really pertinent. Repetti,

indeed, makes it clear that his motivation here is purely personal. He says, the objection “captures my interest...perhaps because I have made my own meditation practice the centerpiece of my philosophical life for over 42 years.” He apparently feels a need to resolve the issue for himself.

My response is that Repetti’s argument is more interesting for unintentionally highlighting yet another fetishistic aspect of Mindfulness. In this case, the fetish functions to ward off the numerous implications of Mindfulness’s relationship to Buddhism. Mindfulness ideology is woefully lacking anything resembling the theoretical apparatus that Buddhists have labored to construct through the ages. As faith-driven, and thus unsatisfactory, as they typically are, Buddhist theories at least attempt to work through the implications of its doctrines in the face of broader epistemological, ontological, and ethical concerns. Much of this theoretical work by Buddhists was prompted by the objections of their critics. As Repetti has revealed to us in each of his previous refutations, Mindfulness thinkers feel no such compulsion to *respond to* as much as to evade or dismiss criticism. Again, Repetti is proving himself to be the good Mindfulness subject in this regard.

A very telling exchange between Jon Kabat-Zinn and Danny Fisher brilliantly highlights the fetish at work, if somewhat frantically so.<sup>15</sup> I will cite the exchange at length, and let my comment on it serve as my conclusion to this response to Rick Repetti.

Kabat-Zinn: You understand that I myself am not a Buddhist, right? I don’t see what I do as Buddhism so much as I see it as Dharma expressing itself in the world in its Universal-Dharma-way.

Fischer: Well, that might be a good place to start. I know you have a history with...is it the Cambridge Zen Center?

K-Z: I’ve studied with a lot of different Buddhist teachers; still do. For a time I actually did consider myself to be a Buddhist. But I realized at a certain point that it was really most important for me to be a human—the fewer affiliations I had, the better.

<sup>13</sup>They are, namely, like water cascading off a cliff, inherently empty or content-free, hence not requiring judgment or reaction, etc.

<sup>14</sup>*Inquiring Mind*, “Coming to our Senses: A Conversation with Jon Kabat-Zinn, <http://tinyurl.com/jszqm2a>. Retrieved April 21, 2016.

<sup>15</sup>“Mindfulness and the cessation of suffering: An exclusive new interview with mindfulness pioneer Jon Kabat-Zinn,” *Lion’s Roar*. <http://tinyurl.com/hb38sag>. Retrieved April 22, 2016.

For me personally, that is. Also, I don't think I would have been able to do what I did in quite the same way if I was actually identifying myself as a Buddhist; it inevitably would have been seen as Jon Kabat-Zinn trying to put his Buddhist trip over on other people. I wanted to offer instead a kind of translation of a universal understanding or approach that was never really about Buddhism. The Buddha himself wasn't a Buddhist, and the term Buddhism is an invention of Europeans. And, of course, Buddhists could [*sic*] really care less because it's all about non-duality: as soon as you start classifying Buddhists and non-Buddhists you're not really a Buddhist anymore. I get quoted on these points a lot. All of this is just a way of giving you a background flavor of what it is that I do.

F: Speaking of quotes of yours, one that appears in the press release about your kickoff of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month at UCLA is about your work as an offering of "the wisdom and the heart of Buddhist meditation without the Buddhism..."

K-Z: Yeah, I have said that. I say those kinds of things a lot. It's not meant to be disrespectful, in that anyone who knows anything about Buddhism will understand that it's not about that—it's about the Dharma. It's about non-attachment to name and form, so to speak.

F: So, in a sense, it's about getting past "Buddhism?"

K-Z: I don't know that it's about getting past it so much as it is about going back to the beginning.

Jon Kabat-Zinn embodies here the fetishistic disavowal that Mindfulness is entangled in a relationship with Buddhism. This disavowal is not a well-reasoned repudiation. It is not a cool-headed rejection of the claim. It functions as a fetish because it enables Kabat-Zinn simultaneously to *distance* himself from the apparently unacceptable truth that Mindfulness is consequentially bound up in Buddhism and to *sustain* the implicit benefits derived from that relationship. Reasons for doing so should be obvious. Repetti's desire to refute the "Meditation Doesn't Matter Much to Buddhists" objection is indicative of these reasons. In short, the reasons constitute a coping mechanism: how to avoid entrapment in the overly determinate network of postulation that is Buddhism while simultaneously asserting mastery over Buddhism's central truth (e.g., Mindfulness captures "the wisdom and the heart of Buddhist meditation without the Buddhism").

If Mindfulness is subsumed under Buddhism, it cannot avoid appearing as an indefensibly simplistic version of its progenitor. For, given Buddhism's complex network of postulates concerning, for instance, the grounding of meditation practice in a robust ethics, Mindfulness is unable to answer adequately for its deviations from traditional norms. If Mindfulness is wholly withdrawn from Buddhism, on the other hand, it then becomes barely indistinguishable from any other unsophisticated, under-theorized self-help cure. Maintenance of this fetishistic disavowal thus enables Kabat-Zinn to view Mindfulness as more essentially Buddhist than is even traditional Buddhism. It enables the delusion that, in his words, Mindfulness is not so much Buddhism as it is "Dharma expressing itself in the world in its Universal-Dharma-way."

We could explore this central facet of Mindfulness ideology through several potent critical theories. We might apply, for instance, Harold Bloom's concept of the anxiety of influence, and find that Mindfulness emerges out of an intentional, if largely unaware, misreading of the Buddhist text. To paraphrase Bloom for our purposes, when two "strong" systematizers meet, the newer one must commit "an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation" of the older one. Otherwise, the innovator will be subsumed under the older master, becoming but a mere manager of the traditional status quo. That Kabat-Zinn accomplished this feat with Mindfulness was due in part to his "self-saving caricature of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism" of Buddhism (Bloom 1997). The fetish aids Kabat-Zinn and his Mindfulness followers in staving off this unacceptable conclusion.

We might also employ the critical tool of Sigmund Freud's "narcissism of minor differences" (Freud 1961). This is a condition that breeds contempt toward that which you perceive as lying too close to you for comfort. Freud defines this as "a convenient and relatively harmless satisfaction of the inclination to aggression, by means of which cohesion between the members of the community is made easier." He gives as an example the way northern

Germans ridicule southern Germans. Any astute observer of the Buddhism/Mindfulness interface is witness to the mutual contempt each has for the other.<sup>16</sup> To see how this condition is narcissistic just consider the manner in which, in the above exchange, Kabat-Zinn gazes into the mirror of Buddhism and sees reflected back to him the “Universal-Dharma-way,” the “the wisdom and the heart of Buddhism,” that is precisely the face of his very own Mindfulness. It is the fetish that allows this distorted reflection.

We might, finally, apply Jacques Lacan’s critical theory of the hysteric’s discourse. Doing so, we would see in what ways Mindfulness rhetoric presents an exemplary instance of the hysteric’s approach. As in Bloom’s theory, the hysteric always stands in relation to a master. For example, Kabat-Zinn reveals in the exchange—as indeed Repetti does throughout his piece—that he values and indeed desires the outcomes of the master discourse, Buddhism. Yet at the same time, he reveals that he is impelled to challenge and resist being a subject of that discourse. As hysteric, he must therefore cast the master project in his own terms. It bears repeating that as chysteric—as, that is, an *alienated* subject of the master—Kabat-Zinn is nonetheless captured by the *desire* for the wisdom and liberation that the master discourse so deftly arouses in him. The

fetish enables him the illusion that he is outflanking today’s traditional Buddhists themselves toward that end by “going back to the beginning” and thus becoming more essentially Buddhist than the Buddhists themselves.<sup>17</sup>

We might apply these and numerous other critical tools to better understand Mindfulness as the ideological system that it is. To call Mindfulness an ideological system is not to dismiss it out of hand as a product of false consciousness or devious manipulation. It is, rather, to acknowledge Mindfulness as being uniquely productive. It is productive of a quite particular subject, one that imagines his or her relation to the world in quite particular ways. The value of criticism is that it enables us to make explicit the operations of an ideological system that the system itself keeps implicit—its unstated assumptions; its unspoken values; its relationship to existing social, economic, and political formations; and, perhaps most importantly, its tacit formation of individual actors in the world. Marjorie Gracieuse sums up this task of criticism perfectly: It “consists in wresting vital potentialities of humans from the artificial forms and static norms that subjugate them” (Gracieuse 2012). It might be true that, as Repetti believes, “meditation matters” for humanity. But, it is equally true that criticism matters for humanity. Without it, we can’t distinguish a vital human potentiality from a self-serving prescription of a covertly ideological program. Rick Repetti’s refutation of four objections to Mindfulness is valuable in stimulating further critical work toward this end.

<sup>16</sup>I say “astute” observer because this contempt is often veiled in the passive aggressive niceties of “right speech.” “Right speech” has emerged as a decisive discursive strategy in contemporary Western Buddhism. That is, it has become an apparently indispensable mechanism for normalizing certain voices, ideas, and behaviors, while excluding others. It has, in other words, become a censorious tool of subjugation. As such, it deserves further study. It certainly has burgeoned with the coming of the internet, no doubt due to the potentially unruly democratic nature of online discussions. I know of no Western Buddhist (*pace* Kabat-Zinn and Repetti, that moniker includes Mindfulness) blog, podcast, Web site, or Twitter account that does not invoke “right speech” either implicitly or explicitly, quite often the latter. The result is that Western Buddhist discourse is bland and predictable. Western Buddhist webmasters have apparently figured out that “The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum.” (Chomsky 1998). So-called right speech is a crucial element toward this end.

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<sup>17</sup>For a fuller account of the Lacan’s four discourses, see Wallis (2016).

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