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ON BEING MINDFUL: THE PROMISE AND PERILS OF THE "MINDFULNESS MOVEMENT"

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Abstract

This is an appreciative and critical review of Doug Oman's (University of California, Berkeley) "Mindfulness for Global Public Health: Critical Analysis and Agenda." Following a contemplative methodology, I begin with a brief self-contextualization rooted in critical subjectivity. The first primary section of the paper in turn offers some appreciative comments, in which I draw particular attention to Oman's "fourteen integration-relevant axes and dimensions." This represents the "promise of mindfulness," at least in terms of health and wellness. The subsequent section focuses on some critical reflections. I draw particular attention to issues related to mispresenting "mindfulness" as a supposed universal as well as various unquestioned assumptions and problematic tendencies in the Mindfulness Movement, especially the privileging of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and derivative approaches. This represents the "perils of mindfulness." I conclude with a brief visionary statement on potential future prospects.

Key Words: Contemplative experience, contemplative practice, Contemplative Studies, health, Jon Kabat-Zinn, meditation, mindfulness, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Mindfulness Movement, Religious Studies, therapeutic meditation

This is an appreciative and critical review of Doug Oman's (University of California, Berkeley) "Mindfulness for Global Public Health: Critical Analysis and Agenda." It is organized into three principal parts: (1) Appreciative comments; (2) Critical reflections; (3) Future prospects.

To begin with self-contextualization, critical subjectivity, and auto-ethnography, which are some of the hallmarks of Contemplative Studies, I am neither a clinical psychologist, mindfulness researcher, nor public health advocate. My primary fields are Contemplative Studies, Daoist Studies, and Religious Studies, with expertise in the comparative and cross-cultural study of meditation and cognate disciples, especially Daoist (Taoist) forms of contemplative practice (see Komjathy, 2017; Komjathy, 2020a; Komjathy, 2020b; Komjathy, 2021). I assume that I have been invited to provide this critical response due to my standing as a leading architect and advocate of Contemplative Studies (see Komjathy, 2015; Komjathy, 2018; Komjathy, 2020c). Briefly, Religious Studies is the interdisciplinary scholarly field dedicated to research and education on religion/religions, including theory and method derived from and applicable to the comparative and cross-cultural study of the related cultural phenomena broadly understood. It is diametrically opposed to uncritical adherent and "non-specialist" views, which often are rooted in unquestioned assumptions, uninformed opinions, and even anti-religion (secular Protestant) biases. It assumes and advances *religious literacy*, that is, deeper engagement and understanding of religious adherents, communities, and traditions. This includes from both emic/insider and etic/outsider perspectives (see, e.g., Doniger O'Flaherty, 1995; Doniger, 1998; McCutcheon, 1999; Komjathy,

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2011; Komjathy, 2016; Komjathy, 2018). Contemplative Studies is an emerging, interdisciplinary scholarly field dedicated to research and education on contemplative practice and contemplative experience.[2] As I understand and define these terms, “contemplative practice” refers to approaches and methods that develop attentiveness, awareness, interiority, presence, silence, transformation, and a deepened sense of meaning and purpose. Observant readers will note the (intentional) absence/exclusion of “mindfulness.” As I will discuss momentarily, this is because the latter concept has a particular history, largely indebted to secularized and medicalized (as well as banalized and commodified) Buddhist meditation. In my way of thinking, “mindfulness,” although complex and diverse, falls into the category of “attentiveness,” as well as the associated “concentration.” Paralleling assumed Buddhocentric values like “wisdom and compassion,” it is not a universal category (see below), or even a helpful heuristic device for that matter. “Contemplative experience” refers to experiences that occur within the parameters of contemplative practice, are associated with particular contemplative practices, and/or are deemed significant by contemplatives and their associated communities. Both “contemplative practice” and “contemplative experience” require investigation of associated tradition-specific technical terms.

bàoyī 抱一: embracing the One	shǒuyī 守一: guarding the One
guīgēn 歸根: returning to the root	xīnzhāi 心齋: fasting of the heart-mind
jìngzuò 靜坐: quiet sitting	zuòwàng 坐忘: sitting-in-forgetfulness

Table 1: Daoist Contemplative Lexicon Related to “Meditation”

One issue here involves engaging Contemplative Studies as interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and even transdisciplinary. That is, rather than privileging one particular discipline or field (e.g., clinical psychology, neuroscience), we must work to respect and include a more holistic and integrated approach. For my part, I am especially disturbed by and committed to remedying the disparagement and marginalization of the Creative Arts and the Humanities, and liberal arts education more generally. I would like to see greater attentiveness, mindfulness if you will, to relatively neglected dimensions of contemplative practice like aesthetics, community, creativity, embodiment, movement, place, play, and so forth (see Komjathy, 2015; Komjathy, 2018). In fact, as explored momentarily, I have been on the front lines of resisting and opposing the cooptation and domestication of contemplative practice in constructions such as “contemplative research” and “contemplative science,” specifically as corporatized forms of apparent legitimation (“verification”) that undermine and marginalize tradition-based representatives and communities (“stake-holders”). This does not mean that clinical, medical, and scientific approaches do not have contributions to make. What it does mean is that these are relative and should be qualified, while other approaches deserve equal recognition, respect, and support. This is not equivalent to so-called “alternative medicine” or “complementary medicine” (3), which assume Western

[2] Observant readers will note my use of “scholarly” in place of “academic.” In addition to my involvement with outsider-scholarship, including independent scholars and intellectuals beyond mainstream academia, this is because I now largely view “academic” as a description of political, technocratic, and increasingly corporatized discourse. It often involves pseudo-scholarship and faux intellectualism, with an emphasis on the control of, rather than the production of knowledge, let alone wisdom and insight. Such issues are particularly relevant in the present context, with the question of “mindful” collusion and complicity with exploitative and oppressive systems coming into high relief.

biomedicine (allopathic medicine) as normative and self-evident, but more analogous to "indigenous cultures" and "decolonialist approaches" (see, e.g., King, 1999; Smith, 2012).

Along these lines, I self-identify as a Daoist scholar-practitioner and translator, and, in addition to having a Ph.D. in Religious Studies with an emphasis on Daoism, I am an ordained Quánzhēn 全眞 (Complete Perfection) Daoist priest (*dàoshì* 道士) tending to a living, multicultural and multiethnic Daoist community. Thus, my approach might be thought of along the lines of "scholar-monks" in other traditions, like Buddhism (e.g., Buddhaghosa, Kumārajīva, Upatissa) and Roman Catholic Christianity (e.g., Meister Eckhart, Thomas Merton). In fact, I increasingly think of myself as a "Daoist new monastic" and "Daoist contemplative recluse." I say all of this not as an exercise in ego construction or identity politics, but to encourage deeper engagement with our own participation and positionality, including personal histories and locations. This stands in contrast to much of academic discourse, which involves the "taboo of subjectivity" (see Wallace, 2000; also Laing, 1967; Komjathy, 2018). Here is one area in Oman's article that deserves further reflection. Oman consistently uses the phrase "the present analyst" (27-29) in place of the first-person pronoun "I," while at the same time clearly having a personal commitment to and even advocacy of a "mindful approach" (see below). Why cannot (must not?) one speak from a direct, lived perspective? Are the academic consequences of non-depersonalization, non-dissociation, and non-fragmentation so dire? This is all the more strange given the larger argument concerning the beneficial and transformative effects of mindfulness interventions for *individuals* within the confines of public health. Of course, I am aware of the academic privileging of "objectivity" and third-person discourse, including the elevation of reason and intellect as the presumed "highest" faculties of consciousness (cf. intuition, sonar). Nonetheless, while the aspiration for greater neutrality and objectivity is laudable and necessary to a certain extent, it also may be distorting and misleading. Mindfulness research is not self-evident, and its relationship to "public health" may be as problematic as promising. I will return to the latter issue momentarily. Here I will just make the following comment: Mindfulness, at least as discussed in Oman's article, is only one contemplative approach/methodology; mindfulness research in terms of clinical psychology is only one trajectory; and public health is only one practice context. There is meditation, inquiry, and community beyond each and every one of these. For example, as a counterpoint, one might consider place-specific Daoist community in which Daoists practice Quiet Sitting (*jìngzuò* 靜坐) with an informing and surrounding Daoist aesthetics and material culture rooted in a study-practice approach (SPA). Might this not actually be more conducive to human actualization and human, perhaps even "non-human," flourishing?

As a final preliminary point, I left mainstream academia in 2019 due to systemic corruption and hypocrisy, during which I voluntarily resigned from my tenured professorship in protest, repudiation, and renunciation. Thus, I now work as an independent scholar-educator, outsider-scholar, and translator. And perhaps also a court-exile…For these reasons, I may offer alternative, radical, and even subversive perspectives unmoved by such common academic concerns as funding, membership, power, promotion, title, and the like. Specifically, with respect to meditation and cognate disciplines, and drawing upon my pioneering work in Contemplative Studies (see Komjathy, 2015; Komjathy, 2018), I envision something else and something more.

APPRECIATIVE COMMENTS

Moving into appreciative comments, Oman's article analyzes contemporary mindfulness literature and practice from the perspective of the public health field in the United States, with a particular concern for health promotion practices. It is specifically intended as a resource for both mindfulness researchers and public health professionals. The core of the paper and its primary contribution involve systematic analysis of mindfulness and public health based on fourteen integration-relevant axes and dimensions.

One noteworthy feature at the outset is Oman's critical discussion of the concepts of "health" (2-4) and "mindfulness" (4-7). With respect to the former, the article includes a helpful chart of some prominent definitions of "public health." Here the author draws attention to that of the World Health Organization (WHO): "[Health is] a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (2). While requiring deeper engagement with and reflection on indigenous and culturally-diverse perspectives (see below), from my perspective this and similar definitions are significant for emphasizing more complete understandings and ideally actualizations of human meaning, purpose, and flourishing. That is, health is not simply "physical health" (2). While perhaps taboo in the present context and in the larger field of academic psychology, attached as it is to scientization (and perhaps scientism [science-as-religion]), here one thinks of the "Third Force" of humanistic and transpersonal psychology (cf. behaviorism and psychoanalysis), specifically Abraham Maslow's (1908-1970) "hierarchy of needs." (Did I just lose you and/or my [already-fading] social capital?) Let me be clear: I am not interested in authoritarian and totalizing discourses, except as counter-examples of my own commitments to collaboration, liberation, and flourishing. Setting aside "objective viability," I find Maslow's framework to be a helpful "contemplative map," including as related to "contemplative psychology" (see de Wit, 1991; also Komjathy, 2018). It also has provided an important framework for clarifying my own subjective experiences with meditation as well as human being and experiencing. For present purposes, we may recognize that, while important and necessary, there are existential and spiritual (yes, spiritual) dimensions beyond "basic needs" like food, water, and shelter. In Maslow's language, there is flourishing beyond "physiological needs" and "safety needs," and perhaps beyond "belonging" as well. Of course, this raises the issue of "contemplative environs" and "contemplative opportunities" beyond inherited structures of limitation and oppression. Can we imagine and work to actualize contexts in which all beings, not merely specific human beings or human social groups, are supported and flourish? For this, we may need to renounce social acceptance and social conformity, at least with(out) respect for the status quo. Along these lines, Oman emphasizes utilizing an "ecological approach" (3-4). A truly ecological approach is not only one in which equity, diversity, and inclusion (or which order you prefer) is emphasized, but also one that is attentive to community, empowerment, place, self-determination, and the like. It involves recognizing the systemic nature of problems and potential solutions. As we will see, it may be that allopathic medicine, corporate interests, pharmaceutical industry, and "public health" are fundamentally un- and even anti-ecological. They may represent a "substitute ecosystem" that undermines actual ecosystems (bioregions and watersheds), and the associated health and well-being of residents. As the American naturalist, forester, and conservationist Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) urges us, we may "think like a mountain." As a further (un)development, perhaps we might learn to "live like a watershed."

Oman in turn provides a critical discussion of the term "mindfulness," including a level of reflection and sophistication rare in parallel publications. (For the moment, I will leave aside the

perhaps less critical promotion of the American hybrid spiritualist [Jubu?] and physician Jon Kabat-Zinn [JKZ; b. 1944] [2, 5, *passim*]). The article briefly examines both "emic and etic views," that is, insider/adherent (Buddhist) and outsider/scholar ("non-Buddhist") perspectives.[3] Again notably, Oman mentions some issues involved in modern decontextualized and reconceptualized mindfulness (therapeutic) meditation, including by the so-called "mindfulness establishment" (4-5). The latter centers on modern medical interventions like Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and the derivative Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), now increasingly placed under the more general rubric of "mindfulness-based interventions" (MBI). This involves cultural appropriation of Indian Buddhist source-practices under the rubric of the Pali *sati*, nineteenth-century Orientalist scholarship, and Kabat-Zinn's own amalgam (via Thich Nhat Hanh, Philip Kapleau, and Seung Sahn) (see, e.g., Wilson, 2014; Purser, 2019).[4] One issue here is that, while Oman mentions the "polysemous history of multiple meanings" of mindfulness/*sati* (cf. "inspection"/"memory"/"retention"), more attention is required, especially on the part of the larger "mindfulness research" community. For example, the Chinese translation of the Pali *sati* is *niàn* 念 ("recollection"), with the character consisting of *jīn* 今 ("now") and *xīn* 心 ("heart"). From a Daoist perspective, it may be understood as the "mind of now," or present-moment awareness. I would, in turn, suggest that John Dunne's "Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach" (2015) should be required reading (and application) (see also Sharf, 2015). That is, beyond the Mindfulness Movement's (MM) emic account, we need more attention to the actual history and sources. For this, contemporary tradition-based Buddhist scholar-monks like Anālayo and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Jeffrey Block) may have important contributions to make. This, of course, would require moving beyond dual Orientalism, including ethnocentric constructions (see, e.g., Lopez, 1999; Iwamura, 2000). Along these lines, it is noteworthy that Oman, unlike so many of his peers, includes discussion of religiously-committed mindfulness meditation (8-9). Nonetheless, there may remain an "indeterminacy of translation" between the various constituencies involved (see, e.g., Festinger, 1957; Komjathy, 2018; Venuti, 2021).

As mentioned, the primary contribution of Oman's article involves systematic analysis of mindfulness and public health based on fourteen integration-relevant axes and dimensions. This is preceded by an interesting theoretical section (7-9) in which the author suggests a more integrated approach incorporating "stress/suffering theory," "impact theory," and "face theory." This is followed by a helpful chart of the fourteen components (9). Again, this core section will be largely of interest to mindfulness researchers, especially with public health commitments. For present purposes, I will highlight a few features that I find relevant beyond the article and its audience narrowly conceived. Granted that these more closely align with my own research interests and contemplative commitments, they are as follows: (A8) Attentional environment; (A9) Equity; (A10) Cultural adaptation; (A11) Community partnership; and (A12) Religious factors. These relate to adherence, community, and place. Here it is especially noteworthy that Oman suggests and advocates for attentiveness to the diverse views and needs of specific communities, including

[3] One issue here is "closet Buddhist researchers," including what I refer to as "Buddhocentrism." That is, many of the supposed "outsiders" actually are Buddhist sympathizers and even Buddhist adherents, with an accompanying unrecognized or undisclosed evangelical Buddhist agenda (e.g., Tibetan liberation). See Lopez, 1999; Lopez, 2012; Komjathy, 2015; Komjathy, 2018. Oman recognizes this in his reference to "stealth Buddhism" (19). This destabilizes the entire "emic/etic" construction. See Komjathy, 2016.

[4] Like other "lineage constructions" at work in meditation studies, the associated "sangha controversies" remain unmentioned and unaddressed. That is, the "*sīla*/*śīla* question," including the ethics of appropriation, is erased. See, e.g., Komjathy, 2015; Komjathy, 2018. This includes in the biographies and projects of many so-called "thought-leaders."

religious ones. He also raises the issue about suitability and self-determination, including cultural adaptation and partnering (19). For example, are MBI appropriate for indigenous populations, or does this represent spiritual colonialism, and even evangelism (18)? I, for one, would like to see greater attentiveness to "indigenous contemplative practices" that represent forms of cultural and spiritual self-empowerment and self-determination. Along these lines and in terms of decentering and defamiliarization, I was amused to find the acronym WEIRD for "Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic [developed]" societies (14) (see also Bourdieu, 1988; Young, 1994; Kulick and Wilson, 1995). One might, in turn, gloss the "W" as "white," with "white spiritual privilege" (WSP) probably added to so-called "mindfulness" (see Goldman, 2012). Oman also provides some helpful points deserving deeper reflection with respect to religious factors (18-22). One issue involves religiosity versus secularity, including among researchers themselves. Is quasi-secular mindfulness practice and research not itself a form of adherence?

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

While perhaps contextually comprehensible and justified, one major and obvious issue involves the privileging of "mindfulness," especially as constructed within the Mindfulness Movement itself. In addition to the previously-mentioned need for investigating the meaning, interpretation, and application of so-called "mindfulness," practices like MBSR and its derivatives are only one form of contemplative practice. They may be helpful in certain contexts and for certain conditions, but they are *not* equivalent to "meditation" and cognate disciplines. From my perspective, they also are not the most interesting, relevant, or profound contemplative practices (see Komjathy, 2015; Komjathy, 2018; also Murphy, 1992). Specifically, "mindfulness" is not a universal category. This is one area where Oman's article proves problematic and even deficient. For example, he cites N.N. Singh's article "Mindfulness: A Finger Pointing to the Moon" (2010) published in this same journal, claiming "mindfulness is ubiquitous in all wisdom traditions [*sic*]" (9, 20; also 24). This simply is not the case, and it is inaccurate and problematic on multiple levels. First, as we have seen, Oman himself recognizes that, historically speaking, "mindfulness" is largely indebted to the Buddhist Pali concept *sati*, which has its own complex history, meaning, and application (see, e.g., Dunne, 2015; Sharf, 2015). As a counterpoint, Daoist meditation tends to frame practice-realization in terms of *shǒu* 守 ("guarding"), *wàng* 忘 ("forgetting"), and *zhāi* 齋 ("fasting"). This is not to mention informing commitments, principles, qualities, and values like *wúwéi* 無為 ("effortlessness"), *wúmíng* 無名 ("namelessness"), and *wúyù* 無欲 ("desirelessness"). Observant readers will note the recurrence of *wú* 無, which literally means "without" but has the contemplative connotation of "absent of" and "free from." This relates to what I refer to as Daoist "beyond" and "non-states." What would happen to the so-called Mindfulness Movement if these were combined with, say, *wúyòng* 無用 ("uselessness") and *wúzhī* 無知 ("non-knowing"). Second, there are a number of issues in Singh's simple (and apparently simplistic) analysis. These include the invocation of a Chan/Zen Buddhist analogy (via classical Daoism) to discuss mindfulness as well as the "wisdom traditions" construction in place of indigenous cultures and religious traditions. "Mindfulness" is not a finger (practice/meditation) pointing at the moon (awakening/enlightenment); as a modern therapeutic approach, it is perhaps more akin to Western postural yoga (WPY) in relation to Hindu classical Yoga. Just as WPY replaces samsaric embodiment with modern body-image and beauty constructs, systems like MBSR replace liberation with health. Therapeutic mindfulness broadly understood is a decontextualized and

reconceptualized practice rooted in an alternative worldview that may contradict and even undermine the liberational power of the source-tradition. We in turn need to consider the radical challenges of alternative contemplative approaches and systems, including the possibility that "health" is a mistaken concept. Along these lines, the invocation of "wisdom traditions" evidences naïve Perennialist views of religion (see, e.g., Komjathy, 2015; Komjathy, 2018), that is, that there is some universal element beyond diversity and particularity. I, for one, reject the construction of Daoism as a "wisdom tradition" (7, 24), and I have dedicated most of my scholarly career to remedying mistaken views about this indigenous Chinese and now global religious tradition (see, e.g., Komjathy, 2013). In addition, a Pluralistic view of religion, which recognizes diverse views, practices, and experiences informed by comparative and cross-cultural literacy, is both more accurate and more viable. It helps one to "think through" other views and approaches, to consider "alternate cognitive realities." In addition to considering emic views (see above), we need to recognize the ways in which the Mindfulness Movement represents something like its own New Religious Movement (NRM). This might include reflection on "the advantage and disadvantage of mindfulness for life." Here I would again encourage individuals to consider the edited volume *Contemplative literature* as a *collective baseline*. More radically, we need greater engagement with living contemplative communities and contemplative traditions, including source-ones associated with "mindfulness" broadly understood. From my perspective, this includes individuals and communities rooted in what I refer to as religiously-committed, tradition-based, and even theologically-infused contemplative practice. The latter points beyond secular materialism and social constructivism, so often assumed in mainstream academic accounts. This is meditation beyond "happiness," "health," "wealth," "wellness," and the like.

As mentioned, Oman does draw attention to the importance of considering indigenous perspectives and religious approaches. However, this tends not to be the case in the larger Mindfulness Movement, which at times fosters and perpetuates various forms of "cognitive imperialism" and "spiritual colonialism." We have already engaged "mindfulness" as one such totalizing category, but the same may be said about "health." Here I draw on my chapter on "therapeutic meditation" in the edited volume *Contemplative literature: A comparative sourcebook on meditation and contemplative prayer* (2015). This is the only analysis of the topic, which includes MBSR, from a Religious Studies perspective. As far as I am aware, it also is one of the few critical discussions of the larger phenomenon of therapeutic meditation. As mentioned, Religious Studies is the scholarly field dedicated to research and education on religion/religions. It aspires to be comparative, cross-cultural, neutral (non-normative), interdisciplinary, and phenomenological (descriptive). It also utilizes theory and method derived from and applicable to the comparative and cross-cultural study of "religion" and related cultural phenomena. From my perspective, Religious Studies thus offers a model for specific topical and thematic inquiries, such as meditation studies. In any case and to continue, I have developed a "theory of praxis" in which one recognizes and explores "praxis" as a technical term that includes four interrelated dimensions: view, method, experience, and goal. In the case of therapeutic mindfulness, these center on biological health, mindfulness (often MBSR), self-regulation, and personal wellbeing. There is an accompanying soteriology (ultimate purpose) and theology (view of the sacred). These center on health, largely understood from a biological and more occasionally social perspective. Here a pedagogical anecdote may be helpful. When I was teaching my "Contemplative Traditions" (later: "Comparative Meditation") course, an upper-division undergraduate seminar, students were required to practice *one* self-selected contemplative practice for the entire semester, including at least one direct experience with the associated community. One student had chosen MBSR. About

midway through the semester, she visited me during office hours with a variety of observations. She communicated that she had, according to the protocol, become increasingly "relaxed" and "destressed." She felt more "well-adjusted" and "healthier." However, she also felt dissatisfied with the system, inquiring, "Is that all there is?" That is, beyond the presumed utilitarian values, this student had larger existential, soteriological, and theological concerns that were not being addressed. This was by no means anomalous among students who self-selected MBSR throughout the years. While perhaps overly "anecdotal" for some readers, it brings attention to the qualitative over the quantitative. One might, in turn, propose a modified "Mindfulness Inventory," that includes at least the following two questions:

> Did you have existential (meaning/purpose), soteriological (ultimate purpose), and/or theological (ultimate reality) questions before engaging in mindfulness practice?
>
> If so, were these clarified and supported during your mindfulness practice?

Along these lines, the Mindfulness Movement often resembles its own quasi-religious movement, complete with evangelical tendencies. While Oman is relatively careful in this regard, there are moments when the "public health" dimension contains this element. "Can mindfulness contribute to building the needed planetary, societal, and individual resilience?" (1). In addition to supposed universalized mindfulness, the author, invoking Jon Kabat-Zinn, envisions "a mindfulness-catalyzed global renaissance" (5, 28). Tellingly, here Oman alludes to the Indian Hindu mystic and spiritual teacher Ramakrishna (Gadadhar Chattopadhyaye; 1836-1886), who also was the teacher of Vivekananda (1863-1902), the Hindu missionary and founder of the Vedanta Society. As these figures utilized a universalized Hindu monism that included hybrid spiritualist views, it too represents a form of Perennialism. Perhaps Mindfulness is the new Brahman. It thus is not surprising that other quasi-religious devices and maneuvers occur, including apocalyptic rhetoric.

> "As people worldwide cope with a growing set of serious challenges ranging from pandemics to climate change to resource shortages, few would disagree that we need strengthened planetary social and health resilience." (1)

And

> "But with global challenges looming, now is the time for us to work out our global and societal resilience with diligence." (29)

I am one of Oman's assumed "most concerned people," but I also observe the increased presence of tribalist and nationalist interests in the modern world, including the contemporary United States. In fact, it appears that various apocalyptic death-cults are vying for control of their preferred endgame scenario. Thus, the inevitable question arises: Is mindfulness really the solution to the "global health crisis"? Or is corporatized mindfulness part of the very anti-ecological structure that Oman aspires to remedy? Is the modern cooptation of "mindfulness" as one form of therapeutic meditation equivalent to NWA records and Che Guevarra t-shirts. That is, is it just yet another installment of capitalist appropriation, commodification, domestication, and consumerism? Are we simply "polishing brass on the Titanic"? Or, anticipating the arrival of Bane, as Selina Kyle (Catwoman) comments, "There's a storm coming…You and your friends better batten down the

hatches, because when it hits, you're all gonna wonder how you ever thought you could live so large and leave so little for the rest of us." Along these lines, while understanding academic funding concerns and potential corporate partnership, I am disturbed by Oman's emphasis on "branding" (6, 25-26), perhaps with an assumed or projected strategy for "franchisation" *à la* MBSR. Given the systemic degradation, including mass socio-economic inequality, I find myself thinking of Afropessimism (see Wilderson, 2020). A more radical form of critical race theory (CRT) and social justice, Afropessimism suggests that, given black dehumanization, othering, and oppression as the very root of American society, *the world must end*. The only way for black people in the United States to be free and to flourish is for the entire system to collapse and decompose. This requires a complete, radical restructuring. Of course, I am speaking out of turn, and I see the "systemic nature" beyond race constructs. It is ecological in the fullest sense, including "non-human" enslavement, suffering, violence, and death. There is an inclusive solidarity rooted in mutual empowerment and mutual flourishing. Thus, we might need an antidote along the lines of a projected "Ecopessimism." This might require resisting and even dismantling the entire Military-Industrial-Prison-Slaughterhouse Complex (MIPSC) (Komjathy, 2022). Arguably, many of the systems behind Oman's paper are contributors to and responsible for, or at least complicit in the impending (ongoing) ecological collapse. This is health beyond human health and the so-called "healthcare system." It seems clear that the future is post-human.

I also feel obliged to comment on the prominence and somewhat uncritical elevation of Jon Kabat-Zinn (JKZ; b. 1944) in the article (1-2, 5-7, 19-20, 23-24, 28, *passim*). I too have a certain appreciation for Kabat-Zinn's contributions to Mind-Body Medicine (MBM) and therapeutic meditation, specifically the development of Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (see Komjathy, 2015; Komjathy, 2018). However, Kabat-Zinn is not an unproblematic figure, and there are, in fact, some disturbing features of the "JKZ/MBSR phenomenon." First, other pioneering figures, like Herbert Benson (1935-2022), Eugene Gendlin (1926-2017), Ellen Langer (b. 1947), and Zindel Segal (b. 1956), deserve recognition and engagement. Second, from a more critical perspective, Kabat-Zinn exhibits hybrid spiritualist and Orientalist tendencies, including cultural appropriation for personal profit. Not to belabor the point, but he began constructing MBSR as explicitly "not Buddhist" and "non-religious" (5, 19), but subsequently began presenting himself as a "Buddhist teacher," especially once he became more famous and successful (author's field observations). While this mimics parallel trajectories of other academics, from closet adherent untenured faculty members to confessional adherent tenured full professors, with accompanying secrecy and concealment (see, e.g., Kulick and Wilson, 1995; Taussig, 1999), it actually is more entrenched in the "Oriental Monk" phenomenon (see Iwamura, 2000). The Oriental Monk is an ethnic stereotype centered on Asians as "storehouses of wisdom," who come to the West (whether via import or export) to save "Westerners" (white people) from societal and cultural decay. However, this is not the whole story of the construct: Oriental Monk figures, whether real or fictional, eventually transmit their wisdom and spiritual technologies to (primarily white) "dharma successors." Kabat-Zinn follows this line of cultural appropriation and substitution. He draws part of his authority from earlier "Asian" teachers, while now becoming a projected prominent Jewish-Buddhist ("Jubu"). However, he is not just a Jubu; he also has become a surrogate of tradition validated by Western biomedicine and science (cf. Matthieu Ricard). Given the high degree of fame, power, prestige, wealth, and so forth, one might, following the supposed source-tradition, suggest that MBSR is a means for reproducing and, in fact, escalating the samsaric system. In place of the received informing values, one might suggest resubstitution of desirelessness, non-harm, and voluntary poverty. Here a modest proposal might inspire sufficient pause: All profits

from MBSR should be distributed to communities in need, especially impoverished individuals associated with the source-cultures and source-ethnicities. This is Buddhist mindfulness as rooted in awakening, enlightenment, realization, and the like (see also 23). *This is actualized and experiential practice beyond rhetoric*. Finally and related, there are aspects of the JKZ phenomenon that more closely resemble something like a "JKZ cult," though not in Oman's piece. Having circulated through some of the same "contemplative milieus" as Kabat-Zinn (e.g., Mind & Life Institute [MLI]), with its accompanying obsession with "spiritual celebrity," various individuals frame him as their "guru"; draw legitimacy from their training with him (24), including an accompanying "rhetoric of lineage"; and perpetuate insular narratives and dismiss alternative perspectives, including ones involving critical adherent discourse (CAD) and intellectual history like the present response. That is, there is a "cult of personality" in which Kabat-Zinn functions as a charismatic leader within an insular discourse community, and, not surprisingly, with required teacher-training programs and certification. These are not hallmarks of deep contemplative practice, and at times it is far worse than that. For those of us who understand meditation as soteriological praxis, it lacks even rudimentary critical reflection, let alone awakened consciousness and spiritual insight. Perhaps it is mindlessness under the guise of mindfulness. However, like any cult, including the "cult of everyday life" (see Deikman, 1994), it will continue with or without the consent or involvement of myself or other members of the spiritual underground and contemplative resistance movements.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

One important suggestion for further research on mindfulness and parallel meditation studies involves greater collaboration and interdisciplinarity. Oman himself acknowledges and advocates for this (15, 17, 19, 23, 28). In terms of mindfulness and public health, I would like to see research teams and think tanks that include anthropologists, Religious Studies scholars (including those with expertise in Buddhism), as well as individuals rooted in Cultural Studies and intellectual history. As expressed in my own specialist work, it is not enough to have topic-specific expertise; we also need attentiveness to contexts of reception and cultural influences. Along these lines, Oman invokes the Italian Renaissance painter Paolo Caliari's (Paolo Veronese; 1528-1588) *Wedding Feast at Cana* in concert with Mogul miniatures to think about macro and micro approaches (10). How does one move from the whole to the particular, and vice versa? For example, Oman suggests axes A10-A13 as primary (10), while I found different ones to be more interesting (see above). Interdisciplinary collaborations offer unique contributions, with complementary expertise and divergent concerns leading to more complete comprehension and more accurate accounts. Along these lines, I also believe that what I refer to as "critical adherent discourse" (CAD), "inter-contemplative dialogue" (ICA), and "scholar-practitioner approaches" (SPA) are under-recognized and under-utilized. I am grateful to Oman for considering this, including through engagement with my *Introducing contemplative studies* (23-28). Again, one omission involves the diversity of contemplative practice and contemplative experience documented in *Contemplative literature* (2015), including critical reflection on the entire phenomenon of decontextualized and reconceptualized meditation like modern therapeutic meditation.

For those inside the Mindfulness Movement, including those conducting mindfulness research and utilizing mindfulness-based interventions, I would like to see deeper engagement with and reflection on sources and adaptations, including the "ethics and politics of appropriation."

Along these lines, greater recognition of the diversity of contemplative practice, contemplative experience, contemplative communities, and contemplative traditions, contra Perennialist claims of "universal mindfulness," would be welcome. Here individual and community self-determination is essential. There is a wide variety of contemplative practice and a broad spectrum of contemplative approaches. For such inquiries, we need to train ourselves to listen to alternative, disempowered, marginalized, and even subversive voices. This includes tradition-based contemplatives and contemplative communities, beyond the "usual suspects" such as the rotating pool of Buddhist celebrities. Can we employ a "mindful approach" to hear beyond the limitations of mindfulness itself?

I concur with Oman about the promise of the Mindfulness Movement in terms of facilitating and supporting human resiliency, health, and flourishing. At the same time, I have pointed towards some perils with respect to unquestioned assumptions and ingrained opinions. This includes what I consider something along the lines of uncritical religious adherence and quasi-evangelism. As Oman concludes with the American poet Robert Frost's (1874-1963) "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," allow me to do the same, but in some alternative directions. In the words of the British writer D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930), "I am not a mechanism, an assembly of various sections./And it is not because the mechanism is working wrongly, that I am ill." And, following the American poet Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962), "Meteors are not needed less than/mountains: shine, perishing republic."

ADDENDUM

The present occasional piece originally was an invited response to Dr. Doug Oman's (University of California, Berkeley) "Mindfulness for Global Public Health: Critical Analysis and Agenda." Specifically, it was commissioned by the journal *Mindfulness*, under the editorial direction of Christian Krägeloh, for a specifical issue. Invoking the authority of a so-called "senior psychologist" as pretext, the journal subsequently rejected it. The absurdity of this cannot be overemphasized: The piece was an *invited response*, not an unsolicited independent article. It is, moreover, explicitly located within Contemplative Studies and Religious Studies, *not* (scientistic) psychology. These facts add yet more ethnographic material concerning the so-called Mindfulness Movement as well as the associated journal *Mindfulness*, which appears to be an insular mouthpiece of the former. The latter's lack of intellectual rigor and lack of openness to alternative perspectives point yet again to its members as uncritical quasi-religious adherents, rather than scholars and intellectuals as such. One can only assume (and hope) that the piece is so radical and perhaps subversive to the Mindfulness Movement that its representatives would not allow it to be read. Perhaps it is just too dangerous to "The Cult of Zinn."

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