

Mindfulness: a Tool or a Skill?

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Secularized, packaged, and monetized, mindfulness as co-opted by the Western the self-help industry may ultimately be counter-productive in accomplishing the purposes for which it is marketed. Author David Forbes goes so far as to claim that rather than being an antidote to suffering, “individualistic therapies and commodified society” (by which he refers to secularized, Westernized mindfulness, or “McMindfulness”) “is itself a major generator of social suffering and distress.”¹ Peter Doran criticizes the corporate and institutional usages of mindfulness as a tool to increase productivity or “help mitigate consequences” when laying off employees. However, Doran distinguishes between “right mindfulness” (a “pathway to critical engagement and resistance”) and “wrong mindfulness” (a tool used by the individual to achieve the neoliberal ideal of “self regulation” while remaining blind to “the power structures that are themselves an important source of our distress.”)²

In his critique of the appropriation of mindfulness practices in schools, James Reveley does not make a distinction between a “right” and “wrong” mindfulness. Rather, he generalizes that “mindfulness meditation is a conducive line for transmitting neoliberal ideals” due to its emphasis on “therapeutic self-examination”³ (the medicalization of risk for depression) that teaches children they are in control of their own emotional well-being (the responsabilization of the individual). Unfortunately, Reveley conflates the actual teachings of mindfulness (which he defines ambiguously) with school administrators’ goal-directed intentions in using mindfulness as a tool to prevent mental illness.

Reveley defines mindfulness by quoting conflicting descriptions. First, he cites Felver et al. who say that “‘mindfulness relates to the self-regulation of attention’ with an ‘attitude. . .of acceptance and openness to the current internal (e.g., cognitions and emotions) and external (e.g., sensory stimuli)

¹ David Forbes, “How capitalism captured the mindfulness industry,” *The Guardian*, April 16, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/apr/16/how-capitalism-captured-the-mindfulness-industry>.

² Peter Doran, “McMindfulness: Buddhism as sold to you by neoliberals,” *The Conversation*, February 23, 2018, <http://theconversation.com/mcmindfulness-buddhism-as-sold-to-you-by-neoliberals-88338>.

³ James Reveley, “Neoliberal meditations: How mindfulness training medicalizes education and responsabilizes young people,” *Policy Futures in Education* 14, no. 4 (2016): 507, 508, doi: 10.1177/1478210316637972.

experience.”⁴ Later, he refers to Barker’s characterization of mindfulness as “do-it-yourself medicalization of every moment,”⁵ a kind of “self-surveillance [that] is qualitatively different from the ‘second order reflection’⁶ on one’s emotions that Solomon suggests is essential to having a fulfilling emotional life.”⁷ Reveley fails to explain how and why Robert Solomon’s “second order reflection” is different than the initial definition of mindfulness as an “attitude. . .of acceptance and openness to the current. . .experience.” Instead Reveley claims that “Even the normal episodic emotional ups-and-downs. . .are in mindfulness parlance, evidence of illness or propensity for illness.”⁸

Through examining the history of positive psychology, Reveley builds a case that school administrators have adopted the teaching of mindfulness as a preventative measure against mental illness in school children (and have overreached in their definition of “mental illness”). However, Reveley does not make it clear that the *content* of mindfulness practices teaches children to judge their emotional ups-and-downs as signs of illness: he provides no supporting examples of mindfulness curricula containing such a teaching. Certainly this teaching has no part in traditional Buddhist mindfulness teachings: the monk Thích Nhất Hạnh teaches us to “listen deeply to our suffering” and to “acknowledg[e] our feelings without judging them or pushing them away, embracing them with mindfulness.”⁹ Of course, Reveley is criticizing Western, secularized mindfulness, not actual Buddhist teachings. The question becomes: does the content of Westernized mindfulness teach the medicalization of emotional health?

I believe that Reveley’s claim that mindfulness practice responsabilizes the individual does apply to the mindfulness practices described in both Holly Rodger’s *The Mindful Twenty-Something* and

⁴ Joshua C. Felver et al., “Mindfulness in school psychology: Applications for intervention and professional practice” *Psychology in the Schools* 50, no. 6 (2013): 532, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21695>, quoted in Reveley, “Neoliberal meditations,” 503.

⁵ Kristin Barker, “Mindfulness meditation: Do-it-yourself medicalization of every moment,” *Social Science & Medicine* 106 (2014): 168, doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.01.024, quoted in Reveley, “Neoliberal meditations,” 504.

⁶ Robert C. Solomon, *True to Our Feelings: What Our Emotions Are Really Telling Us*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 267, quoted in Reveley, “Neoliberal meditations,” 505.

⁷ Reveley, “Neoliberal meditations,” 505.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 504.

⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Communicating*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 30, 28.

Vanessa Cornett's *The Mindful Musician*. However, Reveley's claim that mindfulness medicalizes emotions applies only to Cornett's version of mindfulness, not Rodgers's. I will compare the structure and content of both Cornett's and Rodgers's books in light of my own experiences with mindfulness to show how Reveley's criticisms only partially apply to mindfulness when presented as a skill (as in Rodgers's book), but fully apply to mindfulness when presented as a tool (as in Cornett's book). When mindfulness is presented as a skill, the so-called "responsibilization" of well-being is empowering. When presented as a tool, mindfulness is susceptible to co-option by the dubious ends Forbes and other critics describe.

Holly B. Rodgers, MD, presents Koru Mindfulness, her evidence-based mindfulness program, in *The Mindful Twenty-Something: life skills to handle stress ... & everything else*. The book employs a focused, five-part structure that helps the reader systematically develop a mindfulness practice through learning ten types of meditation. The introductions to each type of meditation are paced across the course of the book, and along the way, Rodgers discusses the impact of various other mindfulness-related attitudes and behaviors (such as observing, accepting, becoming resilient, and complimenting more).

Rodgers approaches mindfulness as a skill to be developed to increase general happiness rather than as a tool to be used to overcome negative emotions. Although Rodgers acknowledges students should have a larger reason for practicing meditation, "like wanting to manage stress more effectively or to find a better way to deal with some physical or emotional challenge," the "more immediate goal. . .during a meditation practice is very simply to *fully inhabit* the present moment."¹⁰ This skill of being fully aware must not be "used" in a problem-solving sense. "Non-striving is the bedrock of mindfulness,"¹¹ Rodgers says, and also compares mindfulness to the practice of physical exercise.¹²

Far from teaching readers to see negative emotions as an illness, Rodgers teaches readers not "to control or suppress" negative emotions and to "observe them and give them space."¹³ Rodgers introduces

¹⁰ Holly B. Rodgers, *The Mindful Twenty-Something: life skills to handle stress ... & everything else*, (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2016), 24.

¹¹ Rodgers, *The Mindful Twenty-Something*, 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 21.

the Labeling Feelings Meditation as a way readers can learn to “identify, name, and hold” their feelings in awareness.¹⁴ Additionally, Rodgers teaches “nonjudgment” and “observing mind” as two of the five important points about meditation¹⁵ and invites readers to observe their choices with nonjudgmental awareness, using the words “skillful” and “unskillful” instead of “right” and “wrong.”¹⁶

During my experience practicing mindfulness while reading Rodgers’s book, I became more accepting of my current life situation, which involves a lot of exhausting travel. Initially skeptical that I could relate to this semester with any attitude besides “let’s get this over with,” I found that daily meditation practice allowed me to experience each moment as precious and empowered me to find joy in my situation. Of course, I had the privilege of “choosing” my situation to a degree that others do not, so for me, mindfulness helped me learn to be happy with choices I made. When life circumstances are more severe and further outside one’s control, is mindfulness still an empowering practice?

Rodgers speaks to this question in the first chapter of her book when she explains that her “intent is not to trivialize the magnitude of suffering caused by abuse, prejudice, oppression, and poverty.” But, “almost all forms of suffering can be diminished, even if ever so slightly, by internal shifts in our approach to our difficulties.”¹⁷ Later in the book, she makes sure to explain that acceptance is not liking, agreeing, or resigning to something, nor is it a decision (it’s an action).¹⁸ Rather than taking the place of fighting against injustice, acceptance enables us to bring that pursuit by first allowing us to clearly observe the truth. Although Rodgers does teach that happiness is a skill,¹⁹ this teaching must be viewed in combination with the practice of nonjudgmental observation and acceptance of both the self and the outside world that often leads to action. Rodgers’s cultivation of happiness is a far cry from Reveley’s description of responsabilization as a force that conforms the individual into a “self-managing figure”

¹⁴ Rodgers, *The Mindful Twenty-Something*, 163.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 101–103.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

through the practice of aggressive “self-surveillance.”²⁰

Whereas Rodgers’s book begins with the concept of meditation and continues by building skills from that single starting place, Vanessa Cornett’s *The Mindful Musician: Mental Skills for Peak Performance* begins with a single goal (getting rid of performance anxiety) and then presents *many* strategies targeting that goal that don’t necessarily build in an organic way. For instance, between sections on “Beginning Yoga for Musicians” and “Progressive Relaxation Techniques,” Cornett squeezes in a section quickly overviewing Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method, T-ai chi ch’uan, Qigong, and Laban Movement Analysis—each of which could have been their own book. Partly due to the sheer number of techniques included, the book comes across as more shallow and less methodical.

I found Cornett’s appropriation of the word “mindfulness” somewhat problematic. In the first chapter, she defines “mindfulness” as “moment-to-moment awareness” than can include focused actions as well as introspection. Says Cornett, “Mindfulness is one of the most consistently effective tools with which to manage stress and performance anxiety, and—even more important—to develop compassionate resilience.”²¹ Note the use of the word “tools”—although the myriad “mindful” techniques that she covers are skills that can be practiced and developed, Cornett, unlike Rodgers, is orienting these skills at solving a single problem: mitigating performance anxiety. Although Cornett says that developing “compassionate resilience” is more important than managing performance anxiety, it should be evident from the book’s title that Cornett primarily aims to use mindfulness to optimize “peak performance.”

Most of the techniques Cornett covers in chapters 2–4, 6, and 8–9 are strategies I’ve read about previously but had not previously seen marketed under the “mindfulness” banner. For instance, Carrol McLaughlin’s *Power Performance* covers similar content (improving preparation, managing internal criticism, visualizing the performance), but the cover of her book appropriately refers to these strategies

²⁰ Reveley, “Neoliberal meditations,” 497.

²¹ Vanessa Cornett, *The Mindful Musician: Mental Skills for Peak Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), Kindle edition, “The Meaning of Mindfulness.”

as “techniques” rather than “skills.”²² McLaughlin doesn’t appropriate the word “mindful” to describe her method, even though there isn’t an obvious difference in the amount of mindful awareness the musician must employ in practicing McLaughlin’s vs. Cornett’s similar techniques.

Chapters 5 and 7 of Cornett’s book involve mindfulness meditation, and this is the part of the book that overlaps most with Rodgers’s in terms of content. Here again, Cornett describes her goal-oriented strategies with the word “tool.” Before introducing her more than one-dozen breathing techniques, she says, “For *all* musicians, conscious awareness of the breath is a simple and effective tool to develop concentration, focus, stress reduction, and comfort on stage.”²³ To borrow Reveley’s language, Cornett teaches mindful breathing as a “technology of the self.”²⁴

The two-dimensionality of Cornett’s book isn’t owing to its focus on musicians. Madeline Bruser’s *The Art of Practicing: A Guide to Making Music From the Heart*, was developed as a result of the author practicing “mindfulness meditation”²⁵ (but, being published in 1997, the title doesn’t claim the now-marketable “mindfulness” label). This book presents mindfulness practices pertinent to performing musicians but isn’t result-oriented and consequently engages the reader at an emotional and artistic depth untouched by Cornett. This difference is observed just by comparing the two books’ introductions. Bruser begins by describing how shortly after she began her meditation practice, “I relaxed so much that I stopped practicing the piano altogether.”²⁶ Two months later, she returned to the piano with a new, process-oriented perspective and newly awoken sensory perception. In contrast, Cornett’s book opens with the story of her husband playing unusually confidently in a competition (achieving the goal) after having employed the author’s mindfulness techniques.

²² Carrol McLaughlin, *Power Performance* (Tucson: IntegrityInk.US.LLC, 2008), cover.

²³ Cornett, *The Mindful Musician*, “The Art of Mindful Breathing and Relaxation.”

²⁴ Reveley, “Neoliberal Meditations,” 497.

²⁵ Madeline Bruser, *The Art of Practicing: A Guide to Making Music From the Heart* (New York: Bell Tower, 1997), 2.

²⁶ Bruser, *The Art of Practicing*, 2.

Cornett’s “emotion regulation” techniques are so clearly directed at minimizing negative feelings that Reveley’s “medicalization” criticism applies. Cornett medicalizes negative emotions by teaching readers that they should control their negative thoughts by replacing negatively worded goals with positively worded goals, reframe negative memories using more positive words, and plan thoughts in advance. This treatment of negative emotions is much more aggressive than the compassionate observation taught by Rodgers and Thích Nhất Hạnh. After teaching “disputing,” “distracting,” “reappraising,” “distancing,” “refocusing,” and “avoiding,” Cornett struggles to explain the previous techniques’ relationship to “accepting,” admitting that “acceptance is virtually the opposite of emotion regulation.”²⁷

I don’t contest the effectiveness of Cornett’s strategies in reducing stress and performance anxiety (notably, Reveley also doesn’t contest whether mindfulness reduces depression—in fact, he admits that it does.)²⁸ But, because Cornett medicalizes negative emotions and responsabilizes the individual with averting those thoughts, both of Reveley’s criticisms apply to her work, and I believe that her practitioners are more likely to engage a neoliberal worldview, tasking themselves with happiness without considering the broken system. When Cornett teaches “disidentification affirmations” to help readers avoid placing their self-worth in their performance,²⁹ she does not take the opportunity to question the healthiness of our anxiety-inducing systems that do, in fact, assign professional and financial worth to people based on how well they perform in brief, high-intensity competitive settings. Cornett’s use of mindfulness as a tool may well help readers cope within this system. But musicians, and all people, would ultimately gain the most holistic well-being from employing Rodgers’ empowering view of mindfulness as a non-goal-oriented skill that cultivates nonjudgmental observation of every aspect and structure in the individual’s life.

²⁷ Cornett, *The Mindful Musician*, “Thoughts and Emotions,” “Emotion Regulation.”

²⁸ Reveley, “Neoliberal meditations,” 503.

²⁹ Cornett, *The Mindful Musician*, “Disidentification Affirmations.”

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