

# Book Review

## ***What's Wrong with Mindfulness (And What Isn't): Zen Perspectives***

Edited by Robert Meikyo Rosenbaum and Barry Magid  
Wisdom Publications, 2016

Review by Arne Schaefer JDPSN

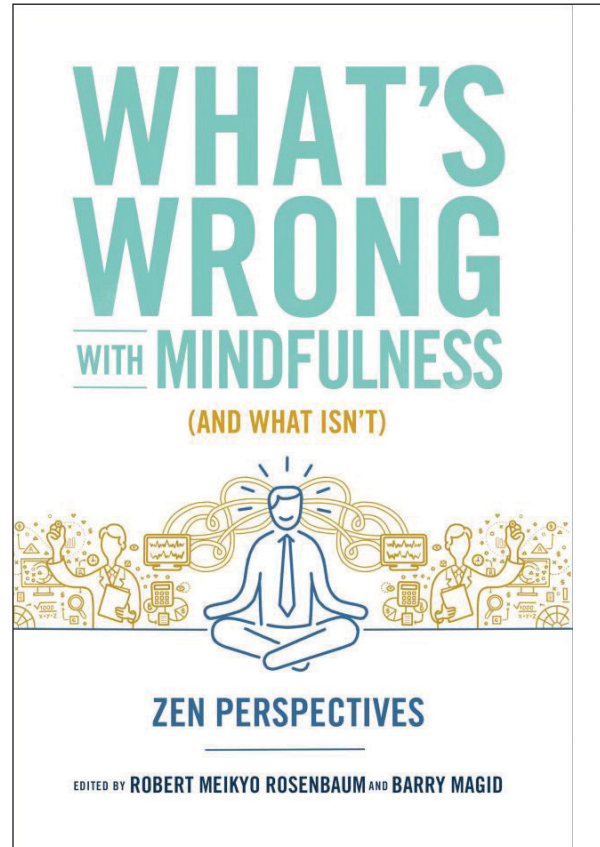
Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in the 1970s, has become very popular. Scientific research supports its use of techniques and methods which, while derived from a Buddhist tradition, demand no religious commitment from practitioners. Not only do individuals benefit from the increasing offerings of MBSR techniques and instructors, but companies like Google are also looking to help their employees to find a better balance in life and be more effective in their jobs. Athletes are looking for more skills to be more successful in sports. Even the U.S. military<sup>1</sup> has used the skills of MBSR instructors to support their troops. But the moment you bring mindfulness into the context of killing, it is understandable to look at the question “What’s wrong and what isn’t about mindfulness?”

The term *mindfulness* is used in so many ways that it is difficult to distinguish between its original meaning and the way it is used now in the “marketplace in the West” (p. 2). The authors see a threat that the success of the mindfulness movement (they call it hype) in the market will obscure even the fundamental nature of Buddhism itself.

The book has two parts: “Critical Concerns” consists of six articles from five different authors and focuses more on facts and a scientific approach to the subject. “Creative Engagement: Zen Experiences with Mindfulness Practice” consists of another five articles by six authors and reflects a more personal approach to the topic. After the epilogue and a short coda the book offers 20 pages of notes and another 20 pages of index and some basic information about the authors and editors.

All the authors come from Zen traditions in the United States with Japanese roots. Some also have a profound training in Vipassana techniques, and some have a clinical background.

The subtitle, “Zen Perspectives,” clarifies the book’s point of view and scope. The strong attraction of mindfulness-based techniques today reminds us of the interest of the beat generation of the 1950s and the hippies in the 1960s and 1970s, many of whom were attracted to Zen. The implementation of Zen in the West had—and still has—its own difficulties and cultural misun-



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derstandings. Knowing about the pitfalls can help to see the problems of establishing mindfulness as a technique that fits anyone today.

Zen schools in the West haven’t flourished in the same way as approaches involving mindfulness, and so the critical parts of this book read as if the authors have some resentment. That was my impression about the first part of the book; I got a little tired by the critical analyses of Marc R. Poirier and Robert Meikyo Rosenbaum, and there were moments when I thought, “I will give back the job of writing this review.” Why isn’t mindfulness wonderful, I thought, if people get some insight from practicing it and report positive effects on their lives? Why should it be important to buy the whole package of Buddhism?

But wait a minute! What is “correct” practice? That is the subject and the value of this book, and there are some interesting aspects to look at more closely and from which to learn.

The two editors, Robert Meikyo Rosenbaum and Barry Magid, are both senior Zen practitioners with a clinical background. Rosenbaum is a neuropsychologist and psychotherapist, while Magid is a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and a Zen teacher authorized by Joko Beck. They and the other contributors tell us to be aware that Zen in America has undergone a transformation with some difficulties and missteps, and thus are concerned the mindfulness movement could carry these sorts of problems to an extreme, since the techniques are “removed from its rich—and rigorous ascetic—Theravadin context” (p. 3). Nevertheless, there are well documented and tested benefits of mindfulness techniques, so the authors try to get the reader to see the risk that mindfulness could become just another program among the numberless ego-centered offerings in our consumer world. They encourage us to take a look at how the originally spiritual practice of mindfulness became a secular activity: Is one’s experience of mindfulness in a secular context still the same experience as the same experience in a religious context? Or is it something else? The equation of Buddhist practice = meditation = mindfulness = therapeutic practice (Robert Sharf, epilogue) should be questioned. Marc Poirier’s critical point is to differentiate between *practitioners* and *consumers*. A consumer is driven by desire and aversion (value-maximizing behavior), while a practitioner looks for transformation and uses more ritualized practices of attention such as meditation.

When I worked as a coach I had learned about a Buddhist approach that used the Buddhist concepts of karma and emptiness to get a deeper understanding of our conditions, but also our possibilities. I liked the work and met interesting people. But I could perceive that some of my clients just wanted a trick to help them become successful. Nothing is wrong with success, but it is definitely not the same as stopping want-



ing something—a core aspect of meditation practice. Poirier’s point makes sense: using practice as a goal-oriented technique for a business commitment to “enforce the model of gain from practice” (p. 24) has different results than using a technique for the practice of non-pursuing, as it is taught on the Zen path, expressed in the aspect of emptiness of the Mahayana traditions and explicitly stated in the Heart Sutra (no path, no wisdom, no attainment, and so on). Liberation has a very different point from goal-oriented techniques. It means to let go of everything, even our ideas of “meditation” and “mindfulness.”

Buddhism has undergone a transformation in the

West from a monastic sangha to a lay sangha. That is why for the two authors Barry Magid and Marc Poirier it is necessary to make another differentiation between a secular practice as seen in the mindfulness approach—a practice compatible with scientific, psychological and philosophical theories and practices not committed to any religious practice—versus a lay practice that is the extension of the Buddhist teaching to laypeople beyond the traditional renunciant monastic sangha.

Both differentiations (consumer versus practitioner, lay versus secular) are interesting, and in our modern times, when acquiring things has become our society's religion, this pattern of turning anything into a form of consumption will also happen to other practices like yoga or Zen. There is no guarantee that exactly these tendencies are not found in Zen practice or any other spiritual practices. This problem was well explained by Chögyam Trungpa in his book *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, in which he describes the mistakes that spiritual seekers commit by turning the pursuit of spirituality into an ego-building and confusion-creating endeavor based on the idea that ego development is counter to spiritual progress. So yes, we have to look closely at what “mindfulness” is about and with what intention it is taught—and this is true for any technique and practice, be it yoga, meditation, mindfulness or the art of archery. In his article “I Doesn't Mind” Robert Rosenbaum indicates this: “All practices are poison; they invoke the very problems they address” (p. 29 ff).

Rosenbaum also warns us of other pitfalls. For instance, even the word *mindfulness* is at risk of connoting that there is something like a “mind” or even a “wise mind” that can be achieved or accessed. Concerning the multitude of scientific studies focusing on the changes of the brain by practicing mindfulness, Rosenbaum declares mind would be “fast beyond measurement,” since it is more than the brain. “The mind relies on the brain, but . . . it also relies on and reflects the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys” (p. 58).

In part 2 I read Gil Fronsdal and Max Erdstein's article, “Creative Engagement,” with strong interest. Both authors have long practiced Vipassana intensively. Fronsdal was a Theravadin monk in Burma in 1985, and Erdstein is a Vipassana teacher trained by Fronsdal and who also practiced in Japan, Thailand and Burma. They look at the roots of the word *mindfulness* as we use it in the West today and show that it refers to the mind (Pali: *sati*). The Pali word *Vipassana* means “clear seeing” and refers to the results of practice: clearly seeing the nature of conditioned phenomena. The basis for practicing clear seeing is the knowing faculty of mind—*sati*—usually translated as mindfulness: “mindfulness meditation matures into vipassana” (p. 94). The

meditation instructions come from the Satipatthana Sutta, which teaches the key techniques for achieving mindfulness, that is, careful attention instead of the recollection of the Dharma. The practice of right mindfulness is essentially a wholesome quality of mind that is free from filters of greed, hate and delusion. Zen training imprints a certain way of presence with unconditional acceptance (nondiscriminating mind) and seeing the world as it is. Anything is practice, and everything that is happening can be fully experienced.

Erdstein and Fronsdal argue that *mindfulness* may not be a good match for how *sati* was used in the ancient Buddhist texts, so they decided to use *sati* in their discussion instead, mainly because *sati* actually refers to a result developed by techniques other than *sati* itself. *Sati* means simply to be present, so “awareness” would actually be a more appropriate translation. Thus *sati* had a different meaning than mindfulness, describing an active practice of directed attention—to be mindful of something or the practice of *sati*. The word mindfulness, on the other hand, corresponds better to the Pali word *sampajanna* (clear comprehension).

*What's Wrong with Mindfulness* is a compilation of interesting aspects of mindfulness and shows mindfulness techniques used in many different ways and offered by many different teachers. It certainly makes sense to continue to discuss and investigate the mindfulness trend and evaluate its positive and negative results. The authors do not doubt the results and effects of mindfulness practice, but they do doubt whether mindfulness is better than other meditation techniques or treatments. The attempt is to “throw some light on the ditches that line the path and offer a warning to tread slowly and carefully” (p. 52). In their coda Rosenbaum and Magid remind the reader that a major teaching of Buddhism is impermanence, and therefore integrating Buddhism (or meditation, be it mindfulness or Zen) into our current society is an ongoing experiment. An ongoing and open discussion of mindfulness will benefit not only representatives and teachers of the mindfulness movement, allowing them to offer better standards and quality in their work, but it will also help “established” Buddhist schools, leading them to important insights into how their paths and engagement can be fruitful and beneficial. In this sense the last line of the book ends with a blessing: “Whatever we may think about it, this is our practice. Practice is alive—which is beyond birth and death, beyond usefulness, beyond gain or loss. *Bodhi Svaha!*” ♦

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1. Comprehensive Soldier Fitness and Mindfulness-Based Mind Fitness Training (MMFT) programs offered mindfulness, positive psychology, and resilience to more than a million troops (p. 76 ff).