

Chapter 16

The No-Self of Zen/Gen: Examining the Interpersonal Aspects of Mindfulness

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ABSTRACT

The Buddhist practice of mindfulness has enjoyed a tremendous surge in popularity in the last few decades, both in the popular press and in the psychotherapy literature. However, the philosophy and practice of mindfulness has often been erroneously equated with quietism or a withdrawal from the world of action, misconceived as a practice of sterile, self-absorbed contemplation. On the contrary, the core Buddhist conception of existential freedom lies in the belief of doing over thinking, and intersubjectivity over introspection. Moreover, the cultural differences in how one conceives oneself, particularly in relation to others around, prove to be a critical factor in determining the efficacy of various clinical techniques including mindfulness practice. The chapter explores the interpersonal dimensions of mindfulness philosophy and practice, and the implications of such paradigms to question whether the current methods of intervention and training based on internality are sufficient for the clinical application.

INTRODUCTION

The practice and aesthetics of spirituality is claimed to be one of the most popular Eastern cultural imports to the West. The Buddhist practice of mindfulness in particular has seen a great surge in popularity both in the mass and social media as well as in the academic literature in last few decades (Davis & Hayes, 2011; Carrette & King, 2005; Purser, 2019). Its industry is currently worth \$4 billion, with the practice of mindfulness being adopted as part of corporate training by technology giants such as Google and Apple (Purser, 2019). Among its benefits shown in research are: improved concentration and mental clarity, moderation of psychological distress such as anxiety and depression, enhanced emotional intelligence such as objectivity, affective tolerance, equanimity, compassion and the capacity to attend to others and one's own self with benevolence (Davis & Hayes, 2011; Wallmark et al., 2013; Pratscher et al., 2019;

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Farris, et al., 2021). More specifically, the practice and philosophy of Zen (禪) has enjoyed an increasing attention thanks to such influential figures as D. T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, John Cage and David Lynch, before getting picked up by popular brands, Hollywood celebrities and social media influencers. Zen is often characterised by formal qualities and experiential concepts such as simplicity, introspection and quietude, with a slow and meditative attitude, stylistically employing monochrome or muted colors and natural material in terms of design. With its ascetic quality, minimalism, particularly in design such as fashion and architecture, has therefore been closely linked to Zen. However, what such modern Zen design represents is often far from the aesthetics of the original Japanese style (Kurosawa, 2004). Cox also claims that the artistic appropriations by post-war creatives in the West bear no physical resemblance to the Japanese Zen and its arts, reducing the historical and anthropological complexities of the practice into a mere aesthetics style (Cox, 2003). Zen is said to have been transplanted and transformed in the West, carefully manufactured into a set of media representations, which are central and critical to the shaping of the entire spirituality industry. While Zen philosophy and practice has often been misconceived to represent introspection with the wellbeing industry focuses on the improvement of the internality of the *self*, the chapter explores the interpersonal dimensions of Zen and question the efficacy of the current paradigm for clinical application.

PART 1: THE ART OF WELLNESS

The general mindset of Generation Y, coupled with the rapid advances in the new media technology, has been suggested to have had a huge impact on the recent resurgence of the Zen inspired design and lifestyle. Despite probably being the most educated generation in history, the millennial generation is faced with a global economic recession, poor career prospects and delayed milestones such as home ownership. Having seen their parents fall victim to downsizing and frequent layoffs in spite of long working hours made them wary of pursuing the same path, many are said to be turning for satisfaction in a different direction, favouring the idea of “making a life” over “making a living” (Eddy S.W. Ng., 2010). In his 2014 *New York Times* Bestseller book, *Essentialism – the disciplined pursuit of less*, Greg McKeown makes a case for the importance of living by design and not by default by eliminating nonessentials and consciously distinguishing the vital few from the trivial many (McKeown, 2014). Marie Kondo, in her book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*, along with her award-winning Netflix series, *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*, also emphasises the disposal of redundant and superfluous items to concentrate on essentials, with her now famed mantra: “*discard everything that does not spark joy*” (Kondo, 2014). Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus, through their publication, *Minimalism – Living a meaningful life*, along with the feature-length film, *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things*, demonstrate why working long hours, wasteful spending habits and ephemeral indulgences inevitably lead to depression, and how removing the excess leads to existential contentment. All these authors present pseudo-religious minimalist approaches for determining priorities, which will eventually lead to a meaningful and satisfied state of being (Moon, 2019; Why Minimalistic Interiors Are Good For Your Wellbeing, 2018; Bunker, 2017; Minimalists, 2020).

However, it has been argued that such modern commercialization of the general Zen lifestyle in the forms of design, art and advertising has had a significant impact on its popularization, the represented ideas are rarely actually *about* them, as the relational and ethical aspects of the philosophy and practice of the *doh*, central to Zen arts, are often overlooked (Cox, 2003). While the term ‘Zen arts’ has no

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