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## The Politics of Consciousness

Kurt Spellmeyer

The original title of this essay was “the Politics of Mindfulness.” Mindfulness, after all, has truly arrived—as we know because *Time* magazine told us so in a 2014 feature story. The cover photograph shows a woman—young, white, blond and beautiful—her lids closed above the words, “The Mindful Revolution.” Mindfulness has become so popular it almost rivals yoga, but it diverges from yoga in important ways. Yoga has inspired a subculture appealing primarily to women in the PMC, the professional-managerial class.<sup>1</sup> Mindfulness, by contrast, is less gendered, and its influence has spread differently—not only to middle management but also to the uppermost echelons of American corporate culture. Almost every week, it seems, another CEO in the *Huffington Post* celebrates its benefits. Like yoga, mindfulness has roots in ancient India, and much can be learned from a study of the roles it once played in that setting. But how are we to understand mindfulness in the context of our time and place, especially now that it has arrived in America’s classrooms?

There’s no way to answer that question, though, if we focus solely on the testimonials of meditators who spend hours on a mat, watching the breath go in and out. Nor will we get a satisfactory account from psychologists, therapists, and brain scientists. We have to step back from individuals to consider the larger society. But as soon as we shift from individuals to their interactions with each other, we enter the domain of politics—not the kind of politics we read about in *New York Times*, but politics in the sense Aristotle meant: our collective creation of the life we share. And once we start to think politically, the limits of the word “mindfulness” will become clearer.

Speaking as someone who has practiced meditation almost every day for more than forty years, I cannot praise it highly enough as a subjective experience. My meditation regimen has carried me through all kinds of tragedies and traumas, and I’m quite convinced it has made life easier for those who have interacted with me in some way, as colleagues, employees and students, or as members of my family. If we multiply the benefits I’ve received by, say, ten or twenty million, the result could be quite substantial. But then again, maybe not. Even if everyone in the United States adopted some form of meditation, normative structures would stay in place, especially our economic system. And other structures would remain unchanged, too—what Raymond Williams calls “structures of feeling,” as well as the taken-for-granted lifeworld which is a product of a history that includes patriarchy, genocide, slavery, and so on (Williams 129; Husserl 127-28).

Not only mindfulness but many forms of meditation can take us to a state of mind where everything feels alive and new, unobstructed and unchanging. I’ve been there myself quite often. Yet that experience of a timeless here-and-now still exists within history because, of course, that’s where we ourselves exist. And in the world that history

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1. According to a 2008 market research study commissioned by *Yoga Magazine*, 72% of yoga practitioners are women. Forty-four percent earn more than \$75,000 a year, while 24% earn more than \$100,000 (<http://www.statisticbrain.com/yoga-statistics/>). Seventy-seven percent are college-educated, and 27% have graduate degrees (<https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2011/09/14/exclusion-and-american-yoga/>; <https://www.namasta.com/press-resources/>).

has made, even the noblest ideas can be used to exploit and manipulate others. This is why Marxist thinkers adopted the concept of “ideology,” pointing beyond ideas to their strategic use in the political sphere. What holds true for ideas, however, applies also to practices of mental cultivation as well as altered states. They can be used to imprison as well as liberate, and to mystify as well as reveal. Because meditation is new to the West, it seems to be immune to these concerns, but this illusion dissipates once we recognize that mindfulness has a history—the history of consciousness.

### The Turn to Consciousness

“Mindfulness” is trending, true enough, but ours is not the first occasion when educated people in the West responded to rapid social change by making a deliberate effort to transform their mental habits. Such a transformation occupied a central place in the work of the nineteenth century’s most influential thinker, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Even those unfamiliar with Hegel’s work know from writers like Dickens, Zola, and Hauptmann how very difficult conditions were—and not just for those living in the West’s colonies, routinely subjected to forced labor, compulsory attendance at schools designed to exterminate their cultures, and the denial of their most basic rights. Life was nearly unbearable, too, for ordinary men and women in the West before labor unions, Social Security, Medicare and free public education. At least 20% of Great Britain was “itinerant, homeless and hungry,” and the great majority lived in poverty or on the edge of being poor (Howden-Chapman, Englishman). The unemployed, by the thousands, made their homes on the street, selling their labor, their bodies, or stealing whatever they could steal. Try as the educated classes might to avoid the grim spectacle, its magnitude called into question modernity itself.

Hegel’s solution wasn’t mindfulness, but he taught that how we think and act are the products of our consciousness, and he argued that we can transform reality by learning to think in new ways. Indeed, he said that people do this all the time without becoming consciously aware: at the moments we feel most trapped or blocked, we begin to re-imagine our relations to the world, and the new paradigm allows us move forward once again. This process, Hegel argued, happens automatically, arising from a force within consciousness, a force Hegel called Spirit or Mind, which, according to his *Phenomenology*, constantly labors to overcome every new contradiction between experience and existing knowledge (Hegel 51-52, 479-93). Hegel didn’t tell his followers to meditate, but he created a new way for the people of his day to regard their situation: even when conditions looked hopeless, he said, things are going work out because Mind is on the case. Some inspired person will devise exactly the solution we need. Our task as individuals is to follow the lead of these people—visionaries such as Hegel himself—or to become great visionaries ourselves.

As the heroes of the story Hegel told, intellectuals eagerly embraced his philosophy as a solution to their self-doubt and despair, and it allowed them to see themselves as agents of change, instead of hangers-on. But intellectuals were not alone in their embrace of Hegel. So deeply did his teaching resonate with earlier traditions in the West, especially Christian eschatology, that people who have never even heard his name still view events from his perspective. Our culture continues to believe that visionaries will

lead us to a future consummation of history—a better world foreordained by the very nature of the universe. Yet even in Hegel’s own lifetime, some of his followers found the results of his program disappointing. Most people’s lives remained quite bleak and unlikely to get better.

One of Hegel’s most trenchant critics was also his former student, Karl Marx, who complained that Hegel’s philosophy changed nothing but people’s attitudes. As Marx famously explained in the “Afterword” to the second German edition of *Capital*, he intended to stand Hegel’s system on its head by diminishing the role he assigned to consciousness:

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of “the Idea,” he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of “the Idea.” With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought. (Marx)

For Marx, Hegel’s focus on consciousness as the engine of human history concealed the real engine which was, Marx believed, the ongoing conflict among classes over the means of production. Marx’s claim to turn Hegel’s thinking on its head wasn’t just a witticism. It described the method he employed all his life: peering beneath ideas, so to speak, to expose the material reality.

Why this history lesson now? I’ve offered it because mindfulness appears to play the same role in our day as the philosophy of Mind did in Hegel’s. Does Marx’s criticism apply to mindfulness as well? Is mindfulness another example of an ideology which systematically misrepresents the way things actually are? The answer would seem to be “yes.”

### **Mindfulness as Ideology**

It is, Marx might say, no accident that *Time* describes the arrival of mindfulness as a “revolution.” The article includes, for example, a profile of Stuart Silverman:

. . . mindfulness has become [Silverman’s] way to deal with the 24/7 pace of his job consulting with financial advisers. Silverman receives hundreds of emails and phone calls every day. “I’m nuts about being in touch,” he says. Anxiety in the financial industry reached a high mark in the 2008 meltdown, but even after the crisis began to abate, Silverman found that the high stress level remained. So in 2011, he took a group of his clients on a mindfulness retreat. The group left their smartphones behind and spent four days at a resort in the Catskills, in upstate New York, meditating, participating in group discussions, sitting in silence, practicing yoga and eating meals quietly and mindfully. “For just about everybody there, it was a life-changing experience,” says Silverman. (Pickert)

Silverman calls mindfulness “life changing,” but how has his life really changed? He doesn’t quit his lucrative job; he doesn’t rethink his values or contemplate challenging established institutions. If mindfulness changes anything, it makes him more compliant and productive, and less likely to be critical of the status quo. Marx might decry this as a textbook case of the idealist game Hegel played—substituting a “revolution”

in consciousness for a revolution in society. A neo-Marxist like Louis Althusser would take Marx's criticism one step further, arguing that mindfulness helps "interpellate" its practitioners by teaching them to occupy a pre-scripted, accommodating subject position (Althusser 127-86).

I find these arguments compelling. As the *Time* article goes on to explain, corporations have been eager to embrace mindfulness as a management strategy. The Catskills program Silverman attended, we learn, was run by a former General Mills Vice President, Janice Marturano, who conducted mindfulness training for more than 500 employees before she left to oversee the for-profit Institute for Mindful Leadership, which has run sessions at elite venues like the annual conference in Davos. As Marturano explained to the reporter from *Time*, modern people "feel besieged by long work hours and near constant connectivity. For these people, there seems to be no time to zero in on what's important or plan ahead." But Marturano apparently never thought to ask why companies need to demand long hours or fail to respect their employees' private hours. Recently, an article in *Fast Company* profiled a mindfulness entrepreneur, CEO Rich Pierson of Headspace, whose treatment of workers was less than compassionate. In the words of one employee, "For a company with a mission to improve the health and happiness of our world internally, we are not at all trying to improve the health and happiness of our world externally. You can't cross the management. If you disagree or ask the wrong question, you will have a target on your forehead" (Weismann).

But this is not the story the press likes to tell. A year before the article in *Time*, *Wired* magazine wrote enthusiastically about the growing influence of mindfulness in Silicon Valley. The article opens with this scenario:

CHADE-MENG TAN IS PERCHED ON A CHAIR, his lanky body folded into a half-lotus position. 'Close your eyes,' he says. His voice is a hypnotic baritone, slow and rhythmic, seductive and gentle. 'Allow your attention to rest on your breath: The in-breath, the out-breath, and the spaces in between.' We feel our lungs fill and release. As we focus on the smallest details of our respiration, other thoughts—of work, of family, of money—begin to recede, leaving us alone with the rise and fall of our chests. . . . The quiet is broken a few minutes later, when Meng, as he is known, declares the exercise over. We blink, smile at one another, and look around our makeshift zendo—a long, fluorescent-lit presentation room on Google's corporate campus in Silicon Valley. (Schachtman)

In the course of the article, we discover that Tan is a Google employee, his meditation class one part of a company-sponsored course called Search Inside Yourself—remember, Google is *the* search engine company. As the *Wired* reporter learns from Tan, the meditation program is "designed to teach people to manage their emotions, ideally making them better workers in the process."

With examples like these in mind, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek has argued that "when 'Western Buddhism' presents itself as the remedy against the stressful tension of capitalist dynamics, allowing us to uncouple and retain inner peace and *Gelassenheit*, it actually functions as [capitalism's] perfect ideological supplement" ("From Western Marxism"; see also Saari and Harni). I completely agree. Yet even Žižek seems to recognize that "Buddhism" in the West's boardrooms doesn't look much like its Asian coun-

terparts, and for this very reason Western entrepreneurs are leaving Buddhism itself behind.

The *Wired* article, for example, extols strategies of “quiet contemplation” as the “new caffeine, the fuel that allegedly unlocks productivity and creative bursts.” Determined not to miss an opportunity for a competitive advantage, other Silicon Valley companies have followed Google’s lead. Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and Evan Williams of Twitter have both promoted mindfulness to their employees, and the two CEOs turned up in 2013 at the Wisdom 2.0 conference on consciousness, alongside “top executives from Linked-in, Cisco and Ford.” They appeared, moreover, not as members of the audience but in the ranks of headliners:

These companies are doing more than simply seizing on Buddhist practices. Entrepreneurs and engineers are taking millennia-old traditions and reshaping them to fit the Valley’s goal-oriented, data-driven, largely atheistic culture. Forget past lives; never mind nirvana. The technology community of Northern California wants return on its investment in meditation. ‘All the woo-woo mystical stuff, that’s really retrograde,’ says Kenneth Folk, an influential meditation teacher in San Francisco. ‘This is about training the brain and stirring up the chemical soup inside.’ (Schachtman)

Getting rid of “mystical woo-woo stuff” means teaching meditation in a way that will support the values of Silicon Valley and its unique form of capitalism, which manufactures novel strategies for monetizing information. The most obvious irony, then, is that Silicon Valley generates the very distractions meditation promises to help us cope with. But the entrepreneurs touting the benefits of mindfulness see it as a means to an end, and the end is greater profitability, not the creation of a cultural milieu more conducive to mental health or social wellbeing.

Kenneth Folk—the meditation teacher who dismisses Buddhist tradition as retrograde—may sound like an outlier, but he follows in the footsteps of the leading apostle of mindfulness, the Harvard psychologist Jon Kabat-Zinn, on record as stating that “mindfulness has nothing to do with Buddhism” (Morris). Within the Buddhist community, Kabat-Zinn’s critics have accused him of wanting to have it both ways, rubbing elbows with the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh while also helping to decontextualize the ancient practices of mental cultivation. The article in *Time* says so quite pointedly when it attributes the success of mindfulness to what it calls “smart marketing”:

Kabat-Zinn and other proponents are careful to avoid any talk of spirituality when espousing mindfulness. Instead, they advocate a commonsense approach: think of your attention as a muscle. As with any muscle, it makes sense to exercise it (in this case, with meditation), and like any muscle, it will strengthen from that exercise. (Pickert)

Kabat-Zinn, in other words, has turned mindfulness into a commodity like yoga, even though Buddhist tradition understands the practice as a preliminary stage in a far more comprehensive program that requires years of dedicated effort to complete. And the goal isn’t extra hours at work, but liberation from the mistaken belief in an isolated self. The Buddha famously walked away from wealth and power, and the monks and nuns who follow his example are celibate, live collectively and are prohibited from even touching money. Buddhism played an oppositional role in both India and China, reject-

ing caste and the legitimacy of the mandarins, but opposition is not at all the role Kabat-Zinn and others want to play.

### **The Problem of Post-Reality**

The Marxist case against mindfulness as an ideology seems overwhelming at first glance. But Kabat-Zinn and his fellow entrepreneurs may have beaten Marx at his own game of standing idealism on its head. The popularity of mindfulness is just one example of a larger contemporary development even the best thinkers of our time have yet to fully theorize: the elite no longer believe in beliefs. The most candid description of this development was recorded by the journalist Ron Suskind during his 2004 interview with an anonymous member of George Bush's inner White House circle:

[You people] believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality. That's not the way the world works anymore. We are an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too. And, that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do. (Suskind)

Suskind's source belittled what he called the "reality based community" because he and his fellow White House insiders regarded beliefs as contingent, tactical and, finally, unreal: all that matters are pragmatic results—in other words, winning. And this reductionism, widely embraced, makes social change nearly impossible because any program of reform has to rely on ideals of some kind. You can't argue for equality with people who don't believe that such a thing exists. You can't defend the idea of justice with people who see "justice" as nothing more than a clever way for losers to get over on the winners. Politicians on the right and the liberal left continue to mouth words like "freedom" and "opportunity," but we know they understand those words as empty tropes they employ in the struggle for advantage. Even to speak of the American elite as "capitalists" assumes that they remain committed to some abstract set of principles, when the disaster that has overtaken us is far worse than the triumph of the "market" as a philosophy. America's current version of pragmatism acts like a corrosive acid that dissolves every idea we might throw in its path, and it has gained this power because, ultimately, all ideas are indeed abstractions and none of them can fully represent the real. By staking out as their home turf this gap between the idea and the reality, America's elite have joined the company of the Chinese Communist Party and the Russian state, institutions we might define as post-ideological because their commitments—even to capitalism—are strategic, not principled.

Now we can begin to understand why mindfulness exerts such a powerful appeal over corporate America. Promising access to a here-and-now unobstructed by language, culture and history, mindfulness offers the elite a pedagogy perfectly compatible with their post-reality pragmatism.

Of course, we haven't actually escaped reality. Climate change, the Sixth Great Extinction and a growing income gap will impose limits on us whether or not we accept them as real. All that mindfulness can do is postpone a rude awakening. But Suskind's anonymous source has a point when it comes to facts—facts don't tell us what

they mean or how we should respond to them. Marx was badly mistaken, then, when he assumed that facts would settle everything. Yet Hegel was mistaken too because he believed that when the facts let us down, the proper exercise of our minds will show us the way to wisdom. Judging from mindfulness, I would say that Hegel's confidence in Mind is naive. And so we find ourselves in this predicament: both of our alternatives have failed—mind training as well as materialism.

Where are we supposed to go next?

### Critical Thinking after Reality

“Post-reality” sounds like a new predicament, but we've been here before as well. Writing in nineteenth century, Marx felt certain his new methodology could dissolve illusions of every kind, clearing the way for the victory of the proletariat as the only class that truly stood to benefit from recognizing the truth. As he and Frederick Engels announced in the *Communist Manifesto*, “What the bourgeoisie . . . produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable” (Marx and Engels). By the 1930s, however, actual events had failed to conform to the trajectory Marx imagined. The Soviet version of materiality gave birth to a totalitarian state unlike anything the world had ever seen before. Meanwhile, in Western Europe and the United States, the masses willingly embraced a different kind of materiality—what Marx called the “fetishism” of “commodities.” Under its spell, even Germany, the most educated and technologically advanced nation at the time, had not only failed to become the staging ground for a global shift to socialism, but was swiftly plunging into the most terrifying barbarity.

One response to these events was the creation of the Institute for Social Research at the Goethe University in Frankfurt—now known as the Frankfurt School. For the Frankfurt theorists, whose most important work coincides with Hitler's rise to power, the question was not simply, “Where did Marx go wrong?” but an even more sweeping one: “Two centuries after the Enlightenment, how has modern society come to seem more, not less, irrational?” How could rationality itself serve to arm unreason with new weapons, a possibility never foreseen by Marx or by Enlightenment thinkers he admired—Descartes, Locke and Kant.

In works like the *Critique of Instrumental Reason* and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, two of the leading Frankfurt theorists, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, attempted to answer these questions. The problem they identified was that reason had overlooked its own irrational presuppositions:

The aporia which faced us in our work thus proved to be the first matter we had to investigate: the self-destruction of enlightenment. We have no doubt . . . that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking. We believe we have perceived with equal clarity, however, that the very concept of that thinking . . . already contains the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today. If enlightenment does not [engage in] reflection on this regressive moment, it seals its own fate . . . . In the mysterious willingness of the technologically educated masses to fall under the spell of any despotism, in its self-destructive affinity to nationalist paranoia . . . the weakness of contemporary theoretical understanding is evident. (Horkheimer and Adorno xvi).



From one perspective, the institutions of the modern world—the economy, government, the legal system and the media—looked thoroughly rational and modern. Science and technology, after all, had revolutionized the self-understanding of many millions of people while completely transforming their material lives. But, at the same time, the process of modernization allowed the transmission of irrationality through what Horkheimer and Adorno rather vaguely described as “the very concept of . . . thinking.”

At this point, the two men were still looking for new ways to extend the scope of rationality. And like other members of the Institute, they looked to sociology and anthropology for an understanding of “culture”—still a new concept at the time—and to the structures of experience that culture transmits intersubjectively. Their turn to culture allowed them to see that the problem they faced was actually much worse than they supposed at first: not simply the persistence of an unreason embedded in traditional attitudes but the rise of a powerful “culture industry” that used the new mass media to inundate the populace with mystifying misrepresentation of the way things were. The images shown on the silver screen, celebrated in popular fan magazines, or narrated in dime store novels appealed to people’s legitimate desire for a better world while leaving the status quo unchallenged and unchanged—in particular economic inequality and the political monopoly enjoyed by the elite. Precisely because these images were so pervasive and appealing, they made it more and more difficult for ordinary people to separate fact from fantasy.

Living in the age of Donald Trump, we can recognize the influence of the culture industry, its power now extended and magnified by the new electronic media. But the media alone can’t fully account for Trump or his adherents, since we all participate in the same culture without all becoming Trump supporters. Convinced that these differences require more granular explanations than the idea of culture alone can provide, Horkheimer and Adorno turned to another emerging discipline—Freudian psychology.

The shift to Freud marks a new stage in School’s development: the introduction of the idea of the mind—consciousness again—as something separate and much more complex than both reason and culture. Freud’s understanding of the mind—and key ideas like repression, sublimation, transference, displacement and defense mechanisms—gave the Frankfurt theorists analytical tools far more nuanced than any prior thinking on the subject. Of particular value to them was Freud’s structural model of the psyche, which he divided into id, ego and superego. The id—which has no place in the mind as imagined by the Enlightenment, or, for that matter, by early anthropology—allowed Horkheimer and Adorno to explain finally how reason and unreason could co-exist. As Freud described it, the id was reason’s opposite:

It is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality, what little we know of it we have learned from our study of the dreamwork and of course the construction of neurotic symptoms, and most of that is of a negative character and can be described only as a contrast to the ego. We approach the id with analogies: we call it a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations. . . . It is filled with energy reaching it from the instincts, but it has no organization, produces no collective will, but only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle. (Freud 91-92)

To Horkheimer and Adorno, it seemed obvious at first that the id was the culture industry's staunchest ally and capitalism's greatest strength. The way to combat its influence was something like Freudian analysis, but applied to the study of the whole society. Armed with the Freudian model, cultural Marxism could bring to consciousness our most irrational impulses. For a few years, at least, this possibility held enormous promise.

But gradually, they came to rethink their position—and to reject a key element of Freud's therapeutic program. In his later work, Adorno as well as his younger colleague Herbert Marcuse broke with Freud over the role of the id, which becomes for them the true agent of liberation. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno argues that reason cannot play an emancipatory role precisely because the ego has been so thoroughly colonized by the superego—the dominant values of society—that its own introspection becomes distorting and inauthentic. In trying to understand ourselves, we have little choice except to rely on the categories offered by our culture, which we internalize so thoroughly they can feel natural and freely chosen. All the while, we remain largely unaware of the prodigious labor of repression required for living as we are expected to. Adorno repairs, then,

The dawning sense of freedom feeds upon the memory of the archaic impulse not yet steered by any solid I. The more the I curbs that impulse, the more chaotic and thus questionable will it find the pre-temporal freedom. Without [a recollection] of the untamed impulse that precedes the ego—an impulse later banished to the zone of unfree bondage to nature—it would be impossible to derive the idea of freedom. (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 221-22)

Adorno's point here deserves a second look because he says that the persistence of the id explains why a desire for freedom survives in spite of society's ability to control even our "private" thoughts. While capitalism found a way to make reason into its instrument, it can't fully colonize the id (see also O'Connor 110-46).

Adorno, then, finally turns his back on the Enlightenment idea of reason as transparent to itself, though reason still has a role to play, one that's purely critical or "negative." The praxis of negative dialectics requires a continuous effort to liberate the id by weakening the power of society over the ego. And critical reason effects this weakening by constantly exposing contradictions between society's totalizing claims and the lived reality.

### **Beyond Negative Dialectics to Zen**

Adorno's thinking has had an enormous effect on the left-Progressive and Marxist traditions in the West for more than fifty years. Only recently, the *Guardian* featured a series of articles on the contemporary relevance of the Frankfurt School (Thompson). The *New Yorker* has published an article, too (Ross). Yet Trump and his allies might have little to fear from a method that exploits the gaps and inconsistencies in our normative social script. I would even say they're masters of the art. Negativity has gone mainstream.

One way out of this cul-de-sac is Marcuse's attempt to affirm the revolutionary potential of the pleasure principle, which could, he argued in *Eros and Civilization*, overthrow capitalism by rejecting the imperative of repressive self-discipline (Marcuse 197-221). So, far this hasn't happened. If anything, the pleasure principle appears to lend itself quite readily to consumerism. But another, and to my mind, more promising avenue can be

found in the work of the philosopher Nikolas Kompridis, who has argued that Adorno failed to push his thinking far enough: when we employ critical reason to dismantle our presuppositions, we aren't left nowhere, as Adorno assumes, with nothing or pure "negativity." The act of clearing away reveals something new—a moment of "world disclosure" (254-80).

Kompridis moves from this insight to a rediscovery of the Romantic tradition, but his ideas open up other avenues as well, including one he doesn't consider: a form of Buddhist meditation quite different from mindfulness—Zen—although the two often get conflated by the popular press. No one who knows Adorno's work can doubt he would react to this claim with hostility. And, indeed, he did in the sixties:

The corny exoticism of such decorative world views as the astonishingly consumable Zen Buddhist . . . casts light upon today's restorative philosophies. Like Zen, they simulate a thinking posture which [historical differences make it] impossible to assume. Restricting the mind to thoughts open and attainable at the historical stage of its [immediate] experience is an element of freedom; nonconceptual vagary represents the opposite of freedom. Doctrines which heedlessly run off from the subject to the universe . . . are more easily brought into accord with the world's hardened condition . . . than is the tiniest bit of self-reflection by a subject pondering upon itself and its real captivity. (qtd. in Nelson 296)

It's worth remembering, however, that Adorno had a similar reaction to jazz, which is surely one of this country's most sophisticated and inspiring contributions to world culture. Adorno called it "primitive" (Adorno, "On Jazz" 47).

Despite Adorno's condemnation, Zen's understanding of the mind has remarkable parallels to the account we find in *Negative Dialectics*. Just as Adorno and Marcuse looked to the id as the agent of liberation, so Zen's *yogacara* psychology, recognizing that our conscious lives draw their content and their form from the dominant culture, turns to a deeper stratum of the mind which it calls the "*alaya vijñana*" or storehouse consciousness. Like Freudian psychoanalysis, the *yogacara* school recognizes something like a process of stratification which stores conscious experience as accessible or inaccessible memories—what the *yogacara* calls "seeds" (Lusthaus, "What is Yogacara," also *Buddhist Phenomenology*). Unlike Freud, however, and more like the late Adorno, *yogacara* posits a deeper psychic core preserving, as Adorno puts it, "an untamed impulse that precedes the ego." This untamed impulse, however, *yogacara* psychology holds in even higher esteem than Adorno does, some yogacarins even calling it the *tathagatagarbha*, "the womb of the Buddhas" (King 19-21). It is the *tathagatagarbha* that allows Zen practitioners to see their situation more comprehensively—provided they find a way to short-circuit the ego and with it, their cultural conditioning. And Zen does so by using contradiction in much the same way as Adorno recommends.

I would suggest, however, that Zen also teaches us how to achieve just what Kompridis proposes—moving through contradiction to a "disclosure of the world," an opening to new possibilities for understanding and action. But the key word here is "moving through." If mindfulness focuses so narrowly on a unitive here-and-now that no space is left for anything else, the life of Zen comes from contradiction. It's certainly true that the experience of contradiction leads temporarily to feelings of loss or emptiness, but disjunction makes disclosure possible, in a manner that is something like the "gestalt

switch” first described by the Berlin School of psychology. One illustration of this process appears in a story, a koan, used in the training of Zen students. Like many koans, this story describes an encounter between a Zen master and a monk.

At this time, the master, Joshu, had become legendary in Zen circles for the depth of his insight. Following the death of Joshu’s teacher, Nansen, many Chinese expected that Joshu would succeed him as the abbot of the temple, but instead Joshu set out on the road, encountering other Zen teachers and their students. Like everyone whose reputation has preceded him, Joshu was often welcomed with respect, but sometimes, as on this occasion, a monk would greet him skeptically. Here’s the exchange:

A monk said to Joshu, ‘The stone bridge of Joshu is widely renowned, but coming here I find only a set of steppingstones.’ Joshu said, ‘You only see the steppingstones yet the stone bridge is right here, before your eyes.’ The monk said, ‘What are you calling a “stone bridge”?’ In reply, Joshu said, ‘It lets donkeys cross over and horses cross over.’ (Sekida 291-93, translation altered)

Joshu’s teaching of the “stone bridge” refers to the situation in China when this conversation took place. The Anji bridge close to the monastery was an engineering marvel, built two hundred years earlier, but the spirit that produced it had been lost. Both Joshu and the monk were born in the decades following the worst civil conflict in Chinese history, the An Lushan Rebellion, which, according to some historians, killed a third of the population and left the Middle Kingdom on life support. In less than a hundred years, the dynasty would fall. Most people couldn’t see a “bridge” of any kind, a way forward from disaster to a better place. And this situation resembles ours today, when no one can believe in anything because everything we once believed in has failed.

When the monk challenges Joshu, he says, in effect, “You’re a great Zen master who’s supposed to know the way into the future, but what I see here goes nowhere. You’re just as clueless as I am.” We might expect a person like Joshu, with a reputation for insight, to say something profound, but instead his answer sounds cryptic and banal: “It lets donkeys cross over and horses cross over.”

The harder we try to interpret this response, the more quickly we will reach the point where we lose confidence in any reading we might give. Every construal will eventually seem contrived and unconvincing. But the failure of our skill as interpreters takes us to the place Adorno had in mind when he wrote, “Thought as such . . . is an act of negation, of resistance to that which is forced upon it” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 19). At this moment, new possibilities can arise precisely because we have exhausted all the stock solutions. Only uncertainty has this power.

In this condition of uncertainty, which Zen calls *mu-shin* or “mind of emptiness,” we undergo an experience of loss which is both cognitive and existential. We would like our uncertainty to be followed by some kind of solution, but as long we expect the solution to be there, waiting for us fully formed, we will keep facing a blank wall. Instead, we need to actively create the new coherence—the bridge—we’re looking for. But how can we create it when our best ideas have all gone down in flames?

As Joshu knew, however, our creativity has a deeper source. He believed in the existence of something like Adorno’s “untamed impulse that precedes the ego,” an impulse we can access only when we exhaust our presuppositions. Then, in emptiness, a solution will appear, though not from the part of the mind that thinks, because it can only think

what it knows already. Instead, the answer comes from a deeper place, the “womb of the Buddhas” or what the Romantic thinkers called “imagination.”

The monk, meanwhile, is still waiting passively for the bridge to present itself, but this passivity is the worst of all the injuries done to us by our materialism, which teaches us that the phenomenal world exists without our own participation. In fact, perception requires us to select, from a torrent of raw sensations, the elements we combine into “reality,” consciously and unconsciously. The world actually exists, of course, but we create our image of it, and because we exist within society—within language, culture and history—we create this image collaboratively unless we are actively dissuaded. If the myth of an objective reality serves any function, it exists to convince we have no part to play and should content ourselves with observing.

Mindfulness as practiced in the United States trains people to become observers of this kind, contemplating a world of objects they have had no part in creating. Merging ego into superego, mindfulness suppresses contradictions that arise when culture conflicts with our experience or with itself. These contradictions, we know too well, generate anxiety, anger and fear, to say nothing of disorders and pathologies that send people to their therapists, local bars or drug dealers. No wonder people try to repress them! Yet only contradictions make meaning possible, since “meaning” is the coherence we create out of discontinuity. If mindfulness is a pedagogy, the same can be said of Zen, but Zen is a pedagogy that wakes us up, instead of telling us to sleep. And in that case, our real work as teachers begins with placing contradictions at the center of the class—in the lessons we craft and the readings we assign. And then these lessons make students responsible for building bridges of their own.



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