



Soren Gordhamer, Rep. Tim Ryan (D-OH), and Jon Kabat-Zinn on a panel at Wisdom 2.0 in 2011. Photo by elizaIO via Flickr Creative Commons: <https://bit.ly/2F8wkhk>

Note on this Case Study:

New technologies present both opportunities and challenges to religious communities. Throughout history, many religious people have created and used new technologies on behalf of their religious traditions. At times, religious needs have driven technological innovation. Yet many religious people have also tried to limit the use of certain technologies that they felt violated principles of their tradition. The relationship between religion and technology is complex and highly dependent on context. As you read these case studies, pay attention to that context: Who are the groups involved? What else is happening in their context? Who benefits from new technologies? Who gets to decide if they are legitimate or not?

As always, when thinking about religion and technology, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

The Religious Literacy Project is directed by Diane L. Moore and all content is constructed under her editorial direction.

Mindfulness in Silicon Valley

Silicon Valley, a region of central California, is a major economic center and home to many companies that specialize in technology like the internet, computers, social media, and more. Over the last decade, many of these companies have heavily invested in trainings in “mindfulness,” which is the English name for a diverse set of Buddhist religious practices that have a history going back thousands of years. In particular, the forms of mindfulness promoted by these companies are influenced by 20th century Theravada Buddhists in Myanmar and Zen Buddhists in Korea.¹ Because of Silicon Valley’s economic, political, and social power, this approach to mindfulness has spread rapidly. The mindfulness industry is now worth over \$1 billion in the US, and corporations like Monsanto, Goldman Sachs, General Mills, and Aetna have joined Silicon Valley in offering mindfulness training. Some estimate that 20% of US companies now teach mindfulness, and many of them fund mindfulness training in public schools. Even the US military has used mindfulness to calm soldiers before they are sent into combat.²

In Silicon Valley, major companies including Google, Facebook, and Twitter have adopted mindfulness practices. Companies have claimed meditation is a “technology,” and they market this technology to tech-savvy consumers under trendy names. Jon Kabat-Zinn offers “mindfulness-based stress reduction,” Kenneth Folk promotes “open-source enlightenment,” Google talks about “neural self-hacking,” and Soren Gordhamer developed “Wisdom 2.0.” In 2010, Gordhamer started an annual event to discuss mindfulness in tech companies, also called Wisdom 2.0, which has drawn thousands of high-powered

CEOs and tech workers. In 2011, Google invited celebrated Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh to Google’s headquarters to lead mindfulness practice. Many companies claim mindfulness trainings have reduced employee stress and increased productivity and profits. However, studies with control groups are inconclusive in proving these claimed benefits.³

¹ Richard King, “‘Paying Attention’ in a Digital Economy...,” in *Handbook of Mindfulness*, ed. Ronald E. Purser, David Forbes, & Adam Burke (New York: Springer, 2016), 31-33, 36.

² Kevin D. Williamson, “‘Mindfulness’ is Just Commercialized Corporate Speak for Buddhist-inspired Help Training,” *Dallas News*, Jan. 9, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2GYix2G>; Ronald Purser & Edwin Ng, “Corporate Mindfulness is Bullsh*t...”, *Salon*, Sept. 27, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2C2Gyvl>; David Forbes, “Occupy Mindfulness,” *CUNY Academic Works*, July 1, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2sbc3z3>.

³ Noah Shachtman, “In Silicon Valley, Meditation is No Fad, It Could Make Your Career,” *Wired*, June 18, 2013, <https://bit.ly/2d0Eiek>; Bret Stetka, “Where’s the Proof that Mindfulness Meditation Works?” *Scientific American*, Oct. 11, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2xzyaiP>.

While many trainers in Silicon Valley acknowledge that mindfulness is a Buddhist practice, they also claim to remove religion from it. They often characterize their programs “Buddhist-inspired,” making the connection to Buddhism while reassuring their largely non-religious audience that they are not promoting religion. For example, Kenneth Folk described Wisdom 2.0 as “a networking opportunity with a light dressing of Buddhism.”⁴ Some question if corporate mindfulness is Buddhist at all; companies usually claim that these trainings are “secular,” even when they bring in well-known Buddhist leaders for trainings. However, some Buddhists claim that “secular” mindfulness is “stealth Buddhism,” which allows Buddhism to be exported to businesses, schools, and hospitals without accusations of proselytizing.⁵

Despite support from some prominent Buddhists, other Buddhists are concerned by the proliferation of these mindfulness practices. At the 2014 Wisdom 2.0 conference, Buddhist practitioner Amanda Ream and other members of a local meditation center protested the event. They called attention to the hypocrisy of the nation’s richest CEOs discussing an escape from suffering for themselves while they were causing suffering for poorer Americans through gentrification in central California. Security removed the protestors without their concerns being addressed. Ream later wrote that true dharma “directs us to feel the suffering of others.”⁶

Ream’s protest was one example of some Buddhists’ concerns about mindfulness in the tech world. Several prominent Buddhists have accused companies of promoting “McMindfulness,” meaning the values of neoliberalism instead of Buddhism’s call to end suffering. Neoliberalism is a dominant economic philosophy in modern American industry that promotes profit-driven, free market capitalism in which workers are responsible for their own well-being. From this perspective, individuals can “choose” between being stressed and sad or being happy and healthy. McMindfulness enables this view by offering a technology workers can ostensibly use to choose health and happiness. However, Buddhist critics claim that this use of mindfulness only shifts the blame for stress onto the employees and discourages them from questioning stressful working conditions. Plus, Buddhist critics note, Silicon Valley profits from mindfulness as a solution to problems it is partially responsible for creating. These Buddhists worry that Silicon Valley is funding McMindfulness because it teaches workers to be “unquestioning consumers” and “compliant” workers. Buddhist monk Bhikku Bodhi noted, “Absent a sharp social critique, Buddhist practices could easily be used to justify and stabilize... consumer capitalism.” In his view, mindfulness has become a “handy buzzword” to sell products.⁷

With billions of dollars in funding from Silicon Valley and American consumers, mindfulness has impacted Buddhism worldwide. Historically, many Buddhists have focused on ending suffering, destroying the self, and escaping from samsara. However, influenced by Silicon Valley’s heavily marketed mindfulness programs, many Buddhists in America have increasingly focused on mindfulness for personal, inner healing rather than future liberation. Some Asian Buddhists have begun to similarly emphasize mindfulness in new ways, reflecting the growth of Buddhism in the West and transforming the tradition as it encounters new cultures and ideologies like American neoliberal capitalism.⁸

⁴ Shachtman, “In Silicon Valley...”

⁵ Candy Gunther Brown, “Textual Erasures of Religion: The Power of Books to Redefine Yoga and Mindfulness Meditation as Secular Wellness Practices in North American Public Schools,” *Mémoires du Livre* 6, no. 2, Aug. 18, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2TStZ11>.

⁶ Amanda Ream, “Why I Disrupted the Wisdom 2.0 Conference,” *Tricycle*, Feb. 19, 2014, <https://bit.ly/2RhyBxe>.

⁷ David Loy, “Beyond McMindfulness,” *Huffington Post*, July, 31, 2013, <https://bit.ly/2kI9vHQ>; Purser and Ng, “Corporate Mindfulness...”; David Forbes, “They Want Kids to be Robots...” *Salon*, Nov. 8, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2Op2Pji>; Bhikku Bodhi, “The Transformations of Mindfulness,” in *Handbook of Mindfulness*, ed. Ronald E. Purser, David Forbes, & Adam Burke (New York: Springer, 2016), 14.

⁸ Bhikku Bodhi, “The Transformations of Mindfulness,” 6, 14.

Additional Resources

Primary Sources:

- Google video on well-known Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh’s visit to their corporate headquarters in 2011: <https://bit.ly/1yKInY1>.
- CNBC video of Google’s chief mindfulness expert teaching corporate mindfulness on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange (2013): <https://cnb.cx/2VG9yT0>
- Huffington Post article by company founder Arianna Huffington on the money to be made from promoting mindfulness (2013): <https://bit.ly/2RaKUeH>
- Editorial by Zen Buddhist teacher David Loy on the dangers of “McMindfulness” (2013): <https://bit.ly/2kI9vHO>
- Amanda Ream on disrupting Wisdom 2.0 (2014): <https://bit.ly/2RhyBxe>.
- Editorial by journalist Kevin Williamson critical of corporate mindfulness (2018): <https://bit.ly/2GYjx2G>
- Editorial by Buddhist scholars Ronald Purser and Edwin Ng critical of corporate mindfulness (2015): <https://bit.ly/2C2GyvI>

Secondary Sources:

- RLP video explaining the concept of neoliberalism (2018): <https://bit.ly/2TuwYZx>
- NPR radio program on Wisdom 2.0 and the 2014 protests: <https://n.pr/2GVF4Jj>
- Wired article on the importance of mindfulness to Silicon Valley CEOs and employees (2013): <https://bit.ly/2d0Eiek>

Discussion Questions

- Why might Buddhists have such diverse views on the spread of mindfulness in corporations?
- What is neoliberalism? Why do some Buddhists see corporate mindfulness as a neoliberal tool?
- Why might corporate mindfulness trainers continue to teach the Buddhist origins of their trainings, while still claiming to be “secular”?
- Is corporate mindfulness Buddhist? Who gets to decide what is Buddhist and what is not?
- Watch the CNBC video of a corporate mindfulness training. How might you imagine different Buddhists would respond to this video? What about their cultural context might cause them to respond differently?
- Compare the two Huffington Post articles by Arianna Huffington and David Loy. Where do they agree and where do they diverge?
- Why has mindfulness become common in public schools? Why are some people concerned about this trend?



Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who gave a keynote address to Google employees in 2011. Photo by Duc Truong in 2006 via Wikimedia Commons: <https://bit.ly/2F4hqZt>