

**Mindful Yoga:**  
**Where Buddhism meets Brahmanism in the Contemporary World.**

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## INTRODUCTION.

The focus of this dissertation is the category of Mindful Yoga. Mindful Yoga describes modern postural yoga<sup>1</sup> practitioners and teachers who draw from Buddhist worldviews and modern mindfulness. I capitalize the term ‘Mindful’ to differentiate it from the descriptive ‘mindful’. The latter simply refers to a yoga practice carried out with awareness, emphasizing its therapeutic outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

Mindful Yoga goes further. One of its principal features is a marked social and environmental concern. It begins to foreground activism. Through the analysis of messages of its key authors, I highlight the strong altruistic stance of this new tradition. I also question its application both in the physical yoga space and in the public realm of activism. Central to the Mindful Yoga ethos is the idea that tending to our own wellbeing is simultaneous with helping others. This is not in itself controversial. We run into problems however when the idea that tending to ourselves *implies* that we are thereby helping others.

My aims are threefold: first I set out to analyze the transition from physical/therapeutic yoga practice to socially engaged altruism. Then I explore where the impulse towards activism arises. Finally, I examine the intersection of Mindful Yoga and activism in real life examples.

Meditation affects behavior. How meditation practice establishes altruistic traits<sup>3</sup> is a question that has received scientific interest in recent years. For example in his book ‘The Science of Meditation’ (2017), science journalist and board member of the Mind & Life

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<sup>1</sup> MPY accentuates the exoteric and stress-relieving effects of yoga (DeMichelis 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Scholarly articles that treat mindful yoga as a category tend to refer to the therapeutic aspects of slow, somatic yoga practiced with awareness, i.e: ‘The experience of mindful yoga for older adults with depression’(Lee 2019), ‘Regular mindful yoga practice as a method to improve androgen levels in women with polycystic ovary syndrome’(Patel et al. 2020), ‘Reducing stress in school-age girls through mindful yoga’(White 2012), ‘Mindful yoga for women with metastatic breast cancer’(Carson et al. 2017) etc.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike a “state”, which is temporary, a “trait” involves an actual *transformation* and lasting change. Goleman refers to traits also as “neural” shifts, differentiating them from altered states like those brought about by hypnosis for example: ‘hypnosis, unlike meditation, produced primarily state effects, and not trait effect as with meditation’ (Goleman 2017:44).

Institute<sup>4</sup>, Daniel Goleman observes that while ‘several meditation methods aim to cultivate compassion. The scientific (and ethical) question is, does this matter – does it move people toward compassionate action?’ (Goleman and Davidson 2017:103). In this dissertation, I ask a similar question: do the contemplative practices of Buddhism, yoga and modern mindfulness in fact constitute stepping stones to more altruistic behaviour?

The fusion of contemplative and activist practice is central to Mindful Yoga. The focus on both self-development and altruism intends to serve as a potential solution to the following problem:

While most practices on the path to awakening provide profound benefits, they do not, in themselves, promote the types of psychological maturity and ethical behaviours associated with contemporary social and eco justice values (Snow 2015:3).

I argue that while the link between activist involvement and either Buddhist or yoga soteriology is tenuous, interconnections do exist.

Regenerative activism recognizes such interconnections. Engagement with both contemplative and activist practice is gaining traction in society. Regenerative activist groups make use of mindfulness and somatic practices to treat “burn-out”<sup>5</sup>. I explore how the recognition of interconnectedness, core to the Buddhist teachings<sup>6</sup>, forms the basis of an integrated activist training<sup>7</sup>. Mindful Yoga promotes activities that, on the face of it,

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<sup>4</sup> Established in 1987, the Mind & Life Institute emerged from a meeting between the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, scientist and philosopher Francisco Varela and lawyer and entrepreneur Adam Engle. Their aim is ‘to bring science and contemplative wisdom together to better understand the mind and create positive change in the world’ (Mind & Life Institute 2021).

<sup>5</sup> ‘Burn-out: Extreme tiredness or a feeling of not being able to work anymore, caused by working too hard’ (Dictionary. Cambridge.org 2021). This term predominates in activist circles where fruitless struggle abounds.

<sup>6</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh (b.1926) notes: ‘In early Buddhism, we speak of Interdependent Co-Arising. In later Buddhism, we use the words interbeing and interpenetration. The terminology is different, but the meaning is the same’ (Hanh 1999:225). Hanh is a Vietnamese activist and Buddhist monk. His writing brings together traditional Buddhist teachings and a modern approach to mindfulness.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Integral activist training honours the inseparability of transforming ourselves and the world. If we don’t change society the opportunities to realise individual potential are diminished. If we don’t change ourselves our efforts to change society are often undermined’ (Ulexproject.org 2017).

have nothing to do with yoga in its modern, transnational, anglophone guise<sup>8</sup>. Instead practice is oriented towards values such as equity, justice and compassionate citizenship. Though the cold distinction between mind practices and body practices is not always avoided<sup>9</sup>, overwhelmingly Mindful Yoga is holistic and includes community.

## WHAT IS MINDFUL YOGA AND FOR WHOM: FUSION AND DISTINCTION.

Mindful Yoga is a modern hybrid. It combines āsana practice, interpretations of traditional Buddhist teachings<sup>10</sup>, classical yoga teachings<sup>11</sup> and modern mindfulness techniques. These feature alongside other expressions (poetry, personal anecdotes, psychological terminology, Taoist passages, teachings from other somatic disciplines etc.) and the use of aspirational language. According to yoga and Buddhist scholar/practitioner Chip Hartranft, the Buddha and Patañjali share the same basic meditative approach. A close reading of Patañjali's yoga sūtras reveals that both Patañjali and the Buddha had the same independent and anti-orthodox spirit too (Hartranft 2010:4). It is this spirit that is reflected in the words of Mindful Yoga authors. While emphasizing similarities between yoga and Buddhism, Mindful Yoga constitutes a form of “pick n mix” spirituality (Hamilton in Sutcliffe 2000)<sup>12</sup> as it adheres to no rigid format. Mindful Yoga teachers highlight the meditative aspect of the physical yoga practices and use Buddhist teachings as a reference.

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<sup>8</sup> The qualifiers modern, transnational and anglophone are used by Mark Singleton to describe the typology that dominates the globalized, contemporary yoga scene (Singleton 2010).

<sup>9</sup> The title of Cyndi Lee's bestselling book 'Yoga Body, Buddha Mind' (Lee 2004) reflects assumptions that yoga is for the body and Buddhism is for the mind.

<sup>10</sup> **Boccio** claims he is 'not selling any particular tradition or school of through other than the focus of mindfulness' (Boccio 2004:68). In his book *Mindfulness Yoga*, Boccio includes teachings from *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, *Bhaddekaratta Sutta*, *Metta Sutta*, *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dhammapada* (Boccio 2004).

**Stone**, who advocates a 'democratic "open-source" style of learning' (Stone 2011:xi), includes teachings from: *Sutta Nipāta*, *Dhammapada*, *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, *Shobogenzo* from the Zen tradition, the Heart Sutra, *Sāratthapakāsini* (Stone 2011).

**Little** references the Zen teachings of Kazuaki Tanahashi (1985), Shunryu Suzuki (1970), *The Silent Illumination of Zen Master Hongzhi* (1991), *The Zen teachings of Bodhidharma*.

**Sudaka**, though unpublished, bases his training course on *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (Bodhiyoga.es 2021)

<sup>11</sup> Predominantly the *Yoga Sūtras*. Also *Upaniṣads*, *Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā*, *Bhagavad Gītā* and others.

<sup>12</sup> Mindful Yoga aligns with New Age movements in more ways than one. A spirit of anti-orthodoxy and the search for 'liberation from restrictive traditions and dependency structures' (Heelas 1996:37) is one such commonality.

Mindful Yoga fuses traditional practices. This fusion (of Buddhist and classical yoga teachings) often neglects discreet philosophical differences, privileging practicability. The assertion that ‘despite certain differences of philosophical description and emphasis, their yoga paths are virtually indistinguishable’ (Hartranft 2010:9) is problematic. Proponents of Mindful Yoga put forward different interpretations of mindfulness: their alignment with orthodox definitions varies. However, the authors I examine all share a preoccupation with the less “self-centred” practices<sup>13</sup>, Buddhist *and* modern. Feuerstein refers to these as belonging to ‘the dimension of moral practice’:

The contemporary distinction between yoga (generally narrowly understood to be posture practice) and Buddhism is a false and unconstructive dichotomy. Without blurring the differences between Hindu and Buddhist spirituality, it makes sense to apply the label “yoga” to both of them. This has the advantage of emphasizing important common ground between them, not least in the dimension of **moral practice** but also in the higher stages of the path’ (Feuerstein in Boccio 2004:x).

Feuerstein focuses on shared territory. Indeed, this becomes the departure point for most Mindful Yoga teachers. Within a saturated, body-oriented yoga industry, they utilize Buddhist and mindfulness teachings to supplement physical cues<sup>14</sup>. Tias Little, one of the teachers I interview for this dissertation, indicates why this might be the case:

I think that the yogic system, at least what’s got transferred to the west, the wisdom teachings, are hard to access because Patañjali’s yoga is obtuse, it’s hard to break through, it’s very philosophical. Parts of it are user friendly but on the whole it’s not that user friendly, so now I think a lot of teachers like myself are drawing from Buddhist teachings, vipassanā and what’s become

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<sup>13</sup> Mindful Yoga discourages fixation on the atomistic self, encouraging self in community. The risk of modern mindfulness is considered by Stone to be that otherwise ‘attention to this moment is reduced to attention to “me” and “mine”’ (Stone 2011:118).

<sup>14</sup> Many senior yoga teachers take this route. Richard Freeman is one example whose teachings I did not include in this dissertation but who nevertheless provides an interesting example of how diverse disciplines such as Zen Buddhism, Astanga vinyāsa yoga, Hare Kṛṣṇa consciousness, haṭha yoga, Iyengar yoga etc. converge around one figure. He says of Zen and Astanga yoga: ‘they look different but they’re extremely similar’ (Mindful Strength 2021).

now more the mindfulness, in order to be able to help people work with their mind (T. Little 2020).

Little highlights a difficulty here. Yoga philosophy is hard to translate to a modern, transnational, anglophone audience. However, a mind/body split is perpetuated when one amplifies the physical aspect of yoga and turns to the Buddhist teachings “to work with the mind”. The aims of Mindful Yoga are manifold. Whereas a classical yoga practitioner strives for *samādhi*<sup>15</sup>, a Theravāda Buddhist practitioner pursues *nirvāṇa*<sup>16</sup> and contemporary yoga practitioners may seek greater muscle tone or relief from stress<sup>17</sup>; Mindful Yoga covertly promises a combination of all of the above<sup>18</sup>. In addition, the following ubiquitous reckoning exists: ‘the understanding that we are practicing not just for our own well-being but for that of the whole world (this) is the most profound benefit of practice’ (Lee 2004:251). Lee’s assumption that the benefits to the practitioner are not limited to the practitioner lacks coherence. It is an example of vague “linguaging”<sup>19</sup> that warrants explication. Yet, this Mahāyānist<sup>20</sup> aspiration is present in much of Mindful Yoga writing.

Mindful Yoga is inventive. Tias Little, for instance, refers to passages from such diverse sources as the *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra*, the *Upaniṣads*, the *Dhammapada*, the *Satipaṭṭhāna* etc (Little 2016) introducing new perspectives. Authors happily include passages from the *Abhidharma* alongside teachings on the life story of Kṛṣṇa. Parallels can be traced between Nāgārjuna and the post-structuralists, between Beat poets and Zen

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Samādhi is the end of the sādḥaka’s quest’ (Iyengar 1966:52)

<sup>16</sup> Nirvāṇa is a key term in Buddhist discourse: ‘The state that obtains when desire and its corollary, ignorance, have ceased to fuel the psychophysical entity that constitutes the ‘person’ and drive in on to further rebirth’ (Johnson 2009:222)

<sup>17</sup> In a study involving 360 yoga teachers and 156 students, researchers reported the following find: ‘both students and teachers adopted yoga practice primarily for exercise and stress relief, but reported many other reasons, including flexibility, getting into shape, and depression/anxiety relief’ (Park et al. 2016:887)

<sup>18</sup> In contrast, DeMichelis enumerates the following list: ‘3 reasons to practice yoga (and āsanas) (i) for health and wellbeing, (ii) for strength/power/siddhis and (iii) for spiritual advancement’ (DeMichelis 1995:244). Altruistic tendencies do not figure.

<sup>19</sup> A term used by Jon Kabat-Zinn. He says that teachers ‘need new ways of “linguaging” our vision, our aspirations, and our common work (...) Each country will have its own challenges in shaping the language to its own heart-essence without denaturing the wholeness of the dharma’ (Kabat-Zinn 2011:301).

<sup>20</sup> Mahāyāna Buddhism promotes compassion (*bodhicitta*) above all else: ‘It is out of compassion that the released ones willingly take on the error (*moha*) of a conventional reality for the sake of being able to guide those still attached to worldly affairs towards release from all suffering’ (Steinkellner 2019:6)



masters, yoga teachers and rock stars without fearing the reprimand of traditional authority<sup>21</sup>.

Mindful Yoga is not geographically bound. Practitioners from diverse backgrounds and pluralistic societies live in a globalized world where the aims of physical wellbeing, self-realization and engaged, compassionate action coexist. Traditional practices have been adapted to meet the world's demands. At a time when the planet is struggling to cope with overpopulation, hybrids emerge that foreground social and environmental issues while appealing to tradition<sup>22</sup>. The promise of a simultaneous individual and societal change is central to much of the writing on Mindful Yoga: 'a path towards joy, a path towards freedom, has to include other people' (Stone 2015:41.20-43.05). Stone puts emphasis on community as do most Mindful Yoga teachers. Group involvement and a willingness to collaborate are necessary to manifest otherwise vague aspirations.

## **METHODOLOGY, SOURCES AND CHALLENGES.**

The self-help genre is expanding continuously. Emanating principally from North America, titles on mindfulness experienced a stratospheric rise in recent years (Google Book ngram viewer 2021). Yet, only a small number exist specifically on Mindful Yoga. I therefore draw on online content to supplement my bibliographic research. This reflects the contemporary nature of an evolving tradition.

Mindful Yoga literature is of varying quality. With the exception of a few publications that I have studied in depth, sources are often simplistic (Bell 2007, Moss 2018, Lee 2004). I also examined Mindful Yoga publications, articles and teachings that ignore any differences between yoga and Buddhism. A lack of consistency raises questions concerning ethics and reliability. These cannot be addressed within the parameters of this dissertation. I have therefore been selective and reject certain writing wholesale.

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<sup>21</sup> A similar phenomenon exists in modern yoga and modern mindfulness where teachers draw liberally from poets such as Walt Whitman and Rainier Maria Rilke, Emily Dickinson and Rumi to introduce "yogic" teachings.

<sup>22</sup> These are: 'modern responses to the challenge of developing a 'spirituality' that engages with the contemporary world' (Carrette & King 2005:108).

Activism<sup>23</sup> exists in traditional teachings. I primarily studied Mindful Yoga authors who foreground activist elements, such as Georg Feuerstein (1947-2012). He notes the dearth of yoga philosophical material available in western yoga circles. In contrast, Buddhist philosophical material is vast. His book ‘The Deeper Dimension of Yoga’ (2003) is a collection of essays that, albeit through a subjective lens, explores the rich history of “mind-oriented” practices buried beneath the callisthenic topsoil of modern yoga<sup>24</sup>. His research projects helped yoga enthusiasts access yoga philosophy. His stance is arguably reductionist however. Feuerstein’s claim that ‘it is useful to think of the spiritual ideas and practices at the core of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism as representing *forms* of Yoga’ (Feuerstein 2003:35) is contentious<sup>25</sup>. Yet, such a universal mindset is widespread in Mindful Yoga writing.

I pay particular attention to Michael Stone (1974-2017). His bestselling book ‘The Inner Tradition of Yoga’ (2008) explores the ethical dimension of Patañjali’s eight-limbed yoga path in detail <sup>26</sup>. Stone fuses yoga, Buddhism and mindfulness with contemporary psychology<sup>27</sup>. In a collection of essays on the connections between yoga and Buddhism<sup>28</sup> he sets out to understand the porous border between them (Stone 2010:13). He argues the need for two varieties of practice: one that prioritizes the health of the individual and one that is more socially directed.

I also draw on excerpts from personal communications. I spoke with three key teachers, two of whom base their teaching entirely on Buddhist principles. Mindful Yoga often

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<sup>23</sup> ‘The use of direct and noticeable action to achieve a result, usually a political or social one’ (Dictionary.cambridge.org 2021a).

<sup>24</sup> Feuerstein introduces his collection saying: ‘Yoga, of course, is so much more than postures, and its real power lies in the domain of mind training and self-transformation’ (Feuerstein 2003:xiv).

<sup>25</sup> Meera Nanda notes ‘the Hindu way of traditionalizing new ideas, denying contradictions, defusing challenges and thereby perpetuating itself’ (Nanda 2005:225) is dangerous. The roots of yoga are increasingly contested and such reductionism plays into the hands of Hindu fundamentalism.

<sup>26</sup> Stone adopts a moralistic tone from the outset. He introduces the eight limbs as follows: ‘We have a moral obligation to the entire ecological web of existence to wake up from self-pity and self-promotion in order to attend to our place in the world with sensitivity and wisdom. The eight limbs are as follows: (...)’ (Stone 2008:44).

<sup>27</sup> Stone was a yoga teacher and a psychotherapist.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Freeing the Body: Freeing the Mind’ (Stone 2010).

involves ‘interpreting and extending the teachings of classical texts in new directions’<sup>29</sup> (Clough 2005:116). The following serve as examples:

- Tias Little, *The Practice is the Path* (2020), *Yoga of the Subtle Body* (2016) and other books. Little is a world-renowned yoga teacher who weaves Buddhist dharma teachings into his yoga courses. He is a practitioner of vipassanā, Tibetan Buddhism and Zen.
- Frank Jude Boccio is a mentee of Georg Feuerstein. He wrote ‘Mindfulness Yoga’ (2004), a detailed guidebook to the practice of āsana through the scope of traditional Buddhist mindfulness. He takes what he considers ‘a Buddhist meditational approach to yoga-asana practice’ (Boccio 2004:30). Boccio is also an ordained Zen dharma teacher.
- Dharmacarya Sudaka. His school Bodhi Yoga in Spain bases its method on the traditional foundations of mindfulness from the *Satipaṭṭhāna* and has links to an activist project<sup>30</sup>.

Modern mindfulness and Mindful Yoga often interpenetrate. In his book ‘Full Catastrophe Living’ (1990) Kabat-Zinn, the founder of modern mindfulness, declares: ‘Mindful haṭha yoga is the third major formal meditation technique that we practice in the stress clinic’ (Kabat-Zinn 1990:95). Positioning haṭha yoga as a meditation technique is an inventive adaptation<sup>31</sup> that disregards orthodoxy. Tias Little notes that Kabat-Zinn decided to take Buddhist teachings and ‘strip back a lot of the cultural references, the Pāli and all that, and made it really user-friendly; it was strategic, it worked’ (Tias Little 2020). Little recognizes the efficacy of Kabat-Zinn’s method in helping people. Modern mindfulness is particularly relevant to the therapeutic aspect of Mindful Yoga. It puts emphasis on stress reduction above all else.

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<sup>29</sup> The Buddhist teachings on “skilful means” set a precedent for such innovative interpretations. For more on this read Kabat-Zinn 2011.

<sup>30</sup> The Eco Dharma Centre runs course in effective-sustainable activism and engaged Buddhist training (EcoDharma 2021)

<sup>31</sup> The meaning of Haṭha yoga is variously understood with regards to “force” of some sort or other, whether as a yoga technique or an effect of yoga (Birch 2011).

The therapeutic aspect of Mindful Yoga is relevant to activism<sup>32</sup>. I examine online articles that reflect this connection. Greater awareness of activist “burn-out” leads to the search for solutions<sup>33</sup>. Without analyzing the specifics of activist projects, I examine sources that articulate new ways of doing activism. Mindful Yoga focuses on both self-development and altruism. Teachers (Boccio, Sudaka, Feuerstein) promote ethical behaviour. Merging the personal and the societal on the awakening path constitutes the activist piece of their teaching. I argue this piece determines the success of Mindful Yoga as a transformative practice.

## THE HISTORY OF MINDFUL YOGA.

The term “mindful yoga” is first mentioned in 1987<sup>34</sup>. It receives relatively little attention until 2001 since when it has become more popular (Google Books Ngram Viewer 2021a).

Yoga practitioners express growing interest in the connections between Buddhism and yoga<sup>35</sup>. This coincides with the findings of contemporary scholarship regarding the Hindu<sup>36</sup> roots of yoga. In ‘The Roots of Yoga’ (Mallinson 2017) it states that Patañjali’s yoga *śāstra* ‘is in fact a partisan text, representing an early Brahmanical appropriation of extra-Vedic, *śramaṇa* techniques of yoga, such as those of early Buddhism’ (Mallinson 2017:xiii). Jacobsen questions whether it constitutes pure appropriation. He sees it as the cultural product of a contested philosophical territory: ‘Yoga philosophy, as it is systematized in the *Yogasūtra*, is a *Sāṅkhya* response to the challenges from Buddhism’ (Jacobsen 2011:20). Either way, it is clear that the influence of Buddhism runs deep in classical yoga:

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<sup>32</sup> Svirsky notes that: ‘the life of an activist is marked by a sense of urgency, anxiety and alertness to a life under attack’ (Svirsky 2010:177).

<sup>33</sup> “Burnout” often equates to post-traumatic stress. For more on this read Laurence Cox ‘Activist burnout and personal sustainability in social movements’ (Cox 2011).

<sup>34</sup> An American Health pamphlet lists mindful yoga as a relaxation technique offering cassettes that include guided seated meditation (Google Books Ngram Viewer 2021a).

<sup>35</sup> Senior teachers at Spirit Rock, a famous retreat centre in California: ‘noticed that more and more yoga students were coming on retreats and wanting to learn about Buddhist meditation’ (Isaacs et al. 2021).

<sup>36</sup> “Hinduism,” (...) is a construct that arose from the emergent discipline of comparative religion and was not (prior to this period) a standard self-designation for Indians. Its usage is closely linked to efforts to articulate a cohesive religious, philosophical, and cultural identity for modern India’ (Singleton 2013:40).

Patañjali's Yoga philosophy and its affiliated school of *Sāṅkhya* had more in common with Buddhism than with the exegetical schools of *Mīmāṃsā* and *Vedānta*, which insisted on the absolute infallibility of the *Vedas* (Nicholson 2013:493).

Buddhist influence is prominent in the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*<sup>37</sup>. Hindu and Buddhist ideas alchemize here explicitly for perhaps the first time. One of the key questions of this text is: how should one live in this world (Venkatesananda 1985:20). Many centuries later the ethical aspect of this question is examined by Mindful Yoga teachers. Other notable precursors to the formulation of Mindful Yoga were Swami Vivekananda<sup>38</sup> (1863-1902) and Aldous Huxley (1894-1963). Vivekananda promoted non-duality predicated on Vedāntin philosophy. Huxley's Perennial Philosophy<sup>39</sup> espoused the universality of religious themes. The lure of perennialism is never far from the Mindful Yoga ethos.

Mindful Yoga took shape in the U.S in the 1970s. In their book on New Age movements, religion scholars Sutcliffe and Bowman observe that figures like Alan Watts<sup>40</sup> began downplaying the philosophical and religious dimensions of yoga and Buddhism. They interpreted them as closer to psychotherapy (Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000:207)<sup>41</sup>. This position is controversial as we shall see. Fusions take place which reflect Alan Watts' interpretation. At the famous Esalen Institute<sup>42</sup> in California, new disciplines form. Bowman notes that while Esalen's basic spiritual doctrine was not new, the Institute presented original combinations. Arcane philosophies and religious perspectives received new applications (Bowman, 2012:2). Important differences between Buddhism and Hindu yoga, for example, are ignored in the interests of a universal practicability.

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<sup>37</sup> Estimated composition ranges from as early as the 6th or 7th century to as late as the 14th (Chapple 1983).

<sup>38</sup> Vivekananda redefines karma yoga as the missionary service of yoga. He steers his audience away from haṭha yoga associated with ascetics, deeming it inappropriate (DeMichelis 2005).

<sup>39</sup> Huxley defines Perennial Philosophy as: 'The metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds ; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being - the thing is immemorial and universal' (Huxley 1947:1).

<sup>40</sup> (1915-1973) British philosopher who popularized Indic spiritual thought in America.

<sup>41</sup> Vivekananda earlier joined 'the intellectual current of secularization which was shaping the forms and language of the psychologization of religion' (DeMichelis 2005:172).

<sup>42</sup> Founded in 1962.

Activism features at Esalen too. The activist aims of Mindful Yoga grew out of a unique context of struggle and resistance associated with movements spanning the 1950s to the 1990s. In his book on Esalen, Jeffrey Kripal remarks:

Alongside (these) psychological, philosophical, and medical dimensions runs another more social, unabashedly ethical or prophetic thread. Esalen, for example, has strong intellectual and institutional roots in both the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s and the environmental movements of the 70s, 80s, and 90s (Kripal 2007:3).

The 1990s saw another key development for Mindful Yoga. The modern mindfulness movement, as organized through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, combined meditation techniques with physical practices of haṭha yoga. Results that were measurable were prioritized over respect for traditional arrangement. Kabat-Zinn acknowledges the wreckage wrought on the human vehicle by stress. In his landmark book 'Full Catastrophe Living' (1990) a sequence of haṭha yoga stretches is one of the tools recommended to help navigate worldly stresses.

Mindful Yoga emerged from 1970s counterculture. It rose on the crest of the New Age movement and settled into a more serious narrative with the 1990s psychotherapy boom. Today, it occupies a territory pregnant with potential on both the personal and transpersonal level.

The "psychotherapizing" of spiritual teachings gives tacit permission to an indiscriminate fusion of Buddhism and yoga. The assertion that: 'Integrating ethics, psychology and spirituality has a long but often forgotten history' (Stone 2009:23), risks conceptual enmeshment.

In the 1920s, D.T Suzuki (1870-1966) reinterpreted Buddhism. He argued that it holds special relevance to the modern world:

The essence was identified as the pursuit of liberation, construed not as a state of salvation that has meaning only within the context of Buddhist

metaphysics, but as a supposed, actual state of ‘awakened cognition’ with universal human significance (Drewes 2018:17).

Mindful Yoga practitioners follow suit. Untethered to traditional culture, they seek to extend the relevance of Buddhist spiritual teachings to contemporary society. Michael Stone, for instance, gave talks and held conversations with Buddhist monks and lay people on the relevance of Buddhism to modern life. He explored social and environmental activism. Through the fusion of Buddhism and yoga he drew disenfranchised practitioners of modern yoga to the discussion. Stone emphasized the need to respond to what is happening now and foresaw the growth of a Mindful Yoga community engaged in activism:

I can intuit the growth of a larger community of thoughtful and dedicated yogins for whom the dharma of Yoga and the Buddha have had immeasurable impact. Hopefully future yogins on the path of awakening will be inspired by this collection and take the dialogue between these traditions much further in the hope of creating a common language and set of practices that respond to the individual, collective, institutional, social, and ecological imbalances of contemporary times (Stone 2010:228).

Stone’s emphasis on community is notable. Stone was influenced by the contemporary movement of Engaged Buddhism<sup>43</sup>, the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh and Deep Ecology<sup>44</sup>. Mindful Yoga sources describe a spectrum of motivations: from the seemingly more “self-centred” practices, characteristic of the modern mindfulness movement, to an outward looking “engaged-in-the-world” approach<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> ‘Engaged Buddhism is radically different from the *Mahāyāna* path of altruism because it is directed to the creation of new social institutions and relationships’ (Queen 2000:11).

<sup>44</sup> ‘Deep ecology is a term coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (b.1912) in 1972 to refer to an environmentalism that believes fundamental changes in the way our species conceives our relation to nature are necessary before we are to find a way out of the ecological crisis’ (Rothenberg 2012:738).

<sup>45</sup> Stone considered yoga to be ‘as much a personal practice as it is a cultural form of awakening’ (Stone 2011:65).

Modern, transnational, anglophone yoga, in toto, is becoming more “mindful”<sup>46</sup>. During the global lockdown of 2020, the virtual yoga community began to pay greater attention to mental health, mindfulness and the socially oppressed. Mindfulness, as a state, has rippled into many areas of modern, consumer life. Hanh writes: ‘When we consume mindfully, we protect our body, our consciousness, and the body and consciousness of our family and society’ (Hanh 1999:97). Yoga scholar Christopher Chapple’s recent call to arms echoes Hanh:

As we emerge someday from this restraint, let’s take a vow, the Bodhisattva vow. Let’s take the vow to remain informed by this time of quiet and to discover all that we can do with our consumer choices. Let us say all that we can say in the public arena on behalf of the Earth (Chapple 2020:14).

Chapple applies Buddhist terminology<sup>47</sup> to current consumerist dilemmas. Such adaptation is an example of how Mindful Yoga continues to expand its reach.

## **THE SPECTRUM OF MINDFUL YOGA.**

Yoga, as a globalized practice, is relatively new. Yoga teachers often lack a wide-ranging knowledge of the full meaning of yoga<sup>48</sup>. The variance between simplistic introductions to Mindful Yoga and teachings that examine the philosophical intricacies of Buddhism is vast. An examination of Mindful Yoga’s gradational journey from physical practice to activism locates this new tradition with greater precision.

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<sup>46</sup> The term “mindful” here equates to “aware”. A rise in publications on the roots of yoga (Singleton 2010, Mallinson 2017, Simpson 2020) and the move towards decolonizing the practice of yoga are examples of this. Podcasts such as ‘Yoga is Dead’ (Yoga is Dead 2021) raise awareness about appropriation and exploitation in the yoga industry.

<sup>47</sup> American Buddhist scholar David Loy describes ‘a fresh version of the *bodhisattva* ideal’ stating that: ‘Buddhism—and by extension, the mindfulness movement—opens up the possibility of a new model of activism that connects inner and outer practice’ (Loy 2016:15).

<sup>48</sup> U.S Yoga Alliance addresses this issue only in 1997: ‘As yoga spread to the west, American teachers and practitioners began debating whether or not there should be a national standard for the training of yoga teachers’ (Yoga Alliance 2021). The 200 hour yoga teacher training program was introduced two years later, privileging the knowledge of āsana.



## PHYSICAL PRACTICE.

Mindful Yoga teachers emphasize that the Buddha teaches mindfulness practices by starting with the body (Stone 2010. Boccio 2004). Authors extend the Buddha's teaching to include *āsana* as a way of accessing mindfulness practice<sup>49</sup>. Practitioners increasingly bridge the evidently porous mind/body divide through *āsana* and breathing exercises. Mindful Yoga belongs to an embodiment trend<sup>50</sup> that seeks to bring body, mind and spirit together in a unified practice. Medical anthropologist Joseph Alter refers to the anxiety and ambivalence that accompanies such a drive (Alter 2008:36). However, the embodied philosophy of Mindful Yoga seeks to transform ambivalence into activism. According to Mindful Yoga teachers, the body is not limited by physical boundaries, it extends to include the body of humanity. Through the body one experiences unity with the other<sup>51</sup>. This experience compels one to act.

Vivekananda popularized yoga in the west (DeMichelis 2005). In the early twentieth century, he advocated the strengthening of the physical body *as a means* to begin working with the mind. I quote him along with his appeal to tradition: 'first build up your physique. Then only you can get control over the mind... "This Self is not to be attained by the weak" (Katha Upanishad 1.ii.23) (Vivekananda. 1992 [1897]:155)' (Singleton 2010:100).<sup>52</sup> Vivekananda prescribes physical practices as a first step towards the awakening path. However, the attainment of the Self is a decidedly Hindu aim<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> Boccio commenting on the Sutra on the Establishments of Mindfulness makes this connection: 'In whatever position one's body happens to be, we should be aware of the movements and positions of the body (...) this is important to keep in mind for our *āsana* practice' (Boccio 2004:90).

<sup>50</sup> The term embodiment in literature has steadily risen over the last half century (Google Books Ngram Viewer 2021b). Various online platforms attest to this: Embodied Wisdom, Embodied Philosophy, Embodiment Conference, Embodiment Portal etc.

<sup>51</sup> The notion of "inter-being" (Hanh 1987) is an adaptation of the Buddhist teaching of Dependent Co-Arising whereby all living things interpenetrate each other.

<sup>52</sup> Vivekananda famously eschewed *āsana*: 'Haṭha-Yoga —(...) is nothing but a kind of gymnastics' (Vivekananda 1923).

<sup>53</sup> 'For many Buddhists, the existence of a conventional "I," which we all have, is accepted on a relative, "mundane" level of reality, but ultimately, the self is affirmed as a non-enduring entity, a result of ephemeral mental and physical aggregates' (Michalon 2018:207).

Mindful Yoga teachers pursue differing aims through the body. Cyndi Lee, bestselling author of ‘Yoga Body, Buddha Mind’ (2005), describes how yoga and Buddhism complement each other. She conceives of the body as a support for meditation:

Yoga helps Buddhists embody their meditation. As the meditator’s body becomes more mobile, strong, and functional, it becomes a support for meditation practice (...) Similarly, the specific focus of Buddhist mindfulness and compassion helps the yogi’s mind become unbiased, wakeful, and connected in whatever physical shape he or she assumes (Lee 2004:12).

Lee refers to Buddhists and yogis separately. She perpetuates the mind/body division by claiming Buddhist mindfulness helps yogis with their meditation and yoga helps Buddhists with their posture. Positing yoga for the body and Buddhism for the mind is the prevailing approach. Boccio emphasizes this point:

Most people seem to see yoga and Buddhadharma as separate, perhaps with yoga as merely preparatory to the “real work” of meditation, or meditation as somehow just about the mind and not relevant to how we work with the body in yoga. (Boccio 2004:3)

Boccio seeks to integrate mind and body in his teachings. He does so through a careful analysis of the teachings themselves. Whilst including passages from Patañjali in his publications, he highlights incongruencies with Buddhist teachings<sup>54</sup> (F.J. Boccio 2020).

Michael Stone considers āsana to be a ritual that overlays deeper, more elusive concerns. Through its practice one communes with a universal nature: ‘We practice yoga postures to move deeply into the workings of the body, which are none other than the simple workings of the universe’ (Stone 2009:31). By equating the body and the universe Stone formulates a distinct non-dual clause. Indeed Feuerstein is more explicit still: ‘I believe there is another side to āsana (...) that is to cultivate and experience āsana as an instrument for tasting

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<sup>54</sup> With regards to activism Boccio holds little regard for Patañjali’s teachings, referencing *upekṣa* as an example of the *sūtras* self-centredness.

nonduality (*advaita*)’ (Feuerstein 2003:233). He goes further in assigning said body a purpose:

The traditional purpose of āsana is something far more radical, namely to assist the Haṭha-Yoga practitioner in the creation of an “adamantine body” (*vajra-dēha*) or “divine body” (*divya-dēha*) (...) In this body, the liberated master can carry out benevolent activities with the least possible obstruction (Feuerstein 2003:233).

Feuerstein attributes deep meaning to the physical āsana. He argues that its practice leads to benevolent activity. Liberation does not exclude the master from said activity, instead āsana supports the body’s continuation as a vehicle of compassion. However, contemporary āsana practice does not reflect this traditional purpose.

Today, Mindful Yoga āsana is mostly practiced where the practitioner feels at ease: in a “sacred space” such as a yoga studio or meditation room<sup>55</sup>. Therein:

The temporary suspension of (...) interpretative habits, along with the altered sense of body awareness created by postural and breathing practice, further contribute to ‘reframe’ one’s identity and sense of being (DeMichelis 2005:255).

The practitioner has the opportunity to cultivate a new sense of being through deconstructing habitual identification. DeMichelis refers to a new perspective but, unlike in Feuerstein’s example, the purpose is not clear. In Mindful Yoga also, the emphasis on Buddhist mindfulness promotes a concept of the body that remains elusive. The practice of ‘observing the body in the body’ (Boccio 2004:90) warrants closer definition if it is to result in a truly *trans*-personal<sup>56</sup> transformation.

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<sup>55</sup> Tias Little owns a yoga studio in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Michael Stone taught in yoga studios worldwide as well as founding the Center of Gravity in Toronto. Frank Jude Boccio teaches online and at yoga studios and meditation centres. Dharmacarya Sudaka owns a residential yoga studio on the East Coast of Spain. Mindful Yoga co-exists with other yoga hybrids, often sharing facilities.

<sup>56</sup> Transpersonal: extending or going beyond the personal or individual (Merriam-Webster.com 2021).

## THERAPEUTIC USES.

Mindful Yoga offers an antidote to the frantic pace of modern life<sup>57</sup>. Millions today practice yoga alongside relaxation therapy (Singleton 2005). In a consumerist culture, yoga forfeits its traditional purpose of either ‘Self-knowledge’<sup>58</sup> or the creation of a “divine body” through which to carry out benevolent activities<sup>59</sup>. Yoga therapy itself has become a distinct yoga typology.<sup>60</sup> Mindful Yoga exists also in the clinical or psychotherapeutic space. In 1979, Jon Kabat-Zinn founded the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Here, modern mindfulness was born and the therapeutic application of meditation became standard<sup>61</sup>. The clinic offers similar practices to those of Mindful Yoga. It too sets out to reduce stress. Kabat-Zinn goes so far as to title a chapter of his bestselling book ‘Full Catastrophe Living’ ‘Yoga *is* Meditation’. Here he states:

When the domain of being is actively cultivated during slow and gentle stretching and strengthening exercises, such as yoga or physical therapy, what people think of traditionally as “exercise” is transformed into *meditation* (Kabat-Zinn 1990:97).

This therapeutic definition of meditation is novel. Kabat-Zinn equates slow *āsana* practice with meditation. The purpose is meditation itself, achieved through the cultivation of the domain of being. Today, the therapeutic application of meditation extends beyond the clinical setting. An app on a smartphone encourages users to stay connected:

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<sup>57</sup> Mark Singleton, in his article ‘Salvation through Relaxation: Proprioceptive Therapy and its Relationship to Yoga’, points out: ‘Relaxation therapy grew up, alongside Modern Yoga, in the cultural context of consumer capitalism. It offered, much as yoga does to millions today, respite from the daily grind and a chance to recharge one’s batteries for the work ahead’ (Singleton 2005:291).

<sup>58</sup> Vivekananda (1992 [1897]).

<sup>59</sup> Feuerstein (2003).

<sup>60</sup> Yoga therapy stems from the work of T.K.V. Desikachar (1938-2016), son of T. Krishnamacharya (1888-1989).

<sup>61</sup> This development in itself was controversial and many Buddhist practitioners ‘condemned attraction to Buddhism as therapy on the grounds of its encouragement of ‘egocentric self-involvement’; proclaiming that Buddhism has to be distinguished from therapy’ (Sutcliffe 2000:209).

Building a mindfulness and/or meditation practice is a great way to reduce stress and anxiety, relax yourself, and live in the present moment. Even if you do it for just a few minutes a day, you'll find yourself calmer and better equipped to handle the daily challenges of modern living (Google 2020).

Boccio views this interpretation of meditation as problematic<sup>62</sup>. Adaptation to daily challenges encourages acceptance and quietism. This app, among many others<sup>63</sup>, promotes an assimilation to existing, and unjust, social structures. This conflicts with traditional meaning: 'The Buddhist ethical precepts are designed to investigate, uncover, and transform those structures and our relationship to them' (F.J. Boccio 2020) he says. Boccio draws on the Buddhist tradition for guidelines to help recognize and transform unjust structures. In Mindful Yoga, the therapeutic aspect of practice supports more ethical endeavours.

The recognition of injustice requires keen insight. Stone emphasizes the importance of presence and focus: 'we are not concerned, in Yoga, with some ultimate reality. We are concerned with the way things happen in each and every moment' (Stone 2011:4). This echoes present-centred modern mindfulness teachings. However, the unbiased, illumined awareness of the present moment is insufficient to assuage suffering. Change is not only possible but inevitable in Buddhism. Impermanence is one of the three marks of existence<sup>64</sup>. Stone urges his readers to consider all activities as part of 'the warp and weave' of life. Practice is not limited to the therapeutic aspect:

Why not just pay attention to our activities on the meditation cushion? Won't that bring about necessary changes? If I find stillness in my mind, doesn't that offer a positive contribution to the world at large? Such formal activities are only a part of practice. Yoga is always a practice that takes place in the world, and so it makes no sense to deny your activities in the world, because that is

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<sup>62</sup> It is also far removed from its original purpose: 'Rather than stressing ultimate spiritual goals such as full enlightenment, ending the cycles of rebirth, or attaining the various stages of sainthood, many Western teachers tend to stress the immediate benefits of mindfulness and untroubled, equanimous presence in the midst of life's vicissitudes' (Fronsdal 2013:31).

<sup>63</sup> Aura, Calm, Breethe, Buddhify, Headspace, Meditation Studio, Insight Timer, Omvana, Mindfulness Daily etc. are some of the apps recommended as the 'Best mindfulness apps of 2021' (Google 2020)

<sup>64</sup> Verse 277. *Dhammapada* (Roebuck 2010).

the fabric of practice, the warp and weave of your life (Stone 2011:25).

Formal meditation is part of a comprehensive practice that includes everything we do. Drawing from Buddhist principles, Mindful Yoga teachers encourage students to revise the meaning of practice and incorporate ethics.

### **AN ETHICAL OVERHAUL: ALTRUISTIC AIMS.**

Mindful Yoga practice is all-encompassing. This understanding stems from a progressive transformation in perspective. However, the shift from a focus on individual liberation to a life of altruism is not new. Altruism is central to some of the best known early expositions of yoga and Buddhist thought. A good example is the bodhisattva ideal (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE): ‘(A bodhisattva is) a figure who delays final, disembodied liberation in order to help unenlightened beings towards nirvāṇa.’ (Mallinson 2017:401). From outside the Buddhist tradition:

A comparable orientation can also be seen in the *Khecarīvidyā*<sup>65</sup>, where the yogi may, ‘for the good of the universe’, decide against abandoning his body (11.3.7). The *Jogpradīpakā*<sup>66</sup> similarly urges the devotee to reject final, disembodied liberation and to always remain in his body as the servant of the Lord (11.1.11) (Mallinson 2017:401).

Altruism results from liberative awareness. In these accounts, the practitioner gains insight from the awakening experience and chooses to dedicate their body to others. Both Buddhism and yoga describe:

The final stages of Buddhist insight, echoed in those described by Patañjali at the end of the *Yoga Sūtra*’s third and fourth chapters, are the awakening of a radical new perspective (Hartranft 2010:28).

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<sup>65</sup> *Khecarīvidyā* of Ādinātha is a Sanskrit text dated to pre 1400 CE (Mallinson 2007)

<sup>66</sup> 18<sup>th</sup> century text written in Braj-language (Mishra 2017).

This new perspective constitutes the ethical overhaul of an otherwise self-centred practice. It brings attention to the conduct of the individual as part of a collective. Best-selling author Cyndi Lee has the reverse understanding however. Placing the individual at the centre, she describes her Mindful Yoga method:

When you apply this mind/heart training to the process of doing yoga āsanās it becomes a way to understand the whole world in the form of you. It provides the means for working with all of those relationships right there on the yoga mat at the same time as you get more fit (Lee 2004:12).

Lee relegates insight to a by-product of fitness practice. Understanding “the whole world in the form of you” constitutes a dangerously exclusive starting point. Her focus on fitness contrasts with Stone. He argues for a wider view, taking into account all activities. Much contemporary spiritual discussion is characterized by the deferral of meaning<sup>67</sup>. This constitutes a precarious springboard to activism.

Other Mindful Yoga authorities explicitly prioritize the wellbeing of others. Mahāyāna Buddhism refers to the welfare of all sentient beings. In the words of Śāntideva in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra*<sup>68</sup>: ‘Through the goodness I have gained in this way, may I be able to allay all the suffering of all sentient beings. 8.6’ (Steinkellner 2019:23). This is also the crux of Mindful Yoga. Tias Little again:

I think yoga particularly was geared towards enlightenment of the self, the personal, whereas at least in the Mahāyāna teaching, the vow of the *bodhisattva* is to support all beings in their awakening, so it’s less self-centric (T. Little 2020).

Little recognizes the need to decrease self-centredness. In this way, Mindful Yoga moves toward greater altruism. Michael Stone seeks to connect the physical/therapeutic aspect of practice to more altruistic endeavours: ‘When we are safe in our own bodies, we have

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<sup>67</sup> Referred to as spiritual bypassing, John Welwood identified ‘a widespread tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks’ (Fossella 2011).

<sup>68</sup> Śāntideva’s keystone Mahāyāna Buddhist text. 8<sup>th</sup> century.

a ground from which to step out into the world' (Stone 2011:155). He links the individual body to altruism by referring to it as the ground of compassionate action.

Kabat-Zinn believes in small acts of activism<sup>69</sup>. He links individual wellbeing to the state of the planet. In a chapter titled 'World Stress', he urges the reader to cultivate awareness of the planetary situation noting that 'world stress will only become more intense in the future' (Kabat-Zinn 1990:417). Kabat-Zinn's message contains one of the most potent beliefs within Mindful Yoga: through the practice 'we come full circle, from the outer world back to the inner world, from the larger whole back to the individual person' (Kabat-Zinn 1990:419). This belief defines how Mindful Yoga relates to activism. Concern for the welfare of all sentient beings constitutes a new perspective. It sets Mindful Yoga apart from modern mindfulness and from other yoga typologies, and is inherent to the Buddhist tradition:

Because the universe as *karmabhūmi* is interconnected and interdependent, as an inextricable part of the whole every individual who performs an altruistic act that benefits the whole inevitably is a benefactor (Lewis 2005:109).

Mindful Yoga teachers need to acknowledge current world context. Yet, new interpretations of mindfulness compromise ethics through extracting terms from their original contexts<sup>70</sup>. Modern mindfulness privileges non-judgmental awareness and does not distinguish between good and bad actions<sup>71</sup>. Referring to the ethical dimension of practice, Boccio notes: 'when you decontextualize the teachings, you lose the most important part, which serves neoliberal ideology perfectly' (F.J. Boccio 2020). His teachings aim to reintroduce a more structured approach to mindfulness practice.

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<sup>69</sup> 'By changing yourself and your own behaviour even in modest ways, such as recycling reusable materials, you do change the world' (Kabat-Zinn 1990:413),

<sup>70</sup> Conversely, regarding early Buddhist mindfulness: 'its emancipatory and ethical efficacy is derived from being integrated holistically with other complementary path factors, particularly right view and right effort' (Purser and Milillo 2014:13).

<sup>71</sup> In contrast, the traditional function of mindfulness is such that: 'the meditator not only observes phenomena but also *interprets* the presentational field in a way that sets arisen phenomena in a meaningful context' (Bodhi 2011:22).



Boccio underlines the fundamental importance of ethics. To him, the commodification of Buddhist mindfulness practice coincides with the commodification of yoga: ‘mindfulness is undergoing the same transformation as yoga, where the first casualty is ethics’ (F.J. Boccio 2020). The Mindful Yoga curriculum as set out by Boccio and Stone, seeks to fuse yoga and mindfulness within an ethical framework.

To summarize: the problem yoga and modern mindfulness face (and which Mindful Yoga sporadically seeks to address) is that individual liberation disregarding wider world context loses potency in a globalized society. With this problematic in mind, Feuerstein asks his readers to heed the call:

Yoga practitioners of whatever persuasion and from whatever part of the world must *now* step forward to deal fearlessly and sanely with the environmental (and correlated societal) challenge in the spirit of the ancient *vīras*, or heroic adepts (Feuerstein 1998:426).

Feuerstein, like others, raises the alarm here. Yet, he does not provide concrete steps towards activism. He refers to an enormous challenge but provides no clear guidelines to follow. His use of language (summoning the fearlessness of the ancient *vīras* to face environmental catastrophe) constitutes an ambiguous connection between practice and action<sup>72</sup>. Nevertheless, Feuerstein’s is an attempt to address what Judith Simmer-Brown<sup>73</sup> refers to as the ‘commodification of spirituality, which privileges blissful states of mind and avoidance of pain over engaging in social activism’ (Sherrell and Simmer-Brown 2019:375). In his book ‘Green Yoga’ (1998), Feuerstein promotes yoga as a solution to environmental problems. He notes the Buddhist cultivation of *bodhicitta* (the thought of awakening) is important, with the aim of freeing all beings from suffering (Feuerstein, 1998:426). This Mahāyānist approach contrasts with the self-centered focus of some yoga practices. We read:

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<sup>72</sup> This problem is not new: ‘Pali texts rarely discuss the implementation of altruistic intentions in specific detail. When compassionate service is discussed, it is defined most often as an individual spiritual attitude that yields karmic benefit to the individual benefactor. Feeling compassion and lovingkindness to the depths of one’s being is the focus, rather than the tireless doing of altruistic deeds (...) where Mahāyāna traditions dominated – adherence to the bodhisattva ideal led to more engagement with altruistic practices and extensive development of institutions to implement them’ (Lewis 2005:110).

<sup>73</sup> Simmer-Brown is a professor of contemplative and religious studies at Naropa University. Her work examines spiritual bypassing and social justice.

Green Yoga is the consistent application of traditional yogic values and virtues in order to make our lifestyle and all our actions not only appropriate and wise, but, above all, also conducive to the welfare of *all* beings on planet Earth (1998:426).

What then is Feuerstein's interpretation of traditional yogic virtues? In his study on altruism in Buddhism, Todd Lewis notes that when Buddhist monasticism spread across Asia, new institutions were established that engaged with local governments (Lewis 2005:103). In our secular, pluralistic society, the application of religious or spiritual values is more complicated.

Mindful Yoga lacks institutional support. Teachers tentatively connect altruism with self-evolution, activism with spiritual life. Nevertheless, the connections articulated in our text are difficult to locate in practice. With this in mind, we ask: can an altruistic concern for all beings prompt activist engagement or must it remain merely a concern? In the next section, I set out to identify some concrete examples where Mindful Yoga and activism converge.

## **MINDFUL YOGA AND ACTIVISM.**

Michael Stone emphasizes action. As well as formal yoga and mindfulness practice, he observes: 'Action is the key to yoga because it recognizes the deep interrelatedness of all things' (Stone 2011:112). This action is *informed* by the wisdom teachings:

What we need to aim for is a creative activism grounded in wisdom and morality; inclusiveness and community, and an integral practice grounded in the recognition that there is no separation (Stone 2011:125).

Stone says one should not separate yoga practice from activism. Yoga is a transformative practice and activists also set out to create change. As 'an assemblage of encounters pushing the system towards new states, activism is one of the causes bringing about evolution and re-creation within the system' (Svirsky 2010:168). This systemic evolution mirrors the internal transformative effects of the formal mindfulness and yoga practices.

Activism features in the complex histories of both Buddhism<sup>74</sup> and yoga<sup>75</sup>. Gil Fronsdal, a Buddhist teacher and scholar, describes the Buddha himself as an activist:

If an activist is someone who promotes social reform of some kind or other, then the Buddha was an activist because he was explicitly trying to affect and benefit the whole world (Mixcloud.com 2021[5:58-6:33]).

Fronsdal has a particular understanding of activism. He explains that the highest benefit from the point of view of tradition is to teach the path of liberation (Mixcloud.com 2021[6:53-7:00]). The activist extends the transformative potential of Buddhism to wider society. Dharmacarya Sudaka shares this perspective. To him, his teacher training course constitutes a form of activism:

Teaching them to be teachers is a form of activism. Teachers have gone on to work with prisoners, refugees, to join outreach programmes... The somatic practices of yoga are a gateway to the teachings of the Buddha; a doorway to awakening (D. Sudaka 2020).

Sudaka encourages his students to engage in activism by teaching yoga in their communities, in prisons, refugee camps etc. While many yoga teachers present the practice as universal<sup>76</sup>, a recent article in *Yoga Journal* highlights homogeneity and the perpetuation of financial and racial privilege in the yoga and wellness industry (Rice et al. 2021). Extending the benefits of a yoga practice necessitates greater efforts. Sudaka recognizes this:

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<sup>74</sup> Positioning activism as integral to Buddhism is nothing new: ‘A few scholars such as Trevor Ling (1985) and Nalin Swaris (2011) have argued (...) that the Buddha may have intended to start a movement that would transform society, rather than merely establish a monastic order with alternative values to the mainstream’ (Loy 2003:19).

<sup>75</sup> Early yoga abounds with examples of activism rooted in anticolonialist movements. One example is of a ‘highly organized bands of militarized yogins (...) so powerful in the eighteenth century as to be able to challenge the economic and political hegemony of the East India Company’ (Singleton 2010:39). Though the meaning of yogin in this context is unspecified, it sets a precedent for later activism.

<sup>76</sup> ‘Yoga is that which takes us away from false identifications such as: “I’m Hindu,” “I’m Muslim,” “I’m American,” “I’m African”—or “this or that” belongs to “me” or “us” ‘ (Bryant 2021).

Yoga is not going to save the world on its own (...) we need to get involved in activities that directly help other people, other beings, the world of ten thousand things. We have to get off our yoga mat and meditation cushion and give (D. Sudaka 2021).

Boccio takes a more systemic view than Sudaka. He accepts that protest can take many forms: 'Letter writing, creating new institutions such as companies owned by employees, challenging typical business corporate structure, education... whatever an individual is good at.' Yet, he continues by saying: 'It is not enough to just be concerned with your own behaviour, because it is enmeshed in a social structure' (Boccio 2020). The social structure itself needs to change.

Activism cannot achieve such structural change on its own. Can Mindful Yoga, with its emphasis on seeing clearly<sup>77</sup>, do so? Stone believes that it can: 'the classical texts and practices need to come alive in our life (...) If our practice is not bringing us into active engagement with our life, it's missing the target' (Stone 2011:77). Anna Stetsenko<sup>78</sup> articulates the same point, though in different terms:

What is needed is no less than a philosophically grounded revision, indeed an overhaul, of the major assumptions about human development, mind, the nature of knowledge and, ultimately, of reality itself—away from assumptions of passivity, accommodation, quietism and adaptation to the status quo (Stetsenko 2020:32).

Critics of modern mindfulness concur: Its teachings are used to pacify individuals (Fronsdal 2013). Buddhist and yoga philosophies contain perspectives on the human mind to support an ethical revision. This provides a link between Mindful Yoga and activism. As practices that feed one another, Mindful Yoga and activism display an asymmetric reciprocity however. Whilst activism is heralded as a key component of yoga practice, mindfulness and yoga are considered ancillary supports. They are viewed as tools subservient to the real work of activism:

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<sup>77</sup> 'The goal of Yoga is to undo the rampant and unconscious patterns of greed, consumerism, addiction, and inattention within and around us by learning how to pay attention' (Stone 2011:64).

<sup>78</sup> Anna Stetsenko is a Russian developmental psychologist whose work focuses on social change.

By exploring a range of tools for skilful emotional self-management, such as mindfulness, the collective emotional wisdom of activists can be better sustained and carried forward (Barker et al. 2008:433).

The spaces of activism and yoga are understood to be distinct. The following quotation calls for practices that support the wellbeing of the activist. However, it also marks a clear separation between activism and regenerative practices by locating them in distinct “spaces”.

Activists need to move away from (and outside of) sites of direct protest and confrontation in order to construct spaces that sustain both their emotional well-being and their resistance over a long time period. (Brown and Pickerill 2009:1)

Yet, the spaces of activism and yoga are not always separate. The physical and therapeutic aspects of Mindful Yoga led into activism during the Extinction Rebellion (XR) protests of 2019. XR considers the emotional wellbeing of activists. Activists could rest and recuperate with the aid of yoga classes, meditation and mindfulness at the protest site. ‘XR organizers have created a kind of wellness first-aid kit with a variety of self-care resources, creating another place in the movement where activism and practice intersect’(Abrahams 2021).

However, Mindful Yoga does not constitute the philosophical basis for XR protests. It supports the activist. Micah M. White, co-founder of Occupy Wall Street, reflects on his movement’s failure to provide such support. He acknowledges they neglected the spiritual aspect of the activist:

We put an overemphasis on street actions (...) we neglected some of the other aspects of change like the structural forces, spiritual forces and subjective forces’ (Micahmwhite.com 2021:[2.40]).

A new type of activism: regenerative activism, introduces initiatives which link the person to the activist project in a more holistic way. The Advaya Collective, for example, organize talks, retreats and events that cater for activists:

We link personal healing with social action and believe that ill mental health and environmental degradation go hand in hand: the way we treat the world is a mirror of how we treat ourselves (Advaya.co 2021).

This type of language echoes Mindful Yoga. Both link the individual with the collective in a way that urges action while encouraging reflection.

The Ulex Project leads regenerative activism. It aims to ‘provide(s) high quality training for activists, change-makers and organizations’ (Ulexproject.org 2017). The importance of mindfulness is foundational to this project: ‘We work with a model identifying three key factors that support personal empowerment and transformation (...) The foundational factor is the development of mindful awareness’ (Ulexproject.org 2017). Mindfulness features as a mark of quality. It is fundamental to a training programme that emphasizes resilience and sustainability.

Mindful yoga and regenerative activism dovetail neatly here. Where the foundation of Mindful Yoga is the body, the foundation of regenerative activism is mindfulness.

## **ARTICULATING MINDFUL YOGA ACTIVISM.**

Calls to action feature in many of India’s spiritual traditions. Kṛṣṇa demands righteous action from Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gītā*<sup>79</sup>: ‘arise with a brave heart and destroy the enemy (2.3)’ (Easwaran 2007:88). In the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Śāntideva warns the reader against complacency:

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<sup>79</sup> The *Gīta* as an activist text is controversial: ‘the promotion of the *Gīta* as a national text could quickly slip into a more sectarian or “communal” agenda. In an anticolonial movement that aspired to be cohesive and unifying on a national scale, the *Gīta* and other Hindu symbols could be seen as divisive, since they excluded non-Hindu communities. Or in another direction, the relevance of the *Gīta* could be projected beyond Hinduism and India to embrace all humanity as a universal spiritual work. (Davis 2015:118).

If such a son of the Victor has secured the spirit of awakening, he should strive, continuously and tirelessly, not to deviate from the rules [of a bodhisattva]’, as ‘any failure of a bodhisattva is particularly serious, because if he fails, he has destroyed the goal of all beings (4.8) (Steinkellner 2019:27).

In present day, traditional passages are twisted to fit the peaceful rhetoric of modern mindfulness and yoga. Historically these come couched in meticulous philosophical (and/or religious) frameworks. Stone attempts to define engaged, secular yoga: ‘Waking up to interconnection paired with taking action in the world forms the basis of an engaged secular Yoga, a path in tune with these times’ (Stone 2011:24). Interconnection is easily conflated with perennialism. The inherent divinity of everything makes action expendable. Recognizing the risk of passivism, Stone emphasizes taking action in the world.

I turn, once again, to Stone in order to generate a clearer, point-by-point, articulation of the Mindful Yoga “project”. Stone collects some of the key issues in Mindful Yoga literature:

In Mindful Yoga the body serves as blueprint for the activist’s relationship with the body of society, the body of politics, the body of community... Positing yoga as relationship, Stone considers the physical practices instrumental in understanding our relationship to the world. The awakening process is framed through such a relationship: ‘We can wake up in relationship and through relationship’ (Stone 2015: [19.37-19.42]). Teachers (Feuerstein, Boccio, Little, Lee, Sudaka) consider āsana a key component to active engagement in the world. They claim embodied mindfulness sparks activist involvement. The renunciatory aspect of early yoga encourages suppression of worldly relationships. In contrast, Mindful Yoga links the body indelibly to the work of activism. David Loy notes that modern mindfulness has yet to address its relationship to social justice issues, referring to the “discomfort” caused by inequitable economic and social relationships (Loy 2016:15). Discomfort is a bodily experience and as such the body provides partial answers. Traditional teachings require reconsideration in light of current contexts. Disembodied practice is obsolete.

Practice is not limited to the yoga mat or meditation cushion. Āsana, mindfulness meditation, direct action in social justice movements, dealing with environmental challenges... all are understood as part of the same project. Mindful Yoga encourages all beneficial activity as entailing personal and global transformation. This all-encompassing rubric of practice is based around traditional notions of karma yoga as well as Buddhist principles: ‘The key teaching of karma, is a teaching of non-duality, is that karma is something you are.’ (Stone 2015: [16.55-17.04]). Stone’s interpretation of karma appeals to the activist. Karma can be individual, collective<sup>80</sup> or indeed planetary and interpenetrates everything. Stone’s efforts to reframe the notion of yoga practice itself, to *include* other activities is an ingenious attempt to extend the teachings to larger sections of the community.

The individual is inextricably part of the collective. Individual liberation is tantamount to a liberated society. ‘Society is an aggregate of individuals, and if enough individuals change, then so will society as a whole’ (Stone 2011:112). This emphasis echoes modern mindfulness: it places the burden of change firmly on the individual. However, Mindful Yoga teachers also attempt to mobilize groups of practitioners towards activism<sup>81</sup>. The group can achieve greater change than the individual. A shared understanding of the basis for activism contributes to a more unified stance.

## CONCLUSION.

Buddhist teachings on interconnection converge with altruism in Mindful Yoga. However, spiritual teachers grapple with current issues. Fronsdal, speaking at the Insight Meditation Centre<sup>82</sup> asks Buddhists: ‘How neutral shall we be? How neutral are we? Should we take political positions and do political social action? Its an open question’ (Fronsdal 2020:[3.55-4:05]). Mindful Yoga calls for clearer parameters rather than open questions.

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<sup>80</sup> Loy highlights the importance of ‘mindfulness encouraging a critical reflection on the causes of our collective suffering’ (Loy 2016:16).

<sup>81</sup> Sudaka writes: ‘I wish to urge us to look to a collective, collaborative response. We need to get together with others and “do something” for others at the same time healing ourselves’ (Bodhiyoga.es 2021).

<sup>82</sup> Established in 1986 in Redwood, California.



If it is to constitute a robust support for the activist, its universal focus requires boundaries and a move beyond vague aspiration.

Several prominent teachers (Sudaka 2020, Boccio 2007, Stone 2011) emphasize the need for collaboration and organization. Ground exists where Mindful Yoga teachings can inform activism, as in the new regenerative activism movement. The Advaya Collective, Extinction Rebellion, The Ulex Project and Occupy Wall Street among others turn to mindfulness to build resilience among their members. Collaboration benefits everyone. It provides practical steps for yoga practitioners and builds a stronger activist presence.

Both yoga and activism are evolving. Their capacity to forge new pathways of change depends on their ability to collaborate. There exists a need to move beyond insular yoga practice or stoic activism. Traditional Buddhist and yoga teachings need to adapt to current contexts. An updated practice incorporates activism and emphasizes altruism. The interface between Mindful Yoga and direct action still requires further research. Data relating to the engagement of Buddhist, mindfulness and yoga practitioners with activism would require close analysis. Then conclusions could be drawn as to the scale and success of such a fusion.

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