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Contemplative Praxis for Social-Ecological Transformation

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Abstract

The growing critical reception of mainstream mindfulness interventions often concerns itself with the social and ethical dimensions of mindfulness practices and their current inability to effectively address social and ecological problems. While Buddhists often advocate recontextualizing the practices in their original ethical frames, such proposals inadequately account for Buddhism's historic biases and secular practitioners' unwillingness to conform to Buddhist norms. Likewise, secular practitioners who argue that ethics implicitly informs mindfulness, but who forgo explicit ethical considerations, are often uncritical of the inner workings of power and injustice shaping mindfulness. This paper presents a dual critique of Buddhist and secular approaches to mindfulness, and attempts to outline dialectical and integral approaches that synthesize aspects of both. This dual critique lends itself to a post-secular synthesis of ethics and mindfulness, as irreducible aspects of each other informed by a non-binary understanding of religion and secularism. Finally, this synthesis is explored in light of several existing theoretical and practical examples of contemplative practices developed to support personal, social, and ecological transformation.

Keywords: Contemplative Studies, Mindfulness, Social Change, Sustainability, Ethics, Buddhism, Secularism

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As MINDFULNESS IS ADAPTED for the purposes of health care, it is commonly presented in alignment with the atomistic view of mental health prevalent within the psychotherapeutic community and without regard for the institutional and environmental causes of suffering.[1] Alternative treatment models that address the social causes of suffering are less frequently employed than the biological, cognitive, and behavioral models for treating individuals. Even those alternative models, such as the sociocultural model, which do consider how suffering is generated by broader social conditions, rarely incorporate an analysis of institutions and the environment.[2] B. Alan Wallace attempts to overcome this myopic view within contemplative science by envisioning the study of mindfulness using a three-pronged approach that balances first, second, and third person accounts of experience. This approach is supposed to counter the reductive logic of the scientific materialist perspective using a broader interdisciplinary method that integrates Buddhist tradition.[3] Though it achieves a more holistic understanding of individual experience, it nevertheless fails to effectively challenge the present-day focus on individual awakening in many Western Buddhist and mindfulness communities. To broaden this focus, Western Buddhist and secular mindfulness communities should view individual and collective awakening dialectically, and view social ethics as integral to mindfulness practice.

A Dual Critique of Western Buddhism and Mindfulness

The general disregard for social and environmental causes of suffering is not relegated to secular adaptations of mindfulness or contemplative science. Mindfulness in traditional Buddhist contexts aligns well with its psychotherapeutic counterparts, because it tends to focus on the individual and concomitant psychological factors of awakening while disregarding the collective, social forms of suffering, expressed by David Loy as institutional greed, ill-will, and delusion.[4] As a result, Buddhist communities that emphasize individual awakening often neglect to highlight how institutions structure their beliefs and practices. Consider, for instance, how Buddhism has dramatically transformed since taking root in Western cultural and institutional environments. As Buddhism is assimilated into Western contexts, very few Western monastic institutions can support themselves through the traditional

means of *dāna* (alms giving).[5] Many Western Buddhists instead participate in the market economy, and as a result, Western Buddhist teachers often cannot provide free teachings and mentorship to the underprivileged, because they must market and sell themselves to earn their livelihood.

Although capitalism and consumerism heavily mediate the student-teacher and lay-monastic relationships within the Western sangha, there is little conscious dialogue about how Western Buddhist or mindfulness communities should interface with capitalism's structural dynamics. As Josh Korda writes in the *Huffington Post*, a survey of Dharma talks online reveals that only "five talks—out of 17,000 in total—focus specifically on the topic of one's vocation." Contrast this with 1,500 talks on mindfulness and 900 talks on *mettā* (loving-kindness) practice, and one discovers that Right Mindfulness receives 300 times more attention than Right Livelihood, even though the Buddha taught that each is an equal part of the Eightfold Path.[6] Effectively, such disproportionate focus separates teachings on Buddhism and mindfulness from an understanding of our social and economic lives. And yet, social and economic dynamics have a significant impact on practitioners. The Buddha clearly stated in the *Maha-cattarisaka Sutta* that "these three qualities—right view, right effort, & right mindfulness—run & circle around right livelihood."[7] So, why has such overwhelming interest in mindfulness become detached from social and material concerns?

One possible answer is that in Western Buddhist communities, teachers often present the Two Truths from *Madhyamaka* philosophy—absolute and relative reality—in unequal fashion, mistakenly elevating the absolute truth above the relative and material grounds of existence.[8] Citing Loyal Rue's *Everyday Story*, Zen teacher David Loy suggests that this tendency to separate spiritual and material existence is symptomatic of an emphasis on cosmological dualism (between *samsāra* and *nirvāna*) and individual salvation that runs throughout early Buddhist traditions.[9] Loy also argues that while Asian Buddhist traditions emphasize ending rebirth by transcending and escaping this unsatisfactory world, "psychological appropriations of Buddhism (including the mindfulness movement) tend to accept this world as it is."[10] Neither classical Buddhism nor the mindfulness movement consider the transformation of social and material conditions to be an integral part of spiritual practice. As a result, many Western Buddhist and mindfulness communities exist within institutions legitimating oppressive social

hierarchies, while exhibiting "an attitude of indifference toward the integrity of natural and social systems."[11] As spirituality becomes divorced from social and material concerns, Jin Y. Park argues, it tacitly legitimates the preexistence of social, economic, and ecological injustice, which inevitably prevails in patriarchal, capitalist, racist, sexist, and homophobic societies.[12]

This essay will seek to redress this distortion in Western Buddhist and mindfulness communities by pursuing a conceptual unification of contemplative theories and practices aimed at social-ecological transformation. Part I argues that individualistic modes of Western Buddhism and secular mindfulness practices should be supplanted by dialectical approaches that place the individual in relationship to the world. Part II argues that social ethics should be integral to mindfulness, rather than being conceived as either a separate or implicit facet. And Part III surveys some existing practices that help shape the development of critically, socially, and ecologically engaged mindfulness. In sum, this essay hopes to reorient Western Buddhism and mindfulness toward a more engaged, liberatory project connecting personal and social suffering. To accomplish this, it maps a terrain of theories and practices that combine an understanding of social-ecological injustice with a contemplative praxis leading to transformation.

Part I: Dialectical Approaches to Western Buddhism and Mindfulness

Dialectics, by definition, describes a methodological approach to resolve conflict through the synthesis of contrasting perspectives. Dialectical approaches to Western Buddhism and secular mindfulness practices offer ways to reorient them so that personal, social, and ecological transformation become integral to one another. For instance, Park reinterprets ethics from a Buddhist-Postmodern perspective, emphasizing that both Buddhist and postmodern philosophy "demand the reconceptualization of the relationship between visible existence and invisible reality."[13] Taking a similar approach in *A New Buddhist Path*, Loy charts a middle ground between transcendence and immanence that views the world and our relationship to it as "a psychological and social construction that can be deconstructed and reconstructed."[14] In his view, the self is formed in relationship with the world. Both Park and Loy's dialectical approaches allow visible instances of suffering

caused by the effects of economic injustice and climate change, for example, to be understood more deeply as the symptoms of hidden histories of slavery, colonialism, and patriarchy.

Borrowing from the Marxist tradition, dialectical orientations to Western Buddhism conceive inner and outer transformation as a concrete whole. In his lecture, "Towards an Integral Model of Buddhism," Bhikkhu Bodhi argues that the Dharma "has to be applied against the background of the period of history we're living in and directed not only to the great universal problems that all humans face but also to the special over-arching problems of this historical period in which we are living."[15] Bodhi's perspective of Buddhism views transcendence and immanence dialectically, and places Western Buddhism within the contemporary socio-historical context to alleviate the social and material conditions of suffering. In general, this perspective requires that Western Buddhism and mindfulness become engaged and incorporate methods of social, historical, and materialist analysis from Marxism, ecofeminism, and critical race theory, for instance, in order to understand the intersectionality of gender, race, and class oppression.

Currently, however, a prominent critic of mindfulness, David Forbes, argues that, "what is often missing from discussions of mindfulness is this intersubjective or second person perspective that addresses the context of shared meaning."[16] In health care contexts, many therapists who appropriate Buddhism and secular mindfulness practices might argue that the client-centered nature of their profession doesn't allow treatment to extend beyond the individual or group. But that does not mean society's view of treatment should be limited to therapeutic applications of mindfulness in individual or group settings. Society should have a much broader view that considers all the diverse constituents of mental health and the role society plays in creating a space for supporting positive health and well-being. Sometimes this broader view demands that society develop a greater capacity to hear people articulate their distress, because if society is unwell, the most valuable treatments are not palliative, but political.

The same is true for Western Buddhism. For instance, if one considers the unparalleled scales of suffering caused by the sixth great extinction event, in which 140,000 species go extinct every year,[17] then Western Buddhism's capacity to alleviate suffering hinges on a political response to systems and institutions that perpetuate such large-scale environmental degradation and injustice. Many prominent Buddhists across traditions now argue that the unprecedented growth in the size

and influence of modern institutions has such a devastating impact on the environment that it demands a historic reevaluation of Buddhism.[18] From the standpoint of Loy's view of Buddhist non-duality, individual well-being is indistinguishable from the world's well-being, which "naturally involves accepting responsibility for [the world]."[19] This view expands the narrow focus of many Western Buddhist and mindfulness communities beyond the psychological and therapeutic, so that personal wellbeing includes political struggle, rather than just social or psychological adjustment. Using mindfulness practice to become more intimately engaged with the world would also expand contemplative science beyond the realm of psychology, so that it considers how suffering is generated personally, socially, and ecologically. Ultimately, these parallel shifts in theory and practice would converge in what I call *contemplative praxis*. Contemplative praxis combines Thich Nhat Hanh's claim that "Meditation is about the awareness of what is going on—not only in your body and in your feelings, but all around you,"[20] with James Rowe's claim that "Revolutionary, systemic change is needed internally, in our relations and in our external conditions."[21] Essentially, contemplative praxis integrates the personal and political, inner and outer aspects of transformation.

Part II: Integrating Mindfulness and Social Ethics

For a dialectical reorientation, Western Buddhist and mindfulness communities should ask whether conditions currently exist that would allow mindfulness to serve as a contemplative praxis for social-ecological transformation. Already, there are some Western sanghas developing forms of contemplative praxis, which I mention in Part III, and there are many resources within the tradition—such as loving-kindness (Pāli: *mettā*; Skt.: *maitrī*) meditation, *tonglen* meditation, and teachings on wisdom (Skt.: *prajñā*)—that can help integrate personal, social, and ecological transformation. Nevertheless, a growing number of critical mindfulness studies show that mindfulness is often reduced to a self-help technique,[22] which, Michael McGhee argues, means that in certain contexts, it "has lost its essential rootedness as a practice of ethical preparation."[23] Unlike in traditional Buddhist contexts, secular mindfulness is typically presented without explicit ethical prescriptions. Moreover, many Western Buddhist and mindfulness communities adopt universalist, ahistorical, and apolitical views that block awareness of privilege and injustice.[24] One commonly-cited example of

these views is that mindfulness is both a place-holder for the universal Dharma and an innate human capacity unencumbered by Buddhism's religious trappings. Such views afford mindfulness proponents privilege by appealing to Buddhism's cultural cache, while simultaneously disavowing their indebtedness to Buddhist cultures—a move that implicates Western Buddhist and mindfulness communities in an ongoing history of white supremacy and cultural erasure.[25]

To evade criticism that secular mindfulness is practiced without ethical moorings, advocates often argue that mindfulness does in fact possess intrinsic or implicit ethics that ensure good conduct. But, as R.K. Payne argues, this position, taken by prominent advocates like Jon Kabat-Zinn, "cannot provide any ethical grounding for human action… [and] the best that one can do, therefore, is wish and hope that the ethical environment somehow rubs off on clients, that ethics are contagious and they can catch it."[26] As an alternative to this position, Payne says there is an integral view of mindfulness that considers ethics to be "completed in the service of purifying the mind and inseparable from the practice of meditation."[27] Whereas positing an intrinsic ethical foundation prohibits critical inquiry into mindfulness' ethical dimensions, the integral view cultivates mindfulness in conjunction with clear comprehension (Pāli: *sampajañña;* Skt.: *samprajanya*), which discriminates wholesome from unwholesome thoughts and behaviors. This integral view of mindfulness is the view that best accords with a dialectical understanding of Western Buddhism and mindfulness.

There are some mindfulness practices which assume this integral approach already emerging within Western Buddhist and mindfulness communities. Each of these has its own potential advantages and drawbacks. For example, Maia Duerr considers what a "Socially Responsible Mindfulness Manifesto" would entail on her blog, where she shares Bhikkhu Bodhi's "Modes of Applied Mindfulness" that distinguish among classical, secular therapeutic, secular instrumental, and socially transformative forms of mindfulness. Bodhi writes that socially transformative forms would "provide a means of fostering structural transformation toward the social ideals of the Dharma." The problem, Bodhi says, is how "to ground these ideals on textual sources and develop a theoretical foundation for an ethic of Buddhist engagement in the world," while resolving the "possible tensions between this application of mindfulness and its classical role."[28] Bodhi's desire to integrate classical Buddhist theory and contemporary socio-historical contexts in a socially transformative form of mindfulness is a thoroughly dialectical

approach to contemplative praxis. It takes an integral view of ethics and seeks to resolve the tension between inner and outer transformation. From a dialectical point of view, however, Bodhi's religious appeal to Buddhism fails to resolve the tension between religion and secularity that often exists in mindfulness communities. Many secular communities simply won't consider the retranslation of Buddhist ethics to be a viable solution, because they don't share Bodhi's religious commitment to Buddhism.

These tensions are most apparent in current debates about right mindfulness, in which Buddhist objectors often assert that ethics are integral to the practice by translating Buddhism's ethical foundations back into secular mindfulness practices. In the *Journal of Management Inquiry*, for example, Ron Purser and Joseph Milillo recover textual resources from the Buddhist tradition in order to challenge the contemporary understanding of mindfulness. Although their argument that "right mindfulness is grounded in an embodied, first-person, and ethically informed theory and practice" accords with an integral view of mindfulness,[29] it doesn't resolve the tension between Buddhist and secular translations. When Lynette Monteiro, R.F. Musten, and Jane Compson sought to resolve these tensions by assessing whether right mindfulness should be applied to secular practices,[30] the Buddhist monk Ajahn Amaro responded by once again clarifying the traditional understanding of mindfulness and examining the traditional role of ethics.[31] Buddhist traditionalists do not typically concede that mindfulness should be divorced from Buddhism's Eightfold Path as a container for integrating mindfulness and ethics. In current debates on right mindfulness, Buddhists assert that mindfulness must be grounded, contained, and expressed through the other aspects of the Eightfold Path, which mutually support it.[32] From a Buddhist perspective, being mindful is not intrinsically or implicitly good. The value of mindfulness depends on what we are mindful of, and for Buddhists, this integral view implies that the role of mindfulness is to remember to avoid misdeeds (*akusala*) and act ethically (*kusala*).[33]

Yet, while attempts to reinsert the ethical foundations of right mindfulness back into secular discourses serves Buddhism, they often exclude the interests of secular practitioners, because they assume that Buddhism is the proper context for mindfulness. In countries where Buddhism is not the official state religion, religiously based ethics face important legal, cultural, and political challenges.[34] For this reason, it is worth examining secular alternatives that embody integral

approaches to mindfulness, which still maintain some connection to their Buddhist roots but which have undergone a deeper process of cultural translation. In many of these cases, the abiding concern is how to ensure that ethical frameworks guide the development of secular meditation without appealing to Buddhism explicitly.[35] Typically, the solution is to replace the language of Buddhism with the language of science, because science is a common idiom that can validate the merit of religious Buddhism in ways culturally accepted by secular communities.[36] In *Mindful* magazine, for instance, Ed Halliwell asks whether the emerging science of compassion and gratitude could be more explicitly integrated into mindfulness courses, so that "deep, contemplative wisdom [can] be preserved in non-religious mindfulness training."[37] This attempt to integrate positive psychology and contemplative science is frequently advanced by a larger group of pragmatic Western Buddhists and scientists, often associated with the Mind and Life Institute, who are interested in developing a secular ethics as the foundation for mindfulness practice.

At the 2014 International Symposium on Contemplative Studies, a participant noted:

> The big hope, at the conference, was that 'contemplative studies' could actually provide a new 'secular ethics' for the world, and help us through the enormous political challenges we face. 'There are one billion non-believers in the world,' the Dalai Lama said. 'They won't listen to a monk talking about inner values, but they might listen to scientists, if they prove a connection to well-being.' He's right – mindfulness has become sort of a secular ethics for a happiness-obsessed modernity.[38]

The celebrated Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard is one of several leaders in this group who now argue that "We need to systematically refer to 'caring mindfulness'… To protect the practice of mindfulness from any deviations."[39] He says, "the ethical component has to be included," so we should "embed the caring, compassionate component right from the start."[40] Neuroscientist Tania Singer has developed this idea further to promote a "caring economy" by "integrating new findings from contemplative sciences into economic models and policies."[41] She works with psychologists, neuroscientists, and economists "to formulate new motivation-based computational models of economic decision-making" that promote pro-social behavior "in order to address pressing global problems like climate change and inequality."[42] The goal of this

research is to incorporate secular ethics into mindfulness, because religion has ceased to function as an ethical compass. Yet, despite its mainstream appeal, it remains to be seen exactly what effect "caring mindfulness" will have on the institutions where it is practiced. For example, in the *Harvard Business Review*, Charlotte Lieberman argues that "compassion, and self-compassion, ought to [be] more in the foreground… even in corporate mindfulness programs;"[43] but how will companies respond if practicing "caring mindfulness" affects their bottom line? Moreover, how would employees who practice compassion experience corporate environments if care is not exercised by the company's dominant culture or standard business practice? Could Singer's "caring" economy really transform the economic incentives of these companies, so their for-profit business models align themselves with the common good?

Part III: Experimenting with Mindfulness for Social-Ecological Transformation

In light of these unanswered questions, there is a need for further experimentation with mindfulness practices designed to support social-ecological transformation. In the remainder of this essay, I will survey some contemplative theories and practices which may aid the development of more critically, socially, and ecologically engaged mindfulness practices. Although pragmatism is a virtue that advocates of secular mindfulness programs often exhibit to a greater extent than many traditional Buddhists, there needs to be very careful and critical attention paid to how secular mindfulness programs develop, so that they sustain the well-being of the practitioners and the environments in which they are embedded, not just the organizations that employ them. As I say in *The Handbook of Mindfulness*, "what is also needed is for mindfulness practitioners to engage critical inquiry, so that they interrogate the ideologies and values around which mindfulness is framed, and so they challenge the concentrations of power and interest that give rise to commodified forms of mindfulness."[44] Critical approaches to mindfulness interrogate any authority that claims to represent Buddhism and mindfulness on behalf of self-evident interests. As Ed Ng states, "When we speak of 'critical mindfulness,' we are following Foucault in performing critique not simply to decry that things are not right as they are. Rather, it is 'to show that things are not as self-evident as

one believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such.'"[45] Proponents of critical mindfulness question the assumption, for instance, that an appeal to science is a value-free proposition, when in fact, certain ideological and institutional interests guide the incorporation of secular ethics into discourses and practices of mindfulness. For example, when Western Buddhist organizations like the Nalanda Institute for Contemplative Science translate Buddhism "through the contemporary lens and language of Western psychology, medicine and cognitive science,"[46] they privilege the authority of science and even assume it to be the preferred method for communicating Buddhism to Western audiences. Similarly, when contemplative scientists claim that they make clear testable predictions which provide realistic models for a secular ethics of mindfulness, they often discount the limitations of these models and their incapacity to reflect the much broader role that mindfulness plays in a contemplative life.[47]

Granted, it is impossible to escape ideology altogether, so given that cultural values invariably structure the dialogue between religion and science, it is important to expose the interests and investments which frame that dialogue, so that a more civil and educated debate can explicitly orient dialogue toward greater inclusivity. In many respects, a dialectical approach to Western Buddhism and mindfulness is reflected in critical approaches that deconstruct and reconstruct mindfulness by clarifying how it interfaces with the world. Whereas right mindfulness and "caring mindfulness" are typically practiced in separate religious and secular contexts, critical approaches to mindfulness borrow from the Frankfurt School a "*non-secular critique* of religion for the sake of religion,"[48] so that the power of mindfulness is renewed through relentless criticism.[49] As I say in "Critical Theory and the Contemporary Discourse on Mindfulness," "the transgressions that Buddhism and mindfulness enact in the world… should mobilize us to turn Buddhism and mindfulness inward, so that they deconstruct and reconstruct themselves."[50] Critical theory distinguishes itself from Buddhism's own history of critical inquiry, because whereas Buddhist traditions such as Madhyamaka are focused on our perceptual experience of reality, critical theory is focused on uncovering the conditions of social and ecological injustice in today's concrete historical situation. By integrating critical theory into the design and implementation of contemplative practices, practitioners can situate personal awakening around a sharp social critique of injustice, orienting them toward collective liberation.

To ensure that social critique leads to awakened action, not paralysis, critical approaches to mindfulness should be developed in socially and ecologically engaged mindfulness practices that move practitioners beyond protest. The Mindfulness for Social Change course developed by Paula Haddock in the U.K. provides a good example of a secular mindfulness program designed to "support efforts for social, environmental and economic justice."[51] Unlike clinical and therapeutic mindfulness programs, Haddock's program incorporates an analysis of "the systemic causes of social, economic, and environmental problems,"[52] and it supports personal wellbeing through active political struggle, rather than merely social or psychological adjustment. The year-long Practice in Transformative Action course at the East Bay Meditation Center is another good example of how socially engaged mindfulness practices are designed to support justice. The center's website explains that the course "is aimed at supporting individuals to foster transformative inner and outer change by bringing mindfulness awareness practices into their work with progressive social change organizations, coalitions and social movements."[53] Besides its focus on political activism, the center's focus on diversity is noteworthy, because it demonstrates how its commitment to social justice is integral to its presentation of mindfulness practice. The center bars white or straight people from attending specific classes, in order to allow community members to practice mindfulness in safe spaces. As Mark Oppenheimer documents in *The New York Times*, "Almost 50 percent of the center's mailing list of 8,000 identify themselves as 'people of color,' and about 40 percent as gay, lesbian or transgender."[54] Affording marginalized people space to practice mindfulness in communities where white, male, middle-, and upper-class European perspectives are not the norm is an important step in decolonizing mindfulness.

Other leaders in socially engaged mindfulness include the Center for Transformative Change, Generative Somatics, and the Movement Strategy Center.[55] Many of these groups were important allies of the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, and as James Rowe reports in "Zen and the Art of Social Movement Maintenance," they demonstrate how to integrate mind/body and anti-oppression work, so that they support personal and political transformation in tandem. In Rowe's article, Adreanna Limbach, who coordinated the activism branch of the Interdependence Project, said, "I began to think of meditation practice less as a service, and more a strategy, since we are bound to recreate structures of injustice in our daily interactions if we are not working

with internal belief systems, and how they are shaped by power, privilege and positionality." Similarly, Tashy Endres emphasized that "It is important to combine structural analysis with spiritual practice… Otherwise, you are likely to replicate oppressions and exclusions no matter how many hours you meditate."[56] Further strategies for using mindfulness to address injustice are documented in Beth Berila's book, *Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy*,[57] and in Rhonda Magee's recent article on "The Way of ColorInsight."[58]

While both critical and socially engaged approaches to mindfulness help eliminate injustice, they must account for the intersectionality between social and ecological justice issues. That is why Western Buddhist and mindfulness communities should form alliances with the broader climate justice movement. Emerging activist movements like Black Lives Matter already understand the connections between criminalization, colonialism, economic justice, community control, environmental racism, and divestment. Western Buddhist and mindfulness communities should similarly develop contemplative practices that elucidate these interconnections. As such, they should design and implement contemplative practices that cultivate a moment-to-moment familiarity with one's intimate relations to human and non-human others. In my own view, these practices should search for deep ecological consciousness "through an active deep questioning and meditative process"[59] that causes "an expansion of identification,"[60] characteristic of deep ecology. This expansion of identification could play an important role in bridging the gap between the anthropocentric and ecocentric points of view that typically separate traditional environmentalism and conservationism from deep ecology and the climate justice movement.

As a Buddhist eco-philosopher who promotes this view, Joanna Macy describes the Great Turning toward ecological civilization in three component parts: "Actions to slow the damage to Earth and its beings, an analysis of structural causes and the creation of structural alternatives, and a shift in consciousness."[61] In the emerging climate justice movement, these parts are viewed as interrelated rather than separate components of social-ecological justice. There is a recognition that inner spiritual conversions that manifest themselves in different sets of values and behaviors also manifest in fundamentally altered social, political, and economic systems. Socially and ecologically engaged mindfulness practices can facilitate this process of mutual transformation, because they provide a method for grounding the often complex,

Illustration by Alicia Brown

interlinking problems of injustice to a felt presence of these problems in our lives.

Currently, many people's needs are met by social, political, and economic systems which insulate them from the social and ecological harms most acutely felt in the Global South. Some people may choose never to sensitize themselves to the suffering these systems cause until systems collapse. However, rather than remain complicit in systemic injustice, socially and ecologically engaged mindfulness practices provide an important catalyst, encouraging some others to internalize the suffering of the world so they become motivated to build alternatives before systems collapse. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, we need to heed the "bells of mindfulness,"[62] so that we can "hear within us the sounds of the Earth crying."[63] Becoming more receptive to the suffering of others and the suffering of the Earth more deeply clarifies the nature of social-ecological crisis. Generally, people are conditioned to think of practical solutions to crises, where practicality is couched in terms

of concrete, systemic, and technical approaches to social problems and environmental degradation. However, the global problematique from which the social-ecological crisis symptomatically emerges not only eludes simple explanation, it also demands that people embody a different mindset than the one that created the problems. In this sense, the eco-crisis is as much an internal, spiritual crisis as it is an external crisis.[64] People must accurately assess the complex nature of interlinking problems before they can propose effective solutions, and sometimes the biggest problems people face may not be the systems supporting failure, but the worldview underlying these failed systems.

The Eco-Sattva Training course provided by One Earth Sangha offers an example of how Western Buddhist and mindfulness communities can combine these approaches to meet the greatest challenges of our time.[65] Of course, more work still needs to be done to commit communities to integrate inner-work and social-ecological transformation. Otherwise, as Clark Strand argues, people may find that practicing Western Buddhism and mindfulness "was a way of sleeping soundly through the worst cultural excesses in human history while fooling ourselves into thinking we were awake."[66] Contemplative praxis for social-ecological transformation boldly appeals to Western Buddhist and mindfulness communities to awaken society at a time of unprecedented peril and promise.

Clearly, systemic and structural violence cause unparalleled degrees of suffering which affects us all at different scales; yet despite our varying degrees of precarity, individual liberation is wholly dependent on ethically and politically informed practices that cultivate wisdom and compassion in community. In this essay, I have argued that dialectical and integral approaches to contemplative practice correct an overemphasis on individual awakening and reorient Western Buddhist and mindfulness communities toward collective liberation. I have also provided many examples of existing efforts to develop critically, socially, and ecologically engaged forms of mindfulness. Together, these various approaches to contemplative theory and practice outline the potential for a unified contemplative praxis aimed at personal, social, and ecological transformation.

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Notes

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