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## What's Buddhism Got to Do With It? Popular and Scientific Perspectives on Mindful Eating

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In 2010, American talk show host Oprah Winfrey interviewed the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh about *Savor: Mindful Eating, Mindful Living*, a book he co-authored with nutritionist Lilian Cheung. Oprah asked the Vietnamese Zen master for “his take on the root of our weight problems” and advice on “how to change [our] own eating habits forever.”<sup>1</sup> *Savor* joined a rapidly expanding repertoire of popular books touting the benefits of mindful eating.<sup>2</sup> The book promised to “end our struggles with weight loss once and for all” while distinguishing itself from the diet fads of the \$50-billion-a-year weight loss industry.<sup>3</sup> Complementing the popular literature on mindful eating, an increasing number of scientific studies offer empirical, qualitative, and clinical perspectives on the efficacy of mindfulness interventions for obesity and eating disorders.<sup>4</sup>

A 2011 article characterizes mindful eating as “a growing trend designed to address both the rising rates of obesity and the well-documented fact that most diets don’t work.”<sup>5</sup> Unlike *Savor*, the article does not contain a single mention of Buddhism. An examination of more than two dozen articles in the scientific literature on mindfulness-based interventions for obesity and eating disorders yields a similar dearth of references to Buddhism. Popular books on mindful eating mention Buddhism more frequently, but often in superficial or imprecise ways that romanticize and essentialize more than they edify. What, then, does mindful eating have to do with Buddhism? The first two sections of this paper examine the ways that Buddhist ideas are referenced in popular books and scientific articles on the connection between mindfulness and eating. The final section presents some Buddhist perspectives that challenge the optimistic claims of mindful eating advocates.

RAISIN AWARENESS AND WHAT BUDDHA SAYS:  
POPULAR BOOKS ON MINDFUL EATING

A quick search on Amazon.com in December 2011 yielded more than two dozen books, eBooks, audio CDs, and even a spiral-bound “Raisin Awareness Mindful Eating Journal” on the topic of mindful eating, the majority published within the last five years.<sup>6</sup> The authors represented hail from an eclectic range of backgrounds, as the veritable alphabet soup of acronyms that follow their names demonstrate: BA, BS, BSN, BSW, CMT, CYI, DSc, MA, MEd, LCSW, LPC, MBSR, MD, PhD, PsyD, RD, RYT, and more.<sup>7</sup> Like their professional backgrounds, the authors’ stated familiarity with meditation also varies widely. Some describe decades of personal “mindfulness” or “meditation” practice, though few connect this practice to a Buddhist teacher, community, or lineage. Others do not mention a personal mindfulness practice at all, situating their experience and interest in the realm of dieting and health instead.

In 1998, Ronna Kabatznick, a social psychologist and long-time meditator, published *The Zen of Eating: Ancient Answers to Modern Weight Problems*.<sup>8</sup> The following year, Donald Altman, a psychotherapist and former Buddhist monk, published *Art of the Inner Meal: Eating as a Spiritual Path*.<sup>9</sup> Though these books do not have “mindful eating” in their titles, they can be said to have anticipated the recent explosion of popular books on the topic. These two books, along with *Savor*, are unique for their relatively strong emphasis on Buddhist teachings. *Art of the Inner Meal* discusses Buddhist texts and monastic life; *The Zen of Eating* is structured around the four noble truths and eightfold noble path; *Savor* includes these foundational doctrines along with explanations of the four foundations of mindfulness, the five mindfulness trainings, the five remembrances, and the five contemplations.

A smattering of Buddhist teachings can be found throughout the popular literature on mindful eating. References to the four noble truths, the Middle Way, compassion, and loving-kindness are common, but are rarely accompanied by in-depth explanations. As a result, they often serve as mere buzzwords/phrases. Citations from Buddhist texts are scarce, though allusions to what the Buddha said are not, as evidenced by numerous quotes attributed to “Buddha.” However, these “quotes” are more akin to catchy recapitulations of purportedly-Buddhist concepts than translations from identifiable Buddhist texts.<sup>10</sup>

Even a strong personal Buddhist practice does not guarantee a strong focus on Buddhism in popular books on mindful eating. For example, *Mindful Eating: A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food* contains relatively few citations of Buddhist teachings, though it is published by a Buddhist press and written by Jan Chozen Bays, a Zen master in the White Plum lineage of the late Taizan Maezumi Roshi. In the preface, Bays details the high costs of eating problems in the U.S. from her perspective as a physician. In the foreword to Bays' book, Jon Kabat-Zinn, widely regarded as a pioneer of bringing mindfulness into mainstream medicine, describes mindfulness as "the awareness and freedom that emerge from that present-moment gesture of profound relationality and consciousness."<sup>11</sup> Kabat-Zinn does not connect mindfulness with Buddhism, the context in which he himself first encountered mindfulness meditation.

Books on mindful eating convey a confusing array of understandings about the relationship between Buddhism and mindfulness. Some regard the two as inseparable, as if mindfulness can serve as synecdoche for all of Buddhism.<sup>12</sup> Others acknowledge no link between the two. Susan Albers, a psychotherapist who has published several books and a case study on mindful eating,<sup>13</sup> provides the confusing explanation that "the term 'mindfulness' came into use in the sixth century during the Buddha's lifetime."<sup>14</sup> This definition offers only a tenuous association between Buddhism and mindfulness, not to mention the unfortunate omission of "BCE" after "sixth century."<sup>15</sup>

Rather than discuss the connection between the Pāli term *sati* and the English term mindfulness, the popular literature tends to allude to mindfulness' ancient origins in contemplative traditions. One book explains that mindfulness has roots in "Buddhist and other contemplative traditions that offer meditative methods of settling the usual busyness and chatter of our minds";<sup>16</sup> the same book also notes that *metta*<sup>17</sup> "comes out of the Asian meditation tradition."<sup>18</sup> The blurred usage of the adjectives "Buddhist," "Asian," and "contemplative" both universalizes and secularizes mindfulness, effectively removing it from its Buddhist milieu. At times, mindfulness is even interpreted through a Christian lens: "In Christian terms, it's called communion... coming into union with everything happening at that moment."<sup>19</sup> This conflation of Christian theology and Buddhist philosophy hardly clarifies the matter.<sup>20</sup>

These examples demonstrate the wide semantic range in which the term “mindfulness” is applied in books on mindful eating. “Mindfulness” is therefore an easily secularized, or at the very least de-Buddhized, term. Jane Goodall’s *Harvest for Hope: A Guide to Mindful Eating* aptly illustrates this definitional ambiguity: her book encourages activism that supports sustainability and food justice.<sup>21</sup> The flexibility that characterizes interpretations of mindfulness is all the more evident in the eclectic practices that are combined with mindfulness in several of the books I surveyed: relaxation response, hypnosis, and self-guided imagery, to name a few.

Highlighting the ancient roots of mindfulness—the title of Kabatnick’s 1998 book is just one of many examples of this phenomenon—creates a dichotomy between ancient and modern that romanticizes the past while valorizing the present for our ability not only to retrieve “ancient wisdom” but also to prove its efficacy through the powerful tools of modern science. Rather than discussing the etymology of the term mindfulness or the historical development of the modern meditation movements in Burma, Sri Lanka, and Thailand that so strongly influenced mindfulness in the West, books on mindful eating freeze mindfulness in a mythic past. To quote Albers again: “Ancient civilizations knew how important it was to have a clear and present mind. These classic mindfulness meditation techniques are still popular today and are gaining renewed respect in many scientific communities for their unique healing qualities.”<sup>22</sup> This statement does not tell us about historical realities so much as it points to some of the characteristics of the intended audiences of these books: people looking to lose weight who are more likely to trust scientifically-proven methods of doing so.

In this light, mindful eating might be viewed as just another trend in the lucrative diet and weight-loss industry. However, many books about mindful eating explicitly emphasize their distance from, and distaste for, this industry. These books are marketed as purveyors of a brand new take on dieting. Some even emphatically oppose being categorized with diet books, despite promising similar results such as losing weight and keeping it off. An eBook with a brief foreword by Thich Nhat Hanh proclaims: “This book, then, is not a diet book.... Ultimately, it is about choosing a new way of life in which you decide what changes you wish to make. This book is about your personal choices.”<sup>23</sup> This rhetoric of personal choice and agency is another

unifying theme across books on mindful eating. In *Savor*, we find the assertion that “with mindfulness, we can choose *how* to live our lives now. We can seize any moment and begin anew.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Albers declares, “Every human being is the author of his or her health or disease.”<sup>25</sup> Such statements ignore the structural injustices that contribute to disparities in eating habits and health outcomes, but are likely to appeal to individualistically-focused dieters.

The distinction between diet books and mindful eating books is not always clear-cut. Bay's *Mindful Eating* explicitly states: “This book is not about diets or rules,”<sup>26</sup> yet the book ends with a two-page bulleted list of “Summary Tips” that could easily be interpreted as the very rules it eschews. Books on mindful eating that include time-bounded periods in their title—four weeks to eating awareness, twenty-one days of eating mindfully—also echo the quick-fix promises of diet books. Mindful eating paradoxically promises to be different than traditional diets while still employing much of the rhetoric used by diet books—not surprising given that they are largely competing for the same audiences. The Amazon.com description of the eBook *21 Days of Eating Mindfully: Your Guide to a Healthy Relationship with Yourself and Food* asks: “Why not start honoring yourself today by embracing true and lasting change that comes from self acceptance, compassion and purpose, not discipline or dieting!”<sup>27</sup> One wonders if mindful eating books, just like the diet books they criticize, might promise too much. It is hard to imagine undertaking mindfulness practice without a degree of discipline and focus.

Proponents of mindful eating counter that their promises are not unrealistic, invoking scientific evidence to support this claim. One article notes that “studies have shown the positive effects of mindfulness meditation on everything from substance abuse to psoriasis, and hundreds of hospitals have established mindfulness clinics.”<sup>28</sup> To the list of “everything” that mindfulness proves beneficial for, we can add eating disorders, a hot topic in recent scientific studies on mindfulness.

#### PROMISING RESULTS: SCIENTIFIC VIEWS ON MINDFULNESS-BASED INTERVENTIONS

In 2010, *Eating Disorders: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention* published a special issue on mindfulness and eating disorders. In the introduction to the issue, the editor speaks glowingly of Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program for training

thousands of professionals and helping tens of thousands of people experience “marked improvement in both physical and psychological symptoms in addition to significant positive changes in health attitudes and behaviors.”<sup>29</sup> Buddhism is nowhere mentioned—this held true for all the articles throughout the special issue, as well as for the more than two dozen other articles I examined.

For scientists and clinicians interested in applying mindfulness to eating disorders, Jon Kabat-Zinn’s importance overshadows the Buddha’s influence.<sup>30</sup> His interpretations of mindfulness are commonly cited throughout the scientific literature. Albers quotes Kabat-Zinn’s definition of mindfulness as “intentionally drawing one’s awareness and attention to the present moment in a nonjudgmental and accepting way.”<sup>31</sup> Ruth Baer, a professor of psychology, also cites Kabat-Zinn in a case study on mindfulness for binge eating: “Mindfulness is a way of paying attention that is often taught through the practice of meditation exercises, in which participants learn to regulate their attention by focusing nonjudgmentally on particular stimuli.”<sup>32</sup> Compared to popular books on mindful eating, “mindfulness” is more coherently defined in the scientific literature, as might be expected for a research community where standard definitions of key concepts is a necessary basis for knowledge-building.

The fifty-year-old woman discussed in Baer’s case study spoke of taking a “leap of faith” when continuing the mindfulness treatment program. Ironically, mindfulness in clinical settings is designed for the most part to be divorced from considerations of faith. As Baer notes in a conceptual and empirical review of mindfulness training as a clinical intervention:

Until recently, mindfulness has been a relatively unfamiliar concept in much of our culture (Kabat-Zinn, 1982), perhaps because of its origins in Buddhism. Kabat-Zinn (2000) suggests that mindfulness practice may be beneficial to many people in Western society who might be unwilling to adopt Buddhist traditions or vocabulary. Thus, Western researchers and clinicians who have introduced mindfulness practice into mental health treatment programs usually teach these skills independently of the religious and cultural traditions of their origins.<sup>33</sup>

This passage suggests a deliberate turning away from mindfulness’ Buddhist roots with the assumption that this will make the practice more palatable to a general audience—an audience that is presumably

not Buddhist and wanting nothing to do with Buddhism. This may explain why the secularization and de-Buddhicization of mindfulness is more pronounced in the scientific literature on mindful eating than in the popular literature. The erasure of mindfulness' Buddhist roots is accomplished by referencing Kabat-Zinn and fellow scientists' definitions of the term or by gesturing towards the vague category of "traditional" practices. An article on Mindfulness-Based Eating Awareness Training (MB-EAT) states that "the concepts of emergent 'wisdom' and self-acceptance, core aspects of traditional meditation practice, also are central to the MB-EAT program."<sup>34</sup> One suspects that these "concepts" may well be based on Buddhist teachings, but the lack of clear attribution makes it difficult to confirm these suspicions.<sup>35</sup>

Even when specific Buddhist principles are openly credited in the scientific literature, there is still a trend towards de-emphasizing their religious origins. A study on Spiritual Self-Schema (3-S) therapy for treating addiction and HIV risk behaviors notes, "Evidence that the Buddhist foundation of 3-S therapy acted as a foundation for strengthening clients' own beliefs was suggested by examining individual items on the MMRS. Practices such as bible reading, watching religious programming, and church attendance increased, as did personal experiences of God in daily life."<sup>36</sup> The therapeutic model integrated a cognitive model of self with a "non-sectarian Buddhist framework suitable for people of all faiths," which adapted the eightfold path and the ten *pāramīs* for a primarily-Christian audience.<sup>37</sup> A related paper described that the final session of the 3-S therapy's eight-week course "stems from the Buddhist custom of seeking refuge in the triple gem—the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—which is translated for 3-S clients as seeking refuge in their own spiritual teacher, the teachings or scriptures of their spiritual teacher, and a community (or fellowship) of individuals who, like themselves, are also trying to live a life in accordance with these teachings [emphasis in original]."<sup>38</sup> Through these forms of reinterpretation, Buddhist teachings are rendered inoffensive, their religious origins made invisible. This erasure is an acceptable means to serve the celebrated ends—in this case, a reduction in drug use and other risky behaviors.

"Promising." I encountered this adjective again and again in the conclusion sections of the myriad articles I examined. The studies are united in their optimism over the use of mindfulness-based interventions for eating disorders. The limitation sections of these papers



typically focus on overarching concerns about study design such as the small sample sizes, absence of a control group, and short follow-up periods. The potential limitations to the actual methods of mindfulness employed are typically not discussed. As a recent study on mindful eating's effect on food liking astutely observed, "there is a lack of clarity as to whether the exposure techniques induced mindfulness or other attention states and whether the instructions adequately directed participants to process stimuli in a nonjudgmental and open-minded manner."<sup>39</sup> The question of how to standardize mindfulness training is a critical yet largely ignored consideration in the methodology of studies on mindful eating: how can we know that the "mindfulness" the various experimenters write about are one and the same method?

Furthermore, might it be the case that mindfulness is easy to prescribe but not so easy to teach or practice? Albers suggests that "mindful eating should be used thoughtfully and by those trained in the concepts,"<sup>40</sup> but exactly what this training should entail is unclear—nor is it clear what entails "thoughtful" use. It may not be realistic to expect clinicians to practice what they preach when it comes to mindfulness interventions. In an interview with the editor-in-chief of *Bariatric Nursing and Surgical Patient Care*, Dr. David Engstrom, a psychologist who recommended mindful eating for bariatric surgery patients with the express goal of having these patients lose as much weight as possible, admits to never having tried mindfulness all day long "because I don't think my life would lend itself to it."<sup>41</sup> For Dr. Engstrom, mindfulness when in the presence of food is sufficient. Indeed, he predicts dire consequences for those who are mindful at all times: "You'd lose your job. You would probably lose everything in your life. You know, you'd get in a traffic accident.... Being mindful doesn't let you plan. And, you've got to plan!"<sup>42</sup> This notion of mindfulness sounds more like a catatonic state than the moment-to-moment awareness that that Thich Nhat Hanh espouses.

Besides calling into question the definition of mindfulness, Dr. Engstrom's viewpoint also suggests a strong overlap between "mindful eating" and "intuitive eating." An article outlining the intuitive eating paradigm explains that it "suggests that one should be mindful while eating, with no distractions present such as television viewing. The purpose of mindful eating is to fully appreciate satisfaction of eating, and then identify when physical fullness has been reached."<sup>43</sup> The article's description of intuitive eating as an alternative to other

weight loss approaches echoes messages found in popular books on mindful eating: intuitive eating offers a focus on how and under what conditions an individual eats; it allows people to eat what they want, as long as they “learn to pay attention to body signals and eat appropriate amounts of food for their physiological needs.”<sup>44</sup> In concept if not in precise method, intuitive eating seems very similar to mindful eating. But the latter has clearly surpassed the former in influence.

The optimistic discourse on mindful eating in the scientific literature contains few dissenting voices.<sup>45</sup> An article in the special issue of *Eating Disorders* argues conceptually for the efficacy of mindfulness for treating anorexia nervosa.<sup>46</sup> Unlike chemical treatments, mindfulness is not noted to have negative side effects, which may explain its chameleon-like ability to blend in to a wide range of treatment options, for disorders of eating and beyond.

I found one exception to the mindful-eating success stories. In a case study of a multiracial, bisexual female in her early twenties, “post-treatment data did not indicate a reduction in binge eating, increased levels of mindfulness or an increase in general life satisfaction.”<sup>47</sup> Curiously, the author’s explanation puts the patient at fault for this null result:

It is likely that Ellen did not experience a clinically significant increase in mindfulness because she did not practice bringing attention and awareness to her reality and staying present with difficult experiences. Consequently, she was not able to reap the potential benefits of the program, which may have included a reduction in binge eating and an increase in subjective well-being. Ellen stated that she recognized the potential benefits of identifying and accepting bodily sensations towards the end of treatment, which may suggest that a longer duration of treatment is necessary to facilitate change.<sup>48</sup>

Rather than suggesting that mindfulness interventions may not be appropriate for or embraced by all patients, this study seems to assume that mindfulness cannot fail. Indeed, the article concludes that “mindfulness continues to be a promising component of treatment for BED [binge eating disorder].”<sup>49</sup> In the secular scientific literature on mindful eating, it would be heretical to conclude otherwise.

MINDFUL EATING, MINDFUL EXCRETING:  
BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES

Expounding the Buddhist perspective on food and eating is beyond the scope of this paper. The multiplicity of Buddhist sects and diversity in the methods one could use to examine the topic further complicate the question posed in the introduction of this paper: what does Buddhism have to do with mindful eating, and vice versa? The vicissitudes of translation only deepen our conundrum. In this final section I draw on a handful of sources in order to consider some Buddhist perspectives that offer alternatives to the popular and scientific literature's views on mindful eating.

The Pāli word *āhāra*, translated as “nutriment” or “food,” refers to more than just material food.<sup>50</sup> In Buddhist philosophy, there are four nutriments, translated by Nyanaponika Thera as edible food, sense impression, volitional thought, and consciousness. The popular and scientific literature ignores these latter three categories when discussing mindful eating.<sup>51</sup>

Closely following *āhāra* in Ven. Nyanatiloka's *Buddhist Dictionary* is the phrase *āhāre paṭikkūla-sañña*, “reflection on the loathsomeness of food,” described fully in chapter 11 of the *Visuddhimagga*. The chapter opens with a section on the “perception of repulsiveness in nutriment,”<sup>52</sup> which details ten repulsive aspects of physical nutriment as a way to overcome “craving for flavours,” thereby destroying greed for sense desires and leading if not to liberation then at least to “a happy destiny.”<sup>53</sup> Ideally, one nourishes oneself “without vanity and only for the purpose of crossing over suffering, as one who seeks to cross over the desert eats his own dead child's flesh.”<sup>54</sup> *Savor* also references the *Sūtra on the Son's Flesh*, though Thich Nhat Hanh interprets this story as an enjoinder to eat mindfully lest we figuratively consume our children's flesh by destroying the health and well-being of “our body, our spirit, and our planet.”<sup>55</sup> The *Visuddhimagga* does not so readily resolve into a cheerful commentary on the planetary benefits of mindful eating, dwelling instead on more grotesque details, as this excerpt from the section about outflows illustrates:

[O]n being swallowed it is swallowed even in the company of large gatherings. But on flowing out, now converted into excrement, urine, etc., it is excreted only in solitude. On the first day one is delighted to eat it, elated and full of happiness and joy. On the second day one stops one's nose to void it, with a wry face, disgusted and dismayed.

And on the first day one swallows it lustfully, greedily, gluttonously, infatuatedly. But on the second day, after a single night has passed, one excretes it with distaste, ashamed, humiliated, and disgusted.<sup>56</sup>

Literature on mindful eating is understandably devoid of such graphic descriptions of the inevitable aftermath of our eating escapades. When Don Gerrard asks us to carefully reflect on one bowl to aid in the practice of mindful eating, he is obviously not referring to the toilet bowl. In all seriousness, the literature on mindful eating tends to recommend the antithesis of contemplating the foul in nutriment. In the MB-EAT program, “the training purposefully cultivates drawing pleasure from eating,”<sup>57</sup> based on the theory that mindless eating is often hurried eating, and that people will slow down and eat less when they enjoy their food. A fitting example of this somewhat hedonist view expressed in the popular literature comes from the book *Pleasure Healing: Mindful Practices and Sacred Spa Rituals for Self-Nurturing*, which encourages people to enjoy aphrodisiac foods in its section on intuitive eating and mindful eating.<sup>58</sup>

Given this morass of viewpoints on mindfulness, one can sympathize with Altman when he contends, “What is mindfulness? Well, it is one of those elusive concepts that is easily confused or misunderstood.”<sup>59</sup> Though Kabat-Zinn’s authority remains central in mindfulness studies related to eating, one clinical researcher comments that the “term mindfulness has accumulated a number of definitions in the research literature.”<sup>60</sup> This researcher provides a rare example of a perspective that considers the different meanings of “mindfulness” and mentions its derivation from the Pāli word *sati*. Still, we lack nuanced descriptions about the ways in which the concept and practice of mindfulness has developed out of—and, in most cases that we have seen, away from—the Buddhist context.

A look at Buddhist texts reveals the extent to which definitions of “mindfulness” in the scientific literature have diverged from scriptural understandings. A paper on mindfulness meditation and cognitive therapy practices in Sri Lanka notes,

The *Maha Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha’s main discourse on developing mindfulness, provides 14 ways to develop mindfulness, grouped into four categories (Anlayo, 2003): body contemplation, feelings contemplation, mind contemplation, and contemplation of mind states. MBCT [Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy], which draws on Buddhist mindfulness practice, has incorporated some techniques

from the body contemplation category, specifically, awareness of breath and of daily activities.<sup>61</sup>

This article underscores that the “mindfulness” applied in clinical settings is a narrower, selective interpretation of mindfulness in Buddhist teachings. For example, the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* includes mindful eating on a section about mindfulness of various bodily activities: “when eating, drinking, consuming food, and tasting he acts clearly knowing; when defecating and urinating he acts clearly knowing; when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent he acts clearly knowing.”<sup>62</sup> Here, eating becomes part of a vast network of activities to be mindful of. By contrast, the literature on mindful eating tends to isolate food to a degree that might seem excessively attached from a Buddhist perspective. Of course, it is quite understandable that mindful eating proponents don’t also double as advocates of mindful excreting. Nevertheless, this passage raises interesting questions about the implications of focusing the practice of mindfulness exclusively on food and eating. Is it possible that a person who has spent a lifetime doggedly trying to lose weight might benefit from mindfulness of non-food-related activities in order to loosen his or her obsessive thinking about food? Might this person benefit from turning his or her attention elsewhere?

The secular-religious divide between mindful eating in clinical and Buddhist settings is largely due to differences in their end goals. The former is concerned with weight loss and maintaining healthy eating habits; the latter takes liberation as its final aim. In an article on Theravāda Buddhism and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Richard Gilpin comments on a paradox that Jon Kabat-Zinn perceives to be a key difference between mindfulness and other health interventions: “goals...are best achieved by abandoning pursuit of these very goals, so that participants cultivate the ability ‘simply to be where they are, with awareness.’”<sup>63</sup> The Zen-influenced ideal of “non-attachment to the outcome”<sup>64</sup> may seem quite at odds with the goals of those who see mindful eating as a means to a specific end, whether it be fitting into a smaller dress, reducing binge eating episodes, or developing a healthier relationship with food. This last goal may be less quantifiable than the first two, but by virtue of the mind conceiving of it as a new state to achieve, it too becomes an outcome. Gilpin’s observes that MBCT may subtly reinforce one’s sense of self, thereby hindering one’s path on the Buddhist path.<sup>65</sup> Mindfulness, it seems, can

serve either secular or religious aims. Kabat-Zinn's writings express some ambivalence about the very concept he has been so instrumental in spreading. Though he seems eager to de-Buddhize the profile of mindfulness, he appears unwilling to de-spiritualize it altogether, insofar as the spirit of mindfulness as nonjudgmental awareness is defeated by grasping towards mindfulness' promised benefits—of which there are many, or so the popular and scientific literature would have us believe.

Kabat-Zinn consciously optimized his version of mindfulness to appeal to “regular people”<sup>66</sup>—but just who are these people, exactly? Attention to class, race/ethnicity, and gender is lacking in both popular books and scientific articles about mindful eating. What are the ramifications of the fact that most of the popular mindful eating books I examined are authored by white females? Which groups of people are not represented in the clinical mindful eating studies? These questions remain unexamined by enthusiastic proponents of the one-size-fits-all magic bullet mindful eating.

While modern Buddhism is often described as having an emphasis on mindfulness meditation and a high regard for scientific rationalism, mindful eating has become secularized to the point that there is little that is obviously Buddhist about it. In the scientific literature, the prevailing attitude is that “mindfulness is secular in nature and open to those of any religious denomination or none[,] is more of a philosophy or science than a religion,”<sup>67</sup> arguments to the contrary—for example, about the potential pitfalls of divorcing mindfulness from Buddhist ethics—withstanding. In popular books on mindful eating, Buddhism and “Buddha” are often sprinkled in for flavor rather than constituting the main ingredient. What are the implications of taking Buddhist teachings out of their cultural and doctrinal contexts and reinterpreting them for commodifiable ends?<sup>68</sup> Considering this phenomenon through the lens of cultural and religious appropriation raises important ethical considerations around privilege and representation that are hidden by the success narrative promoted by the literature on mindful eating.<sup>69</sup>

Popular books and scientific articles may seem to dominate the discourse on mindful eating, but we must not forget that they are not the only voices in the contested territory of mindful eating. It is a territory ripe for creative interpretations, if one knows where to look. Fifteen years before *Savor*, Thich Nhat Hanh offered another perspective on

mindful eating in *Living Buddha, Living Christ*.<sup>70</sup> He wrote of mindful eating as a practice of gratitude, of Holy Communion as a profound expression of mindfulness, ascribing deep interreligious meaning to the act of mindful eating. Popular books on mindful eating tout its merits, piggybacking on scientific literature that is quick to assert that the “application of mindfulness-based interventions to the treatment of eating disorders remains a promising approach worthy of further research,”<sup>71</sup> and is just as certain not to advertise the fact that there “is a small body of evidence for the efficacy of Mindfulness in Eating Disorders, but trial quality has been very variable and sample sizes have been small.”<sup>72</sup> Gilpin reminds us that clinical interventions tend “to slant mindfulness as a kind of unique panacea offering.”<sup>73</sup> To check this hubris, de Zoysa reminds us that “in Buddhist psychology, the mere absence of enlightenment makes anyone similar to a mentally ill person”<sup>74</sup>—in which case we all need mindfulness, and around a whole lot more than just eating. Stepping outside the spheres of popular and scientific literature affords us many other possibilities for understanding mindful eating. Perhaps it is wisest to assume that no single agenda for mindful eating can fit everyone, everywhere.

#### NOTES

1. “A Conversation with Thich Nhat Hanh about *Savor*,” Oprah.com, accessed February 1, 2012, <http://www.oprah.com/spirit/A-Conversation-with-Thich-Nhat-Hanh-About-Savor>.
2. In this article, “popular” books/literature is not a commentary on the popularity level of these writings but an indication of the general audience to whom these books are marketed, in contrast to the narrower audience of the scientific literature.
3. “Neither the countless fad diets, nor the annual spending of \$50 billion on weight loss helps us feel better or lose weight.” See Thich Nhat Hanh and Lilian Cheung, *Savor: Mindful Eating, Mindful Life* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010), book jacket.
4. One clinical psychologist has noted “an explosion of interest in Buddhist philosophy, psychology and practices among psychologists within the past few years” (G. Rita. Dudley-Grant, “Buddhism, Psychology, and Addiction Theory in Psychotherapy,” in *Psychology and Buddhism: From Individual to Global Community*, ed. Kathleen H. Dockett, G. Rita Dudley-Grant, and C. Peter Bankart [New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2002], 105).
5. Kelly McGonigal, “Learn: How Mindfulness Supports Weight Loss,” accessed

February 1, 2012, <http://kellymcgonigal.com/2011/10/21/how-mindfulness-supports-weight-loss>.

6. A casual search in August 2013 yielded a couple dozen more results published in 2012 and 2013.

7. I found this information in these authors' books as well as their personal websites.

8. Ronna Kabatnick, *The Zen of Eating: Ancient Answers to Modern Weight Problems* (New York: Pengee, 1998).

9. Donald Altman, *Art of the Inner Meal; Eating as a Spiritual Path* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1999). Both Altman and Kabatnick serve on the board of directors of The Center for Mindful Eating.

10. For example: "A noble person is mindful and thankful for the favors he receives from others" (Susan Albers, *Eating Mindfully: How to End Mindless Eating and Enjoy a Balanced Relationship with Food* [Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2003], xv).

11. Jan Chozen Bays, *Mindful Eating: A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2009), xiii.

12. Bays claims that "at the heart of Zen, and the Buddhist tradition, is the practice of mindfulness" (Bays, *Mindful Eating*, 1). The implication that there is a single "Buddhist tradition" is problematic given the vast diversity of Buddhist traditions. Furthermore, the claim that mindfulness is "the heart" of Buddhism is debatable: what about refuge in the triple gems, liberation, or ethics?

13. Susan Albers, "Using Mindful Eating to Treat Food Restriction: A Case Study," *Eating Disorders* 19, no. 1 (2010): 97–107.

14. Albers, *Eating Mindfully*, 18.

15. Scholars continue to debate the dates of the historical Buddha, with some placing his lifetime in the fifth century BCE.

16. Sasha T. Loring, *Eating with Fierce Kindness: A Mindful and Compassionate Guide to Losing Weight* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2010), 49.

17. I.e., *mettā*, a Pāli word cognate with the Sanskrit *maitrī*.

18. Loring, *Eating with Fierce Kindness*, 10.

19. Daniel Burke, "Buddhists Say You Aren't What You Eat, but How," Religious News Service, accessed February 1, 2012, [http://www.religionnews.com/index.php?/rnstext/buddhists\\_say\\_you\\_arent\\_what\\_you\\_eat\\_but\\_how1](http://www.religionnews.com/index.php?/rnstext/buddhists_say_you_arent_what_you_eat_but_how1) (article no longer available).

20. To quote another example: Albers invokes Christian terminology in the chapter subheading title "Mindful Eating: Keep Body and Soul Together."



Traditionally, Buddhist philosophy does not support the notion of a soul or any form of a fixed, permanent self. See Susan Albers, *Eat, Drink, and Be Mindful: How to End Your Struggle with Mindless Eating* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2009), 84.

21. Jane Goodall, Gary McAvoy, and Gail Hudson, *Harvest for Hope: A Guide to Mindful Eating* (New York: Warner Books, 2005).

22. Susan Albers, *Mindful Eating 101: A Guide to Healthy Eating in College and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 10.

23. Jeanie Seward-Magee, *A Mindful Diet: Four Weeks to Eating Awareness* (Bloomington, IN: Trafford Publishing, 2009).

24. Nhat Hanh and Cheung, *Savor*, 4.

25. Albers, *Eating Mindfully*, 19.

26. Bays, *Mindful Eating*, 5.

27. Lorrie Jones and Kelly Lenihan, *21 Days of Eating Mindfully: Your Guide to a Healthy Relationship with Yourself and Food* (Lakewood, WA: Simple Serenity LLC, 2011).

28. Burke, "Buddhists Say You Aren't What You Eat, but How."

29. Leah DeSole, "Introduction: Special Issue: Eating Disorders and Mindfulness," *Eating Disorders* 19, no. 1 (2010): 1.

30. As one article puts it: "Beside [*sic*] the Buddha, mindful eating also draws lessons and inspiration from Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program, which introduced the masses—and the medical establishment—to a secularized form of meditation in 1979" (Burke, "Buddhists Say You Aren't What You Eat, but How").

31. Albers, "Using Mindful Eating to Treat Food Restriction," 97.

32. Ruth A. Baer, Sarah Fischer, and Debra B. Huss, "Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy Applied to Binge Eating: A Case Study," *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 12 (2005): 351.

33. Ruth A. Baer, "Mindfulness Training as a Clinical Intervention: A Conceptual and Empirical Review," *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 10, no. 2 (2003): 125.

34. Jean Kristeller and Ruth Q. Wolever, "Mindfulness-Based Eating Awareness Training for Treating Binge Eating Disorder: The Conceptual Foundation," *Eating Disorders* 19, no. 1 (2010): 51.

35. To quote another example: a study that modified the standard MBSR format as an intervention for binge eating concluded, "a 'middle way' might be important for assessing the feasibility of using modified mindfulness interventions for addressing binge-type eating in overweight and obese

individuals,” yet makes no mention of the Buddhist doctrine of the Middle Way (Bruce W. Smith et al., “A Study on the Effects of a Modified Mindfulness Intervention on Binge Eating,” *Complementary Health Practice Review* 11, no. 3 [2006], 135).

36. S. Kelly Avants, Mark Beitel, and Arthur Margolin, “Making the Shift from ‘Addict Self’ to ‘Spiritual Self’: Results from a Stage I Study of Spiritual Self-Schema (3-S) Therapy for the Treatment of Addiction and HIV Risk Behavior,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 8, no. 3 (2005): 175–176.

37. *Ibid.*, 167.

38. Mark Beitel et al., “Reflections by Inner-City Drug Users on a Buddhist-Based Spirituality-Focused Therapy: A Qualitative Study,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 77, no. 1 (2007): 3.

39. Phan Y. Hong et al., “The Positive Impact of Mindful Eating on Expectations of Food Liking,” *Mindfulness* 2 (2011): 105.

40. Albers, “Using Mindful Eating to Treat Food Restriction,” 105.

41. “Mindful Eating: An Interview with Dr. David Engstrom,” *Bariatric Nursing and Surgical Patient Care* 2, no. 4 (2007): 242.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Julie A. Gast and Steven R. Hawks, “Examining Intuitive Eating as a Weight Loss Program,” *Healthy Weight Journal* (May/June 2000): 42.

44. *Ibid.*

45. I found one tentative suggestion that mindfulness training might not be appropriate for underweight patients with severe eating disorders for whom “attending fully to present moment experience can potentially be emotionally aversive and overwhelming” (Adhip Rawal et al., “A Mindful Approach to Eating Disorders,” *Healthcare Counselling and Psychotherapy Journal* 9, no. 4 [2009]).

46. Rhonda M. Merwin et al., “Psychological Inflexibility and Symptom Expression in Anorexia Nervosa,” *Eating Disorders* 19, no. 1 (2010): 62–82.

47. Staci Wade, “Consumed by Consumption: A Mindfulness-Based Intervention for Binge Eating Disorder,” *School of Professional Psychology*, Paper 64 (2009): abstract.

48. *Ibid.*, 26.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Ven. Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary: A Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines* (Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, 2004), 7.

51. Savor offers a notable exception: the third chapter discusses the four

nutriments, asking us to evaluate not only the food in our diets but also the kinds of entertainment we consume, the desires that drive us, and the everyday thoughts, words, and actions that shape our consciousness.

52. Bhikku Ñāṇamoli, trans., *Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification* (Seattle: BPS Pariyatti Editions, 1991), 337.

53. *Ibid.*, 342.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Nhat Hanh and Cheung, *Savor*, 49–50.

56. Ñāṇamoli, *Visuddhimagga*, 341.

57. Kristeller and Wolever, “An Exploratory Study,” 59.

58. Mary Beth Janssen, *Pleasure Healing: Mindful Practices and Sacred Spa Rituals for Self-Nurturing* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2009).

59. Donald Altman, *Meal by Meal: 365 Daily Meditations for Finding Balance through Mindful Eating* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2004), 2.

60. Staci Wade, “Consumed by Consumption,” 8.

61. Piyanjali de Zoysa, “The Use of Buddhist Mindfulness Meditation in Psychotherapy: A Case Report from Sri Lanka,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 48, no. 5 (2011): 680.

62. Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization* (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 2003), 5.

63. Richard Gilpin, “The Use of Theravāda Buddhist Practices and Perspectives in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 9, no. 2 (2008): 235.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*, 243.

66. *Ibid.*, 238.

67. Sharon Hsu, Joel Grow, and G. Alan Marlatt, “Mindfulness and Addiction,” *Recent Developments in Alcoholism* 18, no. 2 (2008): 230.

68. Jeff Wilson defines Buddhist appropriators as “non-Buddhists who employ elements of Buddhism for their own purposes” (Jeff Wilson, “*Mizuko kuyō* in the Abortion Cultural Wars: The Rhetorical Appropriation of Japanese Buddhism by Non-Buddhist Americans,” *Religion* 39 (2009): 11–21.

69. The secularization and commodification of yoga in the West offers an intriguing parallel to the spread of mindfulness-based interventions. See, for example, Søren Askegaard and Giana M. Echkhart, “Glocal Yoga: Re-Appropriation in the Indian Consumptionscape,” *Marketing Theory* 12, no. 1 (2012): 45–60; and Allison Fish, “The Commodification and Exchange of

Knowledge in the Case of Transnational Commercial Yoga,” *International Journal of Cultural Property* 13 (2006): 189–206. Though outside the scope of this essay, the complex literature on the topic of appropriating Buddhism and other Eastern/Asian religions/spiritualities provides much worth ruminating over. For an eclectic collection of diverse viewpoints on this topic, see Franya Berkman, “Appropriating Universality: The Coltranes and 1960s Spirituality,” *American Studies* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 41–62; Baris Büyükotutan, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Appropriation: Buddhism, the Vietnam War, and the Field of U.S. Poetry,” *American Sociological Review* 76, no. 4 (2011): 620–639; La Seng Dingrin, “Is Buddhism Indispensable in the Cross-Cultural Appropriation of Christianity in Burma?” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 29 (2009): 3–22; Catherine Garrett, “Transcendental Meditation, Reiki and Yoga: Suffering, Ritual and Self-Transformation,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 16, no. 3 (2001): 329–342; Pamela E. Klassen, “Ritual Appropriation and Appropriate Ritual: Christian Healing and Adaptations of Asian Religions,” *History and Anthropology* 16, no. 3 (2005): 377–391; and Michael York, “New Age Commodification and Appropriation of Spirituality,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 16, no. 3 (2001): 361–372.

70. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995).

71. Rocío Guardiola Wanden-Berghe, Javier Sanz-Valero, and Carmina Wanden-Berghe, “The Application of Mindfulness to Eating Disorders Treatment: A Systematic Review,” *Eating Disorders* 19, no. 1 (2010): 34–35.

72. *Ibid.*, 47.

73. Gilpin, “The Use of Theravāda Buddhist Practices and Perspectives,” 240.

74. de Zoysa, “The Use of Buddhist Mindfulness Meditation in Psychotherapy,” 678.