

Searching for Integrity: The Politics of Mindfulness in the Digital Economy

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With the proliferation of training courses espousing the benefits of yoga and meditation, [critics](#) have coined the term “McMindfulness” to describe a cottage industry whose profit motives appear to contradict the ethical foundations of the practices it appropriates. From a [Buddhist standpoint](#), mindfulness is not a mere stress-reduction technique: it is a “distinct quality of attention” with transformative social potential. Paradoxically, mindfulness programs are commonplace in companies that depend on advertising – an industry that manipulates attention to enhance revenues, often at the expense of economic justice. Digital technologies enable more efficient techniques, and experts even [encourage](#) marketers to “design for interruption.” Facebook, iPhones, and Google Glass exemplify such strategies. As Nicholas Carr argues, “Google is, quite literally, in the business of distraction.”¹

The paradox of corporate mindfulness is an outgrowth of the process of externalization in market capitalism. Silicon Valley companies create “integrity bubbles” that allow employees to reap the benefits of mindfulness while externalizing the problems of fragmentation and distraction. The resolution of this tension would mean the reconfiguration of the digital economy as we know it, in the spirit of what Jaron Lanier [calls](#) “a new digital humanism.” This goal requires a more holistic approach to the politics of mindfulness that examines both personal and civic mindfulness, the latter of which includes a contemplative approach to critical media studies and the revitalization of journalism as a public good.

The Mindfulness Bandwagon

Chade-Meng Tan spent [eight years](#) as a systems designer at Google before developing the company’s Search Inside Yourself leadership training program. With a book of the same title, the Search Inside Yourself brand of business-friendly mindfulness has garnered [praise](#) from employees and even the Dalai Lama himself.² Now “semi-retired,” Tan fills the role of jocular corporate guru. Describing his current role at Google, Tan [says](#), “A good analogy is

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Yoda, the old man who mostly says wise things, is ungrammatical, and shows you how to use the force.” The comparison is not without complications: the famous Star Wars character appeared on-screen in 1980 as an exile in the swampy caves of a lonely planet, subsisting on a goop that his young apprentice, Luke Skywalker, could barely tolerate. By contrast, as the *New York Times* [notes](#), Mr. Tan “became rich – albeit not nearly as rich as the founders – after Google went public in 2004.” And unlike the young Luke, while reaping the benefits of Tan’s in-house training, employees enjoy the benefit of free lunches in the Googleplex cafeteria.

For Tan and many other corporate leaders, mindfulness and profit go [hand-in-hand](#). One does not have to “pick between being moral and successful,” [Tan explains](#), because “compassion is so pure I don’t think there is any way to taint it.” In fact, Tan geared his programs to “the rich, corporate world” as part of a strategy for achieving [world peace](#). “If I can turn the most powerful part of the world into a land of wisdom and compassion,” he [argues](#), “it’s going to change the rest of the world.” Others take a similar approach. In 2013, The World Community for Christian Meditation [worked with](#) the Georgetown McDonough School of Business to introduce meditation to MBA students, on the premise that meditation “enhances the professional effectiveness of leaders and also how it helps develop an ethical culture in finance and business.”

While a rejuvenation of business ethics would be welcome news, the story of the multinational agribusiness corporation Monsanto – known for its controversial development of genetically modified crops and insecticides like Agent Orange – offers little hope. During his stint as CEO, Bob Shapiro [began meditating](#) and set up in-office meditation rooms. But, as Monsanto forged ahead with corporate expansion and deregulatory policy lobbying, *The Nation* accused Monsanto of “playing God” through bioengineering. Concerns have persisted, and in 2013, protesters [marched](#) worldwide, decrying the company’s negligence toward public health and its abuse of patent rights.

Scholars likewise chastise Google for the way its faith in the beneficence of software engineering encourages “hubris,” from its [deliberate](#) thwarting of iPhone privacy settings to its [obstruction](#) of the FCC’s investigation of Street View.³ Apple and Facebook, both of which also promote mindfulness programs, have faced charges of [tax avoidance](#) and [deception](#) in user privacy practices. This paradox of “corporate mindfulness” is further compounded by the fact that these companies’ products have ushered in an era of compulsive distraction. William Powers suggests that the public’s interest in yoga and meditation is a

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direct measure of frustration with digital devices.⁴ Thomas Metzinger calls for mindfulness programs in public schools – including relaxation and dream recall techniques – to protect against the cognitive threats of mass advertising and digital distraction.⁵

Tan and Metzinger may be waging a zero-sum battle, since each approach fails to harness contemplative practices in ways that challenge the institutional structure of the digital economy. Even if public programs help individuals cope, the interests of corporations and citizens are still at odds. A sustainable solution requires an understanding of the politics of mindfulness, and a strategy for harnessing the transformative power of contemplative practice to enhance – rather than undermine – the integrity of democratic culture.

Greasing the Corporate Wheels

Corporate mindfulness programs assume that global-economic problems may be solved by infusing an ethical sensibility at the top while leaving the structures of corporate capital intact. Insiders emphasize the efficacy of meditation in curbing the stress that pervades corporate life. The *Wall Street Journal* notes that “companies lose an estimated \$300 billion annually to lowered productivity, absenteeism, health care and related costs stemming from stress.” Paraphrasing one Google engineer, the *New York Times* describes mindfulness programs as “sort of an organizational WD-40, a necessary lubricant between driven, ambitious employees and Google’s demanding corporate culture.” However, if such programs grease the wheels of corporate capital, they are ill-equipped to address problems of structural inequality. In some cases, the employees who benefit from these programs are not those climbing the ladder, but those forced out through layoffs. This scenario unfolded at a session of Janice Marturano’s Mindful Leadership program at General Mills. “General Mills had recently announced its first round of mass layoffs in decades,” the *Financial Times* reports, and the session began with “some tears.” Some attendees “were having to fire members of their team, while others were losing their jobs.” Marturano reportedly betrayed no sense of being “troubled by any apparent contradiction around using compassion to breed better capitalists.” While she and other program leaders draw from Buddhist or Hindu practices, the end product is typically “stripped of its religiosity.” Even Meng Tan, one of the few program leaders who identifies as Buddhist, insists that “everything can be completely secular” since “there is no religion associated with bringing attention to the breath.” For her part, Marturano insists that she is “very careful to retain the integrity of mindfulness itself.”

Scholars do raise concerns, however, about the integrity of traditional practices in the face of market pressures. Carrette and King argue that yoga's popularity in the West is premised on its absorption into psychological paradigms in which the practice is "secularized, de-traditionalized and oriented exclusively towards the individual," becoming merely "a physical bodily regime and mood-enhancer/stress-reliever."⁶ The business world "exploits the transformative power of traditional 'spiritual disciplines' by reorienting their fundamental goals. Instead of the more traditional emphasis upon self-sacrifice, the disciplining of desire and a recognition of community, we find productivity, work-efficiency and the accumulation of profit put forward as the new goals."⁷

Irony Wins, Integrity Fails

The ironic effects of this reorientation are especially salient in the case of tech companies that embrace mindfulness programs while developing products and services that inhibit users' ability to sustain attention – the essence of mindfulness. In fact, the Pew Research Center [reports](#), "Many of the nation's busiest workers attribute increases in stress levels to the information and communication technologies in their lives." Examples of this irony abound. Citing Google's meditation rooms, one *Forbes* [article](#) tells readers that meditation can help their career. But, in advising readers to "disconnect yourself from your phone, computer, and everything else that could possibly disrupt you," the same article links to an [essay](#) titled "Back to the Books: How Google Hurts Our Research Skills." Indeed, critics like Nicholas Carr argue that Google Book Search is a "library of snippets" that sacrifices "a deep, personally constructed understanding of the text's connotations."⁸ Citing brain research on Google users, Carr argues that Internet use redirects cognitive energy toward navigational choices, making "deep reading and other acts of sustained concentration" more difficult.⁹ However, those choices provide valuable user data that increase ad revenue – some of which, presumably, pays for the meditation rooms in the Googleplex.

Digital distraction intrudes even into the mindfulness sessions offered to tech employees. Alice Van Ness, who taught yoga to Facebook employees, was fired for refusing to allow employees to use their phone during class. As the *San Francisco Gate* [notes](#), "The incident highlights a growing tension in health studios, where students come to leave the world behind but often find themselves incapable of not checking their text messages, e-mails and – of course – Facebook." Indeed, one of out of five cell phone owners [say](#) their phone

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makes it “at least somewhat harder” to “focus on a single task without being distracted.” Many yoga studios now post notices asking students to leave their phones outside.

This is a striking turn of events, considering that Steve Jobs – himself a Buddhist practitioner – regarded computers not as traps for attention but “bicycles for the mind.” Of course, Jobs embodied similar contradictions. Steve Silberman [highlights](#) “the core tenet of Buddhism that Jobs seems to have bypassed: the importance of treating everyone around you, even perceived enemies, with basic respect and lovingkindness.” Referencing [labor conditions](#) at Apple’s Chinese factories, Silberman suggests that “a more skillful practitioner” might have “found ways of manufacturing products that didn’t cause so much suffering for impoverished workers in other countries.”

Religious history is riddled with such contradictions. In *Zen at War*, Brian Victoria chronicles the complicity of Zen leaders with Japanese militarism, chastising apologists for positing an ahistorical view that ignores “Buddhism’s traditional role as ‘protector’ of the nation and its rulers.”¹⁰ Current campaigns to protect yoga from secularization are also politically fraught. Through its [Take Back Yoga](#) campaign, the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) insists that “Yoga is an essential part of Hindu philosophy and the two cannot be delinked, despite efforts to do so.” Yet, Roman Palitsky [condemns](#) the HAF’s rhetoric as historically inaccurate and complicit with Hindu nationalism, rejecting the “Orientalist construction of what yoga ought to be” as “nary more than fantasy.”

The pursuit of integrity in one’s practice, however, is not inherently an act of self-deception. Rather, it is a pursuit that must be conducted ethically – that is, with integrity. This means avoiding nostalgic fantasies of a pristine past, as well as instrumental appropriations in service of one’s self-interest; engaging reflectively with the philosophy and history of one’s practice, following even the insights that challenge the status quo; and asking how a practice might enhance cultural values like democracy, equality, and justice. The integrity of practice is a historically and socially situated inquiry, and therefore never fully resolved. This does not, however, render it meaningless.

Tiny (Moral) Bubbles

We can nevertheless evaluate the integrity of practice by the extent to which it enables the achievement of integrity in personal, organizational, national, and transnational contexts, where integrity is understood as “an overall organizational framework that unites separate goal strivings into a coherent structure.”¹¹ By this measure, corporate mindfulness programs

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fall short. The ironies described above persist because tech companies create glimpses of integrity – enough to enhance employee satisfaction and brand image – even as they undermine the achievement of integrity in broader contexts. We know that online personalization can create “filter bubbles” that reinforce partisanship at the expense of dialogue.¹² In a similar way, tech companies prosper by creating *integrity bubbles* – limited contexts of work and family life in which a small but satisfied group enjoys an experience of harmony unavailable to others.

Executives claim, for example, that they do not need to “balance” work and home life because they have managed to “blend” them into a coherent whole – a process that one executive [describes](#) as “simple.” For most workers, however, that sense of integrity is not so easy. In fact, employees in high-stress, high-salary jobs are more likely to [report](#) difficulty in integrating work and family life. Companies like Google and Facebook are among the [most highly rated](#) in terms of employee satisfaction, but the bubbles of integrity achieved in Silicon Valley are bounded and incomplete. More than personal satisfaction, integrity means sensitivity to the needs of the whole and justice in treatment of others – including sincere dialogue, not just solidarity with one’s tribe.¹³ Along these lines, [Facebook](#) and [Google](#) have each faced backlash from users objecting to ill-treatment.

More than this, we might understand integrity as a state of being in which “no part of the self is split off in the unconscious so that it is inaccessible.”¹⁴ In this sense, the achievement of integrity on a broad scale appears incompatible with the dynamics of market capitalism, which concentrates wealth and power into relatively few hands while externalizing risk. Risk externalization is the [hallmark](#) of tech companies, who protect themselves legally and financially by placing the burden of responsibility – e.g., for copyright violations in YouTube content – on the shoulders of users. Silicon Valley incubates fun and mindfulness but externalizes the problems of fragmentation and distraction, treating users and foreign workers as expendable – a means to an end.

Executives often begin as wide-eyed idealists. Google’s executives initially rejected the idea that advertising would support their search engine. But, as Bob McChesney argues, over time the logic of capitalism “has whipped them into shape. Any qualms about privacy, commercialism, avoiding taxes, or paying low wages to Third World factory workers were quickly forgotten.”¹⁵ Capitalists are small in number and appear to be carefree. To look at Steve Jobs and the “hacky-sack playing CEOs at Google and Facebook...it seems they have not a care in the world, but you can be sure that somewhere their capital is being ruthlessly

managed to maximize return. These rich kids give a cut of the action to someone else who manages the money so they can enjoy the privileges of being fabulously wealthy. But their capital is at war to grow or it faces death.”¹⁶

Recent revelations about cooperation between tech companies and the National Security Agency (NSA) demonstrate that the wars for capital growth and military dominance are intertwined. Sympathetic portrayals [suggest](#) that tech companies face an impossible dilemma, pressured by secretive agencies against their will. But, the pretense of distaste for government surveillance obscures a more congenial arrangement. Companies have data the federal government wants; government agencies are positioned to pass industry-friendly policies. “The rational course for these firms,” McChesney suggests, “is to cooperate with the national security state. Any other course of action would threaten their profitability. It’s a no-brainer.”¹⁷

Furthermore, Google’s rhetoric about transparency is premised on the assumption, for citizens and government agencies alike, that resistance to disclosure is an admission of guilt. As *Salon*’s Natasha Lennard [explains](#), this notion of transparency is “underpinned by an immense privilege” since those who boast of having nothing to hide rarely identify as racial, political, or sexual minorities. “That which *can* be transparent, without fear of persecution, will always be co-extensive with that which poses no real threat to the current socio-politico-economic status quo,” Lennard argues. Once again, this dynamic harnesses the benefits of disclosure for corporations and the state, while externalizing its risks. Yet, it is the assumption of responsibility – not the externalization of risk – that is the hallmark of integrity.

Will The Real Yoda Please Stand Up?

Systemic issues cannot be addressed through stress-reduction programs that assume the beneficence of unregulated markets. Enhancing system integrity requires breaking from the system itself. Not surprisingly, big data skeptics have praised Edward Snowden for demonstrating an ethical sensibility often lacking in tech and government leaders. Snowden himself [invokes](#) the rhetoric of personal integrity, suggesting that he searched inside himself, so to speak, before taking drastic action – leaving the bubble of self-described “paradise” for the sake of the public interest. The goal of such whistleblowing efforts, furthermore, is to promote mindfulness as a civic virtue, by subjecting data collection programs to careful evaluation by legislators and the general public. As Peter Ludlow [explains](#), whistleblowers

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are “defending us from epistemic attack” by helping to “lift the hood that is periodically pulled over our eyes to blind us from the truth.”

On the weekend the surveillance leaks emerged, Meng Tan [tweeted](#) cheerfully, “Yes, I’m in the movie *Internship*,” and announced that the Chinese edition of *Search Inside Yourself* had launched. Meanwhile, Snowden moved to an undisclosed location in Hong Kong. His passport was later revoked, forcing him to remain in limbo in the transit area of a Moscow airport while petitioning for asylum. Though Tan compares his wit and wisdom to that of Yoda, it seems that Snowden’s fate more closely resembles that of the famed Star Wars character: the latter, realizing the odds against defeating the Empire, went into hiding in the dank caves of the planet Dagobah where he trained the young Luke Skywalker. Indeed, supporters like Daniel Ellsberg [speak of Snowden](#) as a sort of Jedi hacker in exile, voicing hope that Snowden will inspire “comparable civil courage” in others.

Civic Mindfulness

While history could surely use more Ellsbergs, a transformation of the digital economy will involve more than a viral outbreak of personal integrity among industry insiders. A holistic approach to the politics of mindfulness must include both individual and institutional analysis. Strong institutional structures tend to bend contemplative practice to their own ends rather than bending themselves toward a practice. Individuals may experience a limited sense of having integrated work and personal life even as macro-level tensions, such as class inequality, increase. In corporate and activist contexts alike, mindfulness that is too limited in scope (“wrong mindfulness,” or *miccha sati*) will fail to address – and may even enable – institutional blindness. While everyday mindfulness addresses personal stress, civic mindfulness addresses stress in the body politic, including abuses of power and breaches of the public trust.

In *Search Inside Yourself*, Tan suggests that “the way to create the conditions for world peace is to create a mindfulness-based emotional intelligence curriculum, perfect it within Google, and then give it away as one of Google’s gifts to the world.”¹⁸ The book frames Tan, and Google itself, as beneficent social actors. But, Tan’s discussion lacks any substantive engagement with questions of regulation, policy, oversight, and consumer and labor rights. His narrative extends the naïve hubris that Siva Vaidhyanathan identifies as the logical consequence of Google’s techno-centric ideology (i.e., good software engineering equals good behavior).¹⁹

At its best, critical media scholarship tackles these issues head-on. Buddhist ethics can inform critical scholarship by providing principles by which to evaluate individual and institutional media practices: what job employees choose; what products or services a company produces; and how companies handle ethical dilemmas.²⁰ Furthermore, by integrating the fields of [contemplative studies](#) and [media ecology](#), scholars can harness the power of contemplative practice for the cause of media activism. By employing such practices as methodological tools, contemplative media studies can examine media as intellectual technologies, critiquing the impact of digital power structures on the formation of self-identity and the [perception of reality](#), while providing a moral compass for the development of “normative technologies” built upon values of justice, stewardship, and openness.²¹

As “the nation’s early warning system,” journalism has an even more crucial role to play in critical institutional analysis.²² The first task of journalism is to serve as a watchdog of both corporate and governmental power.²³ Unfortunately, coverage of corporate mindfulness, as well as the recent NSA leaks, falls short of this task. One typical *New York Times* [column](#) validates corporate mindfulness by citing experimental evidence that meditation increases empathy toward those within eyesight, ignoring how those who bear the brunt of complex systemic issues – for example, foreign workers – remain largely out of sight. With regard to surveillance, news coverage of Snowden’s personal story displaces substantive debate. Moreover, commercial journalism tends to align itself with government narratives – a problem exemplified by *Meet the Press* host David Gregory’s [suggestion](#) that Glenn Greenwald “aided and abetted” Snowden by publicizing the leaks in *The Guardian*. As a civic value, therefore, mindfulness depends on the cultivation of journalism as a public good rather than a mere commodity. In this sense, [media reform activism](#) is an important element of a holistic approach to the politics of mindfulness.

Tan’s final suggestion for readers is, “You don’t take action, action takes you” – a principle that socially engaged Buddhist leaders embody in their work.²⁴ The irony is that when action “takes” media scholars, activists, and journalists, the result may transform the digital economy in ways that Google’s executives neither anticipate nor desire. Politically engaged mindfulness sees beyond the pro-corporate, anti-regulatory “catechism” of capitalist ideology, imagining alternate media ecologies that enhance human flourishing.²⁵ Critical scholarship and journalism threaten the current regime of one-way transparency and [Kafkaesque](#) data aggregation that drives the behemoths of Silicon Valley, even as they encourage

others to “search inside themselves.” That threat is fitting since, as Carr [suggests](#), “a true search is as dangerous as it is essential. It’s about breaking the shackles of the self, not tightening them.” On the path to integrity, the tiny moral bubbles of Silicon Valley must burst.

Notes:

¹ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 157.

² Chade-Meng Tan, *Search Inside Yourself: The Unexpected Path to Achieving Success, Happiness (and World Peace)* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

³ With regard to hubris, see Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Worry)* (California: University of California Press, 2011), 76.

⁴ William Powers, *Hamlet's BlackBerry: A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 63.

⁵ Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 237.

⁶ Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 116-117.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸ Carr, 166.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁰ Brian Daizen Victoria, *Zen at War* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 233.

¹¹ Robert A. Emmons, *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns: Motivation and Spirituality in Personality* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999), 113.

¹² Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).

¹³ John Beebe, "The Place of Integrity in Spirituality," in *The Psychology of Mature Spirituality: Integrity, Wisdom, Transcendence*, ed. Polly Young-Eisendrath and Melvin E. Miller (Pennsylvania: Routledge, 2000), 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵ Robert McChesney, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 28.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁸ Tan, 235.

¹⁹ Vaidhyanathan, 76.

²⁰ Holly Stocking, "Buddhist Moral Ethics: Intend No Harm, Intend to Be of Benefit," in *The Handbook of Mass Media Ethics*, ed. Lee Wilkins and Clifford Christians (New York: Routledge, 2009), 291-304.

²¹ For a discussion of media as intellectual technologies see Carr, 44. Some forays into contemplative media studies include Tom Bruneau, "An Ecology of Natural Mindlessness: Solitude, Silence, and Transcendental Consciousness," *Explorations in Media Ecology* 10, no. 1-2 (2011): 55-73; and Robert H. Woods, Jr. and Kevin Healey, ed., *Prophetic Critique and Popular Media: Theoretical Foundations and Practical Applications* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013). For a discussion of normative technologies, see Clifford Christians, "A Theory of Normative Technology," in *Technological Transformation: Contextual and Conceptual Implications*, ed. E. F. Byrne and J. C. Pitts (Massachusetts: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989).

²² McChesney, 84.

²³ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁴ Tan, 241.

²⁵ McChesney, 23.