



The Contributions of Mindfulness Practice in a Secular Profession

A Review of

Effortless Mindfulness: Genuine Mental Health Through Awakened Presence

by Lisa Dale Miller

New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2014. 252 pp.

ISBN 978-0-415-63733-6 (paperback). \$39.95, paperback

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0037970>

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Mindfulness, as both a term and a practice, has become enormously popular over the past couple of decades. It seems as if announcements of new books or articles and fliers on mindfulness workshops appear in our mailboxes every day. In fact, during the past 10 years it has become so trendy that it risks becoming a cliché in mental health circles. As testimony to its popularity, “an NIH report found that Americans spent some \$4 billion on mindfulness-related alternative medicine in 2007” (Picker, 2014, p. 43). In this context, Lisa Dale Miller’s book *Effortless Mindfulness: Genuine Mental Health Through Awakened Presence* is an essential read for those seeking to separate mindfulness facts from mindless fictions and for all psychotherapists interested in using mindfulness techniques in practice.

Its meteoric rise in popularity has been accompanied by numerous misconceptions about what constitutes mindfulness and its practice. Among any number of professional mental health groups, mindfulness has become synonymous with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). One might contend that the term and practice of mindfulness have been co-opted by CBT, thus furthering the popularity of both.

Many psychotherapists of various stripes are jumping on the mindfulness bandwagon while toting—if not brandishing—personal baggage containing their idiosyncratic mindfulness misconceptions. For many therapists, mindfulness has become just one more technique to be drawn upon when convenient or necessary, or when some other effective therapeutic strategy is lacking. Although there may be nothing inherently wrong with this approach, we suggest that this ill-considered use of mindfulness strategies has further contributed to the many misconceptions about mindfulness practice.

It is, in part, to offer a corrective to this unfortunate situation that Miller has written this book on effortless mindfulness. One of her main objectives in this volume is to return to and ground the use of mindfulness in its Buddhist roots. To this end she persistently reminds the reader that all this popular mindfulness business stems from a Buddhist psychology. As

Shonin, Van Gordon, and Griffiths (2014) have argued, there has been “a degree of confusion within the clinical and psychological literature relating to the appropriate usage of certain Buddhist terms and practices” (p. 133). Succinctly put, mindfulness is Buddhism, and Buddhism is a Buddhist psychology. At one point, Miller even describes the Buddha as the “first cognitive psychologist” (p. 8).

Historical Antecedents

Miller begins her volume with an extended discussion of the history of Buddhism and the Buddha’s life, returning to the source to explain the emergence of mindfulness practice. She then lays out the three distinguishing characteristics of human existence according to Buddhism: “*basic pain (dukkha-dukkha)*, *impermanence (anicca)*, and *not-self (anatta)*” (p. 5), emphasizing that an awareness of these attributes (especially *dukkha-dukkha*) and how each negatively affects the human struggle is essential if there is to be a radical transformation of the person.

Miller offers some wonderfully informative side excursions into the parallel universe of early Western psychology and its development, referencing the seminal contributions of Cullen, Freud, James, Jung, and others. She notes how some of their notions (e.g., the role of the unconscious, the technique of free association, and so on) are quite similar to concepts in Buddhism. It is helpful for the reader to be exposed to these parallels if for no other reason than to comprehend that many ostensibly modern notions in psychology have existed in other forms for millennia.

Perhaps an omission in her historical overview was not including the contributions of theorists such as Horney, Alexander, Fromm, and Bion—all of whom took a very special interest in Buddhism. Bion’s (1970/1984) exhortation to enter every therapy session without memory, desire, or understanding—and similarly his advice to begin every session as if one has never seen the patient before (Bion, 1967)—sounds remarkably like the call for *effortless mindfulness*.

After this instructive history section, Miller returns to her main project of rooting mindfulness in Buddhism. Her theme throughout is that the cornerstone of a Buddhist psychology is mindfulness, and mindfulness is a Buddhist practice. Her central notion of the salutary effects of *effortless mindfulness* or *spontaneous awakened presence* uses these terms interchangeably, referring to the ability to be in the moment, to be open to the perceptual field in a nonjudging manner, to be open to all experience in the eternal present moment, to be free from “all manner of self-conceptions, including our incessant negative, self-deprecating, anxious internal narratives” (p. 1). She declares these negative narratives to be “the source of mental and emotional suffering” (p. 1). Understanding these things, according to Miller, is the essential path to genuine mental health.

The Use of Mindfulness Exercises

Throughout *Effortless Mindfulness*, Miller offers a variety of meditations, mantras, and other exercises for clinicians to use on their own and with their clients. These exercises are not merely instructional; they are narrative and compassionate, helping the reader understand the practical applications of mindfulness. Rather than issuing a “how-to” manual for

mindfulness meditation, Miller walks the reader through the experience of meditating and addresses problems that may arise.

For example, the supposedly simple act of breathing, or the presumed understanding of the use of breath in the practice of mindfulness mediation, can be challenging for a client with profound anxiety, mild-to-severe trauma, or physical disability. Miller suggests “turn[ing] your awareness to receive the actual physical sensation of your body breathing, *not what you think breath is like*. . . . Breathing happens all over the body” (p. 81). Such thoughtful guidance throughout the book makes Miller’s particular style of teaching stand out among the many voices in mindfulness literature today.

Miller addresses the Buddhist conditions of human existence (pain, impermanence, and not-self) in the context of mindfulness practice and helps the reader understand and access a deeper, more philosophical level of practice than could be achieved simply through “the art of paying attention.” Furthermore, it should be noted that, generally, people don’t like paying attention. In a recent *Science* article, Wilson et al. revealed that, in studies, participants “preferred to administer electric shocks to themselves instead of being left alone with their thoughts” (Wilson et al., 2014, p. 75). So, anyone in the business of promoting meditation is arguably facing adversity from the start. However, Miller provides a comprehensive guide, replete with rich Buddhist history and poignant client success stories to win over the reader’s naturally skeptical mind.

One other noteworthy attribute of this book becomes apparent in these exercises. That is, there is a relational, intersubjective quality to them that enhances their effectiveness. We believe that this relational element fostered by Miller will serve to improve the quality of the therapeutic connection that develops between therapist and client. Moreover, these exercises, coupled with Miller’s warm, relational approach to therapy, appear to significantly deepen the therapeutic alliance—even as they bring the client ever closer to experiencing what she calls *effortless mindfulness*.

The Conundrum

Finally, we must address a conundrum that is inherent in this mindfulness phenomenon and its ever-increasing popularity. Can we offer a psychotherapeutic technique with religious underpinnings without running into ethical complications? If Buddhism is a religion (one of the five major religions of the world) and mindfulness, as declared by Miller, is a Buddhist psychology, then might it be said that psychotherapists who promote the use of mindfulness with their patients are offering a cure through the adoption of a religion and/or religious practices? Miller would emphatically answer “no” to this question. In fact, Miller has declared that, throughout her life, “practicing Buddhism has never included religiosity of any kind” (Miller, 2014, para. 1). Wallace and Shapiro (2006), in their thoughtful article on Buddhism and Western psychology, seemed to shy away from wrestling with this conundrum as well.

Nonetheless, it seems irresponsible not to ask: “Are we treating people with religious activities?” Our answer to this question is simply: “We don’t know.” However, not enough has been written on the subject, and we think that the question needs to be addressed by the field of psychology and by all mental health professionals who use mindfulness in their practices.

We suspect that it is precisely the religiosity problem—whether fully formulated as an ethical conundrum or not—that has led Western psychology, largely influenced by the American Psychological Association (APA) to separate the practice of mindfulness from its Buddhist roots. *Time* called the infiltration of mindfulness-sans-spirituality in today’s society “smart marketing” (Picker, 2014, p. 43). Even though the APA has done much over the past few years to promote the scientific exploration of spirituality and religion, it would be unlikely to support a particular religious path as the preferred approach to mental health.

So herein lies the rub. Miller is faced with the fact that Buddhism is a religion. Rather than address the nuances and implications of that fact, she declares it a nonissue. For the purposes of the book *Effortless Mindfulness*, Miller asks readers to think of the Buddha as a psychologist, not as a religious leader. Her case is compelling, but the problem remains. On one hand, according to Miller, we psychologists have inappropriately, or unskillfully, separated mindfulness from its Buddhist roots. On the other hand, must we, in a secular profession, continue to keep mindfulness separate from its roots, lest we run the risk of being perceived as hawking religious cures in our clinics and hospitals?

Thus, the separation of mindfulness from Buddhism up to this point has been a necessary, logical, and very understandable extension of what our profession has become—a secular discipline, philosophically unattached to any ecclesiastical associations. Miller’s enthusiastic move to reveal the origins of today’s evidence-based practice superstar is bold if not controversial. We hope that this book helps to prompt a much-needed and long-awaited conversation in the field of psychology.

An Exhortation to Further Exploration

Miller’s book is a delightful, educative read that turns psychologists’ attention to the often-overlooked theoretical underpinnings of our work, as well as a thought-provoking reminder to ponder the essential questions that are at the philosophical core of our practices. She offers the entire field of mental health an invaluable service.

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