Mindfulness has become its own field of scholarly studies, scientific research, and clinical practice (Brown, Creswell, & Ryan, 2015; Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013). The so-called “mindfulness movement” is in full swing nowadays, and both its proponents and detractors have become increasingly vocal, articulate, and polarized (Wilson, 2013). The mindfulness movement purports itself as secular, derived from Buddhism yet non-Buddhist; its Buddhist roots are increasingly unacknowledged or conveniently forgotten, a “mystifying” process criticized by some as “crypto-Buddhist mindfulness” (Wilson, 2013). The edited volume reviewed here fits within the current backlash against this process, with a call to reclaim the Buddhist foundations of mindfulness.

The “apparent watering-down of mindfulness”

Most everyone agrees that the contemporary mindfulness movement has done away with large components of the Buddhist tradition. What is being debated is whether some essential pieces were lost in this “apparent watering-down of mindfulness” (Preface, p. viii), and whether they need to be reintroduced.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, considered the founder of present-day mindfulness-based programs, is widely quoted as claiming that his method provides authentic training
in (Buddhist) mindfulness, distilled down to the “essence of the dharma” or “universal dharma” (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013). This position is shared by many of his followers and mindfulness teachers. Conversely, others have expressed concern that the secularization of Buddhist practices through the mindfulness movement has yielded a degenerate form of “Buddhism-lite,” a “McMindfulness,” which lacks essential ethical foundations and offers limited benefits compared to “authentic Buddhism” (Wilson, 2013).

This volume purports, in the editors’ words, to provide “a comprehensive overview of the Buddhist fundamentals of mindfulness” and to “discuss the relationship of mindfulness to core Buddhist practices and teachings” (Preface, p. ix). Its goal is to educate “academics, clinicians,” but also “Buddhist scholars, mindfulness and Buddhist teachers ... and practitioners,” under the premise that “the more they understand the Buddhist theory and principles that underlie the practice of mindfulness, the better positioned they will be to study, practice, and/or teach mindfulness effectively” (Preface, p. ix).

**Is there (and should there be) only one “mindfulness”?**

Considering how rich and broad the Buddhist literature is, and how many different interpretations of mindfulness it encompasses, this ambitious goal is a tall order. There is of course no such thing as a – singular – authentic Buddhist tradition, but instead many (living and extinct) Buddhist traditions, each with their own foundational texts, styles of practice, belief systems, ontologies, and, yes, definitions of mindfulness.

The editors of this volume, to their credit, have made an as yet unprecedented effort to showcase the diversity of perspectives on mindfulness within a single book. Contributing authors span quite a range of professions, credentials, and expertise, with varied and oftentimes multiple backgrounds as research psychologists, religious studies scholars, clinicians, or Buddhist monks. Interestingly, these authors do not overlap with those from other recently published works on related topics such as Williams & Kabat-Zinn (2013), Dale Miller (2014), and Brown et al. (2015), to name a few.

While bringing these diverse voices and opinions to the table is commendable, the resulting collection of essays unfortunately suffers from a certain lack of cohesion in approaching the question of what the Buddhist foundations of mindfulness are.
To anyone minimally familiar with the literature on mindfulness or Buddhism, it will come as no surprise that there is no agreement on what the term mindfulness refers to. Across the different essays in this volume, mindfulness is in turn: a technique, a skill, a process, a property of the mind, a psychological construct; inherently ethical or neutral; Buddhist, spiritual, secular; a form of (meditation) practice, a way of life; a social movement, a revolution, a paradigm shift; a trend, a lifestyle, a commodity; empty of inherent existence. Even the choice of the English work mindfulness to translate the Sanskrit word sati (or smrti in Pali, dran pa in Tibetan) is shown as debatable and historically biased, lacking the connotation of “remembering” or “recollecting” that is present in the original word (Chapter 6, pages 97-98).

**Shortcomings**

Unfortunately, in its attempt for a “comprehensive overview,” this volume disappoints.

First, as with most writings in the field of mindfulness psychology, this collection of essays is still largely biased towards Theravadan Buddhism, from which most of the “core Buddhist teachings” presented in Part I (Chapters 2 to 7) are taken. Only three chapters (Chapters 8, 9, and 12) address mindfulness from the perspective of Mahayana (Zen and Tibetan) Buddhism (with some additional mentions of Mahayana in a few other chapters) – even though Mahayana is the largest major tradition of Buddhism existing today. As much space is dedicated to several branches of modern Buddhism (Triratna Buddhist Order, Ordinary Mind Zen School, and Relational Buddhism, in Chapters 14, 15, and 16, respectively), although the choice of these three particular schools of thought (among many others) is never substantiated.

Second, some of the chapters come across as proselytizing, a tendency likely to backfire and detract from the purpose of educating mindfulness practitioners on Buddhism.

Third, each essay is largely independent of the others, with only very limited cross-referencing across chapters. With this lack of cohesion, and in the absence of a concluding chapter, the editors missed an opportunity to clarify and discuss points of concordance and dissonance across some of the Buddhist foundations of mindfulness.

**Mindfulness and Ethics**
Ethics are not directly addressed in typical mindfulness programs. This omission has led to criticism and concern that mindfulness taught in this way may be missing some essential aspects. In their traditional presentation, Buddhist teachings are embedded within a well-defined ethical framework founded on the principle of “non-harm.” Buddhist disciples are expected to cultivate specific virtues and to follow certain precepts for ethical conduct, the list of which varies across Buddhist traditions and across the categories of laypeople, monks, and nuns. For various reasons, an explicit ethical context has been conspicuously absent from most mindfulness programs. Instead, mindfulness teachers are supposed to “embody” ethical qualities in their own behavior, as well as to create an “ethical space” in their classes, but without giving teachings on ethics; in addition, mindfulness itself is typically presented as inherently good or “wholesome” and as automatically leading to ethical sensitivity, a proposal consistent with some Buddhist scriptures but not others (Chapter 6, page 93; and Chapter 10, page 183).

Most unfortunately, Chapter 6 by Steven Stanley – *Sila and Sati: An Exploration of Ethics and Mindfulness in Pali Buddhism* – entirely leaves out Mahayana Buddhism, even though this later branch of Buddhism is centrally concerned with questions of ethics and moral conduct. A Mahayana perspective is introduced by Karma Lekshe Tsomo in Chapter 8, *Mindfulness and the Six Perfections*, which lists six virtues (*paramitas*) to be cultivated as part of Buddhist practice; however, this chapter barely mentions mindfulness and makes no reference to modern, secular practices.

Several authors in this volume briefly suggest the need for more focus on the cultivation of ethics in mindfulness-based programs, without giving any specifics. However, considering that the lack of ethics has been one of the main criticisms of secular mindfulness, it is somewhat surprising that this topic was not further developed in this volume.

**Buddhism is relevant to mindfulness psychology**

On a more positive note, some individual chapters do stand out as particularly insightful and relevant to psychologists and clinicians interested in mindfulness.

In Chapter 3 (*Mindfulness and the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path*), Malcolm Huxter presents a very clear overview of the Eightfold Path with helpful comparisons to modern psychological concepts, including an articulation of the “four ennobling truths” from a cognitive behavioral therapy perspective.
In Chapter 10 (*Dharma and Distress: Buddhist Teachings that Support the Psychological Principles in a Mindfulness Program*), Lynette Monteiro provides some Buddhist perspectives – taken from both the Pali canon and Zen – on self-concept, emotional regulation, and the causes of stress (all general themes of mindfulness programs), but also on interpersonal contact, ethics, and community.

In Chapter 11 (*Encountering the Psychological Research Paradigm: How Buddhist Practice Has Fared in the Most Recent Phase of its Western Migration*), Kaisa Puhakka reviews the recent history of Buddhism moving to the West and encountering modernity – from the position that “yes, the teachings of the Buddha have been significantly compromised” (p. 217). While acknowledging the restrictions imposed on mindfulness programs for the purposes of clinical research and applications, she reminds us that these requirements “tend to limit research to beginning-level mindfulness practice” (p. 217) as they focus primarily on a “*psychological* level of inquiry,” in which “basic assumptions about the nature of self and world remain intact” (p. 228). Rather, mindfulness training is meant to bring about a shift to an “*ontological* level of inquiry,” in which “these very assumptions are being investigated” (p. 228).

These chapters nicely complement other recent writings on mindfulness-based psychotherapies informed by Buddhist theory and practice (Bazzano, 2014; Dale Miller, 2014).

**Recontextualization is needed**

In Chapter 11, Puhakka states, “If by essential Buddhism is meant that the teachings of Buddhism are not reducible to the forms of the culture within which its transmission takes place, then I affirm such a notion ... At the same time, I am aware that any articulation of what this essential Buddhism might be is necessarily context bound” (p. 222). She also writes,

I see the question of transmission as highly complex, potentially involving both distortion and dilution of the original teaching’s power and also refinement and enrichment. Which it is depends on how the cultural barriers in the transmission are navigated and this, in turn, depends on awareness of the cultural blinders that might operate on either or both sides of the barrier. By cultural blinders, I mean the often unconscious identifications people have with the worldviews, values, and customs of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds... Inevitably, these blinders were embedded in the language and style of expression of the historical Buddha’s own teachings. (pp. 221-222)
In this nuanced perspective, Puhakka does not decry the “watering-down” of mindfulness but points to the inevitability of a “context-bound” approach to teaching mindfulness. In contrast to some other authors in this volume who lament the loss of Buddhist authenticity in the modern process of secularization, Puhakka reminds us that Buddhist teachings were always embedded in a particular culture, and therefore that early texts must be understood in that context (which differed from ours) rather than ex nihilo. She also highlights the possibility that the original teachings may even undergo “refinement and enrichment” in contact with a new culture – as they have over the course of their migration across the Asian continent in the past, and as they, perhaps, will in their encounters with science, clinical psychology, and the diverse groups that exist within the Western world. In particular, mindfulness (as a field) will have to face challenges in contemporary societies such as issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious or spiritual identity, and social justice.

The ancient texts will not provide us with much guidance on how to navigate this recontextualization of mindfulness to our modern societies. Several chapters in this volume offer a few possible avenues. Other proposals have been made elsewhere, both for the mindfulness field (Bazzano, 2014; Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013) and for Buddhism (Batchelor, 2015).

Overall, this eclectic collection of essays makes for an uneven and less than accessible volume that will be in search of an audience. Other than a few high-quality contributions (reviewed above), most chapters follow a standard scholarly presentation of material written for experts in their respective fields; they do not translate very well beyond their respective contexts and offer little insight into modern-day challenges faced by the mindfulness movement. Readers may also be put off by proselytizing overtones at places. In sum, this volume was well intended but perhaps overly ambitious; a missed opportunity.

References

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