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15 Mindfulness and More: Spiritual Forms of Meditation

In recent decades, we've seen a shift, especially in the western world, from traditional religions to a myriad of spiritual practices. Along this spiritual smörgåsbord are all varieties of yoga, meditation, mudras and mantras, to Spiritualism and Spiritism, and everything in between. Some of these spiritual practices piggyback quasi-scientific claims and others maintain themselves as faith-based, beyond what can be explained and deemed rational. Some are composed of disperse informal adherents, committed in heart and mind though not on paper, and others incorporate, enlisting supporters to proselytise, furthering their expansion.

A mainstay at this table of plenty has been mindfulness, which has been picked up by many for a plethora of purposes, ranging from enhanced awareness to dulling pain from the capitalistic plunders in our suffering world. Indeed, efforts to address stress and suffering have spawned a \$4.5 trillion wellness economy (Global Wellness Institute, 2020). Contemplative practices have entered companies in the context of employee training programs, psycho-social interventions under the banner of self-development and stress management.

The most popular of these practices is mindfulness, which has been shown to improve well-being, productivity and other functional outcomes. While cultivating mindfulness brings benefits for individuals and society, other practices also merit consideration. So, mindfulness has become all the buzz, but what broader possibilities exist? How could alternative approaches also be beneficial for workplaces, for the workers within them, and society around them? Let's commence an attempt to answer these questions by explaining what mindfulness is.

Mindfulness, a Prominent Type of Spirituality

Mindfulness is variably defined, at the individual level, as actively noticing new things (Langer, 1990), purposefully paying attention to the present moment without making judgements (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013), and a state of consciousness or "receptive attention" to present experience (Good et al., 2016). Whereas Langer (1990), amiably referred to as the 'mother of mindfulness' and her proponents see mindfulness as a state that can be cultivated during daily life, Kabat-Zinn, known as the 'father of mindfulness' and his following view mindfulness as a practice to be regularly out in the form of meditation (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Alongside, mindfulness is also integrally viewed as a trait that can be built up in oneself through practice (Good et al., 2016) whether through meditation or other methods

such as yoga (Munir et al., 2021). In sum, mindfulness is considered as a state, a trait or a practice, and herein we focus on it primarily as a practice, alternately known as an intervention (Good et al., 2016), as our interest is in spiritual forms of meditation.

At the collective level, mindfulness is seen in regard to how various processes relate to each other to create organizational attention, such as group members acting in sync to surmount a crisis (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006), or as collective minding, a way of making sense of what is happening (Barry & Meisiek, 2010; Sutcliffe et al., 2016), or as collective wisdom (E. King & Badham, 2020). Particularly this latter grouping of a collective notion of mindfulness, collective wisdom, garners attention toward improving socio-economic conditions and political governance (ibid) such that mindfulness transforms not only individuals but also society, for the better.

While many mindfulness practitioners maintain that it is unrelated to spirituality, as does Kabat-Zinn (Purser, 2019), if a broad definition of spirituality is taken, then it would be included. Many prominent definitions of workplace spirituality include notions of an inner life, meaningful work, and sense of community (Neal, 2018, p. 9). Following this stream of thinking, spirituality does not necessarily involve a deity, which one could alternatively call creative force, divine being or another term, and thus extends from humanism to the esoteric. Turning then to how one spiritual practise, that of mindfulness meditation, can help humankind, we proceed to an overview of what benefits research has shown on individual and collective levels.

Benefits of Mindfulness to Individuals and Society

Most studies about meditation have been done about mindfulness, showing how it can boost well-being, creativity and other factors (see the meta-reviews of Eby et al., 2019; Good et al., 2016; Badham & King, 2019 of corporate mindfulness studies). Compared to studies of other forms of meditation, such as transcendental meditation, mindfulness studies have had a more robust research methodology, so have made more headway into top-tier academic journals.

Over eighty percent of the 67 published studies on mindfulness-based corporate training that Eby and colleagues (2019) included in their review had an aim of reducing stress and/or strain, and the remaining minority incorporate other health and well-being outcomes. Among well-being outcomes are experience of positive emotions and improved attention. Many of these studies were in clinical settings, though, more and more, researchers are venturing into other organisations to garner impacts of mindfulness both on individual and collective aspects, namely, enhanced engagement and performance alongside diminished levels of stress (ibid).

To attempt to summarise documented benefits of mindfulness is an ambitious feat, as Good et al. (2016) note that more than 4,000 scholarly articles on this subject had already appeared by the time of their analysis. Nevertheless, they managed to categorise these findings into how mindfulness influences attention, and thereby affects cognition, emotion, behaviour, and physiology. In terms of workplace outcomes, they find support amongst these plentiful publications for how mindfulness raises levels of performance, builds relationships, and augments well-being.

Mindfulness literature could be broadly grouped into four categories as per Badham and King's (2019) perspective, according to the extent of focus on the instrumental goals versus substantive purpose of mindfulness. These scholars contrast individual and collective mindfulness with wisdom on those two levels; thereby not merely placing positivistic research as being at opposite ends of the spectrum as critical research on mindfulness, building a middle-ground, of integral perspectives. Wisdom herein denotes ethical and philosophical dimensions as well as their applications in practice.

In the organisational context, mindfulness has also been explored as way for actors to make sense of events and to adapt accordingly toward forming the best possible outcomes (Barry & Meisiek, 2010; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006). They, and other researchers within the sense-making paradigm, have looked at how collective mindfulness enables teams to refine how they communicate and co-ordinate to solve dire situations. This research looks at mindfulness as a form of attention focus within organisations in regard to collaboration, and by doing so, adds a collective dimension to the otherwise individual-focused literature.

Mindfulness is perceived by many as a tool to improve oneself and society, though simply sitting in silence and watching one's thoughts as they roll by without grasping on. Undoubtedly, this modern tool does ease the suffering of many, plus brings purported benefits, to some extent. Until recently, mindfulness was largely unquestionably accepted as an ultimate solution to bolster well-being, unleash creativity, and solve all other woes of the world. While yes, it has merits in stress-reduction and can reap value in competitive corporate environments, prudence is needed to avoid aggrandised claims (van Dam et al., 2017) as the mindfulness movement surges on.

VanDam and colleagues (2017) put forth that mindfulness research has advanced tremendously since the advent of this concept around the 1970s, though there is still room for improvement in how studies are designed and carried out. They also caution that although mindfulness has desirable attributes in terms of well-being, stress reduction and other outcomes, for those who have post-traumatic stress disorder, depression or other risk factors caused by psychological conditions, care must be taken before and during meditation practice. When necessary, psychological support needs to be accessible to practitioners, to cope with painful memories that may arise, and understand what they are feeling as a result of mindfulness or other forms of meditation.

Mindfulness-Based Interventions at Work

In the context of organisations, spirituality has been limited essentially to applications of mindfulness. Numerous instructors lead mindfulness courses in corporations, either independently or as part of an organisation, such as the Potential Project and the Search Inside Yourself Institute that was launched by a former engineer of Google, that links mindfulness with emotional intelligence. For instance, the non-profit organisation Institute for Mindful Leadership provides various courses of corporate mindfulness, in high-profile companies including Proctor & Gamble and Target as well as the American Red Cross (LoRusso, 2020, p. 5). Many a multinational firm provide mindfulness meditation training to their employees, from Google to Nike to Apple, the list goes on.

The background and certifications of instructors vary, from having either the training to teach Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in the form that Kabat-Zinn (2003) designed (initially within a clinical setting and thereafter extended to non-medical contexts), or another completed accreditation; whereas other trainers teach based on an extension of their own personal contemplative practice. Corporate trainings take an array of forms and focuses, with one common standard being MBSR which runs weekly through a span of eight weeks plus a day retreat, however many other options of mindfulness training programs exist. Online versions continue to pop up too, further prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic, including that of mobile application Headspace.

Mindfulness training focuses on individuals, navel-gazing, intangibly tied to a remote utopian vision of saving society from its ills (Walsh, 2018). Acceptably secular and scientific, mindfulness moved from monasteries to medicine to the boardroom, toting benefits ranging from better control of one's emotions, to awakening creativity (Islam et al., 2017) and ameliorating psychological well-being (Badham & King, 2019; Eby et al., 2019).

This palatable practice, mindfulness, spans the sacred and the profane, thus is inevitably people-pleasing. That is, mindfulness is generally presented as a secular practice yet is thought to still extoll the virtues of the religion that once encompassed it. Further, whatever mindfulness was at its origins becomes molded to fit the desires of its consumer, to quell the stresses of modern life or optimise concentration and decision-making prowess.

Mindfulness is typically introduced into firms as an attempt to boost mental well-being, productivity and other functional outcomes (Islam et al., 2017; Karjalainen et al., 2019; LoRusso, 2020). Some implementations involve physical practices alongside mental aspects, such as yoga, which are postures and movements of Indian origin intertwined in a set of ethics and philosophy (Munir et al., 2021). These scholars describe a similar process of adaptation that has taken place for yoga as has been the case of mindfulness, to suit Western organisations.

Corporate mindfulness interventions are marketed as being capable of cultivating mindful awareness in participants (Eby et al., 2019; Reb et al., 2020). While mindful programs are mostly implemented in groups, the practise is predominantly individually-based (E. King & Badham, 2020). However, bridges to broader aims are appearing, such as Brummans, Hwang & Cheong (2013) who describe participants who thereafter lead others to adopt mindfulness, spreading the movement to assist others in overcoming burdens of stress and avoiding burnout. Proceeding to a next thought, the following section outlines possible additions and alternatives to corporate mindfulness within the span of spirituality.

Additional Spirituality-Based Interventions at Work

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted that our world continues to struggle with gross inequality, rampant injustice plus environmental challenges, pending possible disaster. Rather than aggravating these problems by propagating the status quo, with its neoliberal tendencies to enable privileged individuals to self-aggrandise and to hail economic growth at any cost, collective transformations are necessary to bring about a better world (Bell et al., 2020). Corporate mindfulness, at least in part, serves toward solving these grand challenges, through a changed mindset.

Yet, at least for the time being, the noble communal aims of spirituality are still largely at odds with capitalistic discourse (Karjalainen et al., 2019). While a multitude of spiritual perspectives have existed though the millennia, few visible inroads have been made as of yet into organisations other than mindfulness. For spirituality that is present at work, the original practices tend to be transformed to match the scientised, instrumentalised and commodified design that neoliberalism has imbued into organisational life (Heelas, 2009; Karjalainen et al., 2019).

Some practitioners seek to re-find and reclaim an original version of this contemplative practice, alternately based on Eastern mindfulness, right mindfulness or Engaged Buddhism (S. B. King, 2009), that has not been watered-down by the West. Such programs are sprouting up as social mindfulness, engaged mindfulness and with other terms, reflecting a return to the roots of ethically based, less capitalistically-constricted iterations of ancient religious traditions (see for example Walsh, 2018; Purser, 2019).

Unlike other forms of corporate mindfulness, these social forms keep the religious foundation intact, thus instructing about ethics and social aspects. In doing so, these interventions transcend individual-level focus to awaken collective-level change. Among these approaches are second-generation mindfulness programs, Buddhist-derived interventions that are overtly spiritual, combining meditative insight, ethical awareness, and wisdom insights and practices (E. King & Badham, 2020). These reintegrate a philosophical foundation, such as Patel and Holm (2018)

describe, in re-instating values of non-materialism, openness to change and connection with nature, fostering responsible and benevolent behaviours from mindful managers toward the betterment of society.

Such is the case for emergences of paranormal, esoteric and new age spiritualities at work, in that they undergo a process of transformation as they cross into the business realm (Heelas, 2009). Terminology is covertly changed to avoid taboos, such as for psychics, mediums and channelers, that Zaidman (2015) likens to business consultants. Advice is doled out by these spiritual consultants as to which stocks to buy, which people to hire and so on, all without necessarily mentioning a belief system or ethical code of conduct.

Plus, for these practices, those involved often prefer anonymity and secrecy, to avoid being judged as lacking credibility. Religious affiliations and even spiritual connotations are often stripped from these forms of practices upon entering the pretences and premises of organisations. Simultaneously, such ironically often lucrative and sought-after spiritual practises are often sidelined from being even spoken of to others at work, relegated to the personal sphere.

For the time being then, organisational forms of spirituality are restricted mostly to mindfulness, though alternatives are arising, that could unfold more vast and diverse benefits. Inevitably, these alternatives also undergo a conversion process, to a greater or lesser extent, to take shape in an organisationally-friendly format. Now that mindfulness has paved a pathway for spiritual practises to assume a place in mainstream society, we might well see the advent of new movements. Among these could be the meditation practise of attunement from Spiritualism, for instance, a religion based on a set of guiding philosophical principles (Kirsebom, 2012). This type of meditation, attunement, cultivates awareness of one's own energy in a similar way as mindfulness does, by calming and quieting the mind, and then proceeds to extend awareness to a connection with all beings.

Additional philosophies and practices might well also find their way to become more commonplace, and find entry points into corporate life as well. This possibility is in part thanks to the mindfulness movement, as it opened and widened this window to spirituality at work. As of yet, research on forms of spiritual practices other than mindfulness meditation is sparse, albeit a growing stream of literature.

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