

# Transcript

## Upstream Conversation

### “McMindfulness” with Ron Purser

**Della Duncan:** Thank you so much for joining Upstream, really excited to speak with you. I'm wondering if we can start with an introduction. Would you mind introducing yourself for our listeners?

**Ron Purser:** Sure. I'll give you the formal rundown, first. I'm a professor of management at San Francisco State University, and I've been teaching there about 24 years. And before that, I taught at Loyola University of Chicago for about seven years or so. I've been an academic in the field of management and organizational studies for about 30 years, which is a bit of an oxymoron or an inner conflict, because I'm really not pro-management or pro-corporations at all and quite critical of capitalism, neoliberalism, the whole sort of use of behavioral science techniques to manipulate employees. So I've always felt somewhat as a misfit in my field, but luckily my field is so open and accommodating that I was always able to camouflage myself in ways that allowed me to write in certain outlets that were more receptive to critical perspectives. And that goes from anything to challenging the greenwashing of corporate environmentalism to digital technologies and their impact on our sense of time. So, yeah, I'm fortunate in that regard to have had that freedom.

And then in parallel, a parallel track, maybe more of a vocational thread, is that I've been a student of Buddhism, different schools of Buddhism, going back to my mid 20s. So that's always been sort of in the background influencing my thinking and my writing. And it wasn't until maybe about seven or eight years ago that I came out of the Buddhist closet and actually explicitly started to call into question how contemporary mindfulness was being deployed in questionable contexts such as the U.S. military and corporations. So over a period of time that led to this book I just published actually a year ago.

**Della Duncan:** Yes, and that book is titled "McMindfulness" How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality." And thank you for sharing your own relationship to Buddhism. I think that's important to note. And just to be transparent for myself as well, I would consider myself “Buddhist” and actually studying to be a Dharma teacher in both

engaged Buddhism and also the Vipassana tradition. And yeah, really excited to talk about this. And I have to say for this book, I went back in my highlighted notes and I had 207 quotes highlighted, so I had to whittle them down.

**Ron Purser:** You're like me when I get into a book and it's like 75 percent of it is highlighted in yellow highlighter.

**Della Duncan:** Exactly. So I'll pepper some quotes throughout this interview, but I'd love to just start with what inspired you to write this book?

**Ron Purser:** I think a couple of threads came together, kind of a convergence. Like I mentioned, I've always been critical of management in capitalist enterprises going back to my graduate school days so I always had that lurking in the background. I guess the trigger was when I started to see how mindfulness was being used in Silicon Valley corporations — that got on my radar probably around 2010, 2011. But to be honest with you, the kind of Buddhist training I've had was not enough for personal or insight meditation, it was in other schools and so mindfulness was never really that central to what I was familiar with. So I decided I needed to learn more about Vipassana and Theravada forms of mindfulness meditation, insight meditation. So I took some classes with Shaila Catherine at the sangha she has done in Mountain View, California, the Insight Meditation South Bay, and I became familiar with the more traditional forms of Buddhist mindfulness as it's situated within the Theravada tradition. And when I started comparing that to what was in the mindfulness movement or in contemporary and clinical forms of mindfulness, I saw quite a divergence between their aims and purposes and the practices themselves. And then as I studied the way the media was portraying mindfulness as a technique, kind of as a do it yourself self-help stand-alone technique, kind of decontextualized from any sort of ethical and moral context, then I really took note of that. You know, starting in 2013, I wrote an essay with David Loy, who is one of the pioneers of socially engaged Buddhism called "Beyond McMindfulness," that came out in the Huffington Post and went viral unexpectedly. I had no idea it would cause such a stir. And, you know, at that time, I felt like a lonely voice in the wilderness. But as time went on, more and more people I started to link up with that, had similar critical perspectives and concerns on the mindfulness movement. And so that kind of inspired me.

As I looked at it, I was just kind of stunned by how what was a very countercultural, at least in northern California at one time with the beatniks and the hippies, and, you know, Zen was then was the hip thing back then and it was very countercultural and not really commercial. And so I was kind of stunned when it morphed quite rapidly into a \$1.5 billion industry. And that's why I said, well, that's quite a phenomena. I need to look into that. And that's what led me to write the book.

**Della Duncan:** Yes. And in the book you describe that the term mindfulness was actually coined by someone named Miles Neale, who's a Buddhist teacher and psychotherapist. And in it you have a quote from him that describes it as "a feeding frenzy of spiritual practices that provide immediate nutrition, but no long term sustenance." So maybe it's helpful to describe what do you. And Miles Neale, what do you mean by Mcmindfulness and what isn't McMindfulness?

**Ron Purser:** Yeah, McMindfulness. Obviously, it's kind of a derivative from McDonald's, which is a fast food, unhealthy establishment. So McMindfulness sort of symbolically is a meme that represents a quick fix for the anxieties of late capitalist society. And what I mean by it is the secular forms of mindfulness that are decoupled from any sort of moral or ethical context, commodified into a set of instrumental techniques which are deemed ethically neutral, which means they can then be deployed for any particular instrumental aim or goal. And so being kind of unmoored from any kind of vision of the social good, mindfulness is very easily commodified to the ethos of of market logic. So that's part of the issue, I think, with mindfulness.

But we'll get into this later in more depth, I'm sure. But these applications of mindfulness sort of emphasize placing the burden on individuals to accommodate and adapt to the status quo, which leads to a form of social myopia, because one is kind of overly self-concerned, self-absorbed, endlessly working on self-improvement, which creates sort of this massive blind spot towards the social, political and economic contexts which are generative of a lot of the stresses that we feel as individuals. And so that's part of the problem. It's sold on the marketplace now, like any other commodity, it's become a brand. It's become kind of a lifestyle, marketing kind of lifestyle. The media has kind of contributed to this problem that it's touted as a universal panacea or kind of an elixir for any sort of middle class, white, middle class, upper middle class need or anxiety. It's

kind of put in service of the ego, which is a bit ironic. It's all about me. I, me, and mine. Kind of "minefulness," M I N E, it probably should be called minefulness.

**Della Duncan:** So let's focus on this idea that mindfulness, in the second part of your book title, "How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality." So let's explore for a minute how mindfulness both supports and upholds capitalism and even furthers it. So here's a couple of quotes from your book: "What remains is a tool of self-discipline disguised as self-help. Instead of setting practitioners free, it helps them adjust to the very conditions that cause their problems. They may well be meditating, but it works like taking an aspirin for a headache. Once the pain goes away, it is business as usual. Mindfulness-based interventions fulfil this purpose by therapeutically optimizing individuals, making them mentally fit, attentive and resilient so they may keep functioning within the system. Such capitulation seems like the farthest thing from a revolution and more like a quietist surrender." Two more quotes: "Trickle-down mindfulness, like trickle down economics, is a cover for the maintenance of power," and one more: "Should we celebrate the fact that this perversion is helping people to auto exploit themselves?" So let's make this really visible, how does mindfulness uphold and even support capitalism? Let's make that clear.

**Ron Purser:** Right. Well, as I said, it's part of a long history. Mindfulness is just the latest technique on the scene, so to speak. It's the latest iteration of what we can call capitalist spiritualities. It really amounts to kind of a colonization of mindfulness, which produces a highly individualistic spirituality, perfectly accommodated to our dominant cultural values, which requires no substantial change in lifestyle whatsoever. So it's privatized, it's become a privatized practice, easily co-opted. And my friend Richard King, who was the chair of Buddhist Studies at University of Kent, he wrote a remarkable book called "Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion," and he uses this term accommodationist. So, mindfulness has an accommodationist orientation which operates in such a way that it is our feelings of anxiety at the individual level. It works in that respect, but it also has the side effect of pacification. So we're not really paying attention collectively or in a civic way to the social, political and economic contexts that are causing the distress that we're feeling in the first place.

So, by promoting its health benefits and so to speak, it's easily digested, right? It's easily assimilated into existing systems and it works as kind of a smoothing mechanism,

of salvic force that helps us to cope with the noxious influences of capitalism. And in this way, it becomes subordinated then to the economic realm. And so I think in order to really unpack this at some point, we'll have to talk a little bit about neoliberal ideology, because what's occurred with mindfulness, it's become part of therapeutic culture and therapeutic culture has its own language. It has its own narratives. You know, within a biomedical kind of paradigm, we talk about interventions, that's all kind of biomedical language. But overall, mindfulness has sort of been pulled into those narratives of taking personal responsibility. Words like flourishing resilience, happiness. And we're told we just have to look deeper within ourselves, find our authentic selves.

But this all sort of reflects that privatization of spirituality when it's seen as a private practice, something that's occurring inside our own heads and our brains. And then on top of that, you have the neuroscientist and with all their neuro-babble and rhetoric, then reinforces that mindfulness is sort of neuro-centric. It's not a practice that's socially embodied within a wider social, economic, political, historical context. So in a way, it kind of creates an erasure of the social — it fosters kind of a social amnesia and it appeals to our highly individualistic, entrepreneurial ethos, which now it's all about me. It's about enhancing our personal brand, you know, so it's thriving, you know, in this culture of narcissism and self-improvement and wellness and all that stuff. So it's become part of therapeutic culture. And that sort of displaces, you know, the practice of democracy and political debate. And it fosters this new sense of subjectivity or sense of self, what I call the neoliberal self. And we're encouraged to go a little deeper, go deeper into our interior, care for ourselves. And in that respect, our collective and political lives begin to disappear from view. So I also sort of say that in a way that mindfulness has sort of direct parallels to the Protestant ethic because it's still serving capitalist interests. And this is right out of Žižek — everyone's probably familiar with his critique of Western Buddhism, but we could add mindfulness to that. It allows us to uncouple temporarily, you know, listen to a Headspace app for like five, ten minutes, get a little shot of inner peace, and then we could go back and function as a perfect neoliberal subject in a capitalist enterprise. So that's part of it, I think.

**Della Duncan:** Yeah, and here's another quote from your book, you quote someone named Joshua Eisen, and this is related to the therapeutic piece, you say in the book, quoting him, "Like kale, acai berries, gym memberships, vitamin water and other New Year's resolutions, mindfulness indexes a profound desire to change, but one premised

on a fundamental reassertion of neoliberal fantasies of self-control and unfettered agency." So, yeah, let's chat for a minute about how mindfulness and your critique of mindfulness is both within a critique of the wellness industry, also the happiness industry. And I wonder even about Western psychology in general, because I had this reflection when I heard about liberation psychology for the first time, where I was learning that folks, particularly in Latin America, Latin and South America, were saying Western psychology that focuses on individual stress and unease, isn't very helpful without the context of the social and societal challenges that people face. So this kind of more education around systems of oppression are actually central to the healing and the well-being of individuals. So talk to us about this critique of the mindful movement within the pathologization, privatization of stress in general, and how the burden of managing stress has been outsourced to individuals and is part of a larger critique of Western psychology.

**Ron Purser:** Sure. Yeah, well, I'd like to set it up in a way where we can kind of understand a little bit about how neoliberal ideology is not just an economic ideology or a political ideology. It's really a cultural ideology. It's very a insidious worldview that basically presents individuals as atomized, as competitive actors, as entrepreneurs running their own enterprise. I talk about it as the business of "Me Inc," in competition with others. And so neoliberal ideology, basically, the bottom line is that all decisions about how society should be run should be left to the free market. And so the most efficient mechanism is to allow competitors, individuals to try to maximize their own goods and cut out any sort of state interference, any sort of collectivities, unions, social support mechanisms, safety nets — those are just obstacles, right? To the smooth operation of of market capitalism, so they should be dismantled if possible, and that's problematic.

Now, where it becomes cultural is that that message is basically because you're on your own as an atomized individual. You then have to really start to make sure that you have enough human capital to be competitive in the marketplace so that you can survive. So it's all then sort of psychologized in the sense of, we're working constantly on ourselves, trying to set up our human potential. We're sort of faced with constantly having to update our mental capital, enhance our mental capital in the marketplace. But I think what is often left unsaid is that we're left with pervasive sort of economic insecurity and social instability. So what that does is it creates more anxiety about the future. So we

have more anxiety. And at the same time, we're hearing the neo liberal discourse that's telling us, like I said earlier, we have to retreat, we have to go inward, we have to work on ourselves. You know, you've heard the trope, "all change comes from within." That's sort of part of that.

And so neoliberal ideology is subtle. It operates through our subjectivity. It's not like it's dominating us, like there's some conspiracy out there, Someone who's, like, pulling the strings. No, it's very that we actually are told that we're free individuals and we have a choice, right? And so it operates in this kind of subtle way through psychological modes that are intent on our individualistic psychic survival. So that's where the wellness industry comes in. And it's sort of hand in glove with that ideology by telling us that we have to strengthen our willpower, we have to have grit and resilience, we have to enhance our brainpower, supercharge our concentration with mindfulness. But for what purpose? To thrive in this unjust, toxic, highly uncertain competitive environment. So, yeah, it's part of therapeutic culture, but it's also kind of enfolded in this whole self-help genre, right? Which the whole general trend in Western psychology, which valorizes individual autonomy, valorizes this idea of choice and authenticity.

And so mindfulness comes at us as sort of the remedy and the cure for the stresses that we're feeling on an everyday level. We'll get into that in a minute, but, I like what Lauren Berlant calls "a cruel form of optimism." It sells us back the promissory note, the sort of the promise that if we invest in ourselves and practice mindfulness diligently and if we're patient and positive, everything will work out a long run. So, I don't quite buy that as you as you well know. So, it's a wash in the biomedical and this therapeutic language, it's reframing our problems as individual predicaments or product that we didn't make the right choices if we're a failure. And that's, you know, it's a product of neoliberalism, it's kind of blame the victim mentality. So, our personal troubles, our anxieties are never attributed to the political and social economic conditions, they are always framed as psychological and stresses pathologized in that respect.

So, know the key tenet then of neoliberal mindfulness is that the source of our problems is all inside our own heads. We're suffering from a so-called thinking disease. We're not mindful enough, we're worried too much about the past or the future or we're indulging in mental ruminations or we're not able to regulate our emotions. And so that's all part of

this pathologizing and medicalization of stress, which needs a remedy, right? And mindfulness interventions are presenting themselves as the remedy.

So, the messages, if you can't change your circumstances, just practice mindfulness and change your reactions to circumstances. That's problematic because the explanatory narrative of stress, it's like privatized spirituality, and privatization, which is the driving force of neoliberalism, we also had the privatized stress in our explanatory narratives. Stress is seen as an epidemic. It's omnipresent, it's inevitable. And so therefore it's up to us to cope and to "mindful up," so to speak. And that's what the late critical psychologist in the U.K., David Smail, called "magical volunteerism," the idea that we're atomized, Contextual individuals and we're held fully responsible for our stress and anguish, regardless of any social or economic conditions in which our lives are embedded.

**Della Duncan:** Ok, so we have this view of neoliberalism telling us that we are atomized, isolated individuals and encouraging us to be entrepreneurs and McMindfulness encouraging us to accept the status quo and even just feel better within it. I wonder, what would you say to people who'd be critical, who'd say that mindfulness actually can lead us to seeing more clearly, seeing in ways that are connected with Buddhism, perhaps such as the insight that all things are transient, you know, that change happens. Like as one sitting mindfully, they notice that pain goes away. They notice that their thinking shifts or changes, right? So there's that insight of all things that are transient. Another insight that some may argue would come from mindfulness would be the insight of "no self." This kind of, you know, who am I? As one sits and meditates, they may find there is no I. There is no self and they may have an experience of no self. And then lastly, there's also an insight that is the inside of the interconnectedness of life, the interconnectedness of all beings that as I breathe out, the tree breathes in, and that actually my body is made up of many different creatures and organisms that are working harmoniously to create me. And I too am part of ecosystems larger and larger that create our earth system or Gaia. So I'm wondering, for folks who would say mindfulness would actually eventually lead to some of these insights, which, if we compare them to the neoliberal view, are actually quite antithetical or even, you know, contradictory. Certainly the interconnectedness of life and the isolated individual. So what would you say to that? That the power of mindfulness may lead to these insights?



**Ron Purser:** Right. Well, that's a good question. Well, Michel Foucault is somebody that I draw upon. Later in his life, he actually became very interested in Zen and went to Japan. But he talks about the care of the self. He was very interested in that as a way to use these practices, as a way to be a counter to "neoliberal governmentality," is the word he used, in other words, as a form of resistance to being shaped by these forces. I think the issue is they may eventually, but how long is that going to take? You know, it ties into the Trojan horse hypothesis that I hear a lot about that, you know, if we sprinkle a lot of — just sprinkle kind of this goldust of individualistic, highly therapeutic mindfulness and spread it in a corporation, for example, that train people in these individual methods of mindfulness of breathing and emotional self-regulation, that over time eventually that there will be some sort of miraculous, systemic, deep transformation of that entire corporation. Ok, I'm still waiting to see that. It's been around since 2010. Google's been doing it since then. I don't see them, as you know, Facebook, Twitter, the evidence is pretty thin on that hypothesis, proving it out.

But to be fair, I think that, you know, mindfulness is such a catchall term now that, you know, I think it's difficult to just make broad, sweeping generalizations. I guess it depends on what's being taught, where it's being taught, in what context. Because if you're teaching MBSR, Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, or some sort of clinical, therapeutic form of mindfulness, a lot of people that take those programs — they're short programs, eight-week programs, sometimes shorter than that — they don't sign up for Buddhist awakening, they're not signing up for touching the deep insights into "Anatta," or "No Self," they're there for clinical stress relief. And one of the problems that's emerged is sometimes some people have — we don't know yet, but some people have predispositions or tendencies to go quite deep, quite fast, even with very simple clinical mindfulness practices. And they end up in very almost more distressful states of confusion and anxiety, paranoia. And these are called the adverse effects of meditation, which we're only now starting to acknowledge.

**Della Duncan:** One of the quotes from your book is, "The true meaning of mindfulness is an act of remembering not only in terms of recalling and being attentively present to our situation, but also putting our lives back together collectively." And so I'm really hearing, yeah, about when mindfulness is decontextualized and taken away from these other elements of Buddhism, the challenges then it leads to. And just to share my own experience with this, it's interesting, I went to a therapist because I was having anxiety

after a breakup and thinking back, I'm glad that it wasn't that I'm feeling anxiety from precariousness and, you know, economic strain. And then he recommended mindfulness, know it was a breakup. And he said therapeutically, I'd recommend that you attend a mindfulness meditation retreat. And so I did. And I went to Spirit Rock, which is here in the Bay Area, Vipassana tradition, and went to a week-long practice of mindfulness meditation. And it was very therapeutic and it was very self-focused. I was focusing on my own anxiety and it was helpful. And I went back for a second retreat hoping to get some of the same dose of that helpful self-medication. And instead, the instructor was Joanna Macy, who's an eco-justice Buddhist philosopher and activist.

And it was a total kick in the butt because absolutely I realized that it was, like you just said, fast tracking this this realization that I came to mindfulness for self-oriented reasons. And then, of course, Joanna really encouraged us to tap into honoring our pain for what's happening in the world, to get off our cushions and engage with our spiritual practices actively, and also to open our hearts so that we don't only get swallowed up or wallow in our own pain, but that we open to the pain of the world and really get into compassion for others. So, yeah, let's chat for a minute about what is Buddhism more generally besides this mindfulness that has been taken and really privatized and corporatized. And also engage Buddhism. Tell us about that.

**Ron Purser:** Well, that's a really big question, because when you use the word Buddhism, that's already sort of got issues because there is no one Buddhism. It's not a monolithic entity. But in general, I think it's worth noting that if we take something that's quite common across all Buddhist traditions and schools, let's take what's called the Eightfold Noble Path. And this is something that the historical Buddha developed as kind of a an action plan for awakening. And if you look at things called — there's eight factors on the path. Mindfulness is actually one of the factors. But some of the other factors like Right Livelihood, that's a very social dimension. Right Livelihood means the way that you work, where you work, what you do, what you produce does not harm other individuals or the environment. So, you know, engaging in war, working for a defense contractor, working at Monsanto, for example, which is notorious for its carcinogenic products, maybe even working at some tech companies like Facebook that are generating all sorts of polarization, digital technologies which are designed for distraction and addiction.

**Ron Purser:** What I'm getting at is that I think we have a misconception that's happened over a period of time, especially in the West, that the mainstreaming of mindfulness, we now seem to think that Buddhism equals meditation, period. And so, you know, the image that we have of Buddhism is the sitting monk. And, you know, there's sort of almost an Olympic sort of competitive spirit now among a lot of Western Buddhist practitioners that I've seen, it's like, well, I went on a 10 day retreat. How many times have you gone on a ten day retreat? It's really kind of ridiculous, but I think it's this privileging of meditation without really understanding that the Buddha, Dharma or the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, were not just about mindfulness or meditation. The Buddha really was quite an outspoken social critic of the prevailing social order, which was based on Brahminism and the caste system, for example. And he sort of overturned that. He created a sangha, which was formed around this idea of kind of a democratic assembly, it wasn't based on caste. I could go on and on. But I think the point is that Buddhism does not equate strictly to meditation and that the Dharma had a lot more to do with critical fundamental inquiry into the causes and conditions that lead us to unwholesome mental states, actions that cause suffering, the suffering within our own mind streams, but also the suffering that we co-produce in our social and political systems.

So, there are other aspects to the path which are not strictly valorizing solitary confinement in meditation retreats. And I think one of the other pitfalls because of this misconception is that it's become a bit of an anti-intellectual movement in that respect. Privileging of silence and language, you know, language is how we communicate, how we transmit these teachings through history and language is not the enemy. In a way, I think that we have to recover our ability to engage in vigorous dialogue in ways that can bring out sort of our hidden blind spots. Can't do that if we just stay silent.

So, you know, I think that it's a work in progress in terms of Buddhism and it's sort of migration to the West, it's still a work in progress. It's sort of landed in psychology, it's sort of landed in clinical therapeutic psychology. But I don't think it — like you said, with socially engaged Buddhism, that framework or that paradigm is not going to be conducive to expanding our notion of what suffering means. The suffering is not just occurring in our individual mainstreams, it's occurring institutionally. It's occurring collectively. It's this is what David Loy coined, the term social dukha, social suffering. And so we need a more radical form of mindfulness, which I think cultivates a more

expansive, non-dual awareness. What I mean by that is by melting the sense of separation between self and other and self and the natural environment. It's not merely learning how to be more calm and peaceful, but of tuning into the causes of suffering and pain, like you said. It's not just my own personal suffering that's on the table, but the suffering that's caused by exploitation, injustice, economic inequities, social political oppression and so forth. So we really have to come to kind of this awakening that my personal well-being and happiness is intimately interdependent with the well-being and happiness of every other sentient being.

And so a radical mindfulness will allow us to cut through the illusion of separateness and sort of open up a wider vision of reality, a new consciousness which sees our body is not just a self-enclosed physical body, but the body of all sorts of phenomena is our body. And so it's a radically inclusive sense of self, our body. And then our speech and our language, the way that language has shaped the way that we think, we have to have critical penetrating inquiry and questioning the operation of culture and how it's shaped and limited our way of examining our own sort of automatic feedback process that we have by accepting a lot of assumptions that have been untested and so to speak. So this critical inquiry and dialogue has to be factored into sort of a new communal practice. So it cuts through this illusion of separateness. It opens a wider vision. It sees us all as interconnected and interdependent. It's a social practice and it goes beyond just trying to gain a little inner peace here and there. We really have to come to terms to see how we've been socially conditioned. Right, how our identities have been shaped within the capitalist economy. You know, we have to help people connect the dots, right? Between personal troubles and public issues. And that's what my friend Kevin Healey has called "civic mindfulness." That's sort of, I think, very different than just dealing with one's own personal anxiety.

So, in a way, that's how mindfulness could be liberated, become more of a kind of a Gandhian truth force, right? For social and political change. And I don't think that's going to happen through corporate mindfulness. It'll happen really at the grassroots sort of in the movements that we're seeing today. Even wearing a mask is a form of civic mindfulness, right? Not just, you know, 'I'm not going to wear a mask because I'm a free individual.' So, again, that's sort of a really extreme form of neoliberal ideology operating in that sort of way of thinking.

Oh, one more point is that even if we go back to classical mindfulness, mindfulness is not just internal, it's also external. It's focusing internally and externally. And I think that somehow we've gone way to the extreme of the internal. And so it requires turning that kind of critical inquiry outwards towards the social, political institutions, all these interlinking systems of power that are kind of exasperating, you know, human suffering and stress and really have to kind of see how we've been sort of duped into buying into this idea that we're fully responsible for our own suffering.

**Della Duncan:** Absolutely. One of my favorite metaphors for this inner and outer transition comes from Sophie Banks, who is part of the Transition Town movement. And she described once in a workshop I was in that inner and outer transition play together as if riding a bicycle, where to ride the bicycle we need inner strength and resilience and poise and balance. And we also need forward movement. We need progression. We need direction. And that direction, that movement is the outer transition, that outer systems change and the inner strength, balance, poise is the inner transition or inner attention. And if we only have direction, if our activism is only outer focused and it just keeps going, we can crash and literally burn out. Or if we only have the inner focus and no direction, we'll just fall over on the bicycle. So, I really appreciate what you're saying about this inner and outer, you know, parts together.

And what I'm hearing, you know, the kind of takeaways for how to move mindfulness to be better is, one, to look at mindfulness and to really examine it and to challenge it, to become more a vehicle for creating non-dual awareness, to widening our perception of the self to the ecological self, to becoming more of a social practice, this idea of civic mindfulness, practicing with others, and then also not taking mindfulness outside of the other elements of Buddhism, the Eightfold Path that you spoke about, so that we see mindfulness not just as internal, but as a practice that's part of a larger ethical way of being that, like you said, includes Right livelihood as well as right speech, I believe, right view, a couple others. And yeah. So that part of that Eightfold Path. And then the other piece is this idea that the happiness industry, mindfulness, as well as Western therapy in general, ought to include a realization of the way that our systems impact our health or well-being and happiness, and that they examine and challenge and even educate folks on the structures of oppression and how they influence our stress and how doing work to change those systems would actually be beneficial to our health and wellbeing. If you were talking to somebody who was just starting out or practicing

mindfulness or even someone who was an MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction) teacher, what else would you recommend that they look towards or that they try?

**Ron Purser:** I think fundamentally would be to examine through inquiry how our experience arises. That sounds a bit abstract, but I think there are some issues around how our knowing, our capacity for knowing, is already restricted. It's already been sort of shaped and confined by some fundamental presuppositions which have gone unexamined, particularly our notions of how we are as embodied spatial beings. And secondly, our experience, everyday experience, of time. And so these fundamental presuppositions of reality, part of our humanity, how we understand space and how we act and live in time are often not the focus of any sort of mindfulness inquiry. Those deep assumptions are influencing the kind of reality that we're creating as a human species, because if we see ourselves as fundamentally enclosed within our own bodies, as spatial beings, then we're already reproducing sort of a dualistic way of knowing, which has many, many problems. It's very fragmented. The perspective of the self is the primary one, who knows. And that self has a bias and it stands back from experience. It's always reporting to itself. It's always commenting on its experience. But it really doesn't fundamentally understand how this particular self arises. It's fundamentally taken as a given. And so that to me is the heart of where we need to go.

Now, that may sound a bit ambitious or unclear, but I think that's because these fundamental aspects of our experience, we're like fish in water, right? We don't question them. And when it comes to time, I mean, let's look at what's going on, you know, in the last 10 years, maybe the last five, we've seen this rapid acceleration of time through time-space compression, through digital technologies. Our whole way of knowing and you could look at this historically, that the media, the medium that we use shapes our thinking. It actually changes actually neuro circuits in our brain actually. When we went from oral culture to the printing press and we went to written culture, our visual sense became the most dominant sense.

So, what I'm getting at when it comes to the temporal dimension, our sense of anxiety, the sense of always feeling that we never have enough time, that we're being controlled, there's some sort of an inexorable force that's alien to us, you know, a kind of distraction, the temporality of distraction that are now dominating us. We have to look

more critically at these dimensions of our human experience, because that's where freedom can open up. That's the key to greater knowledge, an expanded consciousness which goes beyond even the sense of death. The whole framework of birth and death is also a set up of time. And these are very deep existential questions which have remarkable and I would say tremendous potential for the next wave of humanity, I hope.

**Della Duncan:** I just love that you're a management professor, and yet you have this vocation of these really deep and thoughtful questions and also thinking about mindfulness. And I'm wondering if we just look at the location of where you are in the Bay Area and Silicon Valley. I don't know if you're familiar with the paper "The California Ideology" by Richard Barbrook [and Andy Cameron] — they talk about the Silicon Valley ideology kind of as neo liberal, neo liberal ideology, really exaggerated even. But, yeah, just wondering if you'd say anything about spatially you and I being in the Bay Area near Silicon Valley. You've mentioned Google and Facebook several times. But yeah, what is the the world view here? And I myself have actually, I've even said it out loud that I hope that mindfulness could be a Trojan horse for engaged spirituality and a shift to a more ecological worldview. Obviously, reading your book and talking to you, I doubt that that's going to happen, but I still hope that that's possible. But, yeah, just tell us a little bit about the view or the ideology of Silicon Valley and how that fits into it — mindfulness and any potentials for change there?

**Ron Purser:** Yeah, that's a good question. One point I want to make is that the mindfulness movement in general, and we'll get to Silicon Valley, has been an elite movement led by elites. And I see the same thing happening in the tech sector. It's kind of the mindful elite that have used their wealth and power to really kind of sort of paint themselves as these benevolent, self-appointed business gurus. And they have a lot of market savvy and they have this hipster facade. You know, it's sort of the pseudo corporate spirituality. It's very capitalist friendly. You know, this idea of conscious capitalism, which is a complete oxymoron, you know, you could become a mindful capitalist, a mindful leader, and so does this whole corporate takeover of mindfulness that ensures it will never become a countercultural force to challenge corporate capitalism.

So, Silicon Valley, it's kind of an idiosyncratic blend of free market libertarianism and spirituality. And in a way, with the decline of institutional religion, you know, this is kind

of historical trend that it's kind of led to the prosperity gospel that's led to this kind of business minded religion that we have now, very kind of consumer oriented spiritual marketplace, right? But if we look at the history of the Bay Area counterculture, so we're situated in the Bay Area going back. You know, this was sort of the hotbed of the beatniks down in North Beach and the hippies with the Grateful Dead and Timothy Leary. So we see that even though they were also focused, you know, on the transformation of the self, they were also focused on this inward journey. They were embedded pretty much in a community, you know, think communes, communes came out of the hippie generation. And they were asking — they were counter to the mainstream, they were asking profound questions about the meaning of life, the nature of society, but then we see this massive shift to a focus on wellness, which is a very ambiguous term, and it offers no counter, it offers no challenge, very market friendly, very corporate friendly. So we have on one hand, we have the countercultural history where there was this compatibility with meditative practice, with psychedelics, the whole anti-establishment, anti-hierarchy.

But they saw this weird kind of connection between that and the sort of anti-authoritarianism of computer information processing back in the early days of Silicon Valley, right? So you have people, you know, like John Perry Barlow, who was the lyricist for the Grateful Dead. He was one of the first early proponents of cyberspace. Right. Kind of a consciousness expanding technology. Steve Jobs, of course, you know, he went to India and, you know, he was practicing Zen here and there. And, you know, so we have that sort of weird combination. But these countercultural leaders, such as Jobs, they really at heart were spiritual libertarians, if you want to put it that way. They really still believed in free markets and that Silicon Valley, you know, was outside the bounds of legitimate critique, right? That digital technologies are benign, they can help cultivate human virtue. It's a very elite subculture, right?

I mean, look at Google, the gender gap at Google. It's a very exclusive sort of culture when it comes to gender and race. And it's an ethos of privilege and entitlement. Zuckerberg, the CEO of Twitter, Jack Dorsey, you know, Jack Dorsey, you probably remember this. He had this vanity project right, where he also went on a 10 day meditation retreat, a digital detox off the remote island of Myanmar. And of course, he tweeted out his accomplishment on Twitter with 117 photos with mosquito bites and all. It's become kind of a status symbol like this is a form of techno martyrdom, minus any



real action to curb, you know, any of the noxious effects of what they're producing. You know, Steve Jobs, as I mentioned, you know, supposedly he was all Zen, but he called his employees shithheads. He was seen as a tyrant.

So, bottom line is that corporate mindfulness works very subtly to train employees, to serve employers. It's not an industrial form of brainwashing, but it is a way of shaping a sophisticated form of bio power, which always kind of says, well, you know, your dissent, your dissatisfaction in the workplace, is a psychological problem, you know, and we have the remedy, whether it was the human relations movement in the 1930s, whether it was active listening or whatever it may be, it always comes back to trying to manipulate the subjectivity of the worker or the employee. And we're looking at farther back in history it was the worker's body that was had to be improved and optimized. You know, going back to Taylorism, Frederick Taylor, a so-called scientific management, tried to industrially engineer, optimize the physical movements of the laborer. But now, you know, we're doing mental work, knowledge work. So now it's become, as Byung-Bhul Han calls it, a form of "psychopolitics" where we're really trying to shape actually the mental sphere of the worker. And in that respect, it functions again as a capitalist spirituality.

**Della Duncan:** It's really lovely to have had this conversation with you, and I just wish for our conversation to contribute to awakening and to liberation and to deeper reflection on all the themes that we've shared. Thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate you. And thank you so much for the work that you do.

**Ron Purser:** Well, thank you, Della. Thank you so much as well. I really enjoyed it.