

I Meditate to Crush it: neoliberalism and the commodification of meditation and mindfulness

Greta Gettelfinger

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“Remember to get some headspace” asserts a notification on my smartphone. The sudden noise is particularly jarring at five-thirty in the morning, where I have found myself drinking

coffee and contemplating if leaving for a “Sunrise Yoga” class in twenty minutes is in fact, worth it. The answer is most likely no, but I will still go, clinging to the promise that practicing yoga at this “divine time” will make a noticeable difference in the rest of my day. I open the Headspace app on my phone, *74-day streak*, it reads, *keep it going!* On most days, this is why I return to the app. I have a streak, and what would that say about me if I simply gave that up? It would certainly reflect my lack of discipline and an unwillingness to commit to the task of bettering myself. Thus, I play the ten-minute *Wake Up* meditation that I almost always default to. As the soothing voice of Headspace founder Andy Puddicombe begins to guide me on this early morning meditative journey, I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and, completely ignore him.

My mind, free to roam, runs through schedules and to-do lists, it probes me to check the weather and my email. It notes that the app’s prompt to “get some headspace,” rather than simply telling me to meditate, is an obvious and trite branding tactic. Andy interrupts my mental musings to suggest that I “imagine the last time that I awoke to clear, warm, bright, sunlight.” This irritates me as I always get up in the dark and have come to loathe his daily reminder of this fact. I make a mental note to switch to the *Up Before The Sun* meditation, which, unsurprisingly, is among the most popular of the hundreds of other guided meditation offerings of Headspace. But for today, ten minutes have passed, I am prompted to open my eyes, and most importantly, day seventy-five is complete.

My habitual interaction with this app is not a criticism of the practice of meditation itself, but rather a reflection of how a large number of people have come to experience the Eastern spiritual practices of meditation, and mindfulness as commodities. Thus, this paper asks, what does the adoption of these Eastern spiritual practices reflect about American values? Meditation has undoubtedly helped many people, myself included. However, it has also long been

intertwined with American capitalism and more recently, neoliberalism. I argue that the commodification and adaptation of meditation, and mindfulness, as seen through corporate culture, smartphone apps, and social media influencers, exemplifies the prioritization of self-regulation, productivity, and self-optimization under a neoliberal economic structure. Ultimately, which aspects of Eastern spiritual practices are adopted in the commodification process, and which are cast aside, illuminates more about Western culture than the Buddhist traditions from which they originate.

Most simply defined, the app Headspace is a platform containing hundreds of guided meditations, which last between three and thirty minutes, and address themes such as stress, sleep, anxiety, and focus. All sessions are narrated by the company founder Andy Puddicombe who promotes the app as “a personal meditation guide, right in your pocket.” (Headspace). The app provides an ideal lens through which to view mindfulness practices in the workplace, as large corporate employers are increasingly buying bulk subscriptions to Headspace for their employees. This is particularly true in the Silicon Valley tech industry where management personnel, following in Zen enthusiast Steve Job’s footsteps, are largely receptive to alternative workplace practices. While a Headspace subscription is a seemingly benevolent employee perk, it also bears a greater significance. In an age of neoliberalism, companies have to a greater extent, incorporated techniques of Eastern spirituality to rationalize their ideologies surrounding productivity standards and justify overburdening their employees. A management professor at SFSU and Zen practitioner, Ronald Purser notes such a discrepancy by highlighting the dissonance between the concern of “unmindful employees,” and the realities of workplace stress, most of which is caused by job insecurity and corporate dysfunction. Essentially, corporations find practices such as mindfulness appealing, because it “keeps us within the fences of the

neoliberal capitalist paradigm. It's saying, 'It's your problem, get with the program, x your stress, and get back to work!' (Purser 2018).

Thus, for an employee or a member of many institutions under neoliberalism, the prevailing sentiment is that the individual bears the sole responsibility for their well-being, their productivity, and their ability to thrive in increasingly demanding environments. Just as a market under neoliberalism is self-regulating, so too is the individual. In order to effectively manage themselves, the individual feels compelled to undergo as many methods of self-optimization as possible. Purser speaks to this by stating that "neoliberal mindfulness emphasizes the sovereignty of autonomous individuals who can navigate the vicissitudes of late capitalist society by becoming self-regulating and self-compassionate, governing themselves, and by freely choosing their own welfare, well-being, and security." (Purser 2018).

Individual sovereignty is not inherently problematic. However, by overemphasizing the self-regulating individual, systemic issues in the workplace are neglected. In other words, rather than address employment conditions, inequalities, or underlying dysfunctions of the workplace, corporations offer their employees a Headspace subscription, thereby signaling that stress, anxiety, or any other condition that might impact productivity is an individual problem and should be managed as such. Thus, Headspace as a commodity good can be seen as an instrument of self-management, and, like many others that fall under the broad category of wellness, a way to encourage consumers to optimize themselves and their performance on an individual level.

Headspace produces advertisements promoting the app as a "gym membership for the mind." (Headspace). The analogous relationship between the gym and Headspace is a compelling one. While there are undoubtedly people who find the gym personally fulfilling, many more who attend are seeking to alter something about themselves or to reap some benefit

associated with exercise. Similarly, Headspace is promoted not for its connection to spirituality, but for its ability to optimize your day to day experiences. This is exemplified in their ad campaigns, which features simplistic photos of a real person who has, supposedly, improved their performance through meditation. Examples of such include the teenage boy basketball player who claims, “I meditate to get buckets,” a woman powerlifter who “meditate[s] to crush it,” as well as the running coach who “uses Headspace to unlock more of his potential on the track.” (Headspace). The advertisements focus on a single person in each of the ads, thereby marketing Headspace as a self-optimization tool that is tailored to the individual. Further, I argue that this overt connection between meditation and athletic achievement is a deliberate marketing strategy, as it invokes in its audience the “better yourself” dogma typically associated with exercise. Thus, paralleling a fitness regime, Headspace is promoted for the performance-boosting benefits that can be ascertained, and therefore, targets the self-regulating individual consumer with the promise to help one reach their optimized potential.

Moreover, all these advertisements contain the suggestion to “download Headspace to find out what guided meditation can do for you.” (Headspace). This choice of words illustrates arguments made by John Berger in his work *Ways of Seeing*. He notes that “publicity as a system only makes a single proposal. It proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more.” (Berger 1972, 131). Headspace advertisements market this promise particularly well, by asserting that their product can improve one’s performance in almost any capacity. This particular publicity campaign effectively “persuades us of such a transformation by showing us people who have apparently been transformed and are, as a result, enviable,” as seen here through the individual subscriber and what they have gained by meditating. Berger further argues that “the state of being envied is what constitutes glamour. And publicity is the

process of manufacturing glamour.” (Berger 1972, 131). While a meditation app and glamour appear incongruent, it is arguably a reflection of shifting values under neoliberalism. The true appeal and allure come from the desirability of becoming the most productive, best performing, and most optimal versions of ourselves.

With brightly colored whimsical graphics accompany the seemingly endless list of guided meditation themes, one does not have to explore the Headspace app for long before becoming distinctly overwhelmed. Do I want to meditate for my self-esteem or for productivity? Should I prioritize “Personal Growth” or “Work & Productivity?” Should I try the “Prioritizing” guided meditation in order to decide? As anyone who has poured over Netflix offerings for an hour before settling on a television show they have already seen knows, the inundation of choices is a quintessential American experience. Thus, Headspace’s vast and vibrant interface highlights the polarity between itself and the simplistic ideologies of Buddhism. Lizzie Widdicombe speaks to the discrepancies between Headspace and Buddhist teachings in her piece for *The New Yorker* which profiled Andy Puddicombe as “a mindfulness guru for the tech set.” She notes that it was necessary for Headspace to separate itself from the religion, as the Buddha’s teachings are not congruent with the realistic consumption of this commodity. Given that “the teachings of the Buddha are not always warm and fuzzy, nor would they play well at a corporate retreat. The most important precept, after all, is the universal truth of suffering.” (Widdicombe 2015). Embraced by corporations thriving under neoliberalism, and marketed as a performance tool to the self-regulating individual, Headspace likely has little desire to endorse that the essence of living is hardship and tribulation.

It is, however, nonsensical to discuss the Buddhist practice of meditation without addressing its connection to suffering. The essence of the Buddha’s teaching is found in the Four

Noble Truths, essentially comprising of the truths of suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. The ultimate causes of suffering, the Buddha argues, is greed and desire, ignorance and delusion, as well as hatred and destructive urges. One can free themselves from suffering by following the Eightfold Path, a set of principles that act as a guide to enlightenment. These include Right Understand, Right Motivation, Right Livelihood, Right Action, Right Speech, and Right Effort. The final two, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration are the paths which meditation pertains to. (BBC 2009).

Buddhists have expressed criticism of the religious appropriation demonstrated in the mainstream meditation and mindfulness pedagogy. The Buddha prescribed the Eightfold Path as a necessary and all-encompassing lifestyle one must adopt to reach enlightenment and end personal suffering, thus, “to pluck some things from the list, while ignoring others, strikes many Buddhists as absurd.” Hence, many practicing Buddhists denounce the “wonder-drug version of meditation,” which has “come to be adaptable to any goal, from training marines to picking investments.” Mindfulness in Buddhism asks you to be mindful of the teachings of the Buddha, not your desired level of productivity. Nonetheless, Headspace’s divergence from traditional Buddhism is not astonishing. Despite Andy Puddicombe’s history as a Tibetan monk, Headspace is a consumer product that has made a niche for itself in a neoliberal framework. Promoting burn-out prevention, tools for productivity, and a vehicle for self-optimization, Headspace expresses American neoliberal values and culture, rather than an homage to the Buddha’s Eightfold Path.

Indeed, as Michelle Goldberg writes in *the New Yorker*, “for well over a century, business-minded Americans have been transforming Hindu and Buddhist contemplative practices into an unlikely prosperity gospel.” (Goldberg 2015). Mindfulness and meditation have

continued to take on a cult following as an outpour of celebrities and wealthy business people attribute their successes to these practices, claiming that their ability to release distractions and tune in to their sensations has given them an edge over the competition. In an ironic juxtaposition to the Buddha who, as previously stated, attributes the experience of suffering to selfish desires, people have flocked to mindfulness and meditation as a self-help guide to monetary success. Contemporary mindfulness, however, still seeks to maintain a semblance of this Buddhist connection by promoting the notion of letting go of one's desires. Though, as Goldberg notes, "the point, of course, isn't that you will no longer care about your bitcoin returns but that, by developing greater calm and attention, you'll ultimately get better ones." In essence, traditional Buddhist teachings are remolded to express the desired end achievement, namely, "the desires you work so hard to let go of are ultimately fulfilled." (Goldberg 2015).

Celebrities and business moguls are not the only public figures promoting meditation and mindfulness. Instagram provides an additional platform for Eastern spirituality commodification. More specifically, the credibility given to social media influencers has provided an opportunity to transform cultural interpretations of these practices. Celebrity endorsements are impactful, but arguably, a social media influencer holds greater power over their audience. Influencers share intimate details of their lives and thus, their followers perceive them as genuine and trustworthy. Further, a typical influencer does not portray their life as something far removed from the experiences of the average person. In essence, they are more relatable because their life appears to the viewer how they imagine their own life could ideally, but more importantly, realistically, be. Thus, this intimacy and relatability manifests in hundreds of thousands of followers who presume they truly know the influencer. Due to this perception, followers are likely to interpret



an influencer's advice and recommendations as more authentic than those promoted through traditional advertising methods or celebrity endorsements.

The commodification of Eastern spiritual practices in this context stems from the commodification of the individual on this platform. Practicing and promoting meditation and mindfulness can be seen as part of a larger brand these influencers cultivate, thereby commodifying not a single practice or product, but an entire lifestyle. Through this commodification, these individuals create an identity brand through which they can influence a variety of consumer behaviors. Sarah Banet-Weiser speaks to this concept by noting that by "examining brands and branding practices as a kind of culture," we can view this commodification as "a vehicle through and within which individuals create particular kinds of political and cultural identities." (Banet-Weiser 2012, 43).

While there are a multitude of Instagram personalities who function as promotional platforms for a lifestyle brand that incorporates meditation and mindfulness practices, this discussion will explore Lee Tilghman, or as she is referred to on social media, *leefromamerica*. Tilghman has almost four hundred thousand followers on Instagram alone, and thus has a significant presence in the subsection of Instagram, mostly populated by white women in their 20's living in Los Angeles or San Francisco, who advocate for self-transformation through commodified Eastern spiritual practices. On August 14th, 2018 Tilghman posted a photograph of herself doing a handstand, with a caption that begins

I am not my productivity levels.

I am not how many emails I send in a day.

I am not how hard I work.

I am not how many things I cross off my to-do list.

I am not how busy I am.

I am not my projects.

My worth is not based on my productivity . . . (Tilghman 2018)

She continues on to declare that, in contrast with her past behaviors, she no longer measures her worth according to her work achievements. Superficially, this sentiment appears distinctly counter to neoliberal values, given its productivity rejecting message. However, I argue that this post, in actuality, perpetuates the same self-regulating narrative asserted through the neoliberal priorities previously discussed. This Instagram post highlights what Berger claims is the purpose of publicity, which is “to make the spectator marginally dissatisfied with his present way of life. Not with the way of life of society, but with his own within it.” (Berger 1972, 142). If the viewer acknowledges that their confidence is intertwined with their productivity levels, the message they receive is that issue is within them, and therefore, the self-regulating individual must also find the solution through personal changes.

Admittedly, discarding long ingrained ideals surrounding self-worth is a difficult task; therefore, we must turn to the same figure who suggested our transformation in the first place for guidance. After all, *leefromamerica* the Instagram influencer, a persona arguably distinguishable from Lee Tilghman as an individual, has successfully shed these expectations. Of course, this is not to assert that she does not pursue the markers of achievement under neoliberalism, but rather that she has transcended beyond our cultural obsession with them. *Leefromamerica* is not a slave to her inbox, nor does she need a smartphone app to tell her to meditate. Suddenly, the viewer feels distinctly inadequate. They no longer admire the self-discipline that drags them to sunrise yoga. Instead, they covet the effortless moral resolve *leefromamerica* embodies. This image and its caption thereby effectively target a consumer because it “steals her love for herself, as she is,

and offers it back to her for the price of the product.” (Berger 1972, 134). In this instance, the product is a lifestyle, which as expected, necessitates the purchase of many tangible products.

The persona, lifestyle, and subsequent products, that *leefromamerica* promotes can be seen to exemplify what Sarah Banet-Weiser discusses in her work on commodity activism. Banet-Weiser notes the presence of “the individual-as-commodity within brand culture,” has essentially, “emerges from the expansion of neoliberal capitalism and its adoption of cultural characteristics that feel distinctly non capitalist.” (Banet-Weiser 2012, 44). *Leefromamerica*’s rebuff of values surrounding productivity does not challenge neoliberalism, but rather provides new avenues for its influence. Messages around consumption or self-optimization are not eliminated; they are simply assigned to an essential oil diffuser instead of a Fitbit. Banet-Weiser speaks to this shift by stating that in the contemporary moment “the creation of value continues to drive capitalism, yet the meaning of ‘value’ shifts and is reimagined within the context of neoliberal capitalism,” as it can further include intangible attributes, such as moral virtue. (Banet-Weiser 2012, 14). Thus, Lee Tilghman, branded through her *leefromamerica* social media presence, has successfully commodified an entire lifestyle, including her self-empowerment and productivity-rejecting discourse.

Many of *leefromamerica*’s lifestyle recommendations incorporate meditation and mindfulness. From meditation pillows and candles, to mindful-eating books and gratitude journals, commodified versions of these spiritual practices are an ever present component of her social media presence. The most apt illustration of such commodification, however, can be seen through *leefromamerica*’s posts pertaining to intention setting. Intention setting is a practice that originated in Zen mindfulness. It can be the focus of a meditation session or repeated to one’s self throughout the day. As opposed to goal setting, intention setting is less tangible and is

supposed to be a reflection of something one wishes to cultivate in their life. Lee's posts mostly embody this purpose, with intentions to "listen more, speak less" or "let my light shine" detailed through rudimentary colored pencil drawings. At first glance, the practice appears distinctly non-capitalistic. However, given the widespread commodification that takes place under neoliberalism, it is remarkably unsurprising to learn that Swell, a reusable water bottle company, produced a "leefromamerica intention bottle" complete with a hand-drawn illustration and inspiring message created by Lee herself.

The significance of the intention bottle is that it illustrates the pervasive power of the lifestyle brand that Lee Tilghman has created. The fact that she collaborated with Swell to create this product indicates that an intention bottle would not be marketable without the *leefromamerica* connection. This highlights the idea that "consumers are seldom available as a ready and willing market; rather, the work of consumer culture has been to produce the desires, and the conditions within which buying a product becomes meaningful." (Grewal 2005, 86). Arguably, many of *leefromamerica*'s followers were not previously familiar with intention setting, nor are they aware that it is an Eastern spiritual practice. However, the consumer culture created through the *leefromamerica* lifestyle brand instills its importance, and subsequent meaningfulness, in the minds of her hundreds of thousands of followers. Ultimately, the commodification of mindfulness, as seen through the *leefromamerica* intention bottle, serves as a trenchant reminder that there is no "outside" to the logics of contemporary capitalism, that resistance, to indulge the popular cultural refrain, has, perhaps, become futile." (Banet-Weiser 2012, 2).

Thus, Instagram, like meditation apps and corporate mindfulness culture, commodifies meditation and mindfulness in order to perpetuate the values that are prioritized by

neoliberalism. Namely, the necessity of self-optimization tactics that emerges when self-regulation applies not only to the neoliberal markets, but to the individual as well. Incorporating Eastern spiritual tactics allows companies to neglect systemic workplace issues, enables headspace to target the growing number of consumers searching for a competitive edge, and allows Instagram influencers to cultivate a lifestyle brand. Ultimately, these practices have been commodified in such a way that they do not represent an appropriation of Buddhism, but rather can be seen as a reflection of American neoliberal values.

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