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MINDFUL UNIVERSITIES IN THE DIGITAL SOCIETY

Foreword by Jon Kabat-Zinn:

There has never been a more opportune time for the unfolding convergence of ancient meditative wisdom practices and their present-day articulations, on the one hand, with the mainstream academic world of the university, its educational, scholarly, and research missions and its catalytic role in envisioning and creating the future, on the other. In particular, mindfulness as a formal embodied meditation practice and as a more generalized moment by moment Way of Being in the world is essential for any healing and transformative potential to be realized, whether it be at the level of an individual human being, within a social group or business enterprise, or when encountering the societal and global challenges our species has unwittingly created for itself and that threaten life as we know it on Spaceship Earth, in Buckminster Fuller's apt terminology. As the authors state on numerous occasions, we are *homo sapiens sapiens*, the species that is aware and is aware that it is aware (or in a more psychological idiom, *awareness* and *meta-awareness*). Meditative practices, along with their essential rock-solid foundation in ethics, are absolutely critical to our living our way into that name we have accorded ourselves, while there is still time. And there is indeed, a universal felt urgency here that needs to be highlighted and taken seriously at this critical moment on Planet Earth.

The overriding principle of the work/adventure of mindfulness is that it is inclusive, all-embracing, imbued intrinsically with utter kindness and acceptance. At the same time, that inclusive embrace is itself unified into one seamless whole in its ethical foundation and its rigorous valuing, protecting, and nurturing of embodied awareness in the face of all the dissipative forces in one's own mind and in society. Thus, mindfulness currently is — and in the future will increasingly need to be — expressed and lived into on every level conceivable, from the individual to dyads, couples, partners, and friends; families and social groups; neighborhoods, communities, businesses, professions, and professional groups. It is germane and essential for the governance of cities, counties, countries, alliances between countries, competing ideologies and economies, and our increasing recognition of the need to tend and befriend our one planet. The overriding curriculum here is to learn how to guide and govern ourselves on all of these levels for the sake of everything beautiful, mysterious, and wonder-full about life and our wholly interconnected living planet that James Lovelock so poignantly and presciently termed *Gaia*. Thus, mindfulness, whether writ small or large, needs to be recognized in its essence as an expression of a universal dharma (lawfulness) arising in its most elaborate expressions out of ancient India, grounded in the various streams of Buddhism and their own ancient antecedent sources veiled in the fogs of prehistory. Just as in traditional Buddhism, when looked at in its entirety, there are many many doors into the one room of the human heart and embodied wakefulness.

The "many doors, one room" principle lies at the heart of this book and in the emergent movement within universities that it represents and will hopefully catalyze to ever-increasing levels. It carefully explicates the various doors that are currently opening all over the world — such as MBSR and the entire family of "mindfulness-based interventions" (MPIs) or "mindfulness-based programs" (MBPs) that have emerged in the past decades. And from a facing wall perhaps but opening into the same room, the door of the ReSource framework and its supporting evidence base, stemming from the very creative work of Tania Singer and her colleagues; and on yet another wall, the doorways of Otto Scharmer's Theory U, along with the pioneering work of Peter Senge, the Presencing Institute, the expressive group

theatre work of Arawana Hayashi, and their colleagues and collaborators in the world of business and organizations — much of that work inspired by David Bohm and his articulation of the power of dialogue, which itself can be thought of as the cultivation and expression of mindfulness in groups.

And let's affirm for now and going forward that taking one's seat in formal meditation, either alone or together with others, is itself a radical act of both sanity and love. And that love, as with the cultivation of mindfulness, is fundamentally selfless, and extends into every moment and aspect of living. In English, when we speak the word *mindfulness*, if we are not simultaneously hearing and understanding it as *heartfulness*, we are missing a key dimension of embodied wakefulness, and what the great Vietnamese Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hanh, termed *interbeing*.

All these frameworks/doorways were developed and nurtured over the past five decades in the service of catalyzing embodied wakefulness and its potential for transforming both the present and the future in ways that optimize wellbeing on every level, and that simultaneously and necessarily minimize the harm we as a species and as individuals are so capable of creating for ourselves and to others, both wittingly and unwittingly when we lose sight of our true nature. In medicine, where MBSR took root, there is the ancient foundational ethical principle of the Hippocratic Oath: to “first do no harm,” (*primum non nocere*). But how would we even know if we are doing harm without mindfulness, without human awareness, and without prioritizing and learning to trust our intrinsic compassion? As we know, a great deal of harm and horror has been perpetrated by medicine when it loses touch with its foundational ethic. And in parallel with the Hippocratic Oath, in Buddhism there is the Bodhisattva Vow, to elevate saving all beings from suffering above completion of one's own meditative trajectory. Yet there too, in spite of the fundamental precept not to kill even the smallest of living things, in Myanmar, some Buddhist monks were leaders in the recent genocidal atrocities leveled at the Rohingya. Without embodied ethical alignment with what is being professed, all mental constructs are without wisdom or compassion.

Pure awareness (another way to describe *mindfulness*) and compassion are both remarkable human capacities — we might even say “superpowers” — capacities that we actually already possess by virtue of being human. What we most need is reliable *access* to these capacities, and, through meditative nurturing via regular cultivation/practice, shaping them to become our “default mode.” To be more explicit about it, that *access* most reliably comes through *cultivation* (*bhavana* in Sanskrit). That is why meditation is of necessity a *practice*, and an ongoing one, a Way (with a capital W, as in Tao) of being in wise relationship with experience, moment by moment by moment, inwardly and outwardly, individually and collectively. It is also why mindfulness is in its fullness an expression of *dharma*, the lawfulness of reality. That lawfulness, if deeply inquired into, attended to, and embodied, can catalyze human learning, realization, and embodied wakefulness on every level, from the individual to the planetary, and thus, to a commitment as well as the means to *govern* ourselves in accordance with a societal and planetary lawfulness in ways that will elevate, insure, and optimize non-harming (*ahimsa*), wisdom, compassion, and wellbeing for all.

The work featured in this very forward-looking book is an essential element in building a livable future for humanity, and for educating the next generations of students who will carry it out as well as be the beneficiaries of their own transformative engagements, inner and outer, alone and together. On the day I am writing this, the New York Times ran the following headline on its front page: **The Godfather of AI leaves Google and warns of danger ahead.** It was followed by the caption: *For half a century, Geoffrey Hinton nurtured the technology at the heart of chatbots like ChatGPT. Now he worries it will cause serious harm.* This is merely an indicator, and a major one, pointing to the *size of the cloth* so to speak,

the measure of what we are facing as a species and as a planet, and why mindfulness is so important. For other indicators and activist solutions, see the work of the Center for Humane Technology [<https://www.humanetech.com/>] and its award winning movie, *The Social Dilemma*.

The authors are to be congratulated for bringing this body of work at the intersection of the analog and the digital, and of the University and its future promise and responsibilities, into the world at such a critical moment. What better role can the university play at this moment in time in nurturing its students and shaping the possible future, when our analog lives and brains — the product of billions of years of evolution on Planet Earth and even more billions in the universe that produced this small living planet and its potential for life and for sentience — are being threatened and potentially eclipsed by a digital attention economy driven by the three poisons that the Buddha identified so long ago: greed, hatred, and delusion, than to help us wake up to our true nature as sentient and intrinsically compassionate beings while we have the chance?

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