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There's An App For That: Headspace, Meditation, and the Shifting Religious Landscape of a Digital World

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There's An App For That: Headspace, Meditation, and the Shifting Religious Landscape of a
Digital World

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Introduction

I am not a practicing Buddhist, but meditation has been an interest of mine, both peripherally and more immediately, since my childhood growing up in Marin County--an area just outside of San Francisco, in California. Home to important American Buddhist spaces like the Green Gulch Farm Zen Center and San Francisco Zen Center, the landscape and history of northern California are marked by Buddhist influence. At my high school, every single morning the student body, faculty, and staff would gather in the great hall to meditate together. Someone (it could be any member of the school community) would stand at the front of the room to lead the exercise, ringing the Tibetan Singing bowl the guidance counselor kept in her office and asking us all to “please, slowly, bring our attention back to our breath”. I didn’t continue meditating once I got to college, save for a few trips to the Center for Spiritual Life weekly meditation group.

However, I thought about it often, especially as the rise of the self-care and wellness movements threatened to consume my instagram feed once and for all. Marked by the presence of crystals, soothing colors, aromatherapy, turmeric lattes, cute yoga clothes, high-tech juicers, and the constant refrain of “take time for yourself--you deserve it!,” the self-care movement aims to correct for some of the more taxing parts of modern life, like burnout from low-paying but high-stress jobs, unrealistic expectations set by social media, and the general feeling that everyone is moving too fast, all the time, with no ability to slow down. *Life is exhausting*, says self-care. *Why don’t you light that zodiac-sign themed scented candle* (a real product advertised to me by the instagram algorithm) *and take a load off?*

Generally, the message is to be a good one: life *is* hard, and we should all take the time to prioritize our health and well-being. The issue, though, with internet self-care culture, is that the solution always seems to require purchasing something, be it a rose-quartz necklace to protect against bad vibes or a powdery substance called *The Bliss Molecule* that you're supposed to stir into your almond milk (sold by a company called Moon Juice, *The Bliss Molecule* is actually just cacao powder--the packaging is really cute, though, to make up for the fact that a single jar costs \$20). So on the one hand, self-care culture embraces the illusion that buying material goods will solve all of your problems, even as the mass manufacturing of disposable and low-quality goods threatens to overwhelm environmental resources and contribute to the kind of labor violations companies like Amazon have become famous for. But on the other hand, the popularity of the movement at all points to a different issue: people are unhappy with the quality of their lives, and are looking for solutions that will make them feel better.

This is where a company like Headspace comes in. It's packaging, marketing, and message are all in line with self-care aesthetics: cute, clean, and full of encouraging slogans like "We're here for you," accompanied by an animation of a smiling sun. But Headspace isn't selling just a product that you buy, use once, and never think about again. It's selling the ability to learn a skill, namely, mindfulness meditation. What is particularly fascinating about Headspace is its ability to toe the line, as it were, between religious practice and secular product. Co-founded by an ordained Buddhist monk, Andy Puddicombe, Headspace's entire catalog of mindfulness meditations are deeply influenced by the 'insight and serenity' form of Buddhist meditation that has its historical roots in the Buddhist community in Burma. Headspace is able to capitalize off of Puddicombe's status as a monk, which lends the App a certain sheen of

authenticity, as well as culturally recognizable Buddhist aesthetics (there is an entire section of the Headspace website devoted to ‘meditation quotes,’ which read like less enigmatic Zen Koans). But Headspace chooses to eschew any formal recognition of its Buddhist influence, instead branding itself as a secular ‘healthcare’ venture. Since meditation has been studied for its possible health benefits, it has increased in popularity, particularly in America and Europe. As rates of anxiety and depression seem to be becoming endemic, particularly among young people, practices like meditation offer a wholesome and ‘holistic’ alternative to (or co-treatment with) psychiatric drugs. This signifies an interesting intersection between religious traditions and practices and secular notions of the therapeutic, and begins to show us what happens when digitization and neoliberal attitudes come into contact with the sacred.

A little more than a month into my second semester of writing my senior project, the Coronavirus pandemic emerged and halted life as it had been lived. Due to the shutdown of the physical campus of Bard College, as well as some personal issues regarding housing, I found myself having to quickly move, and then move again, without the benefit of having my books or material copies of notes with me (left, where they sit even today, to my library carrel). In addition to the strain of not having my materials with me, this period of time has provided additional mental challenges. Struggling to cope with everyday fears of sickness and death, as well as uncertainties about the future (not to mention the unusual slackening of experience that has come with living in quarantine) and the economy, I found it extremely hard to focus or remain productive for almost the entire month of March, and a good part of April. If circumstances were different, this project would be larger, both in terms of page count and scope.

The original project was to be made up of four chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion. I have been able to finish the first three chapters, thankfully, but the fourth was what really was going to tie it all in. I was going to further explore the importance of ‘voice’ in the user experience of the App. And by using *The Culture of Narcissism*, by Christopher Lasch, and *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, by Philip Reiff (and, it has recently been revealed, Susan Sontag), I aimed to explore the changing religious landscape of America, the growth of the category of people referred to legally as ‘Nones’ (spiritual but not religious), and the implications that digitization and neoliberalism have on the transformation of religious experience. . Unfortunately, both of these books, and my notes on them, remain on the Annandale campus.

While it has been comforting, in a way, to know that every person in the world is experiencing similar (and much worse) situations, many of the other seniors I’ve talked to have expressed feelings of deep loss over the impact that the pandemic has had on senior project. Of course it does feel a bit silly to mourn something as ultimately inconsequential as an undergraduate thesis, but for many of us these projects have truly shaped our past years and have provided an anchor to amid the uncertainties of *what comes next* in our lives after Bard. Personally, I’ve been feeling lost without the steady presence of the library in my life, where I can work both alone and surrounded by my peers.

So it has been particularly and deliciously ironic to watch as Headspace adapts and thrives during this pandemic as I feel myself floundering. In fact, you would be hard-pressed to come up with a better business model for times like these: a mobile application that helps you manage stress, depression, anxiety, and fears about death and loss! That you can do without

leaving your house! Already Headspace has established itself as a charitable presence, offering free meditation packs first to New York City dwellers and then to the rest of us as the virus reaches out and touches every corner of the world with its poisonous hand. As individuals and families try to remain sane during quarantine, Headspace encourages us to use this forced solitude to our advantage: meditate, sit with the thoughts of fear and anger, notice them, let them pass on. Regardless of how any of this turns out, watching Headspace respond to the coronavirus pandemic has been a reminder of how adaptable human behavior is, how everything is constantly transmogrifying into some new form, for better or for worse.

Chapter One: A Brief History of Headspace

In May of 2010, in London, another drop fell into the ever-expanding well of Buddhist knowledge and practice in Europe and America: a company, called Headspace, that aimed to spread the practice of meditation to overworked and anxious Londoners. At this initial stage, Headspace focused on holding live events. Founded by Andy Puddicombe, a former Buddhist monk ordained in the Tibetan Kagyu lineage of Buddhism, and Rich Pierson, a young advertising executive suffering from a bad case of corporate burnout, Headspace sprung from Puddicombe's earlier venture--a private practice in which he taught clients, desperate to learn how to manage their mental lives, the techniques and benefits of meditation.

Many of the people Puddicombe saw in this practice held positions in London's high-stress corporate world. They came to him, either recommended by doctors or through word-of-mouth. Only two years past the global recession of 2008, people were working longer hours, more difficult positions, and under the weight of an uncertain financial future. Perhaps as a result, interest in practices promoting the notion of holistic wellness and the reduction of stress and anxiety began to increase.

It was during this period of time that Puddicombe and Pierson met. As a young, unusually successful advertising executive, Pierson was experiencing exactly the type of stress Puddicombe was trying to alleviate. According to an interview he gave on the podcast Foundr, Puddicombe had been doing well with seeing one client at a time, but a friend thought he could "go bigger" and told him about a young man he knew who was both interested in meditation on a

personal level and also saw in it the potential for something “a bit...broader¹”. The two soon met, and began to do what Puddicombe described as a “skill swap”. Puddicombe would train Pierson in meditation for an hour, then they’d go to a cafe and Pierson would drill Puddicombe in marketing. Soon, they found themselves launching Headspace, as an events company that primarily catered to the business set. The events company was a sort of baby-step for Puddicombe: Pierson was convinced that going digital was the right move, but Puddicombe had “only just got [his] first mobile phone”². Plus, he added that he was trained in a tradition that transmitted knowledge primarily through oral means. How would they translate what Puddicombe called the “authenticity” of learning from a teacher in a room onto a digital platform? It seemed like a leap too huge to consider. At least at first.

Basic Timeline

Headspace didn’t launch as a mobile application until 2012, two years after Puddicombe and Pierson founded the company (in the same year, Puddicombe released his first book, “The Headspace Guide to Meditation and Mindfulness”). The app did well, but perhaps not well enough. Then, in 2013, the company moved its headquarters from London to Santa Monica, California and began working on a new and improved version of the application. In January of that year, Puddicombe gave his first Ted Talk, titled “All it Takes is Ten Mindful Minutes”. In

¹ <https://foundr.com/andy-puddicombe#transcript>

² “The Headspace Story with Andy Puddicombe - FP53.” *Foundr*, 13 Aug. 2015, <https://foundr.com/andy-puddicombe>.

July of 2014, Headspace launched version 2 of the app (V2), which immediately became successful, and in 2015 they held their first round of fundraising, led by The Chernin Group (which invests and manages businesses in the media, sports, and technology sectors, and particularly focuses on new and emerging markets--a category in which Headspace no doubt fell into³. At the official launch event for V2, Arianna Huffington, the founder of the Huffington Post, was part of a panel discussion with Puddicombe, where she championed the effects of guided meditation, particularly as it relates to sleep hygiene, an issue she became passionate about after experiencing the type of corporate burnout mentioned above. This is where Headspace becomes, to use a phrase borrowed from advertising jargon, “buzzworthy”.

One article from Fast Company, a popular media brand which focuses on business, describes the data as follows: 2 million active users, “defined as ones who access the \$96-a-year paid program or its free introductory version at least once a month; among paying subscribers, 60% use it every one to three days”⁴. From this point on, Headspace continued to grow its user base, even as the terms of what is available by subscription and what is free change (more on this in chapter two). The Headspace team begins work on another version of the app, called “The New Headspace”. It launched in June of 2017, amid a successful “round b” of funding, led by Spectrum Equity, which managed to raise an additional \$37 million dollars. The new version of the app features a marked change in design: new animations are introduced (a detailed description of the app itself is located in chapter two) as well as more “content”. Also in 2017,

³ *HS Fact Sheet - Google Drive*.

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/12rq2xd9uSBsoHibRaOgI2XDwhIwGxAYF>. Accessed 3 May 2020.

⁴ Barol, Bill, and Bill Barol. “The Monk And The Mad Man Making Mindfulness For The Masses.” *Fast Company*, 28 Jan. 2015,

<https://www.fastcompany.com/3041402/the-monk-and-the-mad-man-making-mindfulness-for-the-masses>.

Headspace collaborates with Amazon and Google, and the Amazon Alexa and Google Assistant feature Headspace “voice skills”.

Then, something monumental happens. In June of 2018, after announcing 30 million members and 1 million paid subscribers, Headspace launched a “digital health subsidiary,” Headspace Health. Headspace Health is described in the “Headspace Fact Sheet” of the Headspace Press Packet as follows:

Headspace Health takes a human-centered design approach that puts patients and healthcare professionals at the center of the design process. Headspace Health is focused on driving meaningful clinical outcomes and helping patients create healthy routines. Programs are being specifically designed for those suffering from a broad range of stress-related chronic diseases, furthering Headspace’s commitment to improving the health and happiness of the world⁵.

The mission of Headspace, described above and on the Headspace website as “improving the health and happiness of the world” harkens back to Puddicombe’s initial goals in starting his own private practice. Meditation, he believes, is a necessary tool not only for “quieting the monkey mind” but also for a reworking of what we have been accustomed to call healthcare.

In an age of increasing reliance on pharmaceuticals, meditative practice offers what might be called a ‘holistic’ approach to mental health care: rather than treating the symptoms of a problem, meditation goes after the root. In addition to all the marketing executives and financial directors Headspace hires, they employ a team of researchers, who collaborate with ongoing clinical studies on the effects of meditation on health, as well as conduct their own studies (peer-reviewed, of course).

⁵ *HS Fact Sheet - Google Drive.*

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/12rq2xd9uSBsoHibRaOgI2XDwhIwGxAYF>. Accessed 3 May 2020.

Led by Dr. Megan Jones Bell, who holds the title of “Chief Science Officer,” the Science team “focuses on developing evidence-based interventions and clinically validating the benefits of Headspace through over 70 clinical research studies conducted by Headspace’s academic partners”⁶. This expansion into healthcare is accompanied by another form of growth: by this point, Headspace had been making partnerships with various corporate entities, such as Starbucks, Unilever, Nike, and the NBA. The companies would offer Headspace--free--to their employees, as an added health benefit. As of January 2020, more than 600 companies have engaged in partnerships of this type.

Executive Summaries and the Power of Corporate Storytelling

At this juncture, I’d like to shift gears for a minute. Now that we have a basic timeline for Headspace’s growth as a company since 2010, it would be useful to have a grasp on the story that Headspace tells about *itself*, which is inextricably bound up with the story it tells about Andy Puddicombe. By his own admission, Puddicombe sees himself as the mouthpiece for Headspace--a “performing monkey,” as he playfully put it in his Foundr interview⁷. It’s Rich Pierson, and the scores of people on the ‘business side’ of Headspace, who keep it going, keep funding rising and engagement numbers climbing. So why, then, is Puddicombe so consistently visible--and vocal--as the backbone of Headspace?

⁶ *HS Executive Bios - Google Drive*.
<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1FjYSkIDFz1o3S4XnA1EBgcQspt4ODZEy>. Accessed 3 May 2020.

⁷ “The Headspace Story with Andy Puddicombe - FP53.” *Foundr*, 13 Aug. 2015,
<https://foundr.com/andy-puddicombe>.

A little while ago, I wrote an email to Headspace, asking some questions about how the company orients itself in terms of its spirituality. I was informed by a customer employee, Ryan, that while they couldn't answer my request, there was a digital "press packet" available, which would hopefully answer my questions. Once I opened the packet, it became clear that there wasn't much in it that would help me on my quest to determine what, if any, religious or spiritual bodies Headspace might align itself with. However, as I read through the provided material, I noticed something interesting. Within the press packet was a section marked "HS Executive Bios". In it were short biographies of four company executives: Andy Puddicombe, Rich Pierson, Dr. Megan Jones Bell, and Sean Brecker (Headspace's CFO).

Clicking through each, it became clear that Andy Puddicombe's bio was doing something rather different than the other three. While Pierson, Jones Bell, and Brecker's summaries mostly stuck to their professional accomplishments and backgrounds, Puddicombe's felt more personal. This could be due to the fact that compared to the other three executives, Puddicombe's professional background is less 'traditional'--he pursued degrees in Sports science and Circus Arts, to say nothing of his ten years travelling and Buddhist ordination. Pierson, Jones Bell, and Brecker lend Headspace their collective professional acumen: their presence gives Headspace the authority it needs to appeal to investors and those who might be skeptical of meditation. Puddicombe's background brings something else to the table: what might be called, following Weber, charismatic authority (a term I will devote time to in a minute). If we look at Puddicombe's executive biography, we notice that about half of the information given details his personal life, before Headspace. The summary is quoted below, in full:

In his early twenties, Andy was a typical student, midway through earning a Sports Science degree. When life took a series of sudden turns, he made the radical decision to

give it all up and set off to Asia to become a Buddhist monk. Over the next decade, Andy studied as a lay-person and novice monk in the traditions of South East Asia, and then took full ordination in the Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. This life-affirming journey led to another when Andy returned to the UK with just one goal in mind: to demystify meditation and make it accessible to all. After several years in private practice, Andy had a chance meeting with Co-Founder Rich Pierson. Together, they created a vision for bringing meditation to people everywhere. Headspace launched in 2010 as an events company, and the Headspace app soon followed. Now reaching a community of over 60 million members in 190 countries through this platform, Andy, Rich and the dedicated team at Headspace are delivering on their mission to improve happiness and health around the world. Andy lives in Santa Monica, California with his wife and two children. Follow Andy on Twitter: @andypuddicombe⁸.

From this summary, the reader begins to understand Puddicombe as more than simply a co-founder of a company. In fact, we begin to see a sort of narrative arc play out: “Life before → “sudden turns” → “spiritual quest” → “enlightenment” → “missionary goal” → “realization of said goal”. Inasmuch as the other executive’s claims to authority were laid out in their bios through past job appointments and education (what could be called “concrete” qualifications), Puddicombe’s authority lies somewhere in that narrative journey. His lifepath is one that is largely incompatible with what most of us think of as the correct road to corporate leadership. He wasn’t trained in finance or business, and has no relevant degrees. However, he followed his own path--maverick instincts!--a hard-won feat, and one greatly admired, *especially* in the world of corporate myth-making.

On Charisma

⁸ *HS Executive Bios - Google Drive*.
<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1FjYSkIDFz1o3S4XnA1EBgcQspt4ODZEy>. Accessed 3 May 2020.

The term “charisma” has become such a stalwart of political and business jargon that its popular origins are perhaps largely forgotten. In his work “Economy and Society,” Max Weber defines charisma as the anti-bureaucratic, anti-patriarchal form of ‘legitimate’ authority. Bureaucracy and patriarchal authority, he argues, achieve longevity as a result of their reproducing the rational economic activities that build ‘normal routine’⁹. It is when those normal routines break down, or no longer provide the satisfaction or stability needed to maintain a certain level of societal contentedness, that charismatic authority comes out to play. ‘Charisma’, then, is defined as a specific gift of the body and spirit, often supernatural, and not accessible to everybody¹⁰. He goes on to write that “genuine charismatic domination therefore knows of no abstract legal codes and statutes and of no ‘formal’ way of adjudication. Its ‘objective’ law emanates concretely from the highly personal experience of heavenly grace and from the god-like strength of the hero”¹¹. Therefore, true charisma in this sense cannot be proved by a list of accolades or qualifications within an existing ‘rational’ system. A charismatic leader is someone whose legitimacy comes not from the ‘higher-ups’ but from an intensely personal, almost spiritual belief in one’s own power.

As might be expected, Weber notes a particular affinity between charismatic leadership and religion, particularly citing Mormonism, writing that “in the faith of their followers, the chief of the Mormons has proved himself to be charismatically qualified, as have ‘heroes’ and ‘sorcerers’”¹². Because his view of charisma is based in a rejection of traditional modes of order, he views the charismatic leader as being particularly powerful in times of both spiritual and

⁹ Weber, Max. *From Max Weber : Essays in Sociology*, Routledge, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bard/detail.action?docID=1111791>.

¹⁰ Weber, Max, et al. *From Max Weber*, pg. 245

¹¹ Weber, Max, et al. *From Max Weber*, pg. 250

¹² Weber, Max, et al. *From Max Weber*, pg. 246

material distress. So, then, how do mythologized CEO's fit into this model of charismatic leadership? According to Weber, charismatic leaders are inherently in opposition to any sort of orderly economic growth--a matter better left to the bureaucrats and patriarchs of old. In fact, they might be seen as arbiters of chaos. A good CEO, on the other hand, is someone who has a firm grasp on how the economy works and ideally is able to sustain and grow a company (institutions which tend to be hierarchical and orderly). Common sense indicates that a profitable company *would not* benefit from inherently chaotic leadership. Yet we consistently see corporate leaders treated as celebrities, willing to shine their personality outwards in a never-ending stream of videos, house tours, Ted talks, red carpets, and tabloid scandals.

Chapter Two: Analyzing App Store Reviews Using My Typology

In order to begin to analyze user experience of the Headspace App, I turned to the “Ratings & Reviews” section in the Apple App Store (App Store), which can be found on the home screen of any Apple iPhone. The App Store sells ‘Apps’, which are essentially computer programs or software applications specifically designed to work on a mobile device. Anybody who has purchased an App is eligible to review it in the store, regardless if they have ever actually used the app.

One may also rate an app by simply tapping the desired amount of stars in a 5-star rating system--Headspace currently has a rating of 4.9 out of 5 stars, with 586,464 ratings overall¹³. To leave a review, a user selects the option “Write a Review,” located at the bottom of the page. Once selected, a pop-up window appears, where you are prompted to rate the app, as well as give a title and write the review (which is deemed optional--the interface suggests a preference for those looking to simply rate). Once the review is written, you tap the word “send”, located on the upper-right corner of the window. After tapping “send,” another box appears, asking the user to “Enter a Nickname,” with an explanation that the nickname appears next to the review.

The use of nicknames here is particularly important--though Apple would ostensibly be able to link a nickname with an Apple account, there is no way for another user, browsing reviews, to make that connection. The nickname here makes the reviewer anonymous. They could write their name if they so choose, but they could also (as is most often the case) create a

¹³ when an application has so many reviews and an average score so close to 5 stars, one should approach the reliability of those ratings with a grain of salt, as it is common practice for corporations to encourage employees to rate their products on personal accounts--see recent drama emerging from the cosmetic company Sunday Riley being outed as encouraging their employees to post fake, positive reviews for their cosmetics on the Sephora website).

username with no identifiable characteristics. My decision to treat these reviews as a site of research is not without pitfalls. According to data from September of 2018, Headspace has 31 million active users. If we take the percentage of people who've rated the app (rated, not reviewed), we see that slightly less than 2% of app users take the time to leave a rating. We don't know the exact number of *reviews* left for Headspace in the app store, but I'd wager that it's less than 586,464 (the amount of ratings), given that reviews take more time to think about and require one to actually write.

Additionally, we have to consider what type of person leaves a written review. In all likelihood, you are inclined to leave a review for two reasons: either having a phenomenal experience, or a horrible one. Already, the user pool becomes smaller--we may lose out on those who have simply an average experience, or who just don't feel like taking the time out of their day to leave a review. Also, as has been noted many times, the anonymity of the internet can make people do crazy things. John Durham Peters, a media and social theorist, explains that the internet provides users with "low visibility," which "allows people to get away with vituperative modes of discourse they would never dare in person" (Durham Peters 199). The nickname function of the app store might allow users to, essentially, create false identities and project opinions that they generally wouldn't when their name was attached.

To analyze these reviews, I decided to create a typology, a system to classify data according to general type. In order to create this typology for categorizing and analyzing the Headspace reviews in the Apple App Store, I collected screenshots of the first 30 reviews that appear on the review page. The interface of the App Store makes it difficult to adequately capture and understand the scope of reviews available: once you access the reviews page of an

App, you come to a single page which scrolls seemingly infinitely. There is no way to reach ‘the bottom’ of the page, where the last review would be, without spending untold hours scrolling--there is also no way to see the number of reviews that exist.

In the course of writing this, however, iTunes updated their App Store, and refined the review categories. Now, you can sort reviews through four categories: Most Helpful, Most Favorable, Most Critical, and Most Recent. In order to refine my research, I decided to select the top five reviews from each group. Then, I analyzed those reviews and put them into my typology system, which consists of: (see fig. 1)

Personal Anecdotes/Testimonials, Especially Dealing with Mental Health	Feelings/Reactions to Voice	Religious/spiritual dimensions	Cost Concerns
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Fig. 1

Personal Anecdotes/Testimonials refers to anecdotes about the reviewer’s personal lives, and how Headspace has affected their lives. Feelings/Reactions to Voice is Of the twenty reviews I looked at, four were repeat reviews (four of the five ‘most recent’ reviews appeared in the other categories). For the sake of brevity, I will refer to the types in the typology as follows: Personal Anecdotes/Testimonials will be coded as Blue, Feelings/Reactions to Voice will be coded Green, Religious/Spiritual Dimensions will be Pink, and Concerns with Cost/Subscription/Updates will be Orange. I found that of the sixteen distinct reviews, five fell into the Blue category, five fell into the Orange category, three fell into a mixed category of

Blue/Orange, one into the mixed category of Blue/Pink, one into the mixed category of Blue/Pink/Green, and one into the mixed category of Orange/Green.

Though my sample size is small, I found this exercise to reveal valuable information: most reviews deemed helpful or valuable dealt with either issues of money, or of personal experience (much of which involved stories of mental health and overall wellness). There were only a few reviews in the pool that mentioned religion or religious practice outright, and a few that mentioned religious practice indirectly by calling meditation a ‘philosophy’ or ‘methodology’. Two reviews out of the pool mention Andy Puddicombe’s voice, with one referring specifically to the practice of guided meditation. And, unsurprisingly, a good chunk of the reviews were concerned with cost--namely, the idea that an App designed to increase general well-being should not cost money, as it is akin to ‘putting a price on happiness’.

Reviews

In order to analyze the reviews more fully, it only makes sense to begin looking at one in its completeness. From the category of “most helpful” comes a review, left approximately one year ago, by a user with the nickname “SublimePastTime”. The review reads, in full,

I’ve been using the app religiously for about two weeks. After a recent ADD diagnosis, I thought it would be a good idea to start working meditation into my routine, and was willing to invest some resources into the guided regiment on Headspace. The problem had been nearly consuming my life and I was pretty frustrated. I was skeptical of “guided meditation” in particular, because I thought that someone talking you through the meditations through your headphones might defeat the purpose. I also have trouble sitting still in particular. I have not been disappointed. The app explicitly states that it is not

intended to treat or cure attention deficit disorders, and I did not expect it to, but it significantly reduced the severity of the problem almost overnight. I am also a collegiate music student, and I saw a tremendous difference in my practice routine and quality of playing as well. The content is very well organized and the methodology/philosophy is explained very thoroughly in fun-to-watch animations. I feel the difference at work and among friends. I just now put the app on the main dock in my phone, right beside the phone, messaging, and music apps. It is now a rewarding and essential part of my routine

¹⁴.

SublimePastTime's review falls into the personal anecdote/testimonial category of my typology: they give a rather detailed description of how using Headspace has affected their daily routine. In particular, though, I'd like to highlight what is here a focus on mental health--in this case, their Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) diagnosis. SublimePastTime downloaded Headspace with the express purpose of helping them to treat and manage the symptoms of their ADD, which had been "nearly consuming" their life.

Though SublimePastTime never mentions exactly *where* they learned about Headspace, it seems like a safe assumption that they were aware of some sort of correlation between meditation and health benefits (more on this later). Meditation, then, is a tool for eliminating the potentially harmful, distracting stimuli of the everyday. It brings the body and mind back to a point of stasis. And, though they now use the App "religiously," there is no mention of any spiritual or religious dimension to their practice. Headspace is, in some ways, a medical intervention.

Many reviews, most of them short in length, fall into the type of 'cost concerns'. These are reviews on the App store page for Headspace dealing with issues of subscription,

¹⁴ SublimePastTime, "Now a Rewarding and Essential part of my Routine." *Headspace*. Headspace Inc, 2019. Version 3.110.1. *Apple App Store*, <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/headspace-meditation-sleep/id493145008>.

downloading, and cost effectiveness. Headspace offers a dizzying number of subscription packages: A student plan (\$9.99 per year, with proof that the user attends an accredited University/College that follows Title 9), a monthly plan (\$12.99 per month), a yearly plan (\$69.99 per year), a family plan (six accounts for \$99.99 per year), and a lifetime plan (a single payment of \$399.99). In addition to these ‘private plans’, Headspace also offers a corporate package, called Headspace for Work, which promises less stress (which includes burnout reduction), more focus, and easier teamwork (“Headspace. “Meditation””). In select countries--Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Netherlands, and the UK--Headspace offers a bundle package with the music streaming service Spotify. Signing up for a two-week free trial will automatically enroll you in the yearly plan after 14 days--and during those two-weeks, only a select number of meditations are available. All of this is to say that Headspace, unlike other meditation Apps available, is most definitely not free.

This is an idea that seems to divide the user community. SublimePastTime notes that they were willing to invest their resources into purchasing Headspace, as they saw the App as a potential treatment to their ADD. This attitude seems to be shared with other reviewers grouped under the ‘most helpful’ section of the review page. However, once you change the settings to show you ‘most critical,’ it’s another story altogether. One reviewer, nicknamed EdgarNoir, left a review entitled “Simply Dreadful,” awarding Headspace a measly one star. He writes,

I find it appalling that you have to pay to unlock the rest of Headspace. It’s absolutely atrocious when I saw that it was extremely limited to free users. Don’t get me wrong, I think it’s a perfect app for those going under major problems in there lives who are in need of relief. I just think it’s downright wrong to pay for happiness.¹⁵

¹⁵ EdgarNoir, “Simply Dreadful”. *Headspace*. Headspace Inc, 2019. Version 3.110.1. *Apple App Store*, <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/headspace-meditation-sleep/id493145008>.

EdgarNoir's attitude is not uncommon among those typed as dealing with issues of cost. He starts out strong: he is appalled that the free trial only gives limited access to the meditation library. And it does beg the question: What's the point of a free trial if you can't test out all the features, and don't know exactly what it is you're paying for? EdgarNoir goes on to characterize this practice--more strong language--as "absolutely atrocious". Something about Headspace's free trial setup feels deeply wrong to him. He then pivots, writing about how Headspace is actually "a perfect app" for those who need it (interestingly, he identifies this needy group as having "major problems", which might be relieved by Headspace's services).

EdgarNoir does not object to Headspace itself. In fact, he believes that it does its "job" extremely well. Yet, as his last sentence shows, it is the business practices of the company, and how they interact with its 'mission', which he rejects: "I just think it's downright wrong to pay for happiness". Headspace, in its mission statement, specifically aims to "improve the health and happiness of the world"¹⁶. What, though, does happiness refer to? Is it a reduction of "major problems" in people's lives? Is it complete control of one's mental capacities, or a worker's ability to collaborate well with others in a corporate setting?

Merriam Webster dictionary defines happiness as both a state of general well-being and a particularly pleasurable experience. It's etymology dates back to the 14th century, where linguists generally trace its origin to the Middle English word *hap*, meaning lucky (instances of this usage are found in Shakespeare's *The Life and Death of King Richard the Second* as well as in *Much Ado About Nothing*). Somewhere along the line, lucky--being on the receiving end of good fortune--morphed into generalized well-being. One might remark, cynically, that today

¹⁶ Headspace. "Guided Meditation for Everybody - About Headspace." <https://www.headspace.com/about-us>.

you're lucky if you're happy. Ostensibly, this is where Headspace comes in. One no longer needs fortune on their side: Headspace will give you the tools to create your own contented state of being.

Now, let's look at a review that falls into the type of "religious/spiritual dimensions". This type, somewhat surprisingly, was represented far less in the reviews I sampled compared to those falling under "personal anecdotes and testimonials" and "cost concerns" types. User Vinnieboombah left a review titled "Simple. Elegant. Fun." which reads:

It's so simple, elegant and fun I've been practicing again after years of not meditating. I've lived in monasteries and Ashrams, I've lived with and studied with masters from India to Snow Mass Colorado and yet I had stopped meditating in the past few years. I'm happy to be back and thrilled to share this with my 11 year old son. Thank you head space.¹⁷

The reason I typed this review as having religious or spiritual dimensions is because of the various practices Vinnieboombah mentions. Though they never specifically state an allegiance to Buddhism, Hinduism, or any other religious tradition that historically has utilized practices of meditation, Vinnieboombah mentions both monasteries and Ashrams and "masters from India". To me, this indicates a prolonged religious or spiritual practice.¹⁸In this review, Vinnieboombah gives an overview of their history with meditation, which included traveling to specific places of spiritual teaching and studying with expert teachers. We can infer that their practice was serious--it takes commitment and responsibility to live in and be part of a monastic or ascetic

¹⁷ Vinnieboombah, "Simple. Elegant. Fun." *Headspace*. Headspace Inc, 2019. Version 3.110.1. *Apple App Store*, <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/headspace-meditation-sleep/id493145008>.

¹⁸ Bruce Lincoln, building off of Talal Asad's work in defining religion, states that a proper definition of religion relies on discourse, practice, institution, and community being present within a tradition. Lincoln states that practice-dominant traditions were often disenfranchised by previous definitions of religion by scholars (particularly Clifford Geertz). Lincoln, Bruce. *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11*. 2nd ed., Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006.

community. They also mention Snowmass, Colorado (albeit with a different spelling), which is home to St. Benedict's Monastery, which is run and inhabited by a community of Trappist monks.

However, somewhere down the line, and for an unmentioned reason, their practice stopped. For years. And then, like a light beam shining down from the heavens: Headspace! How did they discover the app? We don't know--they leave that detail out. But it is simple, elegant, and--tellingly--*fun*. So fun, in fact, that they are able to share it with their tweenage son! Headspace seems here to be an ideal choice for somebody familiar with meditation, who's looking for a way to integrate the practice into their 'profane' life. It would be hard to travel the world and study with masters when you have a young child to look after. Even finding a meditation or practice center closer to home can be a challenge, depending on your location. Headspace offers up a solution, which is to take the master with you. He's right there, in your pocket! And the design of Headspace makes it easy for people of all levels of skill to begin a practice--the bright colors aren't garish, the font is large enough to be approachable and readable but small enough so as to not overwhelm, and Puddicombe's voice is pleasingly 'dry'--no wet or phlegmy sounds or unpleasant amplifications. Everything about the way Headspace is designed has clearly been meticulously considered. It practically says to the user: "here, let me show you. It's easy."

Now I'd like to take a look at the typed category of voice. Very few of the reviews I selected mention voice at all, which I felt to be striking given the ubiquity of Puddicombe's recorded voice among all the meditations, and how central vocal commands are to the actual performance of the meditation. Conceptually, one of the main functions of Headspace is that it

creates a ‘space’ that users can enter anytime, anywhere. This space is somehow separate from the stress or chaos of everyday life, and works to create what scholar Gregory Grieve calls the “ritual environment¹⁹” of the app. Part of the way that Headspace achieves this is through the use of Puddicombe’s voice. SublimePastTime, as quoted above, mentions voice briefly, which I’ll analyze shortly. But I’d like to take a look at a review left by the user apg1616. The review reads,

I love the Headspace app and I’m a big fan of Andy’s soothing voice. I’ve now meditated ~35 days in a row, something I was never able to accomplish through other meditation apps. The design is beautiful and I love the animations. My only feedback is that the courses are very repetitive in terms of the actual structure and guided meditations. While that’s great and I understand it’s helpful to have a similar structure, a 10 min meditation in a course on Happiness and 10 min meditation in a course on Managing Anxiety are about 85% the same except for about 2 min of the session where he talks about the topic. Take deep breaths, close your eyes, feel your room around you, focus on the breath, Andy talks for a min about the topic, bring awareness back to breath, body scan, let go of awareness, bring it back, done. That’s helpful for a very generic meditation, but for these very specific topics, I feel like there should be more techniques used and a bit more difference in what’s asked of the user. I do feel better and relaxed afterwards, but don’t really feel like I’m more prepared to deal with the anxiety. I know I’m more aware of it, which is part of the point, but is that the only point? Again, love the app, just hoping there can be some more added to differentiate and add more value for that topic.²⁰

Typing this review was difficult for me. Although the first sentence mentions Andy Puddicombe’s voice and one of its aural qualities (his voice is “soothing”), much of the review

¹⁹ Forbes and Mahan, *Religion and Popular Culture in America* / Edited by Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan.

²⁰ Apg1616, “Love the app--meditations are very rewarding”. *Headspace*. Headspace Inc, 2019. Version 3.110.1. *Apple App Store*, <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/headspace-meditation-sleep/id493145008>.

actually focuses on apg1616's experiences with what they see as the repetitive character of the meditations. They note some of the specific commands Puddicombe gives during a meditation, but don't write about the quality of his speech or how he sounds. Rather, it seems that apg1616 is worried that they aren't actually being *helped* by the meditations--referencing anxiety, they say "I know I'm more aware of it, which is part of the point, but is that the only point?". Apg1616 seems to be searching for something more. It's interesting to note that they specifically mention the command-chain that Puddicombe talks about when guiding the meditations. Gregory Grieve, writing about the meditation app buddhify, alleges that meditation apps transfer their 'physical' effectiveness to digital technologies through use of 'procedures'.

The Role Of Voice

In his article, "Meditation on the Go," he postulates that buddhify creates a ritual environment through user interface, which "indicates the junction between a person and digital devices and includes the screen elements, such as menus and commands, that lead users through an application"²¹. These specific screen elements create the impression that the user is doing something distinct from 'ordinary' life--they allow the app to draw the user into its world through a particular sequence of actions: clicking on an icon, scrolling through a list of commands, watching a video. Thus the user is able to toggle through their analog reality--perhaps riding the subway--and the calm, meditative reality that the app creates.

²¹ Forbes, Bruce David, and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds. *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, pg. 197

Grieve correctly points out that these processes derive from already existing modes of play in video games, which have long used command-chains as a way to introduce a player into the gaming environment. How, then, does voice begin to enter the conversation? Headspace differs from buddhify in that its primary mode of user interface is vocal, rather than visual. While there are visual commands (users must select which meditation they want to listen to, for example), the actual ‘ritual’ is controlled by Andy Puddicombe’s voice. The scholar Axel Stockburger usefully identifies voice, not visual components, as the primary method in which video games ‘suture’ players into the gaming environment. Often, a pre-recorded voice, provided by a voice actor, guides and directs the gamer through the game ‘universe’. Citing the example of the game *Max Payne*, Stockburger argues that voice is the primary medium of storytelling in games, which is a common method in video games for narrating gaming procedure. He writes that, through voice, “...we are confronted with avatar identification, information, spatial guidance, and general status feedback”²². The game-play situation is not that much different from a smartphone app, wherein a different universe is created digitally in order to draw the user in. The digital becomes, in a sense, a second place.

Elaborating on this, Stockburger cites the work of Michel Chion on “I-Voice,” which can be defined as a foreign voice that we project our identity onto, as creating its own space. Chion states that “...in order for the I-voice to resonate in us as our own, it can’t be inscribed in a concrete identifiable space, it must be its own space unto itself”²³. In other words, in order for a voice to work on us for means of identification, it must create its own sense of existence, of place. When we apply this concept to the digital more generally, we might find that a crucial

²² Stockburger, Axel. 2010. “The Play of the Voice: The Role of the Voice in Contemporary Video and Computer Games”. In *VOICE: Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media*. Pg. 287

²³ Stockburger, Axel. “The Play of the Voice.” Pg. 286

aspect of our enjoyment of digital technologies is this sense of “second-place” they afford. Headspace utilizes both visual and sonic cues to create the feeling in the user of ‘being somewhere else’. For an app aiming to create a sense of calm in its users, who are more than likely turning to it to *escape* their hectic temporal conditions, this feature is incredibly important.

For user SublimePastTime, this sense of place was what made the ‘guided’ aspect of the meditation work. They write that initially they felt skeptical of the effectiveness of guided meditation, as it seemed counterintuitive that a voice playing from their headphones could help them focus. Perhaps this feeling arises from an ignorance of meditation tactics, since guided meditation has a long and storied history as a meditative practice.

But if we dig a bit deeper, this worry may have its grounding in common understandings of the technologically mediated voice. If we look at the sentence in which SublimePastTime raised this concern, we see that it is not so much the fact of a voice guiding the meditation that seems distracting to them, but rather a voice *playing through headphones*. The guided meditations on Headspace, like many other media that rely on recorded voice, use “close miking,” where the speaker projects directly into the microphone with little space between their mouth and the mic piece, in order to create a high-fidelity sound²⁴. When you listen to a recording that has been done using close miking through headphones, you almost feel as if the voice exists within your ear canal. There is no auditory distance between the voice and your perception of it.

²⁴ Stockburger, Axel. “The Play of the Voice.” Pg. 286

Chapter 3: Exploring the Clinical Aims of Headspace

Sometimes people will sign up for a free trial using one email, and when the trial is up, they cancel and sign up again with a new email. Cost effective, maybe, but a lot of hassle, especially if you aren't getting the full shebang. Headspace's limit on the amount of meditations one can access under the free trial may possibly be a response to this practice--they don't want people who have no intention of paying for their product to be able to 'hoodwink' them out of their subscription money.

Many reviewers seem to view Headspace--and by extension meditation--as a tool for improving mental health. That perspective is wholly supported by Headspace's mission statement and marketing strategies. On the "About" page on the Headspace website, we find the statement: "Headspace has one mission: to improve the health and happiness of the world"²⁵. Health, here, is particularly important. If you look at the Wikipedia page for Headspace, you see that it is classified as an "online healthcare company, specializing in meditation"²⁶. What stake does a company like Headspace have in healthcare?

In the past twenty years, there has been a surge of interest in potential health (both mental and physical) benefits that might result from a continued meditative practice. Ever since a 2007 review conducted by the NCCIH--the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, a subdivision of the National Institute of Health (NIH)--looking at 813 existing studies dealing with physiological and psychological effects of meditation, found a dearth of

²⁵ Headspace. "Guided Meditation for Everybody - About Headspace." Accessed November 15, 2019. <https://www.headspace.com/about-us>.

²⁶ "Headspace (Company)." In *Wikipedia*, September 30, 2019. [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Headspace_\(company\)&oldid=918745622](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Headspace_(company)&oldid=918745622).

scientifically rigorous, methodologically sound practices within that group of studies, there has been an influx of studies attempting to verify connections between meditation and health benefits²⁷. Headspace considers itself a part of this wave, and is currently included in more than 65 clinical research studies, as well as its own in-house science team, which has published 16 studies in peer-reviewed scientific journals on mindfulness (NCCIH, “Americans”). One could look at Headspace’s participation in these studies, and existence at all, as symptomatic of America’s neoliberal²⁸ attitudes towards healthcare, where all responsibility for personal health and wellness rests on the individual, rather than community or governmental agencies.

Headspace and “The Scientific Buddha”

So how did Buddhist meditation come to occupy this place in modern clinical research? To trace the historical emergence of Buddhist thought and practice in America is beyond the scope of this project, but the idea that Buddhism is ‘sympathetic’ to a scientific worldview has been circulating for at least the last thirty years, and perhaps longer. One only has to look towards the legacies of the silicon valley tech giants, like Apple founder Steve Jobs (a noted proponent of the “zen” agenda) or the influx of mindfulness-based corporate retreats, like the “Search-Inside-Yourself” program offered at Google’s campus in Mountainview, to see varying

²⁷ “Americans Spent \$33.9 Billion Out-of-Pocket on Complementary and Alternative Medicine.” *National Institutes of Health (NIH)*, 31 Aug. 2015. www.nih.gov, <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/americans-spent-339-billion-out-pocket-complementary-alternative-medicine>.

²⁸ I’m defining neoliberal here in the loose sense of a mode of governance which embraces the idea of a self-regulated market, values competition and self-interest rather than community and solidarity and eschews public and social security in favor of private gains. A useful source on the many definitions and associations of neoliberalism can be found here: Ganti, Tejaswini. “Neoliberalism.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 43, 2014, pp. 89–104., www.jstor.org/stable/43049564. Accessed 4 May 2020.

Buddhist influence on the very systems and products that power our lives²⁹. But what kind of ‘Buddhism’ is being used here, exactly? It’s a question that plagued Donald Lopez, a pre-eminent scholar of Buddhism based at the University of Michigan, to no end. In fact, Lopez took so much issue with the sudden emergence of what he calls the “scientific Buddha” that he proposes in his book, aptly titled *The Scientific Buddha*, that the deity be retired from use altogether. However, in another of his books on the subject, *Buddhism and Science*, Lopez takes a slightly more sympathetic route, analyzing the benefits and shortcomings of analyzing Buddhism through a scientific lense.

One of his particular concerns is the number of clinical trials focusing on the benefits of what he calls ‘Buddhist meditation’. He begins the chapter “Meaning and Meditation” with a detailed, multi-page description of a particular monk’s processes of visualization while engaged in the Vajrayogini meditation, and ends with a ‘gotcha’ moment: the aforementioned meditation is not being attempted by the monk at a monastery or on an isolated mountain cliff, but in a laboratory in New England, monitored closely by a team of neuroscientists who are “seeking to determine whether [the monk’s] body temperature increases” at a certain point during the practice³⁰. And this experiment, as unusual as it might seem, is made even more exceptional when one considers the type of meditation usually categorized as ‘Buddhist’ by the scientists seeking to study it.

²⁹ Oliver, Joan Duncan. “Buddha in the Googleplex.” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, <https://tricycle.org/magazine/buddha-googleplex/>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2020.

³⁰ Lopez, Donald S. *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*. University of Chicago Press, 2008. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bard/detail.action?docID=432262>.

Lopez, seeking to make a point about the iffyness of assigning mindfulness meditation with the label ‘Buddhist’, argues that:

Research on meditation in the realm of cognitive science has taken two major forms. In the first, scientists seek to evaluate the efficacy (variously defined) or a limited number of types of meditation...yet most forms of meditation being studied are not the elaborate visualizations described earlier but practices that, from the Buddhist perspective, are shared by non-Buddhist traditions and that result in deep states of concentration leading to heavenly rebirth--but do not, in and of themselves, lead to nirvana.³¹

Although today the practice of meditation is popularly associated with Buddhism, the history of meditation in Asian Buddhist traditions is not quite so easily parsed.

Lopez astutely points out that historically, meditation was practiced almost exclusively by monks, not laypersons. And even among the monks it was not as common as one might think: Lopez cites Indian texts, Chinese texts describing the lives of monks, and Theravada cultures in Sri Lanka and South East Asia, respectively, as pointing to the reality that traditionally, meditation was only practiced by certain groups of monks, with others focusing on activities like study, service to the monastery, or hymns and sermons³².

One could go even further, like in the previously cited Theravada cultures, to indicate that traditionally, monastic practice is split, divided into those who meditate and those who study texts³³. So, then, to associate meditation exclusively with Buddhism is to run the risk of essentializing a tradition with many complex and varying practices, and to privilege ‘meditation’ over the study and dissemination of text.

And Lopez makes a further point:

³¹ Lopez, Donald S. “Buddhism and Science,” pg. 209

³² Lopez, Donald S. “Buddhism and Science,” pg. 208

³³ Lopez, Donald S. “Buddhism and Science,” pg. 208

Thus, regarding the phrase “Buddhist meditation,” one might ask: what constitutes a particular practice as “Buddhist,” as distinct from an element of a larger yogic tradition found in a wide range of traditions, including Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Sufism, or contemplative practice in Daoism, Judaism, or Christianity? The effects of meditation on neurological function are clearly a promising arena for research. However, the focus on Buddhism for this research appears as yet another manifestation of the West’s fascination with Buddhism--ever ancient, ever modern--as the most appropriate partner of Science³⁴.

According to Lopez, the meditation being studied in research labs, at its core, is only marginally related to Buddhism. Rather, the real relationship is constructed, in part, by the western view that among religious traditions that include meditative practice, Buddhism is uniquely compatible with a scientific worldview.

It’s a theory that certainly seems applicable to the guided meditations produced by Headspace. Although the company refrains from calling itself Buddhist outright, there is more than enough information provided--especially about Puddicombe’s training as a monk--to guide users towards the feeling that the meditations they are completing are related, somehow, to the tradition of Buddhism. As evidenced by the review left by user Vinnieboombah³⁵, the experience of using Headspace is comparable to that of studying in monasteries or ashrams, places which imply a connection to yogic and Buddhist traditions. Thus meditation, in the world of Headspace, occupies what might be called a ‘liminal place’: both Buddhist and not, both scientific and ancient. In Lopez’s book *The Scientific Buddha*, published four years after *Buddhism and Science*, he argues that the West itself holds a similar positioning on meditation as

³⁴ Lopez, Donald S. “Buddhism and Science,” pg. 210

³⁵ See pg. 23 of Chapter Two

Headspace does. In a chapter entitled “A Primer on Buddhist Meditation,” he begins by writing that

an essential element in the modernization of meditation is the claim that a particular form of practice is not ‘religious.’ it may be ‘Buddhist,’ in the sense that its origin is attributed to the Buddha himself, but it is not part of a religious practice, not bound by time or by culture. Yet, although meditation may seek the timeless, its practice originated in time.³⁶

He goes on to write a short but fairly detailed history of Buddhist meditative practices across Asia, and how the extremely sophisticated and diverse set of practices (or rituals, as he argues offhandedly is a more accurate referral) have come to be represented in the West by the figure of the seated monk with crossed legs and the term ‘mindfulness’. He traces this image with a deft eye, providing a history of the transmission of ‘mindfulness meditation’ from Asia to Europe and America that is crucial to understanding the practices offered by Headspace.

Meditation began to shift, from being a primarily monastic practice to one commonly held by laypeople, in Burma, about a century ago. In 1885, Britain colonized Burma, deposing the Burmese king as well as the “*sangharaja*, the ‘king of the community,’ the monk appointed by the king to oversee the Buddhist monastic community”³⁷. This led to a situation of widespread confusion and disorganization, and multiple individual monks took up the challenge of preserving the dharma without a centralized power. Two Burmese monks in particular, Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923) and U Narada (1870-1955) disseminated the practice of mindfulness and meditation to laypeople, with U Narada basing his teachings on the Buddha’s Discourse on the

³⁶ Lopez, Donald S. *The Scientific Buddha: His Short and Happy Life*. Yale University Press, 2012. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt32bfmc. Accessed 1 May 2020. Pg. 81

³⁷ Lopez, Donald S. “The Scientific Buddha,” pg. 97

Foundations of Mindfulness, albeit in a simpler and more easily understandable manner³⁸.

Mindfulness meditation then became extremely popular in Burma, and eventually spread to other countries in Southeast Asia, landing in India, where “youthful seekers from Europe and America enrolled in meditation retreats. From India, it came to America”³⁹. Thus, “the ‘mindfulness’ that is now taught in hospitals and studied in neurology laboratories is thus a direct result of the British overthrow of the Burmese king”⁴⁰. The mindfulness meditation that many of us are familiar with today, then, is the product of a very specific cultural and historical moment.

Mindfulness and Mistranslation

There is a certain irony to this fact, when it’s coupled with the ever-popular refrain that one of the chief aims of mindfulness is to help us to ‘live in the moment’. Part of this may be attributed to the fantasy that technology and globalisation remove the need for specifics of time and context: if everything is shared and simultaneous, the only time that matters is Right Now. Funnily enough, the idea that the present as the single most important sector of time is one that Headspace champions, perhaps inadvertently, through its meditations that focus on being ‘completely present’.

This phenomenon, which might be called “Be Here Now-ism” has roots in the transmission of religious and cultural practices from Asia to America, particularly in the 1960’s and 1970’s, when figures like Ram Das (an American spiritual teacher who popularized the phrase “Be Here Now,” and familiarized the baby boomer generation with the practice of yoga,

³⁸ Lopez, Donald S. “The Scientific Buddha” pg. 98

³⁹ Lopez, Donald S. “The Scientific Buddha” pg. 99

⁴⁰ Lopez, Donald S. “The Scientific Buddha” pg. 99

among other things) emphasized the importance of living in the present for a spiritually fulfilling life. Lopez argues that this rather one-dimensional representation of meditation is resultant of the rampant practice of mistranslation that has shaped Buddhism's transmission to Europe and America.

Sometimes these mistranslations were unavoidable--how could European scholars and missionaries hope to make the connection between the Buddha Sakyamuni (pronounced *Shijiamoni*) of China and the Gotama Buddha (or Samana Gotama) of Sri Lanka, when their understanding of the language and cultures were so limited?--and other times they seemed deliberate and devious: Take Father Athanasius Kircher's (1602-1680, German) account of the life of the Buddha, in which he describes the Buddha as having murdered his mother, despite there being no sources available to him to indicate this as having happened (And Father Kircher relied exclusively on written and oral sources, as he had never actually travelled to Asia himself)⁴¹. The issue of mistranslation is an important one, as it helps us to understand how we ended up with what Lopez calls the 'scientific Buddha,' the popularly recognized incarnation who is both a vaguely religious and secular figure, equally at home as a statue in a yoga studio as at a laboratory studying the effects of mindfulness on depression.

For a company like Headspace, the scientific Buddha is a perfect launchpad. Though Puddicombe doesn't come across as a cynical mastermind bent on exploiting Buddhism for his own personal gain, Headspace has undoubtedly benefited from a cultural tendency to minimize the religious complexity of the Buddha in favor of his more easily digestible cousin. It's existence allows for what Lopez referred to as a claim both to the ancient things of the world as

⁴¹ Lopez, Donald S. "The Scientific Buddha" pgs. 25-26

well as the modern. It bridges the gap between an attractive spirituality and a form of therapy, proven to work by science. The scientific Buddha allows Headspace to dance on this line, between affirming itself as indebted or affiliated to the religious practice of Buddhism and the cold, impersonal sheen of clinical trials and collected data. What emerges is a product that appeals to consumers on two levels: through its utilization of practices based in one of the world's oldest religions (so you know it works, people must have been meditating for a reason!) and its allegiance to the cultural arbiter of science (just in case you need more convincing that meditation works, here are 65+ clinical trials proving its effectiveness, *scientifically*). Headspace aims to work both for the skeptic and the seeker, and every person in between for whom a subscription to a meditation application costs less than a co-pay for a therapy appointment. It has its foot in both doors, so to speak.

Complementary Health and FDA Approval

Additionally, the market growth of the 'complementary health' sector (practices like meditation and acupuncture that 'complement' traditional western medicine) seems to be working in Headspace's favor. The NCCIH recorded a 14% increase of adults using meditation for medical reasons between 2014 and 2017, a group which represents the 8% of American adults (18 million) who used meditation from 2002 to 2012⁴². And in 2007, American adults spent a whopping \$33.9 billion dollars--out of pocket--on complementary and alternative medicine⁴³.

⁴² Clarke TC, Barnes PM, Black LI, Stussman BJ, Nahin RL. Use of yoga, meditation, and chiropractors among U.S. adults aged 18 and over. NCHS Data Brief, no 325. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2018.

⁴³ "Americans Spent"

In a press release for the survey (conducted in 2007 by NCCAM and the National Center for Health Statistics) that measured those expenses, the NCCAM defines complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) as “a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products such as herbal supplements, meditation, chiropractic, and acupuncture that are not generally considered to be a part of conventional medicine”⁴⁴. Although many of these practices may have historical roots that tie into a spiritual practice (herbal medicine, yoga, and acupuncture all come to mind), here, like meditation, they are defined not by their historical context but by the immediate function they serve as a part of the healthcare system in America.

Further on in the press release, the director of NCCAM, Josephine P. Briggs, M.D., is quoted as saying:

with so many Americans using and spending money of CAM therapies, it is extremely important to know whether the products and practices they use are safe and effective...this underscores the importance of conducting rigorous research and providing evidence-based information on CAM so that health care providers and the public can make well-informed decisions⁴⁵.

Clearly, interest in the scientific validity of CAM extends beyond the companies and practitioners who produce it, but regulating CAM products and services has proved extremely tricky, with so many flooding the market. Think, for example, of how many herbal supplements and vitamin bottle labels seem to come with the warning “claims not approved by the FDA”. Additionally, it can seem hard to wrap the mind around a scientific way of measuring what might be said to be a phenomenological experience like meditation or yoga. What constitutes clinical

⁴⁴ “Americans Spent”

⁴⁵ “Americans Spent”

success in those areas? A general feeling of well-being, an emotional release, a spiritual breakthrough? Is there even an instrument available that could measure such a thing?

Headspace has been aware of this issue for a while, and announced in June of 2018 its plan to become the first ‘prescription’ meditation application by 2020. In an interview on “CBS This Morning,” Andy Puddicombe and Dr. Megan Jones Bell discussed their plan to secure FDA Approval for Headspace. Dr. Jones Bell explained that “all of our current studies include much more robust measures, where we’re actually measuring blood samples of cortisol [and] using connected devices. We’ve moved into much more rigorous, multi-site, high-caliber research,” which includes a study on the effect of mindfulness meditation on chronic pelvic pain and work stress, as well as studies on the effects of meditation on diabetes, anxiety, and cancer-related stress (the diabetes study assesses the effect of three months of Headspace use on HbA1C levels)

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Beyond simply authenticating Headspace’s claim that mindfulness meditation improves “the health and happiness⁴⁷” of those who practice it, having the application cleared by the FDA would allow Headspace to be officially ‘prescribed’ by doctors as both a preventative measure as well as a treatment for a myriad of ailments. In some ways, a prescription to meditate marks a move toward a more ‘holistic’ healthcare system.

A common critique of what might be generalized as ‘Western’ healthcare is that doctors tend to be overly focused on treating symptoms, rather than exploring underlying causes and

⁴⁶ “Headspace Targets 2020 FDA Nod for Prescription Meditation App.” *FierceBiotech*. www.fiercebiotech.com, <https://www.fiercebiotech.com/medtech/headspace-targets-2020-fda-nod-for-prescription-meditation-app>. Accessed 1 May 2020.

⁴⁷ “The Science behind Meditation.” *Headspace*, <https://www.headspace.com/science>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2019.

preventative methods. Other healthcare systems, like Ayurvedic medicine⁴⁸, for example, traditionally look at the cumulative effects of a person's lifestyle on their overall health, seeking to eliminate symptoms by treating the *whole* rather than a specific *part*.

Prevention and Social Challenges

In that same CBS interview, Andy Puddicombe explained that he envisions Headspace to be a tool for users to prevent uncomfortable issues like anxiety or chronic pain, saying “we shouldn't wait to get to a point where the doctor needs to prescribe it. I'm a big fan of kind of preventative rather than treatment...I would strongly advise people, whatever they use, to learn meditation and use it as a preventative”⁴⁹. Puddicombe was himself diagnosed with testicular cancer in April of 2013, and has spoken widely of the beneficial effects that practicing mindfulness meditation had on his recovery⁵⁰. Illness and death, while the focus of much scientific study and medical research, are also existential and spiritual topics that greet each and every person at some point in life.

Many of us are reminded of these issues each time we take a daily blood thinner, or receive an infusion of chemotherapy, or take an antidepressant. In many ways, medical intervention is woven into the fabric of our lives and compartmentalized into pills or syrups.

⁴⁸ “Ayurvedic Medicine: In Depth.” *NCCIH*. www.nccih.nih.gov, <https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/ayurvedic-medicine-in-depth>. Accessed 2 May 2020.

⁴⁹ “Headspace Targets”

⁵⁰ Jenkin, Matthew. “Mind over Cancer: Can Meditation Aid Recovery?” *The Guardian*, 14 Feb. 2014. www.theguardian.com, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/feb/14/cancer-meditation-aid-recovery>.

Thoughts of death and anxiety may become linked to those mundane daily rituals, lurking at the edge of consciousness but rarely (if you're lucky) overwhelming it.

As a medical treatment, mindfulness meditation does the opposite--it asks practitioners to consider the darker parts of life as well as the lighter ones, and to sit with them and recognize their emptiness. In the *Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness*, the Buddha prescribes four objects of mindfulness: mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of the mind, and mindfulness of dharmas. Each object is broken up into smaller pieces, nicely explained by Lopez in *Buddhism and Science* in the chapter *A Primer on Buddhist Meditation*. Though the steps one takes to complete a meditative session on any of the objects are many, one of the primary aims of the four objects of mindfulness is to push the practitioner to realize the qualities of impermanence, suffering, and no self⁵¹. The four objects of mindfulness form the foundation of the mindfulness meditations that are perhaps more easily recognizable today.

Headspace's guided meditations, while not mentioning the dharma, do tend to push users towards a more 'balanced' view of the world, where obstacles may be overcome through their recognition. One of the most popular meditation "packs" that Headspace offers is the Grief pack, which aims to guide those experiencing loss through their suffering, ultimately creating a space for healing, a space for acceptance, and a space for letting go, as Puddicombe narrates in session 1⁵². Curious to know how Headspace would approach the topic of death, I listened to the pack, consisting of a series of 10-15 guided meditations. I was immediately struck by Puddicombe's

⁵¹ Lopez, Donald S. "Buddhism and Science" pg. 96.

⁵² *Headspace*. Headspace Inc, 2019. Version 3.110.1. *Apple App Store*, <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/headspace-meditation-sleep/id493145008>.

offer of condolences to the listener, followed by a statement on the universality of grief: everyone has or will experience it at some point in life.

The meditation then moved on to what might be called “awareness”: The listener is urged to pay attention to the quality of feeling in the body, the rise and fall of the breath, whether or not tears start streaming down the face. From there, one is encouraged to notice what’s going on in the mind, to recognize thoughts as they arise, and to try and let go of them instead of lingering. In his lilting accent, Puddicombe gently explains that meditation will not make the grief disappear, but rather help in the process of acceptance.

On the Headspace blog, Puddicombe wrote an entry about his decision to create the grief pack, explaining that one of his biggest inspirations was the story of a man called Joshi, who had experienced the unimaginable loss of his entire family when a flood decimated his home in a village in India. Unable to cope, Joshi went to live in a meditation center, where, through meditation, “he’d found a place of stillness and calm beneath it all”⁵³. Meditating had not eliminated the root cause of his suffering, or the pain he still lived with. Rather, it had allowed him to cope with the knowledge that his family was gone, and to find a place where he could both understand this fact as well as engage with the new reality he found himself living in. He still lived with the grief, but recognized it differently.

Puddicombe’s retelling of Joshi’s story serves as an analogy of how he views the purpose of Headspace in general. Unlike the Buddha, Puddicombe is not concerned with the organization of the world and heavens or even in truth, necessarily. There is no karmic law, no nature of being, no nirvana, no sense of justice. He does not mention the Four Noble Truths, or

⁵³ “Sitting With Grief: Finding Solace in Meditation.” *The Orange Dot*, 14 Mar. 2018. [www.headspace.com, https://www.headspace.com/blog/2018/03/14/grief-and-meditation/](https://www.headspace.com/blog/2018/03/14/grief-and-meditation/).

the Noble Eightfold Path. Those things, (though part of a rather generalized list) tend to be deeply important to the practice of Buddhism, and to how Buddhists might see the world. Headspace makes no such forays into the realm of the cosmological or spiritual. The goal of Headspace, plainly written on their website, is to improve the health and happiness of the world. It is a noble goal. But by invoking only certain elements of Buddhist practice, Headspace loses something significant.

Puddicombe himself espouses the importance of preventative treatment, which should in theory eliminate the need for the treatment of symptoms. And just what are the ailments Headspace aims to prevent? Many of them are chronic issues, physical but also mental. Depression, anxiety, heart disease, diabetes, chronic pain, cancer--the list seems to go on and on. And to Puddicombe--and Headspace's--credit, mindfulness meditation does seem to have a positive effect on these conditions. For example, a clinical trial published in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology* found that breast cancer survivors who practiced mindfulness meditation were found to "have increased calm and wellbeing, better sleep and less physical pain"⁵⁴. But where exactly do these conditions come from? Doctors, scientists, scholars, and government officials have long noted the link between poverty and poor health⁵⁵, and more recent data underscores the possibility that mental health conditions are exacerbated by the social isolation that seems endemic in current times⁵⁶. The point of this is to say that true preventative measures for the

⁵⁴ Jenkin, Matthew. "Mind over Cancer".

⁵⁵ Murray, Sally. "Poverty and Health." *CMAJ : Canadian Medical Association Journal*, vol. 174, no. 7, Mar. 2006, p. 923. *PubMed Central*, doi:[10.1503/cmaj.060235](https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.060235).

⁵⁶ "The Risks of Social Isolation." <https://www.apa.org>. *www.apa.org*, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/05/ce-corner-isolation>. Accessed 3 May 2020.

illnesses that Headspace hopes to treat must account for the larger systemic origins of health crises.

Issues like poverty and social isolation extend beyond the individual, and to try and treat or prevent them on the personal level is to ignore their true origins. Headspace's goals are respectable, but assigning the responsibility for health--already a fraught issue in the US, where most healthcare is privatised--onto the individual seems like a fundamental misreading of what it would mean to actually work preventatively. A person who struggles with extreme stress and anxiety as a result of unstable economic conditions might turn to Headspace as a cheaper alternative to traditional modes of psychotherapy. But can that be said to be a preventative measure?

Even when we look back at Puddicombe's retelling of Joshi's story, cracks begin to appear, showing us that his tragedy may have been more influenced by social conditions than not. Living in a small village in India, three of his children and his mother were killed when a flood swept through, leaving in its wake a dangerous layer of standing water. The stagnant water, filled with disease-causing bacteria, eventually infected his children and mother and they succumbed to illness. Unable to cope with the grief, it's implied that Joshi's father sets what remains of the house on fire and dies in the blaze.

To Puddicombe, this was a tragic instance of fate, an example of the grief felt universally by all people. Each of us at some point will experience an event so horrible we struggle to cope--grief is a great equalizer. But we can also speculate: perhaps if disaster relief or financial stability had allowed Joshi's family to relocate rather than continue living in dangerous conditions, their deaths could have been prevented. Of course, it's easy to say 'what if,' and life

seems to throw curveballs to everybody. But it's true that certain people, because of where they live or how much money they have or what jobs they must do to survive, seem to be thrown more curveballs than others.

The Line Between Intention and Effect

In his first sermon given after his enlightenment, the Buddha is said to have set forth the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths to his audience. Roughly put, the truths are: 1) the existence of suffering, 2) the origin of suffering is craving, or attachment, 3) there exists a cessation to suffering, and 4) the path to the cessation of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path⁵⁷. Every school of Buddhism accepts the Four Noble Truths, and much has been written and debated about them. The Noble Eightfold Path⁵⁸, which if followed should lead to enlightenment, is composed of the steps and behaviors one must adhere to. These behaviors do not *just* benefit the individual, however--a primary focus is placed on how the practitioner interacts with others and the greater world around them: refraining from working in trades that directly or indirectly cause harm, refraining from lying or hateful speech, refraining from killing and stealing, et cetera. The implication is that each action that a person performs has the potential to affect, positively or negatively, the entire world. There is no closed system here; a single drop of water can set off a chain reaction causing a tidal wave.

⁵⁷ "Four Noble Truths | Definition & Facts." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. [www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Four-Noble-Truths](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Four-Noble-Truths). Accessed 3 May 2020.

⁵⁸ Summed up nicely in an article written by Donald Lopez for the Encyclopaedia Britannica: "Eightfold Path | Buddhism." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. [www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Eightfold-Path](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Eightfold-Path). Accessed 3 May 2020.

As an ordained monk, Andy Puddicombe would have learned in great detail about the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. He would have been taught about the complexities of interaction, the interconnectedness of phenomena, and how deeply important it is for those seeking enlightenment to behave compassionately to other beings. With Headspace, Puddicombe of course is attempting to teach a skill which he believes to be beneficial to those who might not otherwise have the opportunity to learn it. However, in reality, Headspace's business model profits off of what might be called pre-existing societal conditions: economic inequality, lack of universal health coverage, environmental damage, the health disparities caused by systemic racism, xenophobia, and institutionalized sexism, et cetera.

Headspace didn't invent any of these problems, and ostensibly seeks to alleviate some of the suffering that exists as a result of them. But there are issues here, the most obvious being the high price of a subscription pack, which excludes any person who can't afford to spend an extra \$12.99 a month, or \$69.99 a year. Ironically, the category of those most at risk for chronic physical and mental health issues overlaps with the category of people who might struggle to pay for a subscription.

And Headspace as a company is not seeking to disrupt an unequal health-care system; in fact, they benefit from the private health insurance sector as well as the increasing abandonment of wellness to the responsibility of the individual. They operate under the conditions that they seek to change--productivity, anxiety, social isolation. I don't point this out to say that Headspace is an evil, hypocritical company. Watching interviews with Puddicombe and his team, the impression one gets is truly that they believe in their mission to improve the health and happiness of the world. But what is the difference between intention and effect? Headspace is for

those who can afford it--it started when Puddicombe and Pierson realized how common burnout was for people working in high-stress corporate jobs. And it's impossible to ignore how a meditation company started by a British man who left England to seek spiritual knowledge benefits directly from the British colonization of Burma. But one also runs the risk of essentializing or tokenizing Buddhism. After all, Buddhism is a proselytizing religion, and is practiced in so many different iterations and contexts that trying to protect its religious 'purity' is a misguided and potentially harmful goal that minimizes the agency of Buddhists and of the religion itself.

However, the existence of Headspace at all is indicative of a greater set of cultural patterns: digitization, globalization, free-market capitalism, and shifting attitudes about the role of religion in a 'secular' society. Recognizing these patterns means dealing with the complexities that accompany them, and the social conditions that make their implementation possible. If associations surrounding meditation hadn't been influenced by the scientific Buddha, it may have been much harder to widely market a product with such strong religious connotations. And scientific interest in the validity and effectiveness of religious practice probably would have looked much different, if it even would've existed at all. So how do we recognize the cultural 'moment' we're in, when it seems to be defined just as much by its tendency to occupy spaces that exist 'between' institutions and attitudes as by those institutions and attitudes themselves? Perhaps the best answer I can give harkens back to a commonly used meditation analogy. If one drop has the power to change an entire ocean, then perhaps the shifts in the water must be viewed with two eyes, one a telescope and the other a microscope.

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