

# 7

## MINDFULNESS AND CONSUMERISM

ERIKA L. ROSENBERG

Many Americans pride themselves on being informed consumers, that is, on making careful assessments of the items they purchase and how much they need them, and on comparison shopping for the best bargains. Indeed, the American marketplace is brimming with options for the ready consumer, so much so that even when deciding to buy a box of cereal, there are enough choices to fill an entire aisle at the local supermarket. Some brands are selected more frequently than others, reflecting better value, better quality, or better marketing. We have lots of choices.

Or do we? My argument is that much of modern American consumer behavior consists of automatic and unexamined actions. What and how much we consume stems more from unconscious choices than from mindful deliberation. Advertising capitalizes on this automaticity to exploit the insatiable need for fulfillment that burdens many modern humans in industrialized countries (Cushman, 1990; Fromm, 1955). How do we remedy this problem? Educating people about the consequences of consumerism is helpful, but people are not likely to act on that new knowledge unless they are ready to hear it and use it.

In this chapter I explain how the cultivation of mindfulness may serve as an antidote to consumerism. This argument hinges on two key points.

First, advertisers and corporations capitalize on powerful psychological processes to strengthen automaticity in consumer behavior. Mindfulness may enhance one's awareness of potentially accessible cognitive-behavioral processes underlying consumption that have become relatively automatic. It can make consumption more a matter of choice than of impulse clouded by the illusion of choice. Second, these nonconscious choices about consumption are driven by a need for fulfillment. Mindfulness might remedy the need for fulfillment that is endemic in modern society (Tulku, 1978), not only by enhancing awareness but also by increasing interrelatedness among people. Thus, the cultivation of mindfulness is offered as a prescription for reducing the destructive effects of consumerism in our society because it can alert us to how we are manipulated to buy particular products, increase our awareness of the implications of consumerism for the world, and facilitate connection among people. I conclude the chapter by outlining an empirical agenda for exploring this largely unresearched area.

### MINDFULNESS DEFINED

On the most essential level, mindfulness is awareness and the ability to see the happenings of one's inner and outer worlds. Mindfulness can be viewed as an ongoing process of expanding one's awareness to include stimuli that might otherwise be filtered out or not attended to, of becoming aware of the kinds of biases to which one's mind might typically be vulnerable, and of maintaining a nonjudgmental stance toward what arises in one's own mind (including emotions as well as sensations provided from one's own body and the outside world).

The notion of mindfulness has recently gained visibility in academic psychology through the writings of Ellen Langer (1989), but its roots lie in the ancient contemplative traditions of the East. Although mindfulness is cultivated by most meditative practices, the term *mindfulness meditation* typically is applied to a wide variety of techniques that derive from the Theravada Buddhist meditation practice of *Vipassana*, which is also known as *insight meditation*. Vipassana training is aimed at the cultivation of awareness and the application of sustained attention to understanding both the ways in which one's mind works and the impermanent nature of the phenomenal world. The training develops present awareness, nonjudgmental observation, nonconceptual awareness (experiencing without identifying or labeling the experience), and awareness of changes in conscious experience (cf. Gunaratana, 1991; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Nhat Hahn, 1987; Wallace, 1999). Mindfulness meditation practices do not directly encourage quieting of the mind; rather, they encourage the awareness that everything that may arise in one's mind—be it a thought, an emotion, or a sensation—eventually dissipates. The meditator is trained simply to note experiences as they occur,

without clinging to or ascribing value to them. These skills allow one to keep thoughts and emotions in perspective. For example, when one is sitting in meditation and a pain arises, one can simply observe and experience the sensation of pain, note its textures and qualities, and then carry on with awareness, rather than becoming overwhelmed by the pain, identifying with the pain, or catastrophizing it. Such observation frees mental space and allows one to see that feelings—such as pain—need not dominate one's consciousness or be self-defining. "In mindfulness, one is an unbiased observer whose sole job is to keep track of the constantly passing show of the universe within" (Gunaratana, 1991, p. 153). Mindfulness is inquisitive and curious or, as Pema Chödrön wrote, "mindfulness is an open-ended inquiry into our experience" (2001, p. 94).

People who are mindful are more aware of their thought processes, more deliberate in the choices they make for action, and less susceptible to the persuasive influence of others. Actions that originate from a foundation of mindfulness are more likely to be a result of conscious choice, that is, to be carefully contemplated behavior. Mindful behavior, then, is the polar opposite of reflexive or impulsive action.

In addition to the centuries of experiential evidence that mindfulness meditation is psychologically beneficial, recent empirical research has demonstrated the psychological and physical health benefits of such mind training. Forms of mindfulness meditation training offered in health care and other therapeutic settings have been shown to be very effective for the treatment of stress disorders (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992), chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, & Burney, 1985), psoriasis (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1998), depression (Teasdale et al., 2000), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD, Schwartz, 1997), and borderline personality disorder (Linehan, Armstrong, Suarez, Allmon, & Heard, 1991; Linehan, Heard, & Armstrong, 1993). Furthermore, after people learn these techniques, they tend to stick with them in the long-term (Kabat-Zinn & Chapman-Waldrop, 1988; Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995; Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998). These totally secular training programs work by teaching people how to relate to their mental experiences differently, by not clinging to destructive thought patterns, unpleasant emotions, or pain. Schwartz (1999) has even demonstrated that the application of mindfulness techniques to the treatment of OCD produces changes in brain circuits thought to be responsible for the disorder.

My argument is that the qualities of mind developed by mindfulness training can help people see how they are subtly induced to engage in consumerist behaviors. Specifically, mindfulness training can address at least two problems of consumerism: (a) the nonconscious psychological processes that are exploited by corporations and advertisers to shape consumer preferences, and (b) the underlying life dissatisfaction and the need for fulfillment that might be temporarily satisfied by consumption activities.

## TWO PROBLEMS OF CONSUMERISM

### Psychological Processes Support Nonconscious Consumer Choices

Most consumer behavior is automatic. In general, people do not realize how much they consume or how they have come to rely on consumption as a means of recreation or temporary fulfillment, because they examine neither their actions nor the underlying needs that are temporarily satiated by buying things. Advertising, in particular, uses nonconscious processes to make us want to consume by capitalizing on our tendency to be automatic rather than mindful buyers, by using the mere exposure principle, and by conditioning us.

#### *Mindlessness*

Ellen Langer popularized the concept of mindfulness in her 1989 book, which was a layperson's guide to de-automatizing behavior and enhancing one's flexibility of thinking. In that book and in her writings since then, Langer has drawn on her social psychological research on mindless behavior, or behavior that has previously been accessible to consciousness but has become nonconscious over time. She has shown that people often do things automatically without examining the instructions or even their options for action. For example, in a classic study in social psychology, Langer, Blank, and Chanowitz (1978) had confederates ask office workers who were waiting to make copies whether they could cut in front of them to use the copier. She manipulated the length of the paper to be copied (5 or 20 pages), the structure of the request, and the nature of the justification for the request. In one condition, the request was unjustified: "Excuse me, I have 5 (or 20) pages. May I use the Xerox machine?" In contrast, the justified requests either were based on real information ("Excuse me, I have 5 [20] pages. May I use the Xerox machine, because I am in a rush?") or based on placebo information: ("Excuse me, I have 5 [20] pages. May I use the Xerox machine, because I have to make copies?"). Note that the placebo request had the same "justified" structure as the request based on a real excuse, but the justification was meaningless. Langer et al. found that for the requests to make a small number of copies (5), people were more likely to comply with the confederate's request if it was justified than if it was not, but that there was no difference in compliance rates between the real and placebo justified conditions. This indicates that people responded automatically when presented with a "reason," but they did not mindfully attend to the reason. When the request was to make 20 copies, however, only the "real" information condition yielded compliance rates higher than the other conditions. Thus, when moderate effort is required of the people, they are less likely to respond mindlessly (i.e., when they have a stake in a situation and they are forced to think). These findings and others (e.g., Langer & Imber, 1979) substantiate Langer's (1989)

claim that actions performed mindlessly are potentially accessible to consciousness, given the appropriate conditions.

Other situations that tend to lead to mindless responses are tasks that are overlearned. Shifting a well-learned task from conscious to nonconscious status certainly has its advantages. For example, if we always deliberately thought about all the movements required to drive a car, we would probably have more accidents. It serves us well to make some things automatic, as excessive attention impairs performance of both motoric (Innes & Gordon, 1985; Singer, Lidor, & Cauraugh, 1993) and cognitive tasks (Langer & Weinman, 1981). Langer (1989) argued, however, that people fall into the tendency to automatize too readily. Only when given a reason to direct attention to their abilities (e.g., through the use of labels that denote particular skill levels) do people attend to task components, whether they are experts or novices (Langer & Imber, 1979). Often it is not in our best interest to behave automatically, and our tendencies to automatize make us susceptible to the effects of priming and other cognitive biases simply because we do not consciously attend to those sources of bias (Langer, 1989).

One can extend this logic to the study of consumption—the persuasive messages that compel us to buy particular products or convince us that we need rather than want certain products capitalize on our habit of processing information automatically or mindlessly. In this context, mindlessness might best be conceptualized as a mental set that predisposes us to manipulation by advertisers.

Marketing and advertising prey on mindless processing by both encouraging it and exploiting it. The enormously successful enterprise of cable shopping networks, for example, depends on people not thinking very much about whether they really need something before they buy it. Tune into a cable shopping channel at any given moment, and you may see two women explaining the urgency that you buy a “rare” porcelain figurine of Little Bo Peep right away, because there are only 56 left and look how many people are purchasing it right now as we speak (the screen displays in the upper left corner the countdown of the number of figurines being sold). Viewers who have watched the channel long enough to hear the pitch do not have time to consider whether they need this item or not, because if they take the time to think, all of the figurines might be gone. This technique exploits the less thoughtful viewer and encourages mindless purchasing. Later in the chapter (see section on “Mindfulness and the Problem of Automaticity”) I discuss research that shows that susceptibility to such marketing gimmicks can be reduced when people are more mindful (cf. Pollock, Smith, Knowles, & Bruce, 1998).

### *Mere Exposure*

In a series of clever social psychological experiments, Zajonc (1968) demonstrated that people prefer familiar objects. Zajonc presented abstract

shapes to observers very quickly—at near subliminal presentation speeds. Over numerous trials some shapes were repeated and others were not, but so many shapes were shown that participants did not recall seeing the “familiar” objects. Therefore, there was no conscious processing of these shapes being familiar. Nevertheless, if observers had been exposed to them previously, their ratings of how much they liked these shapes were greater than their ratings of totally novel shapes.

Mere exposure is one of many nonconscious processes by which advertisers convince people that they need to buy particular products. Using supraliminal overexposure (and perhaps some subliminal techniques, although this is a highly debated topic), advertisers capitalize on familiarity effects, that is, they capitalize on mindlessness. How often are we bombarded with images of a particular product over and over again? Why must we see the same detergent ad three times during a 30-minute program? Basic exposure is the easiest, least creative way that advertisers attempt to form our preferences. This may take the form of a brief television commercial simply presenting a succession of images of the product (with little or no verbal content), repeated commercials in a brief period of time on the same network, or more subtle, sophisticated techniques such as product insertions in major television shows or motion pictures.<sup>1</sup> Marketing of children’s movies or summer action “blockbusters” takes the exposure approach to an extreme: We are bombarded with action-packed trailers both on television and in theatres, commercials about movie-related products (e.g., the McDonald’s Spider-man Happy Meal), and endorsements of other products by movie characters (e.g., Spider-man eating Doritos). Consumer research shows that we prefer products or styles that we have seen more often, regardless of whether we have prior practical experience with the product (Baker, 1999; Schindler & Holbrook, 1993).

### *Conditioning*

It is through conditioning that we learn to think that we need to acquire particular products in order to be happy. Classical conditioning pairs the presentation of an object to buy (presumably a neutral stimulus) with pleasant or desirable “unconditioned” stimuli to create an association between the product and something pleasant. We eventually begin to associate the pleasantness with the product alone and our desire to have it becomes a conditioned response. An example of this is the typical advertisement in which a beautiful woman strokes and admires a new car while she sits next to the man who owns it. The desirable woman and the car appear together repeatedly, thereby creating an association between the two. Such processes clearly play a role in product preferences (Baker, 1999).

---

<sup>1</sup>Product insertion also draws on other powerful techniques such as modeling and reinforcement.

It is perhaps more obvious how operant conditioning can be applied to the same situation, whereby the behavior of buying the car is reinforced with the reward of a beautiful woman. Buy the car, get the babe. Anything desirable and potentially relevant to fulfillment can be seen as an associate or consequence of procuring a particular product: companionship, social status, popularity, money, or a beautiful home, to name but a few examples. Operant conditioning is prevalent in advertising and remains a very effective marketing tool (Peter & Nord, 1982; Winters & Wallace, 1970).

Mere exposure and the various forms of conditioning constitute processes of which we are typically unaware; that is, we do not always realize when we are being conditioned or when mere exposure effects may be building up. With both education (about how our minds can be manipulated) and increased mindfulness, however, such nonconscious processes may become available to conscious awareness, as described later in the chapter.

### Consumption and the Need for Fulfillment

The second major problem of consumerism that can be addressed by mindfulness involves the motivations behind consumption. Although there are many reasons why people consume, I am particularly concerned with the idea that the consumption of goods quickly but temporarily satisfies an underlying need for fulfillment. Although this is primarily a psychological thesis, the idea that a consumer economy creates a void to be filled is rooted in various social and economic theories that have appeared over the past century. For instance, Marx (1867/1909) argued that capitalism creates a false sense of individualism, one that exploits workers and leaves the populace susceptible to manipulation by manufacturers. Much later Simmel (1990) implied that money perpetuates this problem—the inherent flexibility of currency threatens the moral order by removing the personal element from trade. Money objectifies trade relations and contributes to the isolation of the individual. In psychology, Fromm (1947) proposed a personality type that can emerge from an isolated self in a consumer economy: the marketing character. People of this type have so lost a sense of inherent worth and connection to others that they have come to see themselves as a commodity. Seeing oneself as a commodity comes from a sense of isolation, which ultimately stems from the fundamental human need of interrelatedness that is not being met (Fromm, 1955).

These ideas that capitalism, a market economy, and consumerism contribute to a false sense of individualism receive an incisive hermeneutic analysis in the writings of Philip Cushman (1990). Cushman's psychological thesis is that the modern (post-World War II), Western self is empty. Over the centuries humans have moved from a more communal to a more autonomous existence, characterized by a lack of shared experience and meaning. Cushman attributed the movement toward this isolated sense of

autonomy to numerous historical influences, such as Europe's movement toward capitalism, the objective empiricism of enlightenment (which decontextualized the individual), Victorianism, and the industrial revolution (which brought us out of the farm and into the factory). Many of the ills of modern Western society may be linked to inner emptiness, such as low self-esteem, conspicuous consumption, absence of personal convictions, drug abuse, and eating disorders. Furthermore, emptiness makes people more vulnerable to the influences of cult leaders, charismatic political leaders, unethical psychotherapists, and the advertising industry.

Cushman's argument is most relevant to consumerism in terms of his discussion of attempts to compensate for inner emptiness. The empty self needs filling, so it is easy to influence and control. This is a major mechanism encouraging consumerism. Advertisers and major corporations seek to reassure or soothe us with products. Yet, advertising offers an illusory cure. Advertising cannot create a web of meaning like a rich communal, shared culture can, and so it substitutes what Cushman describes as "life style" solutions:

One prominent type of ad offers the fantasy that the consumer's life can be transformed into a glorious, problem-free life—the "life" of the model who is featured in this ad. This can be accomplished by purchasing and "ingesting" the product, which will magically transfer the life-style of the model to the consumer. By surrounding themselves with the accoutrements of the model, by ingesting the proper liquid while wearing the proper clothing, all the while exhibiting the proper shape, customers seek to "become" the model. The customer's problems will simply disappear when the magical transfer takes place. (Cushman, 1990, p. 605)

I would argue that the hunger of the self to find quick remedies for inner emptiness also fosters the illusion of choice in our buying behaviors. As illustrated earlier, a good deal of what underlies our choices about which brands to buy is a function of mindless cognitive processing. Indeed, what Cushman described as a "magical transfer" likely is fueled by such nonconscious processes as classical and operant conditioning. If people could wake up to the sources of emptiness, as well as to the ways in which their minds are being manipulated, the problem of overconsumption (and its destructive consequences). Mindfulness could also address the problem of inner emptiness by halting the feeding of emptiness with momentary fixes of new products and people turn to more enriching forms of fulfillment.

Cushman's (1990) argument that consumption and the ownership of things do not lead to real satisfaction in life is echoed by other writers (e.g., Durning, 1995) and is empirically substantiated. Although consumption may temporarily induce a sense of satisfaction with life (Oropesa, 1995), it offers little in terms of long-term life fulfillment. People from wealthier nations report higher levels of subjective well-being than people from poorer nations (Argyle, 1987; Veenvhoven, 1984, as cited in Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), but these differences may be linked with higher levels of equality and human

rights in wealthier nations, rather than possessions per se (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1996; Diener & Suh, 1999). Studies of less affluent nations show no relationship between happiness and ownership (Fuentes & Rojas, 2001; chaps. 2 & 3, this volume, discuss similar ideas).

American Buddhist educator Joseph Goldstein (2002) has made an argument similar to mine. He said that much of consumer behavior is compulsive and seems to be an attempt to compensate for something deeper that is missing. He also argued that consumer society preys on our need for more things, often "co-opting spiritual values to do so":

A recent automobile advertisement shows a handsome young couple standing in front of a new car, surrounded by all the latest consumer delights. The caption reads, "To become one with everything you *need* one of everything." (Goldstein, 2002, pp. 34–35)

Again, a lifestyle solution is being offered for a deeper problem, and it is doomed to fail.

## MINDFULNESS AS AN ANTIDOTE TO CONSUMERISM

Mindfulness provides an antidote to the problems of automaticity and the need for fulfillment. I explain how this works as well as suggest interventions promoting mindfulness and an empirical agenda for studying these proposals.

### Mindfulness and the Problem of Automaticity

Mindfulness is a powerful antidote to the human tendency toward automatic responding, which corporations and advertisers exploit in the service of consumerism. People can become more aware of psychological processes that previously may have been automatic, such as conditioning (Spielberger, Berger, & Howard, 1963), and less susceptible to advertising gimmicks that prey on mindless processing of information (Pollock et al., 1998).

Pollock and her colleagues studied the "That's-Not-All" technique (TNA), a popular trick of advertising that relies on a form of mindless, automatic processing. They found that when people are put in a situation that lends itself to more mindful thinking, they are less susceptible to the TNA. The experiment involved the "reduced cost" version of the TNA technique, wherein an item of an initial price is suddenly offered at a reduced price, as a function of a last minute change in circumstances; for example, "This cupcake is normally \$1, but I can let you have it today for 75 cents" (Pollock et al., 1998, p. 1153).<sup>2</sup> In the guise of a psychology club chocolate sale, Pollock et al. manip-

<sup>2</sup>The other popular form of TNA is the *added value form*, in which an initial offer is expanded to include extra items. For a comparison of the effectiveness of various forms of TNA, see Burger (1986).

ulated three variables: the size, and thus cost, of the box of chocolate (large or small), the influence condition (control or TNA), and whether participants were given a reason for buying the chocolates: no reason; the placebo reason that "this candy is made of chocolate and sold in this box"; or a real reason, namely, "These Sweet Shop chocolates are fudge hand-dipped in chocolate with pecans. Also, Sweet Shop has been in business over 20 years" (p. 1155). For the small (lower priced chocolates) box only, the TNA exerted a powerful effect on compliance, dramatically increasing sales compared to the control condition. Consistent with the findings of Langer et al. (1978), the placebo reason was as effective as the real reason in increasing sales compared to the no reason condition, but only for the smaller box. That is, this difference did not occur in the large (more costly) box condition. The authors reasoned that individuals relied on peripheral processing (à la Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) in the small box condition: When they do not have a large investment at stake, people are more likely to process information peripherally, and peripheral processing is more likely to be automatic or mindless. In the large box condition, the participants were forced to use central route processing, which requires more conscious deliberation and rational thought, or more mindful thinking. Under mindful conditions people were less susceptible to the TNA manipulation. One can reason that as mindfulness increases, people are less likely to engage in mindless thinking more generally.

The problem with the Pollock study (and many of Langer's) is that it is hard to know whether the people in the mindful conditions are really all that mindful per se. What degree of attentional focus makes something a mindful state versus just a conscious state? How does this mindful state compare with the type of mindfulness developed through a contemplative practice? Is it categorically different or just lesser in degree? The answers to these questions guide the interventions that are needed to prevent people from relying on the type of mindless action on which advertisers capitalize.

At any rate, it seems reasonable (and somewhat empirically substantiated) to assume that if one is less inclined toward mindless processing, then one is less susceptible to the manipulation of advertisers. Furthermore, if people are more attentive to their own experiences, to input from their environment, and to how they respond to that input, then they would be able to choose more carefully what to buy and when to buy it. This means understanding one's true needs (i.e., we really don't need everything that is marketed to us) and taking care to choose products that are better for us and for the planet. We can choose more socially conscious products, instead of those that are more convenient or whose names are more familiar simply because we have been exposed to them. We can take the time to discover which companies use methods of manufacturing that are less environmentally disruptive and which donate a percentage of profits to worthwhile causes. Or we might choose to find out how certain products are made and where they are made, so that we can avoid buying garments that were produced in sweat-

shops of developing countries or exotic rugs that are the product of child labor. With more mindfulness might come more attention to the negative effects of consumerism, and we might choose not to buy certain products at all, to buy less generally, or to recycle and reuse more in an effort to create a less disposable economy.

### Mindfulness and the Need for Fulfillment

Increased awareness improves one's chances of seeing the ways in which one is unfulfilled and how one's actions affect well-being. By learning to savor conscious experience as it happens, people can learn to appreciate the wonder of life and find a deeper sense of fulfillment with their daily lives, one that external pleasures—such as possessions, drugs, or sex—cannot provide. As Pema Chödrön wrote: "Mindfulness is loving all the details of our lives, and awareness is the natural thing that happens: life begins to open up, and you realize that you're always standing at the center of the world" (1991, p. 28). People can achieve greater relaxation, as well as experience an aliveness that enhances their appreciation of all they encounter.

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990; see also chap. 6, this volume), failure to find enjoyment is a function of failure to "restructure consciousness," to transform ordinary experience into potentially optimal experience. That is, the internal conditions of the mind are at least as important as external conditions such as income, the number of goodies one possesses, or health. Although Csikszentmihalyi uses the term *flow* to describe this state of optimal experience, he could easily be referring to mindfulness: "Some people enjoy themselves wherever they are, while others stay bored even when confronted with the most dazzling prospects" (1990, p. 83). Something can be done to enhance people's appreciation of daily experience, to heighten their awareness of their lives, and to make them less vulnerable to manipulation and false sources of satisfaction. People who engage in activities that are characterized by flow states experience greater satisfaction with their tasks (Csikszentmihalyi, 1989). People who are mindful, I would argue, experience greater satisfaction with everything. Although this assertion remains empirically untested, thousands of years of contemplative practice suggests it is true.

Mindfulness may also be related to fulfillment in terms of how it can facilitate connectedness with others. When mindful, people are more open to experience (Rosenberg, 2001), and this openness of mind serves as a foundation for opening one's heart (Chödrön, 1991, 2001). When we are more aware of our thoughts, feelings, and actions, it becomes more difficult for us to ignore the feelings and circumstances of others. In this way, increased mindfulness lays the foundation for increased compassion. Practices that enhance connectedness with others address the problem of isolation that underlies the empty self, as described in Cushman's (1990) critique. The cultivation of such skills should also reduce the magnitude of consumerism in

our society. In fact, several theorists have argued that increasing community and a sense of connection with others may be the best remedy for the sense of emptiness that supports the consumer mentality (Durning, 1995; Fromm, 1955; Kanner & Gomes, 1995; see also chap. 2, this volume).

In the *Mahayana* tradition of Buddhism, which is the tradition from which Zen and all schools of Tibetan Buddhism emerged, the cultivation of compassion goes hand in hand with the development of awareness (Wallace, 1993). It is not enough to be awake to the sources of suffering—one must also feel compassion for oneself and others and use that compassion to fuel actions that are beneficial to all beings. Compassionate action can counteract the destructive intrapsychic and planetary effects of consumerism by facilitating connection between people. When people are more connected, more a part of a greater community of human beings, then many of the problems of consumerism become more solvable. For one, people can realize that they are not alone in the sense of isolation that supports wasteful consumption. Moreover, such connection can help increase awareness of the predicament of our human condition on this planet and of the consequences of wasteful consumption for the Earth (cf. Macy, 1995). Mindfulness and compassion work together here: When we are truly awake and open our hearts to the condition of others, we cannot ignore the effects of mass consumption. At that point it is hard not to act.

## CONCLUSION: FUTURE DIRECTIONS

### Educational Intervention

Ultimately these ideas must be brought into the educational setting. Children can be taught methods for enhancing mindful thinking (in general terms), and schools can offer specific programs geared toward raising awareness of consumerism. Parker Palmer (1998), Linda Lantieri (2001), and Rachael Kessler (1998) train teachers and develop innovative classroom curricula for the cultivation of mindful learning, compassion, and connection. These educational innovators are attempting to show that children become happier, healthier, and more empathic adults if these principles are encouraged when they are young (cf. Glazer, 1999). Their goals dovetail with those of the socio-emotional learning (SEL) movement,<sup>3</sup> because they also aim to teach empathy and better emotional functioning to teachers and children.

---

<sup>3</sup>The SEL movement grew from the publication of Daniel Goleman's (1995) book, *Emotional Intelligence*, but was really an area of applied developmental psychology research for at least a decade before that. SEL research has produced school curricula that teach socio-emotional skills and tools for social judgment (cf. Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995).

Education theorist and innovator Parker Palmer runs the Courage to Teach program, which begins with developing the “identity and integrity” of the teachers (Palmer, 1998). Palmer’s program incorporates contemplative and other practices to help teachers learn specific skills related to great teaching, such as good listening, open-mindedness, trust, and connective capacity. Linda Lantieri (2001), a veteran of the SEL movement, developed classroom curricula for teachers and students, in which she aims to bring the “sacred” into secular classrooms. Lantieri drew on rituals from numerous spiritual traditions, ranging from Buddhism to Native American spiritual practice, to cultivate emotional competence, moral development, and interconnectedness. Similarly, Rachael Kessler taught attentional exercises to increase what she calls the “teaching presence” (Kessler, 1998). *Teaching presence* refers to the capacity of the teacher to be present in the moment, which Kessler argued can foster connection with the students. The work of these educational innovators offers great promise for teaching our children to be more mindful of their actions; to date, little has been done to empirically evaluate the effectiveness of these programs, but some research is currently underway.

Cultivation of general contemplative skills in teachers and students should help people raise their children to be less susceptible to the mindless behaviors that support consumerism. However, we can also offer programs specifically designed to educate children about the hazards of consumerism and how mindful thinking can help us be more thoughtful about how we act in a consumer society.

When I was in 6th grade in California in the 1970s, I participated in a program on propaganda. We learned about the methods advertisers use to try to manipulate our minds and became familiar with various propaganda techniques that are used to convince potential buyers to purchase products or services. Those lessons had an impact on me—the exercises were fun and the messages powerful. Currently there are no such mandated programs in the California public school system. Nevertheless, it should be possible to develop specific exercises for children that not only cultivate a mindful stance, but also teach them to recognize attempts to draw them toward particular products. Furthermore, parents and teachers can educate children to adopt behaviors that discourage mindless consumerism by viewing less commercial television, practicing mindful purchasing habits, and turning children’s innate curiosity toward the natural world and away from possessions and television. A radical approach is to adopt the philosophy of Waldorf schools, which requires all students and their families to abstain from watching television and to avoid contact with many forms of media. Parental co-viewing with children when they do watch TV—to mute commercials or explain why commercials are unpleasant and manipulative—may be more tenable for most families than banning TV viewing altogether, and it can be particularly instructive in helping children realize what advertising is all about. Even doing this in the classroom with older kids (5th grade and higher) could be very instructive and would likely

make a lasting impression. These ideas all merit further study as possible means of reducing blatant consumerism and heightening awareness of the hidden forces that support consumer behavior in our society.

### Ways to Enhance Mindfulness

Typically, mindfulness training involves extended contemplative practice. People often enter into such types of practices through various forms of Buddhist meditation. Contemplative development of mindfulness need not be a spiritual undertaking, however. A secularized version of mindfulness meditation training, Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), is a unique package of sitting meditation (which emphasizes breath awareness; nonattachment to thoughts, emotions, and sensations; and regular bringing of one's attention back to one's breath), body scan (moving one's attention down the body, from head to toe, attending to the various sensations), and Hatha yoga (stretches and postures designed for enhancing awareness and strengthening muscles and improving balance). MBSR has gained attention worldwide for its effectiveness in managing anxiety, stress, and chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1998). In fact, a major health maintenance organization now offers MBSR training programs to its clients as part of a wellness program.

A different and considerably less time-consuming approach to enhancing "mindfulness" is that taken by Langer. She has shown that giving people simple instructions on how to become more engaged with tasks and to have more control over one's environment (which she labels a type of mindfulness training, although it differs considerably from the contemplative sort) can enhance longevity and lead to more successful aging (Alexander, Langer, Newman, Chandler, & Davies, 1989; Langer, Beck, Janoff-Bulman, & Timko, 1984). It is not clear whether the type of mindfulness Langer manipulated in her studies is at all comparable to that developed by more extensive meditation training. Are Langer and others who have taken a social psychological approach to mindfulness (e.g., Pollock et al., 1998) really developing mindfulness, or are they just subtly manipulating the allocation of attentional resources? Whatever the case, both ways of increasing awareness offer promise for reducing human susceptibility to the coercion and manipulation that underlie much of consumer culture. Specifically, people can be taught to recognize how they are manipulated by advertising, how they can make more choices about whether to consume, and how they can better understand motives underlying consumer behavior.

### An Empirical Agenda

Researchers have shown that mindfulness training improves a variety of physical and mental health problems (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992; Kabat-Zinn et

al., 1998; Teasdale et al., 2000), and, more recently, that it leads to significant reduction in stress in normal adults (Williams, Kolar, Reger, & Pearson, 2001). However, much work remains to be done to show the benefits of mindfulness training in terms of improving life satisfaction. Furthermore, with the exception of a single study on how mindfulness affects susceptibility to a popular advertising technique (Pollock et al., 1998), no work to date has explored the relationship between mindfulness and consumer attitudes or behavior. Yet several ideas raised in this chapter offer many possibilities for empirical study. One important question is whether mindfulness training reduces consumption—through increasing awareness both of how advertising manipulates our consumer behavior and of how we learn to turn to consumption as a means of temporary fulfillment in life. More generally, how are life satisfaction and well-being related to mindfulness and the development of awareness and compassion skills? Does teaching people these skills foster a sense of connectedness? One could direct these questions specifically to issues of consumerism to determine whether teaching people mindfulness skills changes their consumer behavior. What about offering special instructions to heighten awareness of consumer manipulation, either through in-depth mindfulness training or shorter mindfulness interventions? Might the additional attentional resources available with the enhancement of mindfulness help people become more resistant to the persuasive techniques used by advertisers? For example, it would be particularly interesting to see whether mindfulness helps mitigate against the automaticity involved in influential communications (Cialdini, 2001) and decreases the likelihood that individuals are influenced by peripheral routes of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Questions about mindfulness could also be applied to special problems or contexts of consumerism; for example, does Internet buying (or any type of impulse buying for that matter) rely on mindless processing, and can it be reduced by mindfulness training? After research has established whether mindfulness training is helpful, programs can be implemented to disseminate this training widely.

Given the improbability of our culture moving away from a consumerist orientation, it is vitally important that we uncover methods for dealing with the harmful effects of consumption. We need not only to heal the wounds to our minds and our planet that are caused by massive consumption, but also to cultivate ways to consume more mindfully. Researching the problem of consumerism offers good opportunity to recommend the psychological benefits of mindfulness training and may help serve as a rationale for including this type of training in a broad range of educational programs. One can envision mindfulness training moving into the public schools the way the SEL movement has begun to permeate elementary and secondary school curricula. Many teachers of Buddhist meditation in the West have argued that the development of mindfulness can be helpful to everyone, regardless of spiritual persuasion, and it need not require any type of religious commitment. It simply requires a sincere desire to open one's eyes.

## REFERENCES

- Alexander, C. N., Langer, E. J., Newman, R. I., Chandler, H. M., & Davies, J. L. (1989). Transcendental meditation, mindfulness, and longevity: An experimental study with the elderly. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *57*, 950-964.
- Argyle, M. (1987). *The psychology of happiness*. London: Methuen.
- Baker, W. E. (1999). When can affective conditioning and mere exposure directly influence brand choice? *Journal of Advertising*, *28*, 31-46.
- Burger, J. M. (1986). Increasing compliance by improving the deal: The that's-not-all technique. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *51*, 277-283.
- Chödrön, P. (1991). *The wisdom of no escape*. Boston: Shambala Publications.
- Chödrön, P. (2001). *The places that scare you*. Boston: Shambala Publications.
- Cialdini, R. B. (2001). *Influence: Science and practice* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1989). Optimal experience in work and leisure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *56*, 815-822.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Cushman, P. (1990). Why the self is empty: Toward a historically situated psychology. *American Psychologist*, *45*, 599-611.
- Diener, E., Diener, M., & Diener, C. (1996). Factors predicting the subjective well-being of nations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*, 851-864.
- Diener, E., & Suh, E. M. (1999). National differences in subjective well-being. In D. Kahneman, E. Diener, & N. Schwartz (Eds.), *Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology* (pp. 434-450). New York: Russell Sage.
- Durning, A. T. (1995). Are we happy yet? In T. Roszak, M. E. Gomes, & A. D. Kanner (Eds.), *Ecopsychology* (pp. 68-76). San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Fromm, E. (1947). *Man for himself: An inquiry into the psychology of ethics*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.
- Fromm, E. (1955). *The sane society*. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Books.
- Fuentes, N., & Rojas, M. (2001). Economic theory and subjective well-being: Mexico. *Social Indicators Research*, *53*, 289-314.
- Glazer, S. (Ed.). (1999). *The heart of learning*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam.
- Goldstein, J. (2002). *One dharma*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Greenberg, M. T., Kusche, C. A., Cook, E. T., & Quamma, J. P. (1995). Promoting emotional competence in school-aged children: The effects of the PATHS curriculum. *Development and Psychopathology*, *7*, 117-136.
- Gunaratana, H. (1991). *Mindfulness in plain English*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications.

- Innes, J. M., & Gordon, M. J. (1985). The effects of mere presence and a mirror on performance of motor tasks. *Journal of Social Psychology, 125*, 479-484.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). *Full catastrophe living*. New York: Delacourt Press.
- Kabat-Zinn, J., & Chapman-Waldrop, A. (1988). Compliance with an outpatient stress reduction program: Rates and predictors of program completion. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 11*, 333-352.
- Kabat-Zinn, J., Lipworth, L., & Burney, R. (1985). The clinical use of mindfulness meditation for the self-regulation of chronic pain. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 8*, 163-190.
- Kabat-Zinn, J., Massion, A. O., Kristeller, J., Peterson, L. G., Fletcher, K. E., Pbert, L., et al. (1992). Effectiveness of a meditation-based stress reduction program in the treatment of anxiety disorders. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 149*, 936-943.
- Kabat-Zinn, J., Wheeler, E., Light, T., Skillings, A., Scharf, M. J., Cropley, T. G., et al. (1998). Influence of a mindfulness meditation-based stress reduction intervention on rates of clearing in patients with moderate to severe psoriasis undergoing phototherapy (UVB) and photochemotherapy (PUVA). *Psychosomatic Medicine, 60*, 625-632.
- Kanner, A. D., & Gomes, M. E. (1995). The all-consuming self. In T. Roszak, M. E. Gomes, & A. D. Kanner (Eds.), *Ecopsychology* (pp. 77-91). San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Kessler, R. (1998, June). The teaching presence. *The Forum, 35*. Retrieved April 21, 2003, from <http://ncip.org/articles/Presence.html>
- Langer, E. J. (1989). *Mindfulness*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Langer, E. J., Beck, P., Janoff-Bulman, R., & Timko, C. (1984). An exploration of the relationships among mindfulness, longevity, and senility. *Academic Psychology Bulletin, 6*, 211-226.
- Langer, E. J., Blank, A., & Chanowitz, B. (1978). The mindlessness of ostensibly thoughtful action: The role of "placebic" information in interpersonal interaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 36*, 635-642.
- Langer, E. J., & Imber, L. G. (1979). When practice makes imperfect: Debilitating effects of overlearning. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 37*, 2014-2024.
- Langer, E. J., & Weinman, C. (1981). When thinking disrupts intellectual performance: Mindfulness on an overlearned task. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 7*, 241-243.
- Lantieri, L. (Ed.). (2001). *Schools with spirit: Nurturing the inner lives of children and teachers*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Linehan, M. M., Armstrong, H. E., Suarez, A., Allmon, D., & Heard, H. L. (1991). Cognitive-behavioral treatment of chronically parasuicidal borderline patients. *Archives of General Psychiatry, 48*, 1060-1064.
- Linehan, M. M., Heard, H. L., & Armstrong, H. E. (1993). Naturalistic follow-up of a behavioral treatment for chronically parasuicidal borderline patients. *Archives of General Psychiatry, 50*, 971-974.

- Macy, J. R. (1995). Working through environmental despair. In T. Roszak, M. E. Gomes, & A. D. Kanner (Eds.), *Ecopsychology* (pp. 240–262). San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Marx, K. (1909). *Capital* (E. Unterman, Trans.). Chicago: C. H. Kerr. (Original work published 1867)
- Miller, J. J., Fletcher, K. E., & Kabat-Zinn, J. (1995). Three-year follow-up and clinical implications of a mindfulness meditation-based stress reduction intervention in the treatment of anxiety disorders. *General Hospital Psychiatry, 17*, 192–200.
- Nhat Hahn, T. (1987). *The miracle of mindfulness*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Oropesa, R. S. (1995). Consumer possessions, consumer passions, and subjective well-being. *Sociological Forum, 10*, 215–244.
- Palmer, P. J. (1998) *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Peter, J. P., & Nord, W. R. (1982). A clarification and extension of operant conditioning principles in marketing. *Journal of Marketing, 46*, 102–107.
- Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). *Communication and persuasion: Central and peripheral routes to attitude change*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Pollock, C. L., Smith, S. D., Knowles, E. S., & Bruce, H. J. (1998). Mindfulness limits compliance with the "that's-not-all" technique. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 24*, 1153–1157.
- Rosenberg, E. L. (2001). *The development of the mindfulness inventory*. Unpublished manuscript, College of William & Mary.
- Schindler, R. M., & Holbrook, M. B. (1993). Critical periods in the development of men's and women's tastes in personal appearance. *Psychology and Marketing, 10*, 549–564.
- Schwartz, J. (1997). *Brain lock: Free yourself from obsessive-compulsive behavior*. New York: Harper.
- Schwartz, J. M. (1999). First steps toward a theory of mental force: PET imaging of systematic cerebral changes after psychological treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder. In S. R. Hameroff, A. W. Kaszniak, & D. J. Chalmers (Eds.), *Toward a science of consciousness III: The third Tucson discussions and debates*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Shapiro, S. L., Schwartz, G. E., & Bonner, G. (1998). Effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction on medical and premedical students. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 21*, 581–599.
- Simmel, G. (1990). *The philosophy of money*. London: Routledge.
- Singer, R. N., Lidor, R., & Cauraugh, J. H. (1993). To be aware or not aware? What to think about while learning and performing a motor skill. *Sports Psychologist, 7*, 19–30.
- Spielberger, C. D., Berger, A., & Howard, K. (1963). Conditioning of verbal behavior as a function of awareness, need for social approval, and motivation to receive reinforcement. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 67*, 241–248.

- Teasdale, J. D., Segal, Z., Williams, M. G., Ridgeway, V. A., Soulsby, J. M., & Lau, M. A. (2000). Prevention of relapse/recurrence in major depression by mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 68*, 615-623.
- Tulku, T. (1978). *Openness mind*. Berkeley, CA: Dharma Publishing.
- Wallace, B. A. (1993). *Tibetan Buddhism from the ground up*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Wallace, B. A. (1999). *Boundless heart: The cultivation of the four immeasurables*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion.
- Williams, K. A., Kolar, M. M., Reger, B. E., & Pearson, J. C. (2001). Evaluation of a wellness-based mindfulness stress reduction intervention: A controlled trial. *American Journal of Health Promotion, 15*, 422-432.
- Winters, L. C., & Wallace, W. H. (1970). On operant conditioning techniques. *Journal of Advertising Research, 10*, 39-45.
- Zajonc, R. B. (1968). Attitudinal effects of mere exposure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 9*, 1-27.