

## **Twenty-first Century Spirituality**

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Humanities

Philosophy

*'Even so, we should not forget and must always keep in mind the fact that this requirement to care for the self, this practice—or rather, the set of practices in which the care for the self will appear—is actually rooted in very old practices, in ways of acting and types and modalities of experience that constituted its historical basis well before Plato and even Socrates. That the truth cannot be attained without a certain practice, or set of fully specified practices, which transform the subject's mode of being, change its given mode of being, and modify it by transfiguring it, is a pre-philosophical theme which gave rise to many more or less ritualized procedures'<sup>1</sup> – Michel Foucault.*

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The hermeneutics of the subject: Lectures at college de France*, introduction by Arnold, I, Davidson, 29.

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## Summary

Foucault shows that the subject always is in a certain relation to truth. Historically, this relation between subject and truth has seen a shift from a culture that demanded a transformation of the subject to have access to truth, to a culture where truth became associated with knowledge.

Foucault suggests that the transformative demands for the subject to have access to truth will completely vanish and make way for the cultural conception of truth as empirical and scientific knowledge, that is, without demands on the level of the subject to be able to know. Foucault traces the beginning of this shift to a conceptual moment in the history of thought called: *the Cartesian moment*. This signifies the moment where truth, or knowledge of truth, and its corresponding transforming practices became disconnected. The *Modern Age* is characterized by a complete separation of truth and practices that emphasize a transformation of the subject.

But as we move into modern times we still find examples of, at least former, transformational practices with ancient roots, some of which are subject to scientific research. This opens the possibility of a scientific approach to our understanding of transformational practices. Mindfulness, and specifically Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction courses, will serve as a case to be interpreted as a spiritual practice in Foucault's framework. This will make it possible to argue that transformative practices might still be significant in two ways: first, as a simple means to get a happier life. In this case spiritual practices will only be used insofar Foucault's modern condition of truth is satisfied, namely scientifically, within our faculty of knowing, shown to make one happy. Second, as they were meant to be: happiness and access to truth acquired by transforming the subject.

## Introduction

Over the past years, mindfulness has seen a large increase in scientific interest. Both psychology and psychiatry are becoming more aware of the potential benefits.<sup>2</sup> There are a variety of hospitals and clinics around the world that offer forms of mindfulness as a means to become and stay happy.<sup>3</sup> Since the time of the Buddha, mindfulness has seen a variety of definitions.<sup>4</sup> Initially, mindfulness is found in the description of *'The noble eight fold path'*, which is the fourth reality of the *'Four true realities for the spiritually ennobled'*, fundamental in Buddhism. John Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic and Center for Mindfulness at the university of Massachusetts and the specific spiritual practice that we will look at, defines mindfulness as *'...awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally.'*<sup>5</sup> Thus, mindfulness seems to be something that an individual performs. It is a practice, concerned with the present moment which constitutes some form of awareness. It requires an effort since the mind has a habit of pulling our awareness to thoughts about past or future away from the present moment. An individual aiming at the kind of awareness that arises through *'paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally,'* is not concerned with the content of thoughts but rather with his or her own subjectivity. While the individual is aware that he or she also feels and thinks, the practice of mindfulness is more concerned with one's sense of individuality. In this sense it can be called a spiritual practice as Foucault and Hadot define it.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of spirituality may not be appealing to the modern analytical and scientific mind compared to the times when most spiritual practices were formed<sup>7</sup>, but there is a growing body of scientific research that seem to validate some of the claims and implications of spiritual practices.

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<sup>2</sup> Greg Flaxman, Lisa Flook, *Brief summary of mindfulness research* (Mindful Awareness Research Centre: UCLA, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Edo Shonin, William van Gordon, Mark D. Griffiths, *Mindfulness-based interventions: towards mindful clinical integration*, (Nottingham: Frontiers in Psychology, 2013), 4, 194, <http://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00194>

<sup>4</sup> A comprehensive list can be found on: <https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/what-is-mindfulness-definition/>.

<sup>5</sup> John Kabat-Zinn, *Full catastrophe living*, (New-York: Dell Publishing, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *The hermeneutics of the subject: Lectures at college de France*, introduction by Arnold, I, Davidson, introduction, xxIII. 'We will call "spirituality" the set of these pursuits, practices, and experiences, which may be purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence, etcetera, which are not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject's very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth.' Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy; <http://www.iep.utm.edu/hadot/#H5>: 'Hadot's use of the adjective "spiritual" (or sometimes "existential") indeed aims to capture how these practices, like devotional practices in the religious traditions, are aimed at generating and reactivating a constant way of living and perceiving [...] despite the distractions, temptations, and difficulties of life. For this reason, they call upon far more than "reason alone."'

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *The hermeneutics of the subject*, 46.

In order to understand the relation between subject and truth and how mindfulness can be the topic of scientific research, it is helpful to start with Foucault's *Hermeneutics of the subject*.<sup>8</sup> Foucault distinguishes two major 'cultures': In the first, the subject's relation to truth is characterized by the conception that one has to make use of spiritual practices so that a transformation can take place in the subject itself.<sup>9</sup> This transformation is required to have access to truth.<sup>10</sup> In the second culture, the subject is in relation to a truth which is characterized as empirical, scientific knowledge.<sup>11</sup> This truth is objectively defined within our knowing faculty. Foucault sees a historical shift from the first to the second culture: *'We can say that we enter the modern age (I mean, the history of truth enters its modern period) when it is assumed that what gives access to the truth, the condition for the subject's access to the truth, is knowledge (connaissance) and knowledge alone.. [...]. That is to say, it is when the philosopher (or the scientist, or simply someone who seeks the truth ) can recognize the truth and have access to it in himself and through his acts of knowledge alone, without anything else being demanded of him and without his having to alter or change in any way his being as subject.'*<sup>12</sup>

In the next section, I will summarize Foucault's two cultures. Then I will sketch some of the ancient subject-transforming practices as they are found in Buddhism and how these have given rise to the modern concept of mindfulness. I will argue that this can be seen as a spiritual practice. In the conclusion I will question Foucault's claim that the first culture will completely disappear.

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *The hermeneutics of the subject: Lectures at college de France*, introduction, xxIII.

<sup>9</sup> Michel, Foucault, *The hermeneutics of the subject*, 41-100.

<sup>10</sup> According to Foucault, the three most significant characteristics that set apart spirituality from philosophy are (1) spirituality postulates that the subject as such is not capable of having access to truth, and, more specifically, that truth is not given to the subject by a simple act of knowledge founded on his status as subject; (2) in order to have access to truth, the subject has to undergo a conversion or transformation and therefore his very being is at stake; (3) once the subject has access to truth, the effects of spirituality on the subject are such that his very being is fulfilled, transfigured, or saved. Foucault concludes, from the perspective of spirituality: "In short, I think we can say that in and of itself an act of knowledge could never give access to the truth unless it was prepared, accompanied, doubled, and completed by a certain transformation of the subject; not of the individual, but of the subject himself in his being as subject." Ibid., 16.

discovering, or learning.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 17.

## Ancient Spiritual Practices and the Care of the Self

In *The hermeneutics of the subject* Foucault asks: 'In what historical form do the relations between the "subject" and 'truth', elements that do not usually fall within the historians practice or analysis, take shape in the West? Foucault takes his departure from the famous Delphic prescription *gnothi seauton* (know yourself). Rather than isolating it as a beginning in the history of philosophy, Foucault subordinates it to the precept of the *care of the self*. The *epimeleia heauton* (care of the self) is the framework in which Foucault tries to explain the *gnothi seauton*. The culturally shaped attitude of 'the care of the self' can be understood as having one's attention directed at oneself, remembering oneself, taking care of oneself.<sup>13</sup> The 'care of the self' can be understood as the philosophical attitude in ancient times: 'Throughout the long summer of Hellenistic and Roman thought, the exhortation to care for oneself became so widespread that it became, I think, a truly general cultural phenomenon. What I would like to show you, what I would like to speak about this year, is this history that made this general cultural phenomenon (this exhortation, this general acceptance of the principle that one should take care of oneself) both a general cultural phenomenon peculiar to Hellenistic and Roman society (anyway, to its elite), and at the same time an event in thought.'<sup>14</sup>

Taking Socrates as his point of departure Foucault highlights the historical and philosophical moments that implicate our mode of being as modern subjects. The relation between the 'care of the self' and 'knowledge of the self' is fundamental for understanding the relation between the subject and truth. So according to Foucault, as Socrates urged humankind to take care of itself, to realize that they are ignorant of the fact that they are ignorant and ignorant about the truth about the self, he marked the beginning of a philosophical tradition.<sup>15</sup> Shown through a variety of examples, like the relation between philosophy and medicine, practices concerned with concentration of the breath(*pneuma*) and techniques of withdrawal(*retraite, anakhoresis*), Foucault concludes that: 'I think we can say that in and of itself an act of knowledge could never give access to the truth unless it was prepared, accompanied, doubled, and completed by a certain transformation of the subject; not of the individual, but of the subject himself in his being as subject.'<sup>16</sup> Foucault continues and makes the historical claim that throughout Antiquity, in different forms, "the philosophical question of 'how

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., xx. "[...] as one of the forms, one of the consequences, as a sort of concrete, precise, and particular application of the general rule: You must attend to yourself, you must not forget yourself, you must take care of yourself."

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Alcibiades*, 1 109e.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *The hermeneutics of the subject*, 9. 'I don't need to tell you that the *epimeleia heautou* is important in the Stoics; it is central in Seneca with the notion of *cura sui* and it permeates the *Discourses* of Epictetus. Having to care about oneself is not just a condition for gaining access to the philosophical life, in the strict and full sense of the term.'; Ibid., 97-98; Ibid., 47.; Ibid., 15, 16;

to have access to the truth' and the practice of spirituality [...] were never separate."<sup>17</sup> So after but also before Socrates and the cultural shift in attitude towards oneself, the means used to care for oneself and to transform the subject were different. But in all philosophical schools of antiquity we find practices who aim at some form of transformation in the subject, so as to be capable of truth.<sup>18</sup>

### Cartesian moment

Foucault makes a chronological leap and identifies a moment in history when philosophy and its transformational practices were separated. The historic period in which the change occurred, Foucault calls the *Cartesian moment*.<sup>19</sup> If the notion of the care of the self refers to the set of conditions of spirituality, the Cartesian moment is the event that disqualifies the care of the self and requalifies the *gnothi seauton* (know yourself), dissociating a philosophy of knowledge from a spirituality of the transformation of the subject's very being.<sup>20</sup> The Cartesian moment allows Foucault to speculate about the shift to modern times in the relation between subject and truth. He says: 'We can say that we enter the modern age (I mean, the history of truth enters its modern period) when it is assumed that what gives access to the truth, the condition for the subject's access to the truth, is knowledge (*connaissance*) and knowledge alone.. [...].'<sup>21</sup> So everyone, regardless of having shaped one's subjectivity in certain ways, can come to find truth by the act of knowledge.<sup>22</sup> This act of

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 17. Aristotle is mentioned as an exception.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 46. 'Even so, we should not forget and must always keep in mind the tact that this requirement to care for the self, this practice—or rather, the set of practices in which the care for the self will appear—is actually rooted in very old practices, in ways of acting and types and modalities of experience that constituted its historical basis well before Plato and even Socrates. That the truth cannot be attained without a certain practice, or set of fully specified practices, which transform the subject's mode of being, change its given mode of being, and modify it by transfiguring it, is a pre-philosophical theme which gave rise to many more or less ritualized procedures.' Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, edited with an introduction by Arnold I. Davidson, translated by Michael Chase, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). 'For instance the Stoics, declared explicitly that philosophy for them was an 'exercise'. In their view, philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory, [...] but rather in the art of living.'

<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, *The hermeneutics of the subject*, 14. 'It seems to me that the "Cartesian moment," again within a lot of inverted commas, functioned in two ways. It came into play in two ways: by philosophically requalifying the *gnothi seauton* (know yourself), and by discrediting the *epimeleia heautou* (care of the self).'

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 15,16.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 14. 'The Cartesian approach, which can be read quite explicitly in the *Meditations* placed self-evidence (*l'evidence*) at the origin, the point of departure of the philosophical approach—self-evidence as it appears, that is to say as it is given, as it is actually given to consciousness without any possible doubt [...] \* . The Cartesian approach [therefore] refers to knowledge of the self, as a form of consciousness at least. What's more, by putting the self-evidence of the subject's own existence at the very source of access to being, this knowledge of oneself (no longer in the form of the test of self-evidence, but in the form of the impossibility of doubting my existence as subject) made the "know yourself" into a fundamental means of access to truth.' (Reference to *meditations*: Descartes, *Meditations sur la philosophic premiere* (1641), (Paris: Gallimard/Bibliothèque de la Pleiade, 1952); English translation by John Cottingham, in Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).



knowledge is founded on the apparent truth of consciousness, which Descartes has shown to be undeniable when even in doubt of everything. This knowledge about ourselves, the knowledge of us having consciousness, is not limited to a particular form of subjectivity, with dispositions, sensitivities, forms of understanding, insight, and so on that can only be acquired by means of spiritual practices. One could say that this apparent knowledge about ourselves gave us the confidence to determine truth. However, this knowledge cannot be achieved without some necessary conditions, defined within the realm of knowledge. Foucault specifies these three: first, internal conditions such as formal conditions, rules of method and the structure of the object to be known; second, extrinsic conditions such as that one has to be sane to know truth; third, cultural conditions such that in order to access truth one must have studied operate between scientific discourses.<sup>23</sup> Foucault thinks that such objective knowledge will one day completely determine the framework in which the subject can know truth. Spiritual practices have then become obsolete, since to have access to the truth, there are no specific demands on subjects themselves.

In sum, Foucault's analysis claims: In ancient Greek and Roman times, access to truth required the involvement of subject altering exercises. Since the *Cartesian moment*, the relationship between subject and truth became defined by knowledge (*connaissance*). Foucault implies that in modern times this cognitive, scientific conception of truth would mean that spiritual practices are no longer necessary to access truth. However, recently there has been a growing scientific interest in practices that are related to *spiritual practices* as they were known in ancient times. In response to Foucault's understanding of spiritual practices and their relation to a transformation of the subject, I will now sketch the historic roots of mindfulness and a modern application called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction.

### **Buddhism and Mindfulness**

After introducing mindfulness and its origin in Buddhism, I will look at a specific application of mindfulness called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) courses. I will argue that MBSR can be understood as a modern spiritual practice, with ancient Buddhist roots. MBSR provides some evidence for two claims: first, the subject is in a relation to a truth that is characterized as (empirical, scientific) knowledge, that is, Foucault's *Connaissance*, knowledge as a familiarity, awareness or understanding of someone or something, such as facts, information, descriptions, or skills, which are acquired by perceiving, discovering or learning. And, second, MBSR is also an example for the possibility that modern applications of mindfulness can result in a transformation of the subject.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 18.

## Buddhism

Mindfulness is usually understood as a Buddhist practice since Siddhartha Gotama, considered the founder of Buddhism, successfully advocated mindfulness during his life.<sup>24</sup> It was he who became 'Buddha' which means the 'awakened one' or 'enlightened one'. Usually 'Buddha' is used to refer to Gotama, although it is a title which more individuals had in the past. 'Buddha' refers to a truer self, something that everyone deep down is and can realize with the help of the teachings of the Buddha. The 'guide' on the path to enlightenment is called *Dhamma*, which refers to the order and lawfulness of reality. Essentially, Buddhism consists of understanding, practicing and realizing this reality.<sup>25</sup>

The communities of practicing Buddhist nuns and monks are called the *Sangha*, which, over time, gave rise to a variety of different schools of thought and conduct. The oldest school of thought is the Theravada tradition, which means 'teachings of the elders'. It has direct roots with the early *Sangha* and emphasizes personal liberation. The Mahayana tradition, called 'the great vehicle', is characterized by compassion and devotion to a variety of beings. This tradition also produced new philosophies, extensions based on The Buddha's teachings, such as Zen Buddhism.<sup>26</sup> The Buddha's teachings are written down in several canons of scriptures, based on the oral transmission of the early *Sangha's*. It is known as the *Pali canon*, written in Pali, a language that is based on a dialect close to the one Gautama spoke. The main teachings are derived from the *Suttas*, discourses of the Buddha. It is here we also find a discourse on Mindfulness. The early teachings of the Buddha revolve around: *The four true realities for the spiritually ennobled*.<sup>27</sup> These realities are to be experienced by a student so he may gain insight from them. They are respectively; the painful, the origin of the painful, the cessation of the painful and the path to the cessation of the painful.<sup>28</sup> The path to the cessation of the painful is called the '*The noble eight fold path*', describing eight aspects one must have 'rightly' developed: Right view, Right Resolve, Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness and Right concentration.<sup>29</sup>

## Mindfulness

The discourse on mindfulness, known as the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta meaning *the greater discourse on the foundation of mindfulness*, is part of the eight-fold path one must follow to attain total liberation from the painful.<sup>30</sup> As we have seen, for one to realize the fourth noble truth, one needs

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<sup>24</sup> *Digha Nikaya* 16: 'Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta'

<sup>25</sup> Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices*, 231.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-87.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 83. For a detailed explanation about the specific factors.

<sup>30</sup> *Digha Nikaya* 2.290-315.

*Right* mindfulness. Mindfulness is a meditative practice, comparable to rituals or devotional practices. A prerequisite for the type of mindfulness the Buddha aims at is an ethical and moral life, so mindfulness implies other forms of Buddhist practices as well.<sup>31</sup> Mindfulness is the practice of bearing something in mind with clear awareness.<sup>32</sup> That means not so much to be aware of the interpretation of sensations and the thoughts emerging from them, but aware of the sensations that arise in the moment one is in. This is a form of awareness where the mind does not wander, but is stable. This concentration, must focus on a variety of elements of the body; the breath, what the body does in general, feelings, mind states etc.<sup>33</sup> The subject is observing the contents of oneself such as how feelings can arise and pass or how the content of one's mind can arise and pass. In this way the subject is changing oneself by learning about oneself. The insights thus acquired is some form of knowledge and is supposed to lead to a better understanding of oneself and would lead to a happier and more fulfilled life.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, from the central doctrine of Buddhism i.e. *The four true realities for the spiritually ennobled* and *the noble eight fold path*, etc., follows the practice of conscious attention on the self.<sup>35</sup> With this understanding it is easy to understand the meditative practice of Buddhist mindfulness as a *spiritual practice*.

### Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction

A good example of a modern application of the practice of Mindfulness is the relatively well known (clinical) practice of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction courses (MBSR). Jon Kabat-Zinn is the founder of one of the most prominent examples of a contemporary modern practice of mindfulness.<sup>36</sup> Called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Course (MBSR), Jon Kabat-Zinn developed this program in 1979 as an experiment in the Massachusetts Medical Center to treat patients with

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<sup>31</sup> Ethical life as a Buddhist meant at least following 5 precepts: 1. Not to kill, 2. Not to steal, 3. Not to lie, 4. No impure sexual conduct and 5. Not to take mind altering substances.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices*, 322.

<sup>33</sup> An excerpt from DN22 Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta: 'a *bhikkhu* lives observing the body in the body, energetically, self-possessed and mindful, having eliminated both the desire for and the despair over the world. He lives observing feelings as feeling, energetically, self-possessed and mindful, having eliminated both the desire for and the despair over the world, etc.'

<sup>34</sup> Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices*, 318-350. Known in Buddhism as *pañña*; namely primarily *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (dissatisfaction or suffering), *anattā* (non-self) and *śūnyatā* (emptiness).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 336-345. At first, the attention is aimed at the sensations produced by the body. On the surface and later on inside. This is a first layer that can be observed. Later on, also other layers like emotions and mental contents are observed. See (MBSR for body observation, the practice of Vipassana for emotional and mental observation)

<sup>36</sup> Other examples are: Vipassana: <http://www.dhamma.org> or see online courses Modern Mindfulness: <https://www.modmind.org/>

chronic pain and other illnesses.<sup>37</sup> It includes courses which seem suitable as an example of a modern spiritual practice for three reasons.

Firstly, the practice of mindfulness in MBSR courses is defined as: *'awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally.'*<sup>38</sup> In this definition, and this is also acknowledged by the founder, the influence from Buddhism is obvious. This definition also shows clearly that MBSR is concerned with the subject, since the focus is on some form of awareness and not the contents of this awareness itself.

Secondly, although MBSR has Buddhist roots, it presents itself as a secular, scientific practice, lending itself to scientific discourse and knowledge which is, according to Foucault, the modern truth. And thirdly, MBSR courses have already enjoyed much scientific attention.<sup>39</sup>

After the first signs of success Kabat-Zinn slowly started to expand his practice. Nowadays, there are over 1000 certified teachers spread out over more than thirty countries and MBSR practices are available at hospitals and psychological clinics.<sup>40</sup> Reports from teachers indicates that a majority of the people who completed this program report *'a greater ability to cope more effectively with short and long term stressful situations; an increased ability to relax, lasting decreases in physical and psychological symptoms; reduction in pain levels and enhanced ability to cope with chronic pain and most importantly a greater energy and enthusiasm for life.'*<sup>41</sup>

We can see why MBSR is an example of a modern spiritual practice. It is concerned with the subject only, its mind and body, and it is meant to be learned by experience, not by reasoning or knowledge (*connaissance*). The practice is aimed at certain personal transformation in the broadest sense, since its effects include not only less pain but also characteristic changes, such as more patience, greater effectiveness in stressful situations and more enthusiasm for life.

### Purely Therapeutically

According to Foucault, in what he calls *the modern period*, everyone has access to truth because knowledge (*Connaissance*) has become its defining element. No transformation on the level of the subject is necessary, so practices concerned with this won't have a role to play in the pursuit of truth.

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<sup>37</sup> Margaret Cullen, "Mindfulness-Based Interventions: An Emerging Phenomenon," 3.

<sup>38</sup> John Kabat-Zinn, *Full catastrophe living*, (New-York: Dell Publishing, 1990). What these specific mental attitudes are I want to leave open. It is important to notice that MBSR deals with the subject in the way Foucault describes spiritual practices.

<sup>39</sup> Margaret Cullen, "Mindfulness-Based Interventions: An Emerging Phenomenon," *Springer Science and Business Media* (2011): 3, accessed 05 April 2016, doi: doi:10.1007/s12671-011-0058-1.

<sup>40</sup> Kate Pickert, "The Art of Being Mindful," *Time* (2014), February 3, 40.

<sup>41</sup> "What is MBSR" Mindfulness Meditation New-York Collaborative, accessed on 19 June 2017, <http://www.mindfulnessmeditationnyc.com/what-is-mbsr>.

It can be questioned whether this period has reached its fullness, since many examples of truth founded on belief are still widely present, given the presence in Western countries of all major religions, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, etc. But there are numerous examples to see that to some extent Foucault is right in saying that knowledge has an increasingly dominant role in determining what is true and false, and what truth consists of, especially in the West.<sup>42</sup> Modern scientific methods and instruments can be applied to acquire truth within the boundaries of knowledge, to the extent that a subject-transforming practice such as mindfulness can be tested for its objective validity. Possibly further scientific developments may evolve that would allow access to some other kind of truth, other than truth within the bounds of knowledge.

Through neurological research we become better able to observe body functions, perceptions and cognitive and emotional functions in the brain. We are getting an ever clearer picture of emotions like fear, disgust and rewarding experiences. Instruments allow us to track changes in the brain and body, and see how these changes influence experience and behavior. We have come to know about the plasticity of the brain i.e. the way it can transform.<sup>43</sup> Structural changes in behavior can also transform the brain. There are also examples where fear is 'cured' by using noradrenergic  $\beta$ -blocker to influence brain signals, which clearly demonstrates the advances made in research fields concerned with the brain.<sup>44</sup> We have the possibility to observe the brain when someone is performing certain tasks and contrast these observations when performing none, or other tasks. This type of research gives us an idea about what the effects of different exercises are on the brain.<sup>45</sup> These are also the methods used when looking for the effects of MBSR courses.

In recent years the number of studies on mindfulness and its clinical applications highlight the growing interest in therapeutic benefits in mind-body interactions.<sup>46</sup> Research focused on the effects of mindfulness show improvements in areas ranging from empathic awareness to improved quality of communication between lovers.<sup>47</sup> Another area is education: children who subjected themselves to a series of mindfulness practices showed increased attention and social skills and decreased

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<sup>42</sup> It is easy to see this point when we look at the dominance of science through the last ages. Now science now covers almost all relative field for human life, even the social sciences are nowadays being 'objectified' with the help of 'new' sciences like cognitive-neuro science.

<sup>43</sup> Alvaro Pascual-Leone, Amir Amedi, Felipe Fregni, and Lotfi B. Merabet., "The plastic human brain cortex," *Annual Review of Neuroscience* (2005), **28**: 377–401.

<sup>44</sup> Merel Kindt, Marieke Soeter, Dieuwke Sevenster, "Disrupting Reconsolidation of Fear Memory in Humans by a Noradrenergic  $\beta$ -Blocker," *J. Vis. Exp.* (2014), e52151, accessed on June 9 2017, doi:10.3791/52151.

<sup>45</sup> MRI, fMRI, CAT, PET, questionnaires, lesions, etc.

<sup>46</sup> Margaret Cullen, "Mindfulness-Based Interventions: An Emerging Phenomenon," 1-5.

<sup>47</sup> Anna Kozlowski, "Mindful mating: exploring the connection between mindfulness and relationship satisfaction," *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* (2013), Vol. 28 , Issue. 1-2.

anxiety.<sup>48</sup> As already mentioned, clinical application of mindfulness by Jon Kabat-Zinn is helping individuals with chronic pain or stress related disorders. Teaching them to recognize their thoughts and feelings with a nonjudgmental attitude results in a larger portion of individuals not relapsing in depression related disorders.<sup>49</sup> A short list of a variety of practices shows the attention it has already gained. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Mindfulness-Based Childbirth and Parenting, Mindfulness-Based Eating, Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention, Mindfulness-Based Elder Care, Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy for Cancer Patients, etc.<sup>50</sup> MBSR programs are considered non-religious. Although the Buddhist origins of mindfulness practice are acknowledged and obvious, the clinical practice has no kind of Buddhist belief system involved. They explicitly say that mindfulness is used in a strictly non-Buddhist context.<sup>51</sup> As such, MBSR practices are presented as secular and validated by science.

### Philosophy and Utility

We have seen Foucault's historical analysis and the division between spirituality and philosophy, how the relation between subject and truth has changed, according to him. We have come to understand how mindfulness, as a Buddhist practice in a modern-day application like MBSR may be understood as a modern spiritual practice concerned with a transformation of the subject. This opens the possibility for the idea that Foucault may have missed twenty-first century spiritual practices when he claims about the *modern age*: *'That is to say, it is when the philosopher (or the scientist, or simply someone who seeks the truth) can recognize the truth and have access to it in himself and through his acts of knowledge alone, without anything else being demanded of him and without his having to alter or change in any way his being as subject.'*<sup>52</sup>

We have also seen that the interest of science in the case of MBSR is focused specifically on the benefits in health and wellbeing, not on the possibility that a specific transformation allows access to some kind of knowledge. I'd like to revisit the question about the significance of modern spiritual practices.

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<sup>48</sup> Christine A. Burke, "Mindfulness-Based Approaches with Children and Adolescents: A Preliminary Review of Current Research in an Emergent Field," *Springer Science Business Media* (2009), LLC.

<sup>49</sup> Teasdale, John D., Segal, Zindel V., Williams, J. Mark G., Ridgeway, Valerie A., Soulsby, Judith M., Lau, Mark A. *Prevention of relapse/recurrence in major depression by mindfulness-based cognitive therapy*, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, Vol 68(4), Aug 2000, 615-623: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.68.4.615>

<sup>50</sup> Margaret Cullen, "Mindfulness-Based Interventions: An Emerging Phenomenon," 2.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3

<sup>52</sup> Michel Foucault, *The hermeneutics of the subject*, 17.

It seems that Foucault's idea about the relation between subject and truth in the modern age is turning out how he saw it. The relation between subject and truth seems indeed dominated by a culture which understands truth as knowledge (*connaissance*), offered by science.<sup>53</sup> We can see this in the numerous examples of research on MBSR. Although it might seem that mindfulness is some kind of revival of old spiritual practices, it is used insofar as it makes us feel and function better. It is not seen as a preparatory process for accessing fundamental truths. While MBSR might be rooted in a 'true' ancient spiritual practice, namely as the 7<sup>th</sup> step in the *Noble eight fold path*, it seems to be only used as a simple tool to be happier. The Buddhist roots are not a point of departure anymore for further examination of truth. That role has been taken over by science. This can also be seen by the explicit claim that MBSR wants to present itself as secular and non-religious. MBSR and modern mindfulness application may ground themselves in Buddhist philosophy, but the *Noble eight-fold path* consist of more than the path of *Right Mindfulness*. The '*Four true realities for the spiritually ennobled*', go unmentioned in research and practice. In this light, a modern day spiritual practice like MBSR seems not aware of a division between spirituality and philosophy as Foucault described it. In the case of MBSR it seems that the original Buddhist philosophy is discarded while only a part of the original transformational practice remain. MBSR research also focuses on benefit only, a happier life. There does not seem to be a need for some kind of transformation that leads to a different relation to truth.

This clearly resonates with Foucault's idea about the modern age. The conception of truth as something that requires a transformation at the level of the subject seems nonexistent. We can find comparable practices and we can find a variety of modern spiritual practices, but it is not a fact that these modern practices, and in particular MBSR, are spiritual practices as they were 'meant to be': utilized for access to truth and lasting happiness. The significance of MBSR is thus not so much that we see a revival of old spiritual practices, the significance of their existence seems to be limited to pure utility and benefit for an individual. The domain of truth and knowledge, including knowledge about the psychological techniques, remain exclusively reserved for science.

But I want to speculate about another possible significant effect of this scientific interest in spiritual practices. We can agree that it's a natural tendency of humans to seek things that are pleasurable, whatever it is. So there is the possibility that if we get satisfied in our modern demand for truth about the possible efficacy of ancient spiritual practices, we get convinced they are good for us through scientific research, good for parenting, stress reduction, less pain etc. While we have seen

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<sup>53</sup> Lutz Bornmann, Ruediger Mutz, "Growth rates of modern science: A bibliometric analysis based on the number of publications and cited references," *Digital Libraries, Physics and Society*, doi: 10.1002/asi.23329. But also consider the growth of new 'sciences' like: Nutrigenomics, quantum biology or cognitive economics.

the rise in popularity of mindfulness research, as shown above, it cannot be denied that there are also a great variety of practices and religious movements that are widely available and utilized.<sup>54</sup> I would imagine that the origin of spiritual practices will also be taken more seriously by science in order to understand them to the fullest, possibly with an acknowledgement of a transformation of the subject as a consequence. The role of science may at first be limited to the observation of behavioral and neurological changes, but science could also inquire into people's level of happiness and specifically things they learned in the process of practicing MBSR, objectifying as much as possible and comparing these findings with other practices. So science could be able, as it were, to rediscover the need for the *care of the self*, the need to look after oneself, to be attentive to oneself, rediscovering its potential benefits in modern scientific ways. As a consequence, a different kind of knowledge may be rediscovered. This knowledge, whatever it is, may never replace the leading condition of truth for our culture as a whole. But for an individual this may well be the case. We might interpret Foucault's analysis about the difference in cultures in which the subject is in relation to truth as the possibility that within a culture of a specific subject-truth relation, other cultures could exist among individual people. We could see the *care of the self* rediscovered because of scientific research into spiritual practices, but how this is connected to *know thyself*, in the form of a prerequisite to know the truth about oneself to be able to care for oneself, is not at all clear. This is the second way in which twenty-first century spirituality may play a role in our lives. We may speculate whether such a 'true' revival may one day officially enrich our lives and knowledge of ourselves.

## Conclusion

I have given an overview of Foucault's historiographical analysis of the relation between subject and truth, up to what Foucault calls the *modern age*. After introducing Buddhism and mindfulness I explained how Mindfulness based stress reduction courses (MBSR) can be understood as a spiritual practice. I showed that science has indeed investigated mindfulness practices mainly for therapeutic reasons. Scientific research does not seem to be concerned with transformation of the subject as Foucault specifies. Furthermore I showed that MBSR practices present themselves as secular. Then I argued that the spiritual practices that were dominant in ancient times, aimed at transforming the subject to be capable of knowing truth and happiness, could also be of significance in the *modern period* in two possible ways:

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<sup>54</sup> James A. Beckford, *New religious movements and rapid social change*, (London: Sage publications, 1 January 1987)



The first way was in Foucault's understanding of the *modern age*. Modern mindfulness will only be used insofar it is proven to be beneficial. Knowledge (*Connaissance*) is seen as the only form of truth, no other measure for truth will be used. Truth acquired by transforming the subject is not a concern for science or motive for an individual when performing mindfulness. Behavioral or neuroscience will not spend time fact-checking the philosophical claims present in the Buddhist roots of mindfulness. As the second way I hypothesized how Foucault might be partially wrong, how modern applications of mindfulness can gain in popularity when the result in a transformation of some subjects as a consequence. Science could confirm the transformative aspect and its effects on our wellbeing, and offer us new ways in which we can understand ourselves and understand what is good for us in general. Subject transforming practices, in ancient and modern ways, have been quite useful. We could strive to understand why and aim to benefit from them as much as possible in the future. As Foucault aptly remarks: '*[..] we should not forget and must always keep in mind the fact that this requirement to care for the self, this practice—or rather, the set of practices in which the care for the self will appear—is actually rooted in very old practices, in ways of acting and types and modalities of experience that constituted its historical basis well before Plato and even Socrates. That the truth cannot be attained without a certain practice, or set of fully specified practices, which transform the subject's mode of being, change its given mode of being, and modify it by transfiguring it, is a pre-philosophical theme which gave rise to many more or less ritualized procedures*'.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Michel Foucault, *The hermeneutics of the subject: Lectures at college de France*, introduction by Arnold, I, Davidson, 29.

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