Mindful Work
An Ethnography of Mindfulness and the Sociality of Feeling in Danish Workplaces
Hedegaard, Marianne Viftrup

Publication date:
2020

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Document license:
CC BY-NC-ND

Citation for published version (APA):
Mindful Work
An Ethnography of Mindfulness and the Sociality of Feeling in Danish Workplaces

PhD Thesis
Marianne Viftrup Hedegaard
Department: Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies
Author: Marianne Viftrup Hedegaard
Title: Mindful Work
Subtitle: An Ethnography of Mindfulness and the Sociality of Feeling in Danish Workplaces
Supervisor: Trine Brox
Co-supervisor: Karen Lisa Salamon
Submitted: July 6th, 2020
Front page photo: After a mindfulness session at Kern. Taken by the author.
# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements** 4  
**Prologue: Mindful Work** 7  
**Introduction** 9  
  - Mindful Work in a (not so) Happy Nation 10  
  - Motivation 14  
  - Argument 16  
  - (Re)defining Mindfulness - and why it matters 18  
  - Between Enthusiasm and Criticism: Approaching Mindfulness Ethnographically 21  
  - Theoretical Grounds and Contribution: The Sociality of Feeling 25  
  - Mindfulness Courses: Learning to *mærke efter* – To Feel How You Feel 31  
  - Methodological Considerations 34  
    - At Home: Insights of the Familiar 35  
    - (Lack of) Transformative Experiences 38  
  - Outline of the Dissertation 41  

**Chapter 1: Enacting Mindfulness in Denmark** 44  
  - Studying Enactments: A Politics-of-What 46  
    - Colonial and Contemporary Enactments of a Scientific Buddhism 48  
    - Meditation as a Therapeutic Intervention 53  
  - Danish Enactments of Mindfulness 56  
    - A Political Priority and a Path to Happiness 56  
    - A Luxury Product and a Threat to the Safety Net 60  
  - Conclusion 63  

**Chapter 2: Affective Work Environments** 65  
  - Heavy Atmospheres and Good Intentions 66  
  - Affective Imprints of Contemporary Work Life 68  
    - The Passion and the Pace 68  
    - The Pressure 71  
    - The Competition 73  
  - Unpredictable Moods of the Post-Industrial Economy 76  
    - The Figure of the ‘Environment’ 79  
    - Learning How to Surf 82  
  - Conclusion 84  

**Chapter 3: Valuing mindfulness** 86  
  - A Workshop at the Manor 87  
  - The Value Creation of Mindfulness 89  
  - From Value(s) to Modes of Valuing 90  
    - Orchestration: Making Space for Mindfulness 92  
    - Exemplification: The Presence and Persona of the Teacher 94
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4: Mærke efter: Feeling How You Feel</th>
<th>104</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“How do I Feel?” – Taking the Temperature with a Body Scan</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the Right Words: The Importance of Mother Tongue</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking with 'Kind Eyes' – The Inner and Outer Body</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introducing 'Affective Artifacts’ – Sensing to Make Sense</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Word is a Feeling - Embodied Words</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisted Feeling – Becoming Attuned to Yourself</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stickers on Doorknobs: When Attunement Fails</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 5: Imagining Inhabitable Bodies</th>
<th>126</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engaging with Images</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounding Images: The Inner Home</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Embracing Images: The Backpack, the Bench, and the Horse</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taming Images: The Good and the Bad Wolf</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Rules: “Feel it, heal it—Name it, tame it”</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 6: Coming to our Senses</th>
<th>146</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Emotions: Finding a Mindful Version of Myself</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Good Choice</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilized Bodies</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveying Feeling</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mærke efter: A Balancing Act of Feeling</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who Cares? Agency, Responsibilization, and Resistance</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Sense-Making Through a Sociality of Feeling</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conclusion: Mindful Work</th>
<th>168</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affective Imprints and The Sociality of Feeling</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Abstract | 175 |
| Resumé | 176 |
| References | 177 |
Acknowledgements

Life happens to you while you are busy writing your PhD. Those were the words, as I remember them, of the head of the PhD-school at the faculty of Humanities, as I began my research in 2016. It sure does. A great many things have happened since I received an email from my long-term mentor Cecilie Rubow asking, “could this be interesting for you.” Inside was a call for a PhD-fellow for the collective research project Buddhism, Business, and Believers. The rest is history, as they say.

First and foremost, I thank the teachers, employees, and managers who devoted their time to tell me about their mindfulness practices, and allowed me to join them in meditation, and in conversation about what matters in work life and beyond. Without you, there would be no thesis.

Another person, without whom this thesis would not have been possible, is my supervisor Trine Brox. Thank you for entrusting me with the freedom to take this project in directions that accorded with my most sincere academic passions and for engaging with my work untiringly and wisely. Karen Lisa Salamon, who co-supervised the project, offered me additional academic guidance. A thesis is not only a becoming of a research project, it is also a becoming of a researcher, and you have both been a support and an inspiration in this metamorphosis. Other colleagues must be mentioned in the same breath; Stine Simonsen Puri, Tea Sindbæk, Tine Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, Ravinder Kaur, and Aja Smith. Thank you for the inspiration and your academic generosity.

My PhD is funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research. From the research group, I want to thank Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg, Trine Brox, and Jane Caple for feedbacks on drafts and for stimulating conversations on the entanglements of economy and religion, value and virtue. In our research project, we have been fortunate to work with capacities such as Ann Gleig, Jørn Borup, Jeff Wilson, and Richard Payne. They have inspired me with their insights from religious studies, philosophy, and feminist ethnography at conferences and workshops.

At the Department of Anthropology at University College London, I benefitted from a vibrant research environment and, most notably, from conversations with Joanna Cook, who engaged generously with two chapter drafts. I also owe thanks to Ignacia Arteaga and Tess Altman for including me in reading groups and writing seminars. At the Department of Anthropology in Amsterdam, I was warmly welcomed by Annemarie Mol and Ulrike Scholtes and their research team, who all offered feedback on a draft for chapter four, pushing me to stay with the tension of feeling.

Early in my research, conferences in Tampere and Turku included me in a network of researchers of contemporary mind-body practices, mindfulness, and therapeutic cultures.

Trained in the Department of Anthropology, I came to ToRS as an outsider. For making ToRS feel like home, I want to thank all my colleagues on the fourth floor, as well as the PhD-group and especially Astrid Krabbe Trolle, Bani Gill, Maansi Parpiani, Valeria Guerrieri, Ingrid Lindbo Fihl, Birgitte Stampe Holst, and Pernille Friis Jensen. It has been reassuring and fun to share this ride with you. A great thanks to Brian Arly Jacobsen, Andreas Bandak, Simon Stjernholm, Dan Hirslund, Erik Sporon Fiedler, Maria Lyngsøe, Maximilian Lasa, and Kasper Ly Netterstrom for daily, enjoyable conversations over lunch and coffee. Furthermore, I want to thank Kirsten Thisted for friendship and for the inspiration you have given me through your way of teaching so elegantly. Thanks also to Frank Sejersen for including me in the teaching team at Cross-Cultural Studies and for always being ready to ponder mindfulness, how to cook a salmon, or construct a thesis argument.

Anne Line Dalsgaard and Katinka Amalie Schyberg provided invaluable and insightful comments on my work during a pre-defense, which moved me to rethink parts of the thesis and engage more fully with the ethnography. I also owe a warm thanks to Aja Smith and Stine Simonsen Puri, who both gave precise and considerate comments on chapter five and the introduction, which helped me reach the finish line. Thank you, Niclas Juul, for your diligent work on proofreading the dissertation.

To complete the thesis, I have relied on the supportive infrastructure of my family and friends. I thank you all for your help, and I am especially grateful for the time many of you devoted to caring for Irene. Knowing that she was having a blast with her aunts, grandparents, cousins, and with our friends has meant the world to me and given me the needed space to focus on my writing. Thanks to the people who lent me their homes, to the Fuglsang’s for providing a writing retreat in Liseleje, and to Kir for housing me on Brett Road in London, to Ove and Lars for dinners and wine, to Brenda for her hospitality and home cooked food, to my parents for helping me in so many ways, to Søren, Julie, and Andrea for being a caring house-family, and to Kiva, Mette, Michelle, Fie, Kirsten, and Sofie for knowing me so well and cheering me on.

Thank you, my dearest Irene, for being patient with me and for showing me every day in your own special way what love, nearness, curiosity, and in the end, mindfulness, is all about.

I owe this work to you, Martin. For all your support and your sourdough-bread and for making life joyful even in the rush of writing up. Thank you, also, for doing the layout of the thesis and for helping me with editing the last bits.
The dissertation is dedicated to two men, my father-in-law, and my grandfather, whose warm presence I will forever miss.

Knud Therkildsen (18.07.2016) and Valdemar Halkjær Hedegaard (07.04.2020)
Prologue: Mindful Work

In the morning
In the morning Susan walks her dogs in the woods. Her tall figure strides down the graveled path at a steady pace. She normally keeps her phone close to check emails and take calls from work but in these early hours she has made it a rule to keep the phone in her pocket.

In this Together
In the Copenhagen suburb of Rødovre, 20 colleagues meditate together in the storage facility of a pharmaceutical company. Until last year, this part of the storage room served as a container for medicines, keeping them cool before shipping them out. Now the company has outsourced its production, and the room is used for crossfit, yoga, spinning, and mindfulness. Susan, the head of HR, suggests rolling out a carpet. To improve the acoustics.

How does it feel?
The employees have closed their eyes on invitation from the mindfulness teacher Peter who now talks in a soothing voice, guiding the group of colleagues in a meditation. He instructs them to pay attention to the movements of their breath and to move it around the body from the toes to the feet, legs, belly, chest, shoulders, and the head. How does it feel?

Bad conscience
At home in her garden Sofie sits in a wooden recliner peeling little pieces of paint off the chair. She would normally be in a meeting by now. She searches her emails from Ursula, her mindfulness teacher, and finds the meditation with the ocean sounds. A voice flows out of the computer and Sofie leans her head against the chair and closes her eyes.

Good habits I
In a university building in the eastern part of town, Annette walks to the kitchen, puts a kettle on, and looks at the kettle while the water heats up. Inhale. Exhale. As the water boils she pours it over her tea and walks back to her office.

---

1 The prologue is inspired by Nina Holm Vohnsen’s montage “Labor Days” (Vohnsen 2017). Vohnsen’s montage attempts to destabilize conclusion, and so inspired I seek to start this thesis in the plural, open-ended practices of various kinds of mindful work as I observed them and as they were expressed to me by my many interlocutors.
Meanwhile
Spreading around a park area in central Copenhagen a group of people walk incredibly slowly as if they were afraid to hit the grass too hard with their feet. They seem to walk consumed in thought. Yet what they are really trying to do is walk mindfully without thinking. They sense the ground beneath them, hard and soft, earth and grass, and the sound of wind in the trees. Olivia stops in front of a lilac and lifts her head up towards a flower.

Good habits II
In Nørrebro, Niels gets up from his desk and walks three steps to sit on the wooden chair beside the window. He reaches for his headphones, places his hands on his knees, closes his eyes, and straightens his back. After ten minutes, he blinks his eyes open and taps his legs to let himself know that he needs to get on with it.

Afternoons
On a bench among the palm trees and agaves, the hothouse gardener Ruth closes her eyes and let go of the tension in her jaw. Sitting down she realizes how tired she feels. It has been a long day.

Taking time out for me
In one of the residential neighborhoods of Vanløse there is an almost inaudible sound of a piano and a tune being played over and over. If you walk past the red house on the corner, you might also catch the frustrated outcry of Henrik’s voice as he hits the wrong node. He takes it from the top. Cursing, smiling, and taking his time.

Transmission
In the soft blue light of the Danish summer evening Pernille talks her husband to sleep in a low voice. “Feel you toes, your shins, your knees, your thighs. And just relax.” He lies beside her with his eyes closed. Before she reaches the upper part of his body, he is asleep. Pernille moves down under the blanket and puts her hands on her stomach. The baby is kicking away.
Introduction

In the twenty-first century, mental health has gained increased attention as an area for intervention globally and in Denmark, not least in workplaces. Stress in particular is considered a significant threat to the flourishing and thriving individual and collective mental and physical health. It is in this setting that mindfulness is booming worldwide (Purser 2019), reaching “meteoric global rise” (Cassaniti 2018, 4) and gaining traction across diverse spheres of societies around the globe. Mindfulness has entered the corporate world as well, most prominently perhaps through Google’s Search Inside Yourself program, which defines mindfulness as the unexpected path to achieving success, happiness, and world peace (Tan, Goleman, and Kabat-Zinn 2014). This thesis examines how Buddhist-derived mindfulness practices have entered the equation on how to create a good work environment, less stress, and more wellbeing at work in Denmark. In the prologue, we meet Olivia, Pernille, Niels, and their colleagues as they engage in what I conceptualize as mindful work, which are various kinds of engagements such as sensing, feeling, and attuning to oneself and others as well as the surrounding world. Their mindful work and the way it relates to feeling better and working well in affective work environments is the topic of this PhD thesis.

Mindfulness has proliferated in Danish society, especially in the last decade, entering the everyday lives and the lingua franca of the Danes. Although mindfulness is defined in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways, a common understanding of mindfulness in Denmark and beyond is as a “psychological therapy” (Stanley 2015) concerned with mental well-being and stress-reduction. In Denmark, stress, the difficulty of concentrating and being truly immersed in something is often identified as harmful yet inextricable signs of the times we live in. Attention and presence are in the popular media articulated as a limited resource, particularly endangered by technological advances. Researchers claim that “our attention span is shorter than ever” and journalists wonder “if we forgotten what presence is” (Mønsted 2019; Meyer 2017; Jensen 2014). Digital distractions and information overload threaten productivity and wellbeing in work life in particular, making it crucial to prioritize and economize with one’s “mental energy” (Campbell 2017). Stress is considered as a particularly pressing public health issue in Denmark. Despite being difficult to define and measure, measurements are done regularly to quantify the rising number of Danes experiencing stress. The Danish Health Authority estimates that 25 percent of the adult population has a high stress level (Jensen et. al. 2018). Danish organizations typically describe stress as a physiological and psychological
condition that is complex and difficult to diagnose (e.g., stressforeningen.dk and al-tompsykologi.dk). Stress does not configure as a disease in medical terms but is an imbalance in the body that, nonetheless, may result in serious medical conditions such as burnout or physical illnesses (Friberg 2009). In the Danish debate, stress is often associated with an inability to work, economic loss, and lack of productivity. The person who is ‘hit with stress’ (den stress-ramte) should be rehabilitated, not only to her individual benefit but to the benefit of society. The Danish state has been defined as a competition state (O. K. Pedersen 2011) where work is heralded as a paramount activity and marker of identify, and unemployment a shameful failure (Krause-Jensen 2020, 205). Citizenship is earned through waged work (ibid.), and the individual must consider herself a ‘commodity’ to be continually optimized in order to be employable on the market (Lautrup Sørensen 2020, 181). In an environment like that, stress is not only an individual issue but a national problem that affects workplace thrift and national economies. In this particular configuration and problematization of stress, mindfulness has emerged as a possible solution.

**Mindful Work in a (not so) Happy Nation**

Denmark has been awarded the title of the happiest country in the world on several occasions (Bjornskov 2015). The popular book *The little book of lykke – secrets of the world’s happiest people*, which is sold in Danish airports and souvenir shops, explicates and advises how to become as happy as the Danes (Wiking 2017). The book is written by Meik Wiking, the director of the Happiness Research Institute, a Danish think tank devoted to investigating why some countries are happier than others. Denmark is a happy country, Wiking argues, because of the citizens’ trust in the state and political systems, but also because of the Danish way of life. He notes how, in Denmark, there is no prestige in working long hours and earning a lot of money. Instead, there is prestige in picking up your child from daycare early, making homemade food, reading books, and visiting museums. These values make for a life worth living, Wiking concludes. The director of the Danish Center for Mindfulness, Lone Fjorback and her colleague Karen Johanne Pallesen, have argued that Denmark can no longer be considered a happy nation, pointing to the increasing number of Danes who fall ill with stress and who take medication (Fjorback and Pallesen 2016). We might be getting wealthier, but we are not getting happier, the authors declare. In an opinion piece in the newspaper Politiken, the authors assert that practicing mindfulness is not only an inexpensive solution to the high rates of stress, it is also a way to regain happiness. Joy and happiness are not found ‘out
there,’ it must be cultivated through meditation and mindfulness (Fjorback and Pallesen
2016).

While Fjorback and Pallesen speak from a particular position at the heart of the mind-
fulness community in Denmark, mindfulness is also celebrated in the more mainstream media
as a way to de-stress, learn to live in the moment, and find ways to happiness. A recently
published Danish magazine dedicated exclusively to mindfulness paints an image of mind-
fulness as a prerequisite for a happy, fulfilling family life, targeting primarily the busy working
mother. The magazine advises on how to “color your way out of stress,” “eat with your
eyes,” and “wake up happy every day” (Weisdorf 2019). That mindfulness makes up the over-
arching frame for a magazine focused on wellbeing, healthy eating, exercise, stress, and posi-
tive psychology affirms sociologist of religion Jørn Borup’s claim that mindfulness in a Dan-
ish context is often articulated as a diverse and non-religious phenomenon booming particu-
larly in the fields of health and popular culture (Borup 2016). While mindfulness is evoked
as a prerequisite for a happy family life in the Mindfulness magazine, the numerous Danish
companies that have carried out mindfulness interventions testify that mindfulness is also
deemed suitable for business. The Danish-founded company Potential Project offers mind-
fulness courses to corporations in 27 countries, including Denmark, and defines mindfulness as
a critical ingredient to enhance “mental clarity” and to become “agile and truly present” in
the global “attention economy.” Proponents of mindfulness for businesses, such as The Po-
tential Project, diagnose contemporary society with an “attention deficit.”

These understandings of mindfulness relate to the way it is globally framed as a prac-
tice that counteracts our supposed lack of concentration and awareness. Accordingly, when
TIME Magazine announced a ‘mindful revolution,’ it introduced mindfulness as “the science
of finding focus in a stressed-out, multitasking culture” (Pickert 2014). Journalist Kate Pick-
ert described how one could “work mindfully, parent mindfully and learn mindfully” and em-
phasized how mindfulness practice was furthermore a means to “spend mindfully,” and there-
fore of great value to businesses (Pickert 2014). Mindfulness, it would seem, is not only ben-
eficial as an individual therapeutic treatment, or for maintaining family happiness, but also

---

2 Jørn Borup concludes that the popularity of mindfulness has reached new heights within the last decade, show-
ing how mindfulness is mentioned ten times as much in Danish media articles from 2011 to 2016 compared to
the decade before, and that 60% of the 140 books on mindfulness published in Danish have come out between
2012 and 2015 (Borup 2016a, 1).

suitable for promoting healthy corporate economies, either because it invites ‘mindful’ consumption or creates ‘agile and truly present’ leaders and employees.

Mindfulness has undergone multiple processes of translation to become suitable for business as service one can tailor to the needs of companies. Scholar of religion Alp Arat has commented on the curious fact that contemplative practices like mindfulness are so widely pursued in ‘secular societies,’ bringing to mind “how impossible it seemed only a few decades ago that something so esoteric, non-rational, and religious as the practice of meditation could one day become so harmoniously embedded within mainstream western society” (Arat 2017, 171). As I gained more insight into what is valued in mindfulness practice in the social situations it is being taught in, I learned that mindfulness at places of work is rarely associated with the religious, esoteric, or non-rational. In courses and interviews with teachers and practitioners, I found that, on the contrary, mindfulness was considered ‘good’ because of its perceived non-religious, evidence-based, and rational qualities.

It is not only mindfulness that is defined as workplace material. Workplaces are also, as elsewhere in society, becoming increasingly psychologized. They embrace the idea of personal growth and self-development and identify a need for building up resilience in the current stressful environment (Madsen 2018; Martin 2007; 2000b). Human resources and the competences and potentials of employees are a company’s most crucial asset in the post-industrial economy, which means that businesses must promote themselves on their ability to manage human minds rather than physical manpower (Salamon 2002; Bovbjerg 2003). It is at the intersection of a society that has become increasingly interested in ‘interiority’ (Pagis 2019) and a work-life that is increasingly challenged by mental illness, stress, and burnout where mindfulness finds its fertile grounds.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the dynamics of mindfulness practice in workplaces in Denmark where employees are invited to work with, feel, and evaluate their state of mind and embodied condition with the help of mindfulness techniques. Such introspective work is considered a good investment on multiple levels. Responding, as it does, to high rates of stress among Danish employees, mindfulness is understood as a practice to ease the individual, agitated body, as well as the corporate economy by transforming stress into ease. Mindfulness is also understood as a way to reconnect practitioners with what really matters. As such, mindfulness at work has adopted the promise that meditation can bring about more happiness and joy at work and home.
The thesis builds on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2016 and 2017, where I observed and participated in the teaching of mindfulness in two workplaces: a sales department of a pharmaceutical company and at a public university. My main interlocutors and gatekeepers were Peter and Ursula, who taught these courses. The mindfulness classrooms at these workplaces became my primary field sites as I participated in collective meditations, mindful walking, body scans, and observed how mindfulness was mediated by mindfulness teachers and received by employers and employees. Together with the employees, I learned to attend and attune to my lived embodied experience in new ways, using mindfulness concepts to account for my bodily reactions, thoughts, and behavior. To my knowledge, no other in-depth ethnographic studies of mindfulness in workplaces have been conducted in Denmark. This thesis not only makes an original contribution to the study of mindfulness, but also contributes novel knowledge to a much-needed field of investigation. By exploring how mindfulness is enacted, engaged with, experienced, and embodied in this particular socio-cultural context, it also responds to the call for ethnographic examinations into mindfulness in the field (see Kirmayer 2015; Salmenniemi 2020; Cassaniti 2018). At the end of this introduction, I will delve into the methodological reflections that have enabled me to understand the matters of concern (Latour 2004a) when mindfulness is put to work in a company context. The material that I produced during fieldwork includes detailed observations from seminars, conferences, and workshops on mindfulness, as well as 37 in-depth interviews with employees, managers, and mindfulness teachers. This material provides the empirical basis for the analytical engagements of the thesis. The empirical realities of my field offer new and more diversified perspectives to the critique of contemporary secular mindfulness iterations that describe mindfulness as social anesthesia preserving the status quo (e.g. Purser 2019). In this introduction, I present how the current study is positioned in relation to the existing scholarship on mindfulness, and introduce the argument, approach, theoretical grounds, and ethnographic material that have inspired the title of the thesis, *Mindful Work: An Ethnography of Mindfulness and the Sociality of Feeling in Danish Workplaces*.

Probing the concept ‘mindful work,’ the thesis investigates the variety of practices involved when employees pursue mindfulness and the way these practices intersect with everyday life, social norms, economic interests, and proper conduct in the context of the Danish

---

4 I have anonymized all names of people and places that I came to know during my fieldwork with the exception of well-known public figures and spokespeople of mindfulness in Denmark and beyond, for instance the director for the Danish Center for Mindfulness, Lone Fjorback.
workplace. Mindful work refers to the dual nature of mindfulness in workplaces; mindfulness acts as a tool for improving work routines, and at the same time, as a tool for working upon the employee. Mindful work is therefore a double movement where employees turn to themselves to work on their own bodies, and their own distress, in order to work better in their companies. The second part of the title refers to the sociality of such mindful work, arguing that to be mindful in a workplace environment involves ‘feeling how you feel’ in relation to the workplace (and its expectations), and as such, feeling is as much public, social, and affective as it is private. The case of mindful work shows how meditation intersects not only secularity, spirituality, and rationality but also health, emotions, affect, and productivity. It contributes to the literature on contemporary spirituality (Heelas 2008) and spiritual management (Magaard and Mortensen 2009; Salamon 2002) that has poignantly shown how spirituality and rationality intertwine in postmodern businesses in unexpected ways. The study also brings valuable nuances to the classical literature on emotional labor (Hochschild [1983] 2012) and the more recent research on affect and immaterial and affective labor. Before I unpack the theoretical framework and contribution further, let me first return to the observations that initially sparked my interest in this research.

**Motivation**

When I began researching workplace mindfulness in Denmark in 2016, it seemed mindfulness was everywhere. Churches conducted mindful services, kindergarten teachers calmed down the children with meditation, hospitals offered mindfulness to patients, and corporate leaders pursued mindful work routines. Flyers on the university campus where I work advertised mindfulness meditation to prevent exam anxiety. Bookshops sold mindful coloring books filled with mandalas, parrots, and patterns. In some schools, children started the day in mindful silence, and antenatal programs provided expecting mothers with mindful ways to attend to body and mind. People in my network also seemed to know mindfulness well, if not through first-hand experience, then through anecdotes or media coverage. I was amazed to see the proliferation of mindfulness, especially in arenas that, to me, did not seem to afford cross-legged contemplation, such as the workplace setting. My wonder was admittedly tied to assumptions about what is ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas [1966] 2001), i.e., ideas about where meditation practices belong. There was something about the image of business people meditating together at work that really puzzled and provoked me.
When I read anthropologist Julia Cassaniti’s account of mindfulness practices in what she calls Theravada Asia, I recognized her apprehension for taking up mindfulness as a research topic (Cassaniti 2018, 8). Mindfulness had, to Cassaniti, become associated with hip, white, privileged people and a movement often overshadowing the less privileged Buddhist ‘others’ it was derived from (ibid.). I shared Cassaniti’s sentiment that mindfulness in our contemporary era had become overwhelmingly pervasive, sprawling throughout society in ways that seem to wander far off from Buddhist ways of engaging with mindfulness (in Pali, sati). Yet, it was also the matter-out-of-placeness that allured me to investigate the ‘work’ that mindfulness does in unexpected contexts, such as the workplace. Investigating mindfulness at places of work was thus fueled by an interest in the dynamics of this exact social setting, where I imagined mindfulness to be put to work in different ways than it was in clinical therapy, for instance. What did it look like when major companies like Carlsberg and Novo Nordisk, who were among the many companies reporting positive results of mindfulness interventions, invited employees to meditate? My earlier research on yoga primed these thoughts about the intentionality and purpose of mindfulness when taken up outside its traditional, religious context. The strand of research investigating how ‘Eastern body-mind practices’ is engaged with in a globalized world also inspired these questions (Brown and Leledaki 2010; B. R. Smith 2007; Strauss 2005; Markula 2014; Philo, Cadman, and Lea 2015).

In 2014, I conducted fieldwork on yoga tourism in India, studying how international tourists, mostly from North America but also in large numbers from Mexico, Brazil, Israel, Australia, and Europe, engaged with the disciplined practices of Iyengar yoga. Not only is the body supposed to bend the right ways in such embodied practices, the mind is supposed to follow and transform, becoming more virtuous by the continuous physical training and moral teachings of yoga (Hedegaard 2015). The people I met in India were middle or upper-middle class and had left their jobs and careers to pursue what many of them thought of as a spiritual path to self-discovery and healing (see also Strauss 2005; Smith 2007). Most had experienced some kind of physical and mental burnout because of their jobs and lifestyles. Whereas yoga, meditation, and breath-work amongst these tourists were motivated by finding

---

5 Iyengar yoga is a hatha yoga practice with a strict focus on bodily alignment. Practitioners enter the postures with the help of props such as belts, bricks, and chairs. The instructions of the teacher and the props point the body into alignment creating not only outer discipline in the form of the right posture but also inner discipline in the form of specific attitudes or states (Lea 2009; Hedegaard 2015).
ways to escape the ‘nine to five,’ or the ‘rat race,’ mindfulness practices are typically cel-
brated for affording the opposite—for its ability to help stabilize and maintain one’s regular
pace, managing stress and burnout while staying in the game (Chaskalson 2011; Kabat-Zinn
2005b; M. Williams and Penman 2011). Mindfulness is about “continuing what you do, but
doing it in a more relaxed way,” as the teacher Peter reiterated at the beginning of each mind-
fulness class. As we will learn in the chapters to come, my interlocutors understood mindful-
ness as a way to keep working, but working in more sustainable ways, as Tove, a laboratory
technician, phrased it. From the onset of my research, I was interested in what this shift from
escaping the system to finding ways to stay in it meant. What did it do to the practice itself?
How was mindfulness, a Buddhist-derived concept, changed to fit the visions of a thriving
contemporary workplace? How was mindfulness ‘put to work,’ so to speak? Moreover, I was
interested in understanding what the practice did to employees—how mindfulness was imag-
ined to work on them, and how it was experienced by mindfulness novices, some of whom
might never have imagined to engage in meditation but did so on invitation from their em-
ployer. I was furthermore interested in the value chain, which Peter and Ursula became part
of when they offered their knowledge about meditation to workplaces that, in turn, provided
the practices to their employees as stress prevention. How was mindfulness courses said to
produce value for the companies? How was this value related to individual emotions and af-
fective states? What happened if people failed to ‘become mindful’?

Argument

Prompted by these questions, the thesis inquires into the ways mindfulness is put to work,
and how it works on employees in the Danish workplace. This inquiry also addresses another,
more general question, what might mindful work tell us about the relationship between care,
and compliance, emotion, and affect in contemporary work environments? To answer these
questions, I make two main analytical moves employing ‘enactment’ and ‘embodiment’ as
my core analytical concepts for exploring mindful work in Danish workplaces. The first part
of the thesis (chapters 1 through 3) is primarily concerned with how mindfulness is enacted
globally and in Denmark (chapter 1) with a specific focus on the workplace (chapter 3) and
how the workplace is experienced by employees (chapter 2). I look at the ways in which en-
actments of mindfulness relate to historical, discursive, and affective processes, e.g., the
translations of Buddhist sati to modern-day mindfulness. Paying attention to how mindful-
ness is enacted means investigating not only the discursive configurations of mindfulness but
also attending to the techniques and materialities that mediate mindfulness; in other words, making it visible, audible, tangible, and knowable (Mol 2002, 33). The second part of the thesis (chapters 4 to 6) is an in-depth examination of how mindfulness is embodied, focusing on the way employees feel and attune to themselves (chapter 4), imagine inhabitable bodies (chapter 5), and find ways to care for themselves through mindfulness practices (chapter 6). I understand embodiment following anthropologist Thomas Csordas paradigm of embodiment (Csordas 1990) and his intentional collapse of the mind and body as he argues that the body is something we have as well as something we are. I expand it with empirical philosopher Annemarie Mol’s definition of the body as something we ‘do,’ incorporating the material world in various ways (Law and Mol 2004; Mol 2002).

Based on my investigation into the enactments and embodiments of mindfulness, I develop a two-fold argument. First, I argue that the practice of mindfulness, although it does indeed turn inward, is nonetheless socially enabled and entangled with the cultural and socio-economic context in which mindfulness takes place. Secondly, I argue that when an employee engages in mindful work, it is not only a personal project but also a professional accomplishment that is embedded in the corporate economy (the company has invested in their mindfulness). This, however, does not automatically mean that workplace mindfulness is stripped of ethical ambitions or concerns. On the contrary, this thesis argues that care and optimization, non-economic and economic values are entangled in mindful work.

This thesis, then, contributes to the field of mindfulness, but it also makes a more general anthropological claim, which is that individual embodied experience cannot be separated from the social realm. This means that even though I separate enactments and embodiment for analytical clarity in this outline, the thesis shows how these processes are interrelated. Drawing from Mol, I argue that the lived, embodied experience intertwines with how it is socially mediated (Mol 2002). Yet, the intertwining of the social and individual sphere of experience does not make embodied experiences the same. This is a crucial point. Even if mindfulness is culturally mediated and socially enacted, the employees and mindfulness novices are, at the same time, individually and creatively engaged with it. Thus, it means I am challenging the idea of mindfulness as a social anesthesia (Purser 2019; Purser 2015). In contrast, by focusing on dimensions of embodied experiences, images, and ways of feeling, all of which manifest how mindfulness in workplaces works, this thesis shows that mindfulness can become a reflexive way of attuning to oneself and to the things one will not accept as an employee. Employees even experience how mindfulness practice can craft a more inhabitable
body and an embodied appreciation of the simplicity of the here and now. In order to become relevant as a therapeutic practice in Danish workplaces, mindfulness has, in important ways, been defined and redefined, as I will elaborate on in the next section.

**(Re)defining Mindfulness - and why it matters**

‘Mindfulness’ is listed in the Danish dictionary as an American English word and a concept originating in Buddhism and yoga, brought to the West to treat stress. The dictionary defines it as a technique to cultivate presence (*nærvær*) and awareness of one’s own body and existence in the moment.⁶ Albeit mindfulness never appears in the *Yoga Sutras* (Patañjali and Feuerstein 1979), it is unsurprising that mindfulness is being connected to two trending ‘Eastern’ mind-body practice as it is in the Danish dictionary definition. Like yoga, mindfulness has undergone multiple transformations as it has moved and transformed beyond monastic walls and national borders. It has manifested into numerous different schools, practices, and programs, some of which have reached immense global popularity.

An interesting characteristic for mindfulness, as practiced in a Danish context, is the eclectic ways that religious sources, neuroscientific findings, and popular psychology are drawn together to constitute mindfulness as a concept and practice fit for modern-day people and modern-day problems. Jenny Eklöf (2016) observes a similar eclectic in Sweden, as does Alp Arat (2017) in his research in the UK.⁷ In Jeff Wilson’s extensive exploration of the popular literature on mindfulness in the United States, Wilson describes how mindfulness has, in recent decades, been branded in innovative ways by applying the appellation “mindful” to everything from clothing to food to sex (Wilson 2014; 2017). The word mindfulness is in the twenty-first century applied to spiritual and secular, religious and non-religious practices alike. As we will see in the following chapters, mindfulness draws upon both religion and science in ways that makes for an interesting example of ‘secular embodiment’ (Scheer, Fadil, and Johansen 2019, 7) and thus contributes to our understanding of what the secular looks and feels like.

In my fieldwork on mindful work, I observed how, despite wide-ranging ways of defining mindfulness, contemporary mindfulness was articulated along a particular lineage,

---


⁷ Alp Arat argues that contemporary mindfulness points towards a “new modality of the secular.” He explains that, while the language of mindfulness operates in complete discursive isolation from the religious, its ontological foundation is nevertheless resting on a claim towards a transcendent whole (Arat 2017:167).
originating with the American professor of medicine, Jon Kabat-Zinn. Every so often, religious authorities like the Dalai Lama were also mentioned in class teachings in a quote on ethical conduct or happy living, for instance. Yet, where the Dalai Lama functioned as ‘icing on the cake,’ closing or opening a workshop, the Danish teachers whom I followed considered Kabat-Zinn as foundational: it was him who gave form, substance, and flavor to the practice of mindfulness. Kabat-Zinn is also globally recognized as one of the main architects behind the contemporary secular iteration of mindfulness (Gleig 2019, 34). Through books like *Full Catastrophe Living – how to cope with stress, pain, and illness using mindfulness meditation* ([1990a] 2011) and *Coming to Our Senses – Healing Ourselves and the World* (2005a), Kabat-Zinn has propelled a global “mindfulness movement” (Wilson 2014) and introduced mindfulness in mainstream institutions by training CEOs, clergy, and congressional staff to meditate.

As other important American and British promoters of mindfulness, Kabat-Zinn started to teach mindfulness based on his encounters with Buddhist thought (Cassaniti 2018, 2). A dedicated practitioner in the Japanese Zen tradition, Kabat-Zinn combined Buddhist teachings with psychological therapy in what became a world-famous, eight-week-long therapy program: Mindfulness-Based-Stress-Reduction (MBSR). His program was initially developed as a treatment to patients suffering from chronic pain, anxiety, and depression (Kabat-Zinn 2011), yet, as we will see throughout this dissertation, people who engage in mindfulness practice are often not sick or diagnosed with a mental or physical illness. Mindfulness has become as much a preventive tool as a treatment.

Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as an awareness that emerges when we pay attention in a particular way: intentionally, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally (Kabat-Zinn [1994] 2005, 4). Mindfulness practice is a way of allowing practitioners to move the mind from a ‘doing’ mode to a ‘being’ mode, thus reorienting our consciousness towards a more mindful way of life. To teach MBSR, one has to be certified through an MBSR institution, such as the Danish Center for Mindfulness. Many teachers of mindfulness, including Peter and Ursula, whom I followed in 2017, are inspired by Kabat-Zinn, yet mix his way of conceptualizing mindfulness with other schools. Ursula, for instance, combines Kabat-Zinn’s mindful attitudes—non-judgment, patience, beginner’s mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go (Kabat-Zinn [1990] 2011, 32–39)—with elements from Google’s Search Inside Yourself program (Tan, Goleman, and Kabat-Zinn 2014) and theories on organizational change. Ursula does this partly because she is not fully certified as an MBSR teacher but
INTRODUCTION

more so because she has realized, working with businesses, that MBSR is ‘too deep’ and ‘too therapeutic’ for a workplace setting. In other words, mindfulness not only has multiple definitions but is also applied differently and assembled from different, sometimes contradictory elements (Stanley and Kortelainen 2019).

Does it matter how we define mindfulness? The lively and sometimes heated debates among scholars and practitioners of mindfulness over the right definitions and right practices of mindfulness testify that it does matter. To claim an original ‘ethical’ Buddhist definition of mindfulness can be a way to critique contemporary uses of mindfulness, like, for instance, the use of mindfulness in the US military (Purser and Milillo 2014) or sometimes more explicitly seek to “reclaim the Buddhist foundations of mindfulness” (Shonin, Van Gordon, and Singh 2015). To pin down definitions can also be a means for scholars, especially within medicine, psychology, and neuroscience, to operationalize mindfulness to streamline and compare clinical trials and mindfulness interventions (Didonna 2009) to verify the so-called universal effects of mindfulness practice.

Although these battles around definitions are important, my project follows another path. The premise of my fieldwork and thesis is that mindfulness, because it is a multivalent and heterogeneous concept, cannot be fully understood without situating it in the social worlds and cultural contexts in which it is practiced. When I engaged with teachers and practitioners of mindfulness, I was interested precisely in their particular ways of defining and practicing mindfulness, and how these various engagements intersected with daily life, not whether their definitions accorded with the Pali canon. This was a way to learn not only about Danish ways of being mindful, but of what the ‘project’ of becoming mindful in the particular context of the workplace might tell us about contemporary forms of ‘good’ work, ‘good’ emotions, and ‘good’ bodies. It is this multidimensional, ethnographic approach to mindful work that is attentive to mindfulness on the ground which will add to the existing scholarship on mindfulness I now turn to.
### Between Enthusiasm and Criticism: Approaching Mindfulness Ethnographically

The academic literature on mindfulness is vast and growing exponentially, as evidenced in figure 1.8

!["Mindfulness" journal articles published by year: 1980-2019](image)

*Figure 1*

The majority of work on mindfulness stems from the field of medicine, psychology, and neuroscience, and is set within the discourse of cognitive science (McMahan and Braun 2017).9 This means that research questions are typically framed in terms of effectiveness, clinical applications, and neurological activity, asking for instance, “what are the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, biochemical, and neurological factors that contribute to the state of mindfulness?” (Didonna 2009, 11). By way of randomized controlled trials, FMRI or EEG brain scans, and self-reported surveys, such studies seek to measure the effect of mindfulness on a variety of

---

8 The figure shows the exponential rise of scientific articles written on mindfulness since 1980. The number of publications with the word mindfulness in the title has grown from zero articles in 1980 to 1203 articles in 2019, per the American Mindfulness Research Association (AMRA). AMRA informs that they obtained the information of the articles from an ISI Web of Science search of the term “mindfulness” in academic journal article titles.

9 Meditation is here cleansed of religious language and instead defined, for instance, as “emotional and attentional regulatory training regimes developed for various ends, including the cultivation of wellbeing and emotional balance.” (A. Lutz et al. 2008) Studies do mention how they draw inspiration from “Buddhist psychology” and Buddhist “models of wellbeing.” Such models are said to aid scientists in understanding the nature of the mind and provide “tools and methods needed to enact changes on the psyche” (Ibid. 6).
INTRODUCTION

conditions and populations, attempting to “rigorously operationalize, conceptualize, and empirically evaluate mindfulness interventions” (Baer 2003, 140). Some of this research places itself within what has been called ‘contemplative science’ (cf. Feldman and Kuyken 2019). Contemplative science combines methods from what they term wisdom traditions, such as Buddhists meditation, with psychological, philosophical, and neuroscientific methods to investigate the nature of the mind. Francisco Varela’s work and the book *The Embodied Mind* (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch [1991] 2018) is a forbearer for much of this work. In 1987, Varela initiated a line of dialogues between scientists and Buddhists, most notably the Dalai Lama. These dialogues are continuing to this day, and the visions for a contemplative science is made manifest in the international institute Mind and Life (van Beek 2012).

In 2016, I participated in the European Mind and Life week-long summer conference along with 120 researchers, most of whom were investigating mindfulness through quantitative means. I was struck with the devoted approach to mindfulness. The vantage point for many of these researchers seemed to be: “mindfulness is inherently good, how can we assess its goodness?” Whereas neuroscientific accounts of mindfulness are often celebratory, a new critically engaged approach to mindfulness has also emerged. Significant work is done to nuance the picture of mindfulness as being fundamentally beneficial—work dedicated to documenting adverse effects of meditation (Lindahl et al. 2019; Lindahl and Britton 2019). Recently, fifteen researchers have collectively advised to ‘mind the hype’ around mindfulness, stressing how some scientific studies on mindfulness are fraught with misinformation and poor methodology. “As mindfulness has increasingly pervaded every aspect of contemporary society, so have misunderstandings about what it is, whom it helps, and how it affects the mind and brain,” the authors assert, and argues that mindfulness is not a “universal panacea” (Van Dam et al. 2018, 37).

Another argument amongst some critics of contemporary mindfulness is that mindfulness, as taught in the West, has been “stripped of the teachings on ethics” that accompanied it originally (Purser 2019, 7–8), and that it has been co-opted by a neoliberal agenda (Purser and Loy 2013). Anthropologist Lionel Obadia has defined contemporary mindfulness as part of a “duty of happiness” persisting in “wealthy societies” (Obadia 2007, 231, 250). His argument is related to that of philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who famously defined the booming of ‘Western Buddhism’ as a remedy against the stressful tension of capitalist dynamics, functioning as capitalism’s perfect ideological supplement (Žižek 2001). The harshest critique is often lashed against mindfulness taught in workplaces. Corporate mindfulness practice, it is
argued, is adhering to the logic of neoliberalism and turns into a project of attaining the right kind of self-management. The American professor of business, Ronald Purser, has forcefully critiqued the corporate takeover of mindfulness as ‘McMindfulness’—a refashioning of the practice that is superficial, gamified, and a pale imitation of the real thing. While my work is indebted to these critical readings of mindfulness, it also seeks to bring new nuances to the field, contributing with ethnographic accounts of how employees engage with, contest, and embrace mindfulness. In my opinion, the field of mindfulness studies has been somewhat polarized between enthusiastic accounts of mindfulness and harsh critiques and is in need of more work that is sensitive to the localized negotiations of what mindfulness might mean. By stating this, I am siding with anthropologist Joanna Cook, who points out how neoliberalism has become an oft-used concept to coin practices of self-cultivation, such as mindfulness (Cook 2016). Even though the concept of neoliberalism goes some way in accounting for the relationship between forms of governance, self-governance, and capitalist market forces at play in mindfulness, Cook advocates for a focus on the multiple meanings and values invested in these practices (Cook 2016). Cook’s discussion of neoliberalism points to the importance of paying attention to both particular empirical context and ‘mind the hype’ of trending academic concepts.

It is difficult to believe that practicing mindfulness will work in the same way across the diverse socio-cultural worlds in which it travels. Yet it is often this postulate that undergirds much literature on mindfulness espousing that it will either work wonders or be a pale imitation of the real thing, as Purser defines it (2019). Professor Laurence Kirmayer has stated the clear but sometimes overlooked fact that mindfulness has a history and a social life (Kirmayer 2015, 461). I fully agree with Kirmayer and others among him (cf. Stanley and Kortelainen 2019) that we need a situated view on mindfulness that includes a mapping of the social world where the practices are enacted, embodied, and embedded (Kirmayer 2015, 459). To make sense of the kind of ‘work’ that contemplative practices do, as David McMahan suggests, is to examine the complex contextual factors, doctrinal, ethical, social,

---

10 Purser argues that, although cloaked in an aura of care and humanity, mindfulness disables collective action and preserves the neoliberal status quo as it conveniently shifts societal maladies onto the individual by framing, for instance, stress and anxiety as a personal problem (Purser and Milillo 2014; Purser 2019).

11 However, I am not convinced of his view that disembedding Buddhist practices from their social and historical contexts lead to ‘misunderstandings’ (Ibid. 462). Misunderstandings would imply that there is a pure or original way of practicing.
cultural, national and cosmic, that make up the social imaginary in which the practice is nestled (McMahan and Braun 2017, 1-4). Such a situated approach can counter neuroscientific readings of individuals—what anthropologist Emily Martin calls the new guise of nature—in providing accounts of the “ineluctably social and cultural complexity of human actions” that render individuals thinkable only as social and cultural beings (Martin 2000a, 585).  

This thesis, therefore, positions itself as part of a body of research that engages with mindfulness by inquiring into the socio-economics, political, historical, and cultural dimensions, as well as ethical aspects of contemporary mindfulness (Ferguson 2016; Gleig 2016; Kucinskas 2018; Wilson 2014; Cook 2016; Gleig 2019). This strand of research, which is inspirational to my study, has opposed understandings of mindfulness as existing purely within individuals, emphasizing how inner experiences of mindfulness rest on mediations and social relations (Stanley 2012) and stressed how understandings of mindfulness are culturally specific and intertwined with socio-political processes (Sharf 2014; Cassaniti 2018). Furthermore, in recent years, Buddhists, academics, and activists alike have problematized particular issues of contemporary mindfulness concerning race, gender, and class, signifying a possible backlash against the growing popularity of secular mindfulness (Gleig 2019, 56–57; Purser 2015; Bhikkhu Bodhi 2016). Central to these discussions is the issue of the ethical framework, or lack of, in contemporary mindfulness, including representation, responsibility, and the relationship between the individual, community (sangha), and society.

I am particularly inspired by a line of work that engages with meditation and mindfulness ethnographically and understands such practices as inherently social (Cook 2010; 2016; 2017; Pagis 2019; Cassaniti 2018; Gleig 2016; 2019; Cassaniti 2015). Cassaniti’s work sheds light on the diverse localized ways of practicing and understanding mindfulness in Chiang Mai, Kandy, Mandalay, and Washington DC. Cook’s book, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism* (2010), examines meditation as an ‘ethical project’ and a ‘technology of the self.’

---

12 Ethnography stands up to neurological foundationalism saying: we may be a product of evolution, but its imperatives do not exhaust the reasons for our actions; because of humans’s immense cultural variability (Martin 2000a, 585.).

13 In one example, American activist Angela Davis asked Jon Kabat-Zinn “what good is mindfulness in a racially unjust world?” in a public dialogue over the value of secular mindfulness. When Kabat-Zinn answered that mindfulness could awaken practitioners to collective suffering, Davis responded unsatisfied that racism is not a set of personal attitudes but a whole system (Rowe 2016, 207).

14 Cassaniti show how people think differently of mindfulness, its temporality, its affective goals, the power it has, the ethics accompanying it, the self it deconstructs/rebuilds because of different cultural conceptions of the mind, mental health, selfhood, spirituality, morality and ways of healing. In Chiang Mai, Thailand, for instance, mindfulness is connected to ghostly energies and spiritual power, locally referred to as *Kwan* (Cassaniti 2018, 6).
showing how, in meditation practice, the human body, mind, and emotions became mediums for religious activities in the constitution of the religious self (Cook 2010, 94). Sociologist Michal Pagis’ ethnography of Vipassana examines the community of strangers coming together to meditate on Vipassana retreats and how they form a “collective solitude” (Pagis 2019). The specific ways meditators interact (or rather the ways they avoid interaction) at retreats, the physical set-up of the meditation hall, as well as the encouragements to keep silent, allows for inverse attention. The individual meditator’s attention is no longer set on the social situation and the ways others respond to her. The community of meditators move “from the role of the audience to the role of co-bodily indwellers” (Pagis 2019, 69). This inversion of attention allows meditators at Vipassana retreats to be in solitude together and devote their attention inward to the subtleties of their embodied experiences. The studies by Cassaniti, Cook, and Pagis have been foundational for me in offering analyses of meditation as a ‘social learning’ involving collective (moral, religious, therapeutic) goals and, at the same time, individual embodied experiences. The thesis contributes to this line of work and the broader strand of work investigating the circulation of so-called Eastern body-mind practices (Borup and Fibiger 2017; Philo, Cadman, and Lea 2015) by offering new insights into the way mindfulness and meditation are enacted, engaged with, embodied, and sometimes counteracted in the context of the workplace. The thesis also offers new analytical tools for understanding such engagements, such as ‘mindful work’ and ‘the sociality of feeling,’ which constitute the analytical framework of the thesis. In the next section, I provide an overview of the theoretical grounds on which the thesis stands and to which it contributes, and elaborate on my analytical approach of ‘the sociality of feeling’ which is derived from academic discussions about the body, emotions, and affect.

Theoretical Grounds and Contribution: The Sociality of Feeling

In 1934, Marcel Mauss pointed to the sociological richness of examining ‘body techniques’ to understand the physical, moral, and magical effects of such practices ([1934] 1992). In his seminal article, Mauss argues that all societies have body techniques peculiar to them, e.g.,

---

15 The nuns central to Cook’s ethnography shape a “monastic subjectivity” by working on themselves and through this work creating a personal commitment to Buddhist practice, precept, and community (Cook 2010, 10). Cook’s work is in line with other anthropological engagements with ethical becoming that have emphasized how ‘the good’ is always situated and often sought after through self-cultivating practices like meditation (Laidlaw 2013; Cook 2010; Fassin and Lézé Samuel 2014; Faubion 2011). Michel Foucault’s work on ascetic practice and care of the self grounds much of this work (Foucault 1985; [1982] 2006; 1997).
introduction

specific ways of swimming, digging holes, and making love that differs from how these activities are performed elsewhere and that connect to ideas of efficiency, orderliness, and morality. The way ‘man’ moves is not merely determined by biological or psychological dispositions, Mauss argues. Rather, our bodies are taught to move and act in specific ways as we socialize with and imitate others. Mauss concludes that the individual body is, in fact, socially configured and must be approached as a physio-psycho-sociological assemblage (Mauss [1934] 1992, 473). Mauss’ body techniques are a helpful starting point for carving out an analytical frame for the study of mindfulness at work. What Mauss calls for is a social reading of the body and its actions moving from the concrete body to a theory of the body, the abstract body. Habits are in Mauss’ understanding not metaphysical or mysterious, but social rationales ingrained in individuals through repetitions and imitation, a ‘habitus,’ closely tied to educational institutions, social networks, and more generally the social and cultural worlds in which the individual moves (Mauss [1934] 1992, 458). Such classical ways of approaching the body help us recognize that the way people are instructed to move, e.g., sitting on a chair meditating, is part of the socialization and transfer of cultural ideas of ‘good’ manners, morals, and proper conduct. In a mindfulness class, learning to meditate is one of the ways practitioners can become calmer, less stressed, and more focused. Importantly then, following Mauss, mindfulness is a technique of the body and way to work towards and nurture specific abilities and ‘good’ ways of relating to oneself and others. If what Mauss tried to achieve was to get at the sociality of movement, I aim to get at the sociality of feeling, using the case of mindful work as empirical ground.

Becoming mindful at work relates to specific, ‘good’ ways of being in a workplace. Pagis emphasizes how Vipassana retreats is a place where attention is turned inward, and people who meditate alongside each other are turned to co-bodily indwellers (Pagis 2019, 69). Such an inversion of attention is not what happens when meditation is practiced in the workplace, however. Meditating alongside superiors, colleagues, or one’s subordinates involves a different kind of power relation, expectation, and investment. The company CEO, the mindfulness teacher, the employees ranging from head of finance to canteen staff are differently invested and invested with differentiated expectations as they engage with mindfulness. To grasp more fully such power relations and get at the empirical realities of practicing mindfulness in workplaces, I have sought additional inspiration in the literature on “affective” and “immaterial labor” (Berlant 2011; Muehlebach 2014) as well as earlier anthropological work on emotions that define emotions as the “missing link capable of bridging mind and
I am particularly inspired and indebted to the work of the American sociologist Arlie Hochschild who theorized what she deems “the commercializing of feeling” in her seminal book *The Managed Heart* (Hochschild [1983] 2012). Expanding on Karl Marx’s work on capitalism and alienation, Hochschild focuses on how post-industrial societies capitalize on bodies and emotions, and develops a framework for addressing private and non-waged (emotion work) and professional (emotional labor) management of emotions. Hochschild is interested in feeling rules, in the pinch between what we feel and what we should feel. She asks: “what happens when feeling rules, like rules of behavioral display, are established not through private negotiation but by company manuals?” (Hochschild [1983] 2012, 19). She shows that to abide by feeling rules, employees perform emotional labor. They manage, contain or promote certain emotions seen as fit to their particular job function; the flight attendant brings herself to smile at a rude passenger to ensure a pleasant flight; the bill collector frowns to induce fear and guilt and make the money flow (Hochschild [1983] 2012, 7, 57, 94).

Yet, while Hochschild’s work shows how employees worked to manage particular unruly emotions such as anger (the flight attendants chew on ice to deal with their fury, for instance), mindfulness practice provides another example of how feeling rules and work life entangles. Mindfulness is a practice that seeks to help practitioners become differently affected altogether. Pagis has aptly defined Vipassana meditation as a practice in which practitioners “feel themselves feeling the world” (Pagis 2019, 55). Similarly, mindfulness is a practice that reaches beyond the individual body and the management of a singular emotion. It involves detecting how the body is affected by the world more generally and how it responds to these impressions. This ambition proposes a more fluid relationship between individual and environment than the one presented in Hochschild’s work, where emotions are managed and performed by the individual alone. To investigate this affective connection between individual and environment, I have turned to the burgeoning literature on affect (Despret 2004; Blackman 2012; Scheer, Fadil, and Johansen 2019; Brennan 2004; Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Ahmed 2004a; 2004b; 2010; 2014; Johansen 2015b). This literature understands emotions as involving the personal with the social and the affective with the meditated (see, for instance, Ahmed 2004a; 2004b; 2010) and makes a fertile ground for investigating what it means to meditate in the context of the workplace.

The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza has been an important inspiration for much of this work in his characterization of the body by its ability to affect and be affected (Spinoza
A premise for much of contemporary affect theory is, building on Spinoza that emotions exist neither in the individual nor the social but between bodies. Emotions are not seen as psychological dispositions, but as social and structural, which should lead us to examine how emotions work to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, the individual and the collective (Ahmed 2004b, 28). Such an understanding of emotionality views the body as open to the environment rather than bounded (Blackman 2012, 22).

Contrary to scholars such as Sara Ahmed, who conflate emotions and affect, I find it useful to differentiate more clearly between emotion and affect. This is helpful to flesh out the relation between the intensities of experience that is characteristic of affect and the ‘socio-linguistic fixing’ through which such experiences are qualified, owned, and recognized as emotions (Massumi 1995, 88). I understand affect as intersubjective forces that have a physical effect on the individual body. Affect, then, is the physicality of emotions: the intensities, forces, flashes, of bodily reactions, meaning that without affect, feelings do not “feel” because they have no intensity (Shouse 2005). Emotion I take to be the naming of that felt affect. Through such naming, emotions actualize norms and values in the flesh (Johansen 2015a, 50). Feeling, then, is the act of getting in touch with affects as well as naming them, transforming them into recognizable social categories of emotions. I am here inspired by anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo, among others, who stressed how “the life of feeling is an aspect of the social world in which its terms are found” (Rosaldo 1984, 145). She states that what we feel (if we get angry for instance) depends on how we understand what happened to us (when something affects us) and construe our options in response (ibid., 143). I want to expand on this, saying that how we go about feeling what we feel, meaning the feeling practices we have for getting in touch with emotions, also take its shape from the social world in which we are involved (ibid.).

Even if I categorize affect, emotion, and feeling differently from Ahmed, her work has been crucial in enabling me to grasp economies and contingencies of affect and emotion; the illness in wellbeing, and the unhappiness in happiness (Ahmed 2004a; 2010). I resonate in

---

16 Emotions, in Spinoza’s understanding, are transitional states and a result of activities and “modifications of the body whereby the active power of the said body is increased, diminished, aided, or constrained” (Spinoza [1677] 1990, 264). As an example, he describes how joy arises because of the body moving closer to a loved object (ibid., 308–310).

17 Blackman is also helpful in her suggestion to theorize “the threshold conditions” and the “psycho/mediation through which affect flows and circulates” (Blackman 2012:23).
particular with Ahmed’s insistence on the historicities of affective experience, both personal and collective, meaning the way the individual gets affected and succeeds or fails in attuning to a certain mood, for instance a national mood (Ahmed 2014, 28), depends on personal biographies and positioning as well as political historicities (Ahmed 2010, 41). Although often positioned in a separate camp from Ahmed, I find that thinking through anthropologist Brian Massumi’s work on affects as ‘intensities of experience’ (Massumi 2015), following Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari 2000), is helpful to also account for the quantitative dimension of intensity added to the quality of experience (Massumi 2002, 30). I try to do this by conceptualizing workplaces as affective. It has furthermore been productive for me to engage with the work of empirical philosopher Annemarie Mol. I find that her work exemplifies in a grounded manner and by using empirical examples, how difficult-to-grasp categories such as intentionality, agency, and affective bodies can be examined through practices (Mol 2002; Law and Mol 2004; Mol 2008; Mol, Moser, and Pols 2010).

I engage with and move from these bodies of work and offer new perspectives showing how mindful work invites a particular way of doing feeling that has the aim of attuning employees to themselves. I coin the term sociality of feeling to conceptualize the socio-material set-up through which, in the case of mindful work, employees are invited to ‘feel how they feel,’ and the cultural norms guiding such acts of feeling as well as the appropriate responses to what is felt. I understand sociality as the practically engaged intersubjectivity that goes beyond language, and that may involve performance, technologies, and rituals (Sjørslev 2007; Hastrup 2011, 102). That is to say, I understand sociality as continually produced in everyday engagements and through power relations and contingent agendas. Sara Ahmed coins the term ‘a sociality of emotions’ (Ahmed [2004] 2014, 8, 218). She juxtaposes it to ‘a sociality of affects,’ a concept that, in Ahmed’s understanding, captures well the transmission of affect, following Brennan (2004), but also assumes that affects pass smoothly and affect

18 Ahmed’s work is particularly interested in mechanisms through which people are found to be misattuned or ‘killjoys’ because they are differently affected and attuned, and in turn affect public moods differently than the privileged majority (on killjoys, see Ahmed 2010; on misattunement, see 2014). “So we may walk into the room and ‘feel the atmosphere,’ but what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival…Situations are affective given the gap between the impressions we have of others and the impressions we make on others, all of which are lively” (Ahmed 2010, 41).
people the same way. Focusing on a sociality of emotions, a concept that is included in Ahmed’s work on the cultural politics of emotions, enables Ahmed to argue that we ‘feel differently’ even when caught up in the same atmosphere (Ahmed [2004] 2014, 218). While I am inspired by this way of conceptualizing emotions, affect, and feeling, I need a different term to properly account for what is at stake in mindful work. A significant difference between Ahmed’s approach and mine is our materials (literary sources versus fieldwork material), and because I do fieldwork, I am better equipped to look at the socio-material setups through which certain ways of feeling, getting in touch with and managing emotion is done. I therefore term it ‘a sociality of feeling.’ The way anthropologist Aja Smith defines ‘proper sociality’ as particular ways of sensing, moving, thinking, and feeling that aligns with social conventions has further inspired my analytical framing of mindful work (Smith 2016, 11). Yet, while Smith focuses on feeling as a partial element of proper sociality, I center my attention on the sociality of feeling to flesh out how acts of feeling through meditation are, in themselves, affectively and socially enabled and intertwine with norms and social ‘goods.’

I examine the sociality of feeling by exploring the relationship between mindfulness teachers, employees, and the workplace, and I use the auxiliary concepts ‘assisted feeling’ and ‘affective work environment’ to understand how employees seek to attune themselves to the work environment through mindfulness. This attunement is a demanding act, since the work environment is, as implicated in the term, a force, and thus experienced as unpredictable and disruptive. This thesis thus contributes to our understanding of the entanglement of affective intensities and individual embodied experience, ‘good’ emotions, and social norms through the concept of sociality of feeling.

Let me elaborate on my empirical field sites and methodology to set up the scene for what mindfulness looks like when practiced in a Danish place of work, where the concept of sociality of feeling is a vital entry to understand the dynamics of mindful work.

---

Mindfulness Courses: Learning to *mærke efter* – To Feel How You Feel

“One of the things…perhaps the most important thing I have learned has to do with breathing. I am really aware of my breath. Fifty years of my life went by before I learned to breathe properly.” This is how Jette describes what learning mindfulness has meant to her. Jette is 56, a lawyer, and one of the many employees I interviewed as part of my fieldwork. As Jette alludes to, the breath and learning to become aware of it is a fundamental part of mindfulness practice. Practitioners are told to ‘follow their breath’ by paying attention to the air moving in and out of their nose or trying to take deep breathes, drawing air all the way down into their stomachs. The simple act of sitting down and paying attention to the breath seems to have a profound effect, according to the many practitioners who told me that after the mindfulness course, that ‘remembering to breathe’ is crucial to their wellbeing. They experience that with practice, they can move their breath from shallow to deep, from the throat area to the abdomen. In mindfulness, the breath works as a bodily anchor, which offers a point of attention that many people feel is calming, soothing, relaxing, allowing them to ‘let go’ of thoughts or get emotions ‘away’ from the body. Jette, for example, describes learning to breathe properly and remembering to breathe as a way to control her thoughts and emotions, something she identified as preventing her from getting sick with stress again.

Jette is an example of how mindfulness and working with the breath becomes a daily engagement for some people who attended Ursula’s, and Peter’s courses. Mindfulness offers a way to keep working while also taken care of oneself, checking in with ten deep breaths, or a short meditation during the day. The course Mindfulness in five steps taught by Ursula at the university and the mindfulness course taught by Peter at the pharmaceutical company both had as its primary objective to reduce stress among employees like Jette. Although the two workplaces are different in organizational structure, the university and the pharmaceutical company, that I will call Kern, face the same major challenge, namely increasing levels of stress among their employees. Both courses offered mindfulness for all members of staff, albeit on different terms and conditions. Let me provide further details about the courses starting with Kern.

Kern is one of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the world, with over 90,000 employees worldwide. The Danish affiliation includes two workplaces situated in Copenhagen and a suburb of Aarhus, and both these workplaces rank highly in surveys of good places
to work. At Kern, mindfulness was implemented at a time of organizational change and increased sales demand from the company headquarters in Zürich. This meant that employees would have to “run faster,” as the head of HR, Susan, put it. Mindfulness was introduced as an initiative targeting the company culture and a means to ease this optimization process. The ambition with mindfulness was to sustain a healthy work environment as sales demands increased, and to enroll as many employees as possible into the courses offered, from secretaries to leaders to canteen staff. Employees were not obligated to participate, but strongly encouraged. Eighty-four people out of around two hundred employees attended. The HR department divided employees into three groups that followed the ten-week mindfulness intervention on either Mondays, Tuesdays, or Thursdays during the spring of 2017. I followed all groups during spring 2017 and interviewed 15 Kern employees, five of whom were in leadership positions.

Ursula taught the staff course, ‘Mindfulness in five steps,’ that runs each semester at the public university and targets university leaders and employees who seek “a path to calm down, concentrate, and experience enhanced joy of working.” The course is set outside of campus in groups of a maximum of twelve people from different departments. The course is listed in the staff-course catalog in the category ‘Wellbeing and personal growth,’ along with other courses such as ‘Mental robustness and wellbeing’ and ‘Manage your time – personal efficiency.’ As opposed to the course at Kern, the university staff course targeted the individual employee, not the company culture, and participation was granted when people on their own initiative asked to be signed up for it. Participants in both classes were mindfulness novices; the practices and concepts offered in mindfulness were mostly new to all of them. Both courses counted more women than men. Participants were between 25 and 60 years old, middle class and upper-middle class, and almost everyone had children. Accordingly, one of the main topics surfacing in the courses at Kern and the university was how to be a more present parent.

The specific course setups resulted in different relational dynamics, expectations, and experiences for the participants. There was a general tendency that the university staff invested their time in the course due to personal motivations. Some experienced physical and mental symptoms of stress; some had been off work with stress earlier in their career and saw

---

20 This is my translation of the course description. My fieldwork was carried out in Danish with rare exceptions of conversations and conferences on mindfulness in English. Excerpts from conversations, interviews and mindfulness classes are translated from Danish to English if not otherwise indicated.
mindfulness as preventive against a relapse; others carried other but equally heavy loads they hoped mindfulness to unburden them of. At Kern, the employees were introduced to mindfulness by the management, and many were unsure what to expect, yet almost all had been positive to the idea of practicing mindfulness. Some employees, especially the ones who were more skeptical, voiced that they ‘gave mindfulness a chance’ because they wanted to support the initiative taken by the HR department.

I observed an interesting ambivalence among my interlocutors across the two groups of employees. On the one hand, they showed gratitude and appreciation for the opportunity to use work hours to experiment with mindfulness. On the other hand, many of them sharply critiqued the idea that stressful work environments or the difficult balancing act between work and family life can be ‘fixed’ with mindfulness—that smelling a flower or remembering to breathe was supposed to improve the circumstances of their job. Signe, a university secretary who had been on leave from work because of stress, put it this way: “My boss tried to make it look as if it was my own fault that I got sick with stress. That’s expectable. It doesn’t reflect well on her leadership if people fall ill with stress. But you can’t allow people to say that it is the employees’ own fault that they get stress. And mindfulness shouldn’t be a fix that just makes people work even harder.” Signe touches on an important tension between care and responsibilization, between offering employees help while also, in a sense, leaving it up to employees themselves to handle the daily pressures of a stressful work environment. This tension marks the following chapters as it was not only employees who opposed the idea of getting ‘fixed’ with mindfulness. To mindfulness teachers Peter and Ursula, it was also of immense importance that mindfulness was not misunderstood as yet another arena where employees had to excel and succeed.

Mindfulness teachers, like Ursula and Peter, and HR managers like Susan, offered employees ways to feel better. Not only in the sense that practitioners should feel good; they should be better at feeling what they feel: How is the work environment affecting me today? Is my body reacting to the fast pace of the workday? Should I take a walk for five minutes to ease my mind and body before I return to my office? Employees must feel how they feel—mærke efter—as the Danish imperative goes to enhance their self-awareness. Ursula, Peter, and Susan hoped that self-awareness would become part of everyday practices for the employees who trained mindfulness. “It is important not to let oneself be consumed by work,” as Susan said. Employees should be passionate but not too passionate; they should juggle many
tasks but not too many tasks; run fast but also slow down once in a while. Such encouragement to feel how you feel that is embedded in social expectations is what I try to capture with the term a sociality of feeling.

As I look back at the many conversations that I have had with mindfulness practitioners about their engagements in mindfulness, the wish to smoothen the relationship between themselves and what we might call ‘the outer world’ was always central. Employees committed to the practice of mindfulness to deal with stressful structures of their work life or difficulties in their home lives. Their commitment to engage in mindfulness fascinated me, as did the efforts of teachers like Ursula and Peter, who were engaged in creatively finding means of enacting mindfulness in accessible ways. Yet it also seemed to me as if mindfulness courses carried with them a “cruel optimism,” to borrow a phrase from Berlant (2011), of fixing the stressful structures of the workplace by handing out life jackets in the form of breathing exercises and meditations for the employees to keep swimming in rough waters. I shared my concerns about whether mindfulness was making a difference in work environments with Ursula and Peter. Ursula emphasized that the real purpose of mindfulness was to “humanize workplaces” and that the participants should not worry that their superiors had tapped Ursula on the shoulder, ensuring she would return participants more “optimized.” “This is your journey,” she said, urging the participants to investigate why they were really there.

Mindfulness courses, as we will see, offer an opportunity for employees to open up and connect with themselves with the aim of easing the stress effected by the passionate, high-paced, and high pressure of work life. But, these courses also work at ‘toughening’ practitioners so as to enable them to resist the adverse effects of the workplace and to handle the pressure. Such hardening is sometimes referred to by mindfulness teachers as cultivating a ‘teflon-mind’ that allows impressions to slip off easily. As we will learn in chapter 2, what I call ‘affective work environments’ require such a sensitized and, at the same time, de-sensitized attitude. In the next section, I will reflect on the methodologies I have applied when studying this field of mindfulness, where teachers and novices enact and embody mindfulness.

**Methodological Considerations**

In anthropologist Marilyn Strathern’s edited volume *Audit Cultures* (2000), she defines the contributions in the book, written by academics about academic work routines and demands of accountability, as ‘local ethnographies’ providing insights and frustration of familiarity
(Strathern 2000, 3). As a Danish academic studying Danish professionals and academics, I found myself similarly challenged and aided by a familiarity with ‘the field.’ This familiarity and my attempts to defamiliarize myself is the focus of the following methodological considerations.

Anthropologists have traditionally emphasized the estrangement when arriving in the field. The probably most well-known example of such a field arrival is Bronislaw Malinowski’s (1922) interlude to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski [1922] 1984). According to the classics, the anthropologist enters the field, is startled by the foreign, builds up a familiarity, and becomes captured within the space-place of the field (Hastrup 2010; Okely 2012). Getting surprised by the unfamiliar and moved by the unexpected is still considered a key ingredient in ethnographic fieldwork, and “serendipity” is understood as a crucial means to new insight (Dalsgaard and Nielsen 2016, 3). Even if the field as a bounded, isolated site has been heavily contested (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Dalsgaard and Nielsen 2016; Marcus 1995), Malinowski’s constructed isolation on an island far away has made its mark on the anthropological tradition, segmenting the importance of arrival, estrangement, and transformation for generations of ethnographers (Bundgaard and Rubow 2016). My fieldwork was unlike the classics, characterized by feeling at home from the beginning. I will, therefore, investigate insights of the familiar and reflect on doing fieldwork ‘at home,’ asking, more precisely, what happens when fieldwork is not transformative. In emphasizing my personal and professional entanglements with the field, I do not mean to say that academic traditions and personal backgrounds are easily separated from the fieldworker and her object of study in other kinds of fieldwork. Knowledge production is always implicated in the researcher’s positioning, even if some positions appear more neutral than others (Abu-Lughod [1991] 2006, 155).

**At Home: Insights of the Familiar**

To do anthropology at home has long been a common expression following how anthropologists have increasingly concerned themselves with their ‘own’ societies. Yet, at the same time, it is an ambiguous trope that often equals home with a “Western inner-city location” (Coleman and Collins 2006, 9). In my case, doing fieldwork ‘at home’ refers to both geography, practices, and approach; I start with the geographical one.

---

21 Encountering the unfamiliar is in anthropological work described as anxiety-provoking yet rewarding since the estrangement helps crystallize the characteristics of the object of study (Jackson 2010).
My fieldwork activities were concentrated in Copenhagen, where I live and work. Here I have observed how employees engage with mindfulness at a university and a pharmaceutical company. My fieldwork has also taken me to other places in Denmark and beyond the country’s borders, participating in workshops and conferences on mindfulness, most notably the Mind and Life’s European summer meeting (2016) and Danish Center for Mindfulness’ conference on mental health (2017). In these ways, I have attempted to create empirical and analytical depth by strategically moving through several field sites in a lateral movement (Coleman and Collins 2006, 12).

I was also ‘at home’ in the practices I studied. I examined how academics and professionals work, and I trained mindfulness alongside them, thus engaging in practices that are familiar to me. It was not at all difficult for me to imagine the frustrations of university researchers such as Henrik, whom you will meet later, under multiple, concomitant pressures like fundraising, teaching, writing, and publishing. I have privileges and pressures that are similar to those of my interlocutors, as our work environments are flexible as well as increasingly performance-orientated, high-paced, and competitive. Meditation practices were also not new to me. As mentioned previously, my research on yoga and meditation enabled me to compare the work of meditation in a mindfulness course with other kinds of contemplative practices. This means that I have able to draw on my own lived experience, both professional and personal, while conducting a “local ethnography” that uses insights and frustrations of familiarity (Strathern 2000, 3).

Feeling at home in the field meant that I had to defamiliarize myself, and play the game of verfremdung by trying to create estrangement (Johansen 2015a, 131). I did so in order to describe my empirical object more fully by, for instance, compelling myself to jot down fieldnotes and take pictures to record well-known places, and activities, knowing that, naturally, even if I am familiar with office work and meditation, it obviously does not automatically render these practices known and understood. I had to re-attune myself to the particularities of these activities at these local places to learn what was at stake for people here.

Initially, I imagined that I could follow mindfulness practitioners around in their daily work life to see how meditating and working merged. I envisioned this following around could furthermore help me gain people’s trust and create rapport. I was fortunate to find myself in a helpful and generous field in which many people were happy to meet up and talk about their mindfulness practice and experience. Gaining trust was not a problem. However, I was also engaging with busy people, and taking people’s time was more difficult. They were
employees who had been offered mindfulness because they had to run faster than usual or feared falling ill with stress. This left me a bit uneasy about the project of following them around, of taking time out of their already busy lives.

Moreover, it turned out that most people did not meditate at work. They meditated in the morning, in the evening, and some not at all. They found other ways of ‘keeping mindful,’ like walking the dog or riding their bike. Realizing this did not only have an impact on my methodological strategies, but it also revealed something about the nature of mindfulness in the two workplaces, and possible beyond these. Mindfulness was, on the one hand, thought of as a very particular activity confined in a certain time and space, performed in weekly slots, but on the other hand, mindfulness was also considered a continuous mental awareness, categorized by employees as a “mindset,” a “life-philosophy,” an “awareness,” a “consciousness.” (In Danish, bevidsthed was the most common word—more or less an amalgam of awareness and consciousness.)

That I wanted to follow people around might have been a default methodological strategy. Since I was doing a ‘multi-sited’ ethnography (Marcus 1995), I wanted to create depth in other ways than simply remaining in one spot allowed me (Coleman and Collins 2006, 12). But what kind of depth might I have gained by following people who practice mindfulness once a week around in their daily work routines? I might have learned a lot about working at a pharmaceutical company and at a university, at least. But I wanted to learn more about the entanglements of mindfulness and ideas of working and living well. What I ended up doing as an overall strategy for my fieldwork—at the two workplaces and elsewhere—was joining in on specific, selected activities related to mindfulness in the two workplaces, combined with a prompt schedule of interview appointments with my interlocutors. Reflecting on the role of time, George Marcus notes that a ‘temporality of patience’ has been the standard and privilege of ethnographic fieldwork and writing up. With increased time-pressures and precarious conditions in the university, researchers cannot afford to take their time in the same measure (Marcus 2016, 144–45). Seen in this light, I was fortunate to move around in a field where time is money and where people took pride in careful planning and showing up on time.

While I was carrying out my fieldwork, learning more about mindfulness, getting to know teachers and practitioners, and experiencing mindfulness for myself, I realized that what the re-attunement required of me as an ethnographer was similar to the attempt of the mindfulness practitioners. Employees were trying to break with habituated ways of being in
the world by learning ‘beginners-mind’ as Kabat-Zinn has defined it. I was similarly trying to observe Danish work life as if it was the first time. Let me explain the similarity between beginners-mind and the ethnographic approach by providing two definitions: first, in Jon Kabat-Zinn’s famous definition of mindfulness, he defines it as a practice that fosters the ability to “pay attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn [1994] 2005, 4). Second, a recent book on methods defines anthropology as a practice involving an “attention towards human life in situ and the ability to be present and at the same time to distance oneself: to be open to the possibility that something can be understood in a completely different way” (Bundgaard, Mogensen, and Rubow 2018, 14). The craft of mindfulness and the craft of anthropology both aim for a particular attention to the here and now as well as an attempt to stay open and non-judgmental about what one encounters. Both crafts emphasize that judgments are inevitable and offer different ways to work with likes and dislikes (as it is termed in mindfulness) and preconceived ideas (as judgments are often referred to in anthropology).

My activities in studying mindfulness overlapped with my professional training, personal experience, and everyday life that made it difficult to ascertain when I entered and when I left the field. In a sense, I was ‘at home’ in both the locality, practices, and approaches of my empirical object of study. In the next section, I will focus more precisely on a challenge of local ethnography, namely the lack of transformation I experienced as I conducted participant observation.

(Lack of) Transformative Experiences
As I began my work on mindfulness in 2016, I wanted to immerse myself in the practice through participant observation that entailed joining in, hanging out, imitating, and sharing the lives of one’s interlocutors (Hastrup 2003a). I wanted to understand how it is to ‘be mindful,’ how it feels to ‘do mindfulness.’ Acquiring understanding via participant observation posed different kinds of challenges in the course of my fieldwork. One of the core activities I engaged in was participating in meditations at Kern and the university, or mindfulness conferences and workshops. The obvious challenge for an ethnographer in that activity is that to participate, you must remain seated in silence with your eyes closed. This does not allow for typical participant observation of what is going on because you are not able to observe with

22 I have translated the quote from Danish to English.
your eyes closed. It is as if such an activity, where observation is made difficult, makes par-
ticipation and the fieldworker’s own involvement, my own experience, even more command-
ing. Perhaps it led me to expect too much of my own participation. I remember thinking that
in this field, my own personal embodied experience will be particular valuable. So I waited
for the embodied transformation to come, for the raw moment of inspiration.

As I have mentioned, it has been a common trope that the anthropologist is trans-
formed when undergoing fieldwork and participant observation, often conceptualized as the
change from novice (or even fool or clown) to skilled insider, or somehow accomplished in
whatever the people of one’s study are doing. Vincent Crapanzano has characterized ethno-
graphic fieldwork as a process in which the fieldworkers sense of self dissolves because of
trying to understand and identify with a different form of being in the world. The writing up
is, according to Crapanzano, a way to recompose oneself as a professional (Crapanzano 1977,
70). The split between the personal and professional self that Crapazano alludes to here is
esential. While the intimately entangled and empathetic fieldworker has been heralded in an-
thropology, it has also been considered pertinent that she gets out on the other side of the
fieldwork recomposed and emotionally detached (Stodulka, Dinkelaker, and Thajib 2019, 3).
Anthropologist Helle Bundgaard provides an illustrative example of this change as she re-
counts her inability to understand the complexity of art-making during fieldwork in Orissa,
India (Bundgaard 2003, 51). She takes on the role of the apprentice. Following failed at-
ttempts to paint she learns the craft and is able, in the end, by way of her embodied under-
standing and shared experiences with fellow painters to better analyse how Indian art in
Orissa is valued and assessed (Bundgaard 2003).

I have done several longitudinal fieldwork, most importantly, a fieldwork of five
months studying the practices of yoga in a North Indian town. The participant observation in
India allowed me to learn advanced yoga postures and sequences, moved me to change my
diet from meat-based to plant-based, and shook my moral foundation concerning food, rela-
tionships, work, and money. I used to joke about this period in my life, saying that I
went native.24 Coming home from India, I experienced, as described by Crapanzano, how I could

---

23 Even though the idea of the fieldwork as an existential transformation is contested (cf. Bundgaard & Rubow, 2016) the immersion in the field via participation remains an important imperative and part of doing fieldwork.

24 To ‘go native’ is an expression found in anthropology to describe when the anthropologist become overly in-
volved in her field. Going native is said to inhibit a critical distance as well as analytical overview and ability (Bundgaard 2003, 65). See Smith (2020) for an excellent discussion of the analytically productive grey zones of
doubt, of going native, and faking it till you make it.
only recover an analytical overview by objectifying my experience, translating my everyday engagements with fellow yogis from experiences to material upon which I produced transcripts, vignettes, and analyses. However, in the cause of my fieldwork researching the influx of mindfulness in workplaces, I was already a native, too familiar with meditation, and with the stress of work to move from complete novice to experienced practitioner. What becomes of the “raw moment of knowing,” I wondered, and the emotionally charged events that render the field comprehensible to the ethnographer in the form of sensational experience (Hastrup 2010, 204)?

Instead of relying on my own embodied experience to reveal how mindfulness works through a sensational new experience, I had to seriously imagine what it must be like for somebody else who has never meditated to engage in collective meditation at work. I had to imagine the estrangement, the puzzlement of being asked to feel your big toes, the difficulty you might have breathing only through your nose. I had to purposefully wonder about every familiar thing that Peter and Ursula discussed and try to catch my value judgments, for instance, about where meditation practices belong (on a cushion, not an office chair). Doing this, I learned to embody mindfulness slowly, gradually, without sudden epiphanies, trying to question what I already (thought I) knew, in order to imagine along with the other practitioners in the room. In no way do I mean to indicate that I am or was an accomplish meditator or that the practices taught by Peter and Ursula are in any way easy. I merely wish to illustrate that, sometimes, fieldwork progresses in entirely different ways than the tradition prescribes.

Reflecting on my lack of transformation reveals important insights about mindfulness at work. In the transformative stories I was told in India, people’s dedication to yoga marked a new life, a before and an after. Mindfulness at work, on the other hand, was characterized by a slow integration into life as it is, effecting a less obvious and more subtle change in most people. Mindfulness was a way of mindfully working with the pressed bodies that had become habituated to certain modes of working, feeling, and thinking, not by providing sudden shifts, not a ‘before and after’ transformation, but by perceiving everyday life a little bit differently. It could be changing small, everyday habits, like looking at the kettle while it boils water for tea in the morning. This is what Annette started doing after her mindfulness course. Instead of running out into the kitchen to put the kettle on, only to rush back into her office to check a couple of emails while the water was heating up, Annette made it a habit to stand and

---

just *look* at the boiling water, and pour it over her tea slowly when it was ready. This minute change in her everyday behavior was connected to existential thoughts about what matters in Annette’s life, how she wanted to be as a person, and what made her feel good. Allowing herself to take a couple of deep breaths was Annette’s idea of mindful work and it became a way for her to take care of herself.

Meditation might become an intensely transformative experience when enacted as such—when it is taught in a context where the contemplative practice is the center of your days’ work, when the food you eat, the things you talk about all become entangled with contemplative practice, as it did in my fieldwork on yoga in India. In another context, such as a Danish workplace, meditation might also be a small pause to breathe, an activity among many; not a primary focus of attention, but five minutes in the parking lot. In some way, mindfulness, as I experienced it in the two mindfulness classes, advised you to stay with life as it is, stay with the trouble, and make the best of it. My local ethnography, offering both insights and frustrations of the familiar, forms the basis of the following chapters outlined in the next section.

**Outline of the Dissertation**

In chapter 1, I show how mindfulness has been defined and redefined, and how selective historical readings of Buddhism have enabled a pattern in contemporary enactments of mindfulness that segments mindfulness as a secular, scientific, and therapeutic practice. By contrasting two debates, I exemplify how mindfulness is not only booming but also contested and negotiated in a Danish context. In the two debates, mindfulness is enacted as 1) an optimal solution to national mental health problems and 2) a sad symptom of a welfare state in decline. I argue that depending on the social context, mindfulness is either welcomed or contested as a means to wellbeing, and I conclude that the meaning of mindfulness is therefore always situated.

While chapter 1 investigates historical and contemporary enactments of Buddhism and mindfulness, chapter 2 examines another important context, namely the Danish workplace, by focusing on empirical accounts of the conditions of so-called knowledge work (*vidensarbejde*). The chapter suggests that knowledge work is not characterized by its physical location or thematic content but by its affective imprints. I identify pace and passion, (self-)pressure, and competition as the main components affecting employees. The chapter argues
that the specific ‘post-industrial mood’ that I define as being environmental requires employees to learn to surf rough waters in a possibly disruptive work environment.

Moving from present experiences of work life more generally in chapter 2, chapter 3 delves deeper into the mindfulness practices at the pharmaceutical company Kern, focusing on the ‘valuing’ of mindfulness. We follow the mindfulness teacher Peter as he hosts a workshop for a cohort of sales staff. The in-depth empirical description allows the chapter to discuss two questions: how is mindfulness valued in the context of the workplace, and what is valued by mindfulness? It answers these questions by engaging with value as a practice rather than an essence, pointing to three modes of valuing employed by Peter. I argue that by orchestrating, exemplifying and evaluating mindfulness, Peter mediates mindfulness as economically and morally valuable. The way Peter’s persona validates what mindfulness can do points us to answer the second question, what is valued by mindfulness, and gives rise to a discussion of the ambivalence of Peter’s position and the balancing act between care and improvement in mindful work.

With chapters 1, 2, and 3 fleshing out how mindfulness is enacted, mediated, and materialized in workplace contexts, chapter 4 focuses more closely on the embodied experience of practicing mindfulness. It does so by examining the mind-body practice of the ‘body scan,’ focusing on the central emic notion, mærke efter. To mærke efter involves sensing, feeling, and assessing how you feel. The chapter shows how Pernille, Karen, and Tove try to do such acts of feeling by way of words, artifacts, and the guidance of the teacher. I argue that to understand such meditative practices, we must reimport words as significant to affective experience and (re)think how affect, emotion, materiality, and language connect. Investigating the emic notion of mærke efter, the chapter concludes that learning to meditate involves what I call ‘embodied words,’ ‘affective artifacts,’ and ‘assisted feeling,’ as employees attune to and assess their embodied condition through the guidance of a teacher. To mærke efter is, therefore, a matter of allowing others to help you turn inward, listening to their words, and engaging with different world counterparts. The detailed descriptions of how practitioners feel how they feel is fundamental to developing and refining the theoretical contribution of the thesis, the sociality of feeling.

Following the way that chapter 4 engages with embodied experiences of mindfulness practice, chapter 5 focuses on embodied images. The chapter identifies three embodied images that I unfold through Tove’s ‘grounding image’ of a home inside herself, Elin's ‘self-
embracing image’ of carrying past trauma in a backpack, and Ruth’s ‘taming image’ of bat-tling two wolves. I argue that images such as the inner home, the backpack, and the wolves work by way of their affective hold. Images are not only imagined; they are felt. The chapter further argues that to ‘imagine along’ with interlocutors is a way of listening that allows for uncertainty and contradictory elements of lived experience. Attending to images shows how individuals, despite disillusion and adversity, craft inhabitable bodies through mindful work.

Chapter 6 problematizes mindfulness as a natural, authentic state of being and shows how employees make sense of themselves, their bodies, and their (lack of) mindfulness through a sociality of feeling. On the surface, employees choose to practice mindfulness, choose to battle stress, choose to succeed or fail at becoming mindful. Still, I argue, the way individual motivation, experience, and effort entangle with the realities of the workplace, the social expectation, cultural norms, and economic interest calls for a more distributed agency and intentionality.

Finally, the conclusion recapitulates the arguments put forward in the chapters as well as the overall argument and theoretical contribution of a sociality of feeling. It reflects further on mindful work, embodied attunement, and affective imprints by revisiting Georg Simmel’s classical work on mental life in the city. It discusses how mindfulness, for some, can be a way to counteract the blasé attitude and numbness that comes from the rush of life and a way to regain a sensitivity towards themselves, others, and the surrounding world.
Chapter 1: Enacting Mindfulness in Denmark

“Mindfulness should be seriously implemented in Denmark with well-educated teachers in close connection with research. We can create much better results for the future, but it requires political willingness. We believe that it is too expensive, irresponsible, and stupid not to do it... Most of us are wasting our time: wandering between the past and the future in search of meaning, we have not yet cultivated the ability to experience and enjoy life, in good and bad, here and now. Happiness and deeper satisfaction are not to be looked for. It is to be cultivated” (Fjorback and Pallesen 2016).26

In August 2016, the director of and researcher at the Danish Center for Mindfulness Lone Fjorbacke and Karen Johanne Pallesen proposed a broad implementation of mindfulness in the Danish healthcare system in an opinion piece in the Danish newspaper Politiken (ibid.). Their proposition included several target groups 1) kids and youngsters should practice mindfulness to attain better mental fitness 2) adults should be offered mindfulness as general prevention 3) mindfulness should be provided to people struggling with depression and to the military 4) health care workers should participate in mindfulness training to avoid burn out, and 5) leaders should be taught mindfulness to make better decisions (Fjorback and Pallesen 2016). The piece illustrates some of the characteristics of contemporary iterations of the concept of mindfulness and how they manifest in a Danish context. Fjorback and Pallesen describe mindfulness not in terms of religion or spirituality, but as a therapy that will help practitioners to decrease stress and cultivate more joy and satisfaction with life. Particular interesting in their definition is how they present mindfulness not as a personal project or a solitary, withdrawn engagement, but as an intervention responding to national concerns and a practice to be implemented broadly to treat the growing numbers of Danes falling ill with stress, depression, and anxiety.

Such a take on mindfulness and meditation would have been foreign to me when I first encountered the word mindfulness in India in 2014. I was conducting fieldwork on yoga, and some of the many international yoga travelers I met told me about their experiences with mindfulness. People who spoke of mindfulness had often attended a ‘Vipassana-course,’ which usually refers to a ten-day silent retreat where novices, along with trained meditators, practice a meditation form connected to the Buddhist concept of Vipassana (Pagis 2019, 41). In India, I developed an image of mindfulness as a strict and long-term meditation practice,

26 Translated and adapted from Danish by me.
often involving a quest for spiritual fulfillment and a life that differed from ordinary life as a worker, spouse, and citizen—driven by paychecks and the ticking of the clock.

When mindfulness began to gain increased prominence in Denmark around 2015 (Borup 2016a), it was rarely identified as a practice involving long-term silent retreats. Mindfulness was something that could be “implemented” to reduce the pressure at work, for instance. In a non-Buddhist Danish context mindfulness practitioners seek mental wellness and therapeutic treatment rather than mental liberation and enlightenment—to paraphrase professor of psychology Peter Elsass (2011). Mindfulness is in a Danish context and popular discourse not about breaking the wheel of Karma, recognizing the impermanent nature of all things; it is about solving profane problems and learning to appreciate life here and now. I understand discourse as the historically and culturally situated way words, materials, and practices are drawn together (Mol 2008, 8).

Such observations on the Danish context of mindfulness have been corroborated by a growing body of research examining the rise of secular mindfulness beyond Denmark. This research has established that the concept and practice of mindfulness has evolved—with tremendous speed in the last few decades—from being primarily, a religious engagement practiced within the walls of Buddhist monasteries to seeping into most layers of society, in the form of secularized programs offered to counter various maladies of contemporary life (Gleig 2019; D. McMahan and Braun 2017; Stanley 2012; R. Purser 2019; Pagis 2019; Cook 2010; Wilson 2014). Pagis emphasizes, for example, how Vipassana meditators use meditation in their lives outside of the meditation hall and instead of disconnecting meditators from the taken-for-granted reality of daily life meditation is now helping meditators to maintain daily life and this-world concerns (Pagis 2019, 13) Cassaniti reminds us that while new evidence-based mindfulness-based programs flourish and spread in many parts of the world, religious ways of practicing and thinking about mindfulness are very much flourishing alongside it. The question that seems so pertinent regarding mindfulness, then, is how it is enacted locally, and how this enactment affects the experience of the practice of mindfulness? These questions are the core concern of this thesis, and this chapter contributes to answering them by investigating two things.

First, the chapter briefly examines how ‘science’ and ‘therapy’ has been mapped on to Buddhism. It does so sparked by the question of how embodied practices originating in Asian traditions happen to boom and flourish globally as therapeutic responses to modern maladies
like stress. Since the scope of the chapter does not allow for in-depth discussions of the historical background of contemporary mindfulness, I limit my focus to the renderings of Buddhism as scientific and therapeutic to show how this framing has shaped the idea now dominant in the mindfulness movement, namely, that Buddhism is a rational rather than a religious tradition concerned with what happens inside the mind and is best practiced by meditating on a cushion. Other historical events have, clearly, also contributed to the current proliferation of mindfulness, such as the founding of the Theosophical Society, and the rise of psychotherapy in the sixties, as well as the establishing of the Insight Meditation society in the United States by figures such as Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, and Sharon Salzberg. For more comprehensive outlines, see Pagis (2019, 17–45), McMahan and Braun (D. L. McMahan and Braun 2017) and Gleig (Gleig 2019, 50–84).

Second, the chapter seeks to demonstrate how the idea of mindfulness as a scientific, therapeutic solution to stress is enacted in a Danish context. I engage with two empirical examples: first, I examine the introductory talks held by researchers at the Danish Center for Mindfulness at the annual festival on mental health in Aarhus 2017; second, I unfold a debate on social media that will illustrate how mindfulness sparks discussions on the relationship between the welfare state and its citizens. I show that to some people like Fjorback and Pallesen, mindfulness presents a solution to the rise of mental illness and lack of compassion. To others, mindfulness is a symptom of lack of compassion and a threat to the solidarity and services of the Danish welfare state. Based on the two ways of enacting mindfulness as a solution or a symptom, I conclude that mindfulness is a concept that is promoted, negotiated, and contested and associated with different values in the Danish society. In the following section, I clarify what I mean by the concept ‘enactment’ by engaging with the work of Mol (Mol 2002; 2008; Law and Mol 2004) who connects enactment to a politics-of-what, which entails both a methodological strategy and theoretical premise to focus on ‘ontology in practice’ (2002, title).

**Studying Enactments: A Politics-of-What**

A human resource tool, a political cause, a religious practice, a remedy for stress, a quick fix, hot air, or an ancient medicine. Mindfulness has many definitions and associations that circulate in Danish society, but pinning down mindfulness as either $x$ or $y$ has important implications and consequences. Mol offers a way to think about such implications in her work on disease and care. In her seminal book *The Body Multiple*, she suggests the word *enactment* to
get at the different ways the disease atherosclerosis is both performed, practiced, and materialized in the health care system, and argues that these different enactments “do” the body differently (Mol 2002, 176).

Mol’s main argument is that reality must be known as practiced and as multiple, what she calls “ontology in practice” (Mol 2002). The reality of atherosclerosis is not the same when doctors and patients talk about it in the consultation room as when radiologists analyze it using x-rays. “In each variant of atherosclerosis, the dis of this dis-ease is slightly different,” Mol stresses (Mol 2002, 176). Not only is the dis different, the ideals that orient treatment are different. Different enactments come with different ways of doing the good (ibid. 182). These differences can be ethnographically observed when attending to practices, to a ‘politics-of-what.’ “A ‘politics-of-what’ explores the differences, not between doctors and patients, but between various enactments of a particular disease” (ibid.). Mol is not interested in teasing out the patient’s perspective and juxtaposing it with the doctor’s perspective; she is interested in the practices participated in by patients and doctors alike, though with different degrees of power, and how these different practices ‘do’ the body differently (Mol 2002, 176–77).

I draw on Mol’s framework and examine how mindfulness is enacted through various practices aligning with specific agendas and resulting in different realities and ideas of work-life, wellbeing, and good health. In that way, I aim to contextualize and situate mindfulness locally without essentializing it. Paying attention to how mindfulness is enacted means investigating not only the discursive configurations of mindfulness but attending to the techniques that mediate mindfulness and make it tangible and knowable (Mol 2002, 33).

Different enactments of mindfulness come with different ‘dis’ in ‘dis-eases,’ they point to different problems, treatments, and gradients of good. Different enactments involve different narratives about the past, present, and future—for instance, the enactment of mindfulness as an ancient mental technology in one setting and mindfulness enacted as an evidence-based program crucial in future mental healthcare in another setting. My goal in pointing to these different ways of enacting mindfulness is not to unveil some ‘backstage’ of

---

27 Mol’s insistence on different ontologies is not connected to the debate following the proposed ‘ontological turn’ in the discipline of anthropology (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Carrithers et al. 2010).

28 Mol argues that we are never done asking what to do and what is good to do. “Doing good does not follow from finding out about it, but is a matter of, indeed, doing. Of trying, tinkering, struggling, failing, and trying again” (Mol 2002, 177).
mindfulness, that mindfulness is performed as one thing but is really something else. On the contrary, I wish to reject the idea of an original mindfulness, inspired by philosopher Michel Foucault’s critique of “origins as exact essences” in his description of the genealogical method (Foucault [1971] 2003, 353). According to Foucault, the genealogist views history as a concrete body of becoming and refuses the idea of an idealist origin and completed development. Following this understanding of history, I want to emphasize the multiple ways in which mindfulness is enacted, drawn from the past, projected into the future, and in effect moved, as well as the ways that mindfulness is contested. Mindfulness, in its many iterations, should be understood as being made through, rather than existing prior to, translocal encounters and entanglements (Zhan 2009). I further use this chapter to highlight the contestation and the ambiguities surrounding mindfulness in Danish society, inspired by recent work on mindfulness that seeks to flesh out the local particularities of mindfulness (Cook 2016; Gleig 2019; Cassaniti 2018) to nuance the mainstream narrative that mindfulness is either booming or backlashing.

I begin by outlining some historical trajectories that will ground the following observations and discussions and help address the question of how mindfulness reached a status as a therapeutic modality (Kirmayer 2015) focusing firstly on the ‘science’ of Buddhism.

Colonial and Contemporary Enactments of a Scientific Buddhism

In a Buddhist context, mindfulness is part of the Noble Eightfold Path to end suffering. Buddhists observe right mindfulness (sammā-sati) in meditation to realize the important tenets of Buddhism; impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anattā) (Cook 2010, 8). The Pāli-term sati (Sanskrit smrti) is the most central Buddhist concept to have influenced mindfulness in its contemporary secularized forms (Cassaniti 2018, 2). Sati can be found in the earliest recorded teachings of the Buddha where sammā-sati, meaning ‘right mindfulness,’ is the seventh element of the Noble Eightfold Path (Stanley 2015, 102). The British colonial official Thomas Williams Rhys Davids was the first to translate the Pāli-canon to

---

29 Foucault follows the way Friedrich Nietzsche understands genealogy as the examination of herkunft (descent) and entstehung (emergence). In the text “Nietzsche, genealogy, history,” Foucault describes how Nietzsche challenged the pursuit of the ‘origin’ since pursuing origins is an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities. The search for the origin of something assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession (ibid. 353).

30 Stanley clarifies how “in the Pāli discourses, sati is categorised as morally either right or wrong. Sammā sati is right mindfulness and micchā sati is wrong mindfulness. This moral intonation of mindfulness in the Pāli discourses as right or wrong contrasts with the idea that mindfulness is an inherently right (or wholesome) mental factor whenever it is present suggested in most mindfulness-based applications” (Stanley 2015, 102–3).
English together with his wife Caroline, establishing ‘mindfulness’ as the accepted translation of *sati*. The Davids’ attempted to capture the ethical content of *sati’s* etymological meaning as memory or recollection, and chose ‘mindfulness’ to translate “the active, watchful mind,” and good Buddhist conduct *sati* implied (Davids 1881, 144–45). From the Buddhist concept *sati* and the practices attached to it, to mindfulness as a stress therapy and health intervention, there is a great leap.

The growing research on mindfulness points to two major factors in establishing mindfulness as a solution to modern malaise around the globe: its scientific grounding and its therapeutic format. Mindfulness—including meditation, breathing exercises, body scans, mindful walking—is palatable even on Wall Street, because, as one of my interlocutors said, “It is verified by science.” Although rarely specifying what kind of ‘science,’ most of my interlocutors emphasized that the ‘scientific grounding’ of mindfulness was important for their motivation to try it. As I learned more about how people connected mindfulness and science, it became clear that ‘science’ referred mainly to two things: a rationality, and a set of practices. It referred to a rationality that, in the eyes of my interlocutors, characterized mindfulness, and that was positioned against belief and religion. It is not ‘mumbo jumbo,’ as Lillian, a laboratory manager, said. Following this, mindfulness was considered ‘scientific’ because of the long list of clinical trials conducted to verify how it works. The ‘science’ of mindfulness was understood as connected to biomedicine and reflects the authority such ‘science’ has gained through socio-historical discourses and power relations where other forms of knowledges has been positioned as ‘traditional’ or ‘other’ (Zhan 2009, 15).

A major part of the marketability of mindfulness has thus come from its decoupling from religion and religious institutions, and the scientific validation of mindfulness by neuroscientists undergirding and giving mindfulness greater currency outside of Buddhist contexts (McMahan and Braun 2017; Gleig 2019; Wilson 2014a). This decoupling has been done by American and British researchers, among others, most importantly Kabat-Zinn. As I showed in the introduction, Kabat-Zinn saw, in his own words, a way to combine Buddhist teachings with medical treatment, yet he would “bend over backwards” to avoid his version of mindfulness being ascribed religious connotations (Kabat-Zinn 2011). He defines mindfulness as a “secular practice,” that is non-religious, yet encompasses the “essence” of Buddhism, or the so-called “deep dharma” (Kabat-Zinn 2011). In 1979, he founded a stress-clinic at the University of Massachusetts and started treating patients suffering from chronic pain, anxiety, and depression with meditative practices. Alongside neuroscientists and psychologists such
as Richard Davidson, Daniel Goleman, and Mark Williams, to mention but a few, Kabat-Zinn reformulated mindfulness into evidence-based programs. His initial endeavors crystallized in the eight-week program Mindfulness-Based-Stress-Reduction (MBSR), which translated the Buddhist practice of mindfulness into a comparable, measurable, and quantifiable practice meeting the requirements of modern science. The program offers a mix of meditation, Hatha yoga, and collective ‘inquiries’ (Crane et al. 2015). In his bestselling books, Kabat-Zinn emphasizes that mindfulness can provide not only healing for ourselves but for the entire world (Kabat-Zinn 2005). Kabat-Zinn’s streamlined MBSR program has been fundamental in launching the practice of mindfulness outside of Buddhist arenas. Buddhist references are still a part of the various mindfulness programs, only Buddhism is not identified as a religion but as a life philosophy, and the historical Buddha is identified, for instance, as the world’s first psychologist (Feldman and Kuyken 2019). Mindfulness takes up an interesting position as a secular yet Buddhist inspired practice, what Arat suggests as ‘post-secular’ (Arat 2017).

References to Buddhism and religion were few when I observed the work of mindfulness teachers, participated in workshops, or engaged in conversations with mindfulness practitioners. One might conclude, then, that sitting on chairs, which we did instead of cushions on the floor, and leaving out the Buddhist heritage of mindfulness is essential in enacting mindfulness as scientific and therefore making it palatable to a workplace setting. It is. But there is more to it than that. Buddhism does not disappear entirely from contemporary, secular mindfulness. Whereas Buddhism is sometimes downplayed to accentuate the ‘scientific-ness’ and the secularity of mindfulness and render it accessible, at other times, Buddhism acts as a blueprint and is emphasized as an essential root and elevated as a science in itself—a religious tradition that anticipated what science now reveals to be true. The Buddhism enacted in mindfulness, as I observed it in Danish contexts and engaged with it in international best-selling books, is thus understood as compatible with non-religious lifestyles. Buddhism and science, reified as such, are dependent on each other in the enactment of mindfulness. Buddhism is added as a spice of ancient wisdom refining—but not mystifying—the act of sitting on chairs with your eyes closed. The fact that mindfulness is associated with Buddhist traditions, as opposed to Christian or Muslim traditions, is significant. Even if Dalai Lama is a religious authority, my interlocutors rather view him as a neutral peacemaker and philosopher,
offering universal insights about human thriving, all of which testifies to the general positive bias surrounding Buddhism sometimes labeled “positive orientalism” (Borup 2016a, 53).³²

Mindfulness is a contemporary example of a historical trend to define Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion and to view elements of Buddhism as a scientific response to human suffering. Buddhism—roughly reified here for clarity—has a long history of political projects in which both Asian Buddhists and Euro-Americans have claimed Buddhism to be the religious system “most in tune with science” (McMahan and Braun 2017, 7). Such claims have been made by local Buddhists in response to Christian critique in the colonial encounter between Asia and ‘the West’ (Lopez, 2008; McMahan, 2008, 2012). It is also a consequence of the early mappings and makings of Buddhism in the nineteenth century by European colonial officials laying the ground for a distinction between a ‘pure’ text-based Buddhism studied in libraries in Europe and the derivative and adulterated Buddhism that was lived and practiced by people around Asia (Lopez 2008, 9). The lived Buddhism in Asia, with its rituals, worship of images, and deities, was relegated to the background as European scholars concerned themselves with early texts that documented words attributed to the historical Buddha. Thomas Rhys David’s definition of the Buddha as an ‘Aryan’ who had taught philosophy and ethics had a long-lasting effect. It segmented the ‘pure’ Buddhism as a religion without dogma, worship, or God that suited the European scholars well in a time when organized religion was rebelled against (ibid., 5).³³

While Buddhism and Buddhist practices have been reframed in colonial contexts to fit with so-called Western science, history provides many examples of how Asian Buddhists have claimed Buddhism to be a science in its own right, and a ‘science’ superior to that of ‘the West.’ Grounded in her work on Thai monastic practices, Cook demonstrates that in the 1950s in Thailand, many urban meditators had become attracted to meditation because it was promoted as a “Buddhist intellectual response to Western Scientific theory.” Meditation centers were modeled as “research centers,” and meditation was presented as a “rational,” “scientific” and “authentically” Buddhist practice for salvation (Cook 2010, 3, 41).

³² Borup writes how in Denmark, there is a very low level of institutional affiliation with Buddhism nonetheless, many Danes evaluate Buddhism positively, which Borup connects with the ‘Hollywood effect’ and the general mediatization of Buddhism producing positive images of Buddhism and upholding a “positive orientalism” (ibid. 53).

³³ Important Buddhist revival movements such as that of the Sri Lankan reformer Anagarika Dharmapāla sought to modernize Buddhism by emphasizing individual efforts as means to enlightenment rather than rituals performed by the clergy. “Such ‘Protestant Buddhism’ (as Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, called it) was demythologized, rationalized and spiritualized, and both intellectual study and experiential practice became democratized, catering to the urban elite” (Borup 2016b, 2).
The rapprochement of Buddhism and science, reified here, involved (and continue to involve) both people from Asian and non-Asian countries engaged in reformulations of Buddhism (D. L. McMahen and Braun 2017; Borup and Fibiger 2017). Anthropologist Martjin van Beek has shown how reformulations of Buddhism as an equivalent science sometimes have the goal of secularizing Buddhist practices, other times of using insights from science, particularly neuroscience, to refine Buddhist practices (van Beek 2012). Projects such as James H. Austin’s *Meditating Selflessly: Practical Neural Zen* (2011), maintain the soteriological aim of enlightenment and aim at an ‘optimization’ of meditation practices using insights from neuroscience to refine Buddhist practices. Other projects, for instance the book *The Bodhisattva’s Brain: Buddhism Naturalized* (2011), authored by Owen Flanagan, aspires to mediate a Buddhist-inspired but secular and scientifically grounded path to happiness “without superstition and magical thinking” (van Beek 2012, 49). Van Beek argues that new ties between neuroscience and Buddhism creates excitement as well as anxieties among Western and non-Western scientists and Buddhists (and the ones that identify as both) (van Beek 2012, 48).

In this section, my aim has been to stress how mindfulness in its contemporary secular form is connected to past and present projects in and out of Asia that have shaped and modernized Buddhism and, in some variations, aligned Buddhism with a particular idea of science. This alignment is an essential forbearer to contemporary forms of secular mindfulness. Such a brief recap admittedly has many shortcomings and does not do justice to the incredibly complex historical trajectory of Buddhism in its many localized versions. An unpacking of different kinds of secularities and religiosities represented in various mindfulness programs would also be interesting. Yet analysis must have a point and a ‘stopping place’ to allow for an interpretation. “Interpretation must hold objects of reflection stable long enough to be of use,” Marilyn Strathern argues, showing how cutting the network is a way of “holding stable” and bring rest to expandable narratives in a seemingly limitless world (ibid. pp. 522). In the next section, I want to dwell more on what has been named the therapization of Buddhism and link this with a turn to ‘interiority’ in contemporary society (Pagis 2019; Madsen 2014).

---

34 In the article “Cutting the Network” (1996) Marilyn Strathern discusses the analytical concept ‘network’ as presented in Bruno Latour’s book *We have never been Modern* (Latour 1993) and stresses the need for analytical boundary work.
Meditation as a Therapeutic Intervention
As scholars, theosophists, and religious activists would enact a scientific Buddhism stripped of culturally specific rituals in the nineteenth century, so the contemporary mindfulness movement articulates Buddhism as universal and scientifically attuned and not tied to a particular lineage but answering universal questions of what it means to be human (see for instance Feldman and Kuyken 2019). Mindfulness addresses this question of what it means to be human by inviting practitioners to turn inward and meditate (Tan, Goleman, and Kabat-Zinn 2014; M. Williams and Penman 2011; Kabat-Zinn [1994] 2005). Anthropologist Lionel Obadia has termed this tendency a ‘therapization’ of Buddhism where New Age imaginations of Tibet and the Himalayas and the boom of Suzuki’s Zen Buddhism have created a contemporary fascination with Buddhism and contributed to the reimagining of Buddhist practices as therapeutic and as offering a solution to the stress of the modern man (Obadia 2007, 234). The story of Buddhism as particularly therapeutic has been forged by Euro-American ideas of what Buddhism entails and encouraged by Asian Buddhist authorities who actively participate in the making of Buddhism as therapy for the modern malaises, as is evident in Dalai Lama’s books on happiness, Obadia argues (Obadia 2007, 231).

Historical and contemporary reimaginations of Buddhist practices as both therapeutic and scientific might go some way in explaining the overwhelming success of Kabat-Zinn’s iteration of mindfulness as a universal formula to counter modern maladies. As mentioned, mindfulness is in popular Danish discourse associated with health, emotional self-development, and secular wellbeing as opposed to religious worship (Borup 2016, 48). The majority of books on mindfulness in Danish are written as guidebooks on how to live more ‘mindfully,’ and only a few books integrate Buddhism as part of a broader historical or philosophical perspective (Borup 49). The understandings of mindfulness presented in these books are connected to a global tendency of applying Buddhist meditative practices for “psychological benefits” (Brox and Williams-Oerberg 2020) so as to achieve relief from the “stresses and strains of modern life” (McMahan & Braun 2017). Mindfulness was, in my fieldwork, understood as a therapeutic tool that had been verified by science, and that promoted mental well-being as well as enhanced positive emotional capacities. Teachers and practitioners would describe mindfulness as a practice, as a way of reducing stress and of reconnecting the practitioner with something that had been ‘lost’ in the contemporary, hectic living—the loss of the
ability to be present, aware, peaceful, and kind to oneself and others. They believed that they could regain this loss by connecting with their body-self in a specific way—by meditating.

The enthusiasm for meditation can be linked to an increased interest in “interiority” in our contemporary times (Pagis 2019, 1). This is what psychologist Ole Jacob Madsen has identified as a “therapeutic turn” (Madsen 2014; 2018), and what sociologist Suvi Salmenniemi labels “therapeutic culture” (Salmenniemi 2020), referring to pervasive discourses and practices that encourage cultivation, care, and transformation of the self through practices such as meditation. The popularity of mindfulness testifies to this inward turn. Also, it shows us a move towards embodied therapies as opposed to “the talking cure” of, e.g., psychoanalysis so popular in the seventies (Pagis 2019, 3). Mindfulness is an embodied way of dealing with individual pain of the mind and body that understands the signs of the body, the movements of the breath, and the chatter of the mind, as the central places of healing. The body must be listened to decode its signs, the breath must be tended to and deepened, and the chatter of the mind must come to a halt. This is done—or attempted done—by observing thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations in meditation.

While my Danish interlocutors had difficulties defining what mindfulness is and how one ‘does it,’ they all agreed that meditation is at its heart. The embodied act of sitting on chairs with eyes closed was not considered religious but therapeutic. Most of my interlocutors tried meditating for the first time on a mindfulness course at work, and many told me that they had wanted to try it for some time. Meditation practices taught in mindfulness at work are adapted to fit into the rhythms and restraints of a working day. People are instructed to sit on chairs to resemble the office environment where they later continue the practice and, as a teacher noted to me, to indicate a scientific approach. Sitting on cushions on the floor might give the wrong idea. Meditations are kept short: they last around five to fifteen minutes. Even if mindfulness courses offered to workplaces are compressed into light meditation routines, the list of positive results that are said to stem from the courses is impressive. There was therefore a great deal of expectations among participants in the two series of mindfulness courses I followed, as they have been told that mindfulness would affect their sleep, their energy levels, their relations with others and themselves.

The work of meditation was considered therapeutic in a certain way at the two mindfulness courses I followed in 2017. Meditation was, in particular, a way to work with our brain. Both Peter and Ursula presented neurophysiological facts about the fight or flight mode...
CHAPTER 1: ENACTING MINDFULNESS IN DENMARK

of the ‘reptile brain’ as prime motivators for training mindfulness. In literature on mindfulness, meditation is often presented as a mental fitness or an inner workout to “take care of our own mind” (Goleman and Davidson 2017, 283). The call to exercise your brain to alter your mind has emerged alongside scientific discoveries of the brain as plastic not fixed resulting in a shift in the way the brain is perceived. With the discovery of the brain’s plasticity, the brain emerged as a site for therapeutic intervention (Rose and Abi-Rached 2013). The brain is something we can and should nurture, train, and optimize. Scrutinizing the alliance between therapy, neuroscience, and mindfulness Madsen shows that the apparent plasticity of the brain makes way for a particular idea about what it means to be human (Madsen 2015). He references historian Fernando Vidal’s concept of ‘brain hood’ (‘you are your brain’), showing how this ontological quality of ‘being a brain’ has opened up a new niche in the self-help culture aimed at the ‘cerebral self’ (Madsen 2015, 65).

The goal of meditation has in secular iterations of mindfulness transformed its purpose from benefitting a religious collective, the sangha, and having a religious goal to supporting individual self-development and self-care (McMahan 2008, 43). Yet, I show that mindfulness, as practiced in contemporary non-religious settings, is still intertwined with the social world and its expectations and goals. If not the religious collective, then the national collective, as evoked by Fjorback in the following section, or the work collective and the health of the work environment as we will see in the subsequent chapters.

As we have here seen unfolded, this thesis relates to a bourgeoning field investigating how and why embodied therapies are pursued in contemporary society. I contend with Cook that, although presented as timeless, universal, and without cultural boundaries, the contemporary surge of meditative practices is the result of a historically specific convergence of religion, cosmology, and philosophy oriented not at religious values but with concerns for physiological and psychological wellbeing (Cook 2010, 2).

Following debates in the Danish media and conducting fieldwork, I had the opportunity to see how the idea of mindfulness as a scientific therapy was carried out and how it was associated with various problems in Danish society in concrete social settings and debates. In the following, I draw on my fieldwork to show how mindfulness is enacted in two ‘sites’: at a conference in Aarhus at the Danish Center for Mindfulness and on an online debate on social media initiated by the well-known Danish academic Svend Brinkmann. As I take the reader through the physical and virtual interactions, it will become clear how mindfulness is a concept and a practice that is promoted, contested, and negotiated. The valuing of
mindfulness (Heuts and Mol 2013) is dependent on the socio-cultural context. We will see how mindfulness at the conference is enacted as a solution to the rise of mental illness and stress, and in the online debate, how mindfulness is considered only a ‘bandage on the wound,’ as a commentator wrote, and in opposition to the solidary system and safety net of the Danish welfare state. I begin in Aarhus in September 2017.

**Danish Enactments of Mindfulness**

It was the beginning of the fall, and the yellow brick walls of Aarhus University were decorated in an abundance of red, orange, and brown ivy. I walked from the bus stop to the university, breathing in the fresh September air, excited to participate in a conference on mental health and mindfulness hosted by the Danish Center for Mindfulness. One of the things that excited me in particular was the fact that the researchers at the center had invited a group of politicians to discuss the rise of mental health in Denmark and the role of mindfulness-based programs as a possible solution to this problem. I remember thinking how mindfulness, with its emphasis on meditation and ‘turning inward’ through such an event, was enacted as a practice that went way beyond individual stress reduction. It was enacted as a health intervention to create societal change. I entered the conference hall and found a seat on the fifth row and soon recognized a few familiar faces in the front row—mindfulness teachers I already knew and the staff from the Danish Center for Mindfulness. It was clear from the engaged conversations, embraces, and relaxed atmosphere that many others in the audience knew each other beforehand as well. I want to take us through the introductory speeches that were held that day because they illustrate well how mindfulness is enacted at the heart of the mindfulness community in Denmark. The first thing I want us to pay attention to is the connection between mindfulness, stress, and happiness.

**A Political Priority and a Path to Happiness**

“Would mindfulness make us happier?” With this question, Lone Fjorback welcomes two hundred participants to a four-day conference on Mental Health—Mindfulness, Compassion,  

---

35 In the beginning of my fieldwork in 2016, I contacted the Danish Center for Mindfulness twice to ask if I could meet with one of them to learn more about their work. I did not receive a reply. As I wanted to respect the center and as I had already decided to dedicate my focus to how mindfulness is practiced at workplaces, I did not push further to gain contact. The insights I have of the center is thus built on my participation in three events hosted by the center where I had the chance to participate in, and observe activities and interactions as well as engage in informal conversation with some of the center’s researchers. To supplement my participation in the events, I have read and watched the material offered at the center’s webpage and engaged with articles and opinion pieces written by researchers at the center.
and Performance. The question hangs in the air a couple of seconds as Fjorback looks out on the crowd as if inviting us to think along and consider the connection between (un)happiness and mindfulness. “We have been getting wealthier, but we are not getting happier, on the contrary,” Fjorback continues and lists how Danes are getting more and more stressed. It is a “disastrous direction our society is heading,” Fjorback exclaims. “A direction that leads to depression, premature death, high economic expenses, stress, and an unsatisfactory life.” Up and down the rows of seats, people are nodding their heads in recognition. On stage, Fjorback lightens up. “There are, in fact, methods to cultivate happiness, reduce stress, and build up good mental health. We believe that it is a societal task to make these scientifically validated and effective programs available.” At this point, the audience starts clapping. Fjorback continues by presenting the programs that are offered at the center.36 Such programs are not only “scientifically validated and effective” but also “inexpensive” pathways to de-stress and regain happiness, Fjorback concludes.

After Fjorback’s introductory talk, she is replaced by her colleague Karen Johanne Pallesen, who is presented as the center’s in-house ‘stress-scientist.’ “Why do we need mindfulness?” Pallesen opens her talk. But instead of saying that we need mindfulness because we are unhappy, Pallesen takes another oft-traveled route. We need mindfulness because we are human beings, she argues. Introducing the fundamental tenets of stress theory, Pallesen explains that the human brain has not been able to keep up with the changes in society. In our brains, we are still in the Stone Age, she remarks, explaining how the excretion of adrenalin is useful when hunting mammoths but less helpful when reading emails at the office. “Human beings are at their core mindful, but the many stressors of modern life distort this mindfulness,” she goes on, and shows a graph that indicates the relation between stress and performance. A little stress can be good for performance, while too much stress might cause a breakdown. “We need mindfulness to move the arrow to the left,” she concludes, moving her finger from the far right to the left on the bell curve that indicates a balanced level of stress.

On the second day of the conference, four local politicians are invited on stage to discuss the prospect of implementing mindfulness more broadly in Danish society. This debate

36 The Danish Center for Mindfulness is an independent research center at Aarhus University, established in 2013 with funds from the Danish fund Trygfonden, bringing researchers, physicians, and mindfulness instructors together. The center collaborates with Center for Mindfulness, University of Massachusetts Medical School, Oxford Center for Mindfulness, as well as a range of prominent American universities. The promotional material and website strongly emphasizes the evidence based research carried out by the center staff as well as their interest in working with people who wish to work professionally with evidence-based mindfulness.
is part of the conference aim to “rethink the choices we are currently making as a society to create ‘the good life’” proposing mindfulness, and more specifically the programs Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Cultivating Compassion Training (CCT), as possible pathways to better living. The organizing team led by Fjorback wants to discuss the possibility of implementing mindfulness on a much broader scale in Danish society, inspired by mindfulness interventions in the UK, where the practice has been brought to parliament: 145 UK parliamentarians have undertaken an eight-week course in mindfulness practice since 2013 (Cook 2016). In October 2017, the House of Commons in the UK furthermore invited politicians from fifteen countries to engage in a series of “secular meditations” intended to increase compassion and awareness (Booth 2017).37 Judging from the comments and questions raised during the debate and the informal conversations I had afterward, a broad implementation of mindfulness programs in Denmark is a scenario that people in the audience support.

The four Danish politicians in the panel represent the right-wing nationalist party Dansk Folkeparti, the socialist left-wing party Enhedslisten, and the center-left parties Alternativet and Radikale Venstre in Danish politics. Fjorback begins the debate by reiterating the connection between an increase in poor mental health and the need for mindfulness. She emphasizes that the mindfulness programs are evidence-based and inexpensive and ready to be implemented. The politicians seem interested, but they all waver when faced with the proposition to roll it out more broadly. Especially when Fjorback and her team suggest to implement mindfulness programs in schools all across the country: “kids should practice mental training as they practice soccer and badminton,” Fjorback states, and the audience applauds. The politicians are still not convinced. When Fjorback compares mindfulness to a vaccine against stress, one politician objects that we must examine what causes stress on a more fundamental level and not only provide vaccines. The audience gets upset at this point and expresses their discontent by moaning and sighing. Some stand up with their hands raised, ready to comment. A man in the audience, a doctor, questions the wavering of the politicians. The doctor is upset that none of the politicians engage in delineating concrete initiatives to implement mindfulness—even if the politicians express their interest and contend that pre-

37 The Conservative and Labour MPs who organized the event said that they would discuss the potential of meditation to “help political leaders stay resilient, clear-minded and creative in the face of constant change” (Booth 2017).
vention against stress and depression is better than prescribing medicine. “You heard the scientists, why don’t we just implement it!” he cries out. The audience applauds loudly. The debate reaches an end without any concrete arrangements, but with the politicians acknowledging the importance of alternative solutions in treating stress and mental health issues. A frustrated Fjorback remarks once again that MBSR and CCT are not alternative solutions but evidence-based programs. The politicians leave the stage, and the conference attendees go for a coffee break, heavily debating what seems to be a widespread frustration with the lack of progressive thinking in the Danish health care system.

As the example above illustrates, Fjorback and her team of researchers are not only investigating mindfulness as an object of research but an object of political concern. They wish to transform conventional ways of thinking about the treatment of mental illnesses. They have a political project and push an understanding of the human mind as a workable resource when approached with the right tools: mindfulness and compassion training. Stress is the problem that mindfulness can solve, according to Fjorbacke and Pallesen. Happiness—sometimes moderated as contentment and ease—is what practitioners of mindfulness will attain with a continuous practice. As they stress in the opening quote of their opinion piece: happiness and satisfaction are not found outside of oneself; it is to be cultivated within. In the context of the political debate, Fjorback accentuated the economic and scientific aspects of mindfulness, arguing how mindfulness is capable of redeeming individual health and, in doing so, securing a healthy economy. The rhetorical move of establishing the problem (poor mental health), appealing to the sentiments of the audience of something lost (our ability to be happy, connect with ourselves and others), and pointing to how we might regain it (via mindfulness), enacts mindfulness as a much needed and reasonable proposition for restoring “basic human values” shared by all Danes—as alluded to by Fjorbacks use of “we”—such as kindness and compassion, to society. The speeches and the debate illustrate that mindfulness is enacted in certain contexts as a solution on how to create a better healthcare system and placed centrally in political debates.

Fjorback’s and her colleagues call for a serious implementation of embodied therapies of mindfulness to counter maladies of modern life has been met with enthusiasm as well as skepticism in Denmark. While generally conceived of as a therapeutic practice aimed at stress-reduction (as opposed to religious liberation), mindfulness is not always applauded as a societal solution to mental health issues in the Danish population. In fact, mindfulness sometimes figures as an example of what ‘we’ should not do to treat poor mental health. Who that
‘we’ comprises, is uncertain. It refers most often to the Danish population, at least the ones with a residence permit and access to the public healthcare system. Mindfulness is, in the eyes of its critics, not a way to improve healthcare but presenting people suffering from stress with individualized quick-fix solutions instead of changing societal structures leading to stress and unhappiness. The following section offers examples of such approaches to mindfulness.

A Luxury Product and a Threat to the Safety Net

Even if the use of mindfulness programs has increased and spread to many sectors of Danish society, it has not been without discontent, discussion, or criticism, both in academic circles and in the Danish media. Before I zoom in on the online debate that will further illustrate how mindfulness is contested and negotiated, I will provide a short example of one of the ways mindfulness is often portrayed by people not convinced of its transformative power.

In September 2019, I attended a PhD defense at the Institute for Public Health in Copenhagen, by a candidate who had investigated stress and unhappiness among youth in high schools. As part of an intervention seeking to better the everyday lives for teenagers, the thesis had investigated if exercise, a healthy diet, and community building would lower stress levels in the high schools. Several times the candidate, and people in the audience, referred to ‘mindfulness’ as the typical yet unfortunate go-to solution against stress. Mindfulness was described as “trendy but inadequate,” and “individualized solution to a collective problem,” and as a technique providing temporary ease that does not get to “the root causes” of stress and malaise. Such a stance against mindfulness is not uncommon. I experienced it often when talking to people about my research topic. In the next example, I elaborate further on how the meaning of mindfulness is sometimes contested in Danish debates.

In the same period that mindfulness received increased prominence in Denmark, a book called Stand your ground – a revolt against the forced development of our times (Stå fast – et opgør med tidens udviklingstvang) became a Danish bestseller (Brinkmann 2014).

The format of the book that is authored by psychology professor Svend Brinkmann imitates a typical self-help book. It provides seven steps and concrete advice on how to live a good life, suggesting that you should stop looking for answers inside yourself, focus on the negative aspects of life, say no, suppress emotions, fire your coach, read a novel, and dwell on the past

38 See Borup for a survey showing an increase of 75% more mindfulness providers from 2012-2015, measured in the city of Aarhus (Borup 2016a).
CHAPTER 1: ENACTING MINDFULNESS IN DENMARK

(Brinkmann 2014, 5,6). This caricature of a self-help book wishes to challenge the idea that the answer to societal issues are inside the head of its citizens and not in the structures that make up society. Brinkman shows how the accelerated culture of Danish society demands of the individual to turn inward, mærke efter, feel how she feels, and develop herself, what Brinkman calls “forced development” (Udviklingstvang) (see also Smith 2016, 73). A path that Brinkman worries will lead to egocentrism and a pathologized society that loses track of essential virtues. Brinkmann was but one voice of many voices who objected against therapeutic solutions such as mindfulness to what he deemed structural problems, and his book in particular sparked discussions about self-development, the good life, the good society, and how to achieve it. “When you start looking for your inner self, you end up finding yourself on the couch eating candy,” psychologist Lene Tanggaard noted, echoing Brinkman’s message that instead of seeking inward, people should turn their gaze outward (Abrahamsen 2014b). Brinkman’s book gained such prominence that Brinkmann is now, arguably, the most well-known academic in Denmark, with a weekly radio program and a regular column in a major Danish newspaper.

The debate I want to unfold was sparked by a text posted by Brinkman on the social media platform Facebook. Brinkmann posted his reaction to an interview with Lone Fjorback on his Facebook profile, and 4020 people liked the post, 363 people commented, and 424 shared the post. The debate was heated, and it shows well the different positions and stances for and against mindfulness. When interviewed, Lone Fjorback had stated that happiness is not dependent on life circumstances but on the individual’s ability to meet and tackle those circumstances. Suffering is something you create in your head, Fjorback is cited by the journalist as saying. Brinkmann contests this viewpoint, arguing that “mindfulness risks becoming an individualistic adoption-ideology, where you have to acquire a positive life view instead of fighting to change problems in society.” One commentator agrees with Brinkman’s position and remarks that there are grave class differences in the possibilities people have for benefitting from mindfulness. The commentator writes: “My daughter suffers from chronic back pain and uses mindfulness, but this is because she has a well-paid job. She can choose a luxury product like mindfulness from the shelf with lifestyle medicines because of her high

39 Brinkmann’s argument is akin to sociologist Hartmut Rosa’s critique of the accelerated society and its effects (Rosa 2010).
40 In 2017, Svend Brinkman was voted number one ‘opinion maker’ in Denmark by a jury of 34 people from the academic world, the media and publishing business, signifying the gravity of his position.
41 To ensure the anonymity of the people commenting on Brinkman’s post, I have chosen not to link to the post.
salary. The lady at the check-out counter (kassedamen) who gets sick does not have the same option. She should have her basic needs covered by the social safety net—not by mindfulness.” Another person opposes Brinkman’s and the commentator and remarks that mindfulness does not cost anything. That comment sparks sarcastic remarks from several others—all of them referring to how expensive mindfulness courses are. One commentator objects that it is a common misunderstanding that positive thinking and mindfulness practice is an obstacle to one’s wish to change the world: “On the contrary, I experience that the better I am at overcoming negative experiences, the more strength and urge I get to do something about injustice. To acquire a positive view on life is not necessarily in opposition to fighting for change in society.”

In this example, we can see that the debate on mindfulness develops into a discussion of health care benefits and on how the individual and the state are related to each other when it comes to ensuring a good society. Like many other countries in the Global North, Denmark has seen the rise of mental illness, stress, and depression in the last decade. The Danish Center for Mindfulness has advocated for systematic implementation of mindfulness in the Danish healthcare system, seeing it as an inexpensive solution to the rising number of people suffering from stress, depression, and anxiety. When pointing to the importance of having a social safety net, the commenter in the thread touches on an important component of Danish society, namely the right to have basic needs and health concerns met. This right is enshrined in the welfare system contract, and most Danes highly cherish it and are therefore overall quite happy to pay high taxes to keep this welfare system afloat (Bruun, Krøjjer, and Rytter 2015). A ‘luxury product’ like mindfulness is not for everyone. Furthermore, Brinkman’s post alludes to a responsibilization of the individual with mindfulness, which challenges the idea that as a citizen you are being taken care of by the state, that there is a safety net of professionals to help you if you burn out, get depression, or become stressed. In the Danish healthcare system, all citizens with residence permits have access to healthcare free of charge. The Danish welfare system is, however, undergoing changes towards increased marketization and privatization with a rapid expansion of the private health sector, shaking the balance of responsibility of being healthy from the state towards the entrepreneurial, health-seeking citizen (D. B. Kristensen, Lim, and Askegaard 2016, 490)42. It is in this context that

42 Especially the increasing privatization and growth of e.g. private healthcare insurances and hospitals and their undermining of the principle of equal access to such core welfare areas as health have been a matter of concern across the political and public spectrum.
mindfulness is either promoted as a possible solution to national problems with stress and mental illness, as we see in Fjorback and Pallesen’s speeches, or as a problematic tendency and symptom of declining services of the welfare state. Whether attacking or defending mindfulness, it is apparent that discussions of the usefulness or harmfulness of mindfulness practices are permeated by larger issues and clefts in ways of perceiving the individual and the individual’s place in the Danish society, as well as the responsibility of the state concerning the health of its citizens.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how Buddhist practices in general and mindfulness, in particular, have historically been seen as both scientific and therapeutic, which has enabled the dominant ways of perceiving mindfulness in Danish society, namely as an evidence-based therapy and an antidote to stress. Mindfulness has evolved from being a means on a religious path to enlightenment to a stress-reducing tool practiced, for instance, in Danish offices by people who consider themselves non-religious. Through transformations and translations of the Buddhist practice sati by researchers like Kabat-Zinn, the practice has reached a status as a “therapeutic modality” (Kirmayer 2015) discursively paired up with stress. The complex historical trajectories of mindfulness include the convergence of phenomena such as Buddhism and science, the therapization of Buddhism, the rise of stress, and the boom of the self-help industry. These historical, political, and socio-economical processes all play a part in answering why mindfulness has gained such prominence and why it may be considered good for stressed-out employees. Even if mindfulness is promoted as a natural and universal ‘good’ in the mindfulness movement, the ‘good’ in mindfulness has changed and changes still as it enters new socio-cultural and political contexts. In a Danish context, mindfulness is both embraced and contested. I have given two examples of how the meaning of mindfulness is negotiated, showing how the Danish Center for Mindfulness enacts mindfulness as a solution to national health care problems and the rise of stress, while others such as Brinkman problematizes the idea of cultivating happiness and wellbeing through mindfulness.

To conclude, I want to return to the opinion piece that opened the chapter. Fjorback and Pallesen’s opinion piece is accompanied by a drawing of a person who has had his skull cut open. He now sits with his brain in one hand and a set of screwdrivers in the other, as if in
the middle of adjusting some malfunction in his brain. Corresponding with the title of the opinion piece, “Five reasons why we should train our mental health,” the drawing suggests that our mental health is dependent on our way of training our brain: the brain can be adjusted using a tool—mindfulness—to decrease mental illness. Such media representations work in powerful ways, producing a link between contemporary mindfulness and the pursuit of good mental health. Moreover, it suggests a particular form of individual agency. The reader gets the idea that her mental health is in her own hands, workable and manageable, illustrated quite literally as a person operating on his own brain. A set of screwdrivers in a drawing, an FMRI-scan of the brain in meditation, a bell curve showing a decrease in stress levels, a pair of Tibetan bells—these things enact not only mindfulness but also the body in different ways. This will become more clear in the following chapters. My use of the concept enactment follows an overall theoretical premise, inspired by Mol and Blackman, among others, suggesting that we are never a singular body. We are multiple bodies brought into being and held together through complex interactions with the surrounding world affording different ways of self-production through various enactments (Blackman 2008, 17).

Attending conferences such as this one, along with my continuous fieldwork in two workplaces, allowed me to compare the ways mindfulness was enacted at various sites. Chapter 2 and 3 will describe more fully how mindfulness is enacted, focusing specifically on the workplace. In chapter 2, we begin at a course facility in downtown Copenhagen following the first session of mindfulness for 12 university staff members.
Chapter 2: Affective Work Environments

“What is your intention?” Ursula looks at us one after the other, her eyebrows raised in a welcoming fashion. We, eleven course participants and I, stand in a circle in a meeting room in downtown Copenhagen. The pale light of the March morning reaches through the industrial-looking windows and façade of the university building. It is the first of five sessions introducing mindfulness to a cohort of university staff. Each of us holds a postcard-sized picture in our hand that we selected from a large pile on a nearby table. Ursula invites us to use the postcard to help us express why we signed up for mindfulness. One woman volunteers to start. She fidgets with her picture and seems a bit nervous. Then she turns it over for us all to see. It shows a wooden bench by a lakeside. Wear and tear in the wood reveals that the bench has stood there a while. At one end, the plank that constitutes the seat of the bench is cleaved in two. “I feel like this bench,” the woman says, “broken, and I am not able to fix it. But I want to learn to accept that I am broken and that it is okay.” I am moved by her postcard, her story, and the shy yet resolute way she declares her intention.

More people join in with their intentions and open up about difficulties they face in their current lives. A middle-aged man turns his postcard to show the group a mountain peak with a couple of birds flying high in the sky. “I am looking to find peace,” he says. Peace has not been around since he was appointed head of studies at his department, a position that made two of his predecessors sick with stress. “I know I can’t change the structures of my job, but I want to do something about my way of relating to them.” “Mmhm,” the teacher says and nods her head attentively. A young woman employed in the HR department shows her postcard. We learn her name is Olivia. Her photo shows a brick wall almost entirely covered in dark-colored graffiti. A pink spot shines through the dark meshwork of graffiti tags. “I want to be that pink,” Olivia says and points to the pink spot. She explains that she thinks the dark-colored graffiti is symbolic of the chaos ongoing at her workplace. Another restructuring of staff creates an atmosphere of confusion and unease among her colleagues who do not know if they will stay at the department, if they have to leave, and what will happen in the future. “I don’t want to be sucked down by the heavy atmosphere; I want to be the light, happy pink that doesn’t sink,” Olivia says. She goes on, telling us about her experiences with being sick with stress years back. “I want to avoid going back to that place. I think this is the reason why I am here. To work on myself and avoid getting stressed.” We continue the round until everyone has spoken.
Heavy Atmospheres and Good Intentions

This chapter contextualizes mindfulness practices at work in Denmark, focusing on how employees experience their everyday life at work. The opening vignette offers an insight into how course participants depict relations between work life, mindfulness, selfhood, intentions, and aspirations. All the mindfulness novices in the circle share something about themselves and their relationship to the world, which they wish to alter, heal, or work on with mindfulness. The first woman, whom I later came to know as Elin, expresses her desire to accept herself fully—knowing that she is imperfect. The next participant, Niels, wants to find ro, Danish ‘peace,’ and one of the most common terms associated with mindfulness in my fieldwork. On Niels’s postcard, a bird flies high over a mountain peak, yet it is not that kind of secluded, solitary peace—ro—that Niels seeks. Niels seeks to find ro within the “structures” in the middle of his hectic work life. This is precisely what Ursula promises: to teach participants technique to find peace (ro) and build up concentration amid a busy everyday life. Olivia articulates a familiar yet philosophically complex idea that ‘atmospheres’ can enter the singular body and affect it—e.g., a heavy atmosphere can suck you down. She wants to be the pink that stays afloat in the chaos at work.

The way we, the participants and I, were invited to share our intentions that day in March strikes me as particularly potent in opening up the complexities of how contemporary work life affects employees in Denmark and the role mindfulness plays in potentially relieving these affects. The participants’ statements illustrate how individual pursuits of “acceptance,” “ease,” and of “staying afloat” through mindfulness is motivated by and enmeshed in social worlds; their ‘intention’ is an expression of a wish for the future that results from economic cutbacks, competition, layoffs, and structural changes in the university as a workplace.

Investigations into the affective relations between the individual and the outer world, e.g., “the heavy atmosphere” of a workplace, asks of us to look at the ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams 1977) that move employees in a myriad of ways. Identified by Raymond Williams as connections between environment and individual, ‘structures of feeling’ is the lived, experienced imprint of a given historical formation, the imprint of the socio-cultural here and now (ibid.). I understand his term in the broadest sense as socially shared affective phenomena (Peschel 2012). It is precisely these imprints and their affective entanglements with the mind-
body of the employees that interest me. In her work on the transmission of affect (2004), Teresa Brennan argues that to imagine such affective entanglements, we must break with the idea that individuals are emotionally self-contained. The individual and the environment have no secure distinction, which is why we can become either drained or energized in the company of others (Brennan 2004, 6). The “atmosphere” literally gets into the individual Brennan stresses (ibid. 1).43 The atmosphere, like a mood, is not a feeling we catch from another person but something around us and with us, something we are caught up in that might not be our own (Ahmed 2014, 15).

Building on this way of thinking about the individual and the environment as affectively entangled, in this chapter I investigate work life not through the organizational structures of the workplace but its affective impressions. I focus on the affects of the workplace, that is, ‘the intensities of experience’ (Massumi 2015) that move people to engage in mindfulness. I illustrate how people are affected by contemporary work life, drawing on several case stories from my material. I foreground the way my interlocutors narrate how work life affects them bodily, mentally, and emotionally. These stories, along with research on modern knowledge work, show that contemporary work life imposes itself on workers by not only blocking up the calendar and consuming their time but also filling up the minds and lingering in their bodies in ways that drain their energy. Work is felt in ways that extend beyond the offices in which it is carried out. It is felt as a pressure, a passion, an acceleration, or as stress.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the surge of mindfulness in Denmark can be linked to the therapeutic turn, and a tendency to turn ‘inward’ for both physical and mental healing (Madsen 2018; Salmenniemi 2020). Tendencies of ‘interiority’ (Pagis 2019) come simultaneously with characterizations of societies as increasingly ‘affect-driven’ (Sharma and Tygstrup 2015). Mindfulness practices at work invite us to think about how these two tendencies merge. This chapter thinks about this by linking people’s turn to mindfulness with their embodied experiences of enduring affective work environments. I argue that practicing mindfulness at work in Denmark is tightly linked to intensities of experience at work, especially of pressure, high pace, and passion, where mindfulness is experienced by the practitioners as

---

43 “In other words, the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The ‘atmosphere’ or the environment literally gets into the individual. Physically and biologically, something is present that was not there before, but it did not originate sui generis: it was not generated solely or sometimes even in part by the individual organism or its genes” (Brennan 2004, 6).
ways of “accepting,” “easing” and “staying afloat.” One can say that it is true that mindfulness then works therapeutically for the individual to cope, yet coping, I find, is too heavily associated with ‘getting through’ difficult times. I see the mindfulness practice of these employees much more as a ‘staying with’ the hardship, a continuous engagement to appreciate the here and now, becoming more finely attuned to themselves in order to adapt to the ‘outer world.’

**Affective Imprints of Contemporary Work Life**

For analytical purposes, I have divided the next sections into three subsections that describe different modalities of contemporary work life that affect the wellbeing of employees: passion and pace, pressure, and competition. I will take you through the corridors at Kern and into the small offices at the university to show how these modalities play out. Although my interlocutors work in separate fields—half of them at a private pharmaceutical company, and the other half at a public university—and different capacities—as secretaries, managers, CEO’s, receptionists, researchers, professors, lab technicians, and more—they all have similar ways of describing their work life as fast-paced, purposeful, pressured, and competitive. I call these descriptions narratives of affective impressions of work. I start by investigating the passion and pace at the pharmaceutical company Kern.

**The Passion and the Pace**

The first thing I notice about Susan is her elegant shoes and her firm handshake. It is my first day at Kern, and it is freezing outside. Inside Kern, it is cozy and warm, and so is Susan’s way of welcoming me. She looks me in the eyes, her curls dancing around her head as she shakes my hand and expresses how delighted she is that I will participate in their mindfulness courses. Susan is the head of HR in the sales department, where I have been permitted to do part of my fieldwork. She initiated the mindfulness training at Kern after a visit to a Human Resource fair in Hamburg. Here, mindfulness was exhibited alongside different kinds of initiatives to promote healthy work environments. Susan heard how workplaces similar to Kern had successfully carried out mindfulness interventions: employees reportedly slept better, concentrated better, and had more energy after the intervention. Prompted by a coming optimization process, which would mean that employees at Kern would have to “run faster,” Susan decided, with her team of HR personnel and the leadership, to initiate a mindfulness training through Kern’s pension funds health program. She hoped that training mindfulness would ease the stress of the immediate optimization process and anticipated that the same
positive outcomes would transpire at Kern as it had done elsewhere. She hoped that mindfulness would help employees ‘slow down.’

As the training evolves in the early spring, I chat sporadically with Susan about how it is going. She is enthusiastic about the program and even tells me how she herself manages to sleep better after having participated in some of the sessions. When we reach the middle of the training period, employees start dropping out of the mindfulness sessions, leaving the meditation room with empty seats and a half-full class. Resolutely, Susan makes a list and notes down who shows up and who skips the training. The course is not mandatory; it is, however, highly encouraged. “Why would you give up on doing something good for yourself?” Susan asks me one morning, crossing out another name on her list.

Mindfulness is a way to ‘do something good for yourself’ at work, but in what way, I ask Susan, as we sit down to talk a day in June. “It makes you slow down,” she says, and recounts how she instantly “fell into a different pace” when she tried it the first time. The mindfulness training at Kern is reaching its final weeks. For three months, almost half of Kern’s staff have practiced mindfulness together weekly. Susan goes on, exclaiming how she hopes that the employees will remember the techniques they have been presented with and applied throughout the intervention. She expects that remembering to be mindful will enable employees to take better care of themselves. “They are so passionate,” Susan tells me, using the common Danish expression that they ‘burn’ for what they do. “Employees at Kern are very passionate and ambitious. They really ‘burn’ for what they do here. The downside to this is that they risk working too much.” Burning for what you do can make you burn out, Susan states. She goes on to explain how Kern struggles with stress as a consequence of its passionate employees. For a couple of years, Kern has had a psychologist attached to the company to provide help for employees who show symptoms of stress, but Susan says that it did not have a great effect. Mindfulness offers something new for the employees who ‘burn’ too much, who are stressed and pressured, the people who, as Susan says, find it hard to take a break and who juggle too many things, giving them “thought congestion” (tankemylder). Using herself as an example, Susan emphasizes that mindfulness offers something different because it affects you on a physical level, “slowing down the pace.”

It made good sense to me why Susan has foregrounded pace as a vital factor of the work mindfulness was supposed to do. The workdays at Kern are fast-paced, and speed, deadlines, and deliveries frame the everyday. As I moved in and out of the hallways at Kern, I felt the fast pace myself as well-dressed employees rushed by purposefully, making their
way to the next meeting, leaving a whiff of expensive perfume behind. The fast pace is supported by the company infrastructure of strategically-placed, fast-brewing coffee machines on all floors. In front of the many meeting rooms, a board signals red if the meeting room is occupied, green if it is free. A timer on the board counts down the minutes and seconds left of the meeting so that people passing by will know precisely when the people gathered in there are free to engage in new conferences and conversations, and when the room is free. Time is money. People move fast.

The high-paced everyday life was not a bad thing for most people at Kern as I understood it, talking to them in between mindfulness sessions and in interviews. Speed created thrills, excitement, and satisfaction. But it also created stress and burnout. The fast pace was not only evident in efficient espresso machines, synchronized Outlook calendars, and process plans. It was felt in the body. Some employees at Kern related how their bodies “vibrated with work” when they came home. Other employees related how the fast pace of work made it difficult to shift into a lower gear after a day at work. The intensity of the high pace lingered in the body even if they did not open their computers. Susan shared with me how an employee had compared returning to Kern after her stress-leave to jumping on an express train. “Kern moves at 120 miles an hour. Coming back in another gear was difficult because the train is going so fast. It is not possible to just trot along. You can’t keep up.” In Susan’s mind, the solution to this problem was, in this case, to carefully set up a plan that slowly re-integrated the employee to their job, accelerating the pace gradually. In the bigger picture, however, she thought of mindfulness as a practice that would help employees slow down without going on leave. Mindfulness could provide a slow-paced breathing space, a timeout, during the workday. Interestingly then, practicing mindfulness in a work setting may offer the means to ‘run faster’ by way of its inverse. To escalate, develop, and run faster, employees were invited to slow down.

Benjamin, a pharmacist and project manager at Kern, painted an apt picture of how the fast pace, deadlines, and rush of work manifested in the everyday of the employees when I met with him for an interview in late May 2017. He described work as “pouring in,” evoking an image of a flood soaking him. Phone calls, emails, and meetings steadily “pour in,” Benjamin said, and added that such downpours made him vibrate with “work stress.” Benjamin is the project manager for eleven countries, managing and coordinating clinical trials, ensuring that the trials align. When work pours in, “the last thing you need is to panic and not
be able to think. You need to forget that you can’t get everything done in time,” Benjamin re-
related. He indicated that it is normal for him to have more work than he has time for. To get 
things done, he needs to keep calm about it and not panic. For this reason, it was not easy to 
prioritize mindfulness. He did not feel he had the time to spare. Nonetheless, he joined his 
colleagues and described how, after having gone several times, he started feeling an effect of 
the practice. Once he sat down in the chair and Peter started guiding a meditation, it was as if 
the tension in his stomach began to melt away, and the continuous focus on his breath calmed 
him down little by little. The tasks that had seemed immensely important to get done before 
class lost their hold on him as he calmed down.

It was precisely reactions like that Susan had hoped for. She was happy with the em-
ployee group at Kern and wanted to care for them while also, obviously, appreciating their 
ability to run fast when the work demanded it of them. In the next section, I move on to look 
at pressure. It is another modality of work life, as experienced by my interlocutors, and in-
volves a different narrative. When employees talked about the fast pace, they used accelera-
tion-metaphors, talking about shifting gears, catching a fast train, slowing down, vibrating 
with stress. The pressure of work was talked about differently, as a heavy, weighing down, 
exhausting feeling. I do not mean to suggest that the two modalities exclude each other, and 
some employees talked about feeling both excessively paced and pressured, tingling with 
speed, and weighed down by responsibilities. Framing employees’ narratives in categories 
such as pace, passion, or pressure is my way of emphasizing some core elements in the broad 
spectrum of how work life affects employees.

The next section focuses on Niels’s experience of the pressure of work. Niels is em-
ployed by the university and followed Ursula’s course. We met Niels in the opening vignette 
as he described his longing for peace. Work life at a university is clearly different from the 
work life at a pharmaceutical company, and yet fast pace and passion, pressure, and competi-
tion were also key factors when university employees explained why they turned to mindful-
ness.

The Pressure
Many of my interlocutors talked about work as a kind of pressure. They sometimes articu-
lated mindfulness as having an effect that “relieved the pressure” or “lifted the weight of 
work from people shoulders.” What is interesting, as in the case of Niels, an associate profes-
sor at the faculty of health, is that the pressure of work is often not understood as unjust, too 
much, or unacceptable. People I spoke to, like Niels, often conceptualized the pressure as a
self-inflicted condition. Similar to the way Benjamin described work as “pouring in” like rain, unavoidably, Niels talked about the pressure of his work as being inescapable. Allow me to elaborate by taking you to Niels’s office on the fifth floor of an eight-story building in the northwest of Copenhagen. Books fill the office from floor to ceiling, and from the window, one gets a good view of the park below. Students and staff pass by, and inside sits Niels, who agreed to speak with me about his mindfulness practice on a warm day in June 2017.

When Niels joined Ursula’s mindfulness course Mindfulness in Five Steps, “he wasn’t there for fun.” Niels was committed to learning to meditate to deal with his new position. Niels was recently appointed the new head of studies at his department. Even though he knows his position is demanding, he explains that it is mostly his own ambitions that pressure him. “It is the job—and it is not the job,” Niels says. “It is a self-imposed pressure… After being appointed head of studies, I don’t have time to publish as many articles. Suddenly I am at the bottom of the list. And I am not used to being at the bottom. That’s not me.” Since Niels wanted to keep up his publishing pace, he started working every day of the week, including the weekends and in the evenings as well. “I have always done that because I like my job, but after becoming head of studies, working round the clock had become something I had to do to keep up. And I started feeling ill.” Niels articulates how he started to feel stressed, how he experienced recurrent stomach aches and excessive thinking. He needed to “turn down the noise,” he said. The “noise” and the “pressure” to Niels felt simultaneously as something that came from the outside and from the inside. As with many of my interlocutors Niels’s way of talking about his work life underscored the insecure boundary between individual and environment. Turning down the noise or lifting the pressure is difficult for him because it is sort of built into the work life Niels loves so much.

Meditation seemed to be a way for Niels to do that, turn down the noise. In the mindfulness course, Niels was inspired to establish meditation as an everyday routine and as part of his regular work life. Now, he meditates every day after lunch, in his office. He points me to the chair he uses, a simple wooden chair standing next to the window, and shows me the YouTube meditation guides he usually listens to. “Ten minutes is justifiable. I would not be able to convince myself that it was okay to use fifteen. I can live without meditating. But my life is better when I do it. I see mindfulness practice as a form of rehabilitation. With mindfulness, I can check how my body feels. I don’t want to get sick again.”

To me, it seemed that the stress Niels experienced was tightly knit into the actual conditions at work that Niels had to endure and not so much a “self-chosen pressure,” as he had
called it. To Niels, however, working weekends felt like a necessary consequence of keeping up with a job he loved. He pointed to an issue that I often encountered in conversations with people who started practicing mindfulness: like Niels, many of my interlocutors blamed their work-related stress on themselves because they should have been better at managing their time, prioritizing tasks, and staying focused. Mindfulness was helpful in this respect. “When the emails begin to pour in and I become overwhelmed, I take ten minutes, calm down, do a body scan, and then I go back at it, feeling better,” Niels explains, using, like Benjamin, the phrase “pour in.” The body is a central element in Niels’s story. When faced with the “noise” and the “pressure” of the job, his body reacts with stomach aches and ruminations, slowing down the pace of his work. However, the body is also the site of solution for Niels as even a short meditation lowers the feeling of pressure and the tension in the body. He takes care of himself by “checking in” with his body. Sitting by the window for ten minutes is a way of providing this care. Turning inward, he turns down the noise and eases the pressure.

Let me conclude the narratives on affective impressions of work with moving on to Henrik. While Susan reiterates the image of an express train to characterize life at Kern, and Niels describes work as a pressure and a noise he must turn off, Henrik compares his everyday life at work to competitive sports.

The Competition

University life has changed. I don’t think people even considered the possibility of being fired before. You got the position, and that was it. Now when we talk about things in the future, my colleagues say, “Yes, well, let’s see if I am still around when the time comes.” That is a source of stress. You need to have better numbers than the others, be more likable, produce more. That’s stressful. It is like a competitive sport. There is no detailed job description; you just need to be better than the rest. Everything is relative to others. In this way, you are never off work. You have to say to yourself, “now I have done enough. It has to be good enough for now.” But there is a permanent insecurity about whether you are doing enough. It sticks with you. And it doesn’t go away even if you work harder.

I cite Henrik in this lengthy quote on how university life feels because I think his own words clearly demonstrate the persistent stress the competitive work environment fosters in him. At present, Henrik is a professor MSO, and he explains that fierce competition due to the increasingly precarious conditions characterizes his work life. Henrik’s description of his work...
life resonates with the way many experience their own work life situation. Once you get a position somewhere, you have to perform, produce, and excel, and even then, you cannot be sure that you will keep the job. For people like Henrik, this kind of work environment is a source of stress. It is stressful because the parameters that measure whether one has performed well—and consequently, whether you are good enough—is shifting in relation to the broader field of researchers. In that way, working as a professor becomes like a competitive sport. Being good is not good enough. You need to be better than the rest. As part of his new mindfulness routine, Henrik plays the piano for 15 to 20 minutes every evening. Mindfulness, to Henrik, involves paying attention to one thing at a time. It also means taking a timeout to nurture that which he has been neglecting while living a life structured by work and raising children, playing the piano, for example. He hopes that practicing mindfulness in formal and informal ways, meditating and playing the piano as well as prioritizing his workloads, will help him descend a few steps on the “stress ladder,” he tells me.

Some employees, especially the ones at Kern, at various times expressed great appreciation for the speed, the competition, and the performance-oriented environment. Michelle, from Kern, who had worked in the pharmaceutical industry for nineteen years, explained it this way: “We are busy. We have always been busy in our line of business. It is a kind of bug that bites us. We need action! And we get it here [at Kern]. We get a kick out of it.” However, Michelle also pondered how long she could keep up the pace. “Can I work like this when I am sixty? I am not sure.”

Listening to these stories, I recognized a pattern in the way people described the relation between work, stress, and mindfulness. Work imprinted itself on the body and affected it, infusing it with excitement, or depleting it of energy. Benjamin explained his work life as inherently chaotic; it pours in over him, making him want to panic and “vibrate with work stress.” Henrik described himself as mentally exhausted, feeling that work is a competitive sport, but a sport in which you never know who won the race. Michelle viewed the high performance and speed as a bug infusing her with energy and leaving her wondering how long she can keep up the pace. Niels felt his work as a pressure weighing him down and giving him stomach aches.

In jobs like those of Benjamin, Henrik, Michelle, and Niels, employees do not sign in and out according to rigidly defined and highly regulated timetables. They have, like all of my interlocutors, relatively flexible jobs, enabling them to work from home or leave work
early to pick up kids and continue in the evening where they left off. As we learned in the introduction leaving work early and spending time with your family is one of the things that, according to Wiking, makes the Danes a happy people (Wiking 2017). Yet, the flexibility and the freedom is also a curse because it blurs the boundaries between work life and leisure time. The problem with those blurred lines, as I came to understand it, was not so much the actual tasks people ended up dealing with at the dinner table in the evenings. The problem for many was how work affected them, that the atmosphere of pace, pressure, and competition of the workplace followed them home, which made it difficult to relax. For many people, work life and private life were not separate but practically and emotionally interwoven. Even if they did leave their computers behind in the office, work lingered as a vibration in the body when at home. This empirical observation resonates with how Krause-Jensen and Salamon have described how technological advancement has transformed work from a place to an individual mental condition (Salamon and Krause-Jensen forthcoming).

Work being a mental condition was a problem and a source of stress for several interlocutors. They described the imprint that their job made on their body and the mind in different ways, often pointing to how the lingering imprints of work disturbed their family life. When they sat down to play with their kids, they did not feel fully present because work always hovered over them and annexed their thoughts, affecting their body to tense up. In a job such as Henrik’s, for example, there is a lot to do. Yet it is not so much the many tasks Henrik emphasizes as problematic. It is the doubt of whether the work done is good ‘enough.’ People like Henrik hoped that mindfulness would help them practice to prioritize thoughts so that such feelings of inadequacy, for example, do not take up too much space. Then there were also the emotional imprints of the fast pace, pressure, and passion at work. Some interlocutors described having difficulties ‘getting in touch’ with their feelings because they rarely had time to ‘check in’ and feel. They hoped that mindfulness would enable them to better connect with their emotions. People also talked about the pressure, pace, and competition at work as something they felt physically in the form of stomach aches, headaches, lack of appetite, and insomnia. The work pace, pressure, and passion resulted in migraines, high blood pressure, and poor memory. It affected them bodily, emotionally, and mentally. Mindfulness entered their worklives as a possible solution to these bodily, emotional, and mental imprints of a paced, pressuring, and competitive work life. For some people, the practice of mindfulness had the ability to make them feel out of time, and to slow down, as Susan says. When
meditating, it was not the boards on the meeting rooms determining their rhythms. It was the beating of their hearts.

Unpredictable Moods of the Post-Industrial Economy

My interlocutors’ experiences of a work life that is fast paced, pressuring, and competitive while also filled with passion and purpose relate well to the way contemporary work life in the post-industrial economy has been characterized more broadly (Salamon 2002; Korsbæk Sørensen 2015; A. R. Kristensen 2012; Willig 2016). Sociologist Pelle Korsbæk Sørensen’s research into work conditions among well-educated employees in Denmark demonstrates how experiences of work-related stress connects to expectations of excitement and joy in one's work life, on the one hand, and experiences of a borderless and precarious work life, as well as a constant demand for self-development, on the other hand (Korsbæk Sørensen 2015, 187).44 The French sociologists Boltanski and Chiapello describe more overall how requirements for self-management in work life in our contemporary era are effected by a shift in the 1980s, from the hierarchical Fordist work structure to a network-based form of organization with varying and differentiated productions and a global outlook.45 This third spirit of capitalism, as the authors define it, is a period marked by the internet, biotech, and global finance, and the keywords of this current period are innovation, change, creativity, mobility, self-help, and self-management. Moreover, careers are seen as a series of projects where the worker has to continually prove his employability (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 166), which relates well to Henrik’s experience of being in constant competition, even in his permanent position. Fifteen years after this analysis was published, new research on the Danish labor market suggests that contemporary work life in the twenty-first century is increasingly marked by precarity and marginalization (Hirslund, Møller, and Salamon 2020). Knowledge work (viden-
sarbejde) is a common Danish term used to define professional work like that of Niels, Susan, Michelle, and Henrik. It is non-manual labor requiring higher education and an expertise level of knowledge. Knowledge work, in particular, offers a high degree of autonomy and flexibility. It also comes with a high level of uncertainty because it relies on ad-hoc modes of organization, calling on people to self-manage (Buch, Andersen, and Sørensen 2009a).

Standing in a circle conveying my intention with mindfulness alongside the other mindfulness novices made it evident to me how self-management is key in contemporary Danish work life. Niels declared how, since he could not change the structures of his position, he wanted to find a good way to relate to the structures by managing his recurrent stomach aches. He did not want to break down with stress like his predecessors. In a similar vein, Oliva wanted to find ways to stay afloat in an environment that dragged her down by working on herself. The subsequent examples throughout this chapter similarly suggest a specific kind of self-management where the problem is not how to get work done, to manage tasks even if people, as Henrik says, were often left to doubt if they had done enough. What people such as Niels, Benjamin, Olivia, and Henrik needed to manage, it seemed, was their relationship to work and how their work life affected them, pressured them, exhausted them, or excited them, making them burn out. This was not only done to feel better, it was also done to stay afloat, as Oliva says. To keep a job you love, as Niels says.

Korsbæk Sørensen remarks that one of the most important characteristics of the third spirit of capitalism, as defined by Boltanski and Chiapello, is that this period does not fear chaos and seeks employees who can navigate the unpredictable terrain of contemporary work life (Korsbæk Sørensen 2015, 16).46 It was precisely this sense of preparing oneself for the unpredictable I got when I started participating in mindfulness courses. Many of the participants were not sick with stress, yet, although a great deal of the participants had so-called stress symptoms. Mindfulness practice was a preventive method to deal with a work life they had come to experience as unpredictable.

Increased pace, high mobility of investment capital and personnel, constant change, and corporate reorganization was also some of the main characteristics of work life in Denmark that anthropologist Jakob Krause-Jensen observed in 1999 (Krause-Jensen 2010). He

46 With the third spirit, the employee is granted more autonomy, however the loosening of rigid work schedules and authoritarian leadership result in an increased demand of self-management. Furthermore, as the organization of work become more flexible and workers more mobile, instability and short-term employment become the reality for many workers (Korsbæk Sørensen 2015, 16).
emphasizes how rapidly changing markets, high degrees of uncertainty and seemingly never-ending technological revolutions marked the labor market at the onset to the twenty-first century, and how these tendencies were particularly pervasive in private companies, such as Bang & Olufsen, where Krause-Jensen did his fieldwork (Krause-Jensen 2010, 3–4). The social reality of Bang & Olufsen was that people frequently moved in and out of jobs (voluntarily or involuntarily) which differed from his own every day at the Department of Social Anthropology, a job he noted as being “much more stable; once a permanent position is obtained, it is rarely abandoned” (Krause-Jensen 2010, 14). Yet the instability that characterized Bang & Olufsen at the time of Krause-Jensen’s research soon pervaded not only private companies but also public institutions such as state universities (Krause-Jensen 2020). The everyday life at university departments in 2020 is far from stable: permanent positions sometimes become temporary following the mood swings of the political and economic climate of the Danish state. The Danish welfare system, although often heralded by outsiders as safeguarding a society of equality and solidarity, has in the last decades been supplemented by a range of neoliberal reforms and privatizations that affect the Danish state apparatus (Bruun, Krøjjer, and Rytter 2015) effectuating what anthropologist Aja Smith has aptly called a “neoliberal welfare state” (A. Smith 2016).47 ‘Neoliberalism’ can be defined as an economic system and a global force (Ong 2006). It signifies not only forms of economic practice or governance, but also points to a reconceptualization of the individual as “a responsible, bounded, autonomous, maximizing individual, who is simultaneously a moral agent and a rational person, but fully accountable for his or her actions” (Eriksen et al. 2015, 917). Therapeutic engagements, self-work and self-care has been called out as key factors of neoliberalism (Eriksen et al. 2015; Madsen 2015; Salamon 2002) although the explanatory value of neoliberalism has also been contested (Laidlaw in Eriksen et. al. 2015, 913; Cook 2016). There are obviously many important ways to nuance and complicate the way neoliberalism and the welfare state merge in the Danish state model. This is not, however, my goal here. Instead, following this brief outline of changes in workplaces in recent decades, I want to return to focus more specifically

47 In her work on leadership training, Smith convincingly shows how the Danish state rests on two seemingly opposite but coexistent ideologies. One ideology centers on the individual freedom and possibilities for self-developing, thus the ability to realize one’s “own potential as neoliberal logics prescribe.” The other ideology emphasizes solidarity and fellow-feeling inherent in the historical make-up of the Danish welfare state (A. Smith 2016, 80).
on how this literature can help account for the imprints of work life as recounted by my interlocutors. I will do this focusing on the figure of ‘the environment.’

**The Figure of the ‘Environment’**

Drawing on insights from his ethnography on Bang & Olufsen, Krause-Jensen argues that ‘the body’ is the privileged image of organizations. He shows how the leadership at B&O explains strategic decisions through physiological analogies, arguing, for instance, that corporate costs should be ‘slimmed down’ (Krause-Jensen 2014, 133). In my fieldwork, I have witnessed how the concept of the good work environment or workplace climate is evoked repeatedly and firmly tied in with the purpose of mindfulness practice. This is evident in classes taught and in the literature describing how mindfulness might benefit the workplace, for instance, in this meta-review arguing that “mindfulness trainings are associated with less negative and more positive emotional tone, which may be important to day-to-day workplace climate” (Good et al. 2016:120).

Whereas the body has, as Krause-Jensen also mentions, been stressed by social scientists as a convenient way to represent social groups as homogenous, bounded systems (Krause-Jensen 2014, 134), a word like environment or climate has other connotations. Brian Massumi has characterized contemporary economic systems and power regimes as, in fact, ‘environmental’ following Michel Foucault (Massumi 2009). In contemporary “neoliberal regimes of power,” Massumi declares, the state of emergency is turned into an everyday condition of life caused by global forces (terrorist attacks, hurricanes, stock markets, viruses) that threaten to erupt or disrupt at any time (Massumi 2009, 154).48 The neoliberal economy thrives on the emergency, argues Massumi, as its mechanism is to ride the waves of metastability through the turbulences of a permanently uncertain environment (Massumi 2009, 176).

I find it particularly relevant how Massumi describes the figure of the environment as a form of power that is indiscriminate and works through the regulation of effects rather than of causes (Massumi 2009, 153). Massumi describes how the local, the global, and the national environments are interconnected, leaving the individual to depend on “an infinite number of things”—a uncontrollable, unspecified whole (ibid.).

---

48 Massumi points out how, unlike regimes of disciplinary power so richly dealt with by Michel Foucault, the neoliberal tendency is not to standardize a norm but to capture the exception and incorporate it. The exception is the norm, and normality is a generalized crisis environment (Massumi 2009, 154). This has become even more evident with the recent outbreak of the corona virus.
It is helpful to think about the affects of the workplace as effects of ‘the environmental.’ As I mentioned in the introduction, neoliberalism and mindfulness is often connected in critiques of contemporary mindfulness practice. Yet, in these critiques, people engaged in mindfulness are considered unaware of their conditioning and mindfulness described as a sedative (Purser 2015; Purser 2019). This is not how I understand the lives of the people I meditated with and interviewed. People I engaged with in my fieldwork, like Niels, understand themselves as part of large systems in which there is no point in trying to change the structures causing the stressful environment. Yet, they are not oblivious to their conditioning. What people like Niels can do is try to lessen the effects, seeking different techniques to avoid getting hit too hard. To make matters more complicated, such work seems to be demanding because people rarely know precisely what hit them when they start to feel stressed or why they end up feeling so stressed that they must take a leave of absence. Stress rests ambivalently between the individual and the environment, coming from outside and inside the body, perhaps amplified by a particular person entering the office or a looming deadline, or amplified ‘internally’ in thoughts ruminating or in the stomach clenching and a racing heartbeat. In providing a bridge between the bounded subject model of emotion and theories of human-non-human affects, Johansen describes how bodily experience such as a beating heart, sweaty palms, and restless legs is intrinsic to emotion yet are not in themselves emotional. The bodily experience is usually directed towards something (Johansen 2015b, 50). Stress and its physical counterparts do not seem to always have a direction, though. The state of stress or its milder version of feeling pressured, paced, or in constant competition at work is more like that of a ‘mood’ than an emotion.

In Clifford Geertz’s distinction between moods and motivations, he describes moods as having “scalar” rather than vectorial qualities. Motives have a directional cast, whereas moods vary in intensity going nowhere. As such, moods spring from certain circumstances, but they are responsive to no ends (Geertz 1973, 97). This seems fitting to affects of the workplace, but then again, Geertz also characterizes moods as fogs that settle and lift, like scents. Such atmospheric qualities do not match the stories of stress I heard during my fieldwork. Even if the tensed atmosphere is lifted in a room for some reason, the tensed body often remains tensed. Sara Ahmed can help us out here. She characterizes mood as an affective lens, affecting how we are affected altogether. She refers to René Rosfort and Giovanni Stanghellini, who differentiate moods from affects, defining moods as sustained emotional states, and affects as more transitory. Moods, Ahmed argues, attend to the world as a whole,
not focusing on any particular object or situation (Ahmed 2014, 14). Yet, even if Ahmed describes moods as an affective lens, she does not mean to say that moods are individual. Moods can be something we get caught up in, and moods can be something we must attune ourselves to through ‘mood work’ (Ahmed 2014, 14–15).

Working at a university or a pharmaceutical company means being part of a particular work environment. Like moods, environments are something that we become caught up in. The scholarship of anthropologist Emily Martin has been instrumental in linking the postindustrial economies with the management of emotions and moods. Martin’s main argument is that optimized moods are an essential fuel to light up innovation and creativity for companies to sustain and develop (Martin 2007). The individual employee, Martin points out, has become a site for investment (Martin 2000a, 582), and she must work on herself to adapt to the environment; that is, the fierce competition of the market (Martin 2000b, 513–14). She must acquire the right kind of optimized mood. This means that not just any form of emotion or mood will do—only moods that are ‘optimized’ and emotions that are ‘harnessed for culturally specific purposes’ are suitable.

Martin describes how the corporate United States in the late nineties was marked by an interest in the state of mania as a potential resource in business. The market itself is at the time often referred to as manic-depressive because of the wild swings in the American stocks around the year 1997. Such a market that is out of control and unpredictable (Martin 2000a, 581) creates a relationship between the individual and the governing system that Martin defines as a reversal of the social contract: “If the social contract was originally seen as a means of keeping unruly individuals in order, we have now arrived at an odd and chilling reversal: Order and rationality now reside in the mind or brain of individuals, and disorder reigns (and is celebrated) in social institutions like the market” (Martin 2000a, 583).

This relates to the way employees such as Olivia explained their experiences of working. As if being a part of a chaotic meshwork that can suck you down. Olivia’s photo of a wall

---

49 Ahmed uses the example of the national mood sometimes measured to predict spending. If the national mood is ‘up’ this means more spending. Moods entangle with the affective logic of capital and of the nation, Ahmed argues. Citizens must attune to the national mood, becoming touched into citizenship. To attune to the national mood of mourning or happiness is to show belonging. Misattunement to the mood, then, might mean being excluded from the ‘we’ of the nation (Ahmed 2014).

50 In her book *Bipolar Expeditions*, Martin investigates the diagnosis bipolar disorder and its reframing from an illness to a strength in the global market. Bipolar disorder entails, according to psychiatrist Kay Jamison a “finely wired, exquisitely alert nervous system,” resulting in a “rapid, fluid and divergent thought” when a person is manic. Such a person is highly desirable in the corporate United States, Martin observes, where the pursued laborer should be dynamic and always adapting to the unpredictable future (Martin 2000a, 578).
of black graffiti and her intention to stay afloat, to be the spot of pink in a heavy atmosphere is symptomatic of the way many of my interlocutors experienced their work life. Their work life is experienced as unpredictable and a force to which they must adapt. What you can do is work on yourself to create robust work routines and to become more resistant to the changing winds. Yet, the interesting part is that this same intense work environment was also experienced as purposeful and passionate, infusing people with energy. People in my study were privileged to work jobs that felt, for the most part, meaningful to them and incited them to work harder, push through, and beat the storm.

**Learning How to Surf**

As we stood in the circle on the beautiful day in March, I was also conveying an intention with mindfulness, like the rest of the course participants. Standing with a postcard depicting a perfectly spun spiderweb, I told the others, and myself, how I sought connection and cohesion in a work life that too often felt fragmented, isolated, and uncertain. It was anxiety-provoking to admit to the others in the circle and to myself that I was fundamentally insecure in my position as a PhD-fellow. I remember thinking as I heard the intentions of the others and declared my own: this is not for fun. People here rely on mindfulness to help them feel better and navigate their work life more skillfully.

I also remember thinking that the participants of the mindfulness course narrated their intentions for engaging in mindfulness training as if they were exemplary cases in a ‘mindfulness-at-work’ bestseller, almost echoing the famous mindfulness idiom, ‘You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn how to surf,’ (Kabat-Zinn 2005b). Participants in Ursula’s course, including myself, seemed, by their own choice of words, to have committed themselves to this premise, that work life is an unpredictable force of nature, and that they needed better surfing skills to navigate chaos and stress. Or perhaps they were merely adept at fitting their stories into the format of the exercise. Perhaps they all doubted, as I did, their intentions and what it was all about, what would come out of it. Maybe they just wanted something to feel better in their jobs.

An exercise like using a picture to narrate one’s intention seemed to inspire a poetic description of why one has chosen to engage with mindfulness. The exercise becomes a way of narrating oneself, either as what one hopes to become (I aspire to be the happy pink, I aim to be a bird in the sky) or what one tries to accept (I am the wooden bench cleaved in two).
Exercises like these offer a form of meaning-making. It is a way to align oneself with something, with the promise of that picture, perhaps. By choreographing mindfulness courses in this skillful way, teachers invite participants to invest in the practice, bringing to mind peoples’ personal aspirations. The postcard exercise reminded me of the volunteer classes and “compassion education” in Northern Italy so well described by Andrea Muehlebach (Muehlebach 2014). When Italian volunteers sign up for volunteering, they sign a contract officially segmenting their heartfelt commitment. With this action, Muehlebach argues, “they are signing on to a new narrative. By signing, they were participating in producing themselves as ethical subjects” (Muehlebach 2014, 57).

By articulating one’s intention, practitioners commit to the promise of mindfulness: that turning inward and attending to their bodies will enable them to ‘learn to surf,’ even on rough waters. There is a kind of loyalty in that declaration, a signing of a social contract that involves the employee maintaining mental health and productivity in a paced, pressured, passionate and competitive system. While this thesis questions this promise of mindfulness as a cruel optimism, it also takes seriously the aspiration and efforts made in mindfulness classes. Additionally, it acknowledges the multiple ways in which mindfulness opens up ways of understanding and healing in a stressful work life. Doing ethnographic fieldwork offers the possibility to observe shifts in the way people talk about their lives. As I got to know the course participants better, it became clearer to me that, in the same way mindfulness was enacted differently in different settings, work life stories and engagements in mindfulness were voiced with many different tonalities. In the coffee breaks in between Ursula’s mindfulness trainings, the tone of the conversation around work life and the intention to be mindful changed. Course participants chatted humorously about their work conditions and laughed at the silliness of a new ‘goal plan’ (målplan) about to roll out across the university. They aired their discontent with their superiors, or agreed on the absurdity of yet another centralization process.

Later on, when I got the opportunity to meet participants in their workplaces and interview them about their mindfulness practices, people’s accounts of their work life and life in general took new complex shapes. In the everyday lives of working Danes who practice mindfulness, being mindful and practicing meditation is part of ongoing projects of living and thriving and trying to lead a good life while taking care of loved ones and oneself. When research asks, as it often does, if mindfulness works, in the booming literature on mindfulness, I believe
that this question must be related to other issues like: how, when, and to whom does mindfulness work? What kind of work does it do? When does it fail to work? How do practitioners make it work?

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I accounted for the affective work environment and its imprints as experienced by my interlocutors. Through empirical examples, I have provided an insight into how the individual pursuit of acceptance, ease, or ways to stay afloat through mindfulness is motivated by larger structural changes, such as economic cutbacks, fierce competition, or uncertainty about one’s future in the workplace. That practicing mindfulness ‘turns down the noise’ is one of the many ways interlocutors verbally convey the effect mindfulness has on them. It was often difficult for practitioners to define mindfulness using words; mindfulness is, as one practitioner said, *intangible*. The only time it becomes tangible is when it is felt. Like Niels, many mindfulness practitioners defined mindfulness in terms of the effect it had on their bodies. They explained how mindfulness is a way to “let go,” “catch your breath,” and “let the shoulders come down.” The feeling of peacefulness and ease in the body after meditation is “mindfulness.” Mindfulness is a way to “get more energy” and “recharge” by “pulling the plug,” “turning down the noise,” “slowing down the pace,” and “feeling the ground under your feet.” Following this, mindfulness is entangled with everyday experiences of feeling tense and pressured, paced and short of breath, drained of energy, and moving without grounding in a passionate and (often too) stimulating work life. I have thus argued that work imprints itself on employees as a feeling of being paced, pressured, in competition, ‘burning’ for something, and becoming exhausted.

I have linked these experiences of work life to the way Massumi describes current regimes of power in the neoliberal era, following Foucault’s characterizations of the dominant regime of power as “environmental” (Massumi 2009). I have furthermore investigated the role of the individual in such a rough climate, engaging with Emily Martin’s work on moods and optimization. The individual in an unpredictable environment must be equipped to navigate rationally and efficiently. She must open up, be flexible, and also shield herself from possible disruptions, be they hurricanes or layoffs. If we look at mindfulness practice in light of this literature, we can think of the practice of mindfulness as ‘mood work’ (Ahmed 2014) that the individual engages in to adapt to the workplace climate of today.
Standing in the circle with my postcard alerted me to the importance of the teachers’ facilitation skills. The way teachers curate and mediate mindfulness and motivate the practitioners is important, as it affects the way participants experience and evaluate practices of mindfulness. Words and other kinds of tools, like postcards, frame the practice of mindfulness, enact it in particular ways, both the teachers’ words about the practice but also the practitioners’ narration of their engagement. In the following chapter, I will focus more intensely on the pedagogical practice of teaching mindfulness. I will investigate how mindfulness attains value and becomes appreciated in a workplace context concentrating on Peter’s way of orchestrating, exemplifying, and evaluating mindfulness.
Chapter 3: Valuing mindfulness

“They asked, what’s your price? It doesn’t matter if it’s high.” Peter rolls down the window and fixes his eyes on the road. We are in a car heading south of Copenhagen to attend a team building day for a cohort of sales staff employed at Kern. Selling pharmaceuticals to hospitals, these employees always travel around the country and rarely come to the Copenhagen office. To make sure that the group also had the chance to try mindfulness, Susan decided with Peter to arrange a condensed three-hour mindfulness workshop on an already planned team building day, and Peter invited me to come along. As we move through the landscape in Peter’s old car, our conversation turns to the issue of money. “It just doesn’t work if I say I charge 500 DKK an hour. People would wonder what yoga study I had been kicked out of.” We cannot help but laugh at the thought of Peter as a failed yoga teacher, and he elaborates that mindfulness is of great value to companies, yet it has to signal its worth. A high price indicates a good product, he argues. While we drive, clouds gather and break into a heavy downpour, making it almost impossible to separate the fields from the horizon and the horizon from the highway. The firmness of the road and the fields are “illusions” anyway, Peter remarks. “Nothing is as firm as it seems… Impermanence!” he shouts with a big smile, turning left on to a small country road as the rain gives way to an incredible, blue sky. As he continues talking about the illusion of the material world, I listen in amazement at his ability to effortlessly shift from game rules of corporate businesses, how much to charge, to religious and existential idioms, how everything is impermanent.

While chapter 2 investigated the affective impressions of work on employees and thus, uncovered the stress, press, pace, and passion that mindfulness responds to, this chapter examines what happens when mindfulness is brought to such work settings focusing on processes of valuing. I do not ask what good mindfulness is, but rather what practices make mindfulness economically and morally ‘good’ as such. How is mindfulness enacted as something of worth, and who and what is valued by mindfulness? Such questions relate to my overall investigation of how mindfulness is enacted and embodied, adding a specific focus on processes of valuing. I argue that when implementing mindfulness in workplaces, it has a dual purpose. It should produce revenue and provide care at the same time.
A Workshop at the Manor

The team building day takes place in an old manor nestled in beautiful scenery two hours outside Copenhagen. The owners of the estate have successfully turned it into a hotel and conference and activity center with canopy walking, boat trips, and traditional Danish food. As we step out of the car, the sounds of birds chirping mix with excited yelling from different groups of colleagues playing what looks like an advanced game of croquet in front of the main house. Two robot lawnmowers move back and forth on the gigantic lawn in straight lines. We make our way across the courtyard and meet the Kern employees for lunch. It turns out to be only women in the group. As we eat, I chat with some of the women who are wondering why I participate in their team building day. Mentioning how I am exploring how mindfulness is used in work places, the team leader tells me in a serious voice how mindfulness is particularly needed for this team because their job is so demanding. It is a tough line of business, marked by a performance culture, she says. She hopes that after the workshop, she and the others will be able to leave the manor with various techniques to better handle the stressful elements of their job. Up the stairs leading to our meeting room, the colleagues talk in lively voices about family life and plans for the coming summer holiday. As we enter the meeting room, the head of the sales team introduces Peter, and everyone gets quiet, awaiting his instructions.

As Peter begins to teach, I can tell that he is a bit uneasy. He usually comes off as relaxed and comfortable when standing in front of a crowd, but I know that he feels short on time and therefore a little rushed, having only three hours to talk about mindfulness. He emphasizes how glad he is to be teaching once again at Tekla, and the women round the table look at each other, puzzled. Tekla is a company that Peter has worked with in the past. When Peter continues talking, having not realized his misstep, the women start to look slightly offended. Without really knowing what to do, I whisper, “you mean Kern?” to Peter. He covers his face with his hand, smiles, and apologizes. Later he tells me that he got angry with himself for saying the wrong name. As a teacher in mindfulness, he is supposed to practice what he preaches, to embody the awareness and presence—the mindfulness—that he encourages participants to cultivate. However, in the spirit of another essential tenet of mindfulness—acceptance—Peter lets it go and continues his teaching.

He starts out talking for a while about the connection between stress and mindfulness and asks the participants what the word meditation makes them think about; they mention the Buddha, the beach, calm, relaxation, yoga, holiday. “This is the point!” Peter cries out. “We
CHAPTER 3: VALUING MINDFULNESS

need to change your associations. It is difficult to be a Buddha in the parking lot.” The women look a bit perplexed—the parking lot?—and Peter invites them to close their eyes as he guides a short meditation. We all sit in silence as Peter guides us to notice how we inhale and exhale. As often before, I am surprised at the change I experience in my own body as I close my eyes and follow Peter’s guidance. A bodily calm enters after just a few minutes.

Upon finishing the meditation, Peter tells the participants that meditating like this, even just for five minutes, in the parking lot before meeting a client, or coming home to the family, and generally before they ‘stress up,’ is a way to become more at ease in a busy work life. Meditation can be an everyday-activity, something you do in the car, as a transition from one thing to the other. “Just don’t do it while you drive,” he jokes, making everyone laugh.

After the shaky start, Peter is back on track, and the participants seem to be listening attentively. Peter unfolds a ‘traffic jam’ example, explaining how being stuck in traffic is a great way to work with one’s mindfulness. Instead of getting upset at the other drivers on the road, cursing and getting angry, the driver could just accept the situation and calm down. One of the women interferes, wondering if not temper has something to do with it: “That’s just the way I am. I get angry in a situation like that, at myself,” she says. To get vexed about being stuck in traffic, and possibly arriving late for a meeting, seems rational enough to her, she says. “It is also about the people waiting in the other end,” a colleague remarks, and the women around the table nod. It is a familiar situation for them to drive through the city trying to reach a client in time and worrying that they will be late; punctuality matters. Peter elaborates what he means by acceptance, saying that the real problem is not the queue of cars but how we relate to the situation. We cannot rush the green light to come on by getting upset about it. We must accept the things we cannot change instead of exhausting ourselves, getting upset about it.

To illustrate his point further, Peter draws on the board behind him the symbol for yin and yang with a red person on one side and a green on the other. While drawing, Peter speaks about the balance in our energy between the feminine and the masculine. “Sometimes we forget our loving, motherly side and to look at ourselves with kind eyes,” he says, pointing to the red person, who is representing the female, inner body. Mindfulness teaches us to rekindle the two sides of our person, making us whole, accepting things as they are—accepting you as you are. You can never be wrong.” I am not sure that Peter was able to win over the woman questioning what is wrong with having a temper, but many of the other women nod, and the class continues.
The three hours pass, and it is time to say goodbye. I think Peter and I are both a bit tired as we drive back to Copenhagen. Sitting in the car, I wonder what the employees gained from this short introduction to mindfulness thinking about the immense task it must be for Peter to evoke experiences of mindfulness in one afternoon. Did those three hours with Peter equip the employees with stress-reducing techniques? Was it worth it? I also think about what is valued through mindfulness. Is it the ability to accept how you feel (you can never be wrong), or is it the ability to change how you feel (you should try not to get upset)? How are these two things connected? How is a more mindful employee connected to the betterment of the workplace, making mindfulness a worthwhile investment?

The Value Creation of Mindfulness

The vignette shows an example of a mindfulness session. Set in magnificent surroundings, this day of team building and mindfulness for the sales cohort marks an effort from Kern to care for their employees. Yet, within the act of caring is also the hope of improvement, that mindfulness will provide tools to reduce stress. As we learned in the previous chapter, Kern has an oft-called performance culture that creates a competitive and fast-moving work life, making staff and leadership turn to different options to better equip employees with the everyday pressure and pace. Mindfulness is one such option. As such, for mindfulness to be of value to both employees and Kern as a company, the employees have to be affected by the three-hour workshop, they have to become more mindful as a way to handle their work life better.

Peter stands in the center of this value creation. His work as a mindfulness teacher is only of value if the employees are moved by mindfulness. Hence, in the manor, and during the ten weeks at Kern, Peter creates value for the company by facilitating a path for the employees’ from stress to less stress. Interestingly, the manor workshop was one of the few times where I doubted if Peter had succeeded in doing this. The workshop pointed me to realize what usually ‘works’ in Peter’s mindfulness classes, and why, in the end, Kern evaluated mindfulness as overall a good investment.

To get at the value of mindfulness, I argue that we must think of value as a practice (Heuts and Mol 2013) and pay close attention to the micro-pedagogical strategies (Muehlebach 2014) that teachers like Peter employ to mediate mindfulness as morally and economically valuable. To Peter, there is a substantial challenge in trying to enact mindfulness as both accessible, something you do in the parking lot, and formative, something that has the
potential to affect you profoundly. In this chapter, I focus on three ‘valuing’ practices crucial to Peter’s mediation of mindfulness. I call these ‘modes of valuing,’ inspired by Heuts and Mol’s conceptualization of value as ‘registers’ rather than essences (Heuts and Mol 2013, 130). The three modes are ‘Orchestration,’ ‘Exemplification,’ and ‘Evaluation.’

‘Orchestration’ is a mode of valuing that refers to the spatial and practical arrangements Peter does to make space for mindfulness. Participating in 30 or so of Peter’s mindfulness sessions, I have seen how Peter orchestrates mindfulness sessions in ways that evoke a particular atmosphere. While this mode involves a coordination of material elements, such as lights, to create appeal and appreciation, the next mode of valuing, ‘exemplification,’ concerns a more immaterial kind of valuing, involving both Peter’s persona and his presence in the room. Here, Peter is enacting mindfulness as worthwhile by exemplifying the value of mindfulness. The last mode of valuing that I explore is that of ‘Evaluation.’ I look at the surveys Peter asks participants to fill out to evaluate the value of mindfulness. Together the three modes show how value creation in mindfulness works because of Peter’s ability to mediate the experience, the example, and the impact of mindfulness. My argument is that Peter does this by orchestrating, exemplifying, and evaluating mindfulness in particular ways. I understand these modes of valuing as practices that overlap, and sometimes sit in tension.

In my fieldwork, I observed how Ursula and Peter both proved to be crucial to the participants’ process of learning and experiencing mindfulness. The limited format of the thesis does not allow me to include examples of Ursula’s teachings in this particular chapter; yet, I want to stress that in Ursula’s classes, I observed similar ways of valuing mindfulness. Ursula would, like Peter, neatly arrange the room to be welcoming and inviting as well as include her persona while teaching, talking, for instance, about balancing motherhood and a career with regular meditation practices. Yet, the evaluative aspect of mindfulness and the importance of ‘talking numbers’ were less evident in Ursula’s course because she was differently positioned than Peter. As we will learn, Peter is hired by one company to do a service for another company, which requires him to navigate multiple interests.

I draw on recent debates on the concept of value in anthropology and therefore begin with a brief introduction to some of the main discussions in the following section.

**From Value(s) to Modes of Valuing**

In this chapter, I examine value practices, inspired by how Daniel Miller has, among others, called for an approach to the concept of value that moves away from what value is to what
value does (Miller 2008). Miller’s approach is furthermore useful in that it emphasizes both the economic and moral attributes of value (Miller 2008, 1123). Instead of trying to map out distinct value domains of the “economic” versus the “other-than-economic,” Miller suggests looking at value as a continuum that bridges alienable value (the priced) and inalienable value (the priceless) (ibid.). Miller’s proposal builds on and relates to anthropological work, which similarly stresses how value as a concept entangles the moral and the economic (Graeber 2001; Muehlebach 2014), and work that emphasize a practice-oriented approach to exploring value through empirical insights (Robbins 2007; Otto and Willerslev 2013; Tsing 2013). I find particularly relevant the appeal in this work to investigate how value is created in processes of social and economic exchange and the insistence that value is not something that is ‘added on’ to an already existing hierarchy or ‘culture’ (Robbins 2007, 297). Value(s) are attributed and aspired for through different kinds of exchanges, and the question of ‘what to value’ is continuously negotiated in everyday encounters.

In workplaces, mindfulness is valued because it promises to care for and optimize employees by facilitating ways to deal with everyday stressors. To grapple with this form of value creation, I have sought inspiration in Heuts’ and Mol’s conceptualization of value as a practice entangled with improvement and care (2013). When people value something, the authors point out, evaluation, the activity of classifying something as valuable or not, and valorization, the activity of making things (more) valuable, are both implied (Heuts and Mol 2013, 129). Heuts and Mol investigate how such valuing practices (evaluating and valorizing) are done by examining how Dutch tomato farmers, sellers, and consumers apply different ‘registers of valuing’ when valuing tomatoes. The registers are that of money, handling, historical time, naturalness, and the sensual (Heuts and Mol 2013, 130–33). As I am interested specifically in how Peter makes employees more valuable through mindfulness, I have adjusted Heuts and Mol’s registers. Instead of registers, I examine ‘modes of valuing,’ meaning manners and methods by which Peter mediates mindfulness as valuable to both employer and employees. The difficult balancing act for Peter is how to mediate the message of mindfulness as a practice for practitioners to care better for themselves and as a practice through which practitioners might improve themselves. (He invites participants to be ‘no one’ hoping for them to become ‘someone who is not stressed.’) The last section in this chapter touches upon this ambivalence.

Through the detailed description of Peter’s mediation of mindfulness, we can better understand what is valued by mindfulness, meaning the kind of good qualities, virtues we
might say, that mindfulness courses import and which employees are invited to aspire towards. For now, let us move on to explore the first mode of valuing and investigate how Peter orchestrates mindfulness at Kern.

**Orchestration: Making Space for Mindfulness**

“If I enter the company wearing purple clothes, bare feet, and long hair, I would be too distant from the employees. Likewise, if I put the word religion in the course title, nobody will show up. I have to speak to their reality and relate mindfulness practice to their everyday lives.” Here, Peter exemplifies some of the ‘dos and don’ts’ when teaching mindfulness in corporations like Kern. Though passionately interested in Tibetan Buddhism and esoteric teachings by figures such as Rudolf Steiner and Krishnamurti, Peter has made it a habit to speak less about the “deeper” part of his motivation for becoming a mindfulness teacher when presenting himself to a group of employees or a new client. Instead, he emphasizes mindfulness as a scientific practice and the weekly mindfulness session as a laboratory in which to investigate our “inner world.”

Interestingly, Cassaniti observes a similar logic of appearance and rationality when she participates in a mindfulness class taught by a nurse at a psychiatric hospital in Chiang Mai, Thailand (Cassaniti 2018). In class, the nurse describes mindfulness as a ‘science,’ something that is not about culture or even religion, which puzzles Cassaniti since many of the patients are Buddhists. Later, when Cassaniti leaves the premises, she confronts the nurse saying how surprised she is to hear that mindfulness (sati) is not considered Buddhist. The nurse laughs and says that sati is, of course, Buddhist, only she cannot teach it that way. “We get our funds from America, so we follow their way… and well, look at me, I am a nurse at a hospital. If I show up teaching mindfulness with my local clothes on, prayer beads in hand, people will think I’m crazy” (Cassaniti 2018, 5). Like Peter, who downplays his adherence to a Tibetan lama, the nurse cannot teach mindfulness with prayer beads in her hand. Teachers must be able to mediate mindfulness in ways that accommodate the social setting. To Peter, the religious and the scientific framing of mindfulness practices are equally valid and not mu-

---

51 However, the nurse in Cassaniti’s ethnography will not be considered crazy in the same way as Peter would be considered crazy. It is a different kind of crazy due to the difference in the cultural context. Peter would be considered less professional for acknowledging openly his adherence to a religious authority in a secular work place. The nurse would be considered crazy because it would be impossible to teach mindfulness in a religiously grounded way in a Thai context; everyone would promote their own lineage and claim to have access to the right way to do it (Cassaniti 2018, 5).
tually exclusive but two paths to the same goal: to help people realize their “fears,” “longings,” and “freedom” by reconnecting with their bodies. One of the ways that Peter tries to effect this, the reconnection with the body is by orchestrating mindfulness sessions in particular ways, providing a space that affords ‘non-doing.’

In the storage facility where the Kern mindfulness training went on every Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, Peter tried to create such a space of ‘non-doing’ and relaxation: “When you step inside this room, you do not have to be anyone or anything,” he reminded participants. The room is spectacular, with high ceilings build in raw, industrial materials. No doubt, this room and the surrounding storage halls and garages are the backstage of the company. Unlike the beautiful wooden floors, neatly decorated walls, and coffee tableaus of the company halls, reception, and lounge areas of Kern, the storeroom has concrete floors and bare walls as well as several practical, but not very pleasing to the eye, installations like large iron cages stuffed with leftover desks, computers, and cardboard for recycling. To make the participants feel comfortable, they were offered blankets and pillows as well as yoga mats when Peter instructed supine meditations. He also used lights and colors to make the room more inviting. A few times, Peter played soothing music on a mobile speaker. Sometimes he dimmed the light; other times he cut the light altogether, leaving only the soft flame from electric candlelights in the dark room. One morning, Peter brought with him a lamp that emitted light in four different colors. Excited, he told me how the colors of the lamp were the colors of the elements; earth, fire, water, and air. The play of lights and color softened up the industrial space, but with the high ceiling and odd interior, the room kept its ‘wow-effect.’ Peter was satisfied with that, and we jokingly called the room ‘the industrial church.’

Such orchestrations facilitated a space that could break with employees’ habitual working mindset, which Peter identified as “a mode of doing.” The room needed to be qualitatively different from offices, meeting rooms, and cafeteria areas to effect such a transition. With the moderations of the room, the dimmed lights, the colors of the lamp, the soothing sounds, Peter’s softened voice, and the cozy blankets, he tried to establish an atmosphere that allowed the employees to “relax their shoulders,” as he said. Orchestration was a balancing act for Peter. The room had to affect employees but not provoke them. Burning incense, for instance, might have pushed the boundaries as to what is acceptable in the work place. Peter had to strike a balance between creating a place that was significantly different from the rest of the work place while still familiar and inviting to the employees.
Paragraph 1: When I started interviewing participants about their experiences trying mindfulness at their workplace, it became clear to me that Peter’s efforts had paid off. Most of them had treasured the weekly mindfulness classes. Nonetheless, they never established a meditation practice in their office. The offices did not afford meditation. They told me how entering the storage room was like entering another place where “they did not have to be someone,” as one of the employees put it, echoing Peter’s encouragement. (This brings up the question of whether it had been, in fact, better to orchestrate mindfulness as more similar to an office space, perhaps allowing for a better transition from the ten weeks of collective training to individual practice in one’s office.) But another thing that they lacked in their offices was a dedicated teacher. In the next section, I explore another mode of valuing, exemplification, and, more concretely, how Peter exemplifies mindfulness by his presence and persona. By doing this, he valorizes mindfulness as something aspirational. Whereas orchestrating mindfulness involves practical arrangements and material elements such as pillows and yoga mats, exemplifying mindfulness is a more demanding task of self-cultivation and self-presentation. There are many ways Peter exemplifies the ‘good’ in mindfulness, for instance through the many stories he tells of former clients who have undergone mindfulness training and through it recovered from stress disorders. Similarly to the way Peter himself exemplifies mindfulness as valuable, such stories enact mindfulness as ‘good’ in a work-related context. Exemplification thus involves several aspects, but I will focus on what I find to be the two most important ones, namely Peter’s presence and persona.

Exemplification: The Presence and Persona of the Teacher

On Monday, Tuesday, or Thursday mornings at Kern, as employees settled in, Peter would usually step outside the storage facility to be alone for a couple of minutes before the class started. Peter pushed himself not to prepare too much for the classes, he told me, but these solitary moments were crucial. Rather than having a carefully crafted script for how to initiate people into mindfulness, Peter believed in the effect of his mindful presence. It was important what he said, but it was even more important how he said it and whether he was able to signal “availability,” he told me. Being mindfully present and attentive to the participants was a way of “putting himself at the participants’ disposal,” referring to a quality of presence. The wrong preparation is the one that engages the head, whereas the right preparation engages the body, he told me. To help people attune to their bodies, he had to go “inward” himself and moderate his presence. “To get them to go deep, I need to shut down my everyday
consciousness and my ambition about where I want this person to go.” Peter further explained that going inward also involved facing parts of himself he was not pleased with, his own sense of anxiety. To allow people to notice themselves by means other than the stories they “tell themselves,” Peter had to meet participants as well as himself on another ‘level.’

It was a bit difficult for me to understand this availability, this presence that Peter talked about. Yet, through my participation in his classes, I had my own embodied experience of how it felt to be met with a teacher that puts himself at the participants’ disposal. Without having the words to account for it properly, such an attentive presence also affected me, allowing me to lower my shoulders even while positioned in the, at times, awkward participant-observer role. To Peter, meeting employees on another level was just as much part of his mindfulness teaching as dimming the lights and handing out pillows. I came to understand that what Peter was essentially trying to do in class was to exemplify what mindfulness is about by way of his presence emanating calmness, attentiveness, and kindness—the very tenets of mindfulness.

Peter is a family father and a former military man. He holds a master’s degree in philosophy and has a record as an extreme runner, having participated in some of the most challenging races in the world. In the workshop on the manor as well as the regular classes at Kern, Peter mixes short meditation exercises with anecdotes from his own life, displaying typical everyday situations. Peter uses the figure of ‘the tired parent’ extensively, telling stories of his hectic mornings: bringing the kids to kindergarten and forgetting their lunch boxes, showing his own ‘flaws’ as a parent, and how he tries to stay mindful anyway. In that way, he appeals to the sensibilities of the many parents participating. Peter also draws heavily on his past as an extreme sportsman and long-distance runner, which tends to create awe in the audience, as when he recounts how it is to run in the Sahara desert for ten days without proper rest. By these means, he establishes himself as a persevering, strong athlete, as well as a caring family father.

I observed this in Peter’s classes, and later I was told in interviews how Peter’s biography and anecdotes made up an essential part of his exemplification of mindfulness, establishing him as an “exemplar” (Faubion 2011). I define Peter as an exemplar because employees repeatedly connected Peter’s way of acting and his life story with ‘good’ ways of behaving and ‘good’ choices. Interestingly the exposure of himself as an imperfect parent, for instance, only seems to strengthen his ethos and established him as both modest and accomplished, a combination many employees later mentioned to me was admirable. The result was
that Peter’s authority became broadly recognized amongst participants, who related to me how they appreciated his real-life stories and were impressed and inspired by his persona.

In the workshop at the manor, Peter says a wrong company name. It breaks with his aura of mindfulness and, consequently, at least for a moment, with the participants’ trust in him as an example of mindfulness. Sitting around the table among the women, I could feel a clear change in the atmosphere the instant Peter uttered the wrong company name. From looking attentively up at Peter, the women looked down, or at each other, some even shook their heads, and it was not until way into the three hours that the concentration and attentiveness was rebuild. Saying the wrong company name cracked the calm alertness Peter otherwise emanated, and I believe that just this small misstep called the usefulness of the practice and the extent to which the method was valuable into question. The reason why establishing ethos and authority is so important is to be able to curate the experience of mindfulness without the participants having too many reservations. In a sense, Peter needs people to view him as a good example for them to engage with mindfulness with. Thinking about it through Ahmed, we might say that he needs participants to be ‘in the mood’ (Ahmed 2014).

Anthropologist James Faubion points out that classical anthropological literature is full of ethical masters, teachers who are in charge of, e.g., performing rituals and who fill out a role as exemplars by conveying images of how to live well serving both as existential guides and practical advisors (Faubion 2011, 55). Followers of these exemplars become virtuous through pedagogical processes in which the teacher improves and refines the practitioners’ reflexive abilities (Faubion 2001, 97). Peter is such an exemplar of the ideal of the mindful person, one who is aware, attentive, open, and in touch with his vulnerabilities, yet resilient, enduring, and in control at the same time. Peter is enacting mindfulness as a worthwhile activity by exemplifying the value of it: he is both resilient and sensitive, at the same time (see also Robbins 2018). If he cannot even remember which company he is hosting a workshop for, then what is the point of all this, the look on the women’s faces seemed to say.

Because Peter orchestrates mindfulness in a workplace setting where some employees are slightly suspicious of and predisposed against him and his teachings, Peter faces the difficult task of persuading those doubters by speaking to the reality of the employees,

---

52 In response to the debate on approaches to values in anthropological analysis Joel Robbins argues that “we need a theory of exemplars more than ever, because exemplars can give us a way of thinking about the existence of values and the emergence of order in social life that does not rely on the kinds of strong models of shared culture that are so much out of favor at the moment” (Robbins 2018, 177).
leveling with them and, at the same time, exemplifying how they might transform. In a ses-
sion such as the manor workshop, Peter teaches in the capacity of mindfulness consultant. He
is hired by Kern through another company, the MPD. The MPD is a Danish pension fund that
has both private and corporate clients, including Kern. It is not ‘just’ a pension fund, but also
a corporation that offers tailored insurance programs and health initiatives as part of a three-
legged effort to secure healthier work-environments.53 On MPD’s web-page, a picture of a
woman in her fifties smiling serenely after what looks like a refreshing dip in the ocean ac-
 companied by the text: “Are 15 % of your employees stressed? We take stress seriously.”
One of the ways MPD takes stress seriously is by offering their clients (companies and pri-
 vate persons) mindfulness to prevent stress at an early stage. Mindfulness is defined as a tech-
nique that is especially helpful because it makes you become ‘present’ and find calm and
strength in yourself so you are well equipped (godt klædt på, literally meaning well-dressed)
to an “increasingly hectic every-day.” “Many feel pressured in a workday that is often busy,
demanding, and complex,” the web-page reads. Dealing with stress before the “damage is
done” is a good investment, the web-page informs, in that it “reduces costs and increases
productivity – a benefit for employees, the company, and society.” Stress damages both indi-
 viduals and companies, making initiatives such as mindfulness an act of care and a good in-
v estment.

As a mindfulness teacher employed in a pension fund and hired by a pharmaceutical
company, Peter has a delicate position. He has to deliver the service that Kern has paid for
and that the pension fund has offered, ‘less stress and more wellbeing through mindfulness,’
by teaching the company employees about mindfulness. The employees have to be moved
and feel better for the service to be fulfilled. He is, in a sense, both the creator, message, and
messenger of mindfulness, having to embody a certain “aura” and “presence” (Logan 2017,
605-606).54 Peter’s success relies on the ability of the employees to become mindful. Peter
stresses that while he cannot force this transformation, he can make himself available to

53 The three legs consist of ‘mental health and sleep,’ ‘physical activity,’ and ‘diet and lifestyle’ that are specifi-
cally targeting stress in Danish companies around the country. In this set-up, mindfulness is the primary solu-
tion.
54 Exploring consumption, charisma, and religious sensibilities in postindustrial corporations, Dana Logan de-
scribes the importance for corporations to have an iconic figure embodying the “corporate aura” and display
what she calls a “theology of presence” (Logan 2017).
guide the process. By his presence and persona, Peter exemplifies the ‘goodness’ of the mindful person and guides practitioners to follow his example. Such exemplification is a crucial mode of valuing mindfulness as worthwhile in a workplace.

In the next section, we will examine a mode of valuing that is related to these efforts, but which involves an entirely different set of practices. I will explore the ‘evaluation’ of mindfulness, a mode of valuing that enables Peter to, as he says, “talk numbers” and better relate to the reality of the workplace. In businesses and corporations, being ‘available on another level’ is not enough. You have to document the effect of such availability. Evaluating mindfulness, Peter does so as he converts mindful experiences into impacts, illustrated in graphs and surveys.

**Evaluation: The Impact of Mindfulness**

One of the ways Peter enacts mindfulness as valuable is by ‘talking numbers,’ i.e., outlining the effect of mindfulness through percentages, graphs, and surveys. At the onset of the mindfulness classes he teaches at companies, Peter runs a baseline survey asking participants to evaluate statements such as, “I am good at being present” and “I am good at listening to myself and react on how I feel.” The baseline is followed by a mid-term survey and a final survey, all completed to document the beneficial effects of mindfulness, not only for the individual employee but for the company as a whole. Peter sends the results of the survey back to the pension fund to document how his mindfulness program benefits their clients. It helps Peter to gain new customers that are attracted by the promise of healthier employees. In these exchanges, mindfulness acts as a commodity that can be bought and sold for a specific price because it does something to the employees. Hopefully, it makes them ‘better at being present,’ for instance.

Working for the pension fund means, as previously mentioned, that Peter has to navigate the interests of several stakeholders: those of the fund, the receiving company, and those of the employees, as well as his own ideas about how and why mindfulness matters. Peter does not like to play the role of the grocer, selling his courses, he tells me. A role that he nonetheless has to perform each time he meets a new company that could potentially be interested in buying a mindfulness course. During such meetings, Peter has to translate the value of mindfulness from the embodied experiences and a difficult-to-explain state-of-mind into a language that is understandable to companies, showing the impact of mindfulness on employees in numbers and graphs. When Peter evaluates mindfulness, he converts the value of the mindful experience into another currency, namely the value of a good workforce, showing
CHAPTER 3: VALUING MINDFULNESS

the percentages of people who have become more mindful (and thus more valuable to the company). Such conversions of value are common in, for instance, healthcare practices where quality of life is objectified in questionnaires in attempts to quantify qualitative experiences of how it feels and what it means to live a ‘good’ life. Mol points out how such surveying, although well-meaning, turns quality of life into social facts and stifles what ‘the good life’ might entail by spreading differences into a spreadsheet (Mol 2002, 174). It does so because questions in a survey make certain assumptions about the ‘good’ life, presupposing for instance that ‘being present’ is ‘good’ (ibid.; see also Johansen and Spielhaus 2019). In chapter 6, I will examine the ‘work’ such surveys do in more detail. For now, it suffices to say that surveying mindfulness allows Peter to ‘talk numbers’ and evaluate mindfulness as a valuable intervention for companies through acts of conversion.

Conversion of value has also been an object of interest to anthropologist Anna Tsing who shows how capitalist commodities acquire their value by moving back and forth between capitalist relations (alienated) and non-capitalist relations (social ties) (Tsing 2013). Similar to Miller, Tsing emphasizes how economic and other-than-economic value forms are entangled and that capitalist accumulation rests on the conversion of ‘stuff’ into capitalist commodities using non-capitalist relations (Tsing 2013, 22, 37). To exemplify this, Tsing inquires into why the precious matsutake mushrooms are sorted over and over again. The sorting is an assessment practice, she concludes, that is common to supply-chain-capitalism, which creates commodity value from non-capitalist value forms. She traces the sorting stages and shows how the mushrooms shift from a status of gift to the state of commodity and back again. The sorting is a work of ‘translation’ and ‘purification’ (ibid., 23). Tsing’s work can help us understand the practices involved in evaluating mindfulness. As with Tsing’s mushrooms, mindfulness gets valued through acts of translations: the dense individualized experience of meditating is purified into columns of numbers that attest to measurable effects; in other words, mindfulness is converted into recognizable and quantifiable impacts. The messiness and individual diversity of meditative experience are categorized, standardized, and operationalized in the questionnaires, which enables Peter to present statistical facts about the benefits of mindfulness. He can ‘talk numbers.’ Yet, while the mushrooms of

55 This entanglement, Tsing stresses, leaves spaces in the capitalist system of non-capitalist sociality and exchanges that are closer to that of the gift than of the commodity (Tsing 2013, 23-24). What Tsing is alluding to here is Marcel Mauss’ classical book Essai sur le don (Mauss [1925] 1996).

56 Acts of purifications and translations are also the subject of Bruno Latour’s seminal book We have never been Modern (1993).
Tsing’s ethnography acquire their value through an exchange from alienated commodity to a gift-like item, it seems mindfulness practice gets valued the other way around, from its non-alienated embodied experiential quality to a detached effect in a survey. The surveys translate the non-economical value of meditation into economic value that testifies how meditation and mindfulness practice has a positive effect on parameters such as sleep, concentration, and relaxation. This creates potentially more healthy employees and fewer sick leaves, and in the end, a better workplace economy. The question is, however, is it possible to separate the non-alienated and the alienated, or the embodied experience from the statistical evaluation? Can mindfulness in workplaces serve as an example of how accounting and caring are connected in contemporary work life, and how the pursuit of wellbeing and a good economy are entangled in ways that make it difficult to pinpoint if the value is created from social relations or capitalist commodification? I will discuss this in the next section, where I focus on Peter’s personal involvement in valuing mindfulness and his ambivalence in valuing employees.

Valuing, Improving, Caring

On a typical day of fieldwork, I biked across town in the early morning to meet Peter at Kern. The receptionist, Ellen, greeted me with a big smile and handed me an entrance pass. “Welcome, Marianne Hedegaard,” the prompter besides the entrance announced. Much later, as I got to know Ellen better, I asked why she did not attend the mindfulness classes. She told me that she would love to, but the reception was too busy. They could not do without her. I noticed how Peter spent considerable amounts of time talking to Ellen about mindfulness when he arrived and left Kern. It was not up to Peter, who ended up on the list of participants in his course, and learning how Ellen had been fighting with stress-like symptoms, he tried as best he could to help her out even if she did not have the opportunity to join her colleagues in the hall.

Tsing emphasizes how the supply-chain-capitalism that marks advanced capitalist economies of today demands the worker’s personal involvement. As opposed to the alienated worker that was the subject of Marx’s labor theory, the contemporary worker is difficult to separate from the product of her labor since the labor often involves the “extension of the person, and her social relations, into the product” (Tsing 2013, 25). Such entanglement of capitalism and worker, of ‘market’ and ‘self,’ is also emphasized by Pagis and Ailon in their examination of the web pages of ‘self-branding’ consultants (Pagis and Ailon 2017). Self-branders’ rhetorical abilities, wit, and reflexivity is part of the ‘immaterial labor’ required of
professionals in contemporary work markets, Pagis and Ailon argue, pointing to the possible emotional implications such labor can have on self and subjectivity (Pagis and Ailon 2017, 19).

In a job such as Peter’s, where the value of one’s service relies heavily on one’s personal involvement as well as one’s ability to transform others, immaterial labor is required of both Peter and the mindfulness practitioners. Peter extends himself into his teachings by drawing on his educational background, experiences of raising children, and of running in ways that establish him as both compassionate and robust, caring and enduring, well-experienced, and well-read. When teaching, he is sincere and open about his complicated relationship with his father and how his running became a form of addiction to rid him of childhood anxieties. Meditation is a way for Peter to get in touch with his vulnerability and his power at the same time, he tells participants. Peter invites participants to be vulnerable, too. They should ask themselves, How do I feel? Encouraging such self-reflexivity is part of his effort to help employees by making them, on the one hand, more open and sensitive, and on the other hand, but simultaneously, becoming more robust. The employees are optimized as well as cared for when allowing themselves to become transformed by mindfulness, becoming compassionate yet robust, caring yet enduring, more present and less stressed, and thus, in the end, more able to navigate contemporary work life.

During our many conversations in 2016 and 2017, Peter and I often returned to his challenges of teaching mindfulness in a way that would not make mindfulness sound like optimization of the individual employee. “In a way, the critics are right,” Peter said. “I am a part of the machine making the wheels spin. The workplace wants to optimize. The employee wants to optimize. But in reality, the practice is about the employees’ difficult emotions. The difficult emotions are important.” For Peter, mindfulness was valuable in its ability to relieve employees of tension, of feeling (too) responsible for their difficulties in managing a demanding work life. But by measuring the impact of mindfulness using surveys to clarify the positive effects, he risks adding another performance-goal to the employee’s list, that of becoming more mindful.

Valuing does not just have to do with the question of how to appreciate reality as it is, how to set a price, but also with the question of what is appropriate to do to improve things (Heuts and Mol 2013, 137). Peter sought, in tandem with the head of HR, Susan, to enhance the performance of people employed at Kern, making them more ‘valuable’ by introducing mindfulness. Susan was excited about mindfulness, perhaps because it seemed to provide the
appropriate kind of improvement, caring for employees and caring about the company at the same time. Peter had an essential role in making this happen—the care, the improvement, and the optimization. Yet to Peter, who personalizes the promise of the pension fund to lower stress and induce mindfulness, it is, at times, an ambivalent task. He helps employees run faster by slowing them down once a week, in a gesture of wanting to care for the employees, not optimizing them, yet needing them to feel better for his teachings to succeed. His teachings are situated in the middle of the everyday life and rationality of the specific company. As such, he cannot do much when employees such as Ellen are not cared for, even if she might be in one of the most stressful position of the company, or when Kern continues to have back-to-back meetings that allow no breaks for the busy employees. Peter related to me how the lack of structural change consequently made the task of transforming Kern to a more mindful workplace less doable. “People cannot become mindful without changing some of the parameters in the company structure,” Peter stressed one day as we left the Kern premises.

Conclusion

“What money measures and mediates…is ultimately the importance of certain forms of human action.”

(Graeber 2001, 66–67).57

I started this chapter in a car talking to Peter about money. Money exchange and Peter’s salary is but one measure among many by which mindfulness at Kern is valued. The vignette from the manor illustrates what I learned to be true after participating in class after class: that Peter’s persona and the way he exemplifies mindfulness, as well as what I have called his ‘availability,’ is crucial. Besides setting a high price, Peter must continually perform mindfulness as valuable through different sets of practices. He must orchestrate a proper space, exemplify the ‘goodness’ of his teachings (practice what he preaches), and evaluate the impact of mindfulness. I have termed such practices modes of valuing, foregrounding orchestration, exemplification, and evaluation.

The chapter thence builds on chapter 1 and chapter 2 by elaborating on how mindfulness is enacted in contemporary work life. In chapters 1 and 2, I situated mindfulness broadly

---

57 It was when reading anthropologist Bani Gill’s evocative analysis of ‘Good Indian Hair’ (Gill 2019) that my attention was brought to this poignant quote by David Graeber.
in relation to the modernization of Buddhism, postindustrial work moods, and the therapeuti-
zation of the Danish society. I showed how mindfulness is discursively enacted not only as
‘good’ in terms of health and wellbeing for the individual but as economically healthy as
well, pointing to various maladies of contemporary society that mindfulness might alleviate
and thus increase productivity and financial value. One of the ways mindfulness is enacted as
valuable is thus by problematizing aspects of life that should be improved or cared for. In this
chapter, I explored in more detail how caring for employees through mindfulness is premised
on the hope of optimization and increased productivity.

My intention in this chapter has been to show that there is no easy answer to how
mindfulness works, and consequently, no easy answer to what mindfulness is worth. It de-
pends. Mindfulness works—and is valued—when transformed from a health initiative to an
individually felt relaxation, for instance. Mindfulness might be momentarily devalued as a
beneficial workplace practice when the teacher says the name of the wrong company, for ex-
ample, and thus suddenly appears mindless rather than mindful.

Mindfulness has a price; it can be bought and sold as programs, but at the same time,
it is “priceless” (Miller 2008, 1131), offering a return to what matters, what it means to be a
human being, as Kabat-Zinn phrases it, or as a means to accept ourselves as who we are, as
Peter phrases it. I argue that mindfulness practice, when set in a workplace, also becomes a
practice of self-regulation and hence accommodating to a culturally specific idea of the valu-
able worker. The mindful, calm, and composed person is posited in opposition to the rushed
and angry person who honks her horn in a traffic jam. The mindful person is posited as one
who accepts what is and calms down. Mindfulness practice is a means of becoming a less
stressed, calmer, and more of a ‘good’ person in a world that offers plenty of distractions,
stresses, and accelerations. A company that provides mindfulness is a company that cares. Or
is it? I have raised this question by pointing to Peter’s ambivalence and the entanglement of
value, improvement, and care. In conclusion, I submit that whether mindfulness is an act of
care depends on how the value of mindfulness is translated from promise to practice, from a
health ideal on a webpage to a practical, emotional, and affective engagement in the work-
place.

The following chapter marks the beginning of the second part of the thesis that fo-
cuses more in-depth on employees and their embodied experiences with practicing mindful-
ness. Chapter 4 will investigate the emic notion of mærke efter and engage with the way em-
ployees try to feel how they feel assisted by Ursula and Peter.
Chapter 4: *Mærke efter*: Feeling How You Feel

Trying to look inwards and feel [mærke] how you are feeling. I think that this is really… I can sense it [mærke det]. It is like; I don’t know, it is strange. I actually feel that I can lie down and tell myself, ‘try to notice how you are feeling [mærke efter],’ and then I can actually feel it [mærke det] better than when I was just sitting in my chair, how I feel. It is a little strange. How to put it, it is like the real picture of how I feel. I might be swamped, running around, but lying in a body scan I can say to myself, more fundamentally; ‘You are actually all right. Do you have any pain anywhere? No. Is anything threatening you? No, there is not, huh?’ That there…I actually think that is good. I really feel that I can get in touch [mærke] with it – how I feel.

In this quote, Karen, head of a sales unit at Kern, explains how doing a body scan affects her. She uses the Danish phrase *at mærke* (‘to feel’) extensively to refer to various sensorial faculties: feeling, sensing, noticing, and getting in touch with oneself. Karen indicates that doing a body scan, lying down, noticing her body, informs her in a more fundamental, more real way about her condition. *Mærke* is a verb used by all my interlocutors without exception. It is a significant verb in Peter’s and Ursula’s teachings, which invite mindfulness practitioners to *mærke* (meaning to ‘sense,’ ‘notice,’ ‘feel’) or *mærke efter* (meaning to ‘feel anew’, ‘to ascertain’) how they are feeling. The expression *at mærke efter* is common outside of mindfulness courses as part of the Danish vernacular. To *mærke efter* is to ascertain the condition of something, e.g., touching a child’s forehead to check if it has a fever or fingering an injured body part to assess the severity of a fall. *Mærke efter* also refers to the less tangible act of “making oneself attentive to one’s affective response to, what one is experiencing, to what one senses and feels” (A. Smith 2016, 20). Hence, to *mærke efter* is akin to the English expression of a gut feeling, associated with bodily intuition as well as more concrete engagement of the senses and the hands.

In the mindfulness courses that I observed, feeling how you feel, to *mærke efter*, was understood as a skill to be cultivated and amplified through meditation techniques such as the body scan. In a body scan, a teacher guides practitioners to sense their entire body from the tip of their toes to the top of their head. The practitioners sit on chairs or lie down on yoga mats with eyes closed, listening to this guidance. Sometimes the body is examined in great
detail, and sometimes teachers name only some body parts—feet, calves, knees, and so on. Body scans are always instructed imperatively: “Notice the sole of your left foot.” The command is softened by an inviting tone: “Try to notice the sole of your left foot. How does it feel?” Peter, who teaches at Kern, asserts that practitioners will experience that, with regular mindfulness training, they can quickly “get in touch” with their “inner body” and “inner longings.” To mærke efter, then, involves being attentive to one’s sensory experiences as well as one’s longings, asking oneself how it feels to be ‘me,’ Peter explains.

When mindfulness practitioners are guided to mærke efter (to feel how they feel), they attend to the inner lining of experience (Pagis 2019, 4–5). How can we better understand the practice to mærke efter in mindfulness practice, and what might this invitation to feel how you feel tell us about the relationship between embodied practices, emotion, and affect embedded in Danish mindfulness courses? This question is related to the overall research question, namely, how does mindfulness work upon employees, meaning how is it embodied. In this chapter, I attempt to answer these questions, drawing on my empirical insights from many hours of meditating and conversing with university employees and sales personnel at Kern. The first part of the chapter will focus on Karen and Tove who, in different ways, emphasize the importance of the words teachers use when guiding a meditation. Their stories will be followed by Pernille’s account of how she learned to look at herself “with kind eyes” in meditation. I elaborate on their stories showing how material objects such as cream puffs and stickers aid and complicate feeling how you feel in mindfulness.

The recent affective turn in anthropology and related disciplines has been defined as a “rematerializing approach to emotion” that emphasizes physical intensity and replaces a former preoccupation with the relation between language and emotional terminology (Scheer, Fadil, and Johansen 2019, 10). As we will see from the empirical examples I present in this chapter, analyses of meditation practices benefit greatly from such a turn yet we will also see how mindfulness courses inspire us to reimport words as significant to affective experience and to (re)think how affect, emotion, materiality, and language are connected. Conceptual thinking and embodied experience are often dichotomized in mindfulness training; the latter emphasized as the doorway to become mindful, the former as an obstacle. Regardless of this apparent preference for wordless experiences, words and metaphors pervade the mindfulness courses that I observed: teachers use words and metaphors when they guide practitioners to turn inward and feel how they feel. Karen, Tove, and Pernille’s stories point exactly to this entanglement of words and embodied experience. Their examples reveal how some words
and expressions become embodied in the sense that, with time and practice, mindfulness practitioners do not think about what the words mean; they feel their meaning. Words do not necessarily stand in contrast to bodies. Instead, bodies may be intertwined with talk (Mol 2014, 110). Sometimes, though, mindfulness teachers use non-verbal means to move participants to sense and feel how they feel. They introduce different material objects moving mindfulness practitioners to sense instead of think. Investigating the emic notion of mærke efter allows me to conclude that learning to meditate is learning to feel how you feel by what I call ‘embodied words’ and ‘affective artifacts.’ In other words: to attune and assess one’s embodied condition is essentially a social process in which the teacher guides practitioners through what I call ‘assisted feeling.’ Turning inward is, I argue, a matter of allowing others to help you turn inward, listening to their words—engaging with different ‘world counterparts’ (Latour 2004b). The concepts of assisted feeling and feeling language, as well as the auxiliary concepts of embodied words and affective artifacts, are important elements of a sociality of feeling in which mindfulness courses are embedded.

To ground these preliminary observations and conclusions, I return to Karen to elaborate on her experiences with mindfulness. We meet her on a day when she is busy as usual, but finds a way to fit our meeting in between two conference calls. Karen’s story exemplifies a tendency among my interlocutors to define mindfulness practice as something that cuts through the noise and stress of their work-life, enabling them to attune to themselves.

“How do I Feel?” – Taking the Temperature with a Body Scan

Karen from control and compliance at Kern is an approachable boss. That is the first thought that goes through my mind as I sit down in her office to talk about what it was like for her to train mindfulness for ten weeks at her workplace. On the wall next to her desk hangs a poster of Karen laughing. The picture is headlined, “My boss told me to have a good day, so I went home.” Noticing that my eyes are caught by the poster, Karen explains how she was recently appointed Head of her sales unit and that her staff gave her that poster as a gift. She put it up on the wall straight away.

Karen is an approachable and highly skilled boss, and an expert within her field. She is busy, she tells me. She cannot remember a time when she was not busy. “This is how it is here,” Karen says with a knowing smile and gestures with her arm around her office. She is settling into her new position while still finishing up business from her previous job function at Kern and also handling the work left undone by one of her employees on leave. Karen
works from eight to five and often continues working from home in the evenings. Sometimes she works on Saturdays or Sundays to catch up. She calls it an “investment.” The extra hours in the evenings and the weekends make her feel calmer and ready for the coming week or workday. Mindfulness makes her calmer, too: “It helps me to ‘feel how I feel,’” she says, using the Danish expression mærke efter.

Karen had never meditated before she participated in the mindfulness course at Kern. Nevertheless, she was convinced that it was a good idea and signed up. In her job, she has to plan all activities carefully and economize both time and energy. But like so many other employees that I talked with, Karen spoke of mindfulness as an activity that was not difficult to prioritize. She knew it would be good for her. Every Thursday, ten weeks in a row, she met with 20 of her colleagues to do an hour and a half of mindfulness practice. Looking back on the course, Karen is happy with the tools she gained from participating in the course. She explains that mindfulness helps her to leave work-thoughts behind and avoid excessive thinking when she comes home and when she goes to sleep at night. She talks about mindfulness as a way of “going inside of herself,” shutting the world out, and attending to how she feels.

In the first sessions, she found it hard to meditate without constantly being drawn to thinking about the to-do list on her desk, waiting for her to return. But as she went down to the storage facility to meditate Thursday after Thursday, it got easier for her to focus on her breath and her body and to put work on pause for a while. Karen tells me that her two sons at home think it is really cool that their mother is allowed to “sleep” at work. They want to be pharmacists, too, so they can do mindfulness and get paid to sleep during work hours. We both laugh, and Karen relates how she has tried to explain to her children that mindfulness is not about sleeping. Mindfulness is a way to feel how you feel, Karen says, again using the word mærke. She compares a body scan to getting your temperature taken. Attending to her body this way gives her an indication of how she is really feeling.

Because we share the same mother tongue, I have an idea of what Karen means when she uses the expression mærke efter and the word mærke, but because of the multivalence of the word and the expression, I ask Karen to elaborate. What does it mean to be able to feel what she really feels? Karen continues and explains that the stress of work is “clouding” how she really feels. “Basically, I am alright,” Karen says. “I am happy and satisfied and physically okay. And not just okay, I am actually content, but you forget it because you are so busy. But when I sense how I feel (mærker), lying down, feeling my body, it is easier to push work away and feel how I genuinely feel.”
This is a particularly interesting version of how mindfulness might make practitioners feel how they feel. To Karen, it is a combination of the bodily reaction to the practice, e.g., the relaxation of the body as well as her ability to cognitively realize how she feels through the practice, which makes her conclude that she is actually all right. As such, mindfulness meditation and the practice of scanning her body to feel how she feels is to Karen not only a physical act of getting in touch with the body in the present moment, but it also involves the noticing of bodily sensations, cognitive awareness, and common sense reasoning—a notion of, *I am actually all right*.

This brings me to the meaning of *mærke*, which needs to be unpacked. In the Danish dictionary, (www.sproget.dk) *mærke* translates as “to notice a physical effect by sense of touch,” which includes feeling, sensing, and perceiving. Yet *mærke* in Danish contains additional elements. It is also a verb that refers to the act of highlighting or marking off something. As a noun, *mærke* is used to describe a wide range of phenomena—similar to the English equivalent ‘mark.’ *Mærke* can refer to marks on the body, e.g., birthmarks (*modermærke*), or marks to navigate or delineate terrain (*tegn, spor, afmærkning*) or stamps, logos, trademarks (*varemærke*) used to label goods and indicate ownership rights (Hansen and Salamon 2016). A *mærke* is an imprint left on somebody, or left for somebody that points to something. *Mærke* has an interesting double meaning as being both a sensory engagement, a sensing and feeling, and at the same time a kind of sign.

I suggest that when Karen agrees with herself that she is actually all right while practicing body scan, it is as much an assessment and a marking off, a stamp we might say, sealing her as being ‘all right.’ She marks herself as all right, underneath the business and the running around. By pushing away the clouds of stress, the thoughts that keep spinning, she gets in contact with the contentment that is behind her every-day busyness. Mindfulness practice enables Karen to remember the good things in her life, she tells me: her thriving sons, her loving husband, her good health. Being in the moment with her body, feeling the toes, legs, torso, and so on provides a space for reminiscence and gratitude for aspects that are otherwise blurred and clouded in the stress of everyday life. The body scan allows Karen to rekindle gratitude and embodied appreciation. In the body scan, Karen is having a conversation with herself, asking herself, “so how do you feel, Karen?” To *mærke efter* for Karen is a practice that involves words, those uttered gently by the teacher, and those she speaks inwardly in silence. It also involves the mind-body that feels, senses, and touches again to ascertain, “What is there? How do I feel?” It involves the respiratory system; the inhale and the exhale that
reaches deeper down the belly as the body scan progresses, calming down the body that was clouded with stress.

Words guide the practice of mærke, of getting in touch with feeling. When Karen lies down to do a body scan outside of a mindfulness class, she puts on her headphones and listens to a guided meditation. In this guide, a voice helps her to feel how she feels by instructing her to sense and attend to her own body through naming body parts: notice the sensation in your feet, thighs, hips, torso, and so forth. Studying meditative experience through micro-phenomenology, a group of researchers recently concluded that even if words in some contemplative contexts are considered an obstacle, in other contexts words may serve as “handlers” or “pointers” that enable the practitioner to deepen the practice of meditation (Petitmengin et al. 2019, 57). Micro-phenomenological interviews helped practitioners to refine, deepen, and stabilize their practice even if words did not describe an experience “satisfactorily” (Ibid.). However, Karen and many others I spoke with related to me that for a word to be a “handle,” and to assist in meditation, it was important that it was spoken in the right language. In the next section we will learn more about the importance of words and of mother tongue.

**Using the Right Words: The Importance of Mother Tongue**

Karen participated in the English mindfulness sessions at Kern. But she wonders if it might have been better had she participated in the Danish sessions. On Thursday mornings, Peter taught in English to accommodate the high-skilled professionals from India, Switzerland, the UK, and several other countries for whom the Danish language was but an incomprehensible murmur. Karen was joined in this class by both native Danish-speaking and English-speaking colleagues, as the company could not run a course for the small group of internationals alone. In the English-speaking mindfulness class, it was not always possible for Karen to fully make sense of what the teacher and the participants said: “English has another tone. The thing about ‘loving yourself’ took a while; it is difficult enough to understand such a phrase as it is. And then in another language. It makes you think, ‘okay, what does Peter really mean? Do I understand it correctly?’” Karen tells me, looking at me with a resigned smile. Karen speaks

---

58 The researchers suggest that words may have a power to trigger in the listener or reader the recognition of an experience that was previously unnoticed. A word might come to designate a particular subtle meditative movement, they conclude (Petitmengin et al. 2019, 57).
Danish natively and prefers to be guided in Danish. At the same time, Karen is a highly educated professional who, like many Danes, speaks the English language well. So what is the problem? The problem is not a lack of understanding, per se. The problem is that English words do not map on to Karen’s feelings. “English is not my ‘feeling-language,’” she explains.

What does it mean to have a ‘feeling-language’? Having a feeling-language indicates the cultural impact on how we feel and the intimate connection between how emotions are felt and how they come to be known and expressed. Karen does not know how to get in touch with her feelings in English, to put it bluntly. To Karen, the English word ‘love’ evokes different stirrings than its Danish equivalent *kærlighed*. It creates apprehension and bodily hesitation that makes her suggest that the practice might have affected her more had she been able to better connect with the words spoken. Habits of naming emotions are historically and culturally variable, anthropologist Monique Scheer argues (Scheer 2012). She points out how, in India, romantic Bollywood films have spread the use of the English phrase ‘I love you’ in Hindi dialogue, and she argues that the phrase gives rise to perform a feeling that was not habitualized in marriages before. To Scheer, then, naming emotions is part of what constitutes them, which makes them available to experience (Scheer 2012, 98).

Classical work on the anthropology of emotions declares in a similar vein how emotions and their expressions, as well as how we might respond well to how we feel, vary. Anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo writes “whereas the affect “shame” may everywhere concern investments of the individual in a particular image of the self, the ways that this emotion works depends on socially dictated ways of reckoning the claims of selves and the demands of the situations” (Rosaldo 1984, 149). I follow Scheer and Rosaldo in understanding emotions as a practice deeply entangled with a socially generated script (Scheer 2012, 91). Understanding emotions, as practiced, does not mean that they have no physical components. Dalsgård and Thorsen’s analysis of emotional behavior during the Ramadan (Thorsen and Dalsgård 2020), for example, unfolds how emotional reactions are formed by cultural ideas about proper behavior, religion, health, and hygiene and affected and altered by biochemistry

---

59 I recognize this apprehension when my husband sees me out the door in the morning with “I love you.” Since his mother is Canadian, the English expression “I love you” feels as natural to him as the Danish equivalent. I, however, cannot bring “I love you” over my lips because the expression to me belongs in romantic Hollywood movies, having nothing to do with my feelings for my husband.
(the lack of food and water leads to short-tempered emotional behavior). The authors conclude that emotions both manifest on the level of biology and are known and worked upon through culture. Knowing and naming how we feel is a culturally acquired faculty. Therefore, the way we act upon what is felt is closely linked with cultural ideas about proper (and civilized) emotional behavior. Affect theories add an extra layer to such understandings importing the notion of atmospheres, moods, and transmission to account for the way we get affected collectively while positioned differently (Ahmed 2004b; Brennan 2004). Chapters 5 and 6 will elaborate on the connection between mindfulness, affects, emotions, and proper action in greater detail. In this chapter, I focus more on how practitioners learn to feel and less on what they do with whatever is felt.

Karen is not alone in her apprehension of other languages. I was often told how English is not able to move practitioners or guide them in the same way as Danish, their native language. When mindfulness novices look for apps or YouTube videos to guide them in meditation, they often encounter English versions, and that does not necessarily work for most native Danish speakers. The most obvious problem is that, when hearing guides in English, the practitioner has to translate before reacting to the instruction, which involves too much cognitive engagement. The other problem, the one that Karen articulates, is that English does not connect to emotions in the same way as Danish does to native Danish speakers. Karen and many others feel their feelings in their mother tongue. What Karen and others related to me is, in essence, that words sometimes aid in the act of getting in touch with, knowing, and expressing how we feel, but at other times, words become an obstacle to those same ends. Words are, Hastrup reminds us, not mere etiquettes labeling the world, but intimately connected to subjective embodied experience as well as socio-cultural contexts shifting in significance with each new situation (Hastrup 2003b, 207, 214). This brings us to another crucial point, namely, the workplace setting.

Another aspect that made Karen hesitant when she heard expressions like ‘loving yourself’ was the social situation of the workplace. Sitting amongst coworkers and ‘loving yourself’ would, for many Danes, be too much to ask. It is too intimate for a workplace setting, where the people meditating alongside you are not strangers that can act as “co-bodily indwellers” (Pagis 2019, 69). In Pagis’s ethnography, it is precisely the collective solitude evoked in the group of meditating strangers that allows the individual meditator to avert her attention inward. When Karen meditates at work, she sits with familiar faces in a meditation
circle with her superior and her staff. In this circle, she is still the highly-skilled, approachable head of the sales unit. The atmosphere in the storage facility does not afford the same kind of inward awareness. Even in this setting, Karen experienced that she became better at “doing mindfulness.” Throughout Peter’s ten sessions of mindfulness, Karen attuned more easily to his guides in English without the same amount of apprehension and hesitation as in the beginning. Karen came to connect some of the English words to the way she felt while doing mindfulness meditations. The words became embodied. She made some of them work. This tells us how language and words are never static but transformative through practice. Later in this chapter, we will delve more into this aspect of transforming words when I unfold how Pernille tries to comprehend the expression ‘kind eyes.’

Tove, whom we will meet again in chapter 6, also spoke about the connection between language and emotions in interesting ways. Having attended the mindfulness course Mindfulness in Five Steps at the university, she explained how she did not select English meditation guides when meditating at home because they did not reach her emotionally. “English is not something I feel with (føler på). I can see what the words mean intellectually, but I can’t use English that much because it doesn’t store itself (lagrer sig ikke) in me.” With Tove’s expression, lagre sig, meaning “to store, house, keep, dwell,” she stresses her need not only to hear and understand the words but to possess them, keep them inside, which is not, for her, possible with English words. Specific Danish words have affected her in problematic ways throughout the mindfulness course as well. She tells me about her apprehension for the word taknemmelighed (‘gratitude’) often used by the teacher Ursula in meditation exercises. Ursula might guide a meditation in which practitioners should develop taknemmelighed for something to cultivate warmth, joy, and contentment with what one has in one’s life. To Tove, the word taknemmelighed does not work that way. The word hits Tove right in the stomach when she hears it. It is emotionally heavy with guilt and shame. “When Ursula said the word taknemmelighed, it was like pushing a button, and my never-ending conflict with my mother popped up,” Tove explains. The word taknemmelighed carries with it the remembrance of being scorned as a child: “You should be grateful to have a sweet mother like me.” It also immediately brings with it the echo of its negation—“you ungrateful kid.”

Karen and Tove’s stories help us realize that the issue is not only whether the word is uttered in Danish or English, but whether the words being used precipitate something fitting or familiar for the meditator. To quote Mol as she investigates the meaning of the Dutch word
lekker, “Words do not have a general and fixed meaning, given with language or ‘a language.’ Instead, what they do, evoke, bring about, is always an empirical question. It depends” (Mol 2014, 26). This is an important nuance to Scheer’s argument of a cultural script. Words and what they evoke emotionally depends. Lekker is, in some contexts, ‘out of place,’ as with ‘loving yourself.’ Furthermore, taknemmelighed might for most people mean simply ‘gratitude,’ but evoke shame and guilt for others. Tove and Karen’s stories also teach us that what a word evokes might transform with practice, hinting at how bodily experience (of peacefulness in meditation, for instance) can make statements like ‘loving yourself’ gain new meaning. This also suggests that Scheer’s argument, that naming emotions makes them available to experience, could be reversed. Bodily experience mediated by a teacher using specific words might envelop these words, even if they are not part of a cultural script, with embodied meaning and an evocation of emotions. ‘Loving yourself’ then becomes an embodied feeling of appreciation rather than a line from a movie.

In the next section, we will move deeper into the discussion about the relationship between embodied experience and words. We follow Pernille as ‘embodied words’ and ‘affective artifacts’ help her to notice how she feels without thinking too much about it.

Looking with ‘Kind Eyes’ – The Inner and Outer Body

I notice Pernille right away. She sits on the front row in the first Tuesday morning class at Kern, a young woman wearing stilettos, lipstick, and resting one hand on her belly. She is pregnant with her first child. As Peter starts talking, Pernille looks more and more puzzled. It does not help when Peter guides a short meditation inviting us to enter our “inner body” and look at ourselves with “kind eyes.” With these “kind eyes,” Peter guides us to move around the body, from the toes to the head, noticing what we feel without judging it. After the short meditation Pernille, who is now utterly confused, raises her hand: “What do you mean by looking with kind eyes? I really don’t get it?” Peter tries the best he can to explain it. As I listen to his explanation and Pernille’s confusion, I am surprised that Pernille takes the proposition to look at herself with kind eyes literally. Having sat in many meditations with different teachers, I am used to such body-talk. To me, the expression ‘looking at yourself with kind eyes’ involves a specific way of attuning to the body, feeling the body from the inside, noticing tensions and sensations with the intention of being generous, open, and kind to whatever
is felt during this experience. However, Pernille’s bewilderment allures me to de-familiarize myself with the practice and try to think about what is being proposed as if it was me hearing this for the first time.

There are several propositions in the idea of ‘looking with kind eyes’ and similar language, which contribute to the confusion that Pernille experiences. First of all, Peter proposes a separation of the body that one looks at and the kind eyes that are looking. The body becomes both subject and object. To further explain to Pernille what he means, he illustrates these two bodies by drawing a green and a red body on a board behind him. He puts a circle around the red body: “This is our inner body,” Peter says, and elaborates on how human beings tend to live in their outer body and the outer world. “Mindfulness can get us more in contact with this,” he says and points to the red body, “the inner part of ourselves.” To embrace this inner part, we must begin to look at ourselves with “kind eyes.” To Pernille, this talk of having ‘two bodies’ and ‘kind eyes’ is abstract, incomprehensible. She has one body, and she is sitting there on the front row inhabiting it, inhabiting one world, feeling the little kicks from the baby, the only element multiplying her in any way. “Having an inner body and an outer body? Come on!”

“When I try to look at myself with kind eyes, I start talking to myself in my head,” Pernille declares, “saying to myself: ‘you are good enough,’ et cetera.” “This is normal,” Peter responds. “In the beginning, this exercise will be a cognitive process. In time, it will be easier to look at yourself with kind eyes in a way that doesn’t conceptualize or overthink it.” With Pernille’s question hanging in the air, I feel a bit worried on Peter’s behalf. How is he going to go on from here? Peter, on the other hand, is prepared for these kinds of questions and continues the class, sometimes stopping to answer questions and always iterating that the mindfulness novices must experience in their own bodies what he is talking about. “These are people who mostly talk numbers,” he tells me after the session as we cross the parking lot to catch the bus. “They are not used to talking about their inner world.” For this reason, Peter finds it crucial that the employees at Kern have ample time to experience for themselves through meditation practice what it means to look at oneself with kind eyes. His words can only get them so far. The rest is up to their effort in meditation. If practitioners maintain an inward-looking awareness, they will not become stressed, Peter asserts. Because then they “feel themselves” and will notice if they are not feeling well. Although more eclectic, Peter’s conceptualization partly corresponds to the way Kabat-Zinn conceptualizes the purpose of
mindfulness as a practice that helps people move from modes of *doing* to modes of *being.* In Kabat-Zinn’s books and talks, he often states that human *beings* behave like human *doings,* preoccupied with achieving, reaching, striving for something instead of just being in the present with what is (Kabat-Zinn 2005b).

I remember the sighs of relief and the nodding of heads when Pernille raised her hand and bluntly asked Peter what he meant with the expression ‘kind eyes.’ Pernille and many of her colleagues struggled to follow Peter in the beginning. As Benjamin, a colleague of Pernille, told me later in an interview, he found himself confused, as though starting from scratch, when Peter instructed him to “sense his gut feeling” (*føle efter i maven*). Mindfulness was a “new world that opened up,” and it involved adjustments as Benjamin generally found it difficult to talk about, let alone *feel* what happened in his body. The employees’ difficulties incited me to develop the concept of a sociality of feeling because their engagements with mindfulness, including their confusion, manifested how mindfulness practice sets up particular ways of ‘doing feeling.’ I elaborate on this in the following section, focusing on how material objects become parts of such processes.

**Introducing ‘Affective Artifacts’ – Sensing to Make Sense**

In a mindfulness class, teachers introduce different exercises to sensitize participants and help them *feel* instead of *think,* to *be* instead of *do.* One of the famous exercises is the raisin-exercise, where practitioners eat a raisin very slowly as if it was the first time they ever ate a raisin, appreciating the form, smell, texture, and taste (Kabat-Zinn 2006). In Ursula’s classes, employees carry out the exercise smelling, peeling, and eating an orange. In Peter’s classes, he substitutes the raisin with a cream puff (*flødebolle,* a popular Danish confection with a sweet marshmallow filling and chocolate covering. At Kern, Peter instructed employees to sit with the cream puff in their hand, feel it, smell it, look at it, listen to it as they bit into it, and really *taste* it as they ate it. Pernille remembers it clearly: “I was so annoyed!” she cries out as she recalls the exercise. For one, she thought it was “stupid” to sit and smell the cream puff, and second, she had trouble dealing with the fact that it melted in her hand as Peter dragged

---

60 “We are human beings, not human doings,” Kabat-Zinn exclaimed as he gave a speech in the Danish theater Ny Teater in April of 2016. This is an often rehearsed point in Kabat-Zinn’s books and teachings. Peter supplements that framework with eclectic elements such as drawing the symbol for yin and yang to exemplify the being and doing mode. I discussed Peter’s conceptual framework with scholars investigating practices of mindfulness in the UK as well as in Finland and Germany; the hybridity of Peter’s teachings put his mindfulness classes in a category by itself. Steven Stanley and Matthew Drage explained that you would never have such a view presented at a standardized MBSR course in the UK, for instance.
on the exercise before allowing the practitioners to eat the cream puff. The exercise with the cream puff was flawed, she remembers thinking, and not thought through. Why had Peter not made sure to give people napkins? The chocolate melted in her hand as Peter talked and talked, leaving her palm sticky and dirty. As we talk about the incident months later, Pernille is amused by her own irritation. She tells me how she confronted Peter after the exercise, asking him why he did not hand out napkins. “He asked me, ‘so how did you feel about the sticki-ness and your irritation?’ and then I got it—ah, I can’t even do this exercise without overthinking it or wanting to be in control.” Pernille pondered how these small exercises trained her to feel and notice instead of think. It trained her to mærke efter.

Seen in retrospect, the mindfulness practices have pushed Pernille to reflect on her habitual reaction patterns and moved her to accept things for what they are instead of getting worked up about it, she tells me. She was skeptical of the mindfulness initiative in the beginning and did not think of herself as the ‘mindfulness-type.’ Mindfulness was too “soft” and “fluffy.” Pernille works in an office that ensures that procedures such as packaging and labeling medicine, for instance, are standardized in the health care company so that the Danish affiliation follows international standards. Pernille defines herself as result-oriented. She is used to working with systems and looking for errors. She wanted the mindfulness exercises to make sense. It was only after six sessions of mindfulness that Pernille felt a bodily effect of mindfulness, when she realized that to make sense of mindfulness, she had to sense, mærke efter, instead of think.

In the last three mindfulness sessions for Pernille and the Tuesday team, I noticed how Pernille showed up to practice mindfulness without wearing her usual high heels. Maybe the weight of her baby moved her to choose trainers, or perhaps something in her approach to mindfulness had changed. Hearing repeatedly from Peter how important it is for the practitioners to ground their feet, Pernille might have made a conscious decision to loosen up her appearance in favor of a possible easier access to the ‘calm state’ that Peter talked about. We never got to talk about her shoes when I interviewed her. She did, however, comment on her initial confusion of wondering how to look at herself with kind eyes. “In the end, I think I figured it out,” Pernille says and smiles victoriously. “Looking at yourself with kind eyes cannot be explained. It is a feeling you experience. It is a place that you—if you are able—can

61 Pernille used the more playful Danish expression “Jeg har luret den,” meaning “I get it,” to explain that she finally understood the purpose of the exercise. Her choice of expression illustrates well her self-irony and playfulness that mixed with the serious manner in which she conveyed her own process of learning mindfulness.
transport yourself to. That ‘peace-place’ is there when you close your eyes. It just feels good. Peaceful. As though heavy stones have been lifted from your shoulders. Like sitting in the garden with a glass of rosé. You just sit there without having to be something or someone.” Pernille stresses that it is her embodied experience, the feeling she gets from meditation that convinced her of the potential of mindfulness. “To me, mindfulness is a feeling of self-peace,” she says. “It is a free space (frirum). You create your safe zone. You become your own safe zone. It is comforting to know that this feeling exists inside of you if you can get yourself there.” What is particularly interesting here is the leap Pernille makes from “it feels like a safe zone” to “you become your own safe zone.” To Pernille, it seems, meditation is not only about feeling the body in new ways, but about acquiring a new body, a safe zone.

Pernille learns to be affected, to feel mindfulness affectively with the help of Peter’s guidance, his words, metaphors, and drawings, as well as what I call ‘affective artifacts,’ such as the cream puff melting in her hand. Moderations such as taking off her high heels offer additional support in the practice of learning to feel how she feels, affording a greater sense of a grounded body. Mindfulness for Pernille inspired her to “be a better person.” Let me unfold Pernille’s story a bit further to flesh out this point.

As we continue talking, Pernille recalls a session where Peter talked about how to use mindfulness in everyday life. As often before, Peter used an example from home. His three-year-old son had wanted to give him butterfly-kisses that same morning, a gesture made by blinking one’s eyelashes against someone’s skin. Peter used the episode to lay out the difference between the child’s being mode and the parents doing mode. The child simply is, in the moment, not occupied with the time and that Peter, his father, needs to catch the bus. He only thinks about wanting to give his dad a butterfly-kiss. Receiving butterfly-kisses is a way of being present with him, staying mindful amid a hectic morning, Peter asserts. The story indicates that learning to be affected in mindfulness classes involves learning to let others affect you outside of class as well.

“This is when I really got it,” Pernille says, even though she also thought the example with the butterfly-kisses was a bit of a “cliché.” She lives with her partner and, every other week, her partner’s daughter. Their mornings are rushed as they try to get ready. She could see herself in that situation as the stressed-out step-parent obsessing about practicalities “when we could just set the alarm clock earlier and try to create a quiet morning where we have time for these things. For butterfly-kisses,” she says.
Mindfulness was not only something that felt good for Pernille as a moment of peacefulness. Attending Peter’s classes also pointed out ‘good’ ways of relating to others. ‘Good’ parental behavior. Looking with kind eyes and feeling at ease in meditation, as well as listening to Peter’s stories about the benefits of being mindful, made her want to act in new ways. This relates to what I emphasized in the previous chapter, namely that Peter becomes an exemplar of the ‘good’ person. “Why not try to be a better person,” Pernille said. She explained that she can be hot-tempered and passionate and that she has a tendency to ‘spin out.’ “The more you think about how you are, becoming self-conscious, the better it is for the people interacting with you and for yourself. Things are less impulsive, more considerate, when you deal with yourself this way. You control yourself.” To Pernille, becoming a better person involves controlling herself and her temper as well as engaging with others in mindful ways. After the course ended, Pernille took it upon herself to help her partner, who has difficulties sleeping, fall asleep at night, imitating Peter’s meditation guides. Learning to look at herself with kind eyes enabled Pernille to envision new ways of acting and reacting to others, affecting them, and letting them affect her in the rush of the every day.

The Word is a Feeling - Embodied Words

Pernille’s initial question about how to look at herself with kind eyes highlights a dichotomy between thinking and feeling, conceptualizing and experiencing, which often surfaces in mindfulness classes. "I have to give you my words,” Kabat-Zinn said apologetically in April 2016, when he taught a full day of mindfulness at a conference center in Copenhagen. “The words can provoke conceptual thinking, but the invitation and the aim [of practicing mindfulness] is much deeper than the conceptual. It is to use thinking as its own doorway into being. So we don’t become prisoners of our thought processes and habits.” In Peter and Ursula’s teaching and in mindfulness teachings generally, there is a complex relationship between the body and the mind, the experience and the thinking, the bodily affects, and the conceptual thoughts. Words are needed to guide the practitioners, but words can also get in the way of experience so that practitioners become “prisoners” of their thoughts, as Kabat-Zinn says, like thinking about one’s breath instead of feeling its movement.

From my training and research in Iyengar Yoga (Hedegaard 2015), I have experienced that words such as the name of a pose, for example, Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog), can, after years of practice, signal how this pose feels in the body. When I practice yoga, I hear the words uttered by the yoga teacher in a layered way. I hear what the
teacher is saying, but it is not so much a conceptual understanding of the instruction as it is a habitual embodied orientation and movement that arises in me as I follow the instruction and move into the right position. The word for the pose is bodily remembered, it incites a specific body-movement and feeling. It prepares the body for the strain or ease of the pose. If the teacher says *Hanumanasana* (Monkey Pose), a highly demanding pose in which the legs are split forward and back, I can almost feel the strain in my hamstrings before moving. Similarly, the instruction to go into *Shavasana* (Corpse Pose), the resting pose at the end of a yoga class, triggers an instant easing in me. And when said in a yoga class, the immediate response will often be an inaudible yet somehow discernible collective sigh of relief as practitioners anticipate the ease of the supine pose. Having a habitual embodied experience allows me to practice yoga without thinking about what I am doing but instead feeling how my body reacts when I do it. It is the same with the words used to guide mindfulness practices.

It was also the embodiment of words that was at stake in Pernille’s story about looking with kind eyes. The instruction to “look at yourself with kind eyes” had through practice become embodied with the feeling of a “peace-place” and immediately manifested itself in the release of bodily tension, as in, ‘I am right there, in the garden with a glass of rosé.’ Such a visceral reaction is enabled by words that have become embodied through habituated practice. The practice of *mærke efter* in a body scan intertwines concepts and embodied experience, emotion, and affect. Conceptual thinking is not bracketed in this process; the words become corporeal. Words are embodied—or the words have a bodily shape, we might say.

The ability to *mærke efter* pursued in mindfulness practices, for instance through techniques such as the body scan, illustrates that turning inward, feeling how you feel, is not an entirely subjective act. It is a socially enabled technique that includes a teacher, embodied words, and affective artifacts helping participants enter a mode of sensing rather than thinking. Many of my interlocutors, including Pernille, related how difficult it was to *mærke efter*

---

62 As such, many yoga practitioners describe how entering yoga poses creates a particular state of mind. The child’s pose where you bow your upper body down on your lower body and rest on your forehead and legs induces the innocence and humbleness of a child. The tree pose where you balance on one leg is making you feel strong as a tree, rooting your body in one leg as if it were a trunk.

63 As I am writing this dissertation, I meditate every day to stay in touch with the practice of mindfulness meditation. I listen to three different meditation guides, recorded by Peter. The three guides start with the same flute intro. Hearing the flute and Peter’s voice readies my body for the meditation. “Feel your breath.” The instruction works like a magic formula, not in the sense that I am cast under a meditative spell, but in the sense that the sound of the flute and Peter’s voice immediately attunes me to my belly, my breath, and my body. As if by a switch. Moreover, it immediately brings my breath lower into my stomach.
without Peter’s guidance and without the room that participants at Kern had gotten used to meditating in. To help further our understanding of the relationship between practitioners, the teacher, embodied words, and affective artifacts that are part of mindfulness practices, let us, for a moment, turn to anthropologists Bruno Latour’s take on how bodies are affected. I supplement Latour’s ideas of ‘the articulate body’ with philosopher Vinciane Despret’s notion of ‘attunement’ and sociologist Inge Kryger Pedersen’s concept of ‘listening’ (‘lytninger’).

**Assisted Feeling – Becoming Attuned to Yourself**

“To have a body is to learn to be affected, meaning ‘effectuated,’ moved, put into motion by other entities, humans or non-humans” (Latour 2004b, 205). From this vantage point, and drawing from the philosopher Vinciane Despret and the psychologist William James, Latour discusses how to speak scientifically about the body and proposes a kind of body talk that attends to what the body has become aware of. The body, in this view, is not seen as an essence, a substance given by nature, but rather as an interface that becomes more and more describable as it learns to be affected by more and more elements (ibid.). What interests me in particular in Latour’s understanding of the body is his description of what “learning to be affected” could look like. He uses the example of the training of people, of “noses” as it is called, for the perfume industry in France. The way noses are trained to differentiate between smells may help to enlighten how practitioners are trained to feel how they feel, to mærke efter, in mindfulness.

In training noses, an odor kit is made of sharply distinct, pure fragrances. To register both the sharp and the small contrasts between odors, one needs to be trained through a week-long session. The trainees start with a “dumb nose,” unable to differentiate between much more than “sweet” and “fetid,” and end up rather quickly becoming a “nose” (un nez) with the ability to distinguish between fragrances (ibid., 207). In Latour’s text, the newly sensitized noses developed through the training session is an example of how “body parts are progressively acquired at the same time as ‘world counterparts’ are being registered in a new way. Acquiring a body is thus a progressive enterprise that produces at once a sensory medium and a sensitive world” (ibid.). Taking into account the kit, the teachers, the different registers of odors and the different noses smelling them, the untrained, and the trained, Latour attempts to demonstrate how sensation and affect is cultivated and involves world counterparts not traditionally defined as part of the body, such as the chemical odor kit. “The kit
(with all its associated elements) is part and parcel of what it is to have a body, that is, to benefit from a richer odoriferous world.” (Ibid.)

In mindfulness practice, practitioners are similarly moved in meditation as a result of a myriad of worldly counterparts. ‘Affective artifacts,’ such as the cream puffs used by Peter in his class, move mindfulness practitioners from cognitive bewilderment to sensorial engagement. Later, they will perhaps be able to feel how they feel with the help of a heightened sensory apparatus that does not depend on the eyes to orient them and look at themselves but rather their sense of embodied awareness of bodily sensations. Education of the senses, such as the training of noses, is to Latour not only making the body more sensitive, but it also turns the world into a more diversified world enriching us more significantly. Latour stresses that the “specialist” training the noses is instrumental in the process of making both people and the world more sensitive:

The specialist has bottled up contrasts in a systematic way. Through his kit and his ability as a teacher, he has been able to render his indifferent pupils attentive to ever more subtle differences in the inner structure of the pure chemicals he has managed to assemble. He has not simply moved the trainees from inattention to attention, from semi-conscious to conscious appraisal. He has taught them to be affected, that is *effected* by the influence of the chemicals which, before the session, bombarded their nostrils to no avail. (ibid.)

What Latour emphasizes here is the importance of a specialist that moves the trainees from inattention to attention, much as Peter moves practitioners from thinking about the body to feeling the body. Peter attempts to achieve this attentiveness through various means. Using props such as cream puffs, he has to tease the participants into feeling, not thinking. It also involves trying to enter a certain mode of ‘availability’ as I discuss in chapter 4. Putting himself at the participants’ disposal, Peter tries to teach practitioners to be affected by the meditations and to understand that his words can only get them so far. We can think of Peter’s ‘availability,’ ‘embodied words,’ and ‘affective artifacts’ as different forms of attunement, that are similar to, yet different from, philosopher Vinciane Despret’s definition of attunement (Despret 2004). To Despret, attunement points to mutual influence and imitation between humans and other species. One example of attunement is the talented horse Hans who became known for his ability to solve multiplication and division problems when asked by
various people. In Despret’s analysis, Hans was able to attune to humans and make humans attune to him, so that he would get the right answer (Despret 2004, 111–12). The horse Hans and his audience were so finely attuned to each other that they were able to influence, imitate, and read each other’s bodies. In mindfulness practice, participants attune to themselves by way of the teacher’s presence, words, and affective artifacts. It is not an attunement between two different species or even two humans, but an attunement in which the practitioner attunes to herself aided by another—the teacher. This only works if the practitioners allow themselves to be affected. If they, as Pernille said, stop making sense and start sensing.

Studying the practice of acupuncture, sociologist Inge Kryger Pedersen notes how acupuncturists and the patients getting acupuncture treatments engage in acts of “listenings” (lytninger) (Pedersen 2014). People undergoing treatment are not only considered recipients, but they also take active part in the treatment by “listening to themselves” (Pedersen 2014, 48). A successful treatment involves both parties listening with more than just the ears attuning on multiple levels to the body being worked on. Listening, then, can be understood as a form of attunement that the acupuncturist, as well as the patient, engages in. They not only create an attuned relationship between them but an attuned relationship between the patient and the patient’s own body. Similarly, in meditation, practitioners try to let the guiding words and the affective artifacts move them as they scan their bodies for tension, tinkling, pleasantness, worries, fears, and inner longings. We can think of this as ‘assisted feeling’ that is, attuning to oneself through others.

Let me elaborate on this point by returning once more to Karen. Her story shows how the efforts to encourage practitioners to be mindfully attuned sometimes end up discouraging them.

**Stickers on Doorknobs: When Attunement Fails**

When I meet with Karen to talk about her mindfulness practice, the first part of our conversation revolves around her mobile phone lying on the table in front of us. On the back of the phone, Karen has attached a little sticker reminding her to practice mindfulness. I recognize it immediately as I have the same sticker on the back of my computer. Peter handed it out to all participants at the beginning of the mindfulness classes at Kern. The sticker illustrates the connection between excessive thinking and stress, depicting four accelerating modes of thinking. Mode one, two, and three are marked with green. Mode four is a mode of excessive thinking that is marked with red to signal the dangers attached to it. By teaching mindfulness,
Peter wants to help people avoid that fourth level of excessive thinking. “If you are on level four, you put your body and your psyche under great pressure,” Peter argues. “Level four results in stress, bad sleep, high blood pressure, digestion problems, weakened memory, etcetera.” Meditation, Peter states, creates a mental break between thoughts. Peter encourages participants to attach a sticker to the doorknob of their front door, so that will be the first thing they see when coming home. Hopefully, the sticker will remind them to stay mindful and in this way extend the weekly sessions of mindfulness at Kern to everyday habits. Peter wants to mobilize a shared language about what mindfulness can do, of how it works and why it is worth practicing. The sticker, like the cream puff, is what I call an affective artifact, a tool in Peter’s mindfulness kit, his “artificially created set-up” (Latour 2004b, 209) to train mindfulness participants to mærke efter, continuously.

The only problem is that the sticker is not working for Karen. The sticker does not make her mindful. On the contrary, Karen is frustrated with the sticker and with herself because she is not doing ‘enough’ mindfulness practice at work. It is only at home that she manages to do her body scan from time to time. She has tried to get the sticker off her mobile phone again, but it is stuck for good, reminding her to practice mindfulness and radiating bad conscience at her whenever she picks it up. Karen wishes she could find more time during her workday to listen to a guided meditation or do a body scan. She has already had a glimpse of what it means to benefit from a more mindful, embodied state, how it feels to give yourself a mental break, as Peter’s teachings suggest. It feels good. It really makes a difference, Karen says. And yet, it remains difficult to keep up the meditations since there is always someone or something that calls for her attention and expertise. The sticker now has become an annoyance to Karen, a reminder that she is not mindful, that she is not meditating enough.

Embodied words such as ‘kind eyes’ and affective artifacts such as stickers are tools that assist mindfulness novices to mærke efter, to feel how they feel. With his words and affective artifacts, Peter attempts to remind and guide practitioners of mindfulness but also to provoke action—such as entering one’s home mindfully. In the same way an odor kit grants the nose a “richer odoriferous world” (Latour 2004b, 207), the sticker might arouse a more mindful world by urging the individual to slow down, meditate, calm down, and mærke efter. For Latour, noses learn to differentiate as well as appraise odors in a more delicate and precise manner than previously via the training provided by the kit and the teacher. This is a way for the body to become more articulate, Latour argues. The noses do not only smell; they register, assess, and rank the perfumes; the noses learn to connect the word violet with a specific
Chapter 4: Mærke efter: Feeling How You Feel

fragrance, and that fragrance becomes violet (ibid., 210). The same is true in meditation practices. The increased ability to mærke efter enables registration and assessment of participant’s own bodies: How does it feel to be me? How do I really feel? Am I mindful? The vital difference between the noses and the meditators is that the noses rank perfumes. The meditators attune to, register, and rank their own bodies. Attuning to one’s stress, excessive thinking, unease, or distraction could potentially evoke judgment that one is not, in fact, mindful. If the perfume is found too sweet, it will be recomposed. If the body is found too stressed, who will make sure of its recomposition? Knowing through embodied experience that the mindful body exists does not automatically make it available to participants of mindfulness courses. Karen’s sticker and bad conscience for not practicing mindfulness open up for the question of what happens when mindfulness does not make you mindful. This question will be examined and discussed further in chapter 6.

Conclusion

In this chapter, my ambition has been two-fold. First, I examined how mindfulness practice involves to feel how you feel, to mærke efter. I examined this by taking the reader into the mindfulness classes at Kern taught by Peter and by sharing Pernille, Karen, and Tove’s stories of how they feel. While Ursula also encourages her participants to mærke efter as part of her mindfulness teaching, I needed to limit my focus to Peter’s classes to describe assisted feeling in-depth. In the cases of Tove and Karen, one’s mother tongue and stickers can, respectively, enable or complicate the ability to mærke efter. To feel how you feel can cut through work-stress and create feelings of gratitude and appreciation, as Karen relates, or transport you to a peaceful place, as Pernille describes it. In Pernille’s case, learning to feel involves learning to see yourself with kind eyes. Mindfulness inspired in her an ambition to “be a better person” and enabled her to connect with herself, her stepdaughter, and her partner in ways that were valuable and meaningful to her at a time in her life when she was about to become a mother herself.

Second, I argued that even though meditation appears as an individual exercise to become aware of the subtleties of one’s own body, it is a social practice enabled by ‘embodied words’ and ‘affective artifacts.’ Feeling how you feel through mindfulness practices does not happen in a wholly spontaneous or natural way. It is something you must practice. Others may encourage you—by, for instance, asking, How do you feel? Or by way of affective artifacts—How does this make you feel? In that sense, we have to do with ‘assisted feeling,’
which furthermore requires that one allows oneself to be affected in order to attune to oneself. To mærke efter depends on the teachers and practitioners being persistently attentive in ‘listening’ to one another. Getting in touch with how one feels through mindfulness practice is therefore a “relational achievement” (Mol 2014, 101). Learning to feel how you feel involves words and world counterparts (Latour 2004b). Karen, Tove, and Pernille’s stories all point to a sociality of feeling. Embedded in such a sociality of feeling is also the social expectation that practicing mindfulness and feeling how you feel will produce mindful employees that are more able to handle the pressures at work. There is thus an idea of a shared collective output of the mindfulness sessions, and the hope for a cohort of mindful workers coming out at the other end of a mindfulness course. Chapter 6 will reflect on this social expectation and how it relates to choice, control, and care in workplaces. In the next chapter, chapter 5, we will learn more about the embodied experiences in mindfulness with a specific focus on images. While this chapter engaged with how practitioners learn to feel how they feel, the following chapter engages with what they feel while meditating and how this is conveyed in images.
Chapter 5: Imagining Inhabitable Bodies

In the previous chapter, I investigated the emic notion of *mærke efter*. I did so by focusing on the often-used meditation technique in mindfulness, namely the body scan. In a body scan, a teacher guides practitioners to sense their entire body from their toes to the top of their heads. They are guided to *mærke efter*, to feel how they feel. In doing so, participants of mindfulness courses turn their awareness “inward,” and attend to the inner lining of experience (Pagis 2019, 4–5). I have argued that such a feeling-practice involves much more than the mind-body of the person doing the feeling. It is an assisted feeling that consists of the guidance of the teacher, the physical set-up, the other people sitting in the room, the affective artifacts involved such as cream puffs, as well as the concepts used for guidance like ‘kind eyes.’ Such concepts describe the embodied attitude through which practitioners should practice feeling. In sum, the body scan, although it is a matter of turning inward, is a social practice shaped by the particular ways mindfulness is enacted. In other words, the embodied experience of mindfulness is shaped by a sociality of feeling.

Engaging with Images

How does the researcher access the inner lining of experience? Such experiences might well be socially enacted, yet the embodied experience remains individually felt. When mindfulness practitioners elaborate on their individually embodied experiences with mindfulness, they often do so by way of images. Images aid practitioners to explain what it is like to meditate; for example, “meditation is like sitting in the garden with a glass of rosé.” Images help practitioners convey what they see and how they feel while meditating, e.g., “I see myself standing calmly inside of myself.” Also, images elaborate on the effects of meditation more generally by relating mindfulness to everyday experiences, e.g., “mindfulness slows down time.” In this chapter, I analyze the images that my interlocutors related to me and the figurative language that was used in the mindfulness classes, which I attended. Attending to images, I do not expect to be able to feel what the mindfulness practitioners feel. Instead, my ambition is a more moderate one: to imagine along with them. I focus mainly on the images brought to me by three mindfulness novices, Tove, Elin, and Ruth, to better understand what it feels to practice mindfulness. I am not only interested in the relationship between images and embodiment, but also the connections between individual images and collective imagery. Individual images and public images, I contend, cannot be separated from one another. As we will see,
mental images are influenced by social and cultural images that are, in turn, affected by ideas, traditions, norms, and habits.64

It was not until I started writing down the images that my interlocutors had related to me that I realized how difficult it was to translate images into academic text. The image, as well as the embodied experience of mindfulness, entails more than its verbalization (A. Smith 2020). It is the additional features of images that are particularly interesting to engage with. Images drag the world with them, as anthropologist Lisa Stevenson notes (Stevenson 2014). In her ethnography about life in the Canadian Arctic, Stevenson attends to images and imagery work to better comprehend Inuit ways of living and dying in postcolonial Canada. Turning to images, Stevenson argues, is a method that allows for interpretation and uncertainty, of not quite knowing what something means. Turning to images means listening for moments when the formulation of a fact does not satisfy. While the fact decodes meaning, the image allows for opacity (Stevenson 2004, 13). Besides, I argue, while images allow for ambiguity and interpretation, they can also pinpoint embodied experiences more precisely than words. There is, I assert, a possibility in the image to convey what is not easily put into words, for instance, the effect of meditation. The image might then allow for opacity and, at the same time, be more to the point than words, numbers, or facts. When Pernille, whom we met in chapter 4, tells me that, to her, meditating feels like sitting in the garden with a glass of rosé, I can better understand the relaxation that she is experiencing when she meditates. However, to do so requires a shared cultural frame and an established agreement that sitting in the garden with a glass of rosé is associated with leisure, enjoyment, and self-care. Following this, I understand images as providing insight about individual experience and how this experience links up with social imaginaries.

Let me describe in more detail what I mean by images by turning to Tove’s, Elin’s, and Ruth’s images. Listening to their stories about mindfulness and work life, I zoomed in on the parts that revolved particularly around what it feels to meditate and practice mindfulness. Those parts are characterized by images and imagery. Looking back on the many conversations I have had with mindfulness practitioners, it seems that embodied experience sometimes requires the density and opacity of the image, as Stevenson also notes (Stevenson 2014, 13). Michelle Rosaldo has argued that feelings are to be discovered not inside, but in the stories we enact and tell (Rosaldo 1984, 143).

64 Albeit mediatized images of mindfulness practice reiterated in the course materials, books, and popular media influence personal imaginaries in different ways, they will not be unpacked here.
I would add that feelings might be discovered in images as well. Yet, there is, of course, the pitfall of giving too much weight to an image, or granting too much importance to a figure of speech. To be clear, I do not see the images I treat here as a determinant of the embodied experience but a way of expressing such an experience making it tangible for others, such as me, the ethnographer. What are these images, and what distinguishes them from, for instance, metaphors? Metaphors are, Lakoff and Johnson argue, pervasive in everyday language, thought, and action: “Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 3). The difference between the images brought to me by Tove, Elin, and Ruth and metaphors is that these images seek to mediate embodied experiences directly, not meaning that meditating, for instance, is like being in an inner home, but saying that meditating is an inner home. I therefore juxtapose images to metaphor and to other ways of engaging with images, such as anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano’s “imaginative horizons” (Crapanzano 2004). The images envisioned in this chapter are not about horizons of hope or future fulfillment but about embodied experiences in the here and now. Images move Tove, Elin, and Ruth to feel at home, embraced, and tamed. It helps them to inhabit their bodies more comfortably in the present moment.

I start by returning to Tove, whom we met in chapter 4, to elaborate on her experiences with mindfulness. Like several other interlocutors, Tove used images when she talked about how mindfulness feels. I will focus mainly on one image that she visualizes in meditation of her inner home.

**Grounding Images: The Inner Home**

Tove and I met the first time on a rainy day in January 2017. Before then, Tove was just a name on a list of former mindfulness participants given to me by Ursula, the teacher of Mindfulness in Five Steps, a mindfulness course that I was about to attend that same spring. Tove was one among many who offered to tell me about her mindfulness practice. On that day in January, Tove rode her bike across town to meet me in my office, for, as she said, she enjoyed being at “KUA,” the popular acronym for the campus of the Faculty of Humanities. When I greeted her in the main entrance hall, she sighed: “This feels like home.” Tove is a laboratory technician, but in reality, she never identified fully with her job. “I never found the right shelf,” she says, “but there is nothing to do about it. This is how my work life ended up. I have been fighting and fighting to get interesting tasks, but nowadays, they just want to use us [laboratory technicians] for very particular purposes.” Tove attended a mindfulness course at her workplace because she was not feeling well. She wanted to retire, as she felt stuck and
could not see any meaning in her job anymore. She was 56 years old at the time. It was too early for retirement and too late for a career shift. She was in distress, not knowing how to endure the coming years. Meditating in Ursula’s mindfulness course changed Tove’s state of distress and inertia about her job.

Tove resisted the idea of mindfulness in the beginning. “Why mindfulness? Is it just to make us more suitable for a stressful work environment?” Tove remembered thinking, echoing my research questions and the public skepticism that runs along with enthusiasm for mindfulness. Still, Tove had thought to herself, we need to make money, and we need to make them in sustainable ways. Therefore, Tove decided to attend the course Mindfulness in Five Steps. She was surprised by the positive effects it had on her. Sticking to her morning meditation or doing body scans became an instant way of feeling better. Her body, which had been a place of tension, became a more comfortable place to dwell. Tove told me how an image of herself emerged when she closed her eyes in meditation—a visualization of herself in miniature form standing inside her own body. Let me recount Tove’s image by first replicating part of our conversation:

T: It is an inner image. I discovered it in therapy, but it is only through mindfulness that I have been able to use it. In the image, I am standing inside of myself, and it just feels like, here, I am completely inside of myself, and I cannot… it’s totally calm, and I cannot get further down. Not to say that I am at the bottom and need to fight my way up, that is not what it feels like, it just feels like there is no hole here, there is not a black hole. I don’t know if that sounds cryptic?
M: No, I don’t think it sounds cryptic.
T: It is just a place where I am standing inside of myself.
M: And it is an image you see?
T: Yes.
M: Something you imagine?
T: Yes. But it is also a feeling. It is both an image, and sounds, and a kind of physical space around me.
M: Sounds you hear or sounds you make?
T: No, no, drip drip. Sounds I hear. The sounds are related to the image. Do you want to hear about it?
M: Yes, if you want to tell me about it?
T: Yes, but it is just because I think it sounds a little weird myself. But okay. I am in a place where I sense that I am standing inside of myself, as if, like a little Tove, I have been swallowed down. But I am not in a stomach but a place where there is a mucous membrane around me; I can see some skin, but because it’s a mucous membrane, it is a little bit moist, and I can hear it dripping. In there, it’s calm and, how to put it… it is here I come from, and from here, I look out.

As she finishes her sentence, Tove looks at me, tilting her head to the side as if she is trying to figure out if I understand what she is saying. Tove’s image amazes me and immediately makes me create mental pictures of my own. In my mind’s eye, Tove’s place is a stalactite cave with a little Tove standing in the middle. The image, now envisioned in both Tove’s and my mind, changes the interview. Tove’s readiness to share the image and my attempt to imagine along with her opens up for another kind of conversation and transforms the formal meeting room where we sit into an intimate and cozy shared space. Having told me about her image and seeing that I did not find her weird, Tove goes on to talk about her family history and the older generations who practiced Spiritism. It was especially women who did so: her aunts, grandmother, and mother, who were able to communicate with “the other side.” Tove tells me that she always felt her father’s presence, even though he died when Tove was fifteen. She thinks that she has “the ability,” too, to live an “extended” version of reality, she tells me in a confidential tone. What had begun as a conversation about the weather a couple of hours earlier ended with Tove’s account of things, that, as she said, she never imagined we would talk about. It was as if the sharing of the image allowed Tove to open up for more extraordinary details about her life. I will return to this, Tove’s readiness to share her image, and my attempt to imagine along with her.

To me, Tove’s image had a prehistoric, mythical aura. It was almost like a creation myth where the meditator returns to the place of her origins. The image reminded me of a popular mindfulness trope, that meditation is about “coming home to yourself.” Peter and Ursula both included this figure of speech— that meditation is a homecoming—in their classes. Ursula told me that she imported the phrase “coming home to yourself” from Tara Brach’s meditations that are available online. The influential American mindfulness teacher Tara Brach is part of the Insight Meditation Society in the United States. On her website, she offers meditation guides free of charge where mindfulness and homeliness are
themed. Examples include the meditations “Coming home with the Breath,” “The Heart space that is Home,” and “Home in the Moment.” In the teachings of Peter, Ursula, and Brach, home is a feeling. The calmness obtained through breathing exercises and body scans, allows practitioners to enter this home, their “calm state,” as Peter defines it. To come home through meditation could involve the teacher guiding practitioners to think of a place they feel comfortable, secure, and at ease. The mentalization of a home-like place helps bring about a feeling of grounding and safety. An essential lesson in mindfulness classes is that the calm state inside—the inner home—is available “wherever you go” (Kabat-Zinn [1994] 2005). Tove’s home inside herself provides this kind of omnipresent comfort, she tells me: “I use it all the time; right when I get out of bed in the morning. This is what is so great about mindfulness, this place that I have found inside myself, because it feels like I don’t need to look for where I have to go. I have this [her home inside of herself] as an image and a place where I know there is peace and joy.”

Tove’s home inside herself is not the typical inner home as described in mindfulness classes, sometimes in symbolic ways as a reflection of the self in a forest lake or a flower on a meadow under a big blue sky. Tove’s home is a place she has been “swallowed” into, that has signs of skin, and that is surrounded by a mucous membrane, which is moist and dripping. Tove’s way of describing her inner home made me think of what it would be like to be in mother earth’s womb. It is not, however, a womb, Tove goes on. It is somewhere else—an utterly calm place. From here, it is not possible to go further down, but it is not the bottom, it is not a black hole. How does one make sense of an image like this for someone not seeing the image herself?

The label image is in risk of not adequately communicating the effect that the experience of an inner home has on Tove. The dictionary Merriam-Webster defines the word image as a representation of something and imagination as something that is never wholly perceived in reality. While Tove’s image is indeed a mental visualization, something she imagines, the image has a physical effect, moving it beyond mere representation. Tove’s home manifests itself in her mind’s eye, but that does not make it unreal. It is not a mirage, a trick of the mind. It is an image with sounds, a kind of physical space, Tove says. To understand Tove’s inner home, I suggest thinking of it as a productive image with an affective hold, following the way Lisa Stevenson defines images and imagery (2004). Stevenson engages with the work of psychologist Ludwig Binswager to unlock the seemingly difficult-to-capture power of the image. She argues that the image, like the dream, works by way of its “affective hold”
(Stevenson 2014, 45)—that is to say, the way it moves us. This is similar to Freud’s idea that psychic images have an energetic force (Freud in Rosaldo 1984, 139). The affective hold and the energetic force are essential to the image, not supplementary. This point is crucial when thinking about Tove’s inner home. To imagine herself standing calmly and protected by a membrane inside herself makes her feel grounded. The inner image, however intangible and immaterial, calms Tove down. Tove’s image, then, is real in the sense that Tove both imagines it and feels it. The image is not representative of her grounded feeling when meditating, it is the feeling of groundedness. Her image works by way of its affective hold—of the way it moves her into calmness, ease, and inner strength. Stevenson contends, with Binswanger, that an image expresses desires, feelings, and experiences, not of something else, as if that something else was hidden in the image, but because those desires, feelings, and experiences are “imagistic.” Becoming attuned to the world is pictorial (Stevenson 2004, 45). Tove’s story suggests that becoming attuned to yourself and your own body might be pictorial as well, and that this pictorial attunement is both felt and imagined.

Contemporary research on mindfulness often applies quantitative methods such as conducting surveys, EEG-scans, and FMRI-scans to test how mindfulness “works” (Baer 2003; Didonna 2009; Goleman and Davidson 2017). In these studies, practitioners of mindfulness list as numbers in statistics divided through Random Control Trials (RCTs), ensuring measurability, comparability, and adding to the growing evidence-based literature on mindfulness-based interventions. Should Tove participate in such a study, she might conclude by way of a survey, using, for instance, the famous MAAS scale to measure mindfulness, that she is “more present,” maybe indicating a seven on a scale from one to ten. (Mindfulness does not, to be fair, solve all her problems.) A seven on the scale would not tell us much about how and why mindfulness works for Tove. The affective hold that Tove’s mindfulness practices have on her is not discernable just by putting a number on it. There is no room in a survey for Tove to write that through mindfulness, she is swallowed down, into a place with no black holes. Being in this place, where she comes from and from where she looks out, she experiences immediate peacefulness.

66 Stevenson sets out with the image of a raven. "The raven is still there," one of Stevenson’s friends, Paul says. After the death of Paul’s uncle, a raven has been sitting behind the family’s house. His sister used to say that the uncle came back to life as a raven. "Does she still think that," Stevenson asks. Paul does not know. Nevertheless, the raven is still there. What matters is not what the raven is or is not, but that it is there and that its ‘there-ness’ matters to Paul. What matters, Stevenson argues, is the relationship we make with the raven as a form of productive and even hopeful uncertainty (Stevenson 2014, 1).
Tove’s image cannot be tested or approached as a fact. It works by way of its affective hold. To make sense of Tove’s home inside of herself is not done by affirming its validity (how would we do that?) but by attending to the relationship between Tove and her embodied image forging a “productive and hopeful uncertainty” (Stevenson 2014, 1). This relationship forged between Tove and her image enables Tove to stay positive, sometimes joyful, and often bored in a work-life that would otherwise fall into meaninglessness. Mindfulness offered Tove a way to relate to herself that was different from the many talking therapies she had gone through to resolve what she deemed her “neuroses.” By experiencing physical calm, Tove could better accept her work life as it was, repetitive and dull, and delineate new ambitions for herself that went beyond work: she decided that the most important thing for her was to create and nurture good relations with others wherever she goes.

Mental images helped Stevenson’s interlocutors hold their loved and lost ones close after they had passed away. A raven that comes and goes or a silhouette of somebody waving goodbye on a ship a long time ago become powerful and productive images that help Stevenson’s interlocutors relate to the past and endure the present. Tove’s image is not an external object like a ship or a raven. Her image is evoked by her meditation and moves from the inside out, creating an embodied feeling. It is a grounding image that roots Tove in the moment and it also stays with her, this feeling of groundedness, after she opens her eyes, she told me.

To give an example of how the calmness of the inner home stays with her, Tove recounts how she recently negotiated work hours with her boss. She was unhappy with her tight schedule of teaching that made it impossible to clean labs properly in between cohorts of students. “He does it every year,” Tove said, “dumping the entire laboratory teaching in one day. I have pointed out the problem repeatedly. This time, I did not yield: ‘You have to find a way to fix the schedule, so the students and I have proper time for proper teaching,’” Tove had argued. Reacting like this, standing her ground, was a big change for her, Tove explained. She would usually get “emotional,” “upset,” and “uneasy” in such situations. She would waver and shake. The uneasiness made it difficult for her to assert her opinion. Tove related her ability to find grounding in meditation to her increased ability to stand firm in her everyday life. “It is easier to trust yourself and resist something if you are in touch with yourself,” she said, stressing how she wants to be someone who cannot so easily be pushed around.

My conversation with Tove made me understand more fully how sensitivity connects with strength in mindfulness practice. We met very early in my research process, and I had not yet had a lot of experience with mindfulness practice myself. I was surprised by the way
Tove described the connection between being in touch with herself and, at the same time, standing her ground and resisting unacceptable conditions at work. She attributed this resistance to meditation. To Tove, meditation was not an opiate that made her more compliant (Purser 2019); it helped her to assert her opinion. At the same time, it also softened her, moved her to be more positive and accepting. As I progressed in my fieldwork, similar stories urged me to dismantle my anticipation that mindfulness at work was perhaps mostly about accommodating the goals of the company. While such goals were foundational for the mindfulness practice and sociality of feeling attuning to one’s body in meditation could also be a way of grounding oneself more firmly inside and outside the meditation room. For several of my interlocutors, mindfulness practices created such a grounding sensation in the body that lasted beyond the meditation.

I define Tove’s image as a ‘grounding image.’ To ground, to be grounded, or to have grounding are regular expressions in mindfulness courses. Grounding is used by Peter and Ursula when they start their classes, for instance. They invite practitioners to do a short meditation that helps them to “arrive” and “ground” in their bodies. To ground themselves, practitioners focus on the contact between their feet and the floor or the air flowing in and out of their nostrils. Grounding is also a common word used in practitioners’ explanations of how meditating makes them feel. Grounding then usually refers to the physical practice done in meditation and the physical effect of a meditation. Talking about an image as grounding might, at first sight, seem counter-intuitive, since imagining something is a mental activity. Yet it is precisely this double effect that I seek to point out. The image, I argue, is productive because of its affective hold, because it is both imagined and felt. Hence, a ‘grounding image’ should be understood concretely, not in the abstract. The image of Tove’s inner home is not an image of something; being inside herself is not like being at home. It is home. Tove’s image affects her, grounds her, and makes her body more inhabitable.

Tove’s inner home shows how images and embodiments relate to each other in mindfulness practice. Another example of this relation is what I call the ‘self-embracing image.’ Like the grounding image, the self-embracing image contains a duality of strength and vulnerability. Yet where the grounding image refers to an instant feeling of ease and calmness, the self-embracing image refers to the continuous effort of trying to accept yourself, an important element of mindfulness practice for many. To illustrate this further, I will introduce Elin, whose use of images expand our understanding of the way mindfulness practices are
embodied and imagined. Elin imagines a more inhabitable body by imagining herself as carrying a backpack. Like Tove, Elin’s imagery illuminates the entanglement of strength and vulnerability. We will be introduced to her images of being a bench by the lakeside, carrying a backpack, or running with the force of a horse.

Self-Embracing Images: The Backpack, the Bench, and the Horse
Elin greets me in the courtyard of her office building on a warm morning early in the summer of 2017. We know each other from the university course Mindfulness in Five Steps that ended a couple of months ago. Now it is June, and Elin’s face is already glowing with the warmth of summer. She takes me through the main halls of the central administration building and finds a quiet place with a couch where we can sit and talk. As we speak, Elin offers a range of examples of the ways she makes use of “her mindfulness.” She tells me that she just came back from holiday with her husband and their two kids. There was a long queue in the airport on their way home. The line was so long that they did not know if they would catch their flight. “Then I used my mindfulness,” Elin says, and elaborates. “I said to my children: ‘Of course we will make it. And if we don’t, we will take the next flight.’” She smiles and tells me how she uses her mindfulness at work. As an IT manager at the university, Elin is, among other things, in charge of recuperating data when university staff loses their work due to technical problems or lack of proper saving. Researchers desperately call on Elin and “breathe down her neck” until she finds a solution. Sometimes when the work is lost, people let their anger out on Elin. “I use my mindfulness to deal with such treatment. I tell people that I can’t have a conversation with them yelling at me. And if they won’t calm down, I hang up.” Elin’s facial expression moves quickly from serious and determined to bashful and mischievous to serious again as she recalls how she once hung up on somebody.

As our conversation continues, it is clear that dealing with flight delays and angry colleagues calmly and resolutely has not always been Elin’s way of reacting. She carries a heavy load, she tells me, using the Danish figure of speech “to carry a heavy backpack” (*bære en tung rygsæk*). The weight of her backpack, indicate some past trauma, and because Elin does not talk about this directly I do not ask. Even without talking about the ‘content’ of the backpack Elin makes clear that the difficult experiences she must have had affects her interactions with others today. Elin tells me that when she was younger, the backpack would weigh her down, making her timid and nervous, fearing what other people might think or say, and how others would perceive her. Such expectations were all because of the things she carries with
her, she tells me, and I sense this is not the first time Elin talks about her “backpack” and past behavioral patterns.

Elin shares with me that attending a mindfulness course was indeed just another step in a long line of different self-development courses and activities she has gone through. “I tend to move outside myself. I feel others very strongly.” She puts her hand on the upper part of her chest as if to indicate that this is where she feels others. “I sense very quickly when someone is upset or angry. Which can be a good thing, too.” She tells me that when she started working with herself 20 years ago, she worked on becoming more embracive of others. “Now,” she says, “I try to embrace myself.” She uses the Danish word rummelig, literally ‘spacious.’ The determinacy returns to Elin’s face as she says this. She sits up in her seat, straightening her back while pushing her chest out. “I am allowed to be who I am,” Elin says, emphasizing “allowed” almost as if it is a mantra. Once again, she returns to the “backpack.” This time concerning her two sons. It is vital to Elin that they grow up without something weighing them down. She wants them to feel more free-spirited and less controlled by the stories that one’s mind tends to produce. Elin believes that by becoming mindful herself, calmness, acceptance, and inner strength will transmit to her children.

The bodily elements of mindfulness, observing her breath in meditation, drawing it deep into her belly, and feeling the ground beneath her feet, are particularly useful for Elin. They are ways for her to return to her own body. Sometimes she uses what is called power poses to gain strength and to avoid getting anxious, she tells me. “It works,” she says. “When I pose with my arms above my head, chest lifted, legs apart standing firmly on the ground, I feel stronger, more able and confident.” Last time she negotiated her salary, she stood in a power pose for two minutes before entering her boss’ office. The image of Elin posing as a superwoman makes us both burst into laughter. Serious again, Elin tells me that she firmly believes that what she thinks creates what she feels. “When I am thinking, I send a signal to my body. I firmly believe in the expression ‘perception is reality.’ When I run, it is clear feedback. I might imagine that I am a horse, and then I run faster. Concerning work, it’s more difficult, but it is basically the same.” Elin tries to be aware of her postures: not to cross her arms over her chest or to shrink her body inward, because these postures make her look like she is excusing herself. Elin’s work at being mindful and approaching trouble calmly is then characterized by bodily movements such as entering power poses and breathing deeply. It is also characterized by images such as imagining being a horse or using the image of a backpack. Those images seem to liberate her in some way: she could move more freely when she
imagined carrying her past ‘outside’ of her body in a backpack or imagined possessing the power of a horse, a force that she might not feel she currently possessed.

There are interesting differences and similarities between Tove’s and Elin’s images and their way of grounding and liberating. Tove’s image of a comfortable, secure inner home is a visualization affected by meditation, a recurrent yet temporary visual image. Tove is able to evoke, imagine, and feel this inner home through meditation. Elin’s image of carrying a backpack is a figure of speech that seems to work as a fundamental self-image, not of how she wants to be, or where she would like to go, but of how things turned out. Imagining herself carrying her past with her in the form of a backpack allows her to accept and explain her tendency to feel others too strongly and get anxious. By envisioning herself carrying a backpack, Elin can better accept the past instead of letting it consume her in the present. This is a different kind of grounding than Tove’s experience of standing firm inside and outside of her inner home. The image of the backpack connects to Elin’s past and future, as well as to her ability to accept herself. Instead of understanding her mindfulness practice as self-development or self-improvement, concepts bearing strong connotations of instrumentalization, we can think of Elin’s engagements as a practice of self-inclusion or self-embracement. In that way, they are a kind of pragmatic care in which Elin works with herself and her habitual patterns of reacting, imagining, and embodying. Her way of embracing herself can be understood as a “persistent tinkering in a world full of ambivalence and shifting tensions” (Mol, Moser, and Pols 2010). As Mol et al. describe it, this care does not dream up a world without lack. Elin does not hope to wake up one day improved and complete—no backpack, no self-doubt, no insecurities. She is working with herself to accept and allow herself to be who she is through self-embracing images. I think of this in line with what Mol has defined as “tinkering,” referring to techniques applied to improve, move, or better bodies without the idea of a perfect ending.

In chapter 2, we saw how Elin chose the picture of the worn-out bench to express her intention with mindfulness in Ursula’s class. She intended to accept that she was broken: she was the bench that was cleft in two, and that was all right. Listening to her choice of words then, I remember feeling sympathy, even sorry for her. Yet, my initial reading of the image of the bench missed the strength in her choice of words and images. The bench was a self-

---

67 Deciding to do something is rarely enough to actually achieve it. And techniques do more than just serve their function—they have an array of effects, some of which are unexpected. Thus, caring is a question of “doctoring”: of tinkering with bodies, technologies, and knowledge—and with people, too (Mol 2008, 12).
embracing image and a result of 20 years of working towards allowing Elin to be who she is. Similar to the backpack, the bench works by its affective hold, the power gained from it. You can be broken, burdened, and okay at the same time. One of the ways that Elin embraces herself is by crafting images that allows her to embody herself more comfortably without wanting to be someone else. Images, as understood by Stevenson, are useful precisely because they capture contradiction without having to resolve it (Stevenson 2014, 11). Images can be suggestive and forceful, like when the image of a horse compels Elin to run faster, when the broken bench feels comforting and self-compassionate, or when the backpack allows her to accept that the past has shaped her. Elin’s images enable her in the continuous effort to be a good role model for her two sons in their everyday life together. Elin talked about how mindfulness, breathing, meditation, and the bodily calm were fundamental components in this effort to embrace herself, be a good mother, and avoid feeling others too strongly. To use one’s mindfulness, as Elin terms it, was to embrace oneself by way of meditation and images.

Elin’s images were, more so than Tove’s image, corresponding with Danish figurative language, and they point to the entanglement of personal and collective imagery. Carrying a heavy load, expressed by Elin in the Danish figure of speech as carrying a backpack, is related to a cultural way of understanding emotional life (Rosaldo 1984) in contemporary Denmark. Our concern with our inner selves is a concern from “our world,” Rosaldo argues, juxtaposing American ways of understanding, for instance, anger with the Ilongot in the Philippines. The Ilongot, as opposed to Americans, do not experience themselves as having boundaries to protect. Selves, and the things they feel, are social creations, Rosaldo argues (Rosaldo 1984, 148–49). Elin talked about mindfulness as a technique that helped her return to herself and not feel others too strongly. She talked about her past experiences as a part of her, weighing her down in the form of an always attached backpack. Such descriptions correspond with more general ways of understanding emotional experience in Denmark. Emotional experience is understood as something that lingers in the individual body and, if we do not attend to it, through therapies, for instance, we risk becoming too burdened by it. As we learned in the previous chapter, mindfulness is about mærke efter, of attending to how we feel, something that is understood as crucial in matters of both mental and physical health.

Interestingly, mindfulness practices also challenge this by inviting practitioners to understand affects, thoughts, and emotions as passing, like clouds on a sky. Feeling how you feel is complicated, and the case of mindful work shows how individual experience links up with cultural frameworks of selves and emotions and social expectations for how to be a good
person. This becomes particularly evident in the next example, the story of Ruth and her image of two wolves. Ruth’s image works, as Tove and Elin’s images, by way of its affective hold, but instead of grounding or embracing her, Ruth’s image is a way of taming her. I elaborate on Ruth’s story in great detail since her image of the wolves sparked a more general discussion about mindful work, images, experiences, and the sociality of feeling.

**Taming Images: The Good and the Bad Wolf**

“We have these two wolves, you know, the good wolf and the bad wolf. When you are down, you want to feed the bad one much more, and to avoid it, you meditate, and then you feed the good wolf instead.” I remember these words vividly. They were uttered by Ruth, a hothouse gardener, on a day in January, as we sat surrounded by greenery and discussed her mindfulness practices. Ruth conceptualizes mindfulness as nourishment for the soul. Brought up Christian and identifying as a non-religious yet spiritual person, Ruth experienced the mindfulness classes as a kind of sermon, “without the hell and brimstone.” When Ruth attended the course Mindfulness in Five Steps at the university, she felt uplifted, hooked, and she quickly established a meditation routine, something that other participants sometimes found hard. Ruth made it a habit to meditate every morning in the bedroom that she shares with her partner. They have a teenage son each from earlier relationships, and her partner and the boys know not to disturb her when she sits on her pillow and listens to meditation guides every morning for fifteen minutes. That is her time, and she does not accept disturbances. Other quotidian practices such as brushing her teeth have become infused with mindfulness for Ruth. Besides daily practices, Ruth observes her behavior against the attitudinal pillars of mindfulness, as described in the MBSR program: non-judgement, patience, beginner’s mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 32–39).

Her initial motivation for training mindfulness was to ease the daily stressors at work. Yet, she experienced how mindfulness practice became a fundamental behavioral change. Practicing mindfulness is, for Ruth, a means of becoming a better person. In Ruth’s view, a good person has patience, empathy, and a great understanding of others. A good person deals with conflicts calmly and is not knocked out, as happens if one is “a little too touchy.” Ruth tells me that she has a history of that, of being too touchy. She describes herself as tending to ‘ride off with hysteria.’ She accentuates how mindfulness enables her to react more calmly.

---

68 I unfold Ruth’s story in greater details in the chapter “The Mindful Gardener and the Good Employee” (Hedegaard 2020).
She wonders if practicing meditation from a young age would have relieved her from her “hysterical tantrums”: “Because I don’t think I get those anger outbursts anymore; there are fewer of them for sure. I am more balanced. They [the tantrums] don’t sound pretty, and they don’t look pretty. And it makes you feel terrible.”

This was when she started talking about the wolves. Ruth explained how she thought of her “hysteria” as a bad wolf inside of her. A recent example was an argument with a colleague that had left her feeling misunderstood and angry. Getting worked up and frustrated with the colleague was a way “to feed the bad wolf,” Ruth said. She fed the bad wolf when she rehearsed to herself how unfairly she had been treated or how it was typical of that person to postulate such things about her. All this only made the bad wolf grow in size. The bad wolf was insatiable; its appetite only grew. To meditate worked as a countermove, Ruth said. It was a way of feeding the good wolf. When meditating, she calmed herself down, focused on her breath, and listened to the words of the teacher guiding her: “You are peace. You are centered.” With meditation, she found a way to look inward to find better answers for how to solve conflicts instead of letting her passions incite instant reactions. The conflict with her colleague resulted in Ruth writing a letter where she explained her side of the story, stressing how she felt that her colleague had violated her boundaries. She reached out for reconciliation, and it made her feel good and at ease: she had done what she could to resolve their dispute, even though her impulse had been to follow the path of the bad wolf and give her colleague the cold shoulder.

Ruth explained to me that to meditate “nudged her” to feed the good wolf because meditative peacefulness helped her to observe her frustration and not get carried away with her feelings. Feeding the good wolf was not easy, Ruth confessed: “The wicked beast, the bad wolf, is so easy to feed, and it has a big appetite. Here, discipline comes in. It would be so easy to say, ‘to hell with the meditations; I am busy feeding the bad wolf.’” Family matters are an essential motivation to keep feeding the good wolf for Ruth. She uses meditation to better deal with stressful situations when raising her son and her partner’s son respecting her limited role as a stepmom. When she sticks to her meditation routine, Ruth is also less jumpy at home, and handles conflicts more calmly and steadily.

Ruth’s wish to follow a mindfulness course was motivated by the fact that she had lost her joy of gardening due to recent restructuring at work, a round of layoffs and organizational instability. Ruth needed to find ways to cope with the fact that she could no longer take care of the plants, her “babies,” the way she felt they deserved. There was not enough time,
Chapter 5: Imagining Inhabitable Bodies

hands, or resources. Ruth illustrates how the turbulent work environment has affected her telling me about how she let the Palm House go. The Palm House is the jewel of the Botanical garden, and where Ruth started when she was employed fourteen years ago. Throughout her employment, Ruth has witnessed how the garden staff has been reduced from 28 to 12 gardeners, sometimes fearing that she might be the next to go. The reduction of staff meant that at present, gardeners have to attend to larger areas and more plants to cover the needs of the garden. The Palm House is a big mouthful, and when the two additional gardeners helping were placed elsewhere, Ruth could no longer keep up her work. Through dialogues with her superior, she was reassigned to three small hothouses. She told me about the reassignment as a case in point, showing how mindfulness helped her in her work life. To Ruth, it was an example of a situation where she could not do anything but try to deal with it in the best way possible.

“It was a big shift having to let the Palm House go. I loved working there. To accept that I could not do it anymore, that it was too much…it was a bitter pill to swallow. I think my mindfulness helped me with it so that I could let go. Sort of. Without screaming too much.” As she talked, Ruth made a gesture at the palm trees, the bamboo, and the spectacular tropical flowers surrounding us there in the Palm House. She related how, as a gardener, you want plants to thrive, not just survive. To witness how the reduction of staff affected the plants, leaving some species to die out, took an emotional toll on Ruth. As such, Ruth’s work-related stress involved on the surface of it the heightened number of tasks to do in the course of everyday life in the garden. On a deeper level, Ruth was affected by a loss of purpose with her work. Disillusionment was the primary reason for her mindfulness practice; she needed something to help her with her embodied emotional reactions. Even though she was “flexible and willing to adapt,” the recent years in the garden had created “emotional stress” and a feeling of being disillusioned.

It is different from when you have a big pile of assignments, you are not going to finish them, and they pile up and pile up. That kind of stress I can manage. It is the emotional stress—the disillusionment of it—of the way things developed in the garden, in society. Such a regressive movement. Like we are moving backward. I thought that was very hard. Very stressful, actually. This was not the way it was supposed to go. Then you have to sit down and meditate on it.
When Ruth said that you have to sit down and meditate on it, she was both sarcastic and sincere at the same time, evidenced by the resigned laugh that accompanied her comment and the way she hurried on to elaborate on the crucial role of meditation in her life. Sitting down and “meditating on it” was not a “miracle cure,” she said; however, it was a helpful and comforting way of dealing with the changing landscape in the garden, staying empathetic and patient, not “screaming too much.” In addition to calming her body down, the mindfulness course offered new perspectives on human behavior and an optimistic life view that Ruth appreciated. She was reminded to be grateful amid frustrating circumstances.

Ruth’s image differs from the image of Tove’s and Elin’s in the sense that her imagery of the wolves builds on archetypical imagery of inner moral conflict. The image of the good and the bad wolf wrestling each other as inner forces fighting for influence is akin to the well-known image of the good and bad angel representing good and bad passions, respectively. Articulating her attempt to do good and behave well as a response to the two wolves, Ruth references symbolism—often religious—she expects will be familiar to me. This might explain why Ruth starts her account by saying: “We have these two wolves, you know,” while Tove starts her explanation of her inner home by saying: “It is a bit weird; do you want to hear about it?” But Ruth’s image is fleshier, more vulgar, than its archetypical counterpart is. Ruth does not listen to angels whispering in her ears. She feeds two hungry wolves, “beasts,” as she calls them. Mindfulness is like a substance, a nourishment, sustaining the kind of good person Ruth would like to be. Mindfulness tames the bad wolf and secures that Ruth acts in a calm, considerate manner.

Mindfulness practices help Ruth to manage her affective condition, dampen anger, frustration, and other ‘negative emotions.’ At the same time, she nurtures her ‘positive emotions,’ like empathy and patience. This is what I elsewhere have identified as “affective labor” (Hedegaard 2020). When we now move from the imagery of the two wolves, we can push the analysis further. This taming image helps Ruth to embody both negative and positive emotions. The bad and the good wolf lives within her as inner forces that she, via this image, can acknowledge: her inner life contains both anger and empathy, frustration and patience. She is not trying to get rid of the bad wolf. Rather, she is trying to reconcile with her anger by way of meditation. Such affective labor, therefore, is not a matter of control or oppression. It is a matter of balancing a fragile body and its flows (Mol 2008, 34). It is a difficult enduring work of attunement: of staying open to affective influences and shielding oneself from being affected too much.
CHAPTER 5: IMAGINING INHABITABLE BODIES

Feeling Rules: “Feel it, heal it—Name it, tame it”

Ruth’s image of the wolves illustrates well the general therapeutic logic undergirding the contemporary iterations of mindfulness. Human suffering in mindfulness programs is understood as located not in events and experiences, but in the ways people relate to those events and experiences (Cook 2017). Ruth’s wolves also reflect a more fundamental cultural idea of emotions as inner forces that the individual needs to control. She must restrain the bad beast—her unruly emotions. This idea is also expressed in two central idioms of mindfulness: “Feel it, heal it” and “Name it, tame it.” What they encapsulate is that mindfulness is a means for practitioners to detect, observe, and name their emotions. A gesture that will, in turn, help them to tame those emotions. Mindfulness novices like Ruth, Elin, and Tove perceived of meditation as a tool to work with and manage their emotions, becoming less upset, anxious, sad, and uncomfortable by meditating. Also, mindfulness teachers Peter and Ursula argued in their classes that if emotions are not attended to, they will linger in the body and pile up. One should “meet” emotions with a “Teflon mind,” as Ursula called it. It means that you let emotions enter your awareness and then slip off easily again. Feel it, heal it—name it, tame it.

Such mindfulness idioms can be understood through Hochschild’s concept of “feeling rules” (Hochschild [1983] 2012, xi), i.e. the cultural structures that guide individuals to navigate feelings in a culturally acceptable manner. The feeling rules mediated in mindfulness classes in Denmark derives from the pedagogy of secular mindfulness programs and historically inherited ideas at the heart of ‘Western’ reasoning: passions must be reasoned with, and the mind should exercise control over the body (Martin 2000a, 576)—one should not run wild with hysteria. As argued by Catherine Lutz, “emotions have in the so-called West been viewed as something natural rather than cultural, irrational rather than rational, chaotic rather than ordered, and subjective rather than collective, unintended and therefore dangerous” (Lutz 1990, 69). People apply a “rhetoric of control” when talking about emotions, Lutz points out.70 Emotions are handled, coped with, dealt with, and disciplined, as is the situation creating the emotion. What I have shown here partly supports this idea, that emotions are

69 Emily Martin reminds us how dichotomous pairs like nature/culture, body/mind, irrational/rational, or passion/reason—with the second one given a higher value than the first—make up the heart of Western reason since at least the Enlightenment. What kind of work do the dichotomies do? For one, Martin says, they shore up invidious distinctions based on gender, race, sex, or nationality, often linking women with the realm of nature, body, irrationality, and passion, and men with culture, mind, rationality, and reason (Martin 2000a, 569).

70 Lutz refers to the work of Renato Rosaldo (1977), who coined the concept rhetoric of control.
controlled and contained by various techniques, such as a rhetoric of control. Crafting mages such as the home, the bench, and the wolves are on the one hand ways to accommodate societal expectations of not being ‘neurotic’ as Tove says, of not moving into others as Elin says, and of not running wild with hysteria as Ruth says. Yet, those same images also have a positive embodied, grounding, embracing, and nurturing effect – an affective hold – that allow Tove, Elin, and Ruth to engage with the world as they would like to – calmly, firmly, and considerate.

To explain our emotional states in images, the weight of the past, the pains of the body and its neuroses or tantrums, is not only to uncover our emotional experience about something but to enact our body and emotions in socially meaningful ways. The affective flushes, pulses, movements of our minds, hearts, stomachs, and skin (Rosaldo 1984, 143) are felt in a body that is historically situated and always meditated (Mol 2002). Mol stresses how bodies come to life in a particular way depending on historical time and social situations, making us realize that the “fleshiness of being alive” is meditated by, e.g., the language available to account for bodily disease or wellbeing (ibid. 26).

Importantly, mediations of the body, such as a neuroscientific way of rendering the body or psychological therapeutic ways of understanding emotions, are not overdetermined. Images like those presented by Ruth, Tove, and Elin indicate how cultural categories and social mediations are also reworked in creative ways and even contested. Ruth’s way of conceptualizing her work to be mindful as feeding hungry wolves might come closer to the battle it seems to be for her to attain and maintain mindfulness, rather than a blissful stroll around the garden, as evoked in Kabat-Zinn’s and Williams’ books, for instance (Hedegaard 2020). Tove’s inner home surrounded by a mucous membrane and Elin’s broken bench also gives personal, fleshy portrayals of the act of meditation that nuances the idealized and blissful meditator. Their grounding, embracing, and taming ways of imagining themselves made their bodies more inhabitable.

**Conclusion**

Visualizing an inner home; feeling the weight of a heavy backpack; feeding two wolves fighting inside of you. Images pervaded the conversations that I had with mindfulness practitioners and pushed me to look at what images do, how they affect the experience and effect of meditation, and how they enter the continuous work done by mindfulness practitioners to feel, heal, name, and tame. Unlike “imaginative horizons” (Crapanzano 2004) that extend
from the reality of the here and now into a realm beyond the horizon, dreamt, projected, or prophesied, the images imagined and felt by Ruth, Elin, and Tove are immediate, corporeal, and productive. They are images one can live by and through in the here and now. This kind of “imagination” does not give form to the “beyond” (ibid., 17). It moves people in the moment as they align with images of horses and wolves, and as they dwell in the immediate peacefulness of an inner home.

Yet, such individual images cannot be separated from social imagery that reflect ideas about the body, the self, and emotions framing good ways of feeling, interacting, and self-relating. Ruth, Elin, and Tove all recognized the ‘feeling rule’ that being emotional is good; feel it, heal it. Being too emotional is not; name it, tame it. Explaining the realities of their embodied experiences using words like “hysteria,” traditionally associated with female sensitivity, indicate the weight of societal expectation on how they should feel. The following chapter will engage more with this particular aspect of mindful work.71

As a researcher wanting to know how it feels to meditate and why people do it, I asked practitioners to verbalize their contemplative experiences, experiences that were not easily verbalized. In fact, it seems that such experiences of how one feels were often pictorial. To express what is going on or how it feels to “be completely inside of oneself” is challenging without sounding, as Tove says, “weird” or “cryptic.” It is equally difficult for the anthropologist to understand. Attending to imagery and images is an ethnographic approach, a way of listening that encompasses hesitation and uncertainty (Stevenson 2014, 13). I will add that images are also able to encompass the fleshiness, the ambivalence, and the unexpected. Images enable experiences, emotions, and lived lives to sit in tension more easily than facts and numbers, having a suggestive, interpretable quality that can capture its contradictions and affective importance. Images like the wolves, the backpack, and the inner home enable accounts of how mindfulness practitioners feel and imagine themselves as they ground, embrace, and tame themselves to move towards more inhabitable bodies.

71 In further research it would be highly interesting to investigate further the gendered aspects of mindful work and affective labor inspired by other studies that forward gender as an important factor (Søgaard Thomas Friis and Krause-Jensen Jakob 2019).
Chapter 6: Coming to our Senses

Meditation is the only intentional, systematic human activity which at bottom is about not trying to improve yourself or get anywhere else, but simply to realize where you already are.

Kabat-Zinn, Wherever You Go There You Are, 1994

“How does it feel to be me right now?” With this question, Peter, the mindfulness teacher at Kern, would end his guided meditations, encouraging employees to sit in silence and feel what it was like to be them in that particular moment. Sometimes he would add another question to incite participants to consider, “How do I want to proceed when I open my eyes?”

This chapter takes as its point of departure, Peter’s questions asked in a meditation session at Kern to further discuss how mindfulness works upon employees. Is mindfulness a matter of realizing where you already are, as Kabat-Zinn defines it in the quote above? Is it a matter of finding a (‘good’) version of oneself? This chapter argues that the way individual motivation and effort entangle with the realities of the workplace, the social expectation, cultural norms, and economic interests calls on us not to presuppose intentionality (Johansen 2015a, 49) but rather consider the many factors contributing to or restraining how we want to proceed.

In chapter 4, we learned how feeling mindful is not a matter of individual effort alone, and how turning inward to ‘feel how you feel’ is a relational achievement involving assisted feeling, embodied words, and world counterparts such as cream puffs. Employees described how they, through such setups, attuned to themselves to “check their temperature,” as Karen said. We followed that up in chapter 5 with an exploration of how mindfulness practitioners use meditation to craft and nurture grounding, self-embracing, and taming images. Practicing mindfulness inspired interlocutors to “become a better person,” as Pernille said, and to “become more empathetic and less touchy,” as Ruth said. In this chapter, I extend these insights and draw on observations from the classes of both Peter and Ursula, as well as Kabat-Zinn’s work on mindfulness, to discuss choice, care, and sense-making in mindful work. The chapter aims to show that coming to your senses through mindful work—sensing your body and making sense of your embodied condition—is motivated and enabled by particular frameworks for understanding the body, its problems, and ways of healing it. Employees are invited to make sense of themselves and their bodies through a sociality of feeling that is cultural as well as biological and affective as well as individual.
Mixed Emotions: Finding a Mindful Version of Myself

It is an early Thursday morning at Kern, and 20 employees are slowly settling in to do an hour and a half of mindfulness practice together. The sound of bells signals that the meditation begins. Peter encourages us to rest in “the softness” as we close our eyes to each other and the outer world. He talks us through the body from the toes to the head, guiding our attention from one body part to the next. “This is a way of becoming present in our body, reaching our calm state. Most of us only live in the head,” he says, and even with my eyes closed I can imagine how he is putting his hand in front of his throat to indicate how “most people cut off the body” and live in their heads and how this is “why we get stressed.” In the meditation, Peter encourages us to imagine that we are somewhere familiar, engaged in everyday activity; for instance, parking our car and getting ready to pick up our children from kindergarten. He talks to us in a soothing voice:

Just imagine that you are in the parking lot now, and you are in front of the kindergarten, you have been active at work, and now you decide to open the potential for relaxation and letting go of everything.

And you are thinking, ‘before I go in there and get my kids, I want to calm down.’ So you just let go of brain, eyes, sink into your physical body. Sink into it. Open to the wisdom of the body.

And then recognize that you are no longer a chased animal, you are no longer the victim of deadlines or whatever your thinking has been telling you the whole day. Now it is time to let go of anything that is structure and plans, and just be for a moment. Relax in the authentic state of being. Kindness. Follow your breathing, discover its movement. And when you connect to the freshness of the breath, your mind will begin to let go and enable you to let go of whatever you are carrying. You just open up to the calm state inside of you.

And without using your rational mind, you ask yourself: ‘How does it feel to be me right now?’ And then you ask yourself: ‘How do I want to proceed after I open my eyes, going to get my kids?’ And then find that version of yourself that is going to leave the car.

As I listen to Peter’s words in the dim storage facility, I can hear the breaths of the people around me. The sounds from outside the room have retreated from my awareness, as have
thoughts about things I have to do when I return to my office. We all sit awhile in silence. I feel softened and comforted by the meditation and Peter’s encouragement to “let go.” As often happens in meditation during this time in my life, an image of my mother-in-law appears in my mind’s eye. Spring is upon us now, bursting and blooming in bright green. It has proven to be the most challenging time for her so far. Her husband loved this time of year. We lost him suddenly last summer because of a heart condition, and it shook our family deeply. As I imagine her sitting on the porch by herself, tears well up in my eyes. I wipe them away quickly with the back of my hand, as I know that soon enough, Peter will invite us to open our eyes, and I will have to be an anthropologist, not a daughter-in-law. The anthropologist should be affected but not too affected by the meditation. Guided by Peter, I am moved to feel how it feels to be me. The meditation attunes me to both bodily sensations and what matters. In this period of my life, what matters is my family’s grief and our attempt to get back on our feet.

The meditation leaves me feeling comforted and softened, yet Peter’s words also bring about a frustration, or an itchiness—I am not sure what to call it. Parts of me wants to argue with Peter, telling him it is not that easy to find the ‘good’ version of yourself, even if you meditate. Not for me as a daughter-in-law. Not for the parents in the parking lot trying to manage the stress of work in order to leave the car mindfully. Life affects us, leaving us sometimes unable to find a mindful way to go about it. Perhaps I feel frustrated because I feel torn between work and family, wanting to nest at my mother-in-law’s house and, at the same time, wanting to carry on with my work and progress in my fieldwork. Meditation whirls up questions about who I want to be—how I wish to proceed, as Peter frames it—and it makes me wonder how I might better care for others and myself.

Furthermore, as an anthropologist, I am arrested by the wordiness of the meditation. Peter frames the act of meditating as a precursor for proceeding and finding a mindful version of yourself, as if such efforts are a matter of intentional acts—of making a choice. The meditation arouses a feeling of ambivalence in me, encouragement, but also discouragement, as I remember what matters to me and how I want to act. At the same time, I feel the restrictions of attending to what matters most, of how I want to proceed from here.

The bell breaks the silence and my stream of thoughts. We open our eyes, and Peter pairs us up, encouraging us to share how the meditation felt. Next to me is Heather from finance, smiling at me, asking, “so, how did you feel?” Afraid that it might make me too emotional, I do not tell her about the inner image of my mother-in-
law and the grief that it stirred in me. I am also not sure how to tell Heather that mediating made me feel ambivalent. Instead, I stick to my physical reaction and share how the meditation made me feel less tense, softer, and, to be honest, a bit sleepy, which is all true. Heather laughs warmly and tells me that it is interesting that I study mindfulness. “Is it very popular?” she asks, and I nod. “Meditation is all right, I guess,” Heather continues, “but why not do some yoga instead and move around a bit? I mean, people were pretty skeptical in the beginning.” “Well, more than two-thirds of the staff signed up” I say, surprised. “Yeah, we had to,” Heather responds with a shrug. “I thought it was voluntary?” She smiles indulgently at me as if I have said something childish: “When you are encouraged to do something from the top, you do it.” She adds, “it’s not like they are forcing us or anything.”

When mindfulness is practiced at a workplace, people are invested in the practice differently. At Kern, the participants working in the HR department were eager and curious, especially to see how the mindfulness sessions affected their colleagues. To them, mindfulness was part of an ongoing process of dealing with stress. Learning to meditate and be mindful was expected to ease the changes to come in the company. Sales had to go up, and employees would have to run faster. They understood mindfulness as a practice of ‘doing something good for yourself,’ achieving wellbeing alongside other wellbeing initiatives that the company offers to employees, such as training crossfit in the morning. Heather clearly expressed her doubts about the usefulness of practicing mindfulness, clashing with the head of HR, Susan, who believed mindfulness to be an act of care. It was as if the negation “it is not like they are forcing us” emphasized the complex power relations at play. It also displayed the tensions between stress and ease, encouragements and enforcements, care and compliance, the particulars of workplace mindfulness. The employees were not being forced, and the course was not mandatory. Yet there was another force at play, an almost tacit understanding to be good sports and support the initiative to promote a good work environment.

I have a vivid, embodied memory of this meditation session. It was the first time the company CEO showed up to a mindfulness class, and I remember feeling uneasy about it. Anthropologist Helen Verran argues that affective disturbances, what she calls “disconcertments,” may act as bodily indicators guiding the ethnographer’s attention to important differences and tensions in the field (Verran 2001). My disconcertment arising with the arrival of
the CEO—him sitting with arms crossed as if he intended not to get too affected, and the employees eyeing their boss from their seats—made me question whether it is calming to meditate together as a group of colleagues in the workplace.

My conversation with Heather from finance was one of the rare incidents where an employee bluntly articulated a mild discontent with practicing mindfulness at work. Employees would almost always evaluate the classes positively when we engaged in conversation during the sessions, in interviews, or in informal conversation. “I feel relaxed,” “I sleep better,” “it calms me down.” They also expressed how mindfulness was not so useful yet, but would be useful at some point even if they did not really “feel it” right away. Employees often told me, “I know I should do it more,” “I know that it would be good for me,” “I know it is a good thing to do.” In other words, my interlocutors talked about mindfulness practice as imperative, and as a definitive ‘good.’ It is not only mindfulness that emerges as ‘good’ in mindfulness initiatives such as the one at Kern. It is also a particular person, the mindful person, that emerges as ‘good.’

Yet, what is ‘good’ for us, the company as a whole, and the individual employee may well be different. There is no single gradient of the good that we can all agree on (Mol 2002, 117), which Heather makes clear when she smiles at me and says that when the top leadership has decided it is good, you go along. Heather was one of the only people who articulated mindfulness as something she was not entirely satisfied with, but discontent materialized in other ways. For example, the empty chairs in the morning at Kern testified to the decreasing number of people attending the mindfulness class. At the university staff course, some participants told me that it was not a passionate wish to meditate that made them join the mindfulness class during work hours. Rather, it was a way to escape the monotony of their usual work routine. Most employees, however, it must be said, showed a great appreciation for the chance to try something like mindfulness at their workplace. To them, an initiative like mindfulness segmented their workplace as that of a caring and considerate company.

No one I spoke to thought of mindfulness as a miracle cure that transformed them into eternally mindful employees, parents, or people. Neither did Peter articulate this belief when we sat after class talking for hours about mindfulness. Yet, there is something in the format and the promise of mindfulness that assumes that the mindful state is always available as a good choice.72 I discovered this assumption of a natural or authentic mindfulness in the books

---

72 I discuss the naturalization of mindfulness in my article “The mindful gardener and the good employee” (Hedegaard 2020). There, I examine a related issue pointing to how metaphors, such as defining mindfulness as
that I read, in Peter’s meditations, and the lectures and workshops that I attended. This chapter aims to problematize the idea of the mindful state as a choice. It focuses on how choice connects to a sociality of feeling, meaning the social and cultural framing that exists when mindfulness is pursued in workplaces.

**A Good Choice**

In the meditations, Peter encourages the meditators to ask themselves how they want to proceed and to find the version of themselves that will leave the car. These encouragements grant the meditators the choice of selecting which version of themselves best suited to the activity of picking up their children from daycare. I felt that the question of how one wants to proceed when picking up children from kindergarten was rhetorical. The obvious answer would be calmly, kindly, and attentive, since the practitioners have been repeatedly told that the body, which does not choose to let go of structure and plans and the active mode of working, finds itself in ‘level four,’ and thus in danger. Like the diabetic body that does not control its blood sugar level (Law and Mol 2004), a body enslaved by deadlines is a body that ‘leaks’ with stress until something is done to restore the body-mind as a whole. The ‘good’ choice of how one wants to proceed is to be mindful and calm, letting go of deadlines. Peter has a caring and well-meaning approach to the meditators, yet portraying the individual as able to choose freely between being a chased animal haunted by deadlines and a mindful parent is a promise of self-mastery rarely matched by everyday life. The person enacted in the meditation is one with direct access to her bodily states and with the ability to notice, assess, and choose how to feel and how to proceed. Choosing to be mindful and letting go of deadlines may be doable inside the meditation hall, but outside of it is an altogether different affair. Peter knows this, of course, which is why he urges participants to make meditation an everyday habit. He firmly believes that continuous practice will enable such ‘good’ choices in the long run.

The idea of individual choice is a firmly rooted pillar in ‘Western civilization,’ yet, as Mol argues, life offers different “situations of choice” (Mol 2008, 7). Some situations do not seem to leave you with much choice. When one understands life as an array of options to choose from, the individual becomes solely responsible for her choices. In Mol’s example, living with a chronic disease such as diabetes exemplifies how life sometimes leaves you an inborn ‘seed’ and meditation as a ‘cultivation of one’s mindfulness garden,’ work to naturalize mindfulness as an inherently good way of being.
with little choice, regarding for instance what and when to eat. In my ethnography, the setting of a place of work shows us that others often tend to make choices for you. If the headquarters of the company such as Kern commands the Danish affiliation to increase sales, sales are increased, and the individual employee finds herself with a bigger pile of files on her desk. She can brace herself, take deep breaths, walk around the block every two hours to refresh herself—these are all ways to make the excessive workload manageable, but are they really choices? I found that employees experienced their lives not as filled with choices, but rather management, careful planning, coordination, and caring for themselves to meet the expectations of oneself and others.

Still, choice was an important component when Kern initiated the series of mindfulness sessions in its sales department. Employees should not be forced to join, the course should not be mandatory, and the process should be evaluated to include the employees’ opinions and experiences. Yet, many of the employees understood the course as precisely the opposite, as mandatory, if only by implication. Several told me that they joined because it was compulsory, and others, like Heather, told me that joining is “what you do” when the top leadership encourages it. Pernille, who did not think of herself as “the mindfulness-type,” expressed gratitude that someone had “chosen for her” because this meant that she actually tried mindfulness, something she would never have chosen to practice herself. Having someone else choose for you is not necessarily a bad thing, then. Having to choose yourself can be an ambivalent task, perhaps leaving you with the feeling that you should have chosen more wisely (Mol 2008, 79).

In Ursula’s course at the university, she greatly emphasized choice and intentionality as well, as we saw in chapter 2, where Ursula invited participants to convey their “intention” with mindfulness, mediated by a picture. It was an elective course, and employees could choose freely from a course catalog. The first day of mindfulness, Ursula emphasized, “This is your journey.” Yet many of Ursula’s course participants told me that they had not chosen the course singlehandedly, that often employers or colleagues had recommended the course out of care, sometimes out of worry, trying to think about what might be good for them. Elin told me how she signed up for mindfulness classes by recommendation from her boss, who “knew about her backpack,” her painful past. Even though employees were aided and encouraged by others, both courses emphasized individual, autonomous choice. One thing was the motivations and intentions of participants. Another thing was the way Peter and Ursula emphasized choice and control in class. The body was an entity which meditation practice might
help practitioners gain control over. While teachings of mindfulness, on the one hand, emphasize the connectivity and fluidity between the individual and the environment by defining calmness as contagious and stress as infectious, for instance, moving from one body to another, and thus spreading to the entire workplace. On the other hand, teachers emphasize the individual’s ability to master the impressions of the world by meditation, by turning inward, which suggested a more bounded individual. Let me elaborate on choice and control by relating an example from Ursula’s teaching one morning in March of 2017.

Civilized Bodies

“Did you know that you are on autopilot 46.9% of the time?” Ursula exclaimed during the second session of mindfulness for eleven university staff members and me. We were gathered in the cozy course facility, finishing our breakfast and drinking coffee, when Ursula continued to unfold the way mindfulness practice helps us to notice when we are in autopilot mode. “Each time we notice that we are drifting off with our thoughts and the awareness is lost, that is the crucial moment. It is really in this moment, when we come back to the awareness and say, ‘Hey, where are my thoughts?’ that we become mindful. Every time we make a conscious decision to bring back our attention to what we are doing, we are mindful. It is like doing a push-up with the brain.” Ursula smiled enthusiastically while stretching out her arm only to bend it again, flexing her muscles.

In class, I remember wondering about the concept of the autopilot, feeling an instinctive resistance towards the idea of being acutely attentive all the time yet also feeling encouraged to exercise my brain to be able to become mindful. I thought about what it does to people to be told that they are on autopilot half the time. What does that knowledge effect in them? I also remember wondering if not autopilot, whatever it was, could be a good thing? During my fieldwork, I learned more about the concept and why it is considered a problematic state in the mindfulness vernacular. Autopilot is considered the antithesis of being mindful, attentive, present, and available. I noticed how participants on the course started using expressions such as “I was on autopilot” when they referred to mindless actions and heavy moods, such as getting annoyed while waiting for the bus. “The bus doesn’t move faster because of my hot temper and impatience. I might as well take the opportunity to listen to the birds.” Pragmatic reasoning and a positive valuation of the everyday sensory experience were foregrounded in
mindfulness classes. It was fascinating to follow how people applied new words, ‘mindfulness words,’ to their everyday experience after having participated in a short course in mindfulness.

Expressions like ‘being on autopilot-mode’ and ‘doing push-ups with the brain’ are particular ways of talking about the body, in which individual experience of getting lost in thought is framed as ‘autopilot’ and meditating as ‘mental fitness.’ Here I am thinking through Ian Hacking’s contention that all intentional acts are acts under a description. He argues how, when “new modes of description come into being, new possibilities for action come into being in consequence” (Hacking 1986, 166). But it is not only modes of action that come into being. It is also modes of feeling and ways of inhabiting the body that come into being as embodied experiences are understood through novel frameworks such as ‘autopilot.’

As I have noted in previous chapters, I take as my premise that bodies are not merely something we are (e.g., being a subject inhabiting a body), or something we have (e.g., being an object of medical intervention). Bodies are something we do (Mol 2002; Law and Mol 2004). The frames available for ‘doing’ our bodies affect how we ‘do’ them, what we deem unhealthy, problematic, or good for them, and also what we imagine our bodies are capable of. A mindfulness class procures a particular form of reality for the lived body. Bodies come into being in particular ways: the brain, for example, is enacted as a muscle to be trained and thus an entity we can choose to take control over or not.

The way mindfulness courses set up frameworks for people to evaluate their bodies was evident in the semantics and became visible when people shifted from saying “my body” to “the body,” and from “I” (jeg) to “one” or “you” (man), in order to illustrate the difference between what they felt, experienced, and how they acted, to how one could (and should) feel, experience, and act. Let me give a couple of examples.

“I have two small children. So it is difficult to be as calm as one should be.”

Alice, 38.

“I would like to get a new perspective on life, get another pace in life. You have to do something actively to achieve it; otherwise, the brain just takes over and makes habits.”

Benjamin, 32.

I sensed that participants experienced some kind of comfort in leaning on the vernacular of mindfulness and the promise of finding a mindful version of themselves. Mindfulness classes
presented them with a grid with which to organize the messiness of everyday life. People attending mindfulness training did not necessarily think about absent-mindedness as being ‘bad’ before the concept of ‘autopilot’ was described to them. Parts of their thinking pattern could now, via the category of ‘autopilot,’ be ascribed as a possible precursor to stress. *One shouldn’t let the brain take over and make habits.*

When practitioners of mindfulness tend to their bodies as they meditate and listen to the mindfulness teacher, they cannot avoid being affected by normative assumptions of how the proper body is constituted, what it can do, and how it should be affected. These courses affect practitioners’ ideas about how their own bodies work on themselves, and how they compare to the mindful body. *The brain might take over if I don’t meditate. I know that I should be calmer.* What I am saying here is that mindfulness courses ‘do the body’ in specific ways that connect with societal rationales about what the healthy body is and what the good (work) life entails.

In *The Civilizing Process* (1939), Norbert Elias notes how ‘civilized’ forms of bodily conduct, characterized by self-restraint and strict control of behavior and affect among Western upper-class society, are essential instruments of dominance as they serve as markers of distinction and prestige (Elias 1994). Social constraints convert into self-restraint that converts into a “more or less habitual and automatic individual self-regulation of drives and affects – possible only for people normally protected from external, physical threat” (Elias 1994, 460–61). The connection between so-called civilized manners, self-restraint, and prestige is evident today as well. Mol reminds us that self-restraint and taming the passions are seen as acts of civility and good citizenship. Take the situation of a meeting, for example:

Calmly take your seat. While the meeting lasts, you will not shuffle, fidget, yawn, sleep, scream, or scratch yourself. Your body is supposed to be able to postpone its needs for food, beverages, and toilet breaks (not to mention sex). Meetings require us to be physically present, but our bodies have to simultaneously absent themselves (Mol 2008, 34)

Professional life has a range of unspoken rules that discipline our bodies into certain modes (sitting still, being quiet) and rhythms that follow the clock, not the body. Contemporary work life produces excessive affects; stress, agitation, excitement and thrills. Some affects are

---

73 Emily Martin remarks how the late twentieth century fear in face of the collapsing public and corporate cohesion finds some comfort in the universalizing structure of neurons (Martin 2000a, 583).

74 The lower strata, Elias argues, are more “directly and spontaneously” driven by their drives and affect (ibid.).
more welcome than others are. A little stress is good for work performance. Too much is damaging. Learning to be mindful – to feel what it is like to be me, as the teacher Peter would phrase it - is a matter of getting in touch with bodily affects. Mindfulness courses offer a model of how a nicely balanced, not stressed, calm body reacts to the “frantic world” around us (M. Williams and Penman 2011). It is an inspiration, as Alice said. It is a reminder, as Ruth said. The ‘mindful body’ is both sensitive (in touch with emotions) and thick-skinned (having the ability to let emotions and affective imprints go).

Mol considers how Henriette, her interlocutor who lives with diabetes, may go about getting through a long meeting without causing herself a ‘hypo’ on the one hand, and without violating the norms of a meeting on the other. The blood sugar level may drop, urging her affected body to reach out for an apple even if eating during meetings is not suitable. She must find ways of seriously taking care of her body so that she can be taken seriously when she speaks, Mol argues (Mol 2008, 35). While Mol’s interlocutor struggled to balance her blood sugar level in everyday life, people seeking mindfulness are seeking ways to balance their stress levels. Many employees did not have stress yet, but they anticipated that they might become stressed in the future.

Who will ensure the recomposition of the body that is stressed out, I asked in chapter 4, prompted by the fact that when employees feel how they feel in a body scan, such actions are said to lead to calmness and reduced stress levels. But what if they don’t? Peter would say that the relaxing of the body in meditation (the sitting, sinking, breathing, and so forth) helps us maintain level one, two, or three, at the same time as avoiding and counteracting level four. To Peter, to sink into the body in meditation opens a path to an embodied wisdom that helps the meditator assess how she feels and enact a good version of herself (to leave the car). Yet I contend that, like persons with diabetes as exemplified in Mol’s ethnography, persons with stress have no way of being fully and solely in control of their recomposition. They are not in control of the size of their workloads or the excretion of cortisol, which happens automatically as a stress response when a person is pressed under huge workloads, for instance. Instead, staying in balance depends on dispersed coordination “inside and beyond the skin”

---

75 “A body with a hypo (that is, with hypoglycaemia, a blood sugar level that is too low) acts wildly. It may say unpleasant, aggressive things, begin to swear. Bystanders may learn to attribute such transgressions to your disease. If so, they may forgive you. But will they still take you seriously a little later, after you have eaten? You cannot tell. Thus hypos are to be avoided during meetings. However, at the same time you are not supposed to do what you need to do in order to ensure this. Civil bodies are to be subjected to the agenda of the meeting” (Mol 2008, 35).
(Mol 2008, 34): minding one’s body, adapting to the environment, and trying to relate in meaningful ways to oneself and the surrounding world. Based on my fieldwork experiences and analyses, I suggest, instead, that employees pursuing mindfulness in a workplace context are moved by a myriad of elements (work expectations, career ambitions, family responsibilities, physical health, affective imprints and more) that complicate how mindfulness works and how it works upon employees. In the next section, I illustrate how evaluating mindfulness segments the opposite idea of how mindfulness works—that it imports the idea of the individual as primarily responsible for being calm and mindful.

**Surveying Feeling**

Peter did not only encourage a self-reflexive dialogue in class, for instance, when asking “how do you want to proceed?” he also inquired into the employees’ mindfulness more explicitly and on behalf of the company when he completed three surveys before, during, and after the mindfulness course. As we saw in chapter 3, Kern evaluates the mindfulness initiative through a survey that documents the practitioners’ development and progression by measuring their levels of stress, ability to sleep, efficiency, and the capacity to be present at work and at home, among others factors.

Participants respond to 32 different statements, such as “I feel efficient at work,” choosing their answers on a scale of “very efficient,” “moderately efficient,” and “not efficient at all.” Almost all statements refer to “I” or “you” by proposing, for instance, “I am good at listening to myself and react upon what I feel,” or “I experience that my energy level at work is high/medium/low.” Only one statement relates to other people by asking, “have your superior supported the initiative?” What interests me here is how the primary function of the survey is not to evaluate mindfulness as such but to evaluate the employees’ ability to develop mindfulness. So, whose needs are attended to when measuring mindfulness ‘levels’ in the company? It is the needs of the stressed-out employee and the workplace undergoing an optimization that is at play. Put simply, the central message of the survey seems to be, “we recognize that the workplace affects you—how well are you at handling this? Does mindfulness change your ability to handle it?” The survey does not ask what the company can do to affect the employee differently.

Drawing on inspiration from Strathern (2000) and Johansen and Spielhaus (2019), I suggest that the survey functions as a technology and a cultural artifact that does three things. One, it allows for a representation of Kern as a place that cares for its employees and takes
control over stressful circumstances. Two, it frames the problem of stress as something to be individually dealt with; the question of whether ‘I’ am good at being present, for instance, not only invites a response but also, in some sense, holds the one being asked responsible for what is evoked in the question (see Johansen and Spielhaus 2019, 174). Three, the survey imitates the logic that was also prevalent when I discussed the mindfulness initiative with Susan, who told me that Kern’s problem was its passionate employees. According to this “logic of choice” (Mol 2008), employees have the choice not to work so much—they could simply choose not to be so passionate about work. It is the passionate employees who overwork themselves who are at risk of burnout, Susan indicated. I tried to respectfully ask Susan if not the employees’ worked so much because they were very busy and burdened by heavy workloads. She then reversed the conversation to talking about how stress was not only connected to work but to family life and challenges at home.

Considering how work and family life can add to experiences of stress and pressure, I believe that Susan had a valid point in complicating the origins of stress. Still, it was striking that the issue of whether Kern was putting too much pressure on its employees was not part of Susan’s narrative. Consequently, the survey does not attempt to evaluate the company, only the employee. I have no doubt that Susan wanted to care for her employees, I am merely suggesting that the survey exemplifies a specific affective relation between the workplace and the employee, an attachment between employee and workplace that is optimistic at its best, and cruel optimism at its worst (Berlant 2011). The individual is invited to work with her affectivity through mindfulness, trying not to be too affected, yet allowing herself to attune to her own bodily responses in order to react to stress, for instance. With mindfulness initiatives, Susan may acknowledge that the workplace affects employees and grant them the tools and the choice of doing something about that affected state. They may choose to meditate in the parking lot in order to step out of the car in a mindful version, or they may choose not to. The choice is up to them. With mindfulness, the management of Kern acknowledges but does not fundamentally problematize the affective effects of the workplace. Pace, performance, and competition still defines the work environment.

If we look back at Hochschild’s examination of the training of stewardesses in The Managed Heart ([1983] 2012), we can conclude that such a relationship between employee and management, where the employee is supposed to work on herself, is not new. Still, it is manifested differently at Kern. Hochschild shows how the recurrent training for flight attendants particularly dealt with states of anger. “The causes of anger were not acknowledged as
part of the problem…The only question to be seriously discussed was, “how do you rid yourself of anger?” (Hochschild [1983] 2012, 113). In the questionnaires at Kern, anger is not a part of the evaluation. Instead, employees are giving the proposition: “I am good at listening to myself,” for instance, and they may rate whether they are good or not at doing so. It is as if mindfulness practitioners are asked to do a more all-encompassing affective labor than the flight attendants were. They are asked never to reach a point of anger. They are asked to listen to themselves, detect how they feel to ensure that anger will not reside in them, but instead pass by, like clouds in the sky, recognized but ultimately let go of. Feel it, heal it. Name it, tame it.

In the book Coming to Our Senses – Healing Ourselves and the World through Mindfulness (2005), Kabat-Zinn probes mindfulness as the path to meaningfulness, health, and sanity, not only to the individual body but to the body politic. Coming to our senses has a double meaning referring to sensing (tasting, smelling, etc.) as well as making sense, processes that are interrelated in Kabat-Zinn’s framework. With mindfulness, we can—as a species—wake up to the fullness of our lives and face our responsibilities for collective well-being (Kabat-Zinn 2012). Kabat-Zinn outlines a sympathetic and visionary ambition for human beings, which nonetheless rests on the belief that we, as a species, will arrive at the same conclusions of ‘good’ when sensing and making sense.

It is interesting how sensing the body here becomes a path to proper action, thinking about how the senses have for millennia been opposed to reason and attached to bodily vice, immoral pleasures, and truth errors (Foucault [1982] 2006, 335). Perhaps this is not so strange after all, considering the way sensing is done in mindfulness. Mindfulness practice does not advise people to indulge in either visceral pain, pleasure, feelings, or even thoughts. All these embodied phenomena should be approached like clouds in the sky that glide on by. The connection between such non-attached attunement to the body, mind, and emotions of the meditator and the development of a mindful state is complicated. Mindfulness adherents say that the mindful attitude comes to them naturally as a result of the practice. The famous

---

76 “The entire species needs to come to its senses,” Kabat-Zinn exclaims in an interview with the magazine Inquiring Mind (Gates and Nisker 2004).

77 Foucault cites Plato for arguing that it is only the ears that, when disciplined, give rise to virtue. Listening continues to be a virtuous act and an important ascetic practice among the stoics. Listening, as Foucault reads Epictetus, requires silence, rules of physical demeanor (the philosopher does not show up with his hair smelling of perfume), precise posture, and paying attention to the meaning of words, not their beauty or grammar (Foucault [1982] 2006, 348–49).
neuroscientists' Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson describe how, with meditation practice, meditators not only hold mindful attitudes; they embody them and act upon them. The body becomes “primed for love” through the sheer act of meditation, meaning, for example, that meditation prepares a person to act out when suffering is encountered (Goleman and Davidson 2017, 121). Coming back to Peter’s meditation, we see how such relations between meditation and action unfold. The meditator is instructed to sink into the body to reach a calm state. The meditator lets go of what her ‘thinking’ has been telling her all day, and thus realizes—comes to her senses, as it were—that she is not a chased animal or a victim of deadlines. Through meditation, one can let go off and effectively tame the affective imprints of work, of feeling chased or being a victim of deadlines. To harness one's mindfulness is to return to a natural state of mind that is calm and composed. Mindfulness is about “arriving at your own door,” as one of Kabat-Zinn’s books is called (Kabat-Zinn 2007). This is what I challenge by pointing to a sociality of feeling in mindful work. I do not mean to say that meditation does not have an effect or that it does not have a profound and positive impact on some. My own experiences of meditating, as well as the many accounts of meditative experiences that I have listened to, testify to the richness of such activities. Yet, the assumption that good conduct—and in the case of Kern, good work environments—comes naturally from meditating must be questioned. It is worth questioning because such an idea puts a lot of pressure on the individual: after having meditated, you must be capable of acting ‘right’ even when faced with increased pressure, a proposition that can be problematic in the workplace.

Kabat-Zinn holds that we come to our senses by returning to who we really are, emphasizing the mindful state as an authentic state of mind. I argue that we, the employees and I, come to our senses as a result of a sociality of feeling that asks something of us, moves us, and sometimes pushes us to feel how we feel so as to reach a state of calm, kindness, and balance, even in a work environment that sometimes exhibits opposite qualities—ruptures, roughness, and imbalance. I do not intend to deny the positive effects that were part of employee engagement with meditation. But I do want to problematize both the idea of a mindful state as natural and the idea of the ability to choose mindfulness. Instead, I point to the multiple socio-cultural factors and logics that frame engagements with mindfulness at work. In the following section, I want to broaden this perspective. I aim to show how the mindful work which employees at Kern engage in, connects to more general ideas of sensitivity, resilience, and proper conduct, illustrated in the common Danish expression mærke efter. Hence, I pick up where I left off in the analysis of the emic notion of mærke efter in chapter 4.
**Mærke efter: A Balancing Act of Feeling**

The survey that Peter runs at Kern asks participants to evaluate their ability to feel how they feel, to *mærke efter*. For example, the survey proposes the statement, “I am good at listening to myself and react to what I feel.” The activity to feel how you feel, *at mærke efter*, is, in Danish popular discourse, something that is both encouraged and discouraged, and associated with either strength or weakness depending on the situation (Abrahamsen 2014a). People have to balance the act of *mærke efter*, as doctor Jesper Bay-Hansen declares, adding how we must take it upon ourselves *at mærke efter* without overdoing it (Bay-Hansen 2015). To *mærke efter* is in some contexts highly encouraged and elevated as both sensible and reasonable, and as a marker of good character: s/he is good at *mærke efter*, which might refer to somebody who is able to feel, sense, and adjust when work is too much, for instance (Jønsson 2017). People who are not good at *mærke efter* can get sick with stress because they are not in touch with their bodies. Being in touch with yourself is considered a way of connecting you with inner dreams and longings (Papsøe 2018). *Mærke efter* can also be something advisable to do in your relation to others. You can *mærke efter* how you affect others to take care of your surroundings. You would often be advised to *mærke efter* when having to make defining life-choices. A young Danish high school student in doubt about her future studies would, for example, be encouraged by her teachers or parents to *mærke efter*—to ensure that she makes the right decision. People on the other side of a personal crisis might conclude that, now, they are able to better *mærke efter* in the sense that they are better at perceiving how they feel, scanning themselves for possible risk factors, such as a racing heartbeat, and reading those bodily affects as part of a bigger picture that calls upon them to act. *To mærke efter*, then, is at times used to refer to a skillful and intuitive yet rational self-relation.

However, to *mærke efter* also has a different ring to it. As mentioned in chapter 1, the massive success of psychology professor Brinkmann’s book, *Stand Your Ground* (2014), recommends the reader to “stop feeling how you feel” (*hold op med at mærke efter i dig selv*) (Brinkmann 2014, 23). The book’s encouragement reflects the ambivalent and contested nature of the activity of feeling how you feel. In a conversation with my father about my work, he noticed how the expression *mærke efter* to men in his generation, the baby boomers, was not at all appealing. It is something women do, a feminine thing. Men do not sit and feel how they are feeling—they do not *mærke efter*. This reaction is not so surprising since studies have shown that, from a historical perspective, being in touch with emotions is linked to female vulnerability (Lutz 1990, 70; Rosaldo, Lamphere, and Bamberger 1974, 30). Attending
and attuning to body aches as well as heartaches in the gesture of mærke efter is, therefore, on the edge of what is appropriate in some situations and for some Danish people, men in particular. The men who had undergone mindfulness training at Kern and the university had a more ambiguous experience of mærke efter in meditations than did the women I interviewed. During our conversation, John, the finance director at Kern, stressed how mindfulness practice was a challenging and ambivalent practice for him because it opened up to a more sensitive dimension, which he usually did not identify with. Having been employed by the company in leading positions in several places in the world, John was always busy and worked many hours a week. For John, attending the mindfulness course was a way of setting an example for his subordinates, knowing that they, especially the men, might be reluctant to meditate and to feel how they were feeling. John himself pondered if mindfulness and to engage in the activity of feeling how he feels, mærke efter, might sensitize him too much, making him less able to endure his demanding job.

The expression and practice at mærke efter is multivalent. It is a practice that is associated with the healthy, capable, sensible person that takes his own mental and physical condition seriously. It is also, at the same time, associated with someone who is self-indulgent, weak, vulnerable, and unable to push through the unavoidable hard times. Susan reflected on the importance of striking a balance between mærke efter yet not becoming overly self-involved by telling me how important it was to talk about stress, but not talk too much about it. Susan related: “When I was young, people never talked about having stress or being stressed. It was another mentality. Nowadays, people might have a stomachache, and they start wondering, ‘Oh my gosh, do I have stress?’” What the engagement in mindfulness practice should do, it seems, was to affect the right level of sensitivity. Susan was offering mindfulness out of care and out of the interest to make Kern run as smoothly as possible, creating a better place to work. Yet, I wondered, what happens if you do not become better at being present or feeling mindful after the ten weeks of mindfulness? How would you be positioned in relation to your superior if you show symptoms of stress after attending a course that should have prevented you from developing such symptoms? What did someone like Heather from finance gain from the course, not aligning with the ‘goodness’ of mindfulness, yet feeling obligated to engage? I now turn to these questions and discuss mindfulness as an act of care and investigate agency, responsibility, and resistance.
Who Cares? Agency, Responsibilization, and Resistance

I am certainly not the first to suggest that workplaces put (too much) responsibility on its employees when it comes to stress and wellbeing. There are several workplace studies of the way Danish employees must self-manage and navigate stressful conditions at work (Willig 2016; Buch, Andersen, and Sørensen 2009b; Korsbæk Sørensen 2015). Internationally, sociologist Nicolas Rose has, for one, been instrumental in pointing out how individuals become accountable for their health and wellbeing in the twenty-first century (Rose 2007). Responsibilization is also identified as a possible harmful outcome of mindfulness at work. This thesis contribute a nuanced perspective of the relationship between responsibilization and resistance at play in contemporary secular iterations of mindfulness. Critics of workplace mindfulness suggest that mindfulness interventions work as opiates for the middle class (Drougge in Purser, Forbes, and Burke 2016, 168), implying an affinity to Marx’s critique of religion and explicating how the mindful imperative to “accept things as they are” is “social anesthesia” that preserves the status quo (Purser 2019, 38). This strand of research argues that mindfulness at work inhibits employees from reflecting on their own conditioning, becoming more accepting of, and less resistant to, problematic conditions at work.

Purser has emphatically argued that, because mindfulness fits so neatly into the mindset of the workplace, offering relief from stress and enhanced concentration, it only challenges the status quo by offering people “ways to become more skillful at the rat race” (Purser 2019, 25). To Purser, the weight on “being” rather than “doing” in mindfulness is symptomatic of the practice and its (lack of) political consequence as it leaves people apathetic and sedate. Purser’s critique involves two elements in particular that hinder a more comprehensive way of looking at mindfulness: firstly, the critique is largely built on macrosociological analyses and does not import perspectives from people who have been subjected to mindfulness at work, and secondly, the critique grows out of a particular idea of what it means and what it looks like to resist and challenge the status quo—what elsewhere has been called “the depoliticisation thesis” (Salmenniemi 2020, 10). It is true that if one looks for political rallies or collective demonstrations, there is nothing of the sort in my empirical material. To understand the ways in which people use mindfulness to resist and challenge, one has to look at the “terrain of micro-politics and everyday resistance” (Salmenniemi 2020, 10). While Purser’s work offers an important critique of contemporary mindfulness, it is my contention, however, that mindfulness practice is not a sedative. Rather, mindfulness practice
makes participants reflect on their conditions through mindful work. As suggested by Robbins, the blindspot of understanding someone (e.g., stressed employees) as suffering or victims of social anesthesia is that we might disregard the complex field of power and agency and the multiple ways people strive towards the ‘good’ (Robbins 2013). In stating this, I am not suggesting that there is no relevance in thinking through the concept of the neoliberal in relation to practices such as mindfulness. On the contrary, I am inspired by analyses that do so (Lea 2009; Markula 2014).78

My empirical material contributes to such investigations into the self-care, the liberating or limiting power of body-mind practices, by showing how mindfulness practice is both accommodating to the norms of the workplace, focusing on productivity, and entangling individual health in this calculation. At the same time, employees describe how practicing mindfulness allows them to reconnect with the limits of what they will accept. We may recall how Tove explained her meditation practice as a way to stand her ground and, finally, after years of accommodating to poor planning of her teaching, insist that it be rescheduled, for instance. Or Elin, who hangs up the phone instead of enduring rude behavior. Or Henrik, who takes up playing the piano again after 20 years, pushed by his reflection through mindfulness that enough is enough, and that he must take time out for himself in a job that often feels borderless. And yes, Tove, Elin, and Henrik stand their ground within the system. Nobody that I spoke with attempted to quit their jobs or to overthrow the system in which they found themselves. Nevertheless, that did not mean they were oblivious to their conditions either.

Tove, Elin, and Henrik, who participated in the staff course at the university, stood their ground in new ways aided by mindfulness. At Kern, such acts of opposition did not transpire. There can be several reasons for this, some of which are methodological. When I interviewed employees at Kern, it was usually at workplace premises. Interviews with participants from the staff university course did usually not take place at their place of work but mine. This may have allowed for different kinds of conversations. While obvious acts of opposition to structural or situational work problems were not at the center of my conversations with employees at Kern, it was clear that participants of both Ursula and Peter’s courses used

78 Sociologist Pirrko Markula has, for instance, examined how yoga practice in the United States is marked by a neoliberal mentality of choice, where yoga practices become “self-enterprising” and part of a scheme to maximize a healthy lifestyle (Markula 2014). Human geographer Jennifer Lea has argued how yoga practice functions as a self-reflexive therapy that balances between liberating and limiting in the care of the self (Lea 2009).
mindfulness practice to reconsider what a good, fulfilled life looks like. Pernille is an apt example of this. In a sense, she embodies the duality of care and compliance of mindful work. She would never have engaged in mindfulness on her own initiative, yet because of the encouragement to do so from the management, she got to experience another way of relating to herself through kind eyes, finding a peaceful place inside herself, and with it a renewed patience and affection. This was not only manifesting in her relationship to herself but also in relation to her husband and her step-daughter, with whom she made efforts to be more attentive, empathetic, and appreciative. To Pernille, learning to be affected in mindfulness was a way to care for and articulate and feel her body in new ways (Latour 2004b).

Mol’s work shows in inspiring ways how taking care of yourself—or letting others take care of you— involves constant attentive work to ‘tinker,’ meaning adjust, try out, and experiment. “Caring is not a matter of control,” she argues, “let alone of oppression. It does not involve staying free or making someone else into a slave. Instead, it is a matter of attending to the balances inside and the flows between a fragile body and its intricate surroundings” (Mol 2008, 34). Working towards a ‘good’ life by caring for oneself, involves tinkering with the body in concrete ways: it is to breathe all the way down into the stomach, for instance—not only because it makes you approach others more calmly, but also because it feels calming, because it makes you feel better.

Mindfulness is about making work life more sustainable, as Tove said. It is about sticking out moments of disillusionment and appreciating the good times, Ruth said. She noted that other people perhaps deemed her naïve for turning to meditation. Was this really the best way to deal with her disillusionment? Why not fight back? No, said Ruth, she was not naïve. On the contrary, she made a conscious effort to deal with the difficulties of work and home life as best she could, meditating regularly and through meditation crafting an inhabitable body that harbored both the vices of the bad wolf and the virtues of the good wolf that she imagined inside of her

Practitioners of mindfulness attempt to attune to themselves, to mærke efter, in order to better adapt to their work environment. Their engagements in acts of meditation cannot be understood as an act of freedom or returning to an authentic being since meditation is also part of being a professional. It is to mind your duty as an employee. Yet it is also not an utterly submissive act, since it involves reflexive engagement that has its own affective, individual, and creative outcomes. The practice of mindfulness shows us, then, that affective experiences intertwine with norms and ‘social goods’ (Johansen 2015b, 50).
Conclusion: Sense-Making Through a Sociality of Feeling

As I noted at the beginning of this thesis, I felt at home in my field, which provided both insights and frustrations of familiarity. The idea of having a choice concerning work life and its stresses was also familiar. When I was interviewed for my PhD fellowship in January of 2016, the hiring committee asked me, as one of their first questions: “So, how will you cope with the stress of writing a PhD dissertation?” They elaborated: “We know that many PhD-students fall ill with stress. What will you do to prevent that from happening?” I remember being confused, not knowing what a good answer might be to this hypothetical yet highly probable future situation. I answered, somewhat hesitantly, “I am good at listening to my body.” I wanted to come off as a person in touch with my vulnerabilities, yet with the capability of someone who would not be struck down by stress. Contemporary work life asks this of my interlocutors and of me to adapt to the work environment; to be persistently attentive, to check, and keep track of our affective state, without overdoing it, not becoming self-absorbed or obsessive. We are asked this so that we might act upon our embodied state, make a choice to meditate, take a walk, or ask our superior for other options: “can I be reassigned, please?” In this way, we attune to ourselves to adapt to the work environment, the “environmental,” as Massumi (Massumi 2009) has characterized contemporary power regimes.

I think about Ruth, her reassignment from the Palm House, and her resigned laugh as she told me about her disillusion with sticking with a job she once loved but now mostly endures. “I guess we all go through times like these,” she had said, and added, half-jokingly, half-seriously, “then we must sit down and meditate on it.” The reason why Ruth and I both laughed when she said this is that we both recognized the tragic undertone of her suggestion. Meditation does not do away with Ruth’s disillusionment, and it will not bring back the time when her job allowed her to meticulously care for the plants, envision new exhibitions, and curate them well. Meditation will help Ruth deal with the fact that such a way of working is no longer possible because of the accelerated pace of her job. It will help her attune to herself and her embodied state, enabling her to manage conversations with colleagues and visitors to the garden in a civilized manner. Ruth dearly appreciates this effect of mindfulness. It is not an effect that is purely performative. Ruth feels better, feels good, after meditating. Meditation, amongst many other things, enables her to relate to others in meaningful ways. We could understand Ruth’s mindful work and her ‘acceptance of what is in the moment’ as
compliance and submission to the existent order of things. We could also understand ‘ac-
ceptance’ as indulging in what is, cultivating appreciation with whatever is offered in the mo-
ment. So, the Palm House did not work out—how can we make the best out of the transition?

Problematising the idea of being given a choice through mindfulness to combat stress, I do not mean to say that the management at Kern and the university were not caring for and worrying about the health of their employees. No, they cared within a specific frame-
work, a sociality of feeling that posited meditation as a good solution to stress, when other so-
lutions might also be important. As I look back on my fieldwork, I do not think that my inter-
locutors made clean-cut choices. But I do not mean to say that they did not have any agency.
Instead, they attempted to stay afloat in the heavy atmosphere. The idea of choice—with its
connotations of a free-willed, autonomous subject—escapes the messy realities of employees
attending a mindfulness class. Feeling good, working well, and acting properly are engage-
ments that depend on social, affective, economic, and cultural factors, and they are always
negotiated. How to care for oneself and others, and how to show empathy and appreciation,
are not matters of making choices but of attuning, adapting, and adjusting, of making peace
with the imperfection of oneself and the present moment.
Conclusion: Mindful Work

This dissertation explores, from various angles, historically, affectively, emotionally, and on an embodied, material, and social level how mindful work is enacted and embodied in two Danish workplaces. This exploration rests on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with employees, managers, and mindfulness teachers. The detailed ethnographic descriptions show the complex ways in which individual stories and pursuits of mindfulness enmesh in and follows from broader socioeconomic as well as sociopolitical ideas about the ‘good’ employee, healthy bodies, and thriving economies. Denmark is a particularly interesting place to study the global surge of mindfulness because of its status as a predominantly secular welfare state and a so-called happy nation. The Danish context thus invites a study of the tension between stress and happiness, the religious and the secular, individual and collective wellbeing, as well as emotions and economy. In this conclusion, I recapitulate the overall argument of the dissertation, and the conclusions put forth in the preceding chapters, which form the basis of the concept of the sociality of feeling.

The first part of the thesis (chapters 1 through 3) answers the research question regarding how mindfulness is put to work – how it is enacted – showing how mindfulness emerges in popular discourses and materializes in local settings with a particular focus on the workplace.

In Chapter 1, Enacting Mindfulness in Denmark, I argued that mindfulness has emerged as a modern-day therapy that has been deemed suitable for business because of the way Buddhism has been historically reified and imagined as therapeutic and scientific. I demonstrated that mindfulness is widely celebrated in a Danish context. Still, mindfulness is also heavily contested and configured quite ambivalently in the public debate as both a symptom and a solution to declining services of the welfare state. Mindfulness adherents enact mindfulness as a path to restore the once happy nation of Denmark. Critics wonder if the trend of individualized meditation practices is a sign of an individualization process that makes each person responsible for her own health. Mindfulness enacted as a solution or symptom to public health problems configures the meditator (and the one who does not meditate) in a particular way concerning state health and national economy. The findings of this chapter supported the overall conclusion that mindfulness practice is not limited to a private experience. When the individual ‘turns inward,’ she does so in relation to and motivated by the social and cultural worlds in which she is embedded.
Chapter 2 Affective Work Environments began with a good intention and a heavy atmosphere. Invited by Ursula, twelve employees declared their motivations for learning mindfulness, which sparked an analysis of the affective relation between the individual employee and the ‘outer world’ and, more specifically, the work environment. The chapter examined the affective imprints of work life on Danish employees by probing pace, passion, pressure, and competition as everyday intensities that shape employees’ experience at work. I argued that the workplace is ‘environmental’ not only by definition (in English work environment, in Danish arbejdsmiljø), but also in practice and effect. I drew on Massumi’s understanding of contemporary power regimes as environmental, a power that works through the regulation of effects rather than causes. The local Danish work environment of a specific workplace, exemplified in Kern and the university, cannot be separated from the ‘uncontrollable, unspecific whole,’ that is, the national and global environment. This means that the local environment of the workplace is unpredictable by default, leaving employees to learn to surf on rough waters.

A road trip and a workshop with the mindfulness teacher Peter sets off a conversation about money that opened chapter 3, Valuing Mindfulness. How is mindfulness valued, the chapter asked, and added another layer to the overall investigation into enactments of mindfulness. The chapter answered that question by unfolding the processes through which mindfulness gets valorized and evaluated in Danish workplaces. The mindfulness teacher Peter is at the center of this value creation. The chapter uncovers how processes of orchestration, exemplification, and evaluation are Peter’s main modes of valuing mindfulness. Through these processes, which involve practical setups, self-cultivation, and surveying, Peter attempts to create value. But, the tension here is that Peter’s work only works if employees are moved to become more mindful. In that way, the value of his service as a mindfulness teacher is reflected in the embodied relaxation (or lack of such) of the employees. Peter’s position – and Ursula’s as well – is delicate because it involves the ambivalence of wanting to care for and optimize employees at the same time. The chapter argued that care and optimization, non-economic and economic value are entangled in processes of valuing and that such entanglement is characteristic of mindful work overall.

The second part of the thesis (chapter 4 through 6) addresses the research question, how mindfulness works upon employees – how mindfulness is embodied – and in doing so fol-
Chapter 4 *Mærke efter: Feeling how you feel* explored how Karen, Tove, and Pernille meditate and focused on the specific technique of the body scan. In a body scan, practitioners are instructed to *mærke efter* – to feel how they feel. This is not only a sensorial engagement, involving feeling and sensing the body. It is also a practice that consists of assessing and deciding where the individual body becomes a compass. Feeling how you feel is done with assistance from the mindfulness teacher who facilitates feeling and bodily attunement through embodied words and affective artifacts. We followed how Karen can *mærke efter*, feel how she feels when she lies down and breathes deeply; how Tove struggles with the word gratitude; and how Pernille learns to look at herself with ‘kind eyes.’ The endeavors of Karen, Tove, and Pernille with mindfulness demonstrate how feeling how you feel involves elements such as feeling language and mother tongue, childhood memories, conceptual thinking, and stickers on doorknobs that may complicate or facilitate a mindful embodied attunement. I argued that to understand such meditative practices, we must reimport words as significant to affective experience and (re)think how affect, emotion, materiality, and language connect. I, therefore, explicated that feeling how you feel does not happen in a wholly spontaneous or natural way. It is something that must be practiced; a practice where others encourage the practitioner and facilitate such acts of feeling by words and world counterparts.

Chapter 5 *Imagining Inhabitable Bodies* delved into the images that pervaded my conversations with employees and focused specifically on the grounding, self-embracing, and taming images of Tove, Elin, and Ruth. Doing so, the chapter also dealt with the methodological challenge of understanding of how mindfulness feels and affects practitioners. Images, I suggested, have an interpretable and dense quality that matches embodied experiences well. I stressed that I do not think of images as less real, fake, or merely representations of how mindfulness feels. Instead, I juxtaposed the images brought to me by Tove, Elin, and Ruth to the figure of the metaphor. Tove’s image of an inner home, for example, is not *like* an inner home, it *is* an inner home. Her image has an affective hold, meaning that it imprints itself on Tove. The images envisioned in this chapter move Tove, Elin, and Ruth to feel at home, embraced, and tamed. It helps them to inhabit their bodies more comfortably. Images like those presented in chapter 5 intertwine with cultural categories and social mediations although not
in a overdetermined fashion. Collective imageries are reworked in creative ways and even contested through individual images.

Building on the accumulated insights from previous chapters, chapter 6 *Coming to our Senses* unearthed the contingencies and conflicts at play in mindful work examining choice, civilized behavior, and resistance. Drawing on Annemarie Mol’s work, the chapter argued that to take care of yourself through mindfulness is not an effect of autonomous choice but a coordination of elements inside and beyond the skin, what I identified as a distributed agency. While Kabat-Zinn holds that mindfulness makes us come to our senses by returning to who we really are, I argued that employees come to their senses in a way that is cultural rather than natural and affective rather than individually bounded. They come to their senses as a result of a *sociality of feeling* that asks of them, moves them, and sometimes pushes them to feel how they feel so as to reach a state of calm, kindness, and balance, even in a work environment that sometimes exhibits opposite qualities—ruptures, roughness, and imbalance. A state where they are able to feel how they feel, without overdoing it. They should feel how the work environment affects them without getting marked by it—*mærke efter uden at lade sig mærke med det*.

**Affective Imprints and The Sociality of Feeling**

In “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903), sociologist Georg Simmel investigated how the onrushing and highly varied impressions of life affected man’s psychological state of mind, questioning how the personality accommodates itself in the adjustments to external forces (Simmel [1903] 1964, 410). The metropolitan person is blasé, Simmel argued: he is reserved and indifferent in his attitude to other people and things. The blasé attitude is a result of trying to protect himself against exhaustion in an overly stimulating environment of the city. “Dissociation,” Simmel continues, is intrinsic to the modern style of life (Simmel [1903] 1964, 412). Simmel wrote his piece on the mental life of the metropolis more than a century ago and would probably find the twenty-first century to be overwhelmingly stimulating. The way he describes the effects of impression overload relates to the way Danes in this dissertation has described the affective imprints of their everyday life at work and in the city of Copenhagen. When I talked with employees at the university and Kern or met them for interviews, our conversations often circled issues of how to balance work and family life. A shared reflection for my interlocutors seemed to be, how do I manage all the impressions of my life without becoming indifferent to it or exhausted by it. They described a work life that
was full of purpose and equally full of pressure. The stress and the rush, the pace and the pas-
sion, the performance and the competition lifted them or weighed them down, infused them
or depleted them of energy. Sometimes it numbed them completely. Simmel’s diagnosis of
the blasé metropolitan also relates to the way popular media characterizes contemporary
Danes as at risk of losing their ability to be truly present and in need of tools to handle their
mental lives in the overstimulating environment that is the current attention economy (see
also Cook 2018). The happy nation of Denmark is, as Fjorback pointed out, thoroughly medi-
cated, and stressed out. Finding a balance in a highly stimulating life seemed to require a
management of one’s mental energy levels to avoid getting consumed in the rush of the eve-
ryday, the information overload, the social media, expectations at work, and the requirements
one must fulfill as an employee, a parent, or spouse.

Practicing mindfulness offered a way for some employees, at least, to regain a sensi-
tivity towards themselves, others, and the world around them. People told me how they
started noticing the blooming flowers on their bike ride to work. They explained how, for the
first time in years, they saw the changing colors of the forest in spring,. They engaged more
fully in activities with their children, trying actively, with the help of different mindfulness
techniques, to let go of work when at home. Mindfulness proved to be a way for some to deal
with the overload of stimulations by, for instance, focusing on one thing at a time; boiling
water for tea or playing a tune on the piano. Mindfulness also became a place to go, a peace-
place inside, as Pernille said, or an inner home, as Tove said.

The study has not sought to answer whether or not mindfulness works, but rather how
mindfulness is put to work in Danish work environments unfolding what I term mindful
work. Applying the term mindful work has enabled me to examine the multiple processes in-
volved in mindfulness at workplaces and investigate how mindfulness becomes a productive
technique for working well by having employees turn to themselves to work on their stress
and unease. I argue that the practice of mindfulness, although it asks employees to ‘turn in-
ward,’ is motivated by and implicated in the cultural and socioeconomic context in which
mindfulness takes place. This means that when an employee engages in mindful work, it is
not only a personal project but also a professional achievement that intertwine with economic
interest, care and optimization, ambivalence, and creative self-embracing gestures all situated
in an affective workplace environment.

The novelty of the study is the perspective the thesis has on employees. Positing em-
ployees at the center of the analysis and investigating their engagement with mindfulness has,
therefore, given original insights and added nuance to the idea of mindfulness as a social anesthesiaby demonstrating how mindfulness is reflexively valued or devalued, felt, pursued, imagined, and sometimes dismissed. The thesis shows how practicing mindfulness at work is a work of attunement, which involves the meditator attuning to her own body through assisted feeling, embodied words, and world counterparts. The employees attune to her own body to mærke efter, to feel how she feels, and check in, take her temperature, as Karen said, to assess how the unpredictable work environment and surrounding social world is affecting her. The work of attunement is, therefore, also a work of assessing and taming that which disturbs a good working body. That being said, mindfulness and learning to feel how you feel can be a way of standing one’s ground and not get knocked down, as Ruth said, or pushed over, as Tove said.

I set up the thesis as an investigation into the enactment and embodiment of mindfulness in an effort to demonstrate how ‘feeling mindful’ is not a private experience but a social, cultural, and affective practice. Thinking through the classical social theory on the body, emotional labor, and affect theory, the thesis proposes the concept of a sociality of feeling to capture the various layers at play in body-mind practices such as mindfulness. The term refers to how ‘feeling mindful’ is the result of particular cultural ideas and social expectations of how to feel, what to feel, and how to manage what is felt. Employees are instructed to ‘feel how they feel’ based on assumptions about

1) how feeling ‘happens’ (you sit down and ‘listen’ to your body)
2) how emotions are managed (you get in touch with how you feel, and this loosens up difficult emotions; Feel it, heal it. Name it, tame it.)
3) how the ‘good’ body feels and relates to the surrounding world (the good body is a mindful body that is both sensitive and thick-skinned).

This means that the sociality of feeling harbors several meanings. It refers to a set-up and particular ways of ‘doing feeling.’ It also refers to a normativity, meaning the socially accepted ways of feeling and what ‘good’ emotions entail. It emphasizes the particular and contingent interests, powerplays, and socio-cultural and affective relations involved when mindfulness practitioners are invited to mærke efter. When researchers such as Brinkman and Tanggaard advised the Danes to stop turning inward to feel how they feel, and instead turn outward to engage with the world around them (Brinkmann 2014; Abrahamsen 2014b), they missed out on the point of mindfulness. Mindfulness is precisely oriented towards and entangled with the social world. The meditator turn inward, or looks at the kettle boiling, plays the piano, scans
her body with kind eyes, or takes a deep breath to engage more fully with the surrounding world, attentively, kindly, empathetically, and mindfully.
Abstract

The dissertation deals with the influx of meditation and mindfulness programs at places of work in Denmark. The thesis posits mindfulness as a socio-cultural practice and a phenomenon best understood through situated analyses that take into consideration political, economic, and social concerns affecting the practice and its purpose. Mindfulness has gained increased popularity as a health intervention in Danish companies. Still, as of yet, the research documenting how employees experience meditating together at work through qualitative means has been sparse. This thesis is based on ethnographic fieldwork in two Danish workplaces, a public university, and a pharmaceutical company carried out primarily in 2017 and, as such, contributes with novel insights into how stress is experienced and worked with in Danish workplaces. The fieldwork, along with 37 interviews with employees, managers, and mindfulness teachers as well as material from international and national conferences on mindfulness, provide the empirical ground for the thesis’ analytical engagements and conclusions.

The increased interest in mindfulness in Denmark reflects a global trend especially pronounced but not limited to the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Nordic Countries. Here, mindfulness is applied across a range of societal institutions as therapy and treatment of mental and physical maladies, and targeting work-related stress in particular. Mindfulness in Denmark is often inspired by the world-famous stress reduction program institutionalized by the American researcher Jon Kabat-Zinn. In the late seventies, Kabat-Zinn developed, with the inspiration from Buddhist meditation practices and concepts, the eight-week-program Mindfulness-Based-Stress-Reduction (MBSR) that includes meditation and exercises and yoga. Kabat-Zinn’s work prompted, along with a growing evidence base for the effect of mindfulness, a mindfulness movement, in which new schools and programs are created continuously. A commonality among them is that they draw on Buddhists practices while identifying as non-religious and seeking legitimacy in neuroscience rather than religious texts.

Recent scholarship on mindfulness has problematized contemporary iterations of mindfulness, especially in places of work, pointing to meditation practices as quick fixes and social opiates, exploiting employees, and adhering to an individualizing neoliberal logic. The thesis takes up this important thread of questioning the consequences of practicing mindfulness in a context where ‘being mindful’ is not only a personal pursuit but a professional accomplishment. Practicing mindfulness as part of a company-paid course does set out a particular and, at times, problematic framework for the participants. The thesis ponders the consequence of such frameworks inspired by work on emotional and affective labor in a post-industrial labor market. The thesis also complicates this narrative showing how care and optimization intertwines in mindfulness courses. While the thesis investigates why mindfulness courses are considered valuable in a workplace context, the biggest contribution is the detailed accounts of how employees work to become mindful and how mindfulness practices are felt, evaluated, and appreciated or potentially dismissed as pathways to a less stressed and more inhabitable body. The thesis proposes the concept of sociality of feeling to grasp the entanglement of individual embodied experience, socio-economic expectations and interests, and cultural norms and values at play when employees are invited to ‘feel how they feel’ through mindfulness practices at work.
Resumé


Introduktion af mindfulness på arbejdspladsen er blevet kritiseret for i bedste fald at være warm luft og i værste fald et socialt opium, som uddyner medarbejdere og understreger en neoliberal individualiserende logik. Afhandlingen bidrager til og nuancerer denne kritik ved at fokusere på, hvordan medarbejdere oplever at meditere på arbejdspladsen. Afhandlingen demonstrerer at det at blive mere ‘mindful’ ikke blot er et personligt anliggende, men i en arbejdssammenhæng også bliver en måde at professionalisere sig på og at fastholde sin produktivitet som medarbejder i et stressende arbejdsmiljø. Mindfulness er ikke bare virksomt for det enkelte individ men også for virksomhedens økonomi idet målet er at skabe en medarbejder der både kan mærke sig selv og samtidig ikke lader sig mærke med det daglige pres. Samtidig gør afhandlingen klart, at mindfulness også kan blive en mulighed for at reflektere over, hvad et meningsfuldt arbejdsliv er, og blive en måde at passe på sig selv og være mere nærværende over for sine nærmeste. Afhandlingen viser ydermere, hvordan det kropslige arbejde i mindfulness kan skabe en større evne til at stå stærkere, lære at sige fra og sætte grænser i ens arbejdsliv. Udrykket at mærke efter er et central element i mindfulnesskurser og afhandlingen undersøger, hvordan dette tilsyneladende indadvendte arbejde er rammesat af sociale normer og kulturelle ideer om ’gode’ følelser og det sunde arbejdsmiljø og begrebslig gør dette som følelsessocialitet. Gennem begrebet følelsessocialitet bidrager afhandlingen til nyere affekteori og antropologiske arbejder om krop, følelser og affekt.
References


REFERENCES


Stevenson, Lisa. 2014. Life Beside Itself - Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic. Oakland, California: University of California Press.


