

Globalization, Mindfulness and Community

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Abstract

This paper will focus on how we might use mindfulness to create a more just and environmentally sustainable global system. The current neoliberal economic model of globalization is based on a conception of human behavior as self-interested individualism. It assumes, despite striking evidence to the contrary, that what is good at the individual level leads to an optimal societal outcome. The recent global downturn and the growing income disparities both within and among nations indicate that this approach has failed to bring prosperity and harmony to the global community, while, at the same time, threatening the natural environment. Heterodox economist critics of the neoliberal model, including Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, John Grey, and Ha Joon Chang, have criticized the current system as hurting the poor and have offered recommendations on how to reform the global system.

Building on this, it is evident that any model of globalization must start from a different conception of humans -- as equal, spiritual beings, living in an interconnected world. To fully realize this concept will require a shift of thinking; it is here that the concept of mindfulness can be utilized. The practice of Mindfulness reminds us of our connection to all living things and to nature, thereby reinforcing our sense of common humanity and our role as stewards of the earth.

Utilizing Mindfulness in the political arena raises important questions. How might this concept be applied in diverse cultural settings around the globe? Here we might begin by asking if mindfulness exists more commonly in cultural non-western settings than in the west, and to what extent it might serve in counter pose to the valuing of short-term profit maximization. Turning to the heterodox economists' recommendations for institutional and regulatory reforms, we ask: does the journey of acting differently at a political level start with the individual, or should we focus on reforming shared practices and institutions through Mindfulness? Can mindfulness create a new kind of political discourse and global decision-making? The paper will explore these issues and offer some paths for future globalization.

Introduction: What is the problem?

Globalization is often defined as the free flow of goods, services, ideas, and the production process itself throughout the world. The flow of labor, to a much more limited extent, is also

“globalized.” This concept of globalization is based on a model of economic behavior that emphasizes the primacy of the unregulated or free market, commonly labeled economic liberalism. Like classical liberalism in western political philosophy, economic liberalism, and its contemporary offshoot, neoliberalism, stress the importance of freeing the individual to act in a manner that best meets his/her individual needs and wants. This makes individual gain, or, in economic parlance, profit-maximization, the prime human motivator. Moreover, economic liberalism, following from the writings of Adam Smith, posits that individual self-interest leads to the best societal outcome.

However, this understanding of human behavior by Adam Smith has been taken out of context. Smith, after all, lived in a very different world when he wrote the *Wealth of Nations* in 1776, and his writing should be understood within the context of the society in which he lived. Likewise, this narrow understanding of the concept of globalization, focusing on freeing market forces and the individual, ignores crucial aspects of human behavior, such as the need for community. These other aspects of human behavior might, in fact, lead us to an alternative model for globalization.

One might ask at this point, why does the search for an alternative model matter? What is wrong with the current approach to global integration, which, as we will see below, so many economists have supported? There are several answers to this key question. The first and most obvious answer is that the current approach has led the world to the brink of an economic downturn as serious as that of the 1930s. But there is more. Even before the 2008 economic crisis hit, in wide swathes of the globe people were not benefiting from globalization; they had been left behind in the competitive global marketplace. Equally serious are the continuing and growing income and wealth disparities between rich and poor, which economic liberalism seems to create both between and within countries. In addition, the current economic approach, with its focus on individual gain and consumption, looks to be environmentally unsustainable, with clear signs of global climate change that, if not reversed, may signal the doom of the planet. Last of all, the individual and self-interest orientation of economic liberalism appears to be the antithesis of social solidarity and the construction of a global community.

Where might we begin to look for alternatives? One answer came via a Japanese World News Agency NHK program, which recently aired an interview¹ in which the interviewee, a representative from Sophia Bank, described a change in Japanese behavior in the period since the devastating earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011. She categorized this new behavior as *social sympathy*, whereby Japanese citizens were motivated to act economically in ways that helped the victims, rather than in ways that maximized their own personal economic wellbeing. That is, they put the fate of fellow citizens above their own, more narrowly defined, self-interest. Moreover, she claimed that this kind of behavior was not

isolated solely to Japan, or to an emergency situation, but that it represented an alternative model to the economic liberal, self-interested human model.

Could she be right, or is the *social sympathy* that she described in Japan an isolated phenomenon, an artifact of the specific circumstances of Japanese culture, economy and the current emergency? Are there other models of human behavior different from the individually oriented, self-interested approach posited by conventional economists? I propose that indeed there are alternative modes of behavior. In fact, these alternative ways of being and acting are not necessarily new, although they have not always been recognized. In this paper we will examine alternatives to the economic liberal approach and ask how these alternative modes of being and behavior might affect the globalization process.

A Brief History of the Global Economy and the Current Neoliberal Global Phase

Before we can begin this examination, we need to look briefly at the phenomenon of globalization. Even a quick historical review of the global economy demonstrates that the world has gone through periods of economic liberalism, where domestic markets and trading were more open, counterbalanced by periods of greater protectionism, often called mercantilism. Bruce Moon's model of global trade shows trade patterns shifting between these two paradigms. A long protectionist period ended in the mid 1800s, replaced by a more open global economy, which continued, with British dominance, until the Great Depression, when the pendulum swung back again towards protectionism². Even this cursory look tells us that economic liberalism as currently practiced is not the only route to global interactions and integration.

The current economic liberal period began to take hold in the post World War II period. This was especially so after the 1960s and 1970s, when those who had advocated a stronger state-led development process, coupled with more protectionist trade measures, found that their economies were stagnating. The election of leaders in Britain (Margaret Thatcher in 1979) and the United States (Ronald Reagan in 1980) who championed the neoliberal approach furthered the dominance of the neoliberal economic approach, while the collapse of the Soviet Union by the late 1980s signaled its triumph. In the 1990s we saw a global agreement on liberalizing trade, with the long-awaited end of the Uruguay Round of negotiations over how to achieve global free trade. As a result, the World Trade Organization, WTO, whose purpose was to oversee and expand global trade through trade liberalization, was established in 1994.

In this current phase of globalization, there has also been a definite air of triumphalism, at least until the current economic global downturn. History, as Francis Fukuyama so famously – and erroneously – claimed, was at an end³. The advocates of global neoliberalism, such as

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge⁴, Jagdish Bhagwati⁵, and Thomas Friedman⁶, among others, have insisted on its overall positive effect. They argued that freeing market forces from regulations has led to a leveling of the playing field which, in the end, helps people all over the globe, from poor and rich countries alike. While some, such as Micklethwait and Wooldridge, admit that the process is not always an easy one and that there are losers as well as winners⁷, they argue that overall the process produces many more winners than losers. In his book *The World Is Flat* Friedman argues that the technological revolution, which gives anyone with electricity and a computer access to the global market, has leveled the playing field, giving space to entrepreneurial creativity from places all around the globe to flourish⁸. Bhagwati, an economist from the Third World, trumpets the positive impact of the free market for poor countries, stressing that the poor benefit from globalization as much as other economic strata⁹. These views, however, did not go unchallenged. Before we turn to the critics of economic liberalism, it is important to look at the cultural changes that this economic approach wrought.

Cultural Changes Wrought by the Global Penetration of Economic Liberalism

Along with the dominance of the neoliberal economic approach to globalization there came major cultural changes. These cultural changes were rooted in the neoliberal emphasis on individual freedom above all other values. In the economic sphere, this stress meant that individuals were seen only as seeking to meet their own wants and needs, which could be satisfied through material consumption and accumulation. Life was a competition among individuals for material goods and wellbeing. Margaret Thatcher, whose idol was Friedrich von Hayek, was a vociferous advocate of this extreme form of individualism. She made the depth of her emphasis on the individual clear in a 1987 statement, “There is no such thing as society¹⁰.” Over the course of the past thirty years, this emphasis on the individual, to the virtual exclusion of the idea of human as beings enmeshed in a social network, penetrated western society. Over the years, this view was increasingly accepted as immutable Truth, and it was this understanding of human beings, as atomized individuals seeking to satisfy their personal self-interest, that was spread around the globe through decades of international implementation of neoliberal economic policies.

Critics of Neoliberal Globalization: Economic Heterodoxy

In contrast to the neoliberal position, there is a group of well-known economists who have taken a more flexible, heterodox position. Their numbers include Joseph Stiglitz, Ha-Jook Chang, Amartya Sen, and John Grey, all of whom have noted the pernicious impact of the neoliberal brand of globalism on poor countries and on the lower economic strata within the rich countries. In their writings, they have criticized the actions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the “lender of last resort,” which imposes a strict brand of economic

liberalism on desperate countries. The IMF prescription includes a list of actions that require governments to shrink their budgets (“austerity” measures), privatize government enterprises, deregulate the domestic economy and open their economy to imports. Collectively, these “structural adjustment” policies of market and trade liberalization have generally been imposed on poor countries that urgently need IMF loans. According to the heterodox economists, these policies often exacerbate the economic problems and hurt worst the most vulnerable in these societies¹¹.

The economist Ha-Jook Chang, originally from South Korea, has added another dimension to the critique of the neoliberals. In his “kicking away the ladder” argument, Chang maintains that the now developed countries, such as Great Britain and the United States, utilized protectionist strategies to nurture infant industries, including government involvement in economic development through what we might today call an industrial policy. It was only when their economies had developed sufficiently to be able to compete in, or even dominate, the global economy, that they “kicked away the ladder” of governmental assistance and/or protection. Thus, for Chang, it is unfair for the IMF to ask poor, less developed nations to prematurely “kick away the ladder” and undergo neoliberal “structural adjustment,” something that the economically advanced nations at that stage in their development did not have to do¹².

While some of the heterodox economists, such as Joseph Stiglitz, think that today's globalization can be ameliorated through regulatory reforms¹³, others, such as John Grey¹⁴, are more sweeping in their condemnation of the neoliberal approach to global economics, positing that the US neoliberal style of global capitalism is simply not sustainable. For example, Grey explains that the rapid introduction of the neoliberal strategy (dubbed “shock treatment”) to post-Communist Russia led to a situation in which the old Communist mafia-types were able to transform themselves into a small cadre of mafia-like capitalists, who prospered while most Russians struggled for daily survival. The outcome is what Grey calls “anarcho-capitalism¹⁵,” a world that Thomas Hobbes might easily recognize¹⁶. For Grey, there are other approaches to globalization that are more humane and also which are a better cultural fit with the values of different regions. These include the European “social market” approach and the Asian “indigenous modernization” model, as exemplified first by post-war Japan¹⁷.

Another critique of the standard neoliberal economic prescription is found in the immediate response to the 2008 economic crisis, where neoliberalism was quickly abandoned for Keynesian stimulus policies in the US; there is still dispute about whether or not more stimulus is needed. Meantime, we are witness today to the spectacle of rich European countries, as well as the United States and Japan, struggling to reactivate their economies while burdened by unwieldy debt burdens, while some Euro-zone countries, such as Greece

and Italy, even have to submit to IMF “structural adjustment” policies, which in the past were so often imposed on poor nations. Ironically, we have even heard IMF head Christine LaGarde urging the EU and the United States not to tighten their purse strings too much, but, instead, to use (Keynesian) economic stimulus policies to help reactivate their economies¹⁸.

Overcoming the 2008 Global Economic Crisis: Heterodoxy Points us Toward an Alternative Model

The 2008 global economic crisis in which we are still embroiled seems to give weight to the heterodox position, but even this group of economists does not solve the crisis completely. The question still confronts us: how can we work our way out of the current global economic crisis? If neoliberalism is not the answer for rich countries, as I have argued, and, if it has not been highly successful for poor countries, which the heterodox economists maintain, to what alternative model might we turn? We can begin by asking what we can learn from the heterodox approach, some underlying principle beyond the specific economic lessons they provide. Indeed there is. It is in their view that when the poor suffer, we all suffer, that we are all better off when all boats rise, and we are all imperiled when the global waters are turbulent, as the current situation in Europe so aptly demonstrates. The heterodox approach reminds us that there is a common good and that our individual self-interest is inextricably tied to the fate of others. This principle of interconnectedness allows us to begin constructing a broader understanding of human behavior and our place in the world that is more holistic and spiritual. It is a view, as we will see, that meshes well with Asian concepts of mindfulness and compassion.

Constructing an Alternative Model of Globalization: Interconnectedness and Engaged, Compassionate Mindfulness

Interconnectedness is a central tenet of Buddhism. As Ira Rifkin explains, all life is interconnectedness, everything from “plankton to people and even the sun itself, are elements of one interconnected whole...[which] fosters “interdependence and interaction...[and could be called] “primal globalization – the organic origin of today’s economic and cultural globalization¹⁹. Mindfulness, which is based on seeing oneself and others with compassion, lies at the heart of our ability to feel interconnected and can form the basis for a new model of globalization. I am particularly interested is a form of mindfulness known as “engaged mindfulness” or “inter-being,” a term developed by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh²⁰. I will begin by defining terms more carefully and then explore how mindfulness may be utilized in the global arena.

Mindfulness is a concept central in Buddhism. Simply put, mindfulness is about “dwelling in the present moment²¹,” or being present. We learn how to be present through mindful

meditation, and, we start by seeing and accepting ourselves as we are. Some (especially those in the West) who are new to mindful meditation often assume that “being in the moment” means disconnecting from the world around oneself and from the world's problems, looking inward rather than outward. Far from cutting oneself off from the world, mindfulness should instead heighten one's awareness of one's environment. In the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, mindfulness should “...bring the practice from the meditation hall into our daily lives...[and] penetrate the activities of everyday life²²....” As a result, the practice of mindfulness reminds us of our connection to all living things and to nature, thereby reinforcing our sense of common humanity and our role as stewards of the earth.

But can this heightened awareness of our interconnected lead to action? The answer here is yes, through the practice of “engaged mindfulness.” Thich Nhat Hanh explained how he and his fellow monks came to “engaged Buddhism” during the Vietnam war: to ignore the people outside their monastery walls who were suffering from the bombings and continue meditating, or to leave the monastery to help them? They decided to do both, to “help people and ...do so in mindfulness....Mindfulness must be engaged. Once there is seeing, there must be acting. Otherwise, what is the use of seeing?²³” Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of “inter-being” reinforces this perspective: “To be is to inter-be. We cannot just *be* by ourselves alone. We have to inter-be with every other thing²⁴.” This state of “inter-being” brings with it responsibility: because “each thing helps to create the other” we are all responsible for the world's ills. “...look at wealth and poverty. The affluent society and the deprived society inter-be. The wealth of one society is made of the poverty of the other²⁵.” Thus, to live in this world is to be a creator of its good and bad features and to be responsible for doing one's part to ameliorate the bad. Inter-being is a form of engaged mindfulness.

Engaged mindfulness, then, provides a vehicle for maintaining and strengthening our sense of common humanity and for building new forms of participation and problem-solving. engaged mindfulness acts as a call to social action, to help others while strengthening our common bonds. It encompasses a broader understanding of self-interest than neoliberalism.

A New Form of Globalization based on an “Inter-be” Concept of Self-Interest

We can now turn again to the story about *social sympathy* in Japan and see its deeper significance. In the aftermath of the destructive earthquake and tsunami, Japanese who live outside of the directly affected zones have chosen to sacrifice immediate economic gain for social solidarity. They buy products from earthquake and tsunami victims, even if it means that they pay more than they would elsewhere. Earthquake and tsunami victims have also been the recipients of investments by fellow Japanese, so that they can restart businesses that were damaged or destroyed. In essence, what the Japanese people have been demonstrating is a form of engaged mindfulness, dealing with the societal consequences of this natural

disaster from a place of compassion. In doing so, they display a more expansive understanding of what self-interest means: their individual self-interest is linked to the fate of other members of their Japanese community. Unlike the “rational calculating man theory” that was transposed from economic theory and that sees humans as motivated by narrow self-interest and dismisses other forms of attachment that might affect behavior, such as friendship, the Japanese are engaging in economic activities from a place of shared self-interest. They understand that if they did not help their fellow citizens, they would, in fact, be hurting themselves. They “inter-be” with other members of their society.

I posit that by using engaged mindfulness to tap into our compassionate, spiritual and inter-being side, we can create a model of globalization that is more inclusive and meets the needs of all humans better than the current neoliberal approach. Some might argue that Japanese culture and the relative homogeneity of their society makes it easier to Japanese to achieve *social sympathy*, and that their actions took place in the face of a severe national catastrophe. All these points have validity; however, I also see the diffusion of the concept of mindfulness into Western countries and what I believe are examples of engaged mindfulness in action in the contemporary international arena. In the United States, the American medical system increasingly accepts Asian medical modalities --acupuncture, the practice of Chi Gong/Tai Chi, and meditation—as valid adjunct therapies. Yoga and tai chi teachers are to be found all around the country, and there is a large, active community of American Buddhists. Together, these activities demonstrate that Americans are looking for a deeper, spiritual meaning in their lives and for connection with others.

A number of activities in the international arena demonstrate how we can act from a place of engaged mindfulness. There are, for example, international organizations working to defend human and environmental rights. In the human rights arena the creation of the International Criminal Court is an instance of our mutual, global responsibility for one another (“inter-being”). Whatever our distinct cultural and religious heritages, we have come together as a global community and agreed that the basic physical and political rights of all human beings must be respected. The impulses that drive the international human rights movement are based on a form of engaged mindfulness. Likewise, we can identify international environmental organizations that comprise a powerful international movement which aims to protect the rights of all species, whether animal or plant-based, as well as protecting the very planet, its water, soil, and air.

We also see the transformation of what in the past might have been solely profit-making activities into activities that are designed to help others. This includes the burgeoning fields of microfinance, corporate social responsibility, and social entrepreneurship. I would argue that social entrepreneurship, for example, is a good example of “inter-being” and engaged mindfulness. Rather than utilizing their entrepreneurial skills solely to enrich themselves,

social entrepreneurs are driven to apply their organizational and people skills in the interests of helping vulnerable people. Social entrepreneurial activities range from creating organization to help the disabled, as well as fighting for their legal rights, helping those with HIV/AIDS, building schools and creating greater access to college for economically disadvantaged youths²⁶.

Ultimately, it is from this place of engaged mindfulness that we will be able to face the challenge of reforming international financial institutions. There are already signs around the globe that the neoliberal form of individualism is on the defensive and that people understand the basic unfairness of the current global model that has led us to the current economic crisis. There is an awareness of ourselves as part of a connected whole that is starting to emerge, although in a somewhat inchoate form. A number of significant movements have emerged in the past year alone, including the Arab Spring and the global Occupy movement. These, along with other non-violent groups, are attempting major change that move the world towards a more equitable and, ultimately, peaceful global community.

Let us look at the case of the global grassroots movements fostering social and political solidarity that began as the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement. Their slogan of contrasting the 99% against the top 1% spoke to people all over the globe.

Can we claim that this movement sprang from engaged mindfulness? Although some might say no, I answer yes, if we consider that these movements are groupings of people who have come together because they see their common humanity and are struggling for a common cause. They comprise a grassroots, democratic movement that began in New York City, spread around the US and then around the globe. It seems to me that a kind of larger, even global, consciousness is at work. This indeed might be seen as engaged mindfulness in action.

If the ultimate goal is for mindfulness to create a new kind of political discourse and global decision-making, then these grassroots movements may be the harbinger of a major global transition. Turning again to the heterodox economists' recommendations for institutional and regulatory reforms, I would aver that the journey of acting differently at a political level may start with the individual, but engaged mindfulness brings us out of ourselves and into the world. There, we can work together as a group to create a different ethos, one of caring for others. Such an ethos may, in the end, facilitate the reforming of financial institutions and practices. Although the exact process remains unclear at this point, we can help encourage the process through our own daily practice of engaged mindfulness.

Endnotes

¹NHK News Agency, a Japanese government TV and radio media center that broadcasts news about Japan in English. This interview was seen by the author on January X, CK DATE 2012, broadcast on the Los Angeles, California public television station KCET TV.

²See, for example, Bruce E. Moon, *Dilemmas of International Trade*, second edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), chapters. 2-3.

³Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

⁴John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *A Future Perfect: The Challenge and Promise of Globalization*, rev. edition (New York: Random House, 2003)

⁵Jagdish Bhagwati, *In Defense of Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

⁶Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*, 3.0, updated edition (New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007)

⁷See Part Five, “Winners and Losers,” comprising chapters 11-13, pp. 199-263, in Micklethwait and Wooldridge, op. cit.

⁸Friedman even chides Americans, warning them that they need to invest in education and to be nimble and entrepreneurial or else risk being outperformed by people in other countries.

⁹Despite being a strong advocate of economic liberalism, Bhagwati did strike a note of caution in one area in his book *In Defense of Globalization*, when he advocated the regulation of the flow of short-term capital. Bhagwati cited Chile as a country that had, he believed, developed reasonable regulations for this volatile capital. Ironically, around the time that Bhagwati's book was published, Chile was finalizing a Free Trade Agreement with the United States in which they Chileans agreed to defang this regulation. The United States had made it as a condition of achieving the Free Trade Agreement, one that Chile had been attempting to finalize with the United States for a decade. According to economist Paul Krugman, it was precisely the lack of controls over short-term capital flows that had unleashed a series of economic crises, from Latin America to Asia, over the past several decades. For Krugman, a similar lack of regulation of financial capital culminated in the current economic crisis. Paul Krugman has detailed these crises and their similarities in his book *The Return of Depression Economics and the Crisis of 2008* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 2009).

¹⁰Interview 23 September 1987, as quoted in by Douglas Keay, *Woman's Own*, 31 October 1987, pp. 8–10.

¹¹For a detailed critique of the IMF see, for example, Joseph Stiglitz' *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 2002). Stiglitz, who served as senior vice president of the World Bank from 1997 to 2000, saw first-hand the actions of the World Bank's sister institution, the IMF.

¹²See Ha-Joon Chang, *Bad Samaritans: The Myth of Free Trade and the Secret History of Capitalism* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008).

¹³See, for example, Stiglitz' *Making Globalization Work* (New York: WW Norton, 2006) and *the Stiglitz Report: Reforming the International Monetary and Financial Systems in the Wake of the global Crisis*, (New York: The New Press, 2010)

¹⁴See John Grey, *False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism* (New York: The New Press, 1998)

¹⁵Ibid. chapter 6.

¹⁶Thomas Hobbes, author of *Leviathan*, lived during the chaotic 17th century in Britain, and drew the conclusion that without a strong government, life would be a struggle of all against all in which no one could live happily.

¹⁷John Grey, op. cit., chapter 7.

¹⁸See, for example, American Public Media, Marketplace Business, <http://www.marketplace.org/topics/business/head-imf-says-governments-need-spend>

¹⁹Ira Rifkin, *Spiritual Perspectives on Globalization, 2nd edition* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2004), p. 100

²⁰Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991)

²¹ibid., p. 10

²²ibid., p. 35.

²³Thich Nhat Hanh, op. cit., p. 91.

²⁴ibid., p. 96

²⁵ibid., p. 98.

For a good overview of the work of social entrepreneurs, see David Bornstein, *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)