

02 Ron Purser

O-Ton

[0:04] Erschöpfung statt Gelassenheit Warum Achtsamkeit die falsche Antwort auf so ziemlich jede Frage ist Ein Podcast von Katrin Fischer, mindfulness functions as kind of a salvic force in a way in corporations that helps people to cope and adapt and adjust to the status quo and maintain the status quo in that sense it becomes almost a form of social Social Amnesia.

Kathrin Fischer:

[0:33] So bezeichnet der amerikanische Management-Professor und Buddhist Ronald E. Poser Achtsamkeit mittlerweile. Er ist selbst praktizierender Buddhist und mein Gesprächsgast in dieser zweiten Podcast-Folge. Ron ist 2013 gemeinsam mit David Loy durch einen Artikel in der Huffington Post berühmt geworden. Die beiden haben sich unter dem schönen Titel MacMindfulness darin kritisch und pointiert mit der Kommerzialisierung von Achtsamkeit auseinandergesetzt. Sie haben sich in der Huffington Post berühmt. 2019 erschien Rons Kritik umfangreich ausgearbeitet in dem Buch How Mindfulness Became the Spirituality of Capitalism, das 2021 auch auf Deutsch erschienen ist. Den Link findet ihr in den Shownotes. Als ich Ron per Mail angefragt habe, ob er Lust habe, in diesem Podcast über Achtsamkeit und seine Kritik an Achtsamkeit zu sprechen, da hat er mir etwas lustlos zugesagt. Eigentlich, hat er geschrieben, interessieren ihn mittlerweile viel tiefer gehende Fragen. However, in the conversation with me, he had his critique very clearly and in the last part of the conversation, we were then slowly in the very big and very philosophical questions that really interest him. How we construct the world, how we think in dualities, and how we can make it possible, with the help of our brain, the work of our brain in question. We carried this conversation in English.

Ron Purser:

[2:00] Yeah, well, thank you for having me, Catherine.

Kathrin Fischer:

[2:02] Yeah, Ron, we want to talk about your critique of mindfulness, which you first detailed in an article in 2013 and then in a book in 2019. In this book, you criticize mindfulness as a banal form of spirituality that no longer has anything to do with its origins in Buddhism, but instead has become a kind of opium for the people, you call it. Or I really do like this commercialized faint. You also criticize the conception of stress to which mindfulness is supposed to be the answer. By doing so, you dive deep into the psyche of people living under circumstances of contemporary capitalism and you portray the corporate mindfulness. And this is very interesting for us here in Germany, because here corporate But mindfulness has not so long ago started. And because the whole topic is so complex, I'd like to start at the beginning, if there ever was a beginning, I don't know. I would like to start with the question, what led you to write very passionately the article Beyond Make Mindfulness in 2013, which went viral then? When and why you and your co-author, David Loy, went so mad that you decided to write about it?

Ron Purser:

[3:21] Yes, thank you, Catherine. Well, I had been studying, actually, David Loy's work for some time. I was enamored by his work and really intrigued by many of his ideas on social theory of Buddhism for the West and as a social theory. And one of his premises, one of his arguments in that book and other books was that we had to kind of reframe suffering. The nature of suffering, at least within the Buddhist historical context, was seen as primarily located within an individual's own mind. That the nature of suffering was basically rooted in what were called the three mental poisons like greed, hatred, and indifference. So his argument was that the nature of capitalist societies and actually the modern world was such that these mental poisons had become institutionalized, as he put it. And that institutions such as corporations, for example, were institutionalizing the nature of greed, for example. So, the profit motive within capitalism was a way of taking what was normally seen within a Buddhist context as an individual problem, and it became more of a social problem in the sense that now we have greed is good. Greed is something we all want to pursue. Growth is all something we want to pursue.

Ron Purser:

[4:49] And that really struck me when I first came across his ideas around what he calls social suffering or social dukkha. Dukkha is a word in Sanskrit that means suffering in Buddhism. So he said we really have to move from seeing suffering or dukkha as an individualized problem and more as a social, institutionalized issue. And if that's the case, then we need a more engaged sort of spirituality or an engaged form of Buddhism, which doesn't exclusively focus just on the problem of the individual suffering, but how suffering is also the causes of suffering are systemic and structural in nature within society itself. And so, as I started to think about and appreciate his arguments, and also the fact that I am a management professor here located in very close proximity to Silicon Valley and the tech industry. Also, I had started studying and practicing various schools of Buddhism in my youth, in my mid-20s. So the convergence of all those tributaries, all those currents kind of just converged.

Ron Purser:

[6:07] Especially as I started to watch YouTube videos, I was watching what were called, I think, Google Talks, or I can't remember exactly what they were called. But they were videos of neuroscientists, mindfulness teachers that were coming into Google. And this was probably as early as 2009, 2010.

Ron Purser:

[6:27] And I took note of that. I said, well, what is this about? Mindfulness at Google? And the more I kind of looked into it, the more I discovered that this was quite a serious initiative that was happening, not just at Google, but many other Silicon Valley companies. And even before Silicon Valley, like companies like Monsanto were one of the early adopters of mindfulness programs. So that led me to reach out to David. I kind of knew him. I didn't really know him that well. And I proposed that maybe we write something about this. And he was already a blogger at that time at the Huffington Post. And that's where we published Beyond McMindfulness. It was only like 1,100 words, a very short piece, and I was really taken aback, quite surprised by just how widely read it became in a short amount of time, more so than any academic article that I had ever written in my entire academic career.

Kathrin Fischer:

[7:29] That's the fate of academics.

Ron Purser:

[7:32] Exactly. And so the nature of writing in that way to the public really kind of also was a turning point for me, too.

Kathrin Fischer:

[7:41] So it was somehow when noticing that the so-called mindfulness revolution consisted mainly of corporate training of mindfulness, you noticed that on that Google Talks. And did you already know by that John Kabat-Zinn, who plays a prominent role in your book, too, the method of mindfulness-based stress reduction, these two, how do you say, strains came together, too?

Ron Purser:

[8:09] Yeah, that's an interesting question. I had seen his books around over the years, but I just ignored him. I thought it was some sort of pop psychology. I had my own Buddhist practice, so I wasn't really paying too much attention to that. So, it took a year or two, and then I started putting two and two together and realizing that, yeah, the mainstream methodology that was being propagated was coming from Jon Kabat-Zinn's gold standard of paying attention in the present moment non-judgmentally and the mindfulness-based stress reduction program, which he started. So yeah, eventually I started to study his work. There was a special issue that came out in a journal called Contemporary Buddhism that he was a guest editor of in 2011. So by that point in time, he had made some very strong public statements and claims. And from that basis, that's when I started to develop a more pointed critique, you could say, of the mindfulness industry and its claims.

Kathrin Fischer:

[9:12] I would love to dive into this critic, of course, in detail, because it's very consistent from my point of view. But before that, as I am located in Germany, and as I said, these corporate mindfulness trainings are not so widespread yet, they are coming, we are always behind the US with our development, as you know. So could you just take us with you a little bit? How, I mean, you attended those trainings, you met the trainers, you have been there. How is it? I mean, Google had this very famous guy, I think, and it's in the Tech Valley. I think that is not a coincidence that the Tech Valley invented this kind of mindfulness training as well. Could you just describe for us a little bit how the situation was then?

Ron Purser:

[10:00] Yeah. Well, let me start out by maybe saying a few words about a typical sort of corporate mindfulness training program that works.

Ron Purser:

[10:10] I mean, there are a lot of companies in the United States now, not just Silicon Valley, like Ford Motor and Uber, many companies. And I think it's good to say that now here we are in 2022 and mindfulness is a \$2 billion industry. And it's very market friendly, you could say. And there are a lot of consultants and trainers now who offer corporations these programs either internally, in other words, that either they work within a human resource department or even their chief mindfulness officers, whatever titles they may have, or their external consultants who are basically brought in. And so their livelihood is based on selling these programs and securing these contracts. So the real issue here is, they ask the larger question or the broader question is, what is really the root cause of stress in corporations? Because they're offering solutions to a problem they've already diagnosed. They've already come up with the solution by basically saying that individuals and corporations are stressed and they're stressed because they're not paying attention. They're not focused enough. They're not concentrated. They're distracted and they're very stressed out. So we have basically a program that can help relieve individual stress of employees.

Kathrin Fischer:

[11:36] And have them stay focused.

Ron Purser:

[11:38] And have them stay focused so they can be more productive and perform their duties. So, we know, though, from a workplace stress research point of view, that the real causes of stress, workplace stress, are not necessarily the failure of individuals', lack of focus or their inability to concentrate. It's really what's going on around them in the workplace, the culture, more structural factors such as, well, especially in the United States, maybe not so much so in Germany. It's the United States as well.

Ron Purser:

[12:12] You know, high pressure, lots of long hours, things like bad bosses, you know, that are coercive, a lack of discretion, decision-making, and autonomy to actually perform one's work. And in the United States, lack of healthcare, like at Starbucks, you know, which is now one of the leading-edge companies in the United States that is unionizing. The union movement is taking off in Starbucks. Fear of layoffs. All these are more systemic factors that are in work-life balance, which is a term I really don't like. So, there are a lot of other causes of stress besides stress. The diagnosis that stress is inside one's head and so therefore send everybody off to a yoga or a mindfulness program. So that's the diagnosis that is sort of framing the corporate mindfulness programs themselves, is that they're trying to address stress in the workplace at an individual level through this individualized training, because the training is strictly on the individual. It's not examining the systemic causes of stress in the workplace. And that basically then lets management off the hook for taking any kind of responsibility for the conditions in the workplace, for the toxic culture that may be permeating a particular company.

Ron Purser:

[13:39] So I just wanted to at least frame it that way. And then we can look more at what's going on at Amazon. You know, this is more recent. And I was surprised it took Amazon so long to adopt mindfulness programs, but now they have. And of course, Amazon has been in the news, in the media quite a lot here. That's another company that's now been facing union challenges. But in the Amazon warehouses, we're talking more about hourly workers that are working at a very fast pace, you know, alongside robots. And they've now instituted a mindfulness program in these sweatshops, these warehouses for Amazon workers. And the program is called Amazon, like Zen. and it basically has these booths set up in the shop floor where a worker can take like a three minute break or whatever it may be how long it's going to be short i could tell you that but they go in these booths and watch a short guided mindfulness meditation video and then they jump right back into what they were doing and they have like positive affirmations guided meditations breathing exercises and so forth.

Ron Purser:

[14:53] But the basic premise is, you know, we'll give you a little shot of mindfulness, a little short aspirin, get back to what you're doing and without any kind of change in the workplace whatsoever. And they call that the working wellness program. So that's one example. But Starbucks was another one, too. In the United States, a few years back, the baristas and the frontline workers were very demoralized because they felt they were understaffed. And you had to get a certain amount of hours before the health care benefits would kick in. And so Starbucks management kind of figured out how to keep their hours down. And they were understaffed at a lot of these stores. And they complained and they petitioned the human resource corporate headquarters. And corporate headquarters responded by saying, oh, okay, you guys are all stressed out. So we're going to gift you a Headspace mindfulness meditation app for every Starbucks employee.

Kathrin Fischer:

[15:45] Instead of changing the working conditions.

Ron Purser:

[15:47] Okay, you know, you're stressed out, then get over it. Here's a solution for you. This is not uncommon in many, many companies. But in Silicon Valley in particular, I think we have a situation where it already has a history, kind of a cultural history in the valley. Of what I've sometimes referred to as spiritual libertarianism. In other words, going back to people like Steve Jobs at Apple, who was obviously very intrigued with Eastern spirituality, particularly Zen, he was interested in Zen. So we have kind of this undercurrent of sort of an appreciation for Eastern spirituality. But at the same time, we have a very driven culture, a very ambitious, highly driven, goal-oriented, profit-motivated set of values in these tech companies. Now, on the face of it, it would look like they're very, very humane because, for example, Google, if you go down to Mountain View, which I have several times, and there are pool tables, there are people who will come do your laundry and your dry cleaning, change your oil.

Ron Purser:

[17:01] It's depicted as, you know, a fun place to work. And now they bring in corporate mindfulness. So now it sort of has almost a public relations kind of element to it, almost like virtue signaling that we're really a caring company because now we're really concerned about individuals' stress levels. And we really want to kind of nurture employees and make them feel that the work they're doing has spiritual value in a sense. So, in a way, we see this convergence of spirituality and capitalism. It's sort of like that they can work together and support each other in a very synergistic way, that you can be a very profitable company and at the same time be engaging in some higher good. And that's sort of the narrative. That's sort of the myth, you could say, of Silicon Valley when it comes to.

Ron Purser:

[17:56] Whether it was Zen under Steve Jobs or whether now it's mindfulness at Google. Because we have an erosion of institutionalized religion in our culture, of course, we have what's often referred to as the spiritual but not religious. So there's still kind of a yearning to be part of something greater than oneself. And now, so the corporation will kind of step in and say, well, we're your family. We're your family. We have everything you need here. You don't even have to leave. You could sleep here if you need to. And a lot of engineers do.

Ron Purser:

[18:31] But there's another element to this. And my friend, Kevin Healy, he coined the term civic mindfulness. And what he meant by that is that there's kind of an irony here, especially in the industries of digital technologies like Google, is that they're offering employees, especially their software engineers, mindfulness programs. And I'm not here to say that they're not getting any sort of benefit from it. They probably are. But it's a very small elite group of software engineers that have a temporary kind of an oasis of calm within the corporation, so that they could be more highly productive in developing technologies of distraction for the rest of us. So, it's a real irony in the sense that they're using a spiritual, well, I don't even see mindfulness as a technique, but it's become an instrumentalized technique that now can be deployed for purposes which it was never intended to be deployed for.

Kathrin Fischer:

[19:36] And military.

Ron Purser:

[19:37] Military, for example, has various types of mindfulness programs, but in a corporation, It's deployed to ensure that employees stay productive and they don't lose time from stress-related illnesses, which is another impetus, another reason why mindfulness has taken off in corporations is because, one, people are more stressed. They are more stressed in corporations. They are more prone to stress-related absences, which is costing corporations billions of dollars. I think a Gallup poll said it was \$300 billion of losses per year. And that's a very unsettling number. And also that a lot of people report being disengaged, you know, especially now, as looking back after the pandemic, we

have what's called the great resignation. In other words, that a lot of people had the experience for a period of time of not having to resign. Commute to work in rush hour traffic for an hour.

Ron Purser:

[20:48] They did not have to put in 60 hours a week like they had been on site. They worked remotely. And they had time to reflect on what was really of value to them. And we see a lot of people in the tech world saying, I really don't want to go back to the office. I'll work less hours. I'll take a reduction in pay. But the basic idea here is that There is this sense of what David Graeber, the anthropologist, the late— The bullshit jobs. Bullshit jobs, yes. People started saying, I don't know if what I'm doing is really adding value to the world. But even before the pandemic, this was a problem, employee disengagement. So the Corporate Mindfulness Initiative became extremely attractive to human resource executives and corporations.

Kathrin Fischer:

[21:41] I'm asking myself, you're a Buddhist, you're a practitioner, you practice Buddhism. So I thought, doesn't have that some impact on you? I mean, this kind of cynical and deprived form of mindfulness, because I feel when you write about mindfulness, I really like the engaged way you write about that. And I find you coin very precise phrases, but I always feel kind of rage against that kind of, or rage is perhaps a big word, I don't know, but kind of feelings against that form of mindfulness. Is that true?

Ron Purser:

[22:17] Well, maybe when I first started. Yeah, there was a bit of a, I guess, a sense of moral outrage is the way to put it. And on the other hand, I come from a professional background. As I mentioned in the field of management and business, that it didn't surprise me in some sense that when it comes to corporate training programs, since we've been talking about that right for now, that there are trends and fads that kind of come and go. And you see sort of this entrepreneurial ethos in the marketplace of ideas. And what becomes trendy also becomes profitable for a certain phase of time. So, you see a lot of consultants that when they see there's a lot of money to be made, they will retool and reskill themselves. And so, suddenly you see all these spiritual entrepreneurs now are experts in mindfulness and they have all sorts of, you know, quick fix remedies and training programs. And that's nothing new in the corporate world in terms of fads and things like that and fashions. But going back to the Buddhist side of it, um.

Ron Purser:

[23:27] Yeah, you know, there is a part of this which has a lot to do with, I guess you could say, decontextualization, cultural appropriation, sort of a – it didn't just start recently with mindfulness. It has a long history of Asian spiritualities being appropriated for purposes to support capitalist enterprises. Because before mindfulness, we had people that were selling Taoism, Tao of the leader, you know, or Zen. It has a long history. In the United States, it has a really strong history of the prosperity gospel as well. In other words, this goes all the way back to the Puritan ethic, actually. And the Puritan ethic was that if you worked hard, you really didn't know whether you were going to go

to heaven or not. But by showing good works and working really hard, you know, you can place your bets, you know, basically that you would have a stronger chance of salvation. And so, in the corporate world now with mindfulness is sort of an updated version of that. So, instead, it's more like, you know, I can tolerate these toxic workplace conditions by practicing mindfulness. By doing that, I can maybe get ahead, you know, advance on the career ladder, on the corporate ladder.

Ron Purser:

[24:49] I'll be a dutiful, mindful employee and do as I'm told, basically. So mindfulness functions as kind of a salvic force in a way in corporations that helps people to cope and adapt and adjust to the status quo and maintain the status quo. In that sense, it becomes almost a form of social amnesia. And what I mean by that is that as I was talking, it erases kind of everything that has to do with the system, everything that has to do with the social, everything that has to do with the political and the economic. And everything is then funneled down to the individual. There's a very highly privatized individualistic spirituality that is marketed. C. Wright Mills, who was a great sociologist in the early 60s, he saw this as a problem as well, in that when we only focus on the psychological or the interior of individuals, then we're losing sight, the other side of the coin, so to speak. And that's what mindfulness has done, is that it basically is creating a disconnect between the individual and the political, or the individual and the social.

Ron Purser:

[26:01] And one extreme or the other is not the answer. So you can actually be an extremist by saying that everything is caused by structural and systemic conditions. You know, you can go that, you can go in that direction too, which is also problematic. But mindfulness has gone in towards the psychological. It's gone towards seeing everything as an individualized problem. And so therefore, their diagnosis is that maladapted individuals are the problem. And so we need to figure out ways to adapt them to the status quo. So it shifts the burden of responsibility completely over to individuals to manage their own well-being. And that serves- And they're very bad conditions.

Kathrin Fischer:

[26:43] I mean, you were talking about the white elite, but they are, I don't know, in the US, it's 50 million people with low wages and very bad working conditions or something like that. So, I mean, you have to tame yourself, calm yourself under very bad circumstances, and you should better change the circumstances.

Ron Purser:

[27:03] Yeah, and not just that, but also it's a blaming the victim mentality as well. And again, going back to the irony that I mentioned earlier is that, yeah, people are more distracted. And why is that? Could it be because of these technology companies that have designed phones and apps to be addictive, to actually try to keep people distracted online? So these technologies of mass distraction, which are being exported by companies like Twitter and Instagram and TikTok and Facebook platforms. They're sort of like the poster childs for mindfulness, which is such an irony to me, because these are companies that are most enthusiastic promoters of mindfulness for their

employees, of course. And so we have this really glaring, to me at least, disconnect between the mindfulness industry, which is very capitalist friendly. I call it the new capitalist spirituality for that reason. And that's why we see it as a \$2.2 billion industry now in 2022 as well.

Kathrin Fischer:

[28:11] I mean, I learned from your book that mindfulness, like positive psychology and the broader happiness industry, has depoliticized stress, just as you said it. And if we are unhappy about being unemployed, just the things you said, losing our health insurance, seeing our children incur massive debt through college loans. It is our responsibility to learn to be more mindful. So you conclude in your book that mindfulness in most cases legitimizes prevailing conditions rather than challenging them. Stress is characterized as a genetic holdover from the Stone Age that we can meditate away. Because we say that mindfulness answers to stress. And I wonder always, it's such a mean concept. Why do we believe in that? It's so obvious that it's not true. Is it the belief that we can you know just earn our own money that we can achieve everything and if we don't achieve it it's our own fault but why do we believe in such an obvious untrue concept

Ron Purser:

[29:16] Yeah, I do talk a lot about the construct of stress. It's a very ambiguous term, which I think is another reason why the mindfulness industry has become so successful, because it has a particular viewpoint on stress, a particular sort of framing of stress, which a lot of people don't appreciate that stress is a very sort of historical construct. And there's many ways of thinking about it. The discourse of stress is not simply that it's all in your head. That sort of discourse becomes a depoliticized narrative, which, as I said, ignores all these other structural, economic, and political factors that are impacting the individual. So we're looking at a problem here that goes a lot deeper and I don't know if you want to get into this now and that is the ideology of neoliberalism it's.

Kathrin Fischer:

[30:12] My next question I wanted to quote Pierre your due so go ahead I'm fine with it

Ron Purser:

[30:18] Okay because it all kind of uh is interrelated when it comes to thinking about stress and neoliberalism and I yeah so if you think about Mindfulness is sort of promoted as an antidote to stress. I mean, that's basically its selling point. And that if you can practice mindfulness.

Ron Purser:

[30:41] You'll learn how to manage your emotional reactions and your impulses and stresses and worries. And so by framing it as an individualized problem that doesn't pose any sort of threat then to the status quo and that's where we really come to this point where mindfulness is complicit then you could say with a neoliberal ethos and neoliberalism is a very politically conservative movement that tries to maintain the status quo. In other words, that those who have attained power and wealth should be given free reign to keep accumulating more power and wealth. And the market is, the free

market is basically the arbiter for all choices. And, you know, it's an interesting side note to mention that the mindfulness and a lot of the mindfulness teachers had quite a positive reception at the World Economic Forum in Davos. I just wanted to point that out. But neoliberalism has become, you know, the new cultural dogma. And it's really kind of insidious. It's a common sense way of...

Ron Purser:

[31:54] That many of us now interpret and understand the world. So, it's not just an economic philosophy, it's become a cultural hegemony. The basic idea behind it is that any kind of collective structures are suspect because they impede a pure free market logic. And that's why this individualized approach to stress and this individualizing training is so appealing within a neoliberal framework, because it's completely resonant with the neoliberal imperative that its individuals are basically the unit for the marketplace. There is no society. There are no collectors, or there shouldn't be. If there are, we need to destroy them or erode them, defund them, whatever it may take. And so, it's an insidious worldview. It goes even deeper than that over time, over time, as individuals become to see themselves as fully responsible, right, for their well-being, their health, their economic well-being, their physical and mental well-being. And then you become an entrepreneur. You have to become an entrepreneur of yourself, basically, to make sure that you're constantly improving yourself and updating.

Kathrin Fischer:

[33:13] And you have to be resilient.

Ron Purser:

[33:14] To be resilient. You have to update your human capital, your self-worth, your human potential, your welfare, your happiness, whatever it may be. All your internal resources then become assets. Everything then is reframed in a subtle way in economic terms. But basically, the neoliberal ideology holds that all the decisions about society should be run and left to the workings of the marketplace. So, what we end up then with, how do we do that? How does that really manifest itself in a way that we don't have to have, you could say, heavy-handed control over people? And that's where Michel Foucault's work really was quite pioneering in his analysis of how that occurred, this idea that entrepreneurs are running their own enterprise, the business of what I call in the book, me incorporated, because we're in competition with others as well in a free market society. And as you dig deeper, you begin to see there's this turning inward occurring. Since everything is on the shoulders of the responsible individual.

Ron Purser:

[34:32] Everything is starting to focus on turning inwards towards one's subjective activity. As you do that, you're basically sort of having a collective forgetting about the social and the political and economic structures that have a lot to do with your impoverishment or your stress or your poor mental health or whatever it may be. So the mandate then is that individuals have to take care of themselves, this idea of self-care, the idea that they have to manage their own stress if they're going to be employable, especially in this precarious economy, right? So this whole turn, this neoliberal

turn is what Foucault called governmentality. And that's a difficult term to understand, governmentality.

Ron Purser:

[35:19] What he was trying to say, I think, is that government is not just some political activity that happens in Berlin, the capital, the centers of power in Washington, D.C., or something like that. He's saying that the government in a neoliberal society has to find ways of linking these power relations to one's subjectivity. So, we begin to see how experts start to play roles in institutions like psychologists, psychiatrists, mindfulness teachers, psychotherapists. They begin to affect the behavior and attitudes and the affective sensibilities of individuals. So, people become more interested in how they can self-improve, how they can turn towards methods of self-care. And people begin to manage themselves. So power becomes more situated in a self-disciplinary way, what Foucault called the techniques of the self. So, these modes of power, you know, and mindfulness, especially you see it in terms of self-surveillance, you know. Now I have to be really mindful of everything that I do. And so, you become sort of split within yourself in some ways.

Kathrin Fischer:

[36:37] And you are never good enough.

Ron Purser:

[36:38] You're never good enough. You're never mindful enough.

Kathrin Fischer:

[36:41] Non-judgmental enough.

Ron Purser:

[36:43] Well, yeah. But see, that's a judgment, which is also kind of funny because... It's so stupid. Yeah. Yeah, you become a project. The self becomes a project that constantly has to work on itself. And that creates this sort of tension in a way within oneself, which is really interesting, since it's all supposed to be about stress relief. But a lot of mindfulness people that I've come across, especially some teachers, are quite uptight, very sort of narrow bandwidth of what's acceptable behavior and acceptable emotions. But it also creates this sort of form of magical thinking, too. You know, it's like, as long as I'm mindful, I'm okay. It's like, there's kind of that kind of magical thinking.

Kathrin Fischer:

[37:27] Yeah, it's very self-centered. So, I mean, the self is very isolated in another way. And so, if you say there is a lack of transcendence or, you know, a longing for transcendence because you are very lonely with yourself.

Ron Purser:

[37:42] Yeah, well, that's right. Right. And there are some new studies that have been coming out lately about that mindfulness training could actually make you more narcissistic and self-centered. So, I think that's right on the spot. Yeah, this is an interesting phenomenon, this idea that you can sort of work on yourself. And there's this idea that you can split yourself and observe yourself. And it creates this tension which, as you say, is kind of contradictory to the whole idea of transcendence, of kind of transcending the self. And it's, yeah, it's an interesting psychological phenomenon in and of itself.

Kathrin Fischer:

[38:24] And people get more stressed and they are looking more for answers to relieve their stress. And then it's a kind of vicious circle you have, I imagine. But I would be interested in how do you put some neoliberal structures via, you know, this governmentality in yourself? How come that we lost so totally the knowledge about connectivity, that we are connected people, social people, that we need other people, that we are vulnerable people, that we are interdependent, that you have the impression we lost that and we suffer? And sometimes I have the impression that I wrote that to you in the email already, that there is some good core in this longing for mindfulness, that the moment the representation of the ego becomes more and more important on all social levels. As you said, you have to be an entrepreneur in social media, of course, as well. You always have to look good and things like that. And in that moment, the longing of letting go of this ego is also increasing, even if this longing itself is marketed again as a product. I sometimes think, isn't there a good impulse in that?

Ron Purser:

[39:42] Yeah, I think everyone is trying to respond to that impulse. The problem is that we see this reframing of stress as an individualized problem. We see the neoliberal ethos as the context for which these programs are situated. So that impulse gets co-opted in a way and misdirected in ways that reinforce this self-centered view, as you're saying. Where we are, you know, apparently these autonomous individuals that could simply manage ourselves, you know, and it becomes also a form of political quietism because we begin to think that I need to fix myself before I can engage politically or I need to fix myself before I have any value in the world. I have to sit on a cushion, maybe even just by practicing mindfulness that I am causing peace in the world. You know, you also have that sort of viewpoint, too.

Kathrin Fischer:

[40:46] That is strange. Yeah.

Ron Purser:

[40:49] And I think we have this desire. I don't know if desire is the right word, but I like your term, impulse. And I think that we, as individuals, we're always practicing some form of mindfulness,

whether we know it or not, because we're always paying attention to something. I think what we don't appreciate is just how much we're imagining our condition to be true in a sense that we imagine ourselves into the situation to such an extent that we don't think there's any other interpretation of that situation. I don't know if I'm being exactly clear, but I was thinking about a new term that just came to me thinking about this interview. Instead of mindfulness, maybe we should start thinking of imaginefulness. In other words, the power of imagination. And that's the utopian impulse. That's that things could be otherwise. Things do not have to be the way they are. And that's one of the things that always irritated me was this admonition by the mindfulness teachers and gurus and trainers that have to accept things the way they are. And I'm like, no, I don't. I don't want to.

Ron Purser:

[42:09] And I understand what they're saying, you know, in a sense, psychologically, you know, if you don't react to something, you know, you don't engage with it, then you won't go down the train of further emotional reactions and making things worse. I understand that point of view. But when it becomes a trope to such an extent that people actually start thinking that's a behavioral sort of imperative to accept things the way they are, then that's problematic. So, I think that one of the deeper questions is that this impulse, what is that impulse really searching for? Because the search itself implies there's a lack of some kind. Somehow, that as a human being, I am fundamentally lacking something. I'm incomplete.

Kathrin Fischer:

[43:03] I don't know whether I agree on that. I think this impulse I was talking from was that you need, you want to be connected with other people or with something transcendent, perhaps. It may be nature. It may be, I don't know. Or you may have, like Barbara Ehrenreich wrote this book, *Dancing in the Street*, *Collective Joy*. You may do something with other people. I think people don't want to be only centered around themselves and look there for something bigger, higher. This is, to me, a very strange idea. Why should I find it in the inner world? Why shouldn't I find it in the outside where, you know, opposite my window are sheep? I mean, so there are some other animals or people or trees or, you know, nice neighbors or nice partners to talk with or something. This is what I always think that people, they don't want to be lonely, that they don't want to be solipsistic.

Ron Purser:

[44:06] And the neoliberal system.

Kathrin Fischer:

[44:09] As you put it, makes you very, very lonely because you can rely only on yourself.

Ron Purser:

[44:14] Yeah, and it also emphasizes, it sort of exacerbates the split between the inner world or the subject and the outer world. It kind of creates an even deeper dualistic split. And I think that one of the issues in our Western society is this idea that the subjective is not to be trusted either. There's

the sense that it's only objective scientific technological knowledge that has validity and trustworthiness, although even now that is under attack.

Ron Purser:

[44:50] So, when we say, oh, well, that's just subjective, you see, we already have this denigration that knowledge, technological knowing, is a model that we've sort of adhered to. And that's why we look to science. That's why we kind of see science as the new high priest of society. And so when it comes to asking questions that have to do with knowledge, one of the problems is we have a kind of an epistemology or even an ontology which sees the lonely self, as you're putting it, as the possessor of knowledge, that the self is the owner of knowledge. And that is a problematic kind of vision of reality in some sense, because the self will always feel that it never is quite satisfied with the knowledge that it has acquired. So it needs to seek out more knowledge and more knowledge. Now, when I use the term knowledge, it could be anything. It could be more power. It could be more material goods. It's not necessarily knowledge like concepts, but concept two apply. And there's this sort of insatiable need on the part of an isolated self that.

Ron Purser:

[46:03] To try to feel complete. Now, what mindfulness has done is said, yeah, you're right. You're incomplete. You're insufficient. You're not mindful enough. And we have the solution, right? So just do this and you're going to feel better. You're not just going to feel better. You might even perform better, whether it's at work or even in sports, you know, they use mindfulness or taking exams. But it's the same problematic that we have this model of knowing which has a split in it. And that split is that there is an isolated self, and then there's the external world. And the external world is the dominion of where truth claims are made through science, through objective observations and empirical validation through third-party methods. And if you look at why has neuroscience become such a fad in the mindfulness movement with brain scans and the measurement of trying to find the neural correlates of mindfulness meditation, monks in fMRI machines and so forth. Again, it's sort of this notion that there is this split and we need science to tell us what we're supposed to do, whether our mindfulness is valid or not based on brain scans and so forth.

Ron Purser:

[47:25] So, you know, I think that's part of the problem with this sort of epistemological kind of confusion in what we're dealing with. And I don't think mindfulness has even thought about this.

Kathrin Fischer:

[47:39] And it's that we are so self-centered and looking then for something higher on the wrong places, perhaps. But you said that perhaps you could have another term, imaginefulness. Was that the term you used?

Ron Purser:

[47:54] Imaginefulness.

Kathrin Fischer:

[47:55] Yeah, I wanted to ask you, I mean, you have started to write about mindfulness nearly 10 years ago. And do you feel that the critique, the profound critique you have, and which has been broadly received, I think it changed anything concerning mindfulness or the deeper concepts about that?

Ron Purser:

[48:15] Well, yeah, I see. Well, yeah, I think a lot of people have told me that it has, that before the critique, there wasn't any kind of questioning at all of either the motives or practices or, yeah, so I think people are now starting to kind of reframe mindfulness and expand its scope to not just focus on individualized stress. There are attempts to do that.

Kathrin Fischer:

[48:40] Are you tired of the subject or are you looking like, you know, imagine fullness, looking for a way to develop it further in a more social, social active way?

Ron Purser:

[48:54] Well, not necessarily. I'm really more focused on questioning the whole language problem of how we divide up the world into these categories itself. In other words, Paying more attention to actually the operations of mind and how language influences our perception in terms of making divisions, which are constructs based on agreements that we all make as social beings. So, my work now is more focused on examining the operations of mine in a way that can shed light on how we're trapped in making such divisions as the personal versus the social, the individual versus the political, all these kinds of subject versus the object. Because unless we do that, it seems like we'll be playing games or fixing one side of the problem and then the other side is ignored. Exactly what's happening now with the mindfulness movement, we're trying to fix individuals and ignoring the greater social, larger world out there. And so, my concern now is more to understand how we're trapped, what Tarthang Tuku, a Tibetan lama, writes about. He calls it the regime of mind. We're all sort of operating within a regime of mind, and that regime.

Kathrin Fischer:

[50:16] Is... Do you have an example for that?

Ron Purser:

[50:18] Well, yeah. I mean, our habitual patterns that we repeat day to day, the suffering in the world through history, which doesn't seem to change over time, the wars that are constant through history, the change of guard, revolutions through time. But we have this incredible advance in material and science and medicine. Yes, we have a better, you could say, material quality of life. We

live longer than we did. Yes, so we have materially improvements technologically. But fundamentally, the human mind is still plagued by these fundamental problems of suffering, which are exported into the world. And now it's affecting the ecology as well, the environment, climate emergency, climate crisis. So, that's the regime of mind at work, which is not something that's inside one's head, so to speak.

Kathrin Fischer:

[51:15] Just to understand it, the regime of mind is, as you said, the subject-object division.

Ron Purser:

[51:22] We have a dualistic structure of mind, which seems to be fundamental, and it seems to be implicit in the operations of how we perceive. And when that structure is operating, then the ability to really transcend one's sense of locatedness as an individual is limited. To have compassion for other beings is not just empathy. It's actually kind of an embodied knowing of unity that is a lived experience that the separation that appears to us is just that. It's an imagined appearance because that's the way our senses and our cognitions are set up so that we can actually survive in a world that requires us to stop signs and balance our checkbooks. We have useful cognitions which require a dualistic way of operating, but when that dualistic way of operating becomes the only way that the mind can operate, that's when we run into the problems that we run into either as individuals or as societies or civilizations, for that matter, over time. So, the deeper questions are one of imagination.

Ron Purser:

[52:34] And I come back to that because we really don't see how we're imaging ourselves into the problems that we're dealing with. In other words, we don't really take seriously the idea that mind is inseparable from the appearances that we're perceiving. Because we've sort of been educated into a view of naive realism, that there is a real, independent, external world out there. And when power structures can say, well, this is the way things are, what neoliberalism does. And on top of that, we have this kind of cultural education that says, don't trust your own mind. You can't trust your mind, right? Then we begin to feel very, very vulnerable. Well, we already do feel vulnerable, but that vulnerability leads to susceptibility to outside influences such as the media, which can begin to overtake our and shape our sense of what's actually real and what isn't. So, in that sense, that in a way, we have to kind of reclaim our sovereignty over our own mind in a way. And mind being mind at large, mind as sort of a non-dual, sort of a unified mind. We're all participating in mind in some way. So, we all have minds. At least I would.

Kathrin Fischer:

[53:57] It's a very, very big question. I mean, I read about that, that if you have special drug experiences, you experience perhaps this mystified or this unity, or if you meditate. So how to experience, really experience a non-duality? That is a big question, huh?

Ron Purser:

[54:18] Yeah, that is a big question. And we've lacked imagination around that question. And we've relied too much on concepts and constructs. They're interesting. Like a lot of people are interested as lay people in like something trending like quantum physics, like, oh, yeah, everything's interrelated and everything's entangled. But, you know, as much as those concepts might be interesting, they don't really change you to actually live in that way. In other words, do they really transform you at such a level that you're now living as if there are no other people, that we're all sort of one being, you know, that it's entangled? No, that doesn't usually happen. So we're living in a world that's shaped by our own constructs and those constructs seem very substantial and unquestionable and that's another i think key thing is that rather than practicing some technique in a rote fashion we should be amping up and kind of rejuvenating our critical questioning capacities and sharpening our intelligence in such a way that we can question everything that we've accepted as unquestionable. And then everything's up to question then. Everything that we've taken for granted in terms of our whole perceptual apparatus.

Kathrin Fischer:

[55:43] Like a tree is a tree and it's only wood.

Ron Purser:

[55:46] Well, to us, from our point of view, that might be. But these constructs are shaped the way that we interpret. And then they become automatic. They run on automatic too.

Ron Purser:

[55:58] It's kind of an automaticity to the way the mind begins to work in the regime of mind. So, it is a much different wave of approaching. That's why I'm sort of not too interested in mindfulness anymore, because I think we really need to go beyond just performing rote techniques to make ourselves feel a little bit better. I think there are much deeper issues at stake here, and we have a lot more potential than just trying to calm ourselves so we fit in better to what are not exactly the ideal conditions for the world right now. So, I think that we need to engage imagination so we can construct a different world that is more suitable for human beings and all living creatures. But we're sort of stuck in sort of habitual patterns and we don't really question the operation of our own mind, then that's going to be very difficult to do. And so, we need to kind more of a visionary quality to these sorts of questions. We need to really have kind of a wonder, a sense of wonder and vision about.

Ron Purser:

[57:04] What is our true nature as a human being to live in this world and to leave it and to have some sort of legacy that we can be at peace with when we reach our death? We should be able to imagine the future in a very kind of lived sense. That's another thing is this whole focus on the present moment is doing a lot of damage to people, in my opinion. It's a fake.

Ron Purser:

[57:34] Adhering to the regime of mind this idea of the present moment, because one of the problems that we have is that we're experiencing a sense of acceleration, like a temporal acceleration. Things seem to be speeding up, especially with the digital technologies. And we don't have the sense of spatial and temporal relief that we used to have, because everything is so interconnected digitally and globally. So we're living in a sense of temporal acceleration, but our whole way of being in time is based on a particular sort of linear temporality. In other words, the past, the present, and the future.

Ron Purser:

[58:23] Now, the interesting aspect of this is that the present moment is always kind of slipping away into the past. And the future never really quite arrives right it's kind of on the edge and once the future arrives it's no longer the future and it's the present the present just slips away into the past so the moments that we experience are not very satisfactory in other words time seems to be something.

Ron Purser:

[58:53] That's not exactly our friend in a way, And we can't really rest. We can't really feel a sense of ease or satisfaction because we're always moving. We're always wanting. We're always something's not quite right or not enough. I need another experience of some kind. Or even when something nice happens and pleasant, it doesn't last. So, we're in this kind of sense of constant transitoriness or impermanence that is kind of almost, it's merciless. It doesn't let up. It's relentless. And that is part of what we don't question. See, we all accept this as this is the way things are. This is the way time operates, right? Everyone else is operating in that way. So, it's a consensus of reality that we have imagined to be real and cannot be anything else but that way of operating in time. So, being in time is a key, you could say, to a different approach to appreciating our experience in a way which does not have to be subjected to this linear temporal momentum.

Ron Purser:

[1:00:18] And when we can kind of relax and deepen into a different way of being in time...

Ron Purser:

[1:00:27] Then we might be able to appreciate more of what we already have, right? We appreciate more of what we already have, then our whole approach might change in the sense that maybe I don't need that new car, right? Maybe I don't need to go on another trip somewhere and have a heavy carbon footprint, right? Maybe I could just walk my dog by the beach here and that's fine. You know, I mean, And it can manifest differently for everybody, but I think the point that I'm making is that we take for granted the fundamental kind of facets of our lived experience, which are based on.

Ron Purser:

[1:01:04] How we're embodied in space, our lived experience in time, and what we think we know or how we know. These are three fundamental facets of human experience, which we all take for

granted. We don't question them. We're living in a regime that tells us what's real and what is, and this is the way things are, and it can't be otherwise. And yeah, maybe you can fix things a little bit here and there, but that dualistic structure, that temporal, linear temporality keeps churning. It's not really examined in a way that can open it up and alter it in ways that can have a kind of a liberating effect. So, I think imagination and we need to find ways of liberating the modern mind from its kind of bondage to a dualistic structure, which has been unexamined and not really questioned in a deep way. So, just focusing on.

Ron Purser:

[1:02:00] Focusing on one's breath and focusing on the individual, you know, all these therapeutic kind of goals that mindfulness is, you know, they're not necessarily negative in the sense that they can offer therapeutic benefit, but they really won't go any farther than that. That's something I think that we need to think beyond.

Kathrin Fischer:

[1:02:18] So that is nearly, I'd say, the end of the talk, because I have the impression that is really, I mean, we could have another hour to talk that or we have to have a second talk, you know, when you when you've been a little bit further, because that is really a big, big, big challenge to get out of the regime of your own head. I mean, how do you do that by thinking? I mean, you think with your instrument that you want to, you know, overcome in a way, or do you need experiences or imagination? I'm very with you. I only have a kind of skepticism. How do you do that except of drugs? I mean, you have so many examples that people really experience this kind of unity and that there is some proof that the brain itself makes this feeling of separation. And if you take some drugs, it just lowers this work. Yeah, this seems to me very interesting. But without that, I can very difficult imagine how you can do that.

Ron Purser:

[1:03:28] Well, yeah, the conundrum is that we're talking about a different operation of mind that's not based on dualism, not based on conceptuality. So how do you touch a deeper level of mind that's non-conceptual by relying on concepts? Well, one way is to see clearly how we're trapped first.

Ron Purser:

[1:03:55] To understand how the current, you could say, operation of mind is actually operating. We don't even do that. So, you can still rely on concepts and thinking, deeply thinking things through with some guidance and observation of the operations of mind. It's a process. It's something that happens over time, very quickly. The operations happen very quickly. So, there's cognition, and this is before labeling occurs, before language sets in. The senses are taking in information, whether it's the eyes or the ears, all of our five senses, even thinking is considered a sense. But nothing's been set in place. Then we identify, what is that? Right. Even then, they're still not. It's starting to make sense and connect it up to what it already knows based on what it's learned. And so, then we assign a label and a word and that word has all kinds of associative meanings based on what's happened before. And then, oh, we recognize. In other words, we re-cognize. So, we're already removed from what's

actually occurring in time. We're actually removed because now we're re-cognizing based on what we've already accumulated from our past experiences. But this is very just a simple illustration.

Ron Purser:

[1:05:24] So, we can still use approaches that appear to be like mindfulness, but to turn them in a more sophisticated way towards how the mind is actually operating in real time, you could say. In real time, I'll put that in quotes. So, yeah, I think this is kind of maybe the next phase of where we might be going in that respect. But it is a conundrum because you might call it wisdom. Wisdom, which is not limited by concepts. It's not limited by dualistic structures, which require making sense of things through language and through concepts, which are inherently divisive. Inherently requires separating out something from something else, which is the nature of dualism. The dualistic approach to perception is based on distinctions, making distinctions between different things, different objects. And wisdom is sort of, like you said, it goes beyond things. It goes beyond even categories that are fundamental to our human existence, like existence versus non-existence is another kind of category, which life versus death. These are all sorts of opposites and polarities, which are very deeply existential concerns as human beings.

Ron Purser:

[1:06:50] So, wisdom is something that can penetrate and allow sort of a knowing quality to be part of our being as homo sapiens. Sapien means knowing. Homo is the biology.

Ron Purser:

[1:07:07] The regime of mind operates to ensure our survival as human beings in very fragile, vulnerable bodies. We have to have these cognitive capacities. They served us well when we were fighting hunter and gatherers. These reactionary mechanisms that we have served us very well, and they still do. But see, that's what's happened is that they've basically become the dominant way of knowing, and we haven't really evolved because now there's what, almost 7 billion, 8 billion human beings on the planet? And if we're all operating as if we're trying to kill tigers and fend for ourselves, right, for our survival, yes, survival is important, but it's run amok. The regime of mine is run amok to the extent that enough is never enough. And that's what's gotten us into so much trouble as a species.

Kathrin Fischer:

[1:08:00] Dron i think this is another topic it's a really deep topic and a difficult topic to to understand and to receive and to express perhaps but perhaps next time we can talk about that further now i'm very happy that you talked with me you wrote me that you're not so much interested in mindfulness any longer, but still you have been willing to talk about mindfulness. And then we just went a little bit further and that was a really interesting talk. I enjoyed so much. Thank you so much for that.

Ron Purser:

[1:08:36] Well, thank you too. Thank you for inviting me to your podcast and I do look forward to maybe another talk in the future.

Kathrin Fischer:

[1:08:44] Also, irgendwann gibt es vielleicht tatsächlich ein zweites Gespräch, dann wenn Ron's Buch zum *Regime of Mind* erschienen ist, an dem er gerade arbeitet. Alle Personen, Bücher und Begriffe, die wir in dem Gespräch erwähnt haben, schreibe ich in der Reihenfolge ihrer Erwähnung in die Shownotes, falls ihr etwas nachlesen oder generell tiefer einsteigen wollt. Da findet ihr auch Rons Webseite. Er ist selbst ein großartiger Podcast-Host und hat viele interessante GesprächspartnerInnen aus dem Themenfeld Achtsamkeit, Buddhismus, Spiritualität und Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftskritik versammelt. The Mindful Cranks heißt der Podcast und die Unterzeile *where using your mind is not necessarily a bad thing*.

Kathrin Fischer:

[1:09:25] Im Dezember läuft dann hier ein Gespräch mit der Japanologin und Religionswissenschaftlerin Inken Prohl. Sie forscht als Professorin für Religionswissenschaften an der Uni Heidelberg unter anderem zu Buddhismus und Achtsamkeit. Das genial perfide der Achtsamkeitspraxis ist diese Doppelfunktion der Konstitution des Selbst. Immer wieder wird mir gesagt, ja, dein Selbst gibt es und das ist wichtig und heilig und du musst es bearbeiten. bei gleichzeitiger, kontinuierlicher Zähmung des Selbst. Unser Selbst wird gezähmt, es wird beruhigt und es wird in eine ganz bestimmte Form gebracht. Und es werden ganz bestimmte Funktionsweisen, die für die Wirtschaft und für die Gesellschaft oder fast, würde ich ja schon sagen, especially for the digital

Kathrin Fischer:

[1:10:19] Großmächte need to be found. These are built. Everything, what you don't need, will be cut out.

Ron Purser:

[1:10:32] This was Erschöpfung statt Gelassenheit. Why Achtsamkeit is the wrong answer on so many questions. This is a podcast from Katrin Fischer.