

Washington University in St. Louis

Washington University Open Scholarship

Spring 2017

Washington University
Senior Honors Thesis Abstracts

Spring 2017

Histories of the Secular: Medical Mindfulness Meditation in the United States

Matthew Drew

Washington University in St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wushta_spr2017

Recommended Citation

Drew, Matthew, "Histories of the Secular: Medical Mindfulness Meditation in the United States" (2017). *Spring 2017*. 26.

https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wushta_spr2017/26

This Abstract for College of Arts & Sciences is brought to you for free and open access by the Washington University

Senior Honors Thesis Abstracts at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spring 2017 by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.

HISTORIES OF THE SECULAR: MEDICAL MINDFULNESS MEDITATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Matthew Drew

Mentor: Cassie Adcock

What gives a research psychologist the authority to assert that the Buddha's true teachings were not religious, but in fact were scientific and universal? Furthermore, what gives this psychologist the authority to recommend "mindfulness" as part of a patients' treatment, a child's school day, a prisoner's sentence, or a soldier's training? Medical research in mindfulness meditation has grown considerably since its infancy in the 1980s, but few scholars have given it the treatment it deserves. Scholars tend to tell the story of mindfulness as one of immigration and assimilation, where Buddhist mindfulness moved from Asia to the U.S. in the mid-twentieth century, and is secularized by the scientific medical research. This narrative downplays the fact that American cultural values and practices were integral to the formation of contemporary medical mindfulness. Additionally, by telling a story of "secularization," it ignores the complex history through which categories of "religion" and "secular" were created and subsequently imposed on Buddhist practices. Using a genealogical study of history, I investigate how multiple discourses converge in the creation of medical mindfulness and I argue that secular medical mindfulness is heavily enmeshed within specific American histories. In Chapter 1, I argue that Protestant medical discourse portrayed internal, calm, mental religious experiences as healthy, while casting off emotional and physically intense experiences as diseased. I show how this discourse permeated the early psychology of religion. In Chapter 2, I examine how nineteenth-century "spirituality" discourse located the "East" as a source of universal, non-religious "spirituality," and laid the foundation for secular medical mindfulness's relationship to Buddhism. In the final chapter, I show how these two discourses meet in medical research on mindfulness meditation and mindfulness programs offered in formally secular institutions. This winding, diverse history shows how secular practices present specific moral and cultural values as ahistorical universals.