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Is there corporate mindfulness? An exploratory study of Buddhist-enacted spiritual leaders' perspectives and practices

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ABSTRACT

The majority of research on mindfulness reflects a secular viewpoint to the detriment of contextualized mindfulness approaches. We contribute to the literature on organizational mindfulness by arguing that mindfulness is a wisdom-based practice that has been exploited as an instrument for stress reduction or moment awareness techniques. We carried out in-depth interviews in Vietnam with 24 organizational leaders who are Buddhist practitioners, using thematic analysis to elucidate our argument. Our findings reveal that the practice of mindfulness is more effectively a personal and contextual choice rather than a universal "band aid," thus departing from secular interpretations and applications. This choice is based on understanding Buddhist teachings and principles and the combination of the Buddhist qualities of wisdom, compassion, and non-attachment. We argue that this more effectively can enable and contribute to a wise, dynamic, and flexible approach to corporate mindfulness.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, there have been tremendous changes in organizational and management practice and theory. We have witnessed a shift from traditional to more contemporary and spiritual approaches in organizations: from control to empowerment (Conger and Kanungo 1988), from traditional leadership theories to sustainable leadership (Hargreaves and Fink 2006), ethical leadership (Starratt 2004) or spiritual leadership (Fry 2003), from profit-maximizing organizational aims to well-being, spirituality and corporate social responsibility (DeFoore and Renesch 1995, Walsh, Weber, and Margolis 2003), from self-centeredness to connectedness (Capra 1993), and from a materialistic to spiritual orientation (DeFoore and Renesch 1995; Fox 1994; Neal 1997). Along with this organizational turbulence and post-modern organizational development (Hien 2014), organizations have become more complex. Organizations, and especially leaders and employees, face diverse and challenging dilemmas that call for contemporary approaches and theories that appreciate sensitivity to context, accurate, and nuanced description of the empirical data, and both narrative and analytic paths of development (Linstead, Maréchal, and Griffin 2014, 178).

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In addressing such concerns, mindfulness has been explored by various organizational scholars (Dane 2011; Levinthal and Rerup 2006; Ray, Baker, and Plowman 2011; Vogus and Sutcliffe 2012; Weick and Sutcliffe 2006) and clinical researchers (Davidson and Begley 2012; Williams and Kabat-Zinn 2011). Mindfulness is popularly conceived as meditation practices that are evident not only in Buddhism but also in other religions such as Hinduism, Islam and Christianity (Shear 2006). With secular interpretations, the concept of mindfulness derived from the Buddhist tradition is probably the most commonly understood one. However, mindfulness in Buddhism exists in various forms and practices that must be interpreted appropriately in its original Buddhist context and associated worldviews to avoid misinterpretation or ineffective practices (Kudesia and Nyima 2015). Nevertheless, the concept and practice of mindfulness have taken a secular form that is based mainly on popular Buddhist teachings preferred by Western teachers (Purser and Milillo 2015). For example, the practice of mindfulness has become popular as a stress reduction technique, which is far different from Buddhist canonical texts (Bodhi 2011; Gethin 2011; Ṭhānissaro 2012).

To explore how and when mindfulness can be introduced in organizations in a way that does not jeopardize its true nature and practice, we seek answers and suggestions from Buddhist practitioners who are organizational leaders in the Buddhist context of Vietnam. We find that exploring various approaches to mindfulness from organizational practitioners in the context of Vietnam is particularly helpful and practicable in contributing to the literature of organizational mindfulness for a number of reasons.

Vietnam is a nation that blends both Western and Eastern values as a result of its long history of colonization, notably by the Chinese, the French, and the Americans, combined with its complex external and internal interventions and conflicts (Le and Truong 2005). Therefore, Vietnam is diverse in culture, a nation which has witnessed rapid socioeconomic changes resulting in feelings of unrest and the need for spiritual forces in people's lives (Taylor 2004). Vietnam is a communist country that is supposed to portray common ownership and distribution of property of wealth based on the ideology of "from everyone according to their skills, to everyone according to their needs" (Black, Hashimzade, and Myles 2012). However, Vietnam's ideology appears to be corrupted and misguided. The lack of trust of the Vietnamese people in the regime, its "political gene pool" and the need to express "freedom" of opinion, speech, press, demonstration, and even religion (Abuza 2002; Thayer 2008) have all fostered the search for personal freedom and mindfulness through spirituality.

Traditional spiritual and folk practices and rituals known as national identity *(bản sắc dân tộc)* include the "Spirit Side" *(bên thánh),* such as ancestor worshipping *(thờ cúng tổ tiên)*, hero worshipping of the deified hero Trần Hưng Đạo, appreciation of mother goddesses *(thánh mẫu)*, the Jade Emperor *(Ngọc Hoàng)*, holy sages of saints *(thánh)*, and figures of the Chinese Daoist pantheon – the Kitchen God *(Ông Táo)* – and the "Buddha Side" including prayers for the Buddhas *(Phật)*, Bodhisattvas *(Bồ tát)*, Buddhist saints or arhats (La hán), and the Dharma guardians *(Hộ Pháp)* (Soucy 2012, 26). In practice, Vietnamese Buddhism has become increasingly engaged in various fields (Nguyen 2009) and dynamic in various forms of practices adapted from the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana paths (Hoang 2008; Weigelt 2011). The Vietnamese context with its complexities and distinctiveness offers new insights for the development of Buddhist practices in general and mindfulness practices in particular.

The purpose of our paper is threefold: (1) to review organizational mindfulness and its criticisms; (2) to explore the nature of mindfulness practices, in particular from the perspective of Buddhist practitioners as organizational leaders; and (3) to contribute to the literature of corporate mindfulness at both individual and organizational levels.

Corporate mindfulness and its critics

The popularization of organizational mindfulness has been described by Stahl and Goldstein (2010) as a "mindfulness revolution". Organizational mindfulness refers to the capability of an organization to be aware of discriminatory details of threats and to respond accordingly (Vogus and Sutcliffe 2012; Weick and Sutcliffe 2011). At an individual level, which originated from Buddhism (Dane 2011), mindfulness has been brought to organizational studies by many scholars (Fiol and O'Connor 2003; Ray, Baker, and Plowman 2011; Vogus and Sutcliffe 2012; Vogus and Welbourne 2003; Weick and Putnam 2006; Weick and Sutcliffe 2011). Mostly, researchers have identified positive outcomes of organizational mindfulness, such as its effectiveness in improving lives (Eberth and Sedlmeier 2012; Halliwell 2014), the ability to manage unexpected events based on anticipation and resilience (Weick and Sutcliffe 2011); the ability to cope with psychological and cognitive stress resulting from multitasking, interruptions, or deadlines (Wajcman and Rose 2011), demands of constant availability (Moen et al. 2013), and the identification of work and non-work boundaries (Fleming and Spicer 2004). Empirical studies of organizational mindfulness support its effectiveness in situations that are continuously exposed to potential crises (Levinthal and Rerup 2006; Vogus and Sutcliffe 2012), in safety and productivity in demanding workplaces (La Porte 1987; Roberts 1989) and in organizations driven intensively by knowledge and innovation (Becke 2013).

Incorporating mindfulness practices at both individual and organizational levels is helpful in contemporary business context because mindfulness is associated with cultural intelligence – "a multi-faceted competency consisting of cultural knowledge, the practice of mindfulness, and a repertoire of cross-cultural skills" (Thomas and Inkson 2009, 174). Thus, mindfulness embedded in cultural intelligence enables "the ability to connect with other people in different cultures and to cope effectively with cultural diversity, which is important for leadership in cross-cultural and multicultural settings" (Gill 2011, 287).

Though mindfulness and its application have added flavor and extended research in various fields in the literature, researchers fear that both the researcher and the reader may choose the popular conceptualization of mindfulness (Brown Ryan, and Creswell 2007; Hanley et al. 2016). Organizational mindfulness is argued, for instance, to be an instrument to be used in the interest of organizations (Sutcliffe and Vogus 2003; Weick and Sutcliffe 2011) rather than as a source of stimulating employees' intrinsic well-being and development of skills and competencies (Becke 2014). Such "modernization" and misinterpretation of secular mindfulness (Wallace 2006) exists because the originally rich Buddhist principles and concept of mindfulness have been reduced to merely "moment" awareness, attention enhancement, and stress reduction techniques (Purser and Milillo 2015). It has become a servant of capitalist society as a commercialized, individualized, and psychologized technique (Hickey 2010; Stanley 2012).

The research on organizational mindfulness shows weakness in its functional and instrumental perspectives (Becke 2014), in the lack of studies at different hierarchical levels, and

in its exploration of different roles of mindfulness (Gavetti 2005; Vogus and Sutcliffe 2012). By limiting the definition to "moment" awareness and present-centered non-judgmental awareness (Kabat-Zinn 1994, 2003), the putative secular mindfulness approach ignores how Buddhist mindfulness appreciates mindfulness practice based on wisdom and values from personal experience (Bodhi 2011; Gethin 2011) and Buddhist traditions (Dreyfus 2011; Dunne 2011).

If mindfulness is not interpreted and practiced correctly, the "mindfulness revolution" (Stahl and Goldstein 2010) in organizations may [have] become merely a "mindfulness fad" (Carroll 2006; Duerr 2004), a "McMindfulness" phenomenon with cow psychology[1] (Purser and Loy 2013) or with "blind spots" (Becke 2014). Buddhist practices including mindfulness emphasize the means to eliminate sources of suffering from the "three poisons": greed, hatred, and ignorance (Flanagan 2011; Mendis 1994).

The commercialization and commodification of organizational mindfulness has, however, resulted in a "quick fix," a "band aid," or a universal cure for all types of contemporary problems (Hyland 2015; Purser and Loy 2013) and, yet again, a manifestation of institutionalized greed (Purser and Loy 2013). It has become a "lucrative cottage industry" (Purser and Loy 2013) – a stress reduction technique (Kabat-Zinn 1990) to be sold to enhance organizational productivity, profit and consumer materialism (Eaton 2014; Hyland 2015; Purser 2014; Stone 2014). Using mindfulness stress reduction techniques as an instrument to pacify employees' exposure to a corporate stressful or toxic life caused by organizations themselves is, according to Purser and Loy (2013), a "refashioned" sophisticated method of deploying a cow psychology within organizations, whereby cows are made to produce more and more milk. In such cases, these secular mindfulness approaches applied in organizations show no resemblance to the "right mindfulness" that is based on compassion and wisdom originating from the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path (Purser 2014; Purser and Milillo 2015).

Mindfulness in Buddhism

Mindfulness (Pāli: *sati*; Sanskrit: *smṛti*) is one of many practices in Buddhism to attain peace and enlightenment for its practitioners. Mindfulness is attained through various states, not necessarily only from meditation (Brown and Ryan 2003). The ultimate goal of Buddhist mindfulness is to help practitioners to realize their non-self or ego-less state of existence to reduce suffering arising from ego-centric desires or needs (Epstein 1999). Right mindfulness is part of the Noble Eightfold Path aimed at liberating one from suffering through knowledge and wisdom (Sanskrit: *prajñā*; Pāli: *paññā*) by seeing the universe (William Swierczek and Jousse 2014) based on the principles of impermanence (Pāli: *anicca*; Sanskrit: *anitya*), karma (cause and effect) (Sanskrit: *karman*; Pāli: *kamma*), dependent arising (Sankrit: *pratītyasamutpāda*; Pāli: *paṭiccasamuppāda*) and the Four Noble Truths (Sanskrit: *catvāri āryasatyāni*; Pali: *cattāri ariyasaccāni*).

Purser and Milillo (2015) have identified two common-ground purposes of Buddhist mindfulness practices: psycho-spiritual development, concerning the goal in eliminating root causes of suffering through salvation, and in-depth meditative training to attain cognitive and emotional transformation in behavioral and psychological traits. Therefore, Buddhist mindfulness is based on wisdom, the intellectual understanding of surroundings to moderate desires, transforming the "self," and reducing the state of suffering resulting from attachment to desires.

One way of articulating wisdom through mindfulness is to recollect past experiences (Bodhi 2011; Wallace and Bodhi 2006). The word *sati* itself is associated with "remember" or "calling the mind" (Anālayo 2010; Gethin 1998; Ṭhānissaro 2012) and reflections on past experiences as an actively engaged state of awareness (Purser and Millio 2015). However, in the process of recalling past experiences, mental qualities are crucial. Mindfulness along with s*ampajañña* – the comprehension aspect of mind – enables practitioners to distinguish between wholesome and unwholesome, skillful and unskillful, and positive and negative experiences both in the past and in the present. With this approach, the practitioner uses experiences that enhance personal development and transformation, intentionally abandoning those that may lead to suffering (Anālayo 2010; Gethin 2001; Purser and Milillo 2015; Ṭhānissaro 2012). Gethin (2001, 44) illustrates mindfulness or *sati* as follows:

> (i) *Sati* remembers or does not lose what is before the mind; (ii) *sati* is, as it were, a natural 'presence of mind'; it stands near and hence serves to guard the mind; (iii) *sati* 'calls to mind,' that is, it remembers things in relationship to things and thus tends to know their value and widen the view; (iv) *sati* is thus closely related to wisdom; it naturally tends to see things as they truly are.

In this way, mindfulness promotes awareness of a reality based on wisdom that "neither suppresses the contents of experience nor compulsively reacts to them" (Anālayo 2010, 267).

Earlier we argued that the major difference between Buddhist mindfulness and secular interpretations lies in wisdom, the ability of the practitioner to skillfully and ethically initiate the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, based on a full comprehension of the Four Noble Truths and principles of impermanence, karma and depending arising. According to Purser and Milillo (2015), the "right" (*sammā*) mindfulness arises as a form of ethics-based mind training from the mutually reinforced factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. For instance, the *right view* of *mundane* – a correct view of the moral efficacy of action (Bodhi 2011) – and *supramundane* – the understanding and realization of sources and ways to eliminate suffering – enables wisdom development to acknowledge the nature of reality without false judgment. On the other hand, the right effort in practicing mindfulness assures "mental training and functions to stabilize right mindfulness and sustain right concentration […] directed toward liberation from suffering and unskillful states" (Purser and Milillo 2015, 9).

This is an important point that secular interpretations are missing. Ironically, secular applications of mindfulness as an organizational instrument in organizations are often unethical owing to greed – itself a cause of suffering. As a result, the application of secular mindfulness in organizations does not represent Buddhist ethics-based mindfulness originating from the Noble Eightfold Path, nor does it foster mindfulness development based on ethical conduct (Ruedy and Schweitzer 2010; Shapiro, Jazaieri, and Goldin 2012). Purser and Milillo (2015) highlight how mindfulness therefore is neither reducible to psychological traits nor equivalent simply to attention and non-judgmental awareness.

Ṭhānissaro (2012) reminds us about the Buddha's intention in introducing mindfulness:

> mindfulness plays in any experience where memory is brought to bear on the present and points in a skillful direction […] instead of telling you to abandon past memories so as to approach he present with totally fresh eyes and bare awareness, he's saying to be selective in calling on the appropriate memories that will keep you on the path to the end of suffering.

In responding to criticisms of secular corporate mindfulness practices, Buddhist "right mindfulness" is neither (i) an instrument for corporate "end" games because it is based on the principles of the Noble Eightfold Path, which embraces ethical intentions; nor (ii) just a

soothing stress reduction technique because "right mindfulness" also depends on the recall of past experiences to articulate wisdom in practice.

The following part of our article provides empirical evidence supporting a Buddhist ethics-based mindfulness approach based on wisdom articulation in an Eastern context and presents the opinions of respondents in relation to Buddhist principles and teachings. These include whether there actually is "organizational mindfulness" and whether leaders are responsible for introducing mindfulness practices to employees. In the opinion of some respondents, the adoption of mindfulness practices at the organizational level exists in various ways and means, not just meditation alone, as they involve a continuous process of self-reflection and self-transformation from personal experiences.

Mindfulness from the perspectives of Buddhist-enacted spiritual leaders

In this section of the article, we detail our approach in examining Buddhist practitioners' viewpoints on mindfulness at the personal level and on the adaptation of mindfulness practices at the organizational level in their roles as organizational leaders. We selected participants who were leaders because their visions and perceptions have a significant impact and influence on the choices they make in introducing practices in their organizations.

Method

To examine how "right" mindfulness approaches are articulated skillfully and dynamically and the salient role of context involved in the process, we studied leaders from various sectors and industries. Because of the exploratory nature of the research, we conducted qualitative research and used an interpretive naturalistic approach to the subjects and the phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). Qualitative research to discover the role of context in leadership decisions is relevant because leadership is a contextually rich topic with multiple layers of a dynamic character and with a symbolic component (Conger 1998).

Sampling

In selecting our respondents, we followed Lincoln's and Guba's (1985) guidelines for purposeful sampling. Since Buddhist practitioners in Vietnam tend not to announce themselves as Buddhist publicly because they consider it as a personal practice and choice in life, we found the application of the "snowball technique" to be very helpful. It was difficult to know from any public records who as business leaders were Buddhist practitioners, but this was obtainable through the snowball technique because Buddhist practitioners in Vietnam tend to involve themselves in a Buddhist community in sharing Buddhist practices and experiences. After identifying the relevant respondents, we interviewed 24 senior executives in leading positions in organizations in various industries. The range of our respondents' background and expertise in different industries contributes positively to the dynamic outcome of our study. Table 1 lists the selected interview respondents who participated in the study.

Table 1. Summary of interview respondents.

Respondent		Background	Sector
R1	CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Printing
R2	CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Pharmaceutical Distribution
R3	CEO	Buddhist	Building/Construction/Investment
R4	Regional Manager	Buddhist	Education and Non-profit
R5	CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Software Consultancy
R6	Doctor, CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Medical Practice
R7	CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Printing
R8	CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Security Technology and Solution
R9	CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Trade and Beauty Service
R10	CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Education Consultancy
R11	Regional Manager	Buddhist	Pharmaceutical Distribution
R12	CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Education
R13	General Manager	Buddhist	Real Estate
R14	CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Food and Drink
R15	CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Event and Media
R16	Country Project Manager	Buddhist	National Water Resolution Project
R17	Venerable, CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Agriculture, Plant Transplant and Education
R18	Country Manager	Buddhist	Energy Management and Automation Solutions
R19	CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Printing and Education
R20	CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Food and Drink
R21	CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Transportation
R22	Lawyer, CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Law Consultancy
R23	CEO and Chief Accountant	Buddhist	Construction and Real Estate
R24	CEO and Managing Director	Buddhist	Communication

Semi-structured interviews

We adopted semi-structured in-depth interviews for our study to capture the complex nature of mindfulness practices and the underlying rational principles and choices involved in those practices. Semi-structured interviews allow space and flexibility for participants' full description of their experiences (Bryman 2015), which plays a crucial role in exploring mindfulness practices. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in November 2016 at respondents' preferred and convenient locations, such as offices, homes, or cafes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The questions were designed to encourage respondents to use and provide in-depth explanation and reasoning. Interviews generally lasted for 45 min to 1 hour. In some cases, interviews lasted longer, especially when respondents were keen on providing in-depth, detailed, and explicit description of their mindfulness practices and application. Table 2 below presents our interview guidelines and questions.

Data analysis

We used thematic analysis for our study of the interview data. Thematic analysis provides common threads in a rich, complex and detailed set of narratives and employs systematic coding and categorization to explore a range of textual information to identity trends, patterns and frequencies of words and meanings, and the nature of relationships and structures of communication (Gbrich 2007; Pope, Ziebland, and Mays 2006). We combined a data-driven inductive approach to explore themes and a deductive approach to organize our data

Table 2. Interview guidelines and questions.

| Interview guidelines and consent	
Have you read the Participant Information Sheet?	YES/NO
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and to discuss the study?	YES/NO
Have you received satisfactory answers to all of your questions?	YES/NO
Have you received enough information about the study and the intended uses of, and access arrangements to, any data which you supply?	YES/NO
Were you given enough time to consider whether you want to participate?	YES/NO
Whom have you spoken to?	
Do you consent to participate in the study?	YES/NO
Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study	YES/NO
* at any time and	
* without having to give a reason for withdrawing and	
* without any adverse result of any kind?	
Are you aware of and consent to the use of recorder during the interview?	YES/NO
Interview Questions	
(1)How long have you been working in the company? What positions have you taken up so far?	
(2)How long have you been practicing Buddhism in your personal life and at work? How easy or difficult do you find practicing Buddhism in the contemporary context?	
(3)Based on which Buddhist principles or path are you practicing Buddhism?	
(4)What are the Buddhist principles that you consider important and apply the most in your everyday life? How do you apply and translate them into your behavior and actions in life?	
(5)To what extent can you say that practicing Buddhism as a leader is important to yourself and your company?	
(6)What do you consider "suffering" in life and at work?	
(7)How well do you think you have applied Buddhist principles in leadership? Has it been effective? How?	
(8)To what extent can you say you are mindful in your life and at work? How difficult is it to apply mindfulness at the workplace?	
(9)How do you practice mindfulness? Based on which Buddhist principles are you practicing it?	
(10)How has mindfulness affected your relationship and outcomes at work? Do you promote mindfulness activities to your employees? What do you expect from such activities, if anything?	

into systematic and relevant code types. To maximize the credibility and trustworthiness of analysis, we used Nvivo11 software. Our data structure is described below (Figure 1):

The themes generated from our analysis suggest that mindfulness practices are contextually formed and affected by the distinctive nature of the Vietnamese context. Mindfulness practices were more about a personal and contextual choice depending on respondents' understanding, perception, and selection of the relevant Buddhist principles and qualities applicable in their own contexts. Additionally, respondents were aware of both the positive results of mindfulness practices and the limitations and dangers that are present in developing such states of mindfulness. Based on such experiences, they presented a contextual approach to organizational mindfulness.

Contextualizing Buddhist practices in Vietnam

Respondents highlighted that the overall context of Vietnam plays a significant role in shaping their Buddhist practices in general and their choices of mindfulness practices in particular. According to the leaders, there are three main reasons for the increasing interest and newly reinforced Buddhist movement in the country.

First, the lack of trust within the society is a "causal effect" *(nhân quả)* of the failed implementation of a genuine Communist ideology within the country, leading to the rising phenomenon of Buddhist spiritual movements in the country. Though Vietnam has a long tradition of following Confucian values as a remnant of Chinese rule and its own

First Order Concepts	Second Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
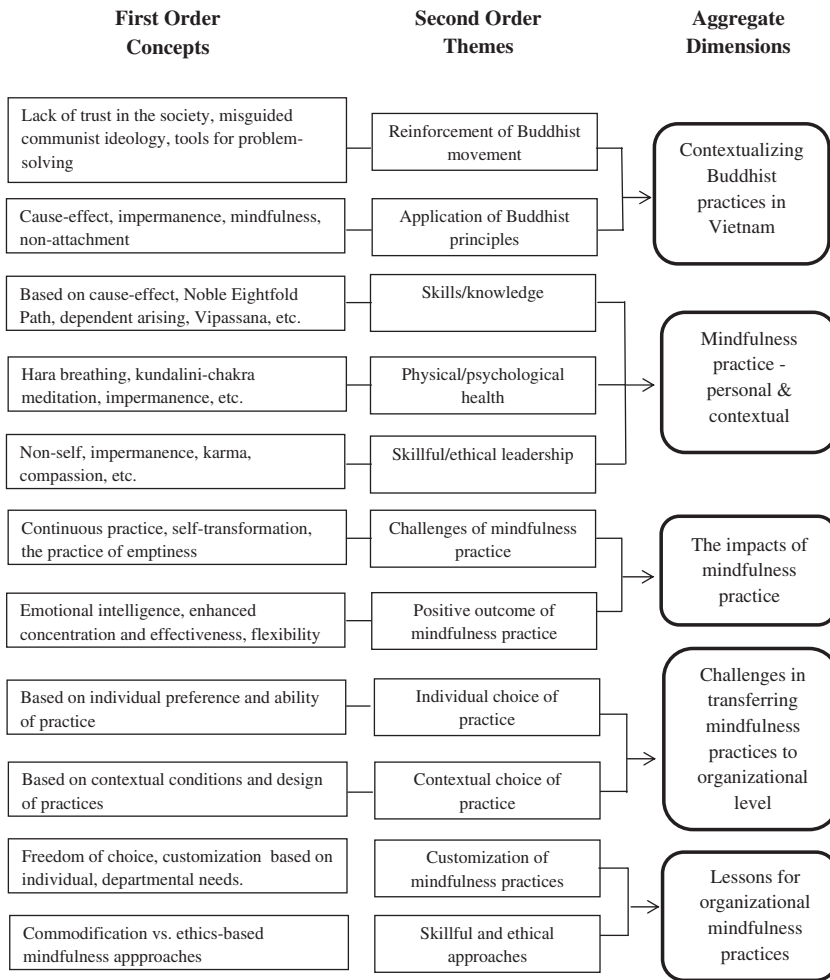
Figure 1. Data structure of interview respondents.

traditional spiritual practices, in contemporary contexts these values have become feudal *(phong kiến)* and are no longer sophisticated enough to deal with complex contextual challenges (Leshkowich 2006, 298). However, in Buddhism, people tend to find philosophical and practical approaches applicable to different contexts for eliminating suffering; Buddhism has thus been significantly reinforced and become engaged recently in Vietnam.

Second, because of the "corrupted" communist ideology in Vietnam, organizations and leaders in particular are facing dilemmas associated with "lobbying" activities, tricky "relationships" *(quan hệ)* with hidden agendas of business partners, and heavily bureaucratic and opaque government officials and practices. Corporate greed emphasizing profit and personal wealth, a lack of regulatory control, and the overemphasis on a profitable "quick fix" business *(chộp giật)* are common, to the detriment of a sustainable and long-term business orientation. Leaders felt that they were operating under much stress in surviving in the competitive and demanding business environment of Vietnam. As a result, many leaders found Buddhist principles of non-attachment *(không bám chấp)*, cause effect *(nhân quả)*,

impermanence *(vô thường)*, mindfulness *(chánh niệm)*, among others, to be effective and adaptable principles in handling the complexities of the Vietnamese context.

Third, Buddhism provides useful analytical tools for leaders to examine problems and see the underlying assumptions in such problems for effective decision-making and solutions. Principles of cause effect and perceptions of levels or types of truth – ultimate truth *(Sanskrit, paramārtha-satya; Pāli paramattha sacca) (sự thật tuyệt đối)* and conventional truth *(Sanskrit: saṁvṛti-satya; Pāli sammuti sacca) (sự thật tương đối)* – are essential to developing keen observations and dealing with tricky customers in highly analytical professions or in a complex relationship-oriented culture like Vietnam. Our findings reflect what Fukuyama (1995) indicated about how ethical systems are major sources of culturally determined behavior, creating the degree and form of trust in the society, which affect relationships at firm, community and national levels. The distinctive context of Vietnam in terms of how people are vulnerable and skeptical in general and how Buddhism is interpreted in particular highlights the importance of context-sensitive and locally responsive approaches in order to understand political, economic, social, and cultural contexts and avoid biased theories or practices (Johns 2006; Tsui 2007, Whetten 1989).

Amid the complex social context, with its existing confusions between superstitious rituals and actual Buddhist practices, as Buddhist practitioners for a significant number of years, most respondents understood that it is crucial to be mindful as well as to understand not just textual meanings of Buddhist principles but, more importantly, their application in life. Most of the respondents, therefore, did not categorize themselves into specific Buddhist traditions/paths and emphasized that all Buddhist paths are just means to an end – enlightenment that such paths should not prejudicially distinguish or discriminate *(phân biệt)* against one another. This has enabled more contextually flexible approaches to mindfulness practices. One of the respondents (R17),[2] who is both a respectful Venerable and a successful leader of a business organization in the country, provided an excellent demonstration of what he considered to be Buddhist mindfulness practice in the context of Vietnam:

> Buddhism is about truth, the life itself, and not about rituals that many Vietnamese people misinterpret. It is not about a Holy Spirit, or merely about religion, superstition that needs burning votive, worshipping, and charity; but about understanding life through Buddhist principles and practise of them wisely in any way that is suitable for yourself. During my fifty years as a Buddhist practitioner in this country, I have come to realize that Vietnamese people need three things to transform themselves positively: skill/knowledge, health, and reputation. All my life, I have been trying very hard to prove this. My research facility assists people in gaining professional skills; my monastery provides shelter, food, and Buddhist teachings for my employees; my ginseng products provide health support for people and the society, and my established reputation along the way has become a source of motivation to inspire my followers in skilfully applying Buddhist teachings in life and at work. I have many followers who are successful businessmen and businesswomen and are leading responsible and ethical businesses. However, I also have followers who have lost their way *(lạc lối)* on this journey and failed to represent respectful Buddhist practitioners simply because they could not control their own desires in this society. As a teacher, I provide all the means that I have, but it is up to my followers and their capabilities to choose the appropriate means and decide how to be mindful and skilful to define and reach their 'ends'. None of my followers practises mindfulness in the same way.

As indicated by R17, the practice of mindfulness cannot be generalized, but needs to be contextually adapted to be responsive to the context of the audience. It does not matter which

traditions his followers were following as long as they were practicing "right mindfulness" of the Noble Eightfold Path. The following section discusses this viewpoint in more detail.

Mindfulness practices – a personal and contextual choice

Our findings revealed that the practice of mindfulness by Buddhist executives is a personal and contextual choice shaped by an understanding and application of Buddhist principles of the individual concerned. Consequently, respondents share various techniques and approaches to attain a state of mindfulness rather than applying a common formula for the practice of mindfulness. Leaders share their experiences in applying various Buddhist principles and mindfulness practices that have assisted them to be mindful in improving their knowledge and leadership skills, staying healthy psychologically and physically, and being pragmatic but ethical in responding to contextual challenges. These approaches reflect what R17 claimed as necessary aspects of self-transformation in the context of Vietnam.

Skills/knowledge

Most respondents acknowledge that a challenging context is a favorable condition to test and practice Buddhism, and so far they found that incorporating and applying Buddhist principles in their roles as leaders have been significantly useful and practical. For instance, principles of cause–effect *(nhân quả)* remind them of the importance of leadership practices representing the Noble Eightfold Path *(Bát Chánh Đạo)* rather pursuing end results at any cost; depending arising *(lý duyên khởi)* enhances leader–follower relationships in appreciating and respecting followers; and non-attachment *(không bám chấp)* and emptiness (Sanskrit: *Śūnyatā*; Pali: *Suññatā*) *(tánh không)* encourage leadership flexibility in initiating visions and adaptability to avoid extremism and allow the combination of skillful leadership practices to handle paradoxes in challenging contexts, such as balancing autonomy and authority, individuality and teamwork, and creativity and discipline. Leader R1 gave an interesting example on how she combined various Buddhist principles in practice to attain mindful leadership:

> It took me many years to experience the state of mindfulness in leadership, which I believe is far from accomplished and needs further practice. I apply Sila (conduct) – Samadhi (concentration) – Prajna (wisdom) (*Giới-Định-Tuệ*) in my leadership to maintain specification, clarification and organization in my company, especially in delegating and guiding employees […] I also find that in dealing with tricky employees and complex situational ethics like compassion (*từ bi*) is inseparable from wisdom. Mindful leadership comes from the combination of compassion and wisdom. If you keep on giving second chances to an employee who has continuous intentional wrongdoings, it cannot be a good example to other employees. I find that the practice of Vipassana (*thiền minh sát*) and the state Samadhi (*định*) helps me a lot to practise the Middle Way (*Trung Đạo*).

What respondent 1A shared reflects a state of mindfulness in being specific and clear in giving instructions and in being able to organize priorities and non-priority workload to avoid misunderstanding and time-wasting and to achieve effectiveness in leadership practices.

Psychological and physical health

Work-life balance has become one of the main concerns for many respondents. Most leaders acknowledge that having psychological and physical health not only benefits living standards but also creates favorable conditions for Buddhist practice. Being mindful about health, therefore, is crucial. To enhance physical health, the leaders applied various breathing techniques such as Hara breathing *(thở đan điền)* and Kundalini-Chakra meditation *(thở luân xa)*. On the other hand, to attain psychological health and well-being, a number of respondents believed that understanding and being mindful of impermanence *(vô thường)* and non-attachment stimulates positive attitudes as described by R24:

> Suffering is part of life and it is a perceptual state. We cannot control the weather, just like we cannot control others around us. It is impossible and ignorant to try to change external factors rather than transforming ourselves and our perceptions. It took me a while to realize this but, once I had, I felt at peace and I look at everything positively. It helps me to be mindful in decision-making.

Skilllful/ethical leadership

Respondents claim that as leaders, they face various tempting offers from the complex contemporary context of Vietnam. To be able to stay mindful, skillful and, more importantly, ethical in this context is a challenging but significant role that, as leaders and especially Buddhist practitioners, they have to master. The most commonly mentioned Buddhist principles that leaders found useful in helping them to stay mindful and skillful in their leadership roles and to moderate their expectations are impermanence *(vô thường)* and non-self (Pali: *anattā*; Sanskrit: *anātman*) *(vô ngā)*. Impermanence makes them realize that nothing exist forever, thus having a "self" or ego as leaders can only lead to temptation and desires caused by their own ignorance and failure to acknowledge the collective nature of the workplace. On the other hand, to remain ethical as leaders and to follow the Noble Eightfold Path as Buddhist practitioners, understanding karma *(nghiệp)*, and combining compassion (karuṇā) *(từ bi)* with wisdom in practice is crucial. R21 clearly demonstrated the relevance of karma in cultivating positive thoughts while R2 explained how she managed to stay skillful, mindful, and contextually flexible in challenging ethical situations:

> Every time that we initiate a bad motive or thought in our mind, we should be mindful and aware of what is going on in our mind and aware of the consequences following those actions. If we are mindful like that, we will not transfer such negative thoughts into action and we can avoid doing harmful things to others […] the practice of Satipatthana *(thiền quán)* helps me a lot. (R21)

> Our company regularly faces dilemmas in staying ethical and true to our mission as a pharmaceutical company. We want to deliver good and affordable medication to poorer people; however, there are too many competitions and bribery going on with officials who sign permits to distribute medication in hospitals. They ignore the fact that some products of other distributors have much higher prices and lower quality, which are unaffordable to many Vietnamese people. We have to compromise to pay only transactional costs to be able to bring needed medication to people in time. I know that involving in bribery activities is wrong, but in this country you have to be skillful and mindful to what you can compromise and what you cannot. For example, we will not compromise the quality of our products to pay other unnecessary costs. (R2)

As R2 reaffirmed, the fundamental tenet of staying mindful is having the wisdom to stay skillful in challenging contexts. Contexts are not uniform: they are multifaceted, multidimensional and dynamic with salient situational features (Johns 2006), just like how "being ethical" in the above case should be defined in its context-sensitive manner.

Respondents shared various dynamic ways of attaining mindfulness – not just by meditation. It foregrounds the significant difference from how secular mindfulness approaches see mindfulness as "one size fits all". Differences exist among respondents because they are different in personalities, working in different industries and professions, having different knowledge and skills, and being exposed to different contexts and causes of suffering. Some find that they may have to work on their emotions and some find challenges in addressing their inconsistencies with vision and consideration of practical implications. An individual practitioner's choice of form of meditation and mindfulness practices is therefore bound to particular contexts and personal conditions and preferences. Respondents presented a context-sensitive approach to incorporating mindfulness practices in their leadership based on the principle of impermanence. Unlike secular corporate mindfulness practices, the mindfulness practices of our respondents are tailored to their physical and psychological needs. Being context-sensitive helps leaders to overcome defensive behaviors in considering alternative mindfulness approaches, learning to compromise and enhance sensitivity to handle concerns over the low level of trust of employees in particular and of the Vietnamese society at large.

The impact of mindfulness practices in life and at work

In applying the various techniques and practices in attaining a state of mindfulness, respondents pointed out both the advantages and the challenges associated with their practices. These experiences form respondents' underlying assumptions in initiating and creating organizational mindfulness. They also reflect how the Buddhist practice of mindfulness involves the recollection and selection of past experiences to attain skillful and mindful states based on wisdom (Anālayo 2010; Gethin 1998; Purser and Milillo 2015; Ṭhānissaro 2012).

Respondents all shared the experience of positive and effective outcomes from various mindfulness practices such as enhanced awareness and concentration in life and at work (R4 and R7), work-life balance in applying and practicing the Middle Way *(Trung Đạo)* in life (R1), the maintenance of emotional intelligence in stressful circumstances (R3, R9, and R19), and behavioral flexibility in their roles as leaders (R16 and R18). Being mindful and aware of reality, especially impermanence in terms of attachments to expectations encourages respondents to have an objective viewpoint in life and at work. For instance, R18 acknowledged that each individual employee is different in terms of characteristics, skills and individual pursuits; thus he or she is flexible in attending to each individual's needs and working styles without imposing personal preferences. However, this does not imply inequality: it displays a respectful way of acknowledging individual differences. This suggests a departure from secular approaches to mindfulness whereby mindfulness practices are often "instrumentalized" and generalized without taking into consideration their suitability and the different needs of employees.

Besides positive outcomes of mindfulness practices, respondents identified some challenges associated with it. Most respondents found that the application of Buddhist principles in practice in general is very difficult; for example:

> A real Buddhist practice is extremely difficult. When you transfer Buddhist philosophy into your life, you live with it every single second. It is difficult for those like me who were educated based on dialectical materialism. It is different. When we change to a spiritual way of living, it takes time to adapt and transform our mind, especially when you have previous scientific education. (R10)

> It is very difficult to practice today. There is nothing more difficult than that because you have to go against yourself. Our nature is greedy, selfish, lazy and fearful. You have to get rid of greediness and ignorance. Can you overcome your greediness? How can you be generous when you have nothing? There is always something you can give; it depends on whether you want to or not. A smile, a hug, a compassionate view also expresses generosity […] it sounds simple but it takes a long journey of practice to truly realize it. (R12)

According R10 and R12, the practice of Buddhism challenges practitioners' thinking, habits and "ego"; thus it is challenging and requires continuous effort and self-transformation. Many respondents claim that even one principle like "emptiness" *(tánh không)* can take more than a lifetime to master and its textual meaning cannot capture its value in practice. "Within that emptiness, you find everything" (R12). People have different personalities, habits and desires in life. They have to find their own ways to stay mindful to deal with their own bad habits and extreme desires to avoid suffering. This correlates with what respondents shared in making contextual choices of mindfulness practices. Buddhist mindfulness practice involves the process of individual self-transformation both physically and intellectually; thus it cannot be generalized as a universal "band aid".

Challenges in transferring mindfulness practices from the individual level to the organizational level

Reflecting respondents' own experiences and choices of mindfulness practices, they said they had introduced various forms of mindfulness practice into their organizations. Before we describe the specific ones in our findings, it may be helpful to note that it has come to our attention that the way respondents apply Buddhist qualities in their lives, and particularly in their leadership roles, significantly affects how they perceive and introduce the *role* of organizational mindfulness. Most respondents highlighted that they experienced self-transformation in terms of better "ego management" and in moderating desires. For example, R4 highly valued his Buddhist application to support mindful leadership:

> For me, Buddhism is very important because it directs me to good things and conducts; and to avoid temptation that anyone at my position may be exposed to. (R4)

Respondents' self-transformation through Buddhist practices also appears to influence not only the way they personally lead but also their organizations at large; for example:

> It changes my way of living and it changes my company indirectly […] I do not propagandize Buddhism in the company; I apply it to change myself. How much I can change myself will indirectly affect the company. (24A)

It was interesting to see that many respondents did not see the practice of compassion as the sole underlying assumption guiding their actions. In the opinion of respondents, it is not enough for people just to be seen or known to be suffering or in pain to be responded to (Himmelfarb 2001; Kanov et al. 2004): compassion needs to be displayed and moderated by wisdom. Wisdom is what differentiates skillful Buddhist practice from unskillful practice. For example, R23 stated that, if a motorbike is given to a man out of compassion

without being aware of whether he knows how to ride it or not, it can be counterproductive and dangerous. This reflects Gilbert's and Choden's (2015) view of "mindful compassion", a quality that helps the practitioner to recognize unnecessary suffering and to attain happiness. This principle also applies to bringing mindfulness practices from the individual level to the organizational level. Introducing mindfulness practices to a larger audience is challenging because there is no one specific way to practice mindfulness. If mindfulness is initiated at the organizational level without acknowledging employees' needs and their physical and psychological abilities that are needed for mindfulness practices, even if it is introduced with good intentions, it can cause unnecessary suffering and, paradoxically, may be counterproductive and even considered as yet another managerial "tool" for nefariously exploiting and manipulating them.

Our respondents addressed various ways of bringing mindfulness into their organizations. They emphasized the importance of wisdom in attaining a state of mindfulness, not just through meditation but also through the opportunities to be exposed to work-life experiences and even to challenges: they encouraged mindfulness through the development of wisdom. For instance, respondents said that they aimed at developing employees' professional skills through workshops (R10), on-the-job training (R7 and R22), experience sharing between leader and followers (R13 and R21) and among managers (R24), and enhancing employee physical and psychological well-being by organizing meditation retreats (R15 and R19), and wiser ball games activities (R24). Their approaches present wisdom-enacted mindfulness states – a major departure from Western secular interpretations of mindfulness practices reduced merely to stress-reduction techniques. Respondents observed, however, that it is difficult both to design practices that satisfy everyone's needs and to engage long-term commitment from employees to practice. Obviously, it takes time to evaluate these approaches; therefore, longitudinal research would be useful in examining the feasibility and practicability of mindfulness practices at the organizational level.

Lessons from Buddhist-enacted leaders for corporate mindfulness approaches

Though respondents acknowledged the effectiveness of mindfulness practice for themselves, they also understood that it needs to be customized and personalized according to personal needs and contextual choices and conditions. Therefore, when they tried to incorporate mindfulness training and practices in various ways for their organizations, they made it voluntary for employees (R19) and based on employees' and departmental needs (R24). Even if mindfulness plays a role at the organizational level, it does not represent "right mindfulness" from the Noble Eightfold Path if it is imposed and generalized. According to respondents, organizational mindfulness can be dynamic in various forms based on personal, departmental, professional, and contextual choices of mindfulness practices. Such needs have to be respected to accommodate the appropriate and right mindfulness practices needed in particular contexts. As R12 said, there is no common formula for mindfulness and meditation practices, so they cannot be initiated by coercion (R24). This is an important concept in Buddhist mindfulness, just as there is no form of effective moral leadership that coerces people to compromise or change their deeply held personal values and beliefs (Gill 2014).

We were also interested in exploring whether the adoption of mindfulness practices in respondents' organizations was any different from the commodification of mindfulness

practices that has been documented in the literature, especially in regard to hidden agendas involved. We asked respondents this question: *What do you expect from mindfulness promoted activities in your organization, if anything?* Our findings revealed some interesting facts. Some respondents' expectations were associated with their personal, organizational and spiritual purposes in contributing to the well-being of society, helping as many people as they can to practice Buddhist compassion:

> 90% Vietnamese people understand Buddhism wrongly. Sharing Buddhism now is extremely important, especially for the young generation. For example, I am a member of Business Buddhist Practitioners Group, involving businessmen and businesswomen who are Buddhist practitioners. We have just had our meeting on Tuesday evening. Yesterday, we had a group called 'loving garden for students'. Friday night is for everybody. We have three groups like that. On the first Sunday of every month, we have an event called 'A peaceful day at the temple', which involves hundreds of people. We also organize free of charge for a group of 200–1000 students to explore Buddhism within two days. For business groups we organize meditation sessions and we have themes for sharing in each meeting. (R19)

Respondent R19 was the only leader who publicly announced himself as a Buddhist practitioner and his company as a Buddhist company. He not only involved his employees in mindfulness programs but also proselytized Buddhism and mindfulness practices for a public audience. This raises questions and concerns over proselytizing Buddhism and mindfulness practices not only at organizational level but socially. On the other hand, others emphasized that they have no expectations in practicing Buddhism in general and mindfulness in particular:

> The more I practice Buddhism, the more I realize that happiness lies in the way of practicing, not depending on the destination or any forms of purpose. (R24)

We identify two big issues here. There is a departure from secular interpretations of organizational mindfulness in the way Buddhist-enacted spiritual leaders show how contextually dependent mindfulness practice is. Therefore, mindfulness needs to be introduced into organizations without the influence of the initiators' own pursuits but by valuing the opinions and choices of employees. Nevertheless, there are also drawbacks in introducing Buddhism at large and mindfulness practices in general. Some respondents, especially R19, indicated that they promoted mindfulness practices widely and socially in the hope of lessening the misinterpretation of Buddhism as merely superstitious rituals and to provide people with basic principles and practices for more positive thinking and healthy lifestyle. However, this might in fact become counterproductive if Buddhism is not introduced and explained thoroughly and skillfully.

Introducing mindfulness practices into organizations and even into smaller groups involves considerable social dynamics. Involving a large number of participants with different capabilities and different educational backgrounds and levels may lead to challenges in maintaining understanding of "right mindfulness" practices of the Noble Eightfold Path that need to be foreseen. Inconsistencies in understanding the nature of mindfulness practices inevitably will result. Buddha himself contextualized his answers for his audience. For example, he refused to give answers and he remained silent when he was asked by Malunkyaputta or Vacchagotta – the wandering monk – to avoid confusion for them (Schroeder 2004). The Buddha limited his disclosure and revelation of his knowledge of the universe and truth with a firm belief that all knowledge was ideology that is needed only for certain reasons, just as he shared his dharma because it can contribute to human salvation (Organ 1954,

139). The Buddha demonstrated a skilful and ethics-based mindfulness approach, being aware of the cause effect of his answers.

This approach needs to be applied to mindfulness practices in our contemporary context in the same way. Mindfulness involves mind training and self-transformation that need to be articulated from lifetime experiences, both from the past and in the present. Employees with richer life and work experiences may have greater advantage in making wiser decisions or understanding Buddhist teachings and approaches to mindfulness compared to students with less exposure to life and work experiences. Even initiated for good purposes, but lacking skill and carefulness, involving Buddhism or mindfulness in social activities may morph into personal pursuits and desires. This suggests the need for Buddhist ethics-based mindfulness and reaffirming how the practice of non-attachment and compassion combined with wisdom is the heart of Buddhist practice.

Discussion

Our findings present evidence supporting the departure of Buddhist mindfulness practices from the reductionist view inherent in secular interpretations of personal and organizational mindfulness. The "right mindfulness" practice in Buddhism is not just about moment awareness (Kabat-Zinn 1994, 2003); it is articulated as a result of mastery of skills and past experiences (Anālayo 2010; Bodhi 2011; Gethin 1998; Purser and Milillo 2015; Ṭhānissaro 2012) and an understanding of Buddhist traditions (Dreyfus 2011; Dunne 2011). Positioning mindfulness as an instrument for stress reduction, not to mention questionable purposes behind such approaches, does actually create obstacles for the practice of Buddhism in general and "right mindfulness" in particular. Wisdom is attained through various sources, including stress. McGonigal (2015) shares the view that there is a "stress paradox" in life: happy lives are not stress-free, and stress-free lives do not guarantee happiness. As stated by our respondents, one has to experience difficulties in life, including stress and suffering, and to learn from them to become wiser:

> There are two things I can say about suffering. When people suffer and they cannot get rid of suffering by themselves, they suffer from it. However, when we are suffering and we intentionally try to learn from it to obtain skills to overcome such states, it is not suffering anymore. It becomes a road towards happiness and peace. Suffering is a challenge and an opportunity for us to fulfill and complete ourselves. (R7)

Therefore, the practice of Buddhism and even mindfulness is a continuous process in which stress and suffering stimulate practitioners' articulation of wisdom and mindfulness.

We agree with Becke (2014) on how research on organizational mindfulness lacks a functional and an ethical instrumental perspective. Mindfulness originated as a personal practice with specific functions that cannot be generalized at organizational levels. Our findings reveal that Buddhist mindfulness practice is a personal and contextual choice. It is dynamic and rich in nature. Mindfulness practice is not only about meditation techniques: more importantly, it places emphasis on the "right" understanding and application of Buddhist-ethics-based principles or, as Purser and Milillo (2015) refer to it, the "right view". For that reason, our respondents as leaders were very careful in introducing mindfulness practices in their organizations as voluntary and based on the contextual needs and demands of employees rather than on managerial diktat. Mindfulness ultimately aims to help people – leaders and followers – to see things as they truly are based on the right

understanding and the application of Buddhist principles along with personal experiences. Failing to do this may result in the dysfunctional misinterpretation of its functions at the organizational level.

In responding to the commercialization and commodification of secular interpretations of corporate mindfulness, our findings reinforce a more ethics-based mindfulness approach of Buddhist-enacted spiritual. However, our findings do raise concerns about socially propagandized Buddhist mindfulness practices in Vietnam. We find the fact that respondents themselves were experienced practitioners in mindfulness practices has contributed significantly in forming their perception and initiatives in introducing ethical and effective organizational mindfulness approaches. The self-transformation process they have personally experienced fostered their understanding of the need for flexibility in application and adaptation in organizations. This reflects skillful and ethical Buddhist mindfulness approaches based on the combination of compassion and wisdom.

Another deviation from secular interpretations of mindfulness is that Buddhist-enacted spiritual leaders value the concept of non-self in expressing compassion and introducing mindfulness into organizations. Secular interpretations of organizational mindfulness on the other hand concentrate on meditation techniques and ignore basic Buddhist teachings, resulting in heavily emphasized ego-centric motives and pursuits that lead to dubious institutionalization and instrumentalization of mindfulness practices. Nevertheless, even though it seems that our respondents elucidated "right mindfulness" approaches, adapting mindfulness in their organizations and respecting personal and contextual choices, such approaches are not without their limitations. There are concerns about how skillfully mindfulness practices may be adapted for larger audiences in society without compromising their fundamental functions based on Buddhist teachings. It is apparent, therefore, that bringing mindfulness practices from the individual level to the corporate level, and even to wider audiences in society, is challenging. This highlights the vital role of wisdom, compassion and flexibility in elaborating "right mindfulness" practices in the right contexts. Such a skillful and flexible approach is likely to foster high levels of cultural intelligence within organizations and to enhance flexibility and appropriateness of behaviors and actions when interacting with people from different cultures, adjusting mental models accordingly, and enhancing awareness of cultural norms and the desire to learn from different cultural situations rather than resisting them (Ang et al. 2007).

Conclusions

Our findings highlight and support the view of how secular interpretations of mindfulness in general and corporate mindfulness at particular have overshadowed and diminished the Buddhist-ethics-based nature of mindfulness practice. Instead of attaining a state of mindfulness based on a comprehensive application of Buddhist teachings to advance wisdom in perceiving and understanding people and context to find resolution to problems and to enhance people development professionally, physically, and psychologically, secular mindfulness practices are generally considered to be merely stress-reduction techniques and techniques to raise moment-awareness and concentration on the moment that can easily be exploited or misused.

Is there really corporate mindfulness anyway? In exploring this question, our findings reveal that the existence of misinterpretations and problems involved with mindfulness

practices come from the fact that no proper attention has been paid to exactly how the practice of mindfulness is effectively and ethically transferred into organizations from forms of individual practice. Many of the distinctive characteristics of mindfulness as an individual practice have been ignored, including individual and contextual choice and dynamic practices that reflect the suitability of mindfulness practices to individual physical and psychological abilities. Secular mindfulness practices are generalized and universalized as a "band aid" and even as a universal solution for all types of contemporary problems and suffering (Hyland 2015; Purser and Loy 2013). But our findings reinforce the view that no individual experiences the same suffering or has the same perception and interpretation of suffering as others do. Thus, making mindfulness a universal "brand" has diminished its dynamic meaning and functions.

Furthermore, taking away individual choice and freedom of exposure to the dynamic nature and ethics-based "right mindfulness" practices as a form of institutionalized and instrumentalized "organizational mindfulness" reflects selfishness, inflexibility and even greed that contravene the basis of mindfulness practices. In responding to secular organizational mindfulness, our findings suggest that corporate mindfulness needs to be initiated only based on contextual, organizational and employee needs and on the basis of respecting employees' choices concerning the practices they may want to pursue. Accordingly, organizational mindfulness needs to be based on the combination of wisdom, compassion and non-attachment to allow flexibility and skillful and ethical mindfulness practices without any association with corporate selfishness, greed or hidden agenda.

Our findings from Buddhist-enacted spiritual leaders may stimulate further research, for example comparing and differentiating mindfulness practices and functions at both individual and organizational levels to explore the gaps that may lead to inadequate approaches, understanding and interpretation of mindfulness practices and corporate mindfulness. Our data show that, to attain a mindful state, meditation is not the only practice; and even meditation itself consists of various types to accommodate the preferences of practitioners – both leaders and followers or employees. Research into this practical side of mindfulness will likely stimulate a more flexible and dynamic approach to corporate mindfulness.

Exploring mindfulness in various contexts may also produce interesting research outcomes. For instance, our findings in the specific context of Vietnam have raised our concerns and curiosity about how the popularization of mindfulness practices socially may simply represent compassion or other sophisticated forms of individual and corporate pursuits.

Lastly, our study is not without limitations. Our findings are highly contextualized, and we explored mindfulness practices and corporate mindfulness from leaders' perspectives. Further research needs to be done to verify the outcomes of such approaches. We encourage more research, such as exploration of corporate mindfulness among other organizational players and within other contexts. It is our belief that the ancient Buddhist wisdom embedded in mindfulness practices has much to say to today's contemporary approaches to mindfulness practice.

Notes

1. Cow psychology refers to the "manipulative use of counseling such as 'active listening', deployed as a means for pacifying employees by making them feel that their concerns were

heard while existing conditions at the workplace remained unchanged" because "contented and docile cows give more milk" (Purser and Loy 2013).
2. This represents the respondent identifier.

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