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“See you on the other side”:

Silent retreats as initiation among mindfulness meditation teachers.

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Ne pas citer sans autorisation de l’auteur

Contribution à l’ouvrage collectif à paraître, *Le bien-être au Nord et au Sud : Explorations, Contradictions, Pouvoirs et pratiques*, J. Tantchou, F. Louveau, Marc-Éric Gruénais (dir.), Academia, coll. Investigations en Anthropologie Prospective.

Mindfulness backlash has become commonplace. The proliferation of this meditative practice throughout the Global North and beyond (such as South Africa, China, and Brazil) has been critically discussed by medias as well as academics and scientists as a neoliberal tool leading to the individualization and psychologization of well-being to better conceal structural inequalities (Purser *et al.*, 2013 ; Barker, 2014 ; Drougge, 2016 ; Van Dam *et al.*, 2018). Its ubiquity seems to exemplify the “wellness command” (Cederström 2015) as an equation of wellness with moral rightness, while mindfulness teachers could easily be categorized as “apostles of the science of happiness” (Cabanas et Illouz, 2018).

This critique, however, is far from being restricted to the detractors of mindfulness. It has become the battle cry of numerous mindfulness leaders themselves - whether scientists, academics, therapists, or Buddhist, turning the world of mindfulness into a contested field (Le Menestrel, 2019). Taking issue with the individualistic ethos, these actors contend that “mindfulness can no longer be reduced to the sole domain of therapeutic efficacy alone (...). The ethical foundations of mindfulness are matters of how we live together in this changing world.” (Stanley *et al.*, 2018 : 23)

Indeed, mindfulness teachers and leaders frequently use the notions of “leaving well”, or “leaving better”. From “being” to “living”, the emphasis shifts from self to society and expands the notion of wellbeing to welfare and the common good. The increasing worldwide support of mindfulness practice by legislators in a dozen countries around the world is the most powerful demonstration of this political dimension<sup>1</sup>. Westminster inaugurated this process with the publication of *Mindful Nation UK* (2015), a report from an all-party parliamentary group where mindfulness meditation is deemed critical for public policy: for the prevention of depression and the improvement of public health; for calmer, more focused school students; for reducing stress and build resiliency at the workplace as well as in the social justice system<sup>2</sup>. University medical centers provide courses to their staff as burn-out prevention, and campus services have extended the offer to students and employees, from Harvard to Paris-Sciences-et-Lettres.

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<sup>1</sup> Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden and Sri Lanka

<sup>2</sup> The Mindfulness Initiative policy institute first created in Great Britain describes mindfulness as « an innate human capacity that enables people to focus on what they experience in the moment, internally as well as in their environment, with an attitude of openness, curiosity and care ».

This institutionalization process is inseparable from the scientific legitimacy of mindfulness as a therapeutic tool and a secular practice. Mindfulness meditation is mostly associated with Vipassana (or Insight) meditation, a Theravada Buddhist practice. Considered as the “father of mindfulness”, Jon Kabat-Zinn developed in 1979 the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center for patients suffering from chronic illness. This marked the transition from a meditation practice to a medical protocol codified through a specific 8-week curriculum based on 2 hour-sessions. While much debated today, Kabat-Zinn definition was long considered as orthodoxy and still is prevalent in healthcare. “Paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally, to the unfolding of experience moment to moment.” The program includes “formal practices” (sitted, body scan, walking meditation, basic yoga postures) and informal practices (any activity of everyday life such as washing dishes, showering, etc), from 3 to 45 mn long, with or without object (meditation on breathing, sounds, body sensations, thoughts or mountain meditation, meditation on compassion, open attention).

In 1995, mindfulness practice extended to the prevention of relapse in depression through the establishment of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) by a team of Canadian and British psychologists. In 2004, MBCT was endorsed by the National Health Institute in Great Britain and together with MBSR, was integrated into the US National Registry of Evidence Based Practices. Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBI) has become a generic term that has been applied for a wide variety of medical and psychological conditions (like addictions, PTSD, eating and sleep disorders, borderline personalities, heart disease, stress related to cancer etc). Established as an object of public health, it has been highly subsidized by private and public fundings such as the US National Institute of Health.<sup>3</sup>

The pivotal political role ascribed to mindfulness meditation has positioned retreats as a line of demarcation between “MacMindfulness” perpetrators or victims of neoliberalism and engaged practitioners driven by a commitment to improve individual as well as collective well-being. Among the opportunities to deepen the practice together, retreats are considered as an essential step. They embrace a variety of formats – from non-residential to residential retreats, from half-day to 3 or more month-long immersion - based on walking and sitting practices along with daily teachings. Silent practice - especially when extended to several consecutive days in a remote place - acts as a probation period<sup>4</sup>. Silent retreats have become these past few years a prerequisite for training as mindfulness instructor, a status considered as the ultimate commitment to mindfulness practice. Whether training programs take place in Buddhist or secular settings, whether they are integrated into academic, medical schools or meditation center curriculums, at least one residential silent retreat of a minimum of 4 days is required.

Mindfulness is situated within the eclectic field of contemporary spiritualities, often approached by French and US sociology as emblematic of neo-liberalism, of the prioritization of individual fulfillment over social progress, and of a blind “therapeutic culture” permeating the institutions of Western societies. From this perspective, mindfulness epitomizes the

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<sup>3</sup> The steady expansion of mindfulness in healthcare echoes the definition of health as a state of mental, physical and social wellbeing institutionalized by the World Health Organization in 1948. It is also concomitant with a change of paradigm of the anthropology of mental health these past 30 years resulting in eclectic practices dedicated to the prevention of ill-being.

<sup>4</sup> It is now offered twice a year to Westminster legislators.

normativity of “individualist culture” (Garnoussi, 2011; 2013). In fact, the reception of mindfulness as a “revolution” and its consecutive backlash seems to encapsulate social scientists conflicting approaches of practitioners as either empowered by a “spiritual revolution” (Heelas, 1996) or duped by capitalism (Carrette et King, 2004).

My approach does not situate itself with either perspective. It is in line with studies considering the self as shaped by the social (Fedele et Knibbe, 2014 ; Altglas et Wood, 2019) and arguing for the role of sensorial sociality in religious practices (Chau, 2008 ; Cohen *et al.*, 2017). Rather than being a process of individualistic syncretistic *bricolage*, mindfulness is a discipline that has to be learned, resulting from socialization to shared values, practices, and sensory perceptions. This is the reason why this paper focuses on mindfulness teachers as major actors in establishing these collective practices and narratives. I also argue for extensive ethnographic approaches still lacking in the field of contemporary spiritualities, and for research rooted not only on a corpus of writings and discourse saturating the field, but also on participant observation (Pike, 2001 ; Magliocco, 2004 ; Fedele et Knibbe, 2014 ; Gobin et Teisenhoffer, 2017).

Shifting from the view of silence as fundamentally individual, Pagis argues for its interactive dimension<sup>5</sup>, and offers an analysis of “covert mechanisms of silent intersubjectivity” in Vipassana retreats (Pagis 2010). In the context of this volume, I propose to go further in understanding retreats in Buddhist and healthcare settings as an initiation ritual. I argue that this ritual framework is crucial to understand the mechanisms of its institutionalization and global expansion. Retreats are key in marking the insertion of practitioners and teachers in particular into a community of practice. They also shed a light on how religious and scientific domains are entangled (Hanegraaf, 2000 ; Stuckrad, 2014).

Informed by participant observation, this paper is based on an extensive multi-sited ethnography since 2015 in France and the US (Massachusetts and the Bay Area) in both clinical and buddhists settings: MBSR and MBCT programs in US and French hospital and in private practice, training programs for health professionals, classes in meditation centers. I focus on two retreats: a 5-day residential “seminar-retreat” dedicated to health professionals in St Jacut-sur-Mer, Brittany, France (Nov.30-Dec. 4, 2015), including 24 hours of silence; an 8-day residential silent retreat at the Insight Meditation Society, in Barre, Massachusetts (July 8-16, 2017), a pioneer institution in the development of mindfulness meditation funded in 1976.

## 1. Gaining legitimacy

### A transformative experience

I first met Cécile<sup>6</sup> in the summer of 2017 at her practice situated in a fancy, haussmannian building in central Paris. A young psychiatrist with a candid and mischievous look, Cécile showed immediate interest in my research and dove into our interview with no

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<sup>5</sup> As a space of “situational silence” where silence is constitutive of the experience - such as in the art, religious spheres, and formal rituals (Kurzon, 1994)

<sup>6</sup> Other than public figures, the names of the teachers interviewed have been changed to respect anonymity.

reservation. She encountered meditation through her father, an experienced retreatant in the tradition of the Indian master S. N. Goenka, one of the most influential Vipassana meditation school worldwide. Goenka 10 day-silent retreat follows a rigorously codified program and are known for being a trying experience, sometimes qualified as “spiritual boot camp”<sup>7</sup>. Although reluctant to the idea, Cécile eventually embarked on the adventure.

It was really hard, I went through mental and emotional turmoil, with obsessions. People meditate in small cells, when they consider that you’re calm enough... You’re in total sensory deprivation. And that’s where you see what’s going on in your mind. I’d see dish passing, sushis, pasta. I said to myself, I’m nuts.... I encountered all the enemies of meditation... anger, ruminations, obsessions, somnolence...I had hearing hallucinations, I would hear bells everywhere, since it was marking breaks or lunch time.

And when it was over I felt something I had never felt in my whole life. It seemed to me that I’d see life in a totally different way. I never saw a sky so blue and a tree so green. I was really into reality, not in my mind. I felt like I won a battle against myself. And then I felt like anything could happen to me, that didn’t matter at all.

Whereas Cécile first considered Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy as a “waste of time”, this first experience of meditation convinced her to experiment the protocole with her patients at a hospital in Paris suburb. She started co-supervising groups with a certified colleague before eventually applying for teacher training, at the time only consisting of a 5-day seminar. Her first experience was followed by numerous other retreats throughout the years from various traditions: 7 other Goenka retreats, Thich Nhat Han’s “Village des pruniers” (one of the most popular zen monk in Western countries, established in France) and Thai-forest-tradition retreats in Southern France and Great Britain. Cécile ended up guiding regular MBCT programs in a hospital psychiatric unit as well as in private practice, both located in central Paris. She is now a well-established mindfulness teacher and leader in Paris and the author of several mainstream books.

On the other side of the Atlantic, in Massachussets, Sam has been a “dharma teacher” trainee since 2017 at IMS. Like many others, he started practicing meditation through the reading of best sellers such as *The Miracle of Mindfulness* by Thich Nat Han. A student of Berklee College in Boston distressed by its highly competitive atmosphere, Sam lost all confidence in becoming the jazz pianist he had always dreamt to be. In 2010, he met a friend on her way to IMS for a silent retreat.

After practicing meditation for 5 years, I had never heard of anybody going to a silent retreat. So here she is diving in with no former practice, and that was fascinating. She said “it was incredible, you have to try this”. I was 25, she was 23. So I signed up for a 4-day long silent retreat. That retreat was just a total turning point (...I had an experience that I could only compare to my experience on psychedelics. By just paying attention to what was happening. That along was shocking and revealing. How is it possible that there is a whole different way of experiencing reality and not substance-altered state. The combination of the practical value of this and the wild fireworks opening was, wow, something really important is here. So I immediately signed up for another retreat.

The comparison with psychedelics directly situates Sam in the footsteps of psychologist Richard Alpert better known as Ram Dass, a major figure of the seventies psychedelic orientalism in the US, and an enduring reference for mindfulness leaders. As a first taste of enlightenment, the exploration of psychedelics paved the way towards meditation (Kripal, 2008a). Sam started dedicating more time to retreats, going to the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center to practice, until he was offered both to peer-lead meditation classes for “people of color” there, and go teach in prison. While still working in a technology start-up

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed description and analysis, see B. Demers (2010)

company, he took the decision to engage in a 4-year teacher training program at IMS, managing both a daily job and intensive training.

In the French national context where a high suspicion of sectarianism prevails<sup>8</sup>, most health professionals involved in the development of mindfulness do not usually publicize their previous experience of retreats in religious settings. Such is the case of Christophe André, a former psychiatrist and prolific mindfulness meditation ambassador. After losing a close friend in his youth, he found refuge at a Benedictine abbey in Southwestern France. Some health professionals I interviewed experienced Buddhist retreats before their involvement into MBI teaching - Vipassana retreat as taught by Goenka, soto Zen, Tibetan- while others discovered meditation through readings and training programs. As a space dedicated to intensive practice in an out-of-the-ordinary collective setting under the guidance of teachers, retreats act as transformative space. For both Cécile and Sam, these retreats were decisive moments of commitment as practitioner first, then as teachers in a clinical setting for Cécile and in Insight meditation centers for Sam. Ultimately, the self-transformation claimed as an integral part of retreat experience is an essential step towards the commitment to transform others.

#### A step towards certification

Since 2010, the worldwide demand for mindfulness programs in healthcare in particular as well as education, work and criminal justice, resulted in the development of teacher-training programs offering highly structured curriculums integrated into a process of certification. Among them, the CFM created by Kabat-Zinn maintains ownership of the first certification program, while other university-affiliated centers have been created throughout the world. Among the most recent and prestigious one stands the Mindfulness Center at Brown University, Rhode Island, claiming global leadership with partnerships with Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Finland, Denmark, Germany, Spain, Italy and France.

Leaders of modern Buddhism have joined the academic involvement in the certification process, determined to position themselves on the competitive market of mindfulness. IMS and its sister center Spirit Rock Meditation Center in the Bay Area (1985) offer continuing education credits for health professionals and social workers that have been approved by national professional associations such as the American Psychological Association. As a result, those institutions have come to blur the boundaries between therapeutic and Buddhist settings of mindfulness practice. They also provide different levels of teacher training programs such as « community dharma leader », « retreat teacher » being the top qualification. By contrast with other levels, people cannot apply but must be nominated on the basis of extended years of practice and 2-to-3 month retreats. Similarly to religious seminar, they commit to teach for 10 years after the 4-year-training is over. At IMS, a specific space remote from the main center named the Forest Refuge is dedicated to aspiring teachers as well as any practitioner with a long-term retreat experience willing to follow a personal retreat from one week up to a year.

In 2012, mindfulness master programs in the 3 British universities of Bangor, Oxford and Exeter published the *Mindfulness-Based Intervention Teaching Assessment Criteria* (MBI-TAC). The absence of a national accreditation process and legislative framework for

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<sup>8</sup> Official efforts to discuss resistance against mindfulness meditation have materialized through the organization of a conference at the French Health Department named « Interventions basées sur la pleine conscience, sciences, santé et société: lever les doutes, ouvrir des perspectives ? » on June 20, 2019.

mindfulness teachers prompted leaders of mindfulness development to establish “good practices” as guidelines for normative criteria, which immediately became an international reference. The manual defines criteria to assess teachers’ degrees of competence, from “beginners” to “competent”, “proficient” and “advanced”. This publication brought to light strategies of professionalization (Le Menestrel, 2019) in which retreat stands as a decisive criteria.

In 2016, this process resulted in a public debate over the necessity for health professionals to do a retreat prior to their training<sup>9</sup>. Whether health professionals should be exempted became the subject of strong controversies, eventually leading to the integration of a 4-day retreat as a prerequisite. The debate was further complicated by the disapproval of some retreats as not legitimate within the training programs curriculums. The Center for mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts and its international partners require Insight meditation retreats, a point of strong disagreement with health professionals who argue for the secularity of MBI<sup>10</sup>, in conjunction with the necessity for health professional skills in order to provide a safe environment for retreatants. Several clinical psychologists reported to me occasional adverse effects such as panna attacks, especially within retreats taught by Goenka. In their view, silent retreat exposes people to challenging emotions that foster “decompensation” (an acute worsening of a clinical condition), hence the interviews made by health professionals to select retreatants. In one case, a psychologist broke the silence to assist the person in crisis, to the disapproval of the retreat center<sup>11</sup>.

At stake are status-related divisions between health professionals and other mindfulness trainees coming from various backgrounds (mostly yoga and sophrology teachers, social workers, educators, coaching, entrepreneurship, or people in professional retraining). While health professionals claim scientific authority on the basis of medical expertise and evidence-based evaluations, Buddhist leaders claim ownership of a 2500-year-old heritage. The increasing overlap between Buddhist and therapeutic settings has exacerbated power struggles over the legitimate authority to deliver care.

Whereas social actors use these binary oppositions, they share common representations and practices. In fact, many health professionals teaching mindfulness present themselves as “instructors” as opposed to “therapists”, claiming a commonality of status as practitioners. The use of mindfulness meditation as a therapeutic technique is explicitly recommended as prevention that goes beyond specific pathologies, claiming an integrative medicine approach. Meditation is presented as a practice to cultivate in the everyday life, a “way of being” vs a “way of doing”, a space of “freedom” rather than a technique, that offers both individual and global response to suffering. As such, it stands as a cosmology promoting social

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<sup>9</sup> See the Oxford Mindfulness Center website <https://oxfordmindfulness.org/news/role-retreats-mbct-teachers/>

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, this classification of retreats has led to power struggles and mutual exclusion within Vipassana retreats themselves: retreats as taught by Goenka are disapproved by most mindfulness curriculums, and retreatants from mindfulness centers and Insight meditation centers such as IMS and Spirit Rock in the Bay Area are unwelcomed at Goenka retreat centers.

<sup>11</sup> These past few years, official reports of unexpected effects of meditation intensive practice such as hallucinations, panic attacks, or distress have been brought up in research papers and official reports to fight against the misinformation of mindfulness hype. Concomitantly, this argument of causality can be discussed as part of a hierarchization process between novice and experienced practitioners who overcame the test of silent retreat.

transformation, social justice, and claims of a better world embedded in moral values of compassion, wisdom and kindness<sup>12</sup>.

### Making retreats palatable

Insight meditation centers and academic institutions who offer retreats make various efforts to reassure possible clients and demystify silent retreat and their monastic, austere imaginary. The IMS website, among other retreat centers, provides guidelines and detailed answers to a series of questions about what to expect and rules to follow. Until the institutionalization of mindfulness was established in medical settings, mindfulness meditation practitioners mostly associated silent retreats with long-term commitments of individuals who had made the choice of a monastic life in Asia and received teachings from Buddhist monks or gurus. As such, they came back to the West endowed with an undisputed legitimacy as religious leaders, designated in contemporary vipassana as “dharma teachers”. Whereas year-long retreat experiences in Asia are still emphasized by western leaders of modern Buddhism as essential to their legitimacy, the choice of monastic life tends now to be discredited if not turned into derision. Far from being promoted as an end in itself, a retreat is envisioned by present-day “dharma teachers” as a springboard for “cultivating” mindfulness meditation into daily life. Meditation, they often argue, is much more challenging when fully engaged in the world rather than isolated from it.

Educational strategies are deployed through a semantic effort to introduce new designations and reinvest retreat with another meaning, especially among mental health professionals (such as the use of “silent seminar”, or “experiential mindfulness residential” for MBCT retreats). All MBI programs include a “silent retreat day” before the last session, once the practice has been established, emphasizing the importance of silence for a complete educational mindfulness meditation experience. In most retreat centers, the experience of retreatants determines the accessibility of other retreats, experienced meditators being given access to longer ones. Academic trainings offer shorter, up to one-week retreats.

Whereas the comfort originally provided at retreat centers used to be very basic – such was the case at Spirit Rock, IMS, or even the first MBCT retreat taking place in France - individual rooms are now provided. The quality of food is a major concern through hearty, elaborated vegetarian meals often including special dishes for vegan and gluten-free diets, possibly softening the challenge of silence for the most reluctant ones. In fact, the poor quality of vegetarian meals and the absence of wine at St Jacut abbey were turned into an object of derision and circumvented, as some participants found a small bar provided for visitors.

### Challenges as an object of practice

Challenges of mindfulness practice and of retreats in particular are presented as an integral part of the practice regardless of the setting and the participants. In fact, retreats are presented as “laboratories” for learning to “be with and work with difficulties”, as the very essence of the practice. Consequently, retreats are seen as an ideal environment for in-depth experimentation of the practice. They mark the transition from what is called the “doing

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<sup>12</sup> Leading to the neologism “kindfulness”, developed by T. Fernando (U. of Auckland) in his keynote at the International Congress of Mindfulness in Auckland, NZ.



mode” versus the “being mode” of “non-judgmental, present-centered awareness”.

The seven foundational attitudes listed by Kabat-Zinn in his original protocols have become central to all MBI and mindfulness practice in general: non-judging, patience, beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go (Kabat-Zinn, 2013 : 19-38), although not always listed as such, have remained guidelines for teachers. One of the main teachings of mindfulness practice rests on the idea that “our thoughts are not facts”. Thoughts are meant as “mental events” visualized through various metaphors (clouds, trains, water falls, movie images). As a result, one of the main attitudes taught in mindfulness practice is response versus reactivity: an invitation to “notice” one’s judgments without getting caught up in “automatic pilot”, in other words habitual mental patterns or “mental traps”. Participants are asked to meet the experience of thoughts, feelings or body sensations with “awareness” and “equanimity”. Equanimity is most commonly defined as “mental and emotional calmness”, or “non-reactivity”. In MBCT programs (Segal *et al.*, 2002), this process is translated into “cognitive rehabilitation”, a process of identification of mental patterns and “cognitive distortion” deemed responsible for negative “ruminative thoughts” and depressive relapse<sup>13</sup>. Session 2 of the 8-week program is entitled “Negotiating obstacles” through the study of a standard questionnaire on “automatic negative thoughts” used as a measuring tool of depression, while session 6 directly approaches alternative ways of looking at thoughts through various practices (body scan, breathing space). Mindfulness practice is understood as a skill of “metacognition”, shifting the posture of the patient from identification or fusion with negative thoughts or physical pain to decentering oneself, or “zooming in and out”, as expressed in St Jacut.

All MBIs convey the notions of awareness, presence, curiosity, nonjudgmental investigation and these past few years, of self-compassion<sup>14</sup> as key attitudes for changing the relation to one’s thinking, feelings, and sensations. More broadly, the notion of “choice” and “freedom” are guiding principles of all attitudes and mechanisms of mindfulness practice: the choice to “respond” rather than “react” under the control of emotions, the “freedom” to choose.

Considering this premise, whatever retreatants come to experience is incorporated into the normalcy of mindfulness practice. All teachers regularly remind participants that feelings such as boredom, impatience, or physical and emotional pain may and will arise. According to teachers, as long as people are aware of what they’re experiencing and observe it with curiosity, they’re practicing. Along this line, all obstacles are presented as opportunities to practice.

## **2. Self-transformation, together: overlapping ritualities**

Here and there; before and after

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<sup>13</sup> In Vipassana retreats, the coming and going of pain is understood as the experience of the Buddhist principle of “impermanence” (Eddy 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Mindful Self Compassion is a specific protocol that has expanded worldwide, sometimes superseding the notion of mindfulness. It was developed by psychologists Ch. Germer and K. Neff in the US, and P. Gilbert in Great Britain.

*IMS, Barre Massachussets, July 8, 2017, fieldnotes.*

*After we fill out all required paperwork and settle in our rooms, all IMS retreatants and volunteers meet in the dining room for the only time of verbal interaction until the end of the retreat, in a week. Eager to share experiences and inquire about other retreatants' itinerary while they can, people interact with their neighbors with particular interest and curiosity. Without beating around the bush, conversations go directly to challenging life experiences, family issues, death, illness, grief... Right before the first meeting in the meditation hall marking the beginning of silence, people say goodbye. Scott, who is on his 7<sup>th</sup> retreat, looks at me with a mischievously look and smiles: "See you on the other side".*

Rites of passage are common among Neo-Pagans initiations featuring test and trials intended to confront initiates weaknesses for the sake of self-transformation (Magliocco 2004, 138). I propose here to look into entities that contribute to the ritual efficacy of retreats. Although the retreats discussed in this paper vary in their purpose, access, and settings, I argue that some commonalities can be identified as constitutive of the entanglements of religious and medical domains within the world of mindfulness.

"I'm going to offer you to go on a journey. That might be difficult", said Cécile to her patients to introduce an MBCT program. In fact, mindfulness teachers often refer to retreats as a "journey" with its sets of challenges, whether at the hospital, in therapeutic practice or in insight meditation centers. Just like other rites of passage – defined by phases of separation, threshold or liminal phase, and incorporation of a new identity (Van Gennep, 1909; Turner, 1969), silent retreats and their accumulative dimension act as a transformative experience. Retreats turn any practitioner into a more respectable, advanced meditator, and teacher-in-training into competent, proficient professionals responding to "good practice" criteria. Each retreat serves as an additional step towards a more selective, skilled circle: those who have been "there". Retreat centers have become so popular in professional careers that some are booked 6 months in advance, leading an IMS teacher to facetiously compare retreat centers to spiritual malls<sup>15</sup>. What prevails is not so much the ability to testify and account for the nature of one's subjective experience. Rather, what turns the retreat into a pivotal moment and contributes to its ritual efficacy is one's personal involvement in an intensive silent practice with its sets of ritual actions and emotions (Houseman 2012 : 191).

The structural framework of retreats contributes to the creation of a liminal, sacred space, marked by a clear beginning and ending.

*IMS, July 8, 8pm, fieldnotes*

*In a vast and bright meditation hall criss-crossed with cushions placed on individual purple mats, one hundred retreatants just did their first sitting as part of an 8-day silent retreat named "Mindfulness, Insight, Liberation". As an alternative, black chairs are available along the walls. The assembly is facing a wide, narrow podium, 2 steps from the wooden-floor, dedicated to the three teachers of this 8-day silent retreat. The only piece of furniture other than a short lectern is a wooden stand with a black-stone statue of the Buddha sitting between 2 candles and orchid pots. After the first meditation on body sensations, one of the teacher bows, hands together, facing us. He explains: "This*

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<sup>15</sup> In reference to the notion of spiritual materialism introduced by Chogyam Trungpa in 1973.

*is just a sign of respect, appreciation and acknowledgment of the challenge of practice. You're not at all required to do it".*

*This first guidance is followed by the "cell phone renunciation ceremony". Baskets with envelopes are placed on the podium, and participants who have doubts about their ability to keep their phone off throughout the whole week are invited to leave it to the organizers who will place them in a safe. About two-third of the participants stand and line up in alleys on both sides of the hall. They start walking slowly towards the podium, where a teacher suggests to bow in front of the buddha statue and "abandon, surrender" their phone. Images of the Christian eucharist immediately come to my mind, including spatial uses of the hall. Yet rather than embodying the christ body by ingesting the host, participants give up their phone considered as a source of disembodiment.*

Smartphones and social medias epitomize a prevalent theme of mindfulness among mindfulness teachers: the multiple source of distractions offered by modern lifestyles keeping people from paying attention, considered as central to the improvement of wellbeing. The "cell phone ceremony" is most telling about the underlying ideology of retreats as a refuge from disembodiment<sup>16</sup>. It situates this ritual within a process of purification typical of New Age and Neo-pagan rituals. "Both the space and the participants must be purged of outside influences" (Magliocco, 2004 : 139). Jack Kornfield, a pioneer in the dissemination of modern Buddhism and mindfulness, was quoted at the IMS retreat for eloquently comparing retreats with dumps<sup>17</sup>.

The end of a retreat – whether it is silent or not- and the reintegration to everyday life is also a topic discussed on the last day, as a transition that requires adjustments. Although retreats are perceived as an out-of-the-ordinary refuge, the proclaimed intention is to integrate the learnings and experience of silent intensive practice into daily life, turning it into a specific skill to be "cultivated". Numerous tools are offered to engage practitioners in what MBIs leaders consider as "sustained intensive training" (Crane *et al.*, 2016). Private therapy practice, psychiatric units, and various mindfulness instructors offer regular courses and workshops to continue practicing and recommend other retreats, while numerous guided meditations are available for free on the web<sup>18</sup>.

Closing rituals can be of very different nature but always tackle on the challenge of extending the benefits of retreats into daily life<sup>19</sup>.

*MBCT seminar-retreat, St Jacut, December 4, 2015, late morning, fieldnotes.*

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<sup>16</sup> The centrality of the notion of embodiment in mindfulness practice and certification will be the subject of another paper.

<sup>17</sup> Another practice of purification used at St Jacut retreat in particular and in MBIs in general is the Tree Meditation: a kind of body scan starting from the pelvis down to the feet, which the teacher invites to extend into "roots" deep down into the ground, in order to slowly absorb the "nourishment of the earth" drawing energy up into their body. This process of "grounding and centering" is common in Neo-Pagan rituals (Magliocco 2004 : 139).

<sup>18</sup> Health professionals' websites and books are a source of numerous guided meditations. As for Insight meditation dharma talks, one of the most comprehensive database is [dharmaseed.org](http://dharmaseed.org).

<sup>19</sup> In fact, this integration is encouraged by the "work practice" included at Insight meditation retreats, inviting participants to contribute to daily chores (cleaning, chopping vegetables, setting the tables...). They are presented as opportunities to practice in any daily life activity. In therapeutic retreats and MBI programs, practicing during routine activities (when showering, brushing teeth, washing the dishes...) are part of the curriculum. See for example <http://mbpti.org/a-5-day-mindfulness-retreat/>

*Suzan asks the participants to get in a semicircle as close as possible to the podium where the teachers are seated, for the “closing ceremony”. She proposes a “breathing space”, a 3-minute-practice common to all MBI meant as an “informal practice”, a pragmatic tool to integrate mindfulness into daily life. It includes 3 steps: paying attention to sensations, emotions, thoughts; bringing the attention to the sensations of the breath in a particular place in the body; expanding the awareness into the body as a whole. Hence the name of “egg timer”, as a metaphor for the succession of expansion and gathering of awareness. Suzan asks us afterwards to think of a word that expresses our feeling at that very moment. She explains that she is going to throw at us two wool balls that each of us will catch, roll up the string around his wrist, before throwing the ball to someone else. Gradually, the trajectory of the string creates a multicolored web connecting all participants. People giggle as the balls knock some out. Scissors are then passed around to cut the string on our wrist and tie it up, forming a bracelet as both a reminder of the retreat and a call for practice.*

Outside of retreats, Mindfulness-Based Programs include their own opening and closing rituals as well, acting as a first step towards the integration to a community of practice: the “raisin exercise” for the first session<sup>20</sup>; the “letter to myself”, a confidential letter that each participant writes at the end of the last session, and that teachers sent them up to a year later.

“Is it the meditation or is it the retreat?” Ritual efficacy.

This question was raised in one of my interviews with neuroscientist Cliff Saron, a major researcher of mindfulness meditation effects on attention training and emotion regulation. With me as well as other interlocutors (Haederle, 2017), Saron remained eager to discuss the variety of factors involved in the changes measured after retreats.

Residential retreats usually take place in rural settings surrounded by nature. They frequently use former or still active religious buildings or Buddhist centers. The MBCT retreat-seminar first took place at the end of a peninsula in Northern Brittany at St Jacut old Benedictine abbey which accommodates laypeople. It has since moved to a Zen center in Ardeche hosting mostly yoga, martial arts and artistic workshops. IMS was an old Catholic novitiate purchased by Jo Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg and Jack Kornfield in 1976. An original stain-glass window representing Jesus has been preserved in the entrance of the meditation hall.

At IMS, retreats typically follow a daily schedule that starts at 5:30 am and ends at 10:00 pm. Silent practice consists of alternate periods of sitting and walking meditation, interrupted by Buddha’s teachings called “dharma talks” every evening (45mn to an hour) and instructions before sitting meditations. The daily schedule also includes three meals - breakfast, lunch and a light dinner- 1-hour of volunteer work (cleaning bathroom, washing dishes, chopping vegetables...) and optional yoga class. The immersion into intense practice is conditional to a disconnection from electronic device, and more broadly from common communication modes such as talking, reading and writing.

Walking and sitting meditation alternate as well at St Jacut - like other training programs specifically designed for health professionals. Daily teachings include yoga

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<sup>20</sup> This exercise originated in the MBSR protocol. The practitioner is given a raisin (sometimes with the eye closed) and invited to observe it very slowly with all of his senses (20 to 30 mn) “as if you’ve never seen anything like it before”. The person is asked to observe its texture, smell it, place it in his mouth, chew it, then intentionally swallow it while paying attention to his sensations.

practice, and role-play exercise simulating teaching sessions with patients. The intensive schedule of retreats (7am-10pm) have been an issue for the French work inspection, to the extent that the therapists in charge of MBCT teacher training eventually reduced the daily schedule to avoid arising suspicion from Miviludes (a French government agency fighting against “sectarian deviance”) and losing their license as a training institute.

Meditation bell rings are a major relief of retreats soundscape. At IMS, one of the volunteer work involved ringing the bell three times, marking the rhythm of the daily schedule (wake up time, work practice, meals, meditation practice, “dharma talk”). Meditation practice is inseparable from bells or bowls of all shapes whether taught by health professionals or “dharma teachers”, within the enclosure of the hospital or of Buddhist retreat centers. During retreats, bell ringing precedes any talk. At St Jacut, the first meeting of the seminar-retreat started with three rings marking the beginning of a short meditation practice, before the teachers introduced themselves.

More broadly, the sounds of silence fill up the space. In addition to the observance of body sensations inseparable from meditation practice, specific practices are offered in that perspective. MBI’s sitting practice specifically includes meditations on sounds. This practice consists in listening to surrounding sounds (external and internal) without interpreting them but rather, observing their texture, volume, pitch, and length. Eating meditation during silent meals is meant along the same line, as an observation of the color, texture, and taste of the food. Beyond these particular practices, the absence of verbal communication only exacerbates sensory perception. Hearing becomes particularly acute throughout the day, and intensified by frequent moments of close proximity (sitting meditation, meals). At IMS, “dharma talks” were moments of silent interaction rituals. I could actually hear people’s response to the teachings: smiling or laughing, nodding in agreement, stifling a sob. Approval and emotions were palpable.

Sitting together contribute to a certain degree of intimacy as most keep the same place throughout the retreat, bringing their own cushions or shawls, arranging them in a specific way, on top of their clothing style, giving a glimpse of people’s personality. Collective practice also confront participants to each other’s presence and behavior, acting as a vehicle for practice, whether it induces irritability, empathy, discomfort or support. During the IMS retreat, the person sitting in front of me occasionally would take a huge gasp of air as if preparing for apnea, eventually expelling long and loud groans. Body and emotional presence is tangible, and contribute to the sensory and cognitive awareness required by the practice, just like in “spiritual dances” such as 5-rhythm dance (Houseman *et al.*, 2016).

Cushions are crucial objects of ritual action. Although chairs are always offered as an alternative, cushions delimitate formal practice. Whereas informal practice is presented as essential to the integration of mindfulness into everyday life, sitting meditation still epitomizes the accomplished, authentic meditator. In fact, the use of mindfulness meditation to support various public causes is inseparable from the act of sitting, encapsulating a way of being<sup>21</sup>. As such, retreats stand as the ultimate challenge. Indeed, the sitting posture is the first source of struggle systematically brought up in discussions with the teachers, especially during extended retreats as people anticipate the challenge of intense sitting. As opposed to Zen meditation practice where the highly codified posture is considered as an essential element conducive to proper practice, posture in mindfulness meditation is an object of numerous adaptations: zafus, meditation benches, chairs were all provided or brought by

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<sup>21</sup> The « way of being » encapsulated by the act of sitting is in fact the object of conflicted interpretations : an act of promotion and popularization for some ; an act of nonpursuing, of no gain for others condemning the commodification of mindfulness (Poirier, 2016)

practitioners themselves at St Jacut like at IMS, where additional small seats with back support were used. People are encouraged to use additional cushions and rolled-up blankets to find the most comfortable position and adjust to any specific needs, such as specific back injuries (going back to the design of MBSR for chronic illness): meditation is meant to be available to anyone. Although some sit in the lotus position, most are in simple cross-legged, kneeling on the cushion turned on its side, or sitting straight up on a chair. In this sense, the flexibility of posture seems like a metaphor of the wide range of applications of mindfulness practice. Any adjustment is accepted as long as the practitioner comes to an “upright and dignified position”. The posture acts as an embodiment of one’s self-positioning: teachers advocate “dignity”, “stability”, and commitment to the practice.

The moral conduct and the attitudes associated with it are not only a requirement, they are socially produced through silent interaction rituals and embodied, such as equanimity (Pagis 2015). Not being able to reciprocate and follow basic, ordinary civilities leads to neutral, sometimes austere facial expressions and contributes to keep one’s composure and refrain from “reactivity”. This was particularly striking when silence was broken on the 8th day of IMS retreat. Eye contacts and smiles – before any exchange of words - were transformative of people’s expression and behavior. Far from a solitary experience – some teachers talk about the “gift of solitude” - retreats are in fact a locus of practice saturated by silent interaction rituals and provide an environment conducive of ritual efficacy.

This ritual framework does not go without dissonance or ambivalence. Some retreatants find ways to maintain individual habits and reestablish some sense of normalcy in the midst of their out-of-the-ordinary experience: at IMS, food was put on the side, placed on a shelf or in refrigerators with a name tag on it, special ingredients was brought despite specific dishes available for gluten-free, dairy free diets. The injunction of “non-clinging”, included in the “Five precepts” followed by IMS as a “code of ethics”<sup>22</sup>, is therefore adapted, while others are circumvented. Such was the case of a woman who mistakenly took the seat of somebody who already had set his plate. Unable to let go of her embarrassment, she substituted words for body language, dramatically agitating her arms and face like a mime artist. Other signs of “reactivity” can often be observed in silent interactions, especially during meals: dubious looks in front of specific food, preferences for certain ingredients or dishes that quickly disappear, smiles at the sight of particularly tasty sweets... Interactions are also influenced by the organization of meals. At St Jacut, everybody sat at the table and passed around dishes, leading to alternative strategies such as eye contact or inviting gestures for basic interactions. At IMS, retreatants could sit outside in the yard anywhere they wanted, leaving more space for sensory experiences. Teachers play an important role in setting the tone, acting as silent gatekeepers of the “right conduct”<sup>23</sup>. However, they are not deprived from “reactivity”. At IMS, the body sounds coming out of my neighbor’s during a sitting generated facial expression of strong discontent from one of the teachers. The code of conduct in silent retreats is therefore the object of various negotiations. Retreats provide nonetheless a space where

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<sup>22</sup> The “Five Precepts” must be followed by all, from retreatants to teachers, visitors and staff. At IMS, they are phrases as such: “To refrain from harming any living, sentient beings – not to kill or intentionally hurt any person or creature, even an insect. To refrain from taking what is not freely given – not to steal or ‘borrow’ without the consent of the giver; to accept what is offered and not try to change it or get more. To abstain from sexual activity. To practice noble silence and to refrain from harming by one’s speech – not to lie, gossip or use harsh or hurtful language. To abstain from using alcohol, recreational drugs and other intoxicants that cloud the mind and harm the body. (This does not apply to prescription medicines)”.

<sup>23</sup> The requirement to “embody” mindfulness as a teacher is an integral part of the certification process and will be the topic of a different paper.

materiality and sensory perception play a key-role in the normalization of mindfulness teachings and practice.

### 3. “A common language”: Narrative performativity

“People don’t need another religion”: Secular Buddhism

The primacy of “direct experience” is a ubiquitous notion in the world of mindfulness. Whether health professionals, neuroscientists, religious leaders or patients, all practitioners situate mindfulness meditation as a practice either compatible with all beliefs, or “outside of all beliefs”. From psychiatric hospital units to Insight retreat centers, the priority of subjective experience over language and concepts is immediately emphasized. MBI’s first session systematically includes a requirement to experiment without judgment or expectation (like in the raisin exercise): “Don’t analyze! Just feel your body, feel your breathing! You don’t have to enjoy these exercises, just do it, that’s all!”

Even within Insight meditation retreat centers, the notions of dogma and religion have no place in teachers’ narratives. At IMS, the observance of “Noble Silence” is presented first and foremost as a tool to minimize distraction and focus on the practice. The insistence on subjective experience (“see for yourself” is one of the mottos) derives from the notion of “secular Buddhism” rooted in a process of secularization that was initiated in the late 19th-century by Burmese monks who laid the foundations of modern Buddhism and of the representation of Vipassana meditation as a technique rather than a doctrine (McMahan et Braun 2017). In the late 1990s, Stephen Batchelor, a former British Buddhist monk in the Tibetan and Zen tradition and a close colleague of Christina Feldman who was guiding the retreat at IMS<sup>24</sup>, developed a pragmatic approach of Buddhism. This pervasive empirical dimension manifests itself in the description of mindfulness as a philosophy and a psychology, a vehicle for secular values and universalism, a way of being that transcends time, belief systems and cultural environments, in a common quest for the “alleviation of suffering”<sup>25</sup>.

In fact, this dissociation from the realm of religion is typical of contemporary spiritualities, through the opposition between experience and belief (Pike, 2004). The “experimental”, lived experience of religion is always in focus, here both explicitly as theoretical object, and as background frame of reference (Gilhus & Sutcliffe, 2014 : 260). With S. Batchelor, Ch. Feldman stands among the pioneers of this process of secularization - as one of the founding members of IMS. As a producer of knowledge on mindfulness, she is actively engaged in both implementing and theorizing interlaced ontologies.<sup>26</sup> When I interviewed her after the retreat, she eloquently echoed this perspective: “People don’t need another religion”. The blurred boundaries between Buddhism and therapy, between a “spiritual” and “secular” approach, is indeed a distinctive feature of the field of mindfulness.

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<sup>24</sup> S. Batchelor, 1997, *Buddhism without Beliefs. A Guide to Contemporary Awakening*, New York, Riverheads Books. Together with Ch. Feldman, he founded the Bodhi College in the UK dedicated to “contemplative education”, presented as a secular hybrid of early Buddhist teachings and psychology.

<sup>25</sup> While Buddhism is convened as the core of mindfulness ethical and philosophical framework, Insight meditation teachers claim a “non-sectarian” approach “unaligned with any Buddhist orthodoxy”.

<sup>26</sup> See her latest publication, C. Feldman and W. Kuyken’s *Mindfulness: Ancient Wisdom Meets Modern Psychology*, 2019.

It needs to be contextualized in the wake of the Esalen Institute, an emblematic place of New Age practices constructed as a synthesis between Western psychology and Eastern contemplatives practices (Kripal, 2008b). IMS is exemplary of this ideology. Teachers refer to the Buddha as the best and first psychologist of all times. They dissociate his teaching from any “metaphysical beliefs”. In return, academic curriculums in psychology and mindfulness teacher training integrate “Buddhist psychology”. This convergence results from a dialectic process: a secularization of the Buddhist rhetoric that parallels what could be viewed as a buddhicization of therapy, more specifically Cognitive and Behavioral Therapies (CBT) of the early 2000s (called the “third wave”).

### Mouth shut, ears wide open

Although silence provides an ideal environment to immerse oneself into experience, rhetorics hold a crucial role in ritual healing (Csordas, 2002). In fact, mindfulness teachers who navigate between secular and Buddhist settings see themselves as “translators” between what they call the “dharma world” and the “secular world”. One of the teachers of the IMS retreat is particularly involved in this process, combining the positions of “dharma teacher”, co-founder of Mindfulness Initiative at Westminster, instructor for parliamentarians, and supervisor of teacher training at the Oxford Mindfulness Center. The elaboration of a common language is an integral part of retreats. I argue that semantic efforts and narrative techniques play a pivotal role in establishing a community of practice, constructing a collective narrative, and disseminating specific values.

The term “mindfulness” originated from the pāli word *sati* - translated originally as memory and recollection<sup>27</sup>. This generic term has expanded into a vast lexical field including the terms presence, awareness, open attention, skill, mental training, emotional intelligence, compassion and (loving)-kindness. As a leader in the establishment of MBI teachings criteria and in mindfulness academic training, R. Crane draws strict boundaries between “scientific” MBIs and spiritual practices (Crane *et al.*, 2016). Her terminology implicitly stresses oppositions deemed necessary to maintain the scientificity of mindfulness practice: distress vs suffering; relief vs liberation, qualities (compassion, wisdom, equanimity) vs values, ethic; training vs belief.

In the field, however, shifts of meaning constantly operate in the language of mindfulness. In North American Buddhist-based retreats, the Four Noble Truths are assimilated to “tasks”. The Five Precepts become synonymous of “agreements”. A teacher in another retreat proposed “poignancy” as a translation of “*dukkha*”, a central concept of the Four Noble Truths usually translated as “suffering”. Other examples from the field include a shift from literal to figurative sense, like the association between the Buddhist notion of “awakening” and the state of being awake. In other cases, the semantics are completely turned around<sup>28</sup>. These shifts of meaning, I contend, are not only the result of a “conspiracy of silence” grounding mindfulness as a purely secular practice to avoid suspicion (Arat & Kolodziejaska, 2017). As demonstrated by the field experience, teachers constantly seek new

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<sup>27</sup> This translation was first offered by Welsh pāli scholars Caroline and Thomas Rhys Davids in the late 19th century.

<sup>28</sup> At a week-end retreat in Paris, Batchelor associated meditation with “renunciation”. Advocating the principles of secular Buddhism and the integration of mindfulness into daily life, he stripped renunciation from its religious meaning of ascetism. Monastic life was reinterpreted as avoidance. Renunciation took up a whole new meaning, turned into an engagement to “renounce” to a conformist life, in order to achieve more “freedom”, to have the “choice” to behave differently through the implementation of meditation in all dimension of our lives, rather than isolated from the world.



translations submitted to practitioners within the retreat, establishing themselves as skillful producer of knowledge regardless of the setting. They practice critical reflexivity (Gobin & Vanhoenacker, 2016) through the constant assessment and adjustment of their language and actions, enacting ritual innovation while contributing to the establishment of mindfulness as being scientific, therapeutic, secular, and Buddhist altogether.

At IMS, “awareness” is applied to the most mundane aspect of daily life, transforming the semantics of basic instructions. As an example, signs invite retreatants to be “aware of plumbing” in the toilets. In the *Retreatant Handbook* available in each bedroom, the section “Awareness in action” includes all the rules of life that retreatants are expected to follow as well as a work charter for those who want to become volunteer. Some terms are much broader than the practice of mindfulness itself such as the notion of “internal weather report” (also called the “breathing space”), common to numerous New Age practices. Another well-worn formula used in numerous academic conferences and training programs, including retreats, is a series of three questions asked to participants at the beginning of the event: “*What is your expectation/why are you here? What is your real expectation? What is it really, really?*” At IMS, one of the retreat teachers used the acronym RAIN<sup>29</sup>, an MBSR technique for handling difficult emotions. Clinical protocols and Insight Buddhist teachings have come to share a common terminology.

These efforts to speak a common language are further demonstrated by the use of narrative techniques such as “personal” anecdotes circulating across teachers, retreats, regardless of competitive approaches (Vipassana as taught by Goenka vs Insight retreat centers such as IMS or Spirit Rock).<sup>30</sup> Far from being duped, Cécile – the French psychiatrist quoted earlier – pointed it out to me herself, laughing about individual stories traveling from one teacher to the other. Her cumulative experiences as a retreatant contribute to train her both as a skilled, accomplished mindfulness teacher aware of the narrative techniques at play, and as a convincing producer of knowledge throughout her publications. The notion of “working misunderstanding” (*malentendu bien entendu*) (Chabloz, 2007) encapsulates long-term mutual benefits of both parties of the interaction (teachers and retreatants).

Teachers’ discursive strategies are combined with a systematic use of humor as a resource to enact secularity and dissociate themselves from the figure of the guru and mystical rhetorics. While the scientific register is prevalent in therapeutic settings, mindfulness teachers in Buddhist settings are typically down to earth, funny, and outspoken. Teachers bios stress humor as a much-appreciated quality, systematically brought up by retreatants. At IMS, mentions of Buddhist sutras (“The Buddha said...”) and pāli words were combined with a witting approach of religious icons. While giving recommendations for posture, Christina looked at the Buddha statue behind her, pointing out that their arms were too long or their legs too short for a sustainable posture. The response of the audience was unambiguous. Everybody laughed.

At last, silence does not confine mindfulness practice to an inward process, nor does it supplant words. It acts as a vehicle for reflexive feedback critical to ritual efficacy and emblematic of “contemporary spiritualities”. Retreatants - like anyone participating in mindfulness-based programs - are systematically invited at some point to share their experience (in pairs, in small groups, with all the participants), this “inquiry” moments being

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<sup>29</sup> RAIN for Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Non-Identification.

<sup>30</sup> Also commonly used are references to charismatic historic figures associated with the struggle for peace and justice such as Mandela or Gandhi.

an integral part of IMS retreat as well. This is a main distinction between mindfulness retreats and Vipassana retreats as taught by Goenka<sup>31</sup>. MBCT sessions are in fact structured by this shared assessment. Each practice is followed by the “three circle pattern”, in the form of questions asked by the teacher: “What was your experience? In what way does it differ from everyday life? What’s the use of the practice in the prevention of depressive relapse?” Teacher trainings are structured along the same practice, named an “exploratory dialogue”. V. Teisenhoffer argues that this discursive practice typical of contemporary spiritualities act as a ritual device essential to rituals efficacy and reproduction (Teisenhoffer 2018).

## CONCLUSION

The institutionalization of mindfulness retreats as part of a certification process have turned them into an essential factor of commonality between Buddhist and clinical settings, crossing over a range of mindfulness meditation usage. In fact, Insight meditation retreat centers stand as key-places contributing to the construction of legitimacy of trainees as well as any practitioner from a variety of backgrounds, whether psychiatrist, therapists, social workers, educators, entrepreneurs, or just lay people<sup>32</sup>. The intense circulation of practitioners between clinical institutions, secular MBSR programs, academic training and Buddhist meditation centers is constitutive of what I envision as a mindfulness “world” (Becker, 1984). Retreat centers act as hubs, educational platforms involving geographic but also upward mobility for trainees who gain legitimacy, popularity and economic opportunities through their insertion into a network of retreatants and through alliances created by this common experience.

The rituals at work in retreats contribute to turn them into a space of socialization where shared values, practices, sensory perceptions and language are collectively incorporated as the “right choices” (Altglas, 2019: 101) and set the conditions of a common experience. I suggest that silent mindfulness retreats, whether guided by health professionals or *dharma teachers*, provide a liminal experience critical to the dissemination of mindfulness meditation as a transformative practice. Teachers carefully orchestrate this ritual framework combining specific meditation practices and objects, silent interactions as well as narrative performativity. Silence plays a significant role not only as a sound category that opens up a meaningful soundscape conducive of cognitive and body skills, but also as a ritual category necessary to the achievement of the initiation. Hence the integration of silence - short or long-term - in all mindfulness programs. As demonstrated by A. Vincent with public religion in Roman Antiquity, silence functions as a normative framework of ritual orthopraxy (2017). More broadly, mindfulness retreats demonstrate the porous boundaries between secular and religious, provide an example of the multiple configurations of secularism (McMahan, 2017), and create a space of convergence between religious and clinical meanings towards a holistic healing system (Csordas, 2002).

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<sup>31</sup> The absence of this ritual device is at the core of health professionals’ criticism, who see it as an educational tool essential to therapeutic efficacy.

<sup>32</sup> Ride sharing to IMS, I found myself sitting with various experienced retreatants: a psychologist and mindfulness instructor in North Carolina middle schools, an employee for a dietary supplement business, a home based mother, and an entrepreneur, all certified instructors from the Center for Mindfulness in UMass.

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