

Author-Meets-Readers: Comments on James K. Rowe's Radical Mindfulness

From Witnessing to Metabolizing Our Fear of Finitude: On James Rowe's *Radical Mindfulness*

ANITA CHARI

University of Oregon, USA (anitac@uoregon.edu)

This review essay explores the significance of the concept of "metabolism" in James Rowe's Radical Mindfulness. The essay contends that Rowe's deployment of the term in the context of a broader philosophical exploration of the problem of human finitude and the ways it impacts political life is a major strength of the book and differentiates it from other recent contributions to the literature on the politics of mindfulness.

Key words: mindfulness; metabolism; trauma; political theory

Mindfulness has become something of a buzzword for our times, an inescapable part of the cultural *zeitgeist*. The last decade has witnessed an outpouring of important work on mindfulness in the field of political theory. This constellation of research takes as its point of departure a critical approach to mindfulness, acknowledging both the ways in which mindfulness has become intertwined with logics of commodification and biopolitical disciplining, as well as its profound political and democratic potential.¹ This constellation of research shows the importance of a nuanced approach to the study of mindfulness, distinguishing various uses of mindfulness and studying carefully the intentions behind their deployment, the contexts in which they are practiced, the reference or lack thereof to the traditions from which the practices originate, and the phenomenological and perceptual orientations that they generate.

One of the most exciting recent interventions in this field of scholarship is James Rowe's *Radical Mindfulness* (2024). Rowe's work focuses on a dimension of mindfulness that has been less

* James Rowe's book *Radical Mindfulness: Why Transforming Fear of Death is Politically Vital* was discussed by Anita Chari, John M. Meyer, James Tully and James Rowe at the Western Political Science Association's annual meeting in Vancouver in 2024. For the purposes of this book panel, the JWP invited Bryce Huebner to engage with the book too. The edited version featured here includes an extended response by Rowe to all his interlocutors. See: James Rowe, *Radical Mindfulness: Why Transforming Fear of Death is Politically Vital*, New York: Taylor and Francis, 2024.

examined: the profound political potential of Buddhist-derived mindfulness's emphasis on human finitude. Rowe's central argument in *Radical Mindfulness* is that fear of death is a core driver of injustice in society. On his account, supremacist, western settler colonial culture is, at its heart, a death-denying project. In the realm of political theory, Rowe sees traces of this death denial throughout the tradition, not least in Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic, which bespeaks a "corporeal resentment that is common across Euro-American cultures" (8). Rowe writes, "Feeling unnecessarily belittled in the face of finitude, perhaps subjects impose their will on human and nonhuman others to pursue the compensatory power and aggrandizement that the natural given appears to deny them?" (8)

The book powerfully reconstructs a critique of this death-denying tendency through theorists and theoretical traditions including Nietzsche, Bataille, Tibetan Buddhism, as well as the Potlatch economies of Pacific Northwest Indigenous peoples. Rowe resuscitates obscured traditions that locate existential fear of death as drivers of domination and supremacist ideology. He robustly argues that mind-body practices that can access and metabolize such core fears are at the heart of how we must practice social justice, and not just "a helpful add-on" (11).

We have come quite far in the political theory scholarship from any simple denunciation of "McMindfulness," as Ron Purser termed it, but there are still difficult questions to be discussed about what distinguishes neoliberal mindfulness, or even death denying culture from what Rowe designates as "radical mindfulness" (Purser 2019). I would contextualize Rowe's work here with the recent work of Farah Godrej, *Freedom Inside*, which specifically asks this question in the context of deployments of mindfulness in incarcerated settings (Godrej 2022). Godrej distinguishes forms of mindfulness that are deployed in the contexts of individualistic discourses that emphasize the sole responsibility of the individual for crime, while denying the structural conditions which produce the inequality and systemic oppression that are also crucial factors in perpetuating it. Godrej's work identifies a paradox in mindfulness discourse that is crucial to examine in the project of deploying mindfulness towards more critical ends: On the one hand, meditative teachings are taught—and in fact are believed to have their most profound effects—in the ways that they teach *acceptance* of external circumstances. In other words, they teach people the ability to neutrally witness their circumstances. On the other hand, at their best, meditative practices give practitioners the subjective and embodied tools to inquire critically into the roots of those circumstances, and those roots are structural, political, and historical.

I believe that Rowe's work offers us crucial insight into how we access these "roots"—for Rowe the ultimate root is death denial. According to Rowe's account, mindfulness practices teach us a capacity for witnessing and being with that which is most fear-inducing in us: our essential mortality. Mindfulness helps us to soothe existential fear, and ultimately to metabolize it. It teaches us to be with and witness the richness of the flow of impermanence, appreciating it rather than rejecting it.

One tension here that I would identify in this regard is between paradigms that emphasize witnessing and those that emphasize metabolism. It is not immediately clear that the witnessing central to many mindfulness traditions, by itself generates metabolism of our fears and survival strategies. Let me explain what I mean.

In a sense, the question boils down to *how* mindfulness allows us to engage with death denial. As Rowe explains, “The most common form that mindfulness meditation takes is settling into a chair or cushion and focusing one’s awareness on the breath. The breath serves as an anchor into the present moment, helping to root practitioners into the materiality of their bodies.” He deploys John Kabat-Zinn’s definition of mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (13).

This definition of mindfulness, and articulation of it as a set of practices, emphasizes witnessing. Yet the notion of neutrally staying with the flow of impermanence, while philosophically appealing, may land us in a bypass of the fundamental somatic discomfort, rage and pain that we inevitably confront when we feel the fear of death or the perceived threat of the other to our survival within our bodies. Practitioner/theorists such as David Treleaven have recently grappled with these questions.² Questions arise about whether mindfulness is able to access our fear of death, not only cognitively, but somatically, allowing us not only to witness it, but to digest, process, and metabolize it. I believe there may be tension between practices that emphasize witnessing and those that emphasize metabolism, though I wouldn’t want to too simplistically separate these two aspects.

Here I would turn to the rich discussion of the somatic dimensions of survival strategies in literatures that are part of what I would call the “trauma-informed turn.” As Resmaa Menakem, one of the major practitioners in this field, argues, trauma-informed paradigms access survival-based compensations and fears through promoting embodied awareness of sensation.³ There is a complex interplay between neutrally being with sensation, and alternatively titrating the sensations affiliated with threats to survival with the sensing of places in the body that have less sensation—this is one way that metabolism occurs. As both Menakem and Treleaven emphasize, this is not a comfortable process, and it’s one that can place us at the edge of overwhelm. Can mindfulness alone provide us with the tools to be with the overwhelming somatic sensations that arise when we confront such existential fears?

A second set of questions constellates around the capacity of mindfulness to generate paradigms that go beyond the individual level of experience. For example, trauma-informed paradigms, such as Menakem’s, emphasize the social nervous system and collective practice as part of the metabolism of survival-oriented fear. Many mindfulness practices are more individualistic in their orientation, even when practiced in *sangha* or groups meditating together, for example. This seems to be an important difference.

The fact that Rowe’s work generates such rich questions is a testament to the profound ways in which it has advanced the field of mindfulness studies in Political Theory and beyond. This is a theoretically rich and passionate monograph that is essential for both theorists and practitioners who are looking to expand their toolkit of transformative practices in the mindfulness realm.

Anita Chari is Professor of Political Science at the University of Oregon, and a political theorist, somatic practitioner, and writer. Her research focuses on the Frankfurt School, Western Marxism, and the relationship between Critical Theory, contemporary art, and

embodied practices. She is the author of *A User's Manual to Claire Fontaine* (Lenz Press, 2024) which emerged from a decade-long conversation with the feminist conceptual artist, whose work provides the theme and title of the 2024 Venice Biennial, *Foreigners Everywhere*. Her first book, *A Political Economy of the Senses* (Columbia University Press, 2015) explored the concept of reification in the critical theory tradition. She is co-founder of “Embodying Your Curriculum™”, an organization that supports academics, educators, and social justice leaders to bring embodiment practices into higher education.

-
- ¹ See for example, Shannon Mariotti, “Zen and the Art of Democracy: Contemplative Practice as Ordinary Political Theory,” *Political Theory* 48, no. 4 (2020): 469–95; Farah Godrej, *Freedom Inside? Yoga and Meditation in the Carceral State*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Much political theory scholarship on the topic engages productively and critically with central arguments from Ronald Purser, *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (London: Watkins Media Limited, 2019).
- ² David A. Treleaven, *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness: Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018).
- ³ Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017).

Lifecraft Beyond the Fear of Death

BRYCE HUEBNER

Georgetown University, USA (Bryce.Huebner@georgetown.edu)

I am convinced that contemplative practices should play a role in radical political practice. But there are difficult questions about which practices should be pursued. In this commentary, I propose that an answer to this question should be sensitive to the different forms of existential thirst and active ignorance that shape self-grasping and supremacist intuitions; and I offer an overview of some of the different practices that might have roles to play in the pursuit of individual and collective liberation.

Key words: existential thirst; disquietude; active ignorance; Buddhist meditation; Val Plumwood

1 A Prelude

The *Vesāli Sutta* is a tale of bhikkhus (monks) who meditate on foul bodily phenomena, such as pus, blood, and phlegm (Bodhi 2000: 1773).¹ When the Buddha leaves for a brief retreat, they focus on this practice, become weary of life, pursue more ascetic practices, and seek the cessation of existence. When he returns, the Buddha teaches mindful breathing to the rest of the community, suggesting that this practice cultivates a peaceful awareness. This strange sutta highlights the dangers associated with contemplating foulness; but it also recommends cultivating a balanced practice, which can diminish self-grasping without fostering self-loathing (Anālayo 2014: 26)²; and it suggests that mindful breathing can buffer against some forms of self-loathing.

The importance of these lessons became clear to me during the early months of 2020. Like many people, I felt anxious about the novel coronavirus, and the ongoing and emerging forms of economic and racial distress. The available information about these phenomena provoked a high degree of uncertainty about the future, and supported a further form of anxiety. But I also worried that I was about to die! For roughly three months, I was completely exhausted; for much of that time, I had a fever that wouldn't break, and a cough that wouldn't quit; and there were many nights when I would cough up blood. I started to sleep sitting up, to reduce the risk of choking on my blood; but that yielded a final form of discomfort. It was hard to sleep; it was hard to get back to sleep when I inevitably woke up; so there were many nights where I just sat.

Luckily, I had been meditating a lot in the period leading up to 2020. So when my attention drifted toward blood, phlegm, or mortality, I meditated. But I often felt a need to follow this with a meditation on lovingkindness. The first meditation helped me cope with my health situation, and supported a richer awareness of my existence as an organism with a finite lifespan. But I couldn't ignore the other people who were suffering, including my wife—who was taking care

of me—and numerous people I had never met. Practicing lovingkindness reminded me that my discomfort wasn't special; it reminded me that my discomfort was entangled with the lives of loved ones, friends, community members, and people I had never met; and it was part of a more balanced practice, which helped me to avoid slipping toward self-loathing while working against my tendencies to self-privilege. I have a long way to go in internalizing these insights. Like most people, I continue to privilege my discomfort over the discomfort experienced by others. But I now know that any path we walk in pursuit of a better world must cultivate a compassionate awareness of our entanglement with the rest of the world.

2 On Radical Mindfulness and the Fear of Death

The early days of the COVID pandemic were not unique. Greed, selfishness, hatred, and confusion continue to organize our world. The forms of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia that have been with us for a long time are on the rise. Governments and corporations are extracting natural resources at alarming rates, with little regard for the impact on people or ecologies. Art and literature are also being transformed into products to be bought, sold, and owned; and the prominence of streaming services, and the rise of generative AI, have both accelerated this process and made it more difficult to consider any alternative. Finally, many people are taught to value money and power above all else. The impact of this situation is complex and multidimensional. Some people feel like things are moving in the right direction. Others experience fear or grief when they reflect upon the state of our world. But some people hold out hope, committing to the pursuit of collective liberation from the forms of extractivism, oppression, and commodity fetishism that shape our world. *Radical Mindfulness* provides a useful perspective for those in this third category.

James K. Rowe argues that a fear of death is the root cause of diverse supremacist intuitions. But he also suggests that contemplative practices can reduce such fear, making the pursuit of collective liberation more resilient. I appreciate many things about this excellent book. I think Rowe is right to search for a cause of supremacist intuitions in cognitive and affective factors that lie below the surface of everyday awareness. I also think he is right that mindfulness is not a panacea, but that contemplative practices can have an important role to play in radical politics. Finally, I appreciate his review of data suggesting that reminders of mortality often increase a person's commitments to their worldview, provoke actions that aim at preserving social status, and heighten the sense of human supremacy (Rowe 2024: 100-01). But I am skeptical of his claim that a fear of death is the root cause of the supremacist intuitions that have shaped our world. Put much too simply, I think we have crafted a world that makes it seem like the fear of death is more central to human experience than it really is, or that it has been over the course of human history.

In our current social context, there are few opportunities for people to develop strategies for making sense of death. But this situation is historically strange, reflecting a world that is shaped by the funeral industry (Doughty 2014, 2017).³ In much of North America, for example, death

is treated as an emergency, with dead bodies rapidly being transferred to funeral homes; these bodies are then sanitized, and buried or cremated soon after a brief period for observation. The social and legal normalization of this process makes it seem as if this is the only real possibility. But these cultural practices only emerged in the late nineteenth century; and prior to that, people had to develop richer strategies for caring for dead bodies. The weirdness of our current situation is exacerbated by the rise of industrialized meat and dairy production, which allows many people to get through life without encountering a whole dead animal that they must take care of. Of course, anxieties about death have a long philosophical history; and they are present in every philosophical tradition I am aware of. But until recently, European as well as Euro-American lifeways would have included practices that made death more familiar. I suspect that culturally-shaped anxieties about death can amplify existential fears. But I am skeptical that the fear of death has motivated most forms of colonialism; and the contingent nature of contemporary forms of death aversion makes me skeptical of the claim that the fear of death *on its own* is what motivates extractivism, or perpetuates bias, exclusion, and oppression.

To be clear, I would not deny that the fear of death can play an important role in human psychology. But it is entangled with numerous other kinds of existential phenomena. With this in mind, it is worth considering the five facts that everyone should contemplate often according to Buddhist tradition (Bodhi 2012: 686).⁴ Buddhists often suggest that we should contemplate the inevitability of (1) aging, (2) sickness, and (3) death, to weaken existential thirsts for youth, health, and life. They also suggest that we should contemplate the inevitability of (4) becoming separated from things we find appealing, to weaken existential thirsts for sensual pleasures. And they suggest that we should cultivate an awareness that (5) we are owners of our actions (karma), heirs of our actions, born through our actions, and bound to our actions, so action is our only refuge; this final contemplation serves as a reminder that actions both reveal and enact the world—and that acting differently can reshape the world.

These contemplations orient us toward the kinds of existential anxieties that people tend to experience. But people will experience different forms of discomfort as they contemplate these facts. Moreover, the discomfort that is prominent will change over time, reflecting the complexity of an unfolding life. But sitting with whatever discomfort arises allows us to discern the contours of our ideologies; and it can allow us to shift our course of action in the pursuit of individual and collective liberation (Piper 1999: 47-50).⁵ Put differently, carrying out these contemplations can highlight the specific form of disquietude (*duḥkha*) that is currently shaping a person's experience (Bodhi 2000: 1299). Is it the physical and mental pain that arise from sickness, aging and death? Is it the distress provoked by failing to get what we want, or the fear of losing something that matters to us? Or is it a more existential form of disquietude, which is provoked by existing as a conditioned being. Each form of discomfort requires pursuing other ways of living and acting, in ways that enact a form of life that is less entangled with self-privileging, and less entangled with the preservation of ignorance regarding the effects of our actions.

It might seem, however, that there is a unified cause of disquietude. After all, canonical Buddhist sources suggest that *trṣṇā*—which I translate as *existential thirst*—is an important cause of disquietude. Existential thirst can shape a person's identity; it can lead a person to assume that

their identity will persist as the world changes; and it can obscure the awareness that aging, sickness, and death are inescapable realities (Rowe 2024: 127). But existential thirst is more than a fear of death; in canonical Buddhist sources, for example, three forms of existential thirst are often distinguished. A *thirst for continued existence* might motivate someone to preserve their social identity, or to maintain their position within interlocking hierarchies of race, gender, and class. It can also impact the social interactions that they will pursue and avoid; and it can manifest in—deeply gendered—concerns to preserve youth and beauty. A *thirst for sensory pleasure* can induce an intoxication with accumulating money, status, and power; and where wealth and status are experienced as conditional, it can support an increased focus on protecting one's possessions. Finally, a *thirst for non-existence* arose in the bhikkhus at Vesālī, who sought death after becoming disgusted by their embodiment. This sort of thirst also leads some people to hope that a giant meteor will crash into the earth, extinguishing their existence; and while such hopes are often entangled with the craving for human extinction more broadly, they tend to obscure the broader ecological impact of an event like this.

Each kind of existential thirst can play a significant role in organizing a way of life. But these thirsts will interact in ways that produce diverging experiences of value, beauty, and pleasure. They will interact with numerous other kinds of affective and cognitive distortions, as well as diverse traces of past actions; and this will produce diverging patterns of thought and action. This makes it difficult to isolate a single cause of a person's propensities. Moreover, as Val Plumwood notes, we should always be sensitive to the role of culture as we attempt to explain the “persistence of domination through political and economic change” (Plumwood 1993: 5).⁶ Plumwood addresses many of the supremacist tendencies that Rowe highlights; but she points to another path, which is organized by the different ways that people treat themselves as distinct and superior to the rest of the world.

Following this path, we might consider the refusal to acknowledge the inevitability of death that leads people who can buy land, and build bunkers, in hopes of preserving an imagined way of life as the world crumbles around them. People who do such things have an outsized impact on our world; and increasingly, we are all forced to live in a world of their making. I doubt we can convince them to follow the path Rowe has proposed. But it is clear that they treat their existence as more significant than the identity of those who are affected by their actions. We might also consider less world-shaping drives, which also lead people to pursue wealth and power. Some of them might fear death. But they are also driven by existential thirsts for sensual pleasures. These thirsts are also bolstered by a recognition that wealth entails personal comfort and control over how things unfold, regardless of how things go for others.

This is far from the end of the story in our world. Many people are driven by a form of active ignorance (*avidyā*). They resist any suggestion that they are complicit in the global climate crisis, or the rising tide of hate; and they hope things will be okay *here*—even if they acknowledge that things will be bad *over there* or bad for *other people*. This orientation is supported by a thirst to preserve a way of life—and it is shaped by cognitive and affective distortions, which lead people to privilege their perspectives over the perspectives of others. Finally, there are people who slip toward existential dread. They might feel like climate collapse and oppressive hatred are inevitable features of human lifeways. They might also assume that the annihilation of the

species is the best option. But at base, this is a way of privileging what they want over the needs and interests of others. It is a craving for an individualistic form of quietude, which can sustain experiential distance from features of the world they abhor.

To be fair, Rowe (2024: 71, 79ff) also draws upon John Mohawk's suggestion that settler colonialism was supported by Euro-American tendencies to distinguish humans from the rest of nature. Moreover, his account of indigenous death practices—explored in collaboration with Darcy Mathews—highlights the importance of reciprocity and the acknowledgment of ecological interdependence. And I suspect that this path is important. Attempts to preserve an ideology of difference can be found across diverse European traditions (Plumwood 1993); likewise, cultural practices that distance people from their histories, and their ecological and social relations, have developed in ways that preserve ignorance (*avidyā*) of how we are entangled with others; finally, even people who should know better often reject the demonstrable truth that we are ecologically and socially entangled animals, whose persistence requires mutual aid and mutual support (however, see: Hrđy 2011; Kropotkin 1972; Plumwood 2012).⁷ While I don't have the space to offer a complete argument for this claim, there is reason to believe that these forms of ignorance shape numerous supremacist intuitions (Brennan 2019; McRae 2019; Plumwood 1993).⁸

So what is to be done? We can use contemplative practices to internalize an awareness of our relational interdependence. These include practices that cultivate lovingkindness, care, sympathetic joy, and equanimity (Heim 2017); and they include practices that focus more directly on material interdependence (Ayya Khama 2018; Thích Nhất Hạnh 2022: 44).⁹ But I doubt there is a silver bullet. Different histories, and different modes of embodiment, will yield a complex range of anxieties about our existence, as well as diverse understandings of the kinds of organisms we are, and variable conceptualizations of the roles we play in the world.

But as I often tell my students, the Buddhist commitment to *anātman* is a commitment to *selflessness*. It is not just a rejection of a metaphysical self; it is a rejection of the diverse ways that we privilege ourselves over others, as well as a commitment to an ethical form of lifecraft. My suspicion is that tendencies to self-privilege are a deep feature of human experience, even in the worlds that are guided more directly by reciprocal practices; but these tendencies become more pronounced under capitalism and colonialism (Howes 2021; TallBear 2019; Whyte 2021).¹⁰ They make it easy to forget that we are ecologically entangled animals, whose lives are finite, and who are bound up in networks of profound mutuality. But dislodging them requires moving beyond our mental lives, to the actions that we own, inherit, and take refuge in. Put somewhat differently, it requires prefiguring better ways of living and acting together.

There are many contexts where we need to work together to decide which path to walk. But there are two contexts where the path forward seems clear to me. First, there is an expanding awareness of the impact of the meat and dairy industries on our ecologies. Robust patterns of environmental degradation, rampant patterns of resource extraction, and class-based and racist power relations must be kept in place to keep meat and dairy cheap and widely available. But the path forward isn't contemplation. It's adopting a vegan lifestyle, guided not by moral purity, but by a commitment to reducing harm to human and nonhuman others. This practice is likely

to have a long-run effect on how people conceptualize their entanglement with others, and their role in patterns of global extractivism (see Ko and Ko 2017).¹¹ Second, we live at a critical juncture, where the ecological impact of Generative AI is coming clearly into view. Generative AI depletes fossil fuel reserves at an alarming rate; data centers produce high levels of greenhouse gasses, while also taxing aging power grids; and the demand for water to cool data centers is rapidly increasing, often in places that are experiencing drought conditions. The decision to use these tools is a decision to build a world with less resources, more pollution, and a more unstable power grid. By contrast, rejecting such tools can be part of a broader practice of ethical lifecraft, which focuses on *the process* of creation, and which acknowledges that writing, music, and art are key components of a flourishing life—not just resources to exploit (compare Howes 2021).

Bryce Huebner is a professor of philosophy at Georgetown University. His research is primarily focused on the embodied, social, and material causes that shape and organize experience; and his primary hope is to deepen our shared understanding of how people can navigate the challenges and opportunities that they face.

-
- ¹ trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, “Vesālī Sutta,” in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Vol. 2. (Somerville MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000).
- ² Bhikkhu Anālayo, “The Mass Suicide of Monks in Discourse and Vinaya Literature: With an Addendum by Richard Gombrich,” *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 7 (2014): 11-55.
- ³ Caitlin Doughty, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: and Other Lessons from the Crematory*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014, *From Here to Eternity: Travelling the World to Find the Good Death*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017.
- ⁴ trans. Bikkhu Bodhi, “Themes,” in *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* (Somerville MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000).
- ⁵ Adrian Piper, *Ideology, Confrontation, and Political Self-Awareness: Out of Order, Out of Sight*, Cambridge Mass./London, England: MIT Press, 1999.
- ⁶ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* New York: Routledge, 1993.
- ⁷ Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011; Petr Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, ed. Paul Avrich, New York: New York University Press, 1972; Val Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile*, Canberra: ANU Press, 2012.
- ⁸ Joy C. Brennan, “A Buddhist Phenomenology of the White Mind,” in *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*, ed. George Yancy, and Emily McRae (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 327-46; Emily McRae, “White Delusion and Avidyā: A Buddhist Approach to Understanding and Deconstructing White Ignorance,” in *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*, ed. George Yancy, and Emily McRae (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 73-91.
- ⁹ Maria Heim, “Buddhaghosa on the Phenomenology of Love and Compassion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 171-89; Ayya Khema, “The Elemental Self,” *Tricycle Magazine*,

-
- 2018 (URL: <https://tricycle.org/magazine/the-elemental-self/>; last accessed on June 22, 2025); Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Understanding Our Mind: 51 Verses on Buddhist Psychology*, Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2022.
- ¹⁰ David Howes, “Hyperesthesia, or, the Sensual Logic of Late Capitalism,” in *Empire of the Senses*, ed. David Howes (New York: Routledge, 2021), 281-303; Kim TallBear, “Caretaking Relations, not American Dreaming,” *Kalfou* 6, no. 1 (2019): 24-41; Kyle Powys Whyte, “Time as Kinship,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities*, ed. Jeffrey Cohen and Stephanie Foote (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 39-55.
- ¹¹ Aph Ko and Syl Ko, *Aphro-ism: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism from Two Sisters*, Brooklyn, New York: Lantern Publishing & Media, 2017.

Questions for, and About, *Radical Mindfulness*

JOHN M. MEYER

Cal Poly Humboldt, USA (john.meyer@humboldt.edu)

James Rowe's Radical Mindfulness is an invitation to think in fresh ways about the relation of existential and structural constraints to urgently needed social change. Here, I pose a series of questions that reading this book prompted for me. These questions address audience, the relationship between the multiple cultural and intellectual traditions engaged in the book, the relation of theory and practice, and a further probing of the implications of understanding death denial as a culturally defined inclination. These questions are intended not simply for the author but meant to invite reflection and consideration among potential readers.

Key words: death denial; existential constraints; *Radical Mindfulness*; structural constraints; theory and practice; will to supremacy

James Rowe's *Radical Mindfulness* is an invitation to think in fresh ways about the relation of existential and structural constraints to urgently needed social change. It is an invitation into conversations across diverse cultures, traditions, and thinkers that nonetheless share commonalities in their embrace of embodied practices and acceptance of death, and therefore of life. It is also an invitation to approach mindfulness practices as synergistic with, but not an alternative to, social and political movements for change.

This is a very personal and, in some ways, intimate book, both in the open and welcoming style in which it is written and in the substantive argument advanced. I am prompted by this openness to approach this review similarly by acknowledging my position as a reader: I'm not a mindfulness practitioner; if it weren't for the work of James Rowe, Farah Godrej and others, I'd be more inclined to be skeptical of the value of such practice for social change movements. By the same token, my lack of practice leads me to approach this review with humility: there is much that was new to me in this book and that I learned from. I hope my comments and especially my questions will make it clear that I find it to be tremendously rich, evocative, and valuable to think with Rowe in the journey that is this book.

Here, I pose a series of questions that reading *Radical Mindfulness* prompted and led me to reflect upon. While some questions might be addressed by the author, they are also meant to invite reflection and consideration among potential readers.

The first question is about the audience. In a limited sense, this entails consideration of the intended readership of the book itself. Yet more broadly, the question is about who most needs to embrace the mindfulness approaches that are described and promoted in the book. Rowe describes one key audience as social movement activists and organizers. In particular, he argues for integrating mindfulness into movements "already focused on structural changes" (59).

Two distinct ways in which movements can incorporate mindfulness are described in the book. Rowe describes the first as the "primary rationale" (158) identified by activists for adopting these

practices; here the instrumental value of these practices for movement participants is central. This is the focus of interviews that are described in the book's appendix (165-76). The focus is on addressing the *effects* of domination as a tool that can—among other things—foster self-care, address trauma, and improve organizational effectiveness. While the attention here is on supporting movement work and workers, an instrumental approach is not unique to these contexts and seems to have many echoes in the efforts to bring mindfulness practices into corporate workplaces. By reducing stress and anxiety, the integration of mindfulness practices has been argued to boost employee well-being, productivity, and hence profits.¹ While nothing in this effort to integrate mindfulness into other workplaces diminishes the value that he identifies for social movement work, Rowe makes it clear that this instrumental rationale falls short of an argument for the political vitality of mindfulness. To advance the latter, the book places much greater emphasis on the case for the inherent value of mindfulness. Here the goal is to address not just effects but underlying *existential causes* of domination. The focus on overcoming death denial moves to the center and Rowe's distinctive arguments become more evident.

While the argument for the inherent value of mindfulness is clearly made, I wanted to hear more about why it is targeted to the particular audience of movement organizers and activists. That is, why prioritize *their* work to overcome existential causes of domination more than others? After all, it seems at least plausible that they are already more attuned to existential challenges and they are already advancing structural change. Couldn't it be argued that it's others not yet involved in these movements who are the audience that most needs to work through these existential challenges, in order to accept the need for structural change?

I raise these as genuine—not rhetorical—questions. Rowe's argument that structural and existential drivers of change (and of injustice) are necessarily intertwined comes through clearly in the book. What is less clear to me is why those already acting to bring about structural change should be the focus of practices to address the existential drivers that are implicated in these efforts.

Perhaps another way to frame my question is to note that the overall focus of the book is on the role of death denial in our culture and society writ large—and so on mindfulness as a way to identify and address this denial. But along the way, the focus is often more narrowly upon internal dialogues and tensions among scholars and practitioners: tensions around gender within Buddhism, dialogues (and the lack thereof) between Indigenous and Marxist interpretations, and so forth. These two dimensions seem to track, at least loosely, with those focused on mindfulness in social movements and its role in social structures writ large. But as I read this, it seems that there then must exist both a source of motivation to pursue structural change that does not rely upon mindfulness *and* that a mindful foundation does not ensure that these are reflected in social structures (see, for example, the discussions of Buddhism and male supremacy at the bottom of pages 134 and 141). Is the conclusion then simply that both existential and structural accounts of—and drivers of—injustice and change matter? Or is there more that we can do to unpack and specify the *relationship between* the existential and the structural?

The second question I wish to raise is about the relationship between the multiple traditions engaged in the book regarding mindfulness, gratitude, embrace of life and embrace of death. Rowe uses these distinct traditions to highlight and challenge particular dimensions of an encompassing “will to supremacy.” Intersectional Buddhist feminism is deployed to highlight and critique core aspects of male supremacy. John Mohawk’s scholarship, and Indigenous resurgence theory more generally, allows him to develop the critique of colonial supremacy. James Baldwin’s writings advance the critique of white supremacy. But should we conclude from this that we need a multiplicity of traditions to develop a three-dimensional understanding of the will to supremacy itself? Or is Rowe simply suggesting that there are many paths to enlightenment? That is, do each of the traditions engaged in the book offer the existential grounding to facilitate perception of the whole? Or does each offer only partial insight that must be complemented by the others?

A third question is about the relationship between theoretical argument and embodied practice. As a work of political theory, of course, there is a clear sense in which this book advances a conceptual argument. The argument is about the importance of embodied forms of knowledge and about breaking down the boundaries of an autonomous sense of self. Yet at the same time, the book is a call for forms of practice that can entail release from thought itself. This invites us to reflect on what (only?) theory and critique can do here, and what (only?) embodied practice can do.

Fourth, Rowe argues for a culturally defined *inclination* to death denial and self-assertion in western societies. He makes this position clear through his engagement with Martin Luther King Jr.’s account of the “drum major instinct” (27-9). Rowe embraces King’s insights here, but challenges his framing of self-assertion and domination as something instinctual or inherent among humans. If we accept King’s framing, then it seems the best we can do is to sublimate this instinct into more positive directions, as King suggests was possible through the civil rights movement. In this case, a challenge to death denial and self-assertion directed toward movement activists would be a sort of “preaching to the choir.” They are the ones who have already redirected or sublimated their instinct in a constructive manner and so least in need of further work on change from within. Yet Rowe argues that only if it’s a culturally defined *inclination*, rather than an instinct, is it something that can truly be overcome (29). In this case, movement participants would seem primed and most receptive to the internal work needed to change this. This would seem to reinforce the premise about audience that I explored above. Given the importance of this point, a further unpacking of its centrality would be welcome.

Finally, I found several of the terms of distinction that Rowe develops in the book to be generative. In particular, he articulates the insights offered by “compost radicalism” and “grounded normativity” in valuable ways. Another term that I wanted to hear more about was Rowe’s distinctive use of “metabolism.” What does it mean to “metabolize” fear or anxiety or denial or oppression? Is this a *metaphor* for “processing” or “making sense of”? Or is it—as I suspect—understood as an *embodied* experience? If the latter, then the definition of metabolism in this context may be less relevant than the affect. How does it *feel* to metabolize our fears? What *sort* of experience is this? What happens to us when we do so? In what ways do we change? Again, my questions here are not critical, but an invitation. In this case, perhaps, an invitation

to Rowe to help readers “metabolize” metabolism and thereby not just understand but *feel* his normative project on a more embodied level.

John M. Meyer is Professor in the Departments of Politics and Environmental Studies at California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt. He is the author or editor of seven books, including *Engaging the Everyday: Environmental Social Criticism and the Resonance Dilemma* (MIT, 2015) and *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory* (Oxford, 2016).

¹ For example, Caren Osten Gerszberg, “Mindful Working: The Best Practices for Bringing Mindfulness to Work,” *Mindful*, September 29, 2018 (URL: <https://www.mindful.org/mindful-working-the-best-practices-for-bringing-mindfulness-to-work/>; last accessed on June 22, 2025).

Braiding Sweetgrass and Joining Hands: Engaging with *Radical Mindfulness*¹

JAMES TULLY

University of Victoria, Canada (jtully@uvic.ca)

I could hand you a braid of sweetgrass, as thick and shiny as the plait that hung down my grandmother's back. But it is not mine to give, nor yours to take. *Wiingaashk* belongs to herself. So, I offer, in its place, a braid of stories meant to heal our relationship to the world.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and environmental biologist.

In *Radical Mindfulness*, James K. Rowe argues that Buddhist self-practices play a crucially important role training for effective practices of social change and transformation. It is also based on a carefully constructed theoretical analysis of the unjust social relationships against which social activists are struggling. In my response, I bring a number of traditions of various kinds of social activism in dialogue and action coordination with one another to illustrate that power-with-and-for is in my interpretation the form of power informing Rowe's basic goodness sketch of just social systems.

Key words: power-with-and for relationships; Buddhist self-practice; just social systems; social activism

1 Braiding Sweetgrass and Joining Hands

My aim is to begin an engagement with a central theme of *Radical Mindfulness*: that is, to bring a number of traditions of various kinds of social activism in dialogue and action coordination with one another. These traditions include Black radicals, ecologists, several Indigenous traditions and recent Indigenous resurgence theorists, terror management theorists, Buddhist feminists, Marxism, Rowe's Buddhist tradition, and others. Rowe not only attempts to bring these traditions into dialogue with one another. He also discusses two iconic ways of bringing traditions into dialogue and cooperation with each other.

The first and more prominent is the Anishinaabe and Potawatomi way of 'braiding sweetgrass' storytelling together made famous by Robin Wall Kimmerer. It is now widely used across Turtle Island by Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists and engaged multidisciplinary academics. Rowe refers to this approach throughout and his sketch of a just social system is based on Kimmerer's gift-gratitude-reciprocity ecosocial relationship. As the Kimmerer quotation above suggests, braiding sweetgrass is a metaphor for the way all biodiverse lifeways of earth live

Journal of World Philosophies 10 (Summer 2025): 252-285.

Copyright © 2025 Anita Chari, Bryce Huebner, John M. Meyer, James K. Rowe and James Tully.

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • <http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp> • 10.2979/jourworlphil.10.1.12

together: symbiosis and symbiogenesis. Symbiogenesis refers to the ability of symbiotic communities to co-generate new forms of life.

A second, complementary, and equally famous way of dialogue and action-coordination is represented by Rowe's engagement with the work of John Mohawk, the late great Seneca scholar and activist. Along with his lifelong colleague, Oren Lyons, Mohawk taught diverse peoples and traditions how to 'join hands and live in peace': Tehatnetsha. This way is the basis of the 'Great Law [Way] of Peace' of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Kayanerenko:wa).² It is the way of living together of the six diverse nations of the Confederacy and with the living earth. It is also the way of joining hands and living together offered by the Confederacy to settlers, from the 1646 treaty with the French settlers, through the Treaty of Niagara (1764) and down to treaty making today. This way of living with diverse peoples is represented by the exchange of two row wampum belts: Teiohate Kaswentha. In Chapter 4, Rowe shows the similarities and possible dialectical connections among the traditions of Mohawk, the late Marx, settler socialists and allies, and Indigenous land defenders.

Rowe mentions that he was introduced to Mohawk's writings by Wet'suwet'en land defenders who defend their traditional territories on the ground in the Unist'ot'en camp and at the provincial legislature in Victoria BC (70). Moreover, Wet'suwet'en and Gitksan peoples have their own traditions of joining hands and social activism.³ Rowe also draws on other social activist traditions that foreground diversity awareness, such as the Movement Strategy Center in Oakland California (172-74).

Thus, a central feature of the traditions that Rowe discusses is that many share a number of similarities while also exhibiting dissimilarities that crisscross and overlap in various ways. Rowe does not try to convince them to join into one tradition. Rather, he asks how they can share stories, join hands and coordinate their very different modes of social activism while understanding, respecting and coordinating their similarities and dissimilarities, as in braiding sweetgrass and Kayanerenko:wa. The strength of the networks comes from the overlapping of many fibers. As the 'radical' Martin Luther King Junior argued in 1967, the braiding of social change traditions, rather than divisive struggles for supremacy among them, is surely one of the most challenging yet necessary conditions of effective, local and global organizations, social change and transformation of the unjust and unequal social systems Rowe discusses: race, class, militarism, gender-related inequality, settler colonialism, and ecocide.⁴ The World Social Forum attempted to facilitate this kind of cooperation. *Radical Mindfulness* suggests a possible way forward.

2 Rowe's Tradition

In Chapter 2 Rowe presents general sketches of just and unjust social systems and the ethos or habitus one acquires through participation in them. As he mentions, members of other traditions will see overlapping similarities as well as dissimilarities with their sketches of just

and unjust social systems. He argues that the unjust social systems derive from the will to supremacy over others and then solidify into the maze of unequal, power-over/under relationships of modern societies in which individual and collective agents compete for various kinds of comparative advantage: politics, economics, military, race, class, culture, and so on. For example, in the sermon by Martin Luther King that Rowe discusses, the ‘Drum Major Instinct,’ King mentions many of these kinds of relationships. Rowe concurs with King’s examples and argues that these power-over/under relationships and ‘drum major’ subject formation have to be transformed (‘metabolized’) (27-9).

Rowe argues that a ‘root cause’ of the competitive will to supremacy over others is the ‘subconscious fear of death’ or ‘impermanence of life’. It is also manifest in everyday existential anxiety in the form of existential fear. The root fear of death causes humans to attempt to gain supremacy over themselves (self-mastery). This fails because there is no unified or unifiable self. Humans are then moved to attempt to gain supremacy over other humans and the living earth. Over time, these dynamics give rise to the unjust competitive relationships and systems of power-over/under (Chapters 2 and 5).

Rowe’s central point is that we are all subjects of various unjust social systems and their supremacy-subordination, power-over/under relationships, and thus their antagonistic, comparative advantage self-formation. If subjects engage in social activism within these relationships and with this antagonistic ethos, they reproduce the competitive, power-over/under logic of these unjust systems even when they win over their opponents. They tend to ‘other the other’ as Barbara Deming famously put it. He mentions several examples of this problem within social activist movements (35). It is discussed in detail in the “Out of the Spiritual Closet” publication that he recommends (172-74).

Accordingly, given the prefigurative relation between means and ends, the first step of effective social activists in transforming unjust social systems is to free themselves from the subconscious fear of death and existential fear. The way for social activists to free themselves is through the Buddhist mind-body practices that Rowe presents. These diverse mind-body practices not only free social activists from fear of death and its effects. They also disclose and begin to orient practitioners into another way of being in the world with others—of the mutuality of being—that is the interbeing ethos of Rowe’s ‘basic goodness’ social and ecosocial systems. This mode of being as being-with (Mitsein) not only informs their organizations, but, as a result, also the ways they interact with others in activist campaigns (155-74).

Many social activists will agree with this argument in general while also pointing out their own dissimilar mind-body practices, organizations, and kinds of social activism. I would like to attempt to braid one such overlapping tradition with Rowe’s tradition in hopes of initiating a dialogue with him and readers of *JWP*. This is the tradition that derives from Mahatma Gandhi, Richard Gregg and the Sarvodaya movements in India. It influenced the African-American nonviolent tradition from the 1920s onward. Rowe mentions it and Martin Luther King’s adaptation of it (165-66, 27-30). It shares many features with Rowe’s tradition and the engaged Buddhism of Thich Nhất Hạnh and Pema Chödrön. Rowe’s sketches of just and unjust social systems and the role of the will to power-over are similar in several respects. I will just mention

two overlapping strands. The first is a dissimilar yet complementary sketch of the roots of the will to supremacy. The second is a sketch of the unique mode of power (power-with) that social activists bring into being-with-each-other in their communities of practice.

3 Shenpa and Power-With Cultures of Gratitude

In the Gandhi-Gregg tradition, the subconscious or conscious fear of death is not seen as a ‘root cause’ of the will to supremacy. Rather, fear of any kind is seen as a consequence of being uprooted. The person who experiences this basic kind of fear is already ‘uprooted’ by a disconnection from the more basic being-with relationships of mutual care with oneself, other humans and the living earth that co-sustain all biodiverse life. This uprooting is often called ‘alienation,’ yet ‘estrangement’ seems more accurate according to phenomenologists.⁵ Humans are not completely alienated from other living beings. Rather, they are the ‘estranged subjects’ of deeply contorted and self-deceptive social relations of pseudo-supremacy/dependence that conceal their interdependency on and exploitation of background, basic-goodness, gift, gratitude, reciprocity ecosocial relationships that co-sustain life. As Rowe knows, Pema Chödrön presents one of the best descriptions of this phenomenon of ‘being uprooted’ from being-with relations and the disposition of the will to supremacy:⁶

In Tibetan there is a word that points to the root cause of aggression, the root cause also of craving. It points to a familiar experience that is at the root of all conflict, all cruelty, oppression, and greed. The word is shenpa. The usual translation is *attachment*, but this doesn’t adequately express the full meaning. I think of shenpa as “getting hooked.” Another definition, used by Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, is “the charge,” the charge behind our thoughts and actions, the charge behind “like” and “don’t like”. Here’s an everyday example: Someone criticizes you. She criticizes your work or your appearance or your child. In moments like that, what is it you feel? It has a familiar taste, a familiar smell. Once you begin to notice it, you feel like this experience has been happening forever. That sticky feeling is shenpa. And it comes along with a very seductive urge to do something. Somebody says a harsh word and immediately you can feel a shift. There’s a tightening that rapidly spirals into mentally blaming this person, or wanting revenge or blaming yourself. Then you speak of act. The charge behind the tightening, behind the urge, behind the story line or action is shenpa.

If this is correct, then the mind-body practices should be oriented to the shenpa underlying fear and other emotional responses to it. Kinesiologists describe this ‘charge’ as the automatic response of the sympathetic ‘nervous system’ (or ‘preceptors’) to a perturbation. It can occur in any interaction and it can become habitual if not addressed. The shenpa energy is manifested in fear, but also in anger, hatred, and resentment.⁷ These emotions then trigger the familiar responses of fight (for power-over/under), flight, submission, compromise, and subaltern modes of resistance within the limited room to maneuver within power-over relationships. The way to address it is to train the human parasympathetic nervous system to suspend the shenpa (not getting hooked) and give the agent time to consider the appropriate response to the

perturbation, including how ‘all relatives’ (humans and more-than-humans) will be affected. The technical Latin term for this reflexive-awareness of the implicate order is ‘proprioception.’ The difficulty is that shenpa becomes habitual, blocking or deflecting the parasympathetic nervous system, and the antagonistic emotional responses of fear, anger, hatred and resentment, and then fight, flight, submission and resistance within power-over relations, become habitual. Individuals and groups become conscripts of their competing truth and trust bubbles.

On this view of unjust social systems and subjectification the role of radical mind-body practices is to ‘sublimate’ the energy manifested in fear, anger, hatred and resentment by suspension and then redirection of it into cooperative relationship that reconnect and re-animate the estranged participants with the intersubjective, being-with (Mitsein) or com-passionate relationships of mutual care that sustain all life from which they have been uprooted: that is, with Rowe ‘mutual goodness’ relationships.⁸ These practices begin with work on the estranged relationship with oneself. The aim is not ‘self-mastery,’ but, rather the being-with relationship of ‘self-compassion’ with oneself. Thích Nhất Hạnh uses the example of anger. If they try to master anger they fail and create a second anger in response. Rather, they treat their anger like a ‘friend’ (philia) and ‘befriend’ it slowly: exploring it, its causes, what would be the resolution, and, then, the ‘way’ from anger to its resolution.⁹

For these self-practices to be transformative, they have to be practiced in communities of practice with others, and in which they are working on transforming antagonistic social *and* ecological relationships at the same time. All three practices are mutually supportive. Kimmerer and Rowe calls these communities of practice “cultures of gratitude” (155).¹⁰ Richard Gregg gives examples of these ‘constructive programs,’ as Gandhi called them, in *The Power of Nonviolence* and Rowe refers to them (166; Gregg 2018: 166-200). When these practices are successful, practitioners liberate each other from estranged relationships and reconnect with the intersubjective power of the gift-gratitude-reciprocity symbiotic relationships that sustain life on earth: anima mundi. That is, they work to become subjects and active agents of the basic goodness social and ecological systems Rowe describes and overcome estrangement, slowly but surely.

This way of thinking about transformative mind-body practices and social activism overlaps with Rowe’s account in many respects, yet it focuses initially on an experience (‘uprooting’) that is not foregrounded in *Radical Mindfulness*. It is worth noting that Rowe raises doubts about single root cause explanations and recommends ‘compost radicalism’ in response to the messy complexity of estrangement (39). I could not agree more.

The second thread I would like to mention is the unique kind of power relationships the Gandhi-Gregg practices bring into being and carry on with each other. As above, they are intersubjective power relationships with-and-for-onself, each other, and all our more than human relatives in ‘cultures of gratitude.’ These modes of power-with-and-for relationships are different in kind from power-over/under relationships. They are co-generated by the agents who are subjects of them by treating each other as equals and creating them through storytelling, agreeing, disagreeing and reconciling, trial and error, and starting again as they live and work together. This is the original meaning of participatory ‘democracy’: a people (demos)

comes into being by co-generating and exercising power-with-and-for-each-other (kratos). In the Gandhi-Gregg tradition, power-with is the basis of self-governing communities of practice. It is also the mode of power they offer to others when they engage in nonviolent, Satyagraha campaigns.¹¹

Several other traditions of mutuality of being, such as feminist care and Indigenous kinship traditions, share similar commitments to power-with as a distinct form of power that should be practiced and gradually displace power-over/under. From their perspectives, power-with-and-for is seen as the form of power informing Rowe's basic goodness sketch of just social systems. I think Rowe may agree with this sketch of power-with to some extent. I hope he will comment on it and the shenpa sketch in his response to this invitation to braid these brief stories into the complex, local and global dialogues of social activists which we inhabit.

James Tully, PhD Cambridge, FRSC, is Emeritus Professor of Law and Political Science at the University of Victoria, Victoria BC, Canada. His recent publications include James Tully et al., *Democratic Multiplicity* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), ed. Alexander Livingston, James Tully: *To Think and Act Differently* (Routledge, 2022).

¹ I am grateful to James Rowe for inviting me to join the panel on *Radical Mindfulness* at the Western Political Science Association 2024 meetings. I learned a lot from the panelists, the audience, and Rowe's responses. He also generously discussed *Radical Mindfulness* with me at a Victoria café. My thanks to Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach for inviting us to continue this dialogue in the *Journal of World Philosophies*. It is an ideal venue for a discussion of *Radical Mindfulness* since it is designed to bring multiple traditions of engaged philosophy and social activism into dialogue and cooperation. I am also grateful to John Meyer for circulating his astute questions of clarification for this journal discussion.

² Kayanesenh Paul Williams, *Kayanerenko:wa: The Great Law of Peace*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2018.

³ See Vernon Kyle Wilson and Kevin Sutherland Wilson, *The Gyamkian Revolution: Reincarnating Law in the Gitxsan Cosmos* (2024).

⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Boston: Beacon Press, 2010.

⁵ Simon Hailwood, "Estrangement, Nature, and 'the Flesh'," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 17 (2014): 71-85.

⁶ Pema Chödrön, *Practicing Peace in Times of War* (Boston: Shambhala, 2007), 55-6.

⁷ Rowe mentions the emotions of anger, hatred and resentment, especially in Chapter four, but he gives subconscious fear of death and existential fear primacy as a root cause.

⁸ Richard Gregg, *The Power of Nonviolence*, ed. James Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 59-72.

⁹ Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (London: Rider, 1995), 51-67. For Gregg's suggested mind-body practices, which include Buddhist practices, see Richard Gregg, *The Self Beyond Yourself* (New York: Lippincott, 1956).

¹⁰ If the self-practices are treated separately, they tend toward self-mastery. If the communities of practice are separate from social engagement, they tend to become self-absorbed. This was discussed at the WPSA panel. See also the discussion of 'Out of the Spiritual Closet' publication at 172-74.

-
- ¹¹ Gregg (2018: xxxvi, xxxix, xxiv, 194). Gregg refers to the work of Mary Parker Follett on the concept of ‘power-with’ in contrast to power-over at 51, 65-66. See also ‘Introduction’ (Gregg 2016: xxxvi, xxxix, li). For the Indian traditions of power-with and freedom-with that Gandhi and Gregg drew on and contributed to, see Dennis Dalton, *Indian Ideas of Freedom: Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghose, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, M.N. Roy, Jayaprakash Narayan* (Haryana: HarperCollins Publishers, 2023).

Revisiting Radical Mindfulness with James Tully, Bryce Huebner, John Meyer and Anita Chari

JAMES K. ROWE

University of Victoria, Canada (jkrowe@uvic.ca)

*In this reply, I offer responses to important questions that James Tully, Bryce Huebner, John Meyer, and Anita Chari ask about the analysis in my book *Radical Mindfulness: Why Transforming Fear of Death is Politically Vital*. Particularly, I engage questions about the role of death anxiety in shaping a compensatory will to supremacy, why I direct my analysis towards social movement actors instead of the broader public, and whether mindfulness practices are sufficient for metabolizing existential fear, or whether other mind-body practices might be better suited to the challenge of embodied transformation.*

Key words: mindfulness; existential fear; death; will to supremacy; embodied social change; engaged Buddhism

It is an honor to respond to these careful engagements with *Radical Mindfulness*. I'm especially grateful to Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach for hosting this exchange in the *Journal of World Philosophies*. This conversation started at the 2024 Western Political Science Association meetings in Vancouver, BC, when Anita Chari, John Meyer, and James Tully generously joined me on a panel to discuss the book. Since then, Bryce Huebner kindly joined the critical dialogue. It is a delight to be in conversation with such close and generous readers. While there are many sites of overlap there are also some frictions that will be sparky and generative to engage. Each of the responses deserve their own reply and so I will move through them in turn. However, three primary questions asked by the respondents will shape my reply.

The first, which is raised in different ways by Tully, Huebner, and Meyer is whether death anxiety plays the prominent role in shaping relations of supremacy that I argue for in *Radical Mindfulness*. Secondly, Meyer raises important questions about audience: why do I focus, for example, on how social movement actors can use mind-body practices to process their existential anxieties, when addressing the anxieties of people not already committed to social justice might have more political yield? Thirdly, Chari raises a crucial question about which mind-body practices are best suited for metabolizing existential fear. Not all practices have the same effect, and Chari wonders about the limits of secular mindfulness, and even Buddhist meditations focused on breath awareness. By answering these three questions I hope to provide a sketch of the book's main argument so that readers who haven't read the text can decide whether they'd like to (adding to the helpful explanations offered by Tully, Huebner, Meyer, and Chari).

1 Dialogue with James Tully

James Tully is one of the most influential political theorists at work today (Nichols and Singh 2014; Livingston 2022; Karmis and Maclure 2023).¹ It is always an honor to be in dialogue with him—conversations that leave the impression that spirits from multiple canons are present to hear his creative and critical engagements with their work. I deeply appreciate Tully’s efforts to “braid” the arguments from *Radical Mindfulness* with proximate but distinct arguments made by Mahatma Gandhi, Richard Gregg, and Pema Chödrön (Tully 2025).²

As Tully notes, existential fear is not centered in Gandhi or Gregg’s account of domination. Richard Gregg is a key figure in the dissemination of Gandhian praxis in the Euro-Americas, influencing key figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. Tully recently edited a volume of Gregg’s writings, bringing them the contemporary recognition they deserve (Tully 2018).³ As Tully explains, fear is not primary for Gandhi and Gregg, instead it is a product of uprootedness, of being disconnected from our deep imbrication in the human and non-human relationships that sustain us. He then creatively invites Pema Chödrön into the conversation since he thinks she offers a particularly illustrative account of uprootedness. In her book *Practicing Peace in Times of War*, Chödrön introduces the Tibetan Buddhist concept of *shenpa* which names:

a familiar experience that is at the root of all conflict, all cruelty, oppression, and greed [...] I think of *shenpa* as ‘getting hooked’ [it is] the charge behind our thoughts and actions, the charge behind ‘like’ and “don’t like” [...]. The charge behind the tightening, behind the urge, behind the story line or action is *shenpa* (Chödrön 2007: 55).⁴

For Tully, *shenpa* names the subcutaneous and often subconscious energies that drive disconnection from our human and non-human relations, and that uproot us from the literal and figurative soils we depend upon for life.

In Tully’s reading, experiences of uprootedness powered by *shenpa* are what underlie fear. In other words, uprootedness and *shenpa* are more fundamental while fear is epiphenomenal. For Tully, these distinctions matter since they help shape the most appropriate response. Instead of focusing on the metabolization of fear, which is more secondary, mind-body practices should target the experience of uprootedness and disconnection that drive fear and aggression. I deeply appreciate Tully’s invitation to consider this different explanation for the will to supremacy. While I have my preferred explanation, I don’t think we can fundamentally know the precise causal sequences that occur below the skin and that support dominative behavior (especially given the different circumstantial factors always bearing down on human decision-making). Bryce Huebner also raises questions about the priority I give to existential fear, while agreeing that we should be searching for causes of “supremacist intuitions in cognitive and affective factors that lie below the surface of everyday awareness.” Part of my ambition in *Radical Mindfulness* is to highlight the prominent role that subconscious realms play in shaping human behavior and political outcomes, and so I am thrilled to be having this debate which can further refine our collective thinking on how best to respond.

Back to Tully's query about uprootedness and shenpa, I'll respond with reference to Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa's writings on existential anxiety (which I engage in in chapter six). Trungpa was one of Chödrön's teachers until his death in 1987. In his book *The Truth of Suffering*, Trungpa argues that our human lives are shaped by "basic anxiety." He notes how the Sanskrit term for suffering, *dukkha*, "also has the sense of anxiety." For Trungpa, "we are constantly anxious" (Trungpa 2009: 7).⁵ Another synonym he uses for "basic anxiety" is "basic bewilderment." He argues that "uncertainty or bewilderment occurs every fraction of a second in our state of being. It goes on all the time" (Trungpa 2009: 34).

The habitual human response to ongoing experiences of "basic anxiety" is to reach for the fantasy of autonomous selfhood to defend ourselves from the imbricated immensity from which we come and depend. For Trungpa, the myth of autonomous selfhood is a compensatory fantasy of control that tries to soothe the basic anxiety felt in the face of existential vastness and uncertainty. If we can exist as discrete beings buffered from the unpredictability of the world, then that is the first step toward exerting further control on that world, bringing it to heel. "We would like to possess our world," writes Trungpa, "and so we act in such a way that whatever we see around us is completely in order, according to our desire to maintain the security of 'me,' 'myself'—which is ego-hood" (Trungpa 2009: 4).

The ongoing ego-formation that Trungpa describes is a primary case of what Tully calls "uprootedness," of disconnection from the human and non-human others who we depend on for life. When we are uprooted from our imbrication in life-sustaining otherness then we are more likely to make decisions that benefit our fantastical construction of self while undoing the seams of relationality that promote collective flourishing. In my understanding, shenpa names the energetic charge that compels us to reach for the protective fantasy of bounded selfhood, while also naming the charge that leads us to reinforce that construction. In Trungpa's description, "basic anxiety" propels both shenpa and the ongoing uprootedness from deep relationality. I think Tully is right that uprootedness can produce feelings of fear in the same way that Buddhists like Trungpa argue that the bounded self produces its own suffering and anxiety since part of us knows our fantastical constructions of self are unreal, and thus unreliable protection from the stormy waves of existence.

I think these distinctions matter since they can help guide our response. Asking participants to embody their deep relationality with existence will arguably run into impasses if we aren't also targeting the "basic anxiety" that compels shenpa and the resulting uprootedness. This is why Trungpa's primary antidote to "basic anxiety," and the disconnection and supremacy-seeking it powers, is to emphasize the "basic goodness" of existence. Trungpa's account of basic goodness is meant to help us release our "basic anxiety" and befriend this mysterious but ultimately nourishing world we inhabit. For Trungpa:

If you actually look, if you take your whole being apart and examine it, you find that you are genuine and good as you are. In fact, the whole of existence is well constructed, so that there is very little room for mishaps of any kind. There are, of course, constant challenges, but the sense of challenge is quite different from the [...] feeling that you are condemned to your world and your problems (Trungpa 1984: 85).⁶

By asking his students to experience their basic goodness through meditation and social engagement, Trungpa was working to weave a “culture of gratitude” that existed both below people’s skin and in social arrangements. Feeling grateful for an uncertain life requires practice because of the ongoing force of basic anxiety. Existential fear or basic anxiety is core to my account because like Trungpa, I think it blocks our recognition and honoring of the relations of reciprocity that sustain life and enable flourishing.

In his response, Tully also asks how the power-with relations promoted by Gandhi-Gregg—as opposed to power-over relations—relate to the analysis offered in *Radical Mindfulness*. I very much appreciate Tully’s sketch. Part of my ambition in *Radical Mindfulness* is to explain the tendency for power-over relations to overwhelm the potential for power-with. As sketched above, I think existential fear plays an underexplored role in shaping a will to supremacy that undermines the potential for power-with. Even at the individual scale, the egohood or fantasy of bounded selfhood described by Trungpa is itself a choice towards power-over (power over our unruly bodies and attempted power over our surrounds, including other people). And so, I think that attending to basic anxiety—and the compensatory will to supremacy it can fuel—is integral to sustaining power-with relations at all scales.

2 Dialogue with Bryce Huebner

Like Tully, Huebner has questions about the centrality I afford existential fear—particularly the fear of death—in shaping dominative affects. I would like to begin with an important clarification. According to Huebner, I argue “that a fear of death is *the* root cause of diverse supremacist intuitions” (Huebner 2025; emphasis added).⁷ This is not my position and I don’t think a singular cause or root exists; I think the causes are multiple. I do, however make a strong causal case for existential fear being *one* of those root drivers deserving our attention. I also think that a fuzzier element in the text is the relationship between death anxiety and the more general “basic anxiety” I described above in my response to Tully. I think death anxiety is an expression of basic anxiety. I use the phrases “fear of death” “existential fear” and “basic anxiety” interchangeably when I think the latter two are more fundamental. This said, death anxiety is perhaps the best known and most recognizable expression of basic anxiety that most people can relate to.

Foregrounding death made it easier to put diverse authors such as James Baldwin, Georges Bataille, Simone de Beauvoir, Ernest Becker, Pema Chödrön, Dorothy Dinnerstein, John Mohawk, and Chögyam Trungpa into conversation. All these thinkers engage the political implications of death anxiety even if they don’t have an account of basic anxiety. And so, for the sake of explanatory expediency, I do sometimes allow death anxiety to stand in for the broader basic anxiety, which may admittedly lead to some conceptual fuzziness.

In his query, Huebner raises a fundamental point about history and how cultural orientations to death are constantly shifting. For Huebner,

anxieties about death have a long philosophical history; and they are present in every philosophical tradition I am aware of. But until recently, European as well as Euro-American lifeways would have included practices that made death more familiar (Huebner 2025).

For Huebner, our contemporary distance from death due to its ghettoization within the funeral industry, medical system, and its obscuration in the industrial food system, creates unnecessary anxiety since we've lost cultural capacities for relating to the viscosity of death. I agree. In *Radical Mindfulness*, I draw upon the Philippe Ariès text *The Hour of Our Death*, which historicizes western attitudes toward death. Those attitudes have morphed many times, and yet since at least Christianization, the different ritualizations of death have been organized around countering what Ariès calls the “savagery of nature” (Ariès 1981: 604).⁸

I begin Chapter One with a discussion of existential fear and resentment alive in the writings of Hegel and those attributed to Saint Paul. These two men lived over one thousand seven hundred years apart, and yet there is a shared thread of existential resentment, of presenting death as a slave-master. I think that thread stitches into the present and explains the will to further cocoon ourselves away from death given the new technological, economic, and cultural capacities to do so. In Tully's terms, that cocooning has further uprooted us from the earthly life that sustains us, and that disconnection undoubtedly drives additional fears. But I maintain that a long-standing thread of existential fear and resentment in the Euro-Americas underpins contemporary efforts to distance ourselves from death.

Following Trungpa, I do think that basic anxiety is an unavoidable fact of human life across time and space. Also, like Trungpa, I think we have a choice in terms of how we collectively respond. We can shore up our defensive ego structure, including group ego structures (what Buddhist philosopher David Loy calls “wego”), or we can acknowledge this anxiety, befriend it, and transform it with the embodiment of basic goodness and the weaving of cultures of gratitude. In Chapter 4, I explore the Haudenosaunee cultures of gratitude that Marx and Engels credited as exemplars of communist society. As Haudenosaunee thinker John Mohawk points out, European communists missed the role of existential gratitude in shaping generous affects and relations (Mohawk 1977: 116).⁹

Despite the success pre-colonial Haudenosaunee societies had in reproducing relations of egalitarianism, they were still shaped by rank and violence, they were not “perfect” from the standpoint of contemporary left-wing progressivism. I am doubtful any society ever has been, even those like the Haudenosaunee who worked carefully to transform basic anxiety with cultures of gratitude (thereby quelling the compensatory will to supremacy). Why might this be? If existential fear is a root driver of bad human behavior and some societies have crafted cultures to transform it, then why might rank or violence persist even in those societies? One answer is because basic anxiety is an ongoing element of existence, and thus impossible to excise from

human relations. Instead, our goal should be to reduce its effects, lessening the subconscious fuel load powering dominative behavior.

Another reason why violence and injustice might persist even in cultures of gratitude is because basic anxiety—and most importantly our response to it—is not the only driver. I agree with Huebner that other embodied forces may play a role. For example, he shares canonical Buddhist teachings on the existential thirst for sensory pleasure, noting how it can “induce an intoxication with accumulating money, status, and power” (Huebner 2025). I agree that other subconscious drives beyond defensive responses to basic anxiety shape human behavior. I would hazard, however, that the relatively benign thirst for sensory pleasure—enjoying good food, a beautiful sunset, pleasurable sex—only becomes a political problem when possessive impulses braid themselves with the original thirst. And I do think that defensive and compensatory responses to basic anxiety go a long way towards explaining that possessive impulse.

In *Radical Mindfulness* I argue that defensive responses to basic anxiety play a major role shaping domination. This, however, is not a monocausal account. For example, while I argue that the capitalist profit motive is likely shaped by past sedimentations of defensive and possessive responses to basic anxiety, I also think the profit motive has taken on a life of its own and is daily reinforced by institutional dynamics such as the corporate fiduciary duty to maximize shareholder value or the competitive logics of capitalist markets (“grow or die”). This is why I think mind-body practices are necessary but not sufficient for political change. We also need to target institutional dynamics directly through conventional political forms such as unionization, electoral politics, protest, direct action and the forging of economic alternatives like worker co-operatives. I argue for incorporating mind-body practices into existing left praxis so that we can begin targeting the existential and institutional drivers of injustice.

While I think that past sedimentations of defensive responses to existential fear are alive in institutional logics like the capitalist profit motive, they are not the only constitutive parts. As I write in Chapter two:

structural conditions and existential experiences are always shaping one another. There has never been some primordial moment absent of structural forces (even if they are simply the contingencies of climate, topography, and nearby resources and how they shaped community structure) that bear down on human decision-making (Rowe 2024: 39).

The contingencies mentioned above, alongside inherited cultural patterns or institutional forms, especially as they mix with ongoing manifestations of basic anxiety, can all contribute to bad human behavior. This is why we need to be moving on multiple fronts to undo supremacist social relations. My argument is that the existential front is more determinative than most critical theory or left praxis has accounted for and thus deserves considerable political attention. But how much attention compared to other drivers of injustice? John Meyer asks a version of this important question in his response.

3 Dialogue with John Meyer

Before turning to Meyer's main question about audience, I want to address the query he makes about the relationship between existential and structural drivers of injustice. He asks: "Is the conclusion then simply that both existential and structural accounts of—and drivers of—injustice and change matter? Or is there more that we can do to unpack and specify the *relationship between* the existential and the structural" (Meyer 2025).¹⁰ This is a crucial question. As noted above, my primary ambition in the book is to argue that existential drivers are central more than incidental to shaping supremacist social relations. While I discuss the relationship between structural and existential drivers in Chapter two, I think this is a subject deserving of more attention than I give it in the book. I hope others take it up, and it is likely a question that will animate future work of mine as well.

The rise of authoritarianism in the United States is a timely case study. Existential anxiety has long been a background condition in US culture—across periods of more and less democracy—and so cannot be pinpointed as the sole cause. I agree with the analysis that increasing economic inequality and insecurity due to capitalist rapaciousness and years of neoliberal governance are the most proximate causes (Monbiot 2024).¹¹ When people are experiencing economic and status insecurity, they are more vulnerable to demagogic scapegoating that offers easy explanations for their suffering, along with the psychic release of knowing that no matter how difficult their circumstances, they are better off than the scapegoated (be they immigrants, trans people, or federal workers).

I do think, though, that heightened economic and status anxiety also aggravates latent basic anxiety and thus amplifies the compensatory will to supremacy that helps shape authoritarian affects among the MAGA movement. In Chapter three I unpack James Baldwin's three-part explanation for white supremacy. For him, a mixture of status anxiety, ancestral trauma, and death anxiety shapes a compensatory will to white supremacy. The political implication of his analysis is that we need to be moving on multiple fronts to undo supremacist social relations: we need Bernie Sanders style democratic socialism to even out stark economic inequalities, but we also need to attend to embodied traumas and anxieties. And for Baldwin, relating to the existential drivers of supremacy is not secondary, since for him they lie "at the root of our trouble" (Baldwin 1993: 91).¹² My argument is that we should augment left politics by incorporating into social movements mind-body practices capable of transforming embodied traumas and anxieties.

Meyer's main question in his response is why I direct my argument towards social movement actors when they are likely "more attuned to existential challenges and they are already advancing structural change" (Meyer 2025). Wouldn't the argument be better pitched towards those in denial about both political and existential realities? This is another good question. The theory of change pursued in the book is that if social movements can accelerate their use of mind-body practices and limit the existential fear and resentment alive in their ranks, then that

will make them more effective in their efforts to change structure and culture (including cultures of death denial).

Social movements are not always pleasant places to be due to infighting (what Freud called the “narcissism of small difference”), the replication of oppression inside movements, and call-out culture. Each of these limitations are significantly shaped by a compensatory will to supremacy. The more that movement actors work with their existential fears and traumas, then the healthier those movements will become. Healthy and vibrant movements are more likely to attract participants and become more politically powerful.

I speak to social movements since I think they are currently a more receptive audience than the general public. Again, the theory of change animating the book, is that if social movements can start taking the existential drivers of domination seriously, then they will become more internally functional and thus better positioned to drive broader external change.

Meyer asks a series of additional questions that I’ll do my best to answer. He wonders, for example, if the different traditions explored in the book need each other to adequately explain the world, or if each tradition offers sufficient “grounding to facilitate perception of the whole” (Meyer 2025). No tradition is perfectly autonomous. They are all the product of co-mingling and co-learning with other traditions. This said, I don’t think that the Haudenosaunee, for example, need Tibetan Buddhism to adequately diagnose basic anxiety and forge cultural countermoves such as the Thanksgiving address. Cross-cultural exchange often sparks fruitful learning—as it has in the past, shaping the traditions we inherit today—but I think past exchanges have birthed traditions that offer sufficient explanations of our world and don’t require supplementation to adequately function. And so, in short, I do think that the traditions engaged in the book “offer the existential grounding to facilitate perception of the whole” (Meyer 2025). But traditions are always changing and so putting them into conversation may help with additional refinements.

Next, Meyer asks about the relationship between theory and embodied practice. More specifically, he asks “what (only?) theory and critique can do here, and what (only?) embodied practice can do” (Meyer 2025). If subconscious responses to basic anxiety help shape wills to supremacy, then we need practices to transform those responses. It is hard to argue ourselves out of anxiety. Significant parts of our body and brain do not speak our mother tongue. And so, it is important to find mind-body practices that can transform our relationship to anxiety in ways that theory or argumentation alone cannot. And yet since large parts of our body and brain do speak our mother tongue, the intention we bring to mind-body practices is crucial to determining their outcome. If we meditate to be more present and effective on the shooting range, then that intention will affect the outcome of our practice. If, alternatively, we meditate with the specific intent of embodying our basic goodness, transforming our relationship to basic anxiety, and radiating openness and generosity instead of defensiveness, then those cognitive instructions will support communications with our subconscious realms. In other words, the thinking that informs our practices of “not thinking” helps shape their outcome. Theory and embodied practice informed by that theory each have their distinctive roles to play in transforming our responses to existential fear.

Finally, Meyer helpfully asks for more description of how it *feels* to metabolize our fears. “What *sort* of experience is this? What happens to us when we do so? In what ways do we change?” (Meyer 2025) This question dovetails with Anita Chari’s question about what different mind-body practices can accomplish, and which are better suited to metabolize fear. And so, I will aim to answer Meyer’s final question in my response to Chari.

4 Dialogue with Anita Chari

One of my primary goals in the book is to clarify *why* mind-body practices matter politically. As I write in the text, “what practices to use, and in what contexts, are crucial questions that will require more collective attention moving forward” (Rowe 2024: 20). I deeply appreciate Chari’s inquiry into which mind-body practices are most politically salient. In particular, she asks which practices are best suited for metabolizing existential fear and undoing the compensatory will to supremacy? She has questions about whether standard secular mindfulness practice is up to the task. Particularly, she asks “whether mindfulness is able to access our fear of death, not only cognitively, but somatically, allowing us not only to witness it, but to digest, process, and metabolize it” (Chari 2025).¹³

Secular mindfulness practice asks us to slow down, be with our body breathing, and witness whatever arises without judgement. This practice is powerful for surfacing subconscious patterns and habits that can become visible when we give them non-judgmental space to arise. While mindfulness is regularly portrayed as relaxing, it is often stressful at the outset since you begin witnessing your habits of mind (e.g. hyper-judgement, self-aggression, self-focus). The witnessing function of mindfulness also allows glimpses of basic anxiety and our different coping mechanisms (from more benignly scrolling social media to compensatory bids for aggrandizement, which increasingly happen on social media). While Chari applauds the witnessing function of mindfulness, she wonders whether the practice can transform the fear it surfaces.

This is an excellent question. As I note in the text, I use “mindfulness” to include all manner of mind-body practices capable of heightening self-awareness and deep self-appreciation (helping us to love bodies that die). Getting to a place of existential appreciation and gratitude requires first metabolizing the fear and resentment that block these more accepting affects. I agree with Chari that standard secular mindfulness has limits in this regard. This returns us to Meyer’s question about theory and practice. The intention informing the practice shapes outcomes. In the book’s Coda I include a contemplation on basic goodness. The contemplation includes meditation instructions I learned in the context of Chögyam Trungpa’s Shambhala trainings. Those postural and breath-awareness instructions are very similar to most secular mindfulness teachings, or what religious studies scholar David McMahan calls the “Standard Version of Meditation” (McMahan 2023: 6).¹⁴ And yet the intention and cosmology informing the practice helps shape its outcome.

In my experience, connecting to the present moment without the buffer of discursive thought is intense. Even after years of practice, part of me wants to look away and seek refuge in egoic thought. But I've come to appreciate this intensity as emblematic of life's effusion and goodness. Conceptual instructions on basic goodness helped me navigate my less conceptual encounters with the fleeting present and the intensity it holds. Likewise, I've also come to see my reaching for egoic thought in the face of life's intensity as itself an expression of basic goodness. I am trying to protect myself and needn't become too judgmental. Paradoxically, actively fighting against our bids for protective ego only tend to give them more strength. Having access to teachings on basic goodness help me befriend the intensity I encounter while meditating while also reducing my judgement when I seek egoic protection (which paradoxically reduces my reliance on ego).

As I write about in the book, social psychology experiments have found that meditation helps people encounter their existential fear without defensive and protective responses (Park and Pyszczynski 2019).¹⁵ Meditation, the researchers hypothesize, reduces defensive reactions because it makes us more tolerant of unpleasant thoughts and emotions. These findings match my experience of increased capacity to sit with the intensity of existence. What used to feel more like the hum of basic anxiety, now feels like an expression of basic goodness, or life's effusion. Meditating with the view of basic goodness has heightened my acceptance of a life, which in its fleetingness, will one day transform my being into new diffusions of energy.

In my experience, meditation is not a linear process. There are days and weeks when my training goes out the window and I am gripped by anxiety and compensatory ego. The difference is that I've experienced a different baseline and have confidence I can return to more open and accepting affects. Chari asks: "Can mindfulness alone provide us with the tools to be with the overwhelming somatic sensations that arise when we confront such existential fears?" My simple answer is it depends on how the mindfulness training is offered. I do think that meditation when informed by a view of basic goodness or some version of existential gratitude, can metabolize existential fear. But I don't think digestion is ever complete. Life is a wild ride, and another wave of basic anxiety is often just around the corner. Good surfers still get crushed by waves, often feeling panicked in the process. But they have the capacity and know-how to find safety and composure before catching the next wave.

Despite my commitment to meditation as one of many powerful tools for transforming our relationship to existential fear, I had an experience last summer that confirms Chari's critical intuition that some practices are more effective and rapid than others at metabolizing fear. I've written about the experience for *Waging Nonviolence*, and so readers can follow up for more detail if they'd like (Rowe 2024).¹⁶ In short, I had the good fortune of joining a psychedelic medicine journey guided by Tsleil-Waututh leader Rueben George (contemporary Vancouver is on lands long governed by the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh nations). George's vision is to build a healing center guided by Indigenous law where residential school survivors can receive the ceremonial medicine for free while settler folk pay. He sees this as a reparative and just funding model given the harms and benefits that flowed from colonial dispossession.

To promote healing and build momentum for his vision, George offers medicine to residential school survivors, their families, and to settlers as well. I journeyed with five other settlers, all of us engaged in either environmental justice or healing justice work. As an undergraduate student 25 years ago, I'd turned to psilocybin and LSD for fun, adventure and a dose of rebellion. Each experience was powerful and offered lessons that were probably more impactful than I realized at the time. But none approached the ego-shaking healing intensity of George's protocol. I attribute the difference to the careful combination of medicines and the ceremonial container Rueben and his team created for the journey.

What was remarkable about the experience was the extent to which I *felt* our reciprocal imbrication with other species and each other. The journey helped me feel my place in a deeply interwoven universe. The particles comprising my organism have shaped different assemblages of animate and inanimate matter on this planet and beyond and will continue doing so into the future. For perhaps the first time in my conscious life, fear completely vacated my body, and I experienced deep feelings of gratitude and love. My experience with George's medicine has offered a significantly shifted baseline that I've felt myself growing into since.

Research shows that meditation enhances psychedelic experiences by reducing initial fear and helping participants release to the ego-dissolving effects of the medicine (Holas and Kamińska 2023).¹⁷ I've also found meditation to be a powerful way of integrating into everyday life the visceral experience of interconnection I had during the ceremony. The journey with George and his team was powerful enough that I'm thinking about focusing my next project on psychedelics and embodied social change. I share this story to affirm Chari's line of questioning and contribute to the collective conversation about how best to transform fear, and integrate this existential work into broader efforts for political and cultural change.

5 Conclusion

I'm honored that scholars I deeply respect have engaged so generously and thoughtfully with *Radical Mindfulness*. I've done my best to answer the primary questions asked by each author. Questions will inevitably remain and hopefully be reason for further conversation with James Tully, Bryce Huebner, John Meyer, Anita Chari and others who share an interest in how our existential fears shape political life.

James K. Rowe is an associate professor of environmental studies and cultural, social, and political thought at the University of Victoria.

¹ ed. Robert Nichols, and Jakeet Singh, *Freedom and Democracy in an Imperial Context: Dialogues with James Tully*, New York: Routledge, 2014; ed. Alexander Livingston, *James Tully: To Think and Act Differently*, New York: Routledge, 2022; ed. Dimitrio Karmis, and Jocelyn Maclure, *Civic*

-
- Freedom in an Age of Diversity: The Public Philosophy of James Tully*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023.
- ² James Tully, "Braiding Sweetgrass and Joining Hands: Engaging with *Radical Mindfulness*," *Author-Meets-Readers: Comments on James K. Rowe's Radical Mindfulness*, *Journal of World Philosophies* 10, no. 1 (2025): 267-73.
- ³ ed. James Tully, *Richard Gregg: The Power of Nonviolence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- ⁴ Pema Chödrön, *Practicing Peace in Times of War*, Boston: Shambhala, 2007.
- ⁵ Chögyam Trungpa, *The Truth of Suffering*, Boston: Shambhala, 2009.
- ⁶ Chögyam Trungpa, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*, Boston: Shambhala, 1984.
- ⁷ Bryce Huebner, "Lifecraft Beyond the Fear of Death," *Author-Meets-Readers: Comments on James K. Rowe's Radical Mindfulness*, *Journal of World Philosophies* 10, no. 1 (2025): 256-62.
- ⁸ Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, New York: Vintage, 1981.
- ⁹ John Mohawk, "A Basic Call to Consciousness: The Haudenosaunee Address to the Western World," in *Basic Call to Consciousness*, ed. Akwesasne Notes, Summertown, TN: Native Voices 1977.
- ¹⁰ John M. Meyer, "Questions for, and About, *Radical Mindfulness*," *Author-Meets-Readers: Comments on James K. Rowe's Radical Mindfulness*, *Journal of World Philosophies* 10, no. 1 (2025): 263-66.
- ¹¹ George Monbiot, "Rightwing Populists Will Keep Winning Until We Grasp This Truth About Human Nature," *The Guardian*, April 13, 2025 (URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/apr/13/trump-populists-human-nature-economic-growth>; last accessed on June 22, 2025).
- ¹² James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, New York: Vintage, 1993.
- ¹³ Anita Chari, "From Witnessing to Metabolizing Our Fear of Finitude: On James Rowe's *Radical Mindfulness*," *Author-Meets-Readers: Comments on James K. Rowe's Radical Mindfulness*, *Journal of World Philosophies* 10, no. 1 (2025): 252-55.
- ¹⁴ David McMahan, *Rethinking Meditation: Buddhist Meditative Practices in Ancient and Modern Worlds*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.
- ¹⁵ Young Chin Park, and Tom Pyszczynski, "Reducing Defensive Responses to Thoughts of Death: Meditation, Mindfulness, and Buddhism," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 116, no. 1 (2019): 101-18.
- ¹⁶ James Rowe, "Meet the Indigenous Leader Using Psychedelic Medicine to Heal the Traumas of Colonization," *Waging Nonviolence*, November 25, 2024 (URL: <https://wagingnonviolence.org/2024/11/indigenous-leader-reuben-george-heal-traumas-colonization-psychedelic-medicine/>; last accessed on June 22, 2025).
- ¹⁷ Pawel Holas, and Justyna Kamińska, "Mindfulness Meditation and Psychedelics: Potential Synergies and Commonalities," *Pharmacological Reports* (2023): 1398-409.