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TIBETAN SINGING BOWLS

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Abstract

Tibetan Singing Bowls exemplify key features of American religion: creativity, commodification, and conflict. Histories published in popular and scholarly outlets portray these objects as ancient Buddhist artifacts, beloved both because they originated in a place imagined as quintessentially spiritual and because their benefits have been confirmed by modern science. Yet, few if any such objects are ancient or Tibetan. Beginning in the 1970s, Asian and American sellers and American buyers created the concept of “Tibetan Singing Bowls” and invested material objects so-denoted with spiritual-scientific meanings that made them into valuable commodities. As newly invented symbols of ancient Tibetan Buddhism, these objects generated interest and controversy—particularly when used to teach mindfulness meditation in public schools. As cultural conflicts played out in the 2010s, the “secularization” of mindfulness featured the removal of “religious” objects that were only recently conceptualized as either spiritual or religious. This cultural history illustrates how modern interest in “spirituality” and “science” overlap, while exhibiting the malleability of concepts of “religion” and “secularity.”

Keywords: Tibetan Singing Bowls, commodification, material objects, Buddhism, mindfulness meditation, public schools, secularization, spirituality, science, religion

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LOS CUENCOS CANTORES TIBETANOS

Resumen

El cuenco cantor tibetano ejemplifica características principales de la religión estadounidense: la creatividad, la conmodificación y el conflicto. Las historias que han sido publicadas en medios populares y académicos representan estos objetos como antiguos artefactos budistas, los cuales han sido muy queridos porque se originan de lugares prototípicamente imaginados de manera espiritual y también porque sus beneficios han sido confirmados por la ciencia moderna. Aún así, pocos de los objetos de este tipo, si existe alguno, son antiguos o tibetanos. A partir de los años setenta, vendedores asiáticos y estadounidenses, y compradores estadounidenses crearon el concepto de “cuencos tibetanos” e invirtieron objetos materiales tan denotados con significados científico-espirituales que los convirtieron en productos de valor. Como nuevos símbolos inventados del antiguo budismo tibetano, estos objetos generaron interés y controversia—particularmente cuando se ha utilizado para enseñar la meditación de conciencia plena en las escuelas públicas. Al desarrollarse conflictos culturales durante la década del 2010, la “secularización” de la conciencia dio pie a la eliminación de objetos “religiosos” que solo recientemente se habían conceptualizado como una de dos, o espiritual o religioso. Esa historia cultural ilustra cómo el interés moderno sobre la “espiritualidad” y la “ciencia” solapan, mientras que exhiben la maleabilidad de conceptos tales como el de “religión” y el de “secularidad”.

Palabras clave: cuencos cantores tibetanos, mercantilismo, conmodificación, objetos materiales, budismo, meditación de conciencia plena, escuelas públicas, secularización, espiritualidad, ciencia, religión, el Bodhisattva Trading

The Bodhisattva Trading Co., Inc., Est. 1996, offers “Authentic Tibetan Singing Bowls for Sale” in its Los Angeles, California showroom and through the internet. The company sells only “authentic antiques from the Himalayas” that are “between 100 and 400 years old.” The bowls are not mere commodities, but embody an ancient spiritual tradition: “since the time of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni (560 – 489 B.C.) the harmonics of singing bowls have been used to induce meditation and assist spiritual seekers to the state of enlightenment.” As a “quintessential aid to meditation,” Tibetan singing bowls “can be found on private Buddhist altars, and in temples,” and are used in “chakra balancing.” Benefits of the ancient bowls have been confirmed by modern science: “20th century technology documented the powerful stress reduction effects singing bowls create through brainwave entrainment: stilling the mind and balancing the brain hemispheres, while tuning us at a cellular level.” Company founder Rain

Gray is an American of European ancestry who recovered “esoteric knowledge” of Tibetan singing bowls that had “all but disappeared” since the “communist Chinese military occupation of Tibet in the 1950s.” After eight years searching the Himalayas for anyone who remembered the bowls’ history, in 1986 he interviewed, with the help of a translator, a seventy-year-old Tibetan Buddhist monk, Lama Lobang Leshe, in Nepal. Padmasambhava, who brought the Buddha’s teaching from India to Tibet in the seventh century, had predicted that “when the iron bird flies, the Dharma will be spread to the West.” In the 1970s, “jet-age travelers” like Gray brought Tibetan singing bowls from their “lofty and magical homeland” to the rest of the world.¹ This seemed to Gray a fulfillment of prophecy, since the bowls invite “non-Buddhists” to hear and “feel” the universal “sound of the Dharma.” The “Tibetan Singing Bowls” marketed by Gray exemplify key features of American religion: creativity, commodification, and conflict.

THE INVENTION OF “TIBETAN SINGING BOWLS”

Histories of Tibetan singing bowls similar to that narrated by Rain Gray can be found on a variety of commercial websites,² as well as in popular³ and scholarly

1 See Bodhisattva Trading Co., “Home,” archived Dec. 5, 1998-Dec. 15, 2019, <https://www.bodhisattva.com/> and “About Tibetan Singing Bowls,” <https://www.bodhisattva.com/about-tibetan-singing-bowls/>. See also, Randall (Rain) E. Gray, “Tibetan Singing Bowl History: An Interview with Lama Lobsang Leshe,” previously published as *Tibetan Singing Bowls: An Historical Perspective*, 1989, https://www.bodhisattva.com/singing_bowl_history.htm. Gray is “no longer with the company,” which is now run by Gray’s co-founder, Shakti. Gray now sells Tibetan singing bowls through a different website: iSingingBowls, archived Sept. 26, 2013-Dec. 15, 2019, <https://www.isingingbowls.com>.

2 Ryan Samataro, “Tibetan Singing Bowls,” *Best Singing Bowls: Great Sounding Antiques*, archived Jul. 14, 2010-Dec. 15, 2019, <https://bestsingingbowls.com/tibetan-singing-bowls/>; Cathy Wong, “The Benefits of Tibetan Singing Bowls,” *VeryWellMind*, updated Aug. 19, 2019, <https://www.verywellmind.com/tibetan-singing-bowls-for-healing-89828>; “The Meaning and Function of the Meditation Bell,” *Mindworks: Mindfulness Meditation App*, archived Apr. 29, 2019-Dec. 15, 2019, <https://mindworks.org/blog/meaning-and-function-of-the-meditation-bell/>; “Tibetan Singing Bowls,” *Yoga Outlet*, archived Sept. 14, 2019-Dec. 15, 2019, <https://www.yogaoutlet.com/tibetan-singing-bowls-c11277/>; “Meditation Bells,” *The Guided Meditation Site: A Place for Lovers of Meditation, Relaxation, Personal Development & Spiritual Growth*, archived April 29, 2019-Dec. 15, 2019, <https://www.the-guided-meditation-site.com/meditation-bells.html>.

3 Mitchell L. Gaynor, *The Healing Power of Sound: Recovery from Life-threatening Illness Using Sound, Voice, and Music* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2002): 1, 3, 11; Eva Rudy Jansen, *Singing Bowls: A Practical Handbook of Instruction and Use* (Diever, Holland: Binkey Kok, 1990), 5; Anneke Huyser, *Singing Bowl Exercises for Personal Harmony* (Havelte, Holland: Binkey Kok, 1999), 11-12; Frank Perry, *Himalayan Sound Revelations: The Complete Tibetan Singing Bowl Book* (London: Polair, 2013); Suren Shrestha, *How to Heal*

books and journal articles published since the 1970s. These accounts typically relate an ancient Buddhist or pre-Buddhist lineage shrouded in secrecy and preserved only through oral tradition, highlight the mystery and spiritual purity of the bowls' isolated Tibetan homeland, and justify modern appropriations by appealing to scientific research that confirms benefits long-recognized by practitioners.⁴ The *Oxford Handbook for Clinical Ethnomusicology* (2008) calls for a "science of the ineffable" that recognizes "healers" in the "mountains of Tibet" who used the "ancient art of playing exquisitely crafted . . . 'singing bowls'" to produce a "'tranquil' state" in which "remarkable healings" that are "unexplainable from a conventional biomedical perspective" can occur.⁵ Another Oxford University Press volume, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out: Journeys through the Soundscape of Healing and Reconciliation* (2011) relies on sales pitches by vendors in Nepal as evidence that the "Tibetan singing bowl has a long history that traces back primarily to Buddhist ceremonies, calls to meditation and even to healing."⁶ Articles in academic journals of music⁷ and medicine⁸ analyze

with *Singing Bowls: Traditional Tibetan Healing Methods* (Boulder, CO: Sentient, 2009), 15-16.

4 Samuel Grimes, "Tibetan Sound Bowls as the Material Discursive Formations of an Orientalized Tibet," (unpublished paper, 2019), 5, 9, 15.

5 Karen Brummel-Smith, "Music and the Meditative Mind: Toward a Science of the Ineffable," in *The Handbook of Medical Ethnomusicology*, ed. Benjamin D. Doen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 309.

6 John Paul Lederach and Angela Jill Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out: Journeys through the Soundscape of Healing and Reconciliation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 90.

7 Octávio Inácio, Luís L. Henrique, and José Antunes, "The Dynamics of Tibetan Singing Bowls," *Acta Acustica United with Acustica* 92 (2006): 637-53; Ronald M. Aarts, Okke Ouweltjes, and Murtaza Bulut, "An Electro-acoustic Implementation of Tibetan Bowls: Acoustics and Perception," *Noise & Vibration Worldwide* 45, no. 1 (2014): 12-23; Wolfgang Thies, "Reaktionen auf das Hören einer Klangschale," *Musik-, Tanz- und Kunsttherapie* 19, no. 2 (2008): 83-92; Jung Soon Moon and Hyeon-Ku Park, "Analysis of the Meaning of Singing Bowl Sounds on the Effect of Meditation," *Transactions of the Korean Society for Noise and Vibration Engineering* 29, no. 1 (2019): 5-12; Elena Fernández and Elena Partesotti, "Tibetan Singing Bowls as Useful Vibroacoustic Instruments in Music Therapy: A Practical Approach," *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy* 25 (July 2016): 126-27; Georg Essl, Stefania Serafin, Perry R. Cook, and Julius O. Smith, "Musical Applications of Banded Waveguides," *Computer Music Journal* 28, no. 1 (2004): 51-63; Eliezer Rapoport, Smadar Shatz, and Noa Blass, "Overtone Spectra of Gongs Used in Music Therapy," *Journal of New Music Research* 37, no. 1 (2008): 37-60; Jaroslav Smutney and Lubos Pazdera, "Acoustic Vibration Analysis of a Tibetan Singing Bowl," *Akustika* 22 (2014): 37-43; Denis Terwagne and John W. M. Bush, "Tibetan Singing Bowls," *Nonlinearity* 24 (2011): R51-R66.

8 Victor O. Oguy, Elena N. Svirshch, and Anna A. Tarasenko, "Study of Vibroacoustic Tibetan Massage Effectiveness to Reduce Anxiety Level," *Modern European Researches*

acoustic properties and/or report “sound therapy” benefits to patients with conditions such as cancer or addiction. Study authors—from countries that include the US, China, Korea, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, France, Austria, the Netherlands, Italy, Greece, Denmark, the Czech Republic, Russia, and Israel—typically recite brief histories like those above to invoke the spiritual mystique of the bowls, and they also employ scientific methods to encourage modern applications, for instance by “health professionals” in nominally “secular” settings. Such combinations illustrate a significant aspect of “spiritual, but not religious” cultural practices.⁹

The problem with these authenticating narratives of Tibetan singing bowls is that the accounts are modern inventions—more akin to myth than history. Few if any of the products marketed as “ancient Tibetan Singing Bowls” come from Tibet, nor were they valuable commodities before the 1970s.¹⁰ Tibet does have a rich musical history that includes opera, monastic, and folk traditions. Scholars have catalogued a dozen distinct instruments and many variations, among them bells and chimes, long used in Tibet. Singing bowls are not, however, among

2 (2018): 63-74; Tamara L. Goldsby, Michael E. Goldsby, Mary McWalters, and Paul J. Mills, “Effects of Singing Bowl Sound Meditation on Mood, Tension, and Well-being: An Observational Study,” *Journal of Evidence-Based Complementary & Alternative Medicine* 22, no. 3 (2017): 401-406; Luca Pigaiani, Manlio Casini, Livia Bidin, Pietro Seghini, and Luigi Cavanna, “Psychological and Physical Benefits in Metastatic Cancer Patients Using Tibetan Singing Bowls: A Pilot Study in an Italian Oncology Unit,” *Annals of Oncology* 27, supp. 4 (2016): 55-58; Livia Bidin, Luca Pigaiani, Manlio Casini, Pietro Seghini, and Luigi Cavanna, “Feasibility of a Trial with Tibetan Singing Bowls, and Suggested Benefits in Metastatic Cancer Patients: A Pilot Study in an Italian Oncology Unit,” *European Journal of Integrative Medicine* 8 (2016): 747-55; Chiara Imbriani, “Le Tibetan Singing Bowls e l’intervento musicoterapeutico,” *Giornale Italiano di Medicina del Lavoro ed Ergonomia: Rivista Bimestrale di Prevenzione, Patologia, Riabilitazione* 39, no. 4 (2017): 273-77; Wolfgang Thies, “Reaktionen auf das Hören einer Klangschale,” *Musik-, Tanz- und Kunsttherapie* 19, no. 2 (2008): 83-92; Vasileios Stamou, Theano Chatzoudi, Lelouda Stamou, Lucia Romo, and Pierluigi Graziani, “Music-assisted Systematic Desensitization for the Reduction of Craving in Response to Drug-conditioned Cues: A Pilot Study,” *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 51 (2016): 36-45; Kam Fung Wong, “A Study on the Effectiveness of a Family Group Using Tibetan Singing Bowl for Cancer Patients and Their Family Members,” *Psycho-Oncology* 27, no. 53 (2018): 153.

9 Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 2-3; Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 5-6, 46, 182.

10 Darinda J. Congdon, “‘Tibet Chic’: Myth, Marketing, Spirituality and Politics in Musical Representations of Tibet in the United States,” (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2007), 127; Ted Gioia, *Healing Songs* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 150; Grimes, “Tibetan Sound Bowls,” 17.

them.¹¹ Researchers have identified similar bowls from China (*quoqing*) dating back to the ninth century and Japan (*rin*) from the nineteenth century that may have been used as musical instruments and/or in ceremonies.¹² Tibetan studies scholar Robert Barnett posits that traders in Nepal invented the concept of a Tibetan singing bowl in the 1970s to sell eating utensils for higher prices to American tourists, many of whom were spiritual seekers drawn to Asian monasteries by the counterculture.¹³

Choice of the term “Tibetan” was no accident. Europeans and Americans had been fascinated by Tibet since the nineteenth century. Traders and explorers for the British Empire brought back stories that conflated Tibet’s remote mountainous location with ideals of pristine spirituality uncorrupted by materialism and political intrigue, though Tibet was less isolated or politically naïve than such stories suggested. Theosophy co-founders Helena Blavatsky and Henry Olcott claimed to recover “ancient wisdom” from *mahatmas*, or “great souls,” who congregated secretly in Tibet, though they were not themselves Tibetan. Actual Tibetans, Blavatsky believed, practiced a debased form of Buddhism, not to be emulated. Blavatsky claimed to have studied Buddhism in Tibet for seven years beginning in the 1850s and to have remained in psychic communication with the *mahatmas*. Following British invasions of Tibet in 1888 and 1903, Britain pressured Tibet to establish formal relations in 1908; yet, because Britain did not establish an administrative presence like it did in China or India, Tibet remained more a mythic than an actual place in the British imagination.¹⁴

Tibet’s mythic appeal grew over the course of the twentieth century. In 1927, American Theosophist Walter Evans-Wentz published *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*—a text that has come to epitomize Tibetan Buddhism for many Americans. Professor of Buddhist and Tibetan studies Donald Lopez explains why this publication is “not really Tibetan” but rather a “product of American Spiritualism.” Evans-Wentz selected relatively obscure Tibetan texts for translation and framed

11 Daniel A. Scheidegger, *Tibetan Ritual Music: A General Survey with Special Reference to the Mindrolling Tradition* (Zurich: Tibetan Institute, 1988).

12 Alan R. Thrasher, “Zuoqing,” *Grove Music Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.L2281952> (May 28, 2015); Grimes, “Tibetan Sound Bowls,” 18.

13 Robert Barnett, “Understated Legacies: Uses of Oral History and Tibetan Studied,” *Inner Asia* 12 (2010): 63-93; Robert Beer, *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols* (Boston: Shambhala, 2003), 31; David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 186.

14 Congdon, “Tibet Chic,” 28, 45, 48; Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3-7; Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011): 19-20, 118, 6, 69; Grimes, “Tibetan Sound Bowls,” 50.

them with so much commentary that the result—which he named after a similar Egyptian composition—“colonized a Tibetan text, turning it into a tome of his American version of Theosophy.”¹⁵ Evans-Wentz’s influence was amplified by Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, and Robert Metzger’s publication of *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1963) and Leary’s audio recording: *The Psychedelic Experience: Readings from the book “The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead”* (1966; reissued 2003). After the Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959 and first visited the US in 1979, campaigns to recognize the “Tibetan Government-in-Exile,” “Free Tibet” from China, and end human rights abuses increased US sympathy with Tibet. Certain Tibetan political and religious leaders—the Dalai Lama among them—have endorsed romanticized portrayals of Tibet, including recordings of Americans playing “Tibetan” singing bowls, because doing so tactically serves political and/or spiritual purposes. Likewise, the CIA funded performances of Tibetan music by Buddhist monks, among others, as part of its strategy of non-military operations against China.¹⁶ Yet critics charge that buying and listening to music privileges relaxation and neo-liberal capitalism above engagement with political or humanitarian issues.¹⁷

The label “Tibetan” has developed into a brand name that sells products. It is positive orientalist stereotypes—notes religious studies scholar Jane Iwamura—of Asians as more spiritual that can most easily “go unchallenged and unseen.”¹⁸ Travelers, ethnographers, and music scholars introduced American audiences to Tibetan music beginning in the 1960s. Yet what most Americans think of as “Tibetan” music is produced by singing bowls—with no documented history in Tibet—played by Americans.¹⁹ Of seminal importance in popularizing brand Tibetan was American Nancy Hennings and Henry Wolff’s *Tibetan Bells* (1972, LP; 2002, CD), followed by *Tibetan Bells II* (1978), *Yamantaka* [conqueror of death] (1982)—in collaboration with Grateful Dead’s Mickey Hart, *Tibetan Bells III* (1988), and *Tibetan Bells IV* (1991).²⁰ These recordings alongside live performances in the 1980s featured

15 Lopez, *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 2, 11, 112, 117, 126, 149.

16 Grimes, “Tibetan Sound Bowls,” 14; Congdon, ““Tibet Chic,”” 116, 59, 63, 83, 64, 196, 94, 198.

17 Congdon, ““Tibet Chic,”” 199, 170; Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 170.

18 Jane N. Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6-7, 115, 5, 21.

19 Congdon, ““Tibet Chic,”” 1, 112, 193.

20 Henry Wolff and Nancy Hennings, *Tibetan Bells* (Tucson, AZ, Celestial Harmonies, 1972), *Tibetan Bells II* (Tucson, AZ: Celestial Harmonies, 1978); *Yamantaka*, with Mickey

Americans and Europeans playing Tibetan singing bowls.²¹ The number one item in an Amazon search for “Tibetan music” conducted on December 15, 2019 and sorted by “Avg. Customer Review” is a recording of 33 *Bowls: Tibetan Singing Bowls*.²² Indeed, most “Tibetan music” recordings offered for sale by Amazon are of bowls played by Americans or electronic versions—“eBowls”—marketed as “New Age” and/or “World” music.²³ Recordings by Tibetans do not commonly use the bowls.²⁴

Alongside listening to singing bowl recordings, consumers can readily purchase bowls of their own (fig. 1).²⁵ There is market demand for material objects that promise spiritual as well as physical benefits.²⁶ “Tibetan” bowls are more valuable as commodities than unbranded bowls because Tibet represents access to spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being; in turn, high-end sales enhance the prestige, and thus the value, of the brand.²⁷ An Amazon search for “Tibetan Singing Bowls” on January 24, 2020 yielded over 10,000 results; individual products have as many as 5,189 reviews. Prices on Amazon range from \$5 to \$2,500.²⁸ Retailers import bowls from Nepal, China, and India; others are manufactured in the US. Most are machine-made, rather than hand-hammered, from bronze or other metallic alloys; some are shiny, but many have been artificially weathered to make them look old.²⁹ Many bowls are inscribed in Tibetan script with the

Hart (Tucson, AZ, Celestial Harmonies, 1982), *Tibetan Bells III* (Tucson, AZ, Celestial Harmonies, 1988), and *Tibetan Bells IV* (Tucson, AZ, Celestial Harmonies, 1991).

21 Congdon “Tibet Chic,” 120-121, 136; Grimes, “Tibetan Sound Bowls,” 11.

22 “Tibetan Music,” Amazon, accessed Dec. 15, 2019, https://www.amazon.com/33-Bowls-Tibetan-Singing/dp/B0060ZJ244/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=Tibetan+music&qid=1576070500&sr=8-1.

23 “Tibetan Music,” Amazon, accessed Dec. 15, 2019, [24 Congdon “Tibet Chic,” 125, 194; Grimes, “Tibetan Sound Bowls,” 111.](https://www.amazon.com/s?k=Tibetan+music&ref=nb_sb_noss; Aarts, Ouweltjes, and Bulut, “Electro-acoustic Implementation of Tibetan Bowls,” 47.</p>
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25 Hannah Harris, “Silent Mind ~ Himalayan Singing Bowls ~ Beautiful Antique Beaten Designs,” Flickr, accessed Jan. 28, 2020, CC0 1.0.

26 Grimes, “Tibetan Sound Bowls,” 3; Fabio Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 3.

27 David A. Aaker and Erich Joachimsthaler, *Brand Leadership: Building Assets in an Information Economy* (New York: Free Press, 2000), ix, 21, 49.

28 “Tibetan Singing Bowls,” Amazon, accessed Jan. 24, 2020, https://www.amazon.com/s?k=Tibetan+singing+bowls&s=review-rank&qid=1579860965&ref=sr_st_review-rank.

29 Logsang Wangdu, “Tibetan Singing Bowls: An Introduction,” *Yowangdu: Experience Tibet*, Nov. 19, 2011, <https://www.yowangdu.com/tibetan-buddhism/tibetan-singing-bowls-an-introduction.html>.



Figure 1: Tibetan Singing Bowl “Promotes Peace, Chakra Healing, and Mindfulness.” This bowl is “Amazon’s Choice” at \$40.92, averaging 4.8/5 in 2,189 reviews.

Tibetan mantra *Om mani padme hūm* [jewel in the lotus] and/or an image of the Buddha.³⁰

USES OF TIBETAN SINGING BOWLS

Metal bowls “sing” when struck with a wooden mallet or rubbed in a circular motion along the rim. The resonant tone crescendos, then diminuendos

³⁰ Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, 132; Congdon “Tibet Chic,” 2; Grimes, “Tibetan Sound Bowls,” 161.

gradually, challenging listeners to detect when precisely it starts and ends. Some listeners attest to “feeling” the vibrations before they hear the sound.³¹ Claims for the power of Tibetan singing bowls extend beyond musical tone production to holistic healing. Since “sound is a vibration . . . when a sound resonates (i.e. the pattern of its vibration is very strong), it can interact with the vibrations in the cells of our body” to “realign the cells of the body” and “restore the normal vibratory frequencies of diseased and out-of-harmony parts of the body, mind and soul.”³² As the “sides and rim of singing bowls vibrate,” their “deep and soothing” sound “resonates with the soul.” This gives bowls “power to heal not only on a physical level but also on emotional and spiritual levels,” thereby producing “healing from stress disorders, pain, depression and most forms of dis-ease.”³³ Reflecting American enthusiasm for complementary and alternative medicine, promoters market bowls as less expensive, more versatile, and more spiritually powerful than modern pharmaceuticals.³⁴

Despite, and indeed through, their mythic lineage, consumers have invested objects named Tibetan singing bowls with spiritual meanings. A revealing parallel can be drawn to religious studies scholar Brent Plate’s analysis of an even more quotidian object—bread. Plate observes that everyone who writes bread’s history feels compelled to “tell its creation story. We have no idea what actually happened in the beginning,” so “we all tell various versions of the same fictional story, a tale that begins ‘Once upon a time in ancient Egypt.’” And, yet, “at the same time, we like the mystery of being unsure of its first time and place, as it adds to the appeal of the substance, as if the unknowing is evidence itself of the long-lasting power of bread and its role in human life.”³⁵ Myth, as defined by historian of religions

31 Lederach and Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, 95, 98.

32 Clare Josa, “Meditation Bells: How Can A Sound Feel So Real?” *Clare Josa*, Sept. 30, 2012, <http://www.clarejosa.com/articles/inspirational-messages/meditation-bells-how-can-a-sound-feel-so-real/>; Jevon Dängeli, “Tibetan Singing Bowls: The Ancient Brain Entrainment Methodology for Healing and Meditation,” *Authentic Self Empowerment*, archived Feb. 11, 2012-Dec. 15, 2019, <https://jevondangeli.com/tibetan-singing-bowls-the-ancient-brain-entrainment-methodology-for-healing-and-meditation/>.

33 Clyde, “The Tibetan Singing Bowl,” *Fractal Enlightenment*, archived Oct. 16, 2010-Dec. 15, 2019, <https://fractalenlightenment.com/585/spirituality/the-tibetan-singing-bowl/>; Ohm Store, “Ohm Store Tibetan Meditation Yoga Singing Bowl Set: Helpful for Meditation, Yoga & Relaxation,” Amazon, archived April 29, 2019-Dec. 15, 2019, https://www.amazon.com/Ohm-Store-Tibetan-Meditation-Singing/dp/B01A6B01CC/ref=pd_lpo_vtph_267_bs_t_1?_encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=7MBQ8G8Z1QABR9SVI048.

34 Candy Gunther Brown, *The Healing Gods: Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Christian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

35 S. Brent Plate, *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to its Senses* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2014), 188.

Wendy Doniger, is a “story believed to have been composed in the past about an event in the past.”³⁶ Myths become “true,” suggests Plate, when told, believed, and acted upon. Plate explains that myths are “always ‘mash-ups,’ always assembled through bits, pieces, and found objects that have been borrowed, begged, stolen, and improvised.” Even if ancient Tibetans never used bowls to access spiritual power, when Americans use Tibetan singing bowls as spiritually significant things, their actions sacralize the objects. The bowls “spatialize sacred stories, give them body, allow them to be interacted with through human bodies and their sense organs.” Thus, “symbol-infused myths and rituals” such as the sounding of Tibetan singing bowls invite participants into a less stressful “world that is simultaneously here and now, just as it is part of an enduring history of ‘then and there’ all of which meshes to foster identity, belonging, and tradition.” The vibrating bowl creates “portals,” or “semi-permeable boundaries between the two worlds that allow movement back and forth,” making it possible to bring back something from that other world so that “everyday life might be transformed.”³⁷

The popularity of Tibetan singing bowls in the United States has grown apace with the rise of mindfulness meditation. Both have similar American origins: brought to the US in the 1970s by spiritual seekers returning from their travels in Asia and entering the cultural mainstream as a critique of stress-inducing technological saturation.³⁸ Used to mark the beginning and end of mindfulness meditation, the spiritual associations of Tibetan singing bowls—coupled with their visual, auditory, and tactile presence—invite participants into a liminal space of absence.³⁹ The sensory impact of Tibetan singing bowls—on the eyes, ears, skin, and viscera—is both tantalizingly foreign and comfortingly recognizable. The bowls are significant for both presence (visual and auditory, of the bowls) and absence (as vibrations slow), sound and silence, what is seen and unseen (as one closes the eyes to listen), all of which disrupt ordinary routines and transport participants into a special place and time. Participants close their eyes, the tone resounds and fades, and for precious moments, all is dark and silent. In that void, the barrage of everyday sensations dwindles to a trickle and transmutes from a flood of distractions to a reservoir of incipient insights. The sensations of one’s

36 Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics & Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 2.

37 S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 25, 24, 40-41, 7, 45.

38 Candy Gunther Brown, *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools: Reforming Secular Education or Reestablishing Religion?* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 163.

39 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969; New York Routledge, 2017), 95; Congdon “‘Tibet Chic,’” 192.

own breath, the rhythmic pulse of one's own heartbeat, the almost undetectable chirp of a bird outside take center stage with palpable intensity. The bowl sounds again, participants slowly open their eyes, stretch their limbs, and reenter the buzz of activity around them, avowedly refreshed and ready for the bustle of ordinary experience.

Mindfulness teachers typically do more than strike a Tibetan singing bowl and wait. They encourage participants to listen in a particular way—letting go of judgments of good and bad or pleasant and unpleasant, and cultivating an attitude of kindness and compassion toward oneself and others. Mindfulness is, according to founders of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Jon Kabat-Zinn) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Mark Williams), “not just ‘knowing what is happening,’ such as hearing a sound, but knowing it in a certain way—free of grasping, aversion and delusion.”⁴⁰ In Buddhist canonical teachings, grasping, aversion, and delusion are the three main poisons (*kilesas*) counteracted by the four virtues (*brahmavihāras*) of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Cultivating these virtues, for instance by meditating to the sound of a Tibetan singing bowl, reputedly alleviates suffering (*dukkha*) and spreads the *dharma*, or teachings of the Buddha.⁴¹

Whereas Tibetan singing bowl and Buddhist meditation enthusiasts such as Bodhisattva Trading Co.'s Rain Gray welcome this development as a fulfillment of prophecy, other Americans fear religious coercion. Nowhere has the coupling of Tibetan singing bowls with Buddhist mindfulness meditation been more controversial than in US public schools.

CONTROVERSIES OVER TIBETAN SINGING BOWLS

Mindful Schools is among the most influential school mindfulness programs (fig. 2).⁴² It started in Oakland, California in 2007. By 2020, Mindful Schools had trained 50,000 school teachers and 3 million students from all 50 states and 100

40 J. Mark G. Williams and Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Mindfulness: Diverse Perspectives on Its Meaning, Origins, and Multiple Applications at the Intersection of Science and Dharma,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, no. 1 (2011): 10.

41 Bhikkhu Bodhi, “The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering,” copyright 1999; reprint, *Access to Insight*, Nov. 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/waytoend.html>. Throughout this article, decisions of when to use Pāli or Sanskrit follow choices most often made in cited sources.

42 Screenshot of “‘Room to Breathe’ – Transforming a Public Middle School Community,” Mindful Schools (website), viewed Jan. 8, 2020, <https://www.mindfulschools.org/video/room-to-breathe-2/>.

countries.⁴³ The program's founders and senior leaders are themselves practicing Buddhists who learned mindfulness in Buddhist contexts.⁴⁴ Megan Cowan—co-founder and author of the Mindful Schools elementary school curriculum—spent two and one-half years as an ordained Theravāda Buddhist nun in Myanmar in the 1990s.⁴⁵ Cowan likely came across—and purchased—Tibetan singing bowls during her travels. When she began teaching mindfulness to US school children, she brought her singing bowls with her.

The 2013 documentary film, *Room to Breathe*, shows Cowan using a Tibetan singing bowl to introduce mindfulness to so-called “troubled” African American and Latino “underachievers” at a public middle school in San Francisco.⁴⁶ Cowan stands at the front of a classroom with a bronze bowl in one hand and a wooden mallet in the other. She instructs the restless adolescents to listen intently and raise their hands when they can no longer hear any sound. Initially, Cowan must overcome the “defiance” of “deliberately disruptive students.” She becomes so “frustrated” that she asks for a show of hands of those who “definitely” do not want to participate. Four students raise their hands, and Cowan sends them into the hallway temporarily. She brings them back, however, once the rest of the class becomes compliant. Cowan explains for the camera that the Mindful

43 Mindful Schools, “Home,” *Mindful Schools*, archived Apr. 11, 2009-Jan. 21, 2020, <http://www.mindfulschools.org/>.

44 Richard Shankman, “About,” *Richard Shankman*, archived Sept. 6, 2015-Dec. 15, 2019, <http://www.richardshankman.org/about/>; Shankman, “Looking Ahead: A Letter from the Interim Executive Director,” *Mindful Schools*, March 20, 2017, <http://www.mindfulschools.org/news/letter-from-the-interim-executive-director/>; Chris McKenna, interview by Ted Meissner, “The Mind Body Awareness Project,” *Secular Buddhist Association*, published October 22, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/save/https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:h1LaR6fCHdUJ:https://secularbuddhism.org/2010/10/22/episode-35-chris-mckenna-the-mind-body-awareness-project/+&c-d=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>.

45 Megan Cowan, “Body as the Vehicle for Insight: Half Day with Megan Cowan,” *Against the Stream*, October 3, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/events/1661859817383860>; Cowan, biographical profile, *Insight Meditation Center*, posted May 23, 2010, <http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/2010/05/a-benefit-for-mindful-schools-with-megan-cowan/>; Cowan, biographical profile, *Spirit Rock: An Insight Meditation Center*, accessed 2017; unavailable May 1, 2019, <https://www.spiritrock.org/InstructorDetails?calendarinstructorid=77963>; Cowan, biographical profile, archived Dec. 15, 2019, <https://www.mindfulschools.org/our-organization/>.

46 Room to Breathe, “About the Film,” *Room to Breathe*, archived Sept. 25, 2012-Dec. 15, 2019, <http://www.roomtobreathefilm.com/about-the-film/credits/index.html>; Room to Breathe, “Press & Reviews,” *Room to Breathe*, archived Sept. 25, 2012-Dec. 15, 2019, <http://www.roomtobreathefilm.com/press-and-reviews/index.html>.



Mindful Schools Why Mindfulness? Our Programs

“Room to Breathe” – Transforming a Public Middle School Community

Faced with overwhelming behavioral and learning challenges, a public middle school in San Francisco decided to try something completely different: mindfulness meditation. This is their story.

“Room to Breathe” was directed by Russell Long for PBS World Channel in 2013.

Figure 2: The *Room to Breathe* film exhibits the use of Tibetan Singing Bowls in a public middle school in San Francisco.

Schools philosophy is that “all students are present in the class even if they are the disruptive ones because we believe that they’re the ones that even might gain the most benefit.” From Cowan’s perspective, her plan works. The “chaos in the classroom” subsides as “struggling students” quiet down to listen for the sound of the bell to cease.⁴⁷ As even the most resistant students come to accept the practice, they take turns striking the bowl. Mindfulness transforms the once-troubled classroom into an oasis of calm, kindness, compassion, and productivity.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *Room to Breathe* directed by Russell Long (2013; San Francisco, CA: PBS World Channel), video.

⁴⁸ Jan Nattier, “Buddhism Comes to Main Street,” *Wilson Quarterly* (Spring 1997), <http://archive.wilsonquarterly.com/essays/buddhism-comes-main-street>.

From a more critical perspective, Cowan is a white authority figure—reminiscent of missionaries complicit in British colonialism—confident she has something her captive audience of racial and ethnic “others” need, even if they do not want it. She coerces participation—even by those students who tried to opt out at the cost of publicly identifying their desire to leave in front of their peers. A majority of Mindful Schools emissaries are US Americans of European ancestry, although there are exceptions, and enlisting people of color to teach mindfulness does not remove the risk of coercion. Mindful Schools Lead Teacher Argos Gonzalez is a public high school English teacher in New York City. Mindful Schools inspired Gonzalez to start every class period—including English classes required for graduation—with five minutes of mindfulness, ritually set apart by striking a Tibetan singing bowl. As one of Gonzalez’s students told an interviewer in 2015, she “initially refused to do the exercises, sitting defiantly while others participated. . . . Eventually, though, she realized she was alone in her resistance, and she began to go through the motions, largely because she likes and respects Gonzalez.”⁴⁹ Peer pressure and teacher authority overcame this student’s will to resist.

Mindful Schools has faced less resistance from students when using singing bowls to teach mindfulness to younger children (fig. 3).⁵⁰ The 2013 documentary film, *Healthy Habits of Mind*, follows Renee Harris, a Caucasian kindergarten teacher in Berkeley, California trained by Mindful Schools. Harris explains for the camera that “the *main* thing in our daily routine is our bell”—revealed by the video footage to be a Tibetan singing bowl. As a multi-racial group of children enters the classroom, Harris lifts up a shiny bronze bowl large enough to rest comfortably in the palms of her hands. The children settle into their “yoga circle,” sitting cross-legged in modified lotus pose (*Padmāsana*). Some children hold their hands palms up, circling their thumbs and forefingers (*jñāna mudrā*), or else they place one hand over their heart. Others emulate their teacher’s posture by pressing their palms together in front of their hearts (*añjali mudrā*). Most close their eyes. They inhale together, then collectively exhale with “one *Om*.” Harris lends a child a wooden mallet to strike the bowl. The children listen intently, one by one raising their hands once they can no longer hear the fading resonance of the bowl.⁵¹

49 Argos Gonzalez, biographical profile, *Mindful Schools*, accessed Dec. 15, 2019, <https://www.mindfulschools.org/our-organization/>; Lauren Cassani Davis, “When Mindfulness Meets the Classroom,” *The Atlantic*, August 31, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/08/mindfulness-education-schools-meditation/402469/>.

50 Abigail Batchelder, “IMG_9848,” Flickr, accessed January 28, 2020, CC BY 2.0. <https://ccsearch.creativecommons.org/photos/cc7a23f1-69a2-4f9e-975d-f45af6b3343c>.

51 “Healthy Habits of Mind,” directed by Mette Bahnsen, *Mindful Schools* (2013; Aarhus, Denmark: Persona Film), <http://www.mindfulschools.org/resources/healthy-habits-of-mind/>.



Figure 3: Child sounding a Tibetan singing bowl.

For school teachers watching the video, Harris emphasizes that the “mindful bell” is a special object. She cautions: “Never use the bell to get them quiet. Keep the bell as something that is more *special* than that.” It should only be used “when you are doing mindfulness,” because “then it becomes this sort of *significant* sound that they start to *associate*” with mindfulness. Harris elaborates that “I do visit the bell *every day*. And that’s kind of like our little check up every day. And then I can bring in these *larger lessons* . . . and they are successful I think because we have checked up with the bell along the way and kept mindfulness going, but it’s just shorter and more *direct*.” Harris envisions the bowl as “special” and “significant” in its associations; it is the “main” component of daily routines because it cultivates “direct” experiences that make children more receptive to “larger lessons.” One such larger lesson is “heartfulness”—the Mindful Schools term for meditation scripts developed in Buddhist traditions to cultivate

loving-kindness (*mettā*), one of four main virtues.⁵² Eyes closed and hands folded, Harris's students "send good thoughts" to sick classmates and those who have "already passed [died]" by chanting scripted blessings in unison: "May you be happy. May you be healthy, and may you be peaceful."⁵³

Peacefulness is, according to Mindful Schools promotional materials, one of the key benefits of using Tibetan singing bowls to induce a mindful state of being. The 2016 film *Release*, produced by Mindful Schools trainee Julie Bayer Salzman, offers a five-minute "visceral/experiential" encounter. The film seeks to "visually communicate the differences between calm and anxious states of mind/body, so that viewers could truly relate to those experiences while simultaneously benefiting from a basic lesson in Mindful Meditation."⁵⁴ The film opens with interviews of middle schoolers discussing the stresses of life at home and school. Salzman frames these interviews with progressively intensifying lights, sounds, and movements—rapidly changing numbers on a stop watch, a fire truck flashing its multi-colored sirens, a cooking pot boiling over, and adolescents wringing their hands, biting their nails, and spinning in circles on a playground ride. The mayhem stops abruptly when someone strikes a Tibetan singing bowl with a wooden mallet. The film transitions to a quiet room, with a lit candle at its center, encircled by a group of middle schoolers sitting cross-legged in modified lotus position. Calming music plays in the background. The teacher instructs the adolescents to close their eyes and "bring your hand up to your chest placing it over your heart" as they begin to meditate. After the exercise, the middle schoolers smile at the camera and talk about how mindfulness has helped them to feel more peaceful.⁵⁵

Films like *Release* amplify the vibrations of Tibetan singing bowls across time and space. For example, in 2017, a public middle school in Bloomington, Indiana showed *Release* to its entire student body during an advisory period. Classroom teachers did not need physical bowls because the film portrays their appearance, sound, and positive connotations. The local curriculum introduced "mindfulness" as a "non-religious proven practice to reduce stress" and directed classroom

52 Thorsten Barnhofer, Tobias Chittka, Helen Nightingale, Claire Visser, and Catherine Crane, "State Effects of Two Forms of Meditation on Prefrontal EEG Asymmetry in Previously Depressed Individuals," *Mindfulness* 1, no. 1 (2010): 21–27; Donald McCown, *The Ethical Space of Mindfulness in Clinical Practice: An Explanatory Essay* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2013), 52.

53 Bahnsen, "Healthy Habits of Mind."

54 Julie Bayer Salzman, "Biographical profile," Mindful Schools, Jan. 26, 2015, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVA2N6tX2cg>.

55 J. B. Salzman, *Release*, Aug. 23, 2016, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVWRvVH5gBQ&feature=youtu.be>.

teachers to lead their students in meditating along with the students in the film.⁵⁶ One eighth-grade boy reported to his father—an evangelical Christian pastor—that students were told to “breathe deeply” and “let their feet connect with the earth” as the film played. Despite being framed as “non-religious,” meditating to the sound of a Tibetan singing bowl struck this child as not only “religious” but also stress-inducing because he perceived the required activity as coercive and as conflicting with his own religion. The father complained to the school principal about the absence of an informed consent process or opt-out provisions, and the school’s refusal to “accommodate” his request for a copy of the full curriculum or notification of when the next lesson would be taught.⁵⁷

Although this Indiana parent’s complaints stopped short of legal action, parents in other school districts have threatened lawsuits. For example, in 2016, a Christian parent and school board member in Massachusetts retained an attorney from the conservative Christian “National Center for Law & Policy”—the same attorney, Dean Broyles, who in 2013 had unsuccessfully sued a California school district for teaching Ashtanga yoga.⁵⁸ Broyles served a legal memorandum alleging that the Massachusetts “Calmer Choice” program violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment by endorsing religious practices.⁵⁹ Since the mid-twentieth century, the Supreme Court has ruled that public schools may not endorse religious practices such as prayer and Bible reading; certain Christians argue that the same standards should apply to practices rooted in other religious and spiritual traditions.⁶⁰ Broyles did not follow through, but

56 Jackson Creek Middle School, “Lesson #1 - August: What is Stress, Mindfulness,” *Stress Management Curriculum*, August 2017, 2.

57 Informant, e-mail to author, August 21, 2017.

58 *Sedlock v. Baird*, Superior Court of San Diego County, No. 37-2013-00035910-CU-MC-CTL (2013), 235 Cal. App. 4th 874 (2015).

59 Dean R. Broyles, *Legal & Practical Concerns Regarding the District’s Calmer Choice Mindfulness Curriculum: To Superintendent Woodbury & Members of the Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District School Committee* (Escondido, CA: National Center for Law & Policy), February 2, 2016, <http://www.capecodtimes.com/assets/pdf/CC190322.pdf>.

60 See, for example, *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 US 422 (1962) and *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp*, 374 US 203 (1963); Sarah Barringer Gordon, “The New Age and the New Law: *Malnak v. Yogi*, Transcendental Meditation and the Definition of Religion,” in *Law and Religion: Cases in Context*, ed. Leslie C. Griffin, 11–31 (New York: Wolters Kluwer, 2010); Gordon, *The Spirit of the Law: Religious Voices and the Constitution in Modern America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 15–17, 210; Steven K. Green, *The Bible, the School, and the Constitution: The Clash That Shaped Modern Church-State Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 20–23, 93; Kent Greenawalt, *Does God Belong in Public Schools?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University

in 2019, the conservative Christian “American Center for Law & Justice,” led by attorney Jay Sekulow (coordinator of President Donald Trump’s personal legal team), publicly contemplated litigating school mindfulness.⁶¹

When American Buddhist converts and sympathizers began marketing “secular” mindfulness in the 1980s, they sought to avoid controversy by subtracting religious-sounding language and adding scientific framing. For example, Jon Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program translates *dukkha*—the first of the Buddhist Four Noble Truths—as “stress,” rather than as “suffering.”⁶² Public school mindfulness curricula omitted terms like Buddhism, meditation, *dharmā*, *dukkha*, and *mettā*, and cited scientific studies reporting physical and mental health benefits. Despite the Protestant, “Word”-orientation of American culture and constitutional jurisprudence, by the 2010s even secular mindfulness programs that had removed religious language were provoking public criticisms by Christians, atheists, and certain Buddhists in the US and Canada.⁶³ In trying to identify what “felt” religious about practices stripped of religious terminology, critics like the Indiana parent cited above seized on objects such as Tibetan singing bowls that appeared to symbolize foreign, ancient, non-Christian religion.

In response to complaints, by the mid-2010s Mindful Schools and similar programs began reconsidering their methods—including their use of objects such as Tibetan singing bowls. Mindful Schools Director of Programs Matthew Brensilver (who learned meditation in Śambhalaḥ and Vipassanā Buddhist traditions) published “Guidelines for Secular Teaching of Mindfulness” in 2016 (revised in 2019). The document insists that Mindful Schools is a “thoroughly secular articulation of mindfulness.”⁶⁴ Brensilver disavows imposing a “com-

Press, 2005), 20, 49–50; Daniel O. Conkle, *Religion, Law, and the Constitution* (St. Paul, MN: Foundation, 2016), 2, 3, 22, 40, 43, 69, 79, 163, 165, 170; Brown, *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness*, 19–38.

61 Candy Gunther Brown, “Conservative Legal Groups are Suing Public School Yoga and Mindfulness Programs,” *The Washington Post*, July 10, 2019.

62 Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR, Skillful Means and the Trouble with Maps,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, no. 1 (2011): 288.

63 Brown, *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness*, 161–208; Edward Tabash, quoted in Nick Street, “Take a Breath,” *LA Times*, July 25, 2007, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-jul-25-oe-street25-story.html>; Richard Stafford, comment on Ray Chwarkowski, “Please Remove Mindfulness Programs (inc. MindUP) from Canadian Public Schools,” *Change.org*, July 24, 2016, https://www.change.org/p/minister-of-education-please-remove-the-mindfulness-program-from-canadian-public-schools?source_location=minibar.

64 Matthew Brensilver, biographical profile, *Insight Meditation Center*, archived June 5, 2013–Dec. 15, 2019, <http://www.audiodharma.org/teacher/231/>; Brensilver, “Dharma

prehensive” system of belief or ethics, promoting “claims about metaphysics,” or “making particular gestures with one’s hands, bowing” or “using religious props” — such as Tibetan singing bowls. In the wake of the Massachusetts Calmer Choice challenge, program founder Fiona Jensen convened a working group to compose a list of practices likely to “offend.” The group reasoned that “if we don’t know where the landmines are, we’re going to step on them.” Jensen’s list of practices to “avoid” because they fail the “litmus test” of secularity includes “loving-kindness” scripts, “*Tibetan bowls*, namaste hands, mudras, mantras.”⁶⁵ Another respondent to the Calmer Choice controversy, Inner Kids founder Susan Kaiser Greenland, published “Church & State: Is the Mindfulness, Meditation or Yoga Program in Your School Secular?” Greenland urges leaving at “home any objects that might have an express or implied religious connotation,” such as “*singing bowls* or finger cymbals.”⁶⁶ Patricia Jennings, a professor of education at the University of Virginia (and life-long meditation practitioner, although she does not identify as a Buddhist), published “Recommendations for Best Practices to Ensure Secularity” in 2016 (which she had been developing before the Calmer Choice controversy).⁶⁷ Jennings advises against focusing attention on the sound of a “bell from a religious tradition (such as a *Tibetan bowl* or cymbals used in Tibetan Buddhist rituals).” Guidelines single out objects like Tibetan singing bowls as failing the litmus test of secularity due to their “express or implied religious connotation,” origin in “religious tradition,” and use in “Tibetan Buddhist

Talks,” *Dharma Seed*, archived June 15, 2013–Dec. 15, 2019, <http://dharmaseed.org/teacher/496/>; Matthew Brensilver, “Guidelines for Secular Teaching of Mindfulness,” *Mindful Schools*, September 6, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170917091855/http://www.mindfulschools.org/foundational-concepts/secularity/>, revised Jan. 1, 2019, <http://www.mindfulschools.org/foundational-concepts/secularity/>.

65 Fiona Jensen, “Facing Pushback on Mindfulness in Schools,” *Omega Institute*, July 29, 2016, <https://www.eomega.org/node/17016>.

66 Susan Kaiser Greenland, “Church & State: Is the Mindfulness, Meditation or Yoga Program in Your School Secular?” *Susan Kaiser Greenland*, archived Feb. 22, 2016–Dec. 15, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160807215936/http://www.susankaisergreenland.com/blog/is-your-school-based-mindfulness-meditation-or-yoga-program-secular.html>.

67 Patricia Jennings, “Mindfulness-Based Programs and the American Public School System: Recommendations for Best Practices to Ensure Secularity,” *Mindfulness* 7, no. 1 (2016): 176–78; Jennings, interview by Matt Welsh, “Q & A with Patricia Jennings, Author of Mindfulness for Teachers,” *Spiritual Media Blog*, April 28, 2015, <http://www.spiritualmediablog.com/2015/04/28/q-a-with-patricia-jennings-author-of-mindfulness-for-teachers/>; Jennings, “Education for Peace: Transforming our Schools with Mindfulness and Compassion,” Mind & Life Institute International Symposium for Contemporary Research, Nov. 11, 2018; Jennings, personal communications to author, Nov. 8, 2019, Jan. 28, 2020.

rituals.” As of 2020, a transition is underway, but there are still school mindfulness programs that use singing bowls.

None of the voices affirming the specialness of Tibetan singing bowls, complaining that they are religiously coercive, or cautioning that their religious connotations feed controversy appears to be aware of the recency of their invention as *American* religious symbols. Controversies over whether it is appropriate to bring things that symbolize ancient, foreign religions into US public schools are ironic in part because the most disputed objects were probably never used in Buddhist rituals in Tibet, and the history of their use in American religious practices is just fifty years old. During the third quarter of the twentieth century, Tibetan singing bowls physically represented romanticized longings for ancient, Asian spirituality and critiques of modern American technological materialism.

By the early decades of the twenty-first century, mindfulness had become so mainstream that leaders forged partnerships with technological giants such as Google and Microsoft.⁶⁸ The significance of Tibetan singing bowls is again shifting as films like *Release*, “eBowls,” and cell phone apps threaten the physical bowls with obsolescence. The leader of a meditation session at the 2019 Mindful Leadership Summit in Washington D.C. did not bring a singing bowl, relying instead on her cell phone chime to signal the beginning and end of the practice.⁶⁹ Mindful Leader’s CEO, Mo Edjlali, told the author that many people in the mindfulness community had simply taken Tibetan singing bowls for granted as how they learned to practice since the 1970s; only in the mid-2010s were leaders realizing that singing bowls are inessential objects the removal of which could calm controversies.⁷⁰ Perhaps the looseness with which the current generation of American mindfulness leaders holds their singing bowls is a product of their recency. It is hard to imagine protesting American Christians being as willing to dispense with Bibles, even in the face of legal challenges.

CONCLUSION

Tibetan singing bowls offer a revealing window onto American religion: exemplifying the themes of creativity, commodification, and controversy. Beginning in

68 Marissa Levin, “Why Google, Nike, and Apple Love Mindfulness Training, and How You Can Easily Love It Too, June 12, 2018, <https://www.inc.com/marissa-levin/why-google-nike-and-apple-love-mindfulness-training-and-how-you-can-easily-love-.html>.

69 Fieldwork by author at Mindful Leadership Summit, Washington D.C., Nov. 16, 2019, https://www.asbcouncil.org/event/2019-mindful-leadership-summit?gclid=Cj0KCQiA0NfvBRCVARIsAO4930lNe97oLYkrQRS6XLh45HAFEBEDCHrdunVgQKfZx_bp8eod9B1j7ckaArfWEALw_wcB.

70 Mo Edjlali, personal communication to author, Oct. 16, 2019.

the 1970s, Asian and American sellers and American buyers created the concept of “Tibetan Singing Bowls” and invested material objects so-denoted with spiritual-scientific meanings that made them into valuable commodities. As newly invented symbols of ancient Tibetan Buddhism, American Buddhist converts and sympathizers, as well as other spiritual seekers, used the bowls to facilitate meditative experiences. When mindfulness missionaries sought to spread the *dharma* by introducing “secular mindfulness” into the cultural mainstream, they replaced Buddhist with scientific vocabulary while continuing to use the bowls in ritualized ways. But because these objects had come to represent ancient Tibetan Buddhism, other Americans, particularly conservative Christians, complained of religious coercion.

This cultural history illustrates how modern interest in “spirituality” and “science” overlap, while exhibiting the malleability of concepts of “religion” and “secularity.” Promotional materials validate spiritual as well as physical benefits of apparently ancient objects by appealing to modern scientific research. In this interpretive context, science does not replace but rather confirms the value of spirituality. Soon after the US Supreme Court stripped the educational landscape and soundscape of Bibles read devotionally in the 1960s, Tibetan singing bowls began appearing in classrooms alongside chalk, pencils, scissors, and glue. The bowls generated interest—as well as controversy—because of their seemingly ancient, spiritual-yet-scientific mystique. Ironically, the “secularization” of American mindfulness practices in the mid-2010s has featured the removal of “religious” objects that were only recently conceptualized as either spiritual or religious. It remains to be seen whether Tibetan singing bowls will, by certain accounts, continue to fulfill ancient prophecy by spreading the *dharma* to America, or whether their resonant tones will soon fade into an enduring silence.