

THEME 02

# Contemporary spirituality is all about the self

SPIRITUALITY

SELF-IMPROVEMENT  
MARKET

MENTAL HEALTH

All sorts of practices that are rooted in spirituality, such as meditation, mindfulness, yoga and astrology, are gaining popularity in the West. The rise of spirituality is traditionally explained by the decline of religion, driving people who want to find meaning and depth in life from religion to spirituality. However, these practices are currently often exercised without the legacy of their spiritual roots, which makes this explanation rather unsatisfying. The appeal of these practices in our time is therefore increasingly linked to other phenomena.

## Our observations

- According to the [National Center for Health Statistics](#) (U.S.), yoga and meditation are now officially the most popular alternative health approaches in the United States, each used by around 35 million adults. The growth is partly linked to better availability, with a boom in studios, classes, and apps, some of them free and online. Not only adults are increasingly practicing yoga and meditation; children aged 4-17 are also practicing more often. Yoga and meditation have their roots in ancient traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism.
- A theory of tidying up our everyday belongings, now known as KonMari, has become very popular due to Marie Kondo's [bestseller book](#) and [Netflix series](#). Her idea is based on the Japanese Shinto philosophy, an ancient religion of Japan. In 2015, Time called her one of the 100 most influential people of the world.
- The use of astrology in more commercial services that go beyond the typical weekly sun-sign column in a newspaper is on the rise. Amazon, for example, recently started [sending out monthly horoscopes](#) to its prime members, brimming with suggestions to spend money on Amazon products. Spotify has launched a partnership with astrologer and blogger (about 1 million readers a month) Chani Nicolas for streaming "[Cosmic Playlists](#)" that are informed by astrological readings. Dating app Bumble, founded by Whitney Wolfe Herd, who co-founded Tinder, recently allowed its users to [filter on zodiac-signs](#), which has been applauded by many of its users. Astrology apps such as [Co-Star](#) and [Sanctuary](#) have [recently attracted serious investors](#) and their memberships are rapidly growing. Popular astrologers today include [Sally Brompton](#), whose daily koans in the New York Post have a loyal cult following, and Susan Miller, whose monthly horoscopes on [astrologyzone.com](#) get 20 million page views a month.
- The [teachings of Meister Eckhart](#), a 14th century mystic, regained popularity in our time first thanks to bestselling author Eckhart Tolle, who is known for his message of focusing on (the power of) the now, and more recently due to the practice of mindfulness that is currently very popular in the West.
- Mindfulness has attracted the attention [of science](#) and clues were found that practicing mindfulness reduces stress and anxiety. Mindfulness is therefore increasingly being applied to improve mental health in large organizations such as [Google](#) and the U.S. military, which has started a trial in which [mindfulness is practiced](#) in order for soldiers to focus and to reduce post-traumatic stress.
- Meditation-apps (e.g. [Headspace](#)), mindfulness, the books of Mari Kondo, etc. can be classified as part of the [self-improvement market](#), a market that contains products and services that seek to improve us physically, mentally, financially or spiritually. This market also contains, for example, devices that count our steps, record our REM cycles, measure our breathing patterns and weight loss programs. Although this market has performed rather weakly in general for the past few years, mainly because of disappointing diet programs, the sections in which spiritual practices fall, such as self-improvement apps and books are in the top 9 segments. 5.6% average yearly gains are forecast from 2016 to 2022, when the overall market value should increase to \$13.2 billion in the U.S.



## Connecting the dots

Nowadays, it might seem evident that people adopt practices such as meditation or mindfulness in order to improve themselves (e.g. to reduce stress or anxiety), but considering the aims of the spiritual origins of these practices, it is not. Ironically, the pursuit of personal improvement is something to overcome in the preceding ancient practices. The “self” in “self-improvement” would be characterized as a false self in the teachings of, for example, Buddhism or Meister Eckhart. Finding one’s true self requires a highly spiritual condition (e.g. enlightenment), in which our personalities, including goals such as weight loss, overcoming fear and stress or optimizing personal performances have disappeared completely. These more ancient contexts have faded into the background in the application of spiritual practices that are popular today. Even in the use of astrology, which does allow for the pursuit of a better personal life, the connection with more traditional values such as directing people to live in a certain way, accepting a personal destiny, or understanding of oneself, has faded. It is instead applied to provide simple, ad-hoc and practical advice on, for example, shopping, career decisions, or accepting or dismissing a potential partner based on his or her sun-sign. In many of these modern versions of spiritual practices, improving one’s life is the main promise, rather than spirituality in the more traditional sense.

The promise of self-improvement, however, does not explain why particularly practices that are rooted in spirituality have reached such high levels of popularity, especially considering the scientific worldview that is dominant in the West. Explanations point to the combination of the simple and practical nature of these practices on the one hand, and the confusing and stressful times we are facing on the other hand. Professor Carl Cederström, who studied the self-improvement market, for example, argues that the success of Mari Kondo’s work can be explained by its offer of simple and practical adjustments to one’s everyday life (e.g. tidying your home) that promises to have a big impact (a more ordered and happier life). This is very welcome in a time in which the social and political environment seem stuck and people may think that very little is likely to improve on a large scale any time soon.

In the same line of thought, sociologist Daniel Nehring has noted how people started to forget about material success and focus on their wellbeing (post-materialism) when the

Great Recession took hold. He says this general inward turn also laid the groundwork for the mindfulness movement and Marie Kondo’s success. With the absence of religion or other institutions that used to provide structure and guidance in times of stress and uncertainty, these practices provide the possibility to narrow down our world and regain a sense of control by practicing simple and feasible activities that promise to deliver instant improvement or change of our personal lives. In this sense, it seems that it is not so much depth and meaning that are missed with the decline of religion, but rather a sense of control. This explanation is supported by, for example, the exponential [increase of download rates](#) of the popular meditation-app Headspace since the election of President Donald Trump. The impact of this particular election was also pinpointed as a reason why people have become [more open to astrology](#), which has the potential to create some sense of structure and stability in one’s life. So, instead of experiencing a sense of control by going to church and praying for a better life, we practice mindfulness or start tidying up our belongings. Finally, anthropology professor Christopher Kovats-Bernat argues that the popularity of these practices is connected to the openness of social media, which allows us to question authority and creates an environment less tolerant of the hierarchical systems that are present in, for example, religion. The openness that surrounds spiritually originated practices regarding someone’s background, personal beliefs or daily occupations is in line with this contemporary [rejection of hierarchal structures](#) and the longing for free dialogue.

The shift from deeply spiritual practices towards a more neutral or secular application of, for example, mindfulness, is increasingly [being criticized](#). Not only because of the disconnection from spiritual legacy and focus on self-improvement, but also because of the hidden danger of negatively impacting someone’s personal life or society in general. Instead of the original values of, for example, Buddhism (e.g. compassion, letting go of ego-attachment, etc.), the lack of the spiritual legacy in mindfulness can [increase self-centeredness](#) because of its focus on self-improvement, enable organizations to subdue employee unrest, promote a tacit acceptance of the status quo, or it can be used as a tool to keep attention focused on institutional goals.

## Implications

- If confusing and stressful times drive the popularity of practices such as mindfulness or astrology, their popularity is not likely to decline any time soon. [Mental health issues](#) are increasing, due to, for example, political turbulence, our [current future shock](#) and overwhelming topics such as [climate change](#) and an [infocalypse](#). Climate change, for example, has caused so-called [eco-anxiety](#), as some experts have noted that concern and a sense of powerlessness about climate change have increased public anxiety. An infocalypse (e.g. the impossibility of separating manipulated content from real content) can cause people to experience anxiety too, because the ability to understand or anticipate information is lost. In order to regain control, mindfulness, yoga, tidying up our belongings, etc. can offer relief and reinstall a sense of control.
- The rise of critical notes on contemporary spirituality (e.g. a vehicle for solipsism and an excuse for self-indulgence), is currently overruled by the positive impact it has on mental health issues (especially mindfulness). However, in order to keep a positive reputation aside from psychological benefits, some of the more traditional values such as compassion and acceptance might be reinforced in contemporary spirituality.