

# Secular mindfulness: potential & pitfalls

Article

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## **Introduction**

Imagine for a moment that you are a health & fitness trainer—you work with people who go the gym regularly and work out daily, to support them in their efforts to cultivate a perfectly-toned body. Over the past few years you've noticed that many other people in society are beginning to do some exercise—they don't work out daily, but perhaps they attend a weekly yoga class or go cycling on the weekend. In fact you can hardly open a newspaper these days without reading about the latest study on the benefits of exercise. What would you think? “This is pathetic, these people aren't really keeping fit, they'll never get a perfect body just by going out on their bike once a week...” Or: “Isn't it great that so many people are finding ways to exercise at a level that suits them—they won't get a perfect body, but they'll be healthier than if they did no exercise. And some of these people do eventually come to the gym.” It's an imperfect metaphor, but it is a similarly strange experience when something you have practiced for many years and highly value, but that used to be very much a minority interest, emerges into mainstream culture and begins to “go viral”. It almost seems as

if everyone is doing it, apparently including Bill Clinton, Russell Brand, Google employees, and even the US Marines. We may have mixed feelings about this explosion of interest in mindfulness. As Rebecca Crane from Bangor Centre for Mindfulness (the UK's leading training center for MBSR and MBCT) said at their 2011 conference, with regard to the convergence of Dharma and scientific psychology that informs MBSR & MBCT: "As in all cross-cultural marriages, both sets of parents have some concerns."



## **Background**

The field of mindfulness-based programs and therapies is perhaps the most widespread current example of how a Buddhist practice has been secularised. This all basically stems from the initial vision of Jon Kabat-Zinn, on a retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, in 1979, when he asked himself the question: “*..how to take the heart of something as meaningful, as sacred if you will, as Buddha-dharma and bring it into the world in a way that doesn't dilute, profane or distort it, but at the same time is not locked into a culturally and tradition-bound framework that would make it absolutely impenetrable to the vast majority of people, who are nevertheless suffering and might find it extraordinarily useful and liberative.*”<sup>1</sup>

This led him to develop the eight-week course that came to be called “Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction” (MBSR). In the early years it was a small and relatively unknown program; it came to public attention with Kabat-Zinn's first book *Full Catastrophe Living* in 1990, and Bill Moyers's documentary “Healing from Within” in 1993. In the 1990s MBSR came to the attention of Zindel Segal, John Teasdale, and Mark Williams who were developing a cognitive-behavior therapy approach to the prevention of relapse in major depression; they went to train with Kabat-Zinn and over some years developed Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) which has been shown in clinical trials to be effective for preventing relapse in recurrent depression. In more recent years, mindfulness in various forms has been taught in programs offered in schools, in many kinds of organisations and businesses, and to the general public. I will use the term “secular mindfulness” (or “mindfulness-based programs,” MBPs) to refer to all these developments, though I am drawing mainly from my experience of teaching MBSR and MBCT in physical and mental health care.

The people who teach these programs fall into three main categories:

- 1) People working in these various fields who had previous experience of Buddhist meditation, for whom MBPs provide a way to combine these interests and bring Dharma into their work. This is my situation, having been a clinical psychologist and meditation practitioner for many years when I discovered Kabat-Zinn's work and began training.
- 2) People working in these fields who had little or no previous experience of meditation before undertaking training in MBPs. They might initially see mindfulness as just another therapy technique, but training courses emphasise the importance of personal mindfulness practice as a foundation for teaching, and increasingly include some retreat experience and teaching on Buddhist psychology.
- 3) Buddhist teachers who see an opportunity to extend meditation teaching to a wider population than would previously have come to their classes. This raises the question of what additional skills are needed to work with specific populations, e.g. with medical or mental health needs, when teachers may have little prior training or experience with these groups.

Several disciplines come together in the broad endeavour of "secular mindfulness," including Buddhism, psychology, therapy, and science. One of my colleagues compared it to a "square dance," a metaphor that does not privilege one or other position, but emphasises the dynamic nature of the dialogue and the importance of knowing where we are positioned at any particular time. Unfortunately what often seems to occur is, at one extreme, an uncritical convergence of different fields in Buddhism and psychological or neurological science, as if meditation can only be a valid activity if it can be shown to affect the brain. Scientific studies

are important to provide the kind of evidence Western medicine and psychology look for in order to recommend something as legitimate activity in healthcare, and may help us unravel which aspects of practice are more effective. However there are aspects of the language and methodology of science that don't sit so well with what goes on in MBPs. There is somewhat of a paradox in measuring the efficacy of these programs when the essential difference between them and other therapeutic interventions is the goal-less quality of not trying to fix things—mindfulness instead entails a change in how we relate to our experience, and its results are gained through dropping the struggle to get results. As Ed Halliwell wrote on his blog<sup>2</sup>, this nuance probably won't be found in the newspaper reports of the latest study of the benefits of mindfulness, and the reader won't understand it unless they have practiced themselves.

At the other extreme we find a polarization of views, sometimes including assumptions about the other position that set up straw men to be attacked, such as the common accusation that teachers of MBPs see mindfulness as merely “being in the present” or “bare attention” when in fact—like Dharma teachers—they define mindfulness in a wide variety of ways. To quote just one example: *“The essence of mindfulness is to be fully aware of our experience in each moment, equally open to whatever it has to offer and free of the domination of habitual, automatic, cognitive routines that are often goal-oriented and, in one form or another, related to wanting things to be other than they are.”*<sup>3</sup> There is a depth of psychological theory underpinning approaches such as MBCT, which is based on a specific and empirically supported theory of how depressive relapse happens. Not only is there more to Buddhism than mindfulness, there is more to most MBPs than mindfulness.



### **MBPs & Dharma—the usual discourse:**

This debate has by now been played out enough times, in Buddhist journals and meetings of Dharma teachers, that I think we can begin to recognize a familiar pattern of arguments. Concerns expressed by traditional Dharma teachers include:

- MBPs are said to be diluting the Dharma, watering down the radical teachings of the Buddha into some sort of “Dharma-lite” and offering a “one-fold path,” without reference to the other limbs of the eight-fold path.
- Clinicians and researchers may become mindfulness teachers with relatively little training, compared to the years of practice, including long retreats, generally thought necessary in the Dharma world.
- MBP teachers are often seen as neglecting the importance of ethics in the Buddhist psychology that underpins mindfulness, which

of course in the tradition is always implicitly *samma-sati*, right or appropriate mindfulness. Applications in profit-oriented businesses or in the military tend to fuel this suspicion.

- Secular mindfulness teachers may not be aware of the kinds of things that can come up for people practicing meditation—both problematic spiritual emergencies and profound insights—and won't know how to guide people with these (though many are of course mental health therapists).

These concerns are reflected in some recent articles in *Tricycle*, which appear to be indicative of some Buddhist backlash against secular mindfulness—and indeed secular Buddhism, which is, rightly or not, seen as part of the same cultural trend. For example, Linda Heuman's<sup>4</sup> discussion of the assumptions of the modern age begins by asking why, if there is a solution to the suffering of *samsara*, do we want to spend time exploring whether meditation can lower blood pressure; and Donald Lopez<sup>5</sup> who argues that the goal of meditation is not stress reduction but “*stress induction... the result of a profound dissatisfaction with the world.*”

However the world of scientific psychology and therapy has its own concerns, including:

- The mindfulness bandwagon is seen to be hurtling along on the basis of relatively little solid scientific evidence of its efficacy for many of the clinical populations it is being offered to, and there is a lack of critical analysis of some of the science, at least as reported in the mass media.
- Is the growth of MBPs really secular or is it “stealth Buddhism” (as one British newspaper called it); there is suspicion that Buddhists may be secretly imposing their religious views in the guise of healthcare or psychology.

It is partly in response to such views that pioneers of secular mindfulness tended to under-state the Buddhist roots of these programs and to avoid the “B” word in case it put people off or caused problems with service managers. This might well have been a skillful means, but perhaps fuelled some of the concerns of Dharma teachers.

Those of us who teach MBPs and are committed to offering this work with integrity also have concerns about the mindfulness “bandwagon,” such as:

- How are instructors trained, and do they and their managers understand the need for personal practice and experience, or do they see mindfulness as just another therapeutic “tool” that they want to get into their organization at minimal cost?
- Who are the people it is being offered to, and—particularly in mental health settings—is this based on a clear and evidence-based rationale of how mindfulness relates to their particular needs; without this is there potential for harm?
- Might some Buddhist groups or teachers be jumping on the secular mindfulness bandwagon for their own reasons, such as recruitment or increasing revenue? Perhaps this too may be a skillful means, but it is noticeable that publicity material of almost any Buddhist tradition now tends to talk about stress-management, mindfulness, or psychological well-being, in a way that wasn’t the case ten or fifteen years ago. Conversely, some Dharma teachers may be reluctant to use the term “mindfulness,” despite its centrality to all areas of practice, because they don’t wish to be misunderstood or associated with secular MBPs.





### **Responses:**

Those of us who teach MBPs and see its benefits for participants generally reply to the concerns expressed above by Dharma teachers with arguments such as the following:

- We might say we aren't claiming to offer the whole Dharma, just using one aspect of practice as a therapeutic method.
- We might say we are working with a completely different client group—e.g. people with chronic illness, or business leaders, or stressed teens—who would be unlikely to turn up at Buddhist retreat centers or classes and might find them inappropriate due to their own religious beliefs.
- We might point out that some participants do later go on to access Buddhist classes and retreats and deepen their practice. At my local retreat centre, Gaia House in the UK, recent years have seen an increase in the numbers of people coming on retreats

and many of them have started with a secular eight-week course. MBPs are apparently not pulling people away from traditional retreats.

- I would add that key Dharma teachings and practices are implicit in MBPs even if not explicit, for example:
  - The eight-week MBSR or MBCT course includes:
    - cultivation of embodied awareness; recognizing feeling tone and how we react to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences; identifying how strong emotions are felt in the body and using this to be less pulled into ruminative thinking.
  - At its heart is the link between craving/aversion and suffering, and the distinction between the “two arrows”<sup>6</sup> of primary and secondary suffering, so the emphasis is on how we relate to our experience rather than trying to change the experience itself.
  - Although we wouldn’t use the terminology of the three *lakkhanas* when teaching MBPs, through the practice people often do come to realize the changing and evanescent nature of their experiences, and are therefore able to sit more loosely to pleasure and pain and be less identified with their experience, for example less defined by thoughts such as: “I am a depressive person”.
  - There is an emphasis on the importance of cultivating kindness and compassion, not just as a meditation practice (which may or may not be taught directly in MBPs) but as an essential quality of mindfulness that is modelled by the instructor’s attitude to the

participants. No experience is criticized, and the tendency to harsh self-blame is recognized and gently undermined. “Non-judgmental” (an aspect of many definitions of mindfulness that is often scorned by traditional Dharma teachers) doesn’t imply that we do not discern that some mind-states, such as anxious rumination, are unhelpful. It means that we learn not to judge ourselves as stupid or hopeless for having them. Self-compassion is often one of the strongest aspects of what people say they’ve learned from the course.

- Clear comprehension—*sampajañña*—is also implicit, insofar as mindfulness is seen as not just being present to our experience but deeply inquiring into it; this is very much part of MBCT and MBSR as I’ve learned and taught them, though it isn’t always clear in the way the term mindfulness is used in secular settings.

The key question is what is the impact on participants. The aim of mindfulness-based programs is the relief of suffering—central to how the Buddha described his teaching. This may not be phrased in terms of “complete enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings” but how many Dharma students achieve this?—many do not see it as a realistic or even helpful aim, especially when there is much disagreement in the tradition about what it might mean.

Teachers of MBPs are probably influenced less by the scientific outcome studies than by some of the things group participants say at the end of the course, such as, to quote just a couple of examples:

*“After sixteen years of recurrent depression I had resigned myself to it—now I really don’t believe I will feel that way again;”* or: *“If I hadn’t learned mindfulness I don’t know how I’d be able to handle having been diagnosed with terminal cancer.”* Of course not everyone finds these programs so helpful, but if they are helping some people with long-standing depression, or in the face of death, it’s hard to dismiss that as Dharma-lite.

Perhaps “diluting” is not always be a bad thing—it can make strong medicine palatable. However even if we agree that MBPs are not really diluted Dharma, there may be more well-founded concerns about “diluted mindfulness,” i.e. superficial teaching based on minimal experience. Because mindfulness is fashionable at the moment, there is no doubt that some people are trying it out clinically with limited experience. This has always been the case with any innovations in psychological therapy; in my experience, most therapists with any integrity soon realize they don’t really know what they’re doing and either drop it or seek further training.

However perhaps the worst-case scenario with regard to the current popularity of mindfulness is that through poor teaching it could become devalued and judged as ineffectual. One key motivation for many of the experienced Dharma practitioners and teachers involved in teaching and training of MBPs is to try to prevent this outcome.





### **An alternative discourse**

There are pitfalls whenever anything profound and precious enters the mainstream; it can't help but be at times misrepresented and misunderstood. But that can tend to put those of us who teach MBPs on the defensive—especially those of us who also teach in the Dharma world—so that our responses to our critics, such as those listed above, tend to have a somewhat apologetic quality.

We could however take a bolder and more radical stance, according to which secular mindfulness is one way of freeing some essential and liberating teachings and practices of the Dharma from the unhelpful accretions of cultural and religious Buddhism. If the Buddha's teachings are essentially about enabling us to see our habitual tendencies more clearly, to realize how we tend to relate to our experience with clinging and aversion, and to reduce the

resulting suffering we cause to ourselves and others, this is surely relevant to people of all faiths or none. This is what is re-contextualized in secular mindfulness programs.

This is more of a distillation than a dilution, and in that sense perhaps has similar aims to the wider field of secular Buddhism. It can take us closer to the central point in what the Buddha taught: what is it that frees people from suffering and distress. It can also make it clearer how we can then enhance this with additional knowledge and wisdom from our own traditions. For example, in MBCT, adding cognitive psychology to mindfulness can improve what either can offer alone to prevent recurrence of major depression.

There are also aspects of secular MBPs that the Dharma world could learn from, in particular the emphasis on inquiry, in the specific sense that virtually all the teaching points are made during interactive dialogue about people's immediate experiences of mindfulness practice. Although this of course also plays a large part in Dharma teaching, particularly in individual interviews, the emphasis there tends to be more on didactic instructions and talks to large groups. In both contexts, the more a teaching point resonates with a person's direct experience, the more it is likely to touch them and be remembered. MBPs also have a particular emphasis on weaving practice into everyday life (which can be easier to teach in a weekly class than on retreat) including shorter practices such as the three-minute breathing space which participants often report as one of the most helpful aspects of the course.

There is also much ongoing debate among teachers and trainers of MBPs about training and supervision, some of which might be relevant for Dharma teacher training. In the UK, an informal

network of training organisations has agreed to a set of Good Practice Guidelines for teachers of mindfulness-based approaches<sup>7</sup> which see it as essential to have regular supervision and feedback on our teaching, however experienced we are.

And there are certainly issues that many teachers of secular mindfulness need to give more attention to, in particular the place of ethics, not merely as a set of precepts but as an aspect of training the mind and heart: what kind of person are we aiming to become, or to help others to become, through mindfulness practice, and what are the implications of this for how we teach and the settings we teach in. This inevitably also raises the question of the social and global aspects of *dukkha*—MBPs do not often address the socio-economic conditions that lead to vulnerability to stress-related illness or depression, or the suffering caused by the impact of a very unmindful culture on the natural environment. However this is not unique to MBPs, being equally a challenge for Dharma teachers and indeed for other therapeutic approaches.



## **Conclusion**

I would suggest that we can see secular mindfulness and Dharma as a continuum. At one end, there is in-depth practice including exploration of ethics, intensive meditation, and philosophical inquiry, usually but not necessarily within the more “religious” Buddhist traditions. At the other extreme, there are simplified practices such as “one-minute mindfulness” YouTube videos or brief meditations found on smartphone apps like Buddhify for busy urban people on the go.

In between, we find a range of practices and approaches including MBSR and MBCT, mindfulness in schools, and mindfulness-based programs in businesses and organizations. It seems to me rather simplistic and unhelpful to characterize this wide range as a continuum from “profound” to “superficial,” or even “spiritual” to



“secular,” or indeed to see either end as better or worse when they serve different people with different interests. All are in the service of reducing distress and enhancing well-being.

The main distinction we might make is between on the one hand, highly accessible Dharma (such as mindfulness-based programs) that can have a transformative effect on the lives of many people, of any faith or none, who have no wish to sign up to Buddhism or come on retreat; and on the other hand, a more fully-committed practice, including regular retreats and longer periods of formal meditation, for those—fewer in number—who wish to pursue the path of practice to its ultimate possibilities. Secular Buddhism could be found anywhere along this continuum, and has much to offer at all points.

We might draw a comparison with Buddhist countries in the East, where intensive meditation practice and Dharma study is done almost exclusively by monastics, and for most lay people Buddhism generally consists in trying to follow the precepts, attending some rituals and teachings, and making offerings to temples and monasteries. A parallel though different situation may be developing in the West, where intensive practice is done by a minority of committed Buddhists (lay and monastic, religious or secular), and the wider society learns more basic mindfulness practices in various secular contexts. The overall level of practice across society would be similar, and this could have a much more significant impact on the problems of our age than just a few people doing hard-core Dharma practice. To return to the fitness training metaphor: in a few years time mindfulness in our culture will be like exercise—even those who don’t do it will know that it is a good thing.

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*Footnotes:*

- 1 Kabat-Zinn J “Indra’s net at work: the mainstreaming of Dharma practice in society.”  
In: G Watson, S Batchelor and G Claxton *The Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, science and our day-to-day lives*. Rider, 1999.
- 2 <http://blog.themindfulmanifesto.com> 21 August 2010.
- 3 Teasdale J “Emotional processing, three modes of mind, and the prevention of relapse in depression.” *Behavior Research and Therapy* 37 (1999) p S71.
- 4 Heuman L. “What’s at stake as the Dharma goes modern,” *Tricycle* Fall 2012.
- 5 Lopez D. “The Scientific Buddha”. *Tricycle* Winter 2012.
- 6 Sallatha Sutta, Samyutta Nikaya, XXXVI.6.
- 7 <http://mindfulnessteachersuk.org.uk>; see also <https://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/trainingteachers/index.aspx> for similar guidelines in the US.