

# Introducing Mindfulness- Based Wellbeing Enhancement

*Cultural Adaptation and an 8-week Path  
to Wellbeing and Happiness*

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## CHAPTER 9

# The Untold History of Mindfulness

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## CHAPTER 9

# The Untold History of Mindfulness

*I've always thought that mindfulness is Buddhist but I have started to appreciate mindfulness a lot more now and am also grateful to so many traditions and teachers who have contributed to my growth and learning today.*

*—Atiqah (trainee teacher in mindfulness)*

A river would usually look different downstream from when it is closer to its source. Fed by the many tributaries along its course, the river becomes unrecognizable primarily from the way it looks by the time it reaches down to the plains. Such is the case with the evolution of mindfulness where it has been fed by different practices and philosophical traditions to the point where it becomes quite unrecognizable by the time it becomes a secular practice.

In this chapter, we will be discussing the *brief* history of mindfulness in ancient and modern times. We will be drawing on salient points from several sources and our own knowledge to answer two big questions, often unasked and unpopular, about secular mindfulness:

- Was Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness Buddhist?
- Was secular mindfulness an invention by Kabat-Zinn?

Though this chapter is not essential for mindfulness teachers, it can still aid in the appreciation of secular mindfulness in its evolution and development especially since there has been misinformation about mindfulness and its roots perpetuated by and originating from high places. We will deconstruct these assumptions from the standpoint of modern evidence and textual sources. In the process of presenting our position, we may disagree with several authors that we have cited and learned from in the other chapters of this book. In no way is this a devaluation of their competence on the subject of teaching mindfulness. We do not wish to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Due to my (KK) early exposure to mindfulness in the late 1990s through the Advaita Vedanta tradition and my training in Indian philosophy, many doubts emerged about the way secular mindfulness was positioned. I realized this immediately when I participated in the mindfulness-based stressed reduction (MBSR) program and after studying the *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn. And in 2019, I was invited to Delhi to speak at a conference to show the connection between the often neglected Indic roots of Kabat-Zinn's secular mindfulness. My initial findings were confirmed when I started to see a trend in the recent writings of scholars of Buddhism such as Sarah Shaw and Robert Sharf. Let us now discover this untold story of secular mindfulness.

## 1 MINDFULNESS IN INDIC RELIGIONS

We might think of mindfulness as one tributary of the human wisdom tradition.

While its most highly articulated roots lie deep within Buddhism, its essence is universal and has been expressed in one way or another in all human cultures and traditions.

—Jon Kabat-Zinn

It is important to state that historically all forms of meditation arose in religious traditions. And mindfulness is a *unique* type of meditation among several other types. Mindfulness originated in two Indic religions, namely Hinduism and Buddhism. The original terms for mindfulness were *smṛti* (in Sanskrit) and *sati* (in Pali), the latter being the language of early Buddhism. The terms *smṛti* and *sati* literally mean 'memory' or 'remembering'. However, the Buddha (c. 500 BCE) repurposed the definition of *sati* into a form of vigilance (Shaw, 2020). Two entire discourses by the Buddha, *Anapanasati Sutta – Discourses on the Mindfulness of Breathing* and *Mahāsatipatthana Sutta – Discourses on the Great Foundations of Mindfulness*, are considered the foundational texts on Buddhist mindfulness. Eventually within Buddhism, *sati* meant a host of practices that revolved around *vigilance, attention, remembrance, mental stability, meditation style, wisdom, discrimination, and a process* (Hwang & Kearney, 2015). It is to be noted that the purpose of mindfulness in Buddhism is for the purpose of advancing the practitioner to the eighth limb of the eight-fold path, *samadhi*.

Prior to the Buddha and until the 1st century ce, ideas and teachings about vigilance and remembrance appear in the Vedic (early Hindu) texts as well. Though the term *smṛti* appears in the *Yogasūtra-s* (4th century BCE to 3rd century ce) in the context of memory, *smṛti* was not the preferred term in the case of Vedic texts. The reference to *vigilance* appears in many of the pre-1st-century texts such as the *Katha* and *Mundaka Upanishads* (466–386 BCE) and the *Bhagavad Gita* (c. 200 BCE) as the Sanskrit term *apramatta*. Another

variant of vigilance in Sanskrit is the term *apramada* which appears in the Mahabharata (3rd century BCE–3rd century CE) and the Baudhayana Dharma-sutra (500–200 BCE). The difference between the dating on the Vedic texts and the period of Buddha, is due to the pre-Buddhistic teachings not being put into writing until much later, which is the case with most of pre-1st century Indic teachings and traditions.

The mindfulness tradition within Buddhism continued to develop into two focal areas, one on the practice of directing attention to the breath and the other directing attention to insight (Shaw, 2020). The Vipassana and Zen traditions are proponents of the insight path. Most of the MBPs appear to belong to the attentional path of using the breath as an anchor though the written works of Kabat-Zinn exude the influence of the insight traditions as well. Interestingly, such a division of practice and insights is also found in the pre-Buddhistic Vedic texts, the Upanishads, as *upasana-s* and *jnana* (Prabhananda & Smith, 1979; Ishvarananda, 1959).

Alexander Wynne (2007) argues in his book *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*, that Buddha was informed by the early Vedic teachers and teachings (not the Hindu texts though) in his distinctive formulation of his teachings. A similar view was held by Vishwanath Prasad Varma (1973) in his book *Early Buddhism and its Origins*. They claim that early Buddhism was influenced by the Upanishads and the Vedic practices. Barry Boyce (2011) refers to the same point when he states that mindfulness existed prior to the Buddha. This could possibly explain the similarities in the way *sati* and *apramatta/apramada* have been described in both traditions. What we would see after the period of the Buddha, is that both Buddhism and Hinduism utilized the quality of being *vigilant* within their respective soteriological systems. However, it is through the Buddhist teachers that vigilance or mindfulness got its deepest and extensive treatment as a practice.

The translation of the word *sati* continues to create controversy. Many different English definitions have been proposed. Jeff Wilson in his book, *Mindful America*, had compiled these translations which are conscience, ascertainment of truth, watchfulness, well awake, correct memory, right memory, and right self-discipline. However, it was Rhys Davids' 1886 translation of *sati* as *mindfulness*, that has become the most popular and preferred one.

The original source of mindfulness goes back to the times of the Vedic tradition and early Buddhism, though it can be found as a practice in other faith traditions.

## **2 MEDITATION AND MINDFULNESS IN THE ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS**

Meditation and mindfulness can also be found in the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), and are usually of three types: recitative,

visualization, and unmediated (Eifring, 2013). As with almost all religious meditative traditions, rarely do we come across content-less meditations in the Abrahamic religions, such as the bare-attention tradition of the modern Burmese Buddhists. In this regard, meditations in the Abrahamic religions are closer to the insight traditions of Buddhist mindfulness and the Hindu Upanishads, as they employed scriptural insights into their meditations.

The Merkavah (c. 1st century ce) and the Kabbalah (12–16th century ce), mystical traditions of Judaism, are two examples that taught meditation as a spiritual practice. With the rise of monasticism within Christianity between the 4th and 7th centuries ce, the recital of Jesus prayer emerged. This meditative practice was for the purposes of concentration on God, internalizing specific spiritual attitudes, to cultivate mental tranquility, and reduce mind wandering (Johnsén, 2013). More complex forms of meditations were developed in 7th–8th-century East Syrian Christianity, which included practices such as concentration, bodily movements and meditation, and culminating in an illumined mind (Seppala, 2013). The German Christian Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) and the 16th-century Teresa of Avila had also taught very interesting conceptions of “being” and “doing” as meditative prayer (Cooper, 2013; Frohlich, 2013).

The Sufi tradition of Islam is highly replete with meditative practices. Bringing an inward focus and the removal of mental distractions are principles of the Dhikr, a meditation which involves both stillness and movement (Buehler, 2016). Al-Ghazali (1058–1111), one of the most prominent and influential Islamic teachers, in his *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, presents the virtues of vigilance and awareness, *muraqabah*, which are very supportive in ensuring one’s behaviors and actions are intentional (Shaker, 2015). Al-Ghazali’s description of the practice is very similar to mindfulness as presented in the Indic religions.

It is a misnomer to assume that meditation and mindfulness are alien to the Abrahamic religions. Similar to Buddhism and Hinduism, contemplative practices evolved in the medieval times among the Abrahamic religions.

### 3 ROOTS OF SECULAR MINDFULNESS

We believe that any investigation into the roots of secular mindfulness should start with Kabat-Zinn as he is the founder of this whole movement via his MBSR. His words, both the explicit and the implicit, would have to be studied in order to understand what influenced the MBSR. Kabat-Zinn (2011) claims that in 1979, during a two-week Vipassana retreat, he got the inspiration for the MBSR as a flash of insight.

During our search for the roots of secular mindfulness over the past few years, we encountered an interesting phenomenon. Almost every author connected the roots of secular mindfulness to Buddhist origins by presenting an

unbroken and continuous tradition from the times of the Buddha until today. Woods and Rockman (2021), claim that MBSR was a product of Burmese Buddhism and Vipassana traditions. They do not state any other influences which was worrying for us. Feldman and Kuyken, in their insightful book, *Mindfulness: Ancient Wisdom Meets Modern Psychology* (2019), state

Mindfulness and mindfulness training are embedded in most contemplative traditions . . . Although it is possible to outline how contemporary mindfulness draws upon the rich lineage of each of these early traditions [referring to a few other spiritual and philosophical traditions], in this book, we draw primarily on Buddhism and, specifically, Buddhist psychology.

They do not state why they chose to neglect the “rich lineage of the other early traditions.” McCown et al. (2011) devote almost 50 pages in their book locating mindfulness within Buddhism that goes as far back as the beginnings of Orientalism with William Jones in the 18th century. To make matters more confusing, Kabat-Zinn in his foreword to the aforementioned book states,

competency in teaching mindfulness within secular mindfulness-based frameworks is a combination of knowing and not knowing. It helps to know from the inside, through your bones and skin, the general framework of the *dharma*, including the Four Noble (Ennobling) Truths, the Eight-Fold Noble Path, something of the Abhidharma, stories of the certain teachers and teaching stories, and perhaps the teaching lineage of at least one Buddhist tradition.

(p.xxi)

Given these perspectives, it is important to examine the works of Kabat-Zinn to understand what gave birth to the secular MBSR.

## Kabat-Zinn’s Influences

Kabat-Zinn in his works between 1982 and 2011 explicitly presented several influences of secular mindfulness. They can be broadly categorized into four schools which are Vipassana, Zen Buddhism, yogic traditions (Advaita Vedanta), and Hatha yoga. In Table 9.1 below, we have compiled the influences cited.

Kabat-Zinn clearly states in his papers that there were only four consistent sources of influences for MBSR, known as the stress reduction and relaxation program (SRRP) in its early years. In the next section, we make a concise presentation of these four traditions.

**Table 9.1** Influences of Jon Kabat-Zinn

Sources	(1) <i>Vipassana</i>	(2) <i>Zen Buddhism</i>	(3) <i>Advaita Vedanta</i>	(4) <i>Hatha yoga</i>	Other sources
Kabat-Zinn, (1982)	Sattipatana Vipassana or insight meditation of Theravada Buddhism	Soto Zen of Mahāyāna Buddhism	Yogic traditions: J. Krishnamurti, Vimila Thakar, and Nisargadatta Mahara		
Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth & Burney, (1985)	Sattipatana Vipassana or insight meditation of Theravada Buddhism	Soto Zen of Mahāyāna Buddhism	Yogic traditions: J. Krishnamurti, Vimila Thakar, and Nisargadatta Maharaj		
Kabat-Zinn, (1994)	Buddhist mindfulness meditation practice			Hatha yoga	
Kabat-Zinn, (2003)	Buddhism		Yogic traditions: Vedanta of Nisargadatta Maharaj, J Krishnamurti, Ramana Maharshi	Hatha yoga	Eckhart Tolle, Lao Tzu, Chuang Tsu
Kabat-Zinn, (2011)	Joseph Goldstein	Chinese and Korean Zen traditions	Yogic traditions: Vedanta of Nisargadatta Maharaj, J Krishnamurti, Ramana Maharshi	Hatha yoga	

## Vipassana

Vipassana, a Pali term, literally means *insight*. The goal of this practice is to develop insight into the nature of reality through the teachings of Buddhism. This tradition was believed to be resurrected by two Burmese monks, Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923) and Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982). These two teachers were known to have adapted Vipassana meditation for Burmese laypeople. The latter was particularly interested in making meditation accessible to the laypersons who were not familiar with Buddhist scriptural canon and in the process founded the “bare-attention” tradition. Scholars are of the view that both of these Buddhist monks had reinterpreted the original meaning of sati found in the Buddhist canon (Sharf, 2016).

Kabat-Zinn’s teacher, Jack Kornfield, was a student of Mahasi Sayadaw. Another of his teachers, Joseph Goldstein, learned Vipassana through S. N. Goenka (1924–1979) and U. Ba Khin (1899–1971) who belonged to the tradition of Ledi Sayadaw.

## Soto Zen

Soto Zen is a Zen school of Japanese Buddhism that was developed in the 13th century by the teacher, Dogen. This tradition has Chinese roots, as Dogen learned these teachings in China before returning to Japan. This school developed a unique practice called Shikantaza which involves objectless meditation coupled with inquiry. Kabat-Zinn (2011) states that he learned Soto Zen from the Korean Zen teacher, Seung Sahn (1927–2004) in the 1970s.

## Advaita Vedanta

Kabat-Zinn cites four Indian teachers, namely Jiddu Krishnamurti, Vimala Thakar, Ramana Maharshi, and Nisargadatta Maharaj, who have directly influenced his conception of mindfulness. He erroneously places all of the teachers under the umbrella of yogic traditions although these teachers are of the Advaita or the Advaita Vedanta tradition. These teachers, especially Ramana, Krishnamurti and Nisargadatta, have also radically influenced the eclectic and secular Neo-Advaita movements in North America. Neo-Advaita is described as having a

significant effect on the larger culture of liberal American spirituality, particularly with regard to Neo-Advaita’s eclecticism, focus on interior transformation, privileging of experiential over conceptual dimensions



of religion, mistrust of conventional religious organizations, ideal of the divinized human, and vision of human unity and solidarity across religious as well as national and ethnic boundaries.

(Lucas, 2011, p. 98)

Neo-Advaita is a modern offshoot of Advaita Vedanta and is often criticized by traditional Advaita Vedanta practitioners and teachers as not presenting a *clear* and *structured* path to free oneself from suffering (Waite, 2011). Popular teachers such as Eckart Tolle, Mooji, Andrew Cohen, and Rupert Spira are examples of contemporary teachers of Neo-Advaita.

Advaita Vedanta is considered to be the oldest Hindu tradition that traces its source to the Upanishads. It teaches that that self is intrinsically whole, undifferentiated and homogeneous awareness. This teaching finds its expression throughout Kabat-Zinn's books. One interesting feature of this tradition is that meditation is downplayed (or even criticized at times) and seen as not being the means to its soteriological goal. There is no evidence that Kabat-Zinn had any contact with any of these teachers. We can presume that these teachers are part of his informal lineage.

Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986) was a charismatic Indian philosopher who taught from his direct experience. His statement “truth is a pathless land” is often considered to be the core of his teachings. He also popularized the term “choiceless awareness” which Kabat-Zinn uses to describe the awareness that arises from mindfulness practices. Vimala Thakar (1921–2009) was largely a follower of Krishnamurti, and taught that spiritual liberation should be coupled with social action.

Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981) is a teacher of Advaita and considered to be an enlightened person. He did not write any book though all of his books were transcribed conversations by his followers. His book *I Am That* is considered to be his magnum opus. He had a significant influence on the Neo-Advaita movement. Jack Kornfield has been radically influenced by this teacher and spent some time with him in Mumbai. When a Buddhist magazine (Shaheen, 2016) asked Kornfield in an interview as to why he would rely on a Hindu teacher to explain the Buddhist conception of emptiness, he stated “I believe that dharma is universal . . . I use whatever expressions best help to awaken us.” This position and attitude are also found in the works of Kabat-Zinn. Kornfield lists Nisargadatta as one of his teachers on his personal website.

Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) taught Advaita Vedanta and is possibly the most prominent teacher inspiring the Neo-Advaita movement. He taught the method of self-inquiry which is to reflect on the question “Who am I?” He was a man of few words and promoted the inquiry into the self through silence, removal of ignorance, and abidance in awareness. Both Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein quote the words of Ramana in their teachings. Kabat-Zinn (2011) states that Ramana's method of “Who am I?” is the core practice shared by Zen traditions as well.

Kabat-Zinn's deep influence of Advaita can be seen in a quote by Nisargadatta Maharaj from the book *I Am That* (Nisargadatta, 1973) that appears in Kabat-Zinn's paper:

. . . by watching yourself in your daily life with alert interest with the intention to understand rather than to judge, in full acceptance of whatever may emerge, because it is here, you encourage the deep to come to the surface and enrich your life and consciousness with its captive energies. This is the great work of awareness; it removes obstacles and releases energies by understanding the nature of life and mind. Intelligence is the door to freedom and alert attention is the mother of intelligence.

(Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 300)

In the first edition of the book *Full Catastrophe Living*, Kabat-Zinn acknowledges several other teachers of the yogic tradition such as Swami Chinmayananda, Ram Dass, and John Lauder. However, in the second edition of the same book, these teachers are not acknowledged.

## Hatha Yoga

Hatha yoga is a sophisticated form of religious discipline developed in medieval India originally meant for ascetics. However, Hatha yoga became secularized and eventually became a postural system by the time it became popular in America after the middle of the last century. One significant feature of Hatha yoga is that it is body positive, a feature not found in Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. Kabat-Zinn acknowledges John Lauder as his Hatha yoga teacher in the 1960s. In a 2021 podcast interview with Wendy Hasenkamp (Kabat-Zinn, 2021), Kabat-Zinn states that

the body scan, which in part I adapted from what John Lauder was doing at the end of his yoga class, and of course from Goenka's sweeping meditation, U Ba Khin's whole tradition of very micro level scanning through the body, after doing three days of anapana, just breath awareness.

This shows that Kabat-Zinn could have inherited his body-positive attitude from his Hatha yoga teachings. On the contrary, in early Buddhist and Advaita Vedanta teachings, the human body is seen as something repulsive. We can infer that the body scan practice is an invented practice, though its antecedents can be found in Buddhist teachings in the last century (Anālayo, 2020).

A few consistent trends found in Kabat-Zinn’s mindfulness can be traced to these four influences which are:

**Table 9.2** Mapping of trends against Kabat-Zinn’s influences

<i>Trends</i>	<i>Vipassana</i>	<i>Zen Buddhism</i>	<i>Advaita</i>	<i>Hatha yoga</i>
1 Non-dual or choiceless awareness as a state of being		□	□	□
2 Pedagogy involving inquiry and dialogue	□	□	□	
3 Mindfulness practices being an unaided and objectless meditation	□	□	□	
4 Body-positive attitudes				□
5 Life as something positive instead of suffering			□	
6 This worldly, the present life	□	□	□	□

Zen and Advaita Vedanta share several of these features, in spite of them being different epistemologically and in their ontological appreciations of reality. Leesa Davis (Davis, 2010) records four of these common features as:

- Unfindability analysis – the principal target of unfindability analysis is the practitioner’s objectified and reified notions of self in the form of the objectified, individualized “I” that is at the heart of the bifurcating self-and-other (subject/object) structures of personal identity.
- Bringing everything back to the here and now – the experiential effect of “cornering” the student in the absolute present moment in which there is no “room” for conceptual projections of the future or abstractions from the past to take hold and proliferate.
- Paradoxical problems – “develop” the undermining of practitioner adherence to dualisms by exploiting the rising sense of paradox and contradiction that the practitioner experiences when familiarly structured either/or patterns of thought are problematized by non-dual understandings.
- Negation – such negative pointers as non-grasping, no-mind, unborn, non-thinking, and not-knowing (among others) are emphasized in the foundational texts and frequently employed by teachers to refute students’ dualistic attachments to reified concepts of self and path.

Kabat-Zinn appears to have noticed these features in his early years of training and made them part of his “universal dharma,” though *these common features are not found in the Pre-Zen Buddhism and other non-Zen Buddhist traditions.*

In summary, the sources of secular mindfulness as conceptualized by Kabat-Zinn is plain and simple. Contrary to what has been claimed by many authors, four distinct traditions were fused and secularized to make mindfulness accessible to everyone, thus removing the barriers to it. *These four traditions being Vipassana, Zen Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta and Hatha Yoga.* As Stephen Morris (2022) observed, Kabat-Zinn has certainly combined multiple knowledge traditions that were ontologically and epistemologically distinct, in spite of them having similarities. Kabat-Zinn's innovation and insights deserve more credit than it has been given thus far.

Most mindfulness books do not specifically acknowledge the influence of the Advaita and Hatha Yoga (or sometimes Zen) on neither the MBSR nor secular mindfulness. We have also found books that forcefully connect the limited Buddhist influences of secular mindfulness to the tenets of Buddhism (or Buddhist Abhidharma). Not only that, we have also noticed a trend where Kabat-Zinn gradually loses the vocabulary of the yogic traditions in his speeches and works from the 1990s, though it is implicitly there.

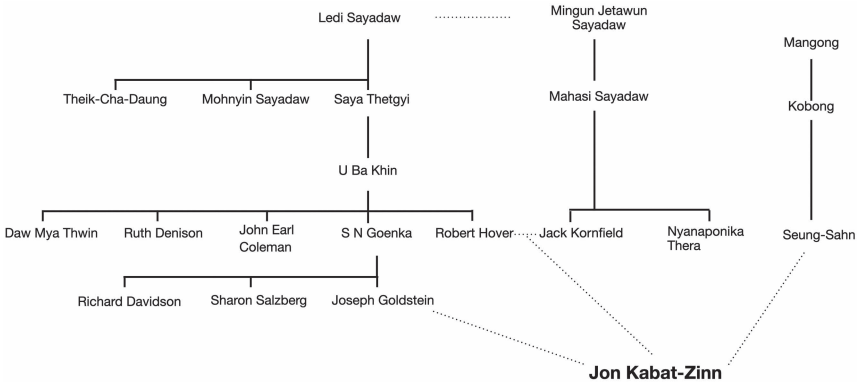
Our findings confirm Sarah Shaw's (2020) observation in her book, *Mindfulness*, that Kabat-Zinn's interpretation of secular mindfulness could have been influenced by his contact with Advaita Vedanta, Zen traditions, and Burmese Vipassana teachers. However, it is interesting how subsequent books and research papers have mostly failed to study the two other influences, i.e. yogic traditions and Hatha yoga, that influenced the MBSR. In summary, Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness is

- not solely Buddhist
- an invention by him
- a combination of different and incompatible traditions
- secular and wellbeing focused given that the soteriological goals have been eliminated from it

## 4 THE LINEAGE OF KABAT-ZINN

Where did Kabat-Zinn inherit his unique appreciation and understanding of mindfulness which brings together different traditions that are epistemologically distinct? We believe that Kabat-Zinn inherited this from his own teachers. We made an attempt to construct his lineage (see Figure 9.1).

The connection to a lineage can be both formal and informal. The formal connection to a lineage comes from a formal training and direct contact with teachers of a tradition. The informal connection, on the other hand, comes from one's conscious and unconscious intellectual subscription to teachings of a teacher or a school of thought. This could be from reading books, watching videos, and meeting the teachers. We can include Philip Kapleau (1912–2004), Nisargadatta Maharaj, J. Krishnamurti, Ramana Maharshi, and Vimala Thakar



**Figure 9.1** Jon Kabat-Zinn’s lineage

in this category. Interestingly, Kabat-Zinn declares more of his informal than his formal connections to his lineage in his works.

Books often claim that Kabat-Zinn learned from the famous Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022). However, Kabat-Zinn (2011) states that he did not meet Thich Nhat Hanh before his book, *Full Catastrophe Living*, was published. Kabat-Zin’s early training in meditation in 1973 was from Robert Hover (1920–2008), a student of U Ba Khin in the Vipassana tradition (Anālayo, 2020). Further, he learned meditation at the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) with Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein in the 1970s (Wilson, 2014). Jack Kornfield was known to have incorporated many other spiritual traditions into his teachings such as non-dual Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, and Advaita Vedanta, which were inherited by Kabat-Zinn. Kabat-Zinn learned Zen from the Korean Zen teacher, Seung Sahn, in the early 1970s (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). We can consider these four teachers as Kabat-Zinn’s earliest formal connection to the lineage.

## 5 THE MYTH OF BUDDHIST ORIGIN

Repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth.

(Anonymous)

As discussed above, Kabat-Zinn clearly states in his papers that his secular mindfulness has been radically influenced by non-Buddhist traditions as well as adapted Buddhist teachings (specifically Zen) in a secular way, given that he was (is) not a Buddhist nor a Buddhist scholar. In spite of this evidence, mindfulness literature continues to perpetuate a solely Buddhist origin to mindfulness or deliberately contract an explicit doctrinal connection. Robert Sharf

(2016), Chair of the Berkeley Center for Buddhist Studies, states that secular mindfulness is quite different from Buddhism, and that it is perhaps more Hindu and quite contrary to the goals of Buddhism. We can go on and on ad nauseum about how this partial account of mindfulness gets perpetuated by very reliable and expert mindfulness teachers and scholars. When something gets repeated again and again, it becomes history and truth. Such is the case with secular mindfulness in our opinion.

To us, this effort to reclaim secular mindfulness to Buddhism, and citing appropriation, is similar to how postural yoga in the Western world has been cited as an appropriation. Let us now briefly discuss how this myth of Buddhist origin could have been possibly perpetuated.

We need to acknowledge that Kabat-Zinn's works are bereft of the Buddhist beliefs of rebirth, karma, deities, devotional/magical practices, Buddha being a spiritual being, the non-negotiable authority of the Buddhist canon, and the importance of the community (*sangha*) (Husgafvel, 2018). In addition, the pessimism found in Buddhism is completely replaced by a positive perspective of life including the body being seen as something positive. Rupert Gethin (2015), Professor of Buddhist Studies of the University of Bristol, claims that the modern mindfulness conceptualizations of non-judgmental acceptance, open-monitoring, and focused attention are alien to Buddhist conceptualizations of mindfulness. A similar idea has also been proposed by Robert Sharf and Sarah Shaw, though the latter entertained the possibility of such modern conceptions with qualifications. Interestingly, these astute views are coming from scholars of religion rather than from mindfulness teachers.

On the other hand, Kabat-Zinn is seen at times to progressively deepen the Buddhist connection with mindfulness after the mid-1990s, as we see an increasing amount of literature accusing him of appropriating Buddhism. At this juncture, we know that Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness was not categorically Buddhist. Let us now briefly look at the history of Buddhism in America which may throw more light in our favor.

Buddhism entered America about 180 years ago through immigrant Asian Buddhists. However, when Buddhism met America, it was transformed into a different religion as its teachings got watered down. Jaime Kucinskias (2019) and Ann Gleig (2019) claim that this transformation took place through the minds and teachings of Americans who assumed that they were teaching a "purer" version of Buddhism steeped in cognitive depth without the superstitions, rituals, and cosmology subscribed to by the immigrant Asian Buddhists. These Americans were usually white Euro-American converts who tended to psychologize the teachings of Buddhism and taught meditation for therapeutic purposes. Wilson (2014) further argues that these Americans,

- reinterpreted Buddhist cosmology
- removed the monastic context
- removed the Buddhist context

- whitened Buddhism – making it relevant to a white population
- constructed a new lineage

This movement eventually became to be known as American Buddhism which is now about 180 years old. This movement was also influenced by the *modernist* Buddhist traditions of Thailand, Japan, and Tibet. American Buddhists, both lay people and the monastics, cherry picked elements that best depicted Buddhism to be modern, humanistic, and scientific. They downplayed ceremonial aspects, chanting, beliefs, and cosmology. For example, Andrew Weiss, an American Buddhist teacher, writes in his book, *Beginning Mindfulness: Learning the Way of Awareness*, that “the teachings of the Buddha, in the earliest and original form, are remarkably free of doctrine” (Weiss, 2004, p.xvi) which is obviously untrue. He further claims that Buddhism does not offer any beliefs to believe in, thus making the religion universal. This attitude was also found among the early orientalist such as the Rhys Davids and Paul Carus. We need to recognize that these attitudes were not recent but have been cultivated over 180 years starting with the early Buddhist teachers and interpreters. Sophia Rose Arjana in her book *Buying Buddha, Selling Rumi* (2020) claims that this same phenomenon has happened in the American soil to Hinduism and Islam when unique forms of Yoga and Sufism were developed. Arjana further states that this phenomenon is a deliberate process of searching into the mysticism within Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, and repackaging it as spirituality. Eventually, she states, it gets commodified in the American soil.

American Buddhism, while domesticizing Buddhism, also took the position that enlightenment was not exclusive to Buddhism but is universal, thereby taking the view that the dharma too is universal, a position Kabat-Zinn often shares to justify his secularization of mindfulness. This position has also been legitimized through the interpretations of the Buddhist canon by even monastic Buddhist teachers, according to Gleig.

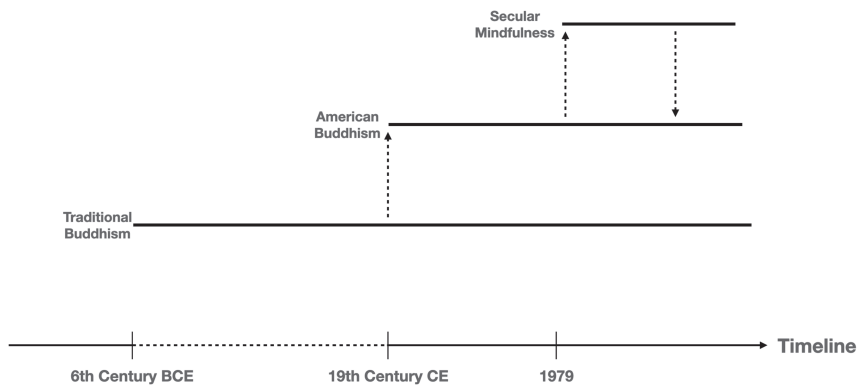
It is within this movement of American Buddhism that Kabat-Zinn first learned meditation from the teachers at the IMS, namely Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein. Kabat-Zinn’s introduction to mindfulness comes from a background of watered down and transformed forms of Buddhism. As much as the IMS was formed to teach Theravada Buddhism, yet it was an American form heavily informed by *modernist* forms of Buddhism from Burma. The difference was that Kabat-Zinn took another step forward by secularizing it. However, as Fronsdal (1995), opines that Western teachers favor a secular approach to mindfulness because the Buddhism’s “world-renouncing, literalist, dualistic, male-centered and at times misogynist tendencies” prevents people from accessing its important value:

Today most Western lay teachers offer an alternative to such orthodoxy. Rather than stressing world renunciation, they stress engagement with, and freedom *within* the world. Rather than rejecting the body, these Western teachers embrace the body as part of the wholistic

field of practice. Rather than stressing ultimate spiritual goals such as full enlightenment, ending the cycles of rebirth, or attaining the various stages of sainthood, many Western teachers tend to stress the immediate benefits of mindfulness and untroubled, equanimous presence in the midst of life's vicissitudes. Rather than emphasizing spiritual and psychological purification, most western teachers focus on the transformation of one's relationship to one's emotions and to one's inner and outer world.

Many teachers confirm that Kabat-Zinn had extracted the religious elements of Buddhism and left it stripped of its soteriological goals. Robert M. Rosenbaum and Barry Magid (2016) and Wilson (2014) state that while Kabat-Zinn separated Buddhism from mindfulness, his teachers at IMS and earlier American Buddhist teachers retained the major elements of Buddhism.

We can therefore surmise (see Figure 9.2), that secular mindfulness becomes another offshoot of American Buddhism, in the same way that the latter was an offshoot of traditional Buddhism.



**Figure 9.2** Timeline of mindfulness evolution

We see another trend emerging in the last two decades among American and traditional Buddhists who capitalize on the fame of secular mindfulness to zealously connect it back to Buddhism, a phenomenon confirmed by Kucin-skas. Though we can see that mindfulness is not Buddhist nor religious, yet scholars, like Wilson, wage several unjustified charges against Kabat-Zinn and mindfulness advocates which includes:

- hiding overt references to Buddhism so that they can bring mindfulness to secular audiences to further their agenda
- making contradicting and confusing statements trying to squeeze themselves out of Buddhism



We believe that these charges arise from the *erroneous* assumption that mindfulness is exclusively Buddhist, an unchallenged assumption that has become accepted truth. This error has been exacerbated by the fact that Kabat-Zinn chose to introduce the term *mindfulness* to his SRRP when he changed its name to MBSR after 1992. Prior to 1992, we do not see any works laying claim to mindfulness. We wonder if these inaccurate representations and unjustified charges would be so if he had chosen to use the terms “meditation” or “awareness,” instead of “mindfulness.”

With this assumption, another phenomenon emerges within American Buddhism, which is the reclamation of mindfulness into the Buddhist fold. Wilson and Gleig describe this phenomenon as American Buddhism influencing mindfulness first and then later mindfulness influencing American Buddhism itself. We also see the trend of MBSR getting authenticated through a process of legitimization by Buddhist teachers and practitioners perhaps more zealously than even Kabat-Zinn. Kucinkas rightfully observes that Buddhists are now using this as a “placeholder for the whole dharma” because of its lack of specificity. In fact, the *term* “mindfulness” alone seems sufficient to lay claim over it. And in doing so *these authors strategically leave out the other significant influences cited by Kabat-Zinn when tracing the roots of mindfulness. This gets repeated again and again until the myth seemingly becomes a truth.* Rebecca Crane (2017) rightly states that this trend is problematic when bringing MBPs into institutions.

How does Kabat-Zinn respond to these accusations? He responds by suggesting that secular mindfulness “can be” Buddhist, though not solely. The second type of response he gives is that it is secular, by leaning on to his “universal dharma.” To begin we need to acknowledge that Kabat-Zinn was trained in medicine and as a mindfulness practitioner. Unlike his teachers, he was neither a Buddhist, nor a Buddhist teacher, nor a Buddhist scholar. He was not interested in the scholarly aspects of mindfulness. He clearly states that his intention in creating MBSR was to heal people, and that too without the proselytizing zeal found commonly in religious teachers. To quote him, “These meditative practices are really meant to recognize and learn to inhabit that domain of being, *as opposed to fragment it into the sacred-secular divide, the mind-body divide, or the self-other divide*” (Baer, 2017). We see this tenor in all his works.

Kabat-Zinn acknowledges his influences clearly in his works without hiding them, although the emphasis could be varied. Sometimes he responds to the charges of appropriation by interpreting Buddhism and mindfulness through the lenses of universal dharma, a popular trend already found in American Buddhism. For example, in an interview in 2015, he claimed that mindfulness has the,

potential to actually elevate humanity in profound ways that are just completely in accordance with the fundamental teachings of the

Buddha about the nature of suffering and the possibility of the sort of transformation and liberation from suffering . . .

(Shonin, 2015)

And by claiming so, he does not lose the secular stance he takes with his secular mindfulness. Responses like these show to the Buddhist sympathizers, that they could connect secular mindfulness to Buddhist tradition if they wanted to. In the same interview, he states that “I didn’t make up the idea that there is such a thing as mindfulness meditation” and that he learned it from a Nyanaponika Thera’s (1901–1994) (a Sri Lankan monk of German descent) book *Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. Interestingly, Thera also comes from the lineage of the *bare-attention* tradition of Mahasi Sayadaw, the Burmese monk. This tradition, a *modernist* tradition within Buddhism, teaches that one can attain enlightenment by just training attention. It is obvious that Kabat-Zinn is merely re-stating what has been already there in the American Buddhist meditation movement, which has been profoundly influenced by the Burmese modernist tradition.

The secular position that Kabat-Zinn takes emerges at times when he is not reverential to Buddhism nor the Buddha. He (2011) confesses that in the mid-1980s, he would claim that the Buddha himself was not a Buddhist and that the word Buddha literally meant “an awakened one.” He further states that his motivation for MBSR was to show the universality of dharma that helped people live a life well-lived. For example, he considered the streams of self-inquiry asking the question “Who am I?” to be the same in the traditions of Chinese Chan, Korean Zen, Japanese Zen, and the Advaita Vedanta teacher, Ramana Maharshi. Implicitly, Kabat-Zinn was not interested in the technical definitions of what he termed as mindfulness, but was more intentional about how mindfulness helped people alleviate their suffering. He states,

It always felt that the details concerning the use of the word mindfulness in the various contexts in which we were deploying it *could be worked out later by scholars and researchers who were knowledgeable in this area, and interested in making such distinctions and resolving important issues* that may have been confounded and compounded by the early but intentional ignoring or glossing over of potentially important historical, philosophical, and cultural nuances . . . as well as a deeper understanding of the dharma itself . . .

As much as he found inspiration from the works of Buddhist monks, such as Nyanaponika Thera, and sought approval for his universal dharma from Thich Nhat Hanh, Dalai Lama, and Benhuan, he was not intending it to be defined so clearly. His conceptions of non-dual awareness and non-duality in mindfulness was linked to his eclectic training from his direct teachers. He further

advocates assimilations of other traditions, when he (2011) claims that the early teachers of MBSR were also inspired by the Buddhism, Sufism, Taoism, yoga and Vedanta.

We can certainly conclude from the above discussion that Kabat-Zinn did not invent mindfulness, but *he had certainly invented secular mindfulness*. Further the “tributaries” of the ever expanding “river” of secular mindfulness happens to be non-Buddhist sources thus casting doubts if its teachings are the same as the Buddha and early Buddhism. This could explain why the river downstream looks very different from its sources in the highlands.

In conclusion, we would like to invoke a famous analogy of the chariot that 7th-century Buddhist scholar, Candrakirti, writes in his *Madhyamakavatara*. He uses the chariot analogy to justify emptiness of the self, by showing that the individual is composite and when broken down, the self ceases to be absolutely real. Comparing this with the chariot, he states the chariot is a *name* given to something which is composite and when the chariot is dismantled, it ceases to be. Similarly, secular mindfulness is like a chariot with its shaft as Soto Zen, the axle as Advaita Vedanta, the yoke as Hatha yoga, the wheels as Vipassana, the carriage as an empiricism, and the reins as Taoism, Sufism, etc. Every one of these traditions has informed and shaped it to be what it is. Assuming secular mindfulness to be Buddhist is as preposterous as believing the shaft to be the whole chariot.

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