

Recreating Mindfulness Meditation in America

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[Abstract] This paper, based on the rising popularity of mindfulness meditation in America, reexamines the ideas and practice of decontextualization and recontextualization adopted by Buddhism in encountering with different cultures in the last 2500 years of history. This paper analyzes how mindfulness meditation in America today has shifted its goal from attaining Nirvana in traditional Buddhism to highlighting the pragmatic function of improving the mental health of practitioners. It further discusses Buddhist views of non-duality of the sacred and profane by examining how such a shift could result in the secularization of Buddhism and the sanctification of the secular.

Introduction

In the history of more than 2500 years Buddhism spread from “The Middle State” of ancient India to other parts of Asia, undertaking the course of recontextualization when encountering with other cultures and thus giving rise to varieties of Buddhism, such as Chinese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Theravada Buddhism as well as their sub-streams of Chan Buddhism and Zen Buddhism, respectively. All these Buddhisms arrived in America one after another in modern history, readily transformed themselves in meeting with Christian religion, progressing from Buddhism(s) in America to American Buddhism in which mindfulness movement has become a mainstream today. The rising of American Buddhism in general and the development of the mindfulness movement in particular once again demonstrated the creativity and adaptability of Buddhism.

This paper introduces first briefly the history of Buddhisms in America to American Buddhism, and then investigates how the surfacing of the mindfulness movement is related to modern science and psychotherapeutic practice. A special attention is paid to examine how leaders of the mindfulness movement have justified their efforts of recreating new mindfulness culture skillfully by reembracing the Dharma and disassociating from traditional Buddhisms so that they are free of traditional restraint for medicalizing the practice of Buddhist meditation in dealing with psychosomatic maladies in contemporary America.

Making of American Buddhism

No one knows exactly when Buddhism was first introduced to America, yet scholars in general accept that Buddhism arrived in America first from China when Chinese immigrants arrived in the West Coast in the 1840s for the mining industry. Based on kinship and in the form of ancestor worship as well as for material prayer, Buddhism these immigrants brought with them was rather part of Chinese folk religion assorted with Confucianism and Daoism prevailing at the end of the Qing dynasty. By 1875, there were about eight Buddhist temples run by Chinese communities in San Francisco. Gradually, monastic Buddhism of Chan orientation arrived in America, although large monasteries appeared rather later. Ven. Xuanhua (1918-1995) a disciple of well-known Chan master Xuyun (?-1959) founded The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in 1959, and in 1978, Xilai Temple appeared outside Los Angeles.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Japanese Buddhism also landed in America and showed rapid development after the World Parliament of Religion in 1893, largely due to the efforts of missionaries from Soto and Rinzai Zen, and others, and one of the most important figures was Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1966) who was responsible for popularizing or rather westernizing Zen Buddhism in America. In the 1960s and 1970s, more immigrants from Southeast Asia, such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodian, and Vietnam arrived in America, bringing with them Theravada Buddhism and its meditation practice. The arrival of Tibetan Buddhism in the early 1970s immediately attracted the attention of western cultural elites and intellectuals who have since then not only undertaken the course of studying, teaching, and practicing Tibetan Buddhism, but also expanded the enterprise of Buddhism-Science dialogue, setting a new paragon for the discourse of Buddhist modernity. All these eventually paved a way for the widespread of the mindfulness movement towards the end of the 20th century.

The development of Buddhisms from different traditions and popularization of the mindfulness movement in America could be roughly divided into three stages.

Formation stage before 1960s—In associating with various Occultist movements related to theosophy, orientalism, and mysticism, Buddhism from China, Japan, as well as southeast Asia were gradually transmitted to America by Asian immigrants and their descendants. These Buddhisms co-existed peacefully and spread slowly for almost a century. Each of them maintained its traditional identity while undertaking self-transformation in new social and cultural contexts. Largely due to the historical, linguistic, cultural, political, religious, and even geographic embedment, they largely remained among their immigrants. Influenced or rather determined by colonialism and orientalism prevailing at the time, Buddhism in the West was considered superstitious and inferior to Western religion and culture, which enjoyed the status of spiritual superiority, cultural chauvinism, and language authority.

Development stage from 1960s-1990s—Buddhism as religion from different regions of Asia blossomed gradually while Buddhist philosophies began to draw the attention of intellectuals and Buddhist meditation became popular in American society, readily demonstrating its creativity and adaptability, its inner connection with modern science, and usefulness for the mental health and spiritual life of people, particularly the middle classes. Zen Buddhism promoted by Alan Watts, Jack Kerouac, and others exerted great impact on the advent of American Cultural Revolution in 1960s-1970s. Zen centers and communities, such as Rochester Zen Center in New York found by Philip Kapleau, San Francisco Zen Center and the Zen Center of Los Angeles were founded one after another. During this period, Tibetan Buddhism entered America and soon attracted an attention

of intellectuals who became interested in its analytic philosophy and colorful culture. In 1974, Chogyam Trungpa (1939-1987) founded the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado and soon upgrade to be Naropa University, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, and others were invited to teach Buddhism there. In 1979, a conference on Comparative Approaches to Cognition: Western and Buddhist, was held in Naropa University, both Buddhists and scientists attended the conference.

Since the early 1960s, the presence of Theravada Buddhism in America increased significantly, and 350 temples of Theravada tradition were founded by the immigrants from Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam toward the end of 1990s. Medication centers and institutes based on Theravada Buddhism were set up throughout America. Ruth Denison founded Dhamma Dena in the high desert of California in 1977; Sharon Salzberg, Jack Kornfield, and Joseph Goldstein, co-founded the Insight Meditation Society over a former Catholic seminary in Barre, Massachusetts in 1975; and Jon Kabat-Zinn founded the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979. In May 1975, The Insight Meditation Society (IMS) was set up, providing secluded retreat environment for the practice of meditation in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. In 1982, Dhamma Dhara Vipassana Meditation Center was opened in Shelburne Falls, Mass.

Thanks to the missionary efforts and charismatic leadership of Dalai Lama (1935-present), Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022) and others, Buddhism turned to be a popular object of scientific study in the academic world, full of scientific ideas, democratic spirits, and rational practices as it could be examined objectively; Buddhist worldview and ethics, Buddhist philosophy of dependent-origination, no-self, impermanence, particularly relativity and emptiness of Madhyamika school, mind-body relation in Yogacaga school, are studied in parallel with modern science, such as quantum mechanics, neuroscience, cognitive psychology. The attempt was thus made to de-cap the superstition and backwardness of Buddhism formerly shaped by orientalism and Western complexity of superiority. During this period, Columbia University, Harvard University, University of Chicago, University of Wisconsin, and universities in California, initiated the study on Buddhist meditation. By 1994, about two dozen universities had at least two full-time faculty members each in Buddhist studies and nearly 150 academic scholars of Buddhism-scholar practitioners or Buddhism appreciators. Scientific study and academic collaboration further enhanced public interesting in Buddhist cultures and meditation practices, helping Buddhism gain footholds in American society while mindfulness meditation soon turned to be a nationwide new movement.

Mindfulness meditation stage from the 1990s-Present—Western Buddhists and meditation practitioners such as Joseph Goldstein (1944-present), Jack Kornfield (1945-present), Sharon Salzberg (1952-present), and Christina Feldman studied the vipassana meditation in Asia in first, and soon began to teach it to American audience, specifically aimed at dealing with the symptom of mental depression prevailing at the time. The followers of Burmese monk Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923) and his student Mahāsi Sayādaw (1904-1982) who taught “pure insight” or Suddha vipassana or “mindfulness-only” in a simplified form of breathing and body movement also arrived in America in 1990s, setting up mindfulness centers. Towards the end of the last century, mindfulness meditation in collaboration with Chan of Chinese Buddhism, Zen of Japanese Buddhism, Son of Korean Buddhism, Thien of Vietnamese Buddhism, Dzogchen of Tibetan Buddhism, and even the meditation of other religions taught by Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) and Ramana Maharishi (1879-1950) flourished in America, and so turned to be a mainstream of Buddhist development.¹ According to *The Complete Guide to Buddhist America*, there were then more than 1,000 meditation centers in America and most of them were run by American converts or so-called Euro-American Buddhists or white Buddhists.

Early in 1987, a conference on “World Buddhism in North America” was held at the University of Michigan and a “Statement of Consensus” was announced, outlining the visions of American Buddhism in future: 1. to create the environments necessary for tolerance and understanding among Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike; 2. to initiate a dialogue among Buddhists; 3. to increase a sense of community, and 4. to cultivate thoughts and actions of friendliness towards others, to approach the world as the proper field of Dharma. The statement summarized the major features of the contemporary American Buddhism at the time. On January 17-19, 1997, “Buddhism in America Conference” was held in Boston, Lama Surya Das, an American Buddhist and founder of the Dzogchen Foundation in Cambridge, Massachusetts, characterized American Buddhism of the future as following: 1. Dharma without dogma; 2. A lay-oriented sangha; 3. A meditation based on experiential tradition; 4. Gender equality; 5. A non-sectarian tradition; 6. An essentialized and simplified tradition; an egalitarian, democratic, and nonhierarchical tradition; 8. A psychologically astute and rational tradition; 9. An experimental, innovating, inquiry-based tradition, and 10. A socially informed and engaged tradition. These characteristics reflected the pragmatic

¹ Richard King, “Meditation and the Modern Encounter between Asia and the West,” *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation*, edited by Miguel Frias, David Brazier, and Mansur Lalljee, 2019, 5/24, p. 17.

nature of American Buddhism in general and the worldly reorientation of mindfulness meditation in particular.

Many factors have contributed to the rising of American Buddhism and fast development of the mindfulness meditation,² such as the new age movement of being “spiritual but not religious,” religious romanticism, interiorization of religiosity, neo-paganism, individualistic intuition and needs, self-determining, freedom and liberalism, privatization of religious practice, and arising of so called “educated classes” of modern self-perception. Yet, the scientific studies of Buddhist philosophy and medicalization of Buddhist practice could be the two most important factors. Particularly, neuroscience and cognitive psychotherapy brought the mindfulness meditation into social discourse and daily life of ordinary people. Through such studies and practice, Buddhism is presented as the religion of science and art of living for human flourishing, full of self-effort, reflectivity, inner freedom and peace.

From Vipassana to Mindfulness Meditation

In the last one and half century, Buddhisms of different regions and traditions were brought to America, undergoing doctrinal reinterpretation and cultural recontextualization. Gradually American Buddhism emerged with some special features, and one of them is the mindfulness meditation of cognitive therapy. This new form of meditative practice or often called the mindfulness movement was chronological succession yet quite different from its predecessor of Vipassana meditation in Theravada Buddhism. In current study of Buddhism in the West, scholars would agree that differences are necessary and even inevitable for the spread of Buddhism from the East to the West,³ yet others would see them as the distortion and even betrayal.⁴ In responding to such views, some leaders of the mindfulness movement made efforts to justify the differences

² According to the data from the 2012-2017 *National Health Interview Survey*, in the past 12 months in 2017, the use of meditation increased more than threefold from 4.1% in 2012 to 14.2% in 2017, the most fast increasing among three complementary health in America. (other two are Yoga and chiropractor), (NCHS Data Brief, n. 325, November 2018. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db325-h.pdf>)

³ Laurence J. Kirmayer, “Mindfulness in cultural context,” *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 2015, v. 52 (4), 460.

⁴ 温宗堃，〈批判正念：當代正念課程的批判與回應〉，《福嚴佛學研究》，第 12 期，2017，頁 103-118。

claiming the new was created by reembracing the Dharma and disassociating themselves from traditional Buddhism.

Buddhist meditation in general consists of samatha—concentration or serenity and vipassana—superior knowledge, and the two were normally practiced by monastics for the sake of the liberation from cycle of rebirth or attaining the enlightenment. The samatha meditation is commonly shared by other religions while the vipassana is more Buddhistic guided by the ideas of impermanence, no-self, and suffering of the world. The sequence of the practice is not dogmatically fixed but varying as one could practice first samatha and then vipassana, or vice versa, or simultaneously. Yet monastics in Theravada tradition would prefer samatha first and then vipassana for stable concentration and intuitive knowledge could arise only from the state of samadhi. Nevertheless, the new form of meditation promoted vipassana practice without being relied on the foundation of samatha, highlighting sati in practices at the expense of samathi as meditators are instructed to engage in an analytical meditation on no-self, impermanence, and suffering.

In the mediation practice promoted by Mahasi Sayadaw, U Ba Khin, Goenka and others in Myanmar in the early 20th century, there are two kinds of concentration—access concentration or the vehicle of clam—samathayāna, and absorption concentration or the vehicle of pure insight—suddhaviṣṣanāyāna. The practitioners may not enter the calm meditation, instead, they could directly jump to the insight. This kind of practice is also called “dry insight” (sukkhaviṣṣana) because it lacks the lubricating “moisture of the jhanas.” In the dry insight meditation, one postpones the full development of samatha until the insight arises. Yet he may turn back to samatha if failing to access to a higher insight or after attaining a certain state of insight such as after the rising of the knowledge of equanimity toward formations (sankharaupekkha ñāna). Nevertheless, under any circumstances, the culmination of insight or perfection of wisdom occurs only from a state of samatha, (bodhi, 349) because only then could intellectual understanding of no-self, impermanence, suffering, and emptiness previously cultivated be taken as the meditation object and the world is seen as it is in the union of samatha and vipassana. Clearly, such insight meditation promoted by the masters in Myanmar was further developed in the West with more emphasis on sati, or mindfulness.

Suddhaviṣṣana or Sukkhaviṣṣana movement soon spread to other Theravada countries welcomed not only by monastics but also lay Buddhists. Under the instruction of capable monastics, lay Buddhists began to learn and practice vipassana meditation based on the Satipatthana Sutta and Abhidhamma philosophy, which had been almost exclusively practiced and studied within monastic sangha before. Having mastered such

practice, some lay Buddhists turned to be the meditation masters being entrusted with the responsibility of protecting Buddhism. The followers of Ledi Sayadaw, such as Mohnyin Sayadaw (1872-1964), Saya Thetgyi (1873-1945), U Ba Khin (1899-1971), and particularly S. N Goenka (1924-present) expanded the vipassana meditation to non-Buddhists, advocating that the Buddha did not found Buddhism as religion, but as “an art of living,” instructing people to meditate the nature as it is. “The day ‘Buddhism’ happened, it devalued the teachings of the Buddha. It was a universal teaching and that made it sectarian”⁵ What the Buddha taught is Dharma, as they claimed, the universal truth applicable to all. Vipassana meditation is thus the way of liberation for all Buddhists and non-Buddhists. Goenka is quoted to have said: “Meditation is now no longer taught as part of Buddhism and reference to doctrinal teaching is further diminished...Insight meditation has become a nonsectarian and universal practice explicitly available to all religious adherents.”⁶

Mingun Sayadaw (1870-1955) another well-known meditation master began to teach vipassana meditation to lay Buddhists in 1910s, and one of his most famous students was the Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982) who attached the systematic importance of Abhidhammic approach to vipassana meditation. In following the Seven Stages of Purification (*sattavisuddhi*) as outlined in *Satipatthana Sutta*, the *Visuddhimagga*, and *Abhidhamm*, Mahasi overwhelmingly advocated dry (*Suddha*) Vipassana practice in daily activities highlighting the importance of *sati* or mindfulness and paying little attention to deep concentration.⁷ Practitioners could directly and mindfully observe their verbal and bodily movements, and by doing so they would realize the truth of impermanence, suffering, and non-self.

The vipassana meditation was brought to America largely by Westerners who had studied and practiced it under the mentorship of meditation masters in Asia and soon transformed it to the mindfulness meditation. The first generation of vipassana practitioners in the West readily decontextualized its Asian tradition and methodology by selecting and highlighting what is needed in the West, casting away the irrelevant or unscientific. With the help of modern neuroscience which has approved the positive efficiency of meditation, and cognitive psychotherapy which underlines the attention of patients on their internal and external world, as well as the awareness of consciousness

⁵ S.N. Goenka, “Superscience: An Interview by Helen Tworikov,” *Tricycle*, 10, n. 2 (2000): 49-50, (44-50).

⁶ Eric Braun, *The Birth of Insight Meditation: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw*, Chicago University Press, 2013, 159.

⁷ Eric Braun, *The Birth of Insight Meditation*, 162.

and sub-consciousness in dealing with depression and anxiety, they further accentuated the sati or mindfulness, which became the most unique feature of the mindfulness based cognitive therapy in contemporary West.

Epistemologically, sati means memory, reminiscence, or recalling of both the past and the present, it was first translated as mindfulness or awareness by Rhys Davids (1843-1922), one of pioneering Western experts in Pali language. Nyanaponik (1901-1994), well-known monk-scholar rend the term into bare awareness and clear comprehension. Following such interpretations, Westerner practitioners became more interested in its meaning of bare awareness, non-judgment, and being at present. Gradually, the vipassana for spiritual enlightenment turned to be mindfulness based cognitive therapy and gave rise to an institutionalized, independent, non-sectarian, and all-inclusive mindfulness movement, essentially for dealing with mental depression and anxiety. David McMahan once observed: “No longer just a technique of transcendence for ascetics who have renounced the worldly life, meditation has acquired the purpose of fostering deeper appreciation of everyday activities and of cultivating skillful, robust, and mindful engagement in life. Rather than exclusively a means of achieving awakening in a traditional sense, it has in some cases been reconfigured as a technique for self-discovery, self-discipline, self-transformation, and physical and mental health outside of doctrinal and sectarian formulations. Meditation has also become democratized and individualized in a way quite foreign to all but the recent history of Buddhism.”⁸

The shift of the focus from the Vipassana or insight to sati or mindfulness, from spiritual goal to psychotherapeutic treatment may also have something to do with the shift of leadership from monastics to lay Buddhists in the West. Institutionalized centers and carefully planned programs for mindfulness practice were set up one after another, advocating its psychotherapeutic efficiency absent of Buddhist spirituality. Richard King once said: “It is somewhat ironic that Buddhist meditation, traditionally understood as a means of increasing awareness of the impermanent (anitya), stressful, and unsatisfactory nature of existence (duḥkha), now finds itself being deployed in the contemporary period as a therapeutic technique for overcoming stress.”⁹ Among these lay organizations, some maintain their Buddhist identity, while others seldom mentioned Buddhism or even deliberately disassociated themselves from Buddhism for varied reasons, such as the

⁸ David L. McMahan, “Meditation and Modernity,” *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, Oxford Scholarship online, 2009, p.3.

⁹ Richard King, “Meditation and the Modern Encounter between Asia and the West,” 18.

politics of the separation of the state and religion, sensitivity of religious identity in public institutions, or for maxima access to multi-culture society.¹⁰

The medicalization of Buddhist meditation has effectively enhanced the popularity of its practice in society.¹¹ Yet, such development seemed to have done little in promoting Buddhism in America, instead it invited criticism from both Buddhists and intellectuals that the mindfulness movement has despiritualized Buddhism. Kimmayer said: “However, there are justifiable concerns that in the process of transmission and translation something essential may be lost in terms of goals, methods, and messages, whether ethical, moral, or pragmatic. Thus, the effort in MBSR [Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction] and third wave cognitive behavioral therapies to secularize, simplify, and convey mindfulness practices in a therapeutic idiom has allowed practitioners to work with large numbers of people in clinical settings who start from a place not of seeking enlightenment or some other moral or spiritual good but simply want help dealing with everyday struggles with illness, pain, and suffering.¹² Jeff Wilsom also expressed his concerns about the shifting from religious practice to medical exercise, as he said: “At the same time, there are voices of dissent from within the tradition, suspicious of the changes demanded by such recontextualizations. Some fear that the transcendent element of Buddhism is in danger of being lost entirely, while others feel that mindfulness has been misunderstood on a basic level by its newest fans. Even medical mindfulness’s greatest proponents occasionally show signs of surprise or chagrin at the degree to which their program has been carried out, or some of the secondary affects it has had on Buddhism in America.”¹³ To these scholars and Buddhists, the mindfulness movement has lost its Buddhist identity and spiritual significance, for it is professionalized to become the property of psychologists, doctors, scientists, for they are mainly practiced by medical clients rather than Buddhists.¹⁴

¹⁰ Jeff Wilson highlighted the centralized control and secret practice, and religious component as two major factors of the transcendent meditation. The Mindfulness Movement go beyond the two so that it is successfully integrated into American culture within the medical establishment and society at large: Jeff Wilson, “Medicalizing Mindfulness: How is Mindfulness Modified to Fit a Scientific and Therapeutic Culture?” *America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*, (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014), 5-6.

¹¹ Jeff Wilson, “Medicalizing Mindfulness,” 27.

¹² Laurence J. Kirmayer, “Mindfulness in cultural context,” *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 2015, v. 52 (4), 460.

¹³ Jeff Wilson, “Medicalizing Mindfulness: How is Mindfulness Modified to Fit a Scientific and Therapeutic Culture?” *America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*, Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014, p. 3.

¹⁴ Jeff Wilson, “Medicalizing Mindfulness,” 27.

Recreation of the Dharma

Leaders of the mindfulness movement would however readily reject the accusation of secularizing Buddhism because as they claimed, the mindfulness meditation has little to do with Buddhism, for it is rather the new embodiment of the Dharma. Jon Kabat Zinn, the founder of the MBSR, denied that he was a Buddhist and the MBSR was part of institutional Buddhism. Instead, he followed the example of meditation masters who had reinterpreted the Dharma to justify the vipassana practice in Asia, expounding the mindfulness as an umbrella term associated with a universal dharma or the teaching of the Buddha. In other words, the mindfulness meditation is not Buddhism but the Dharma. “By ‘umbrella term’ I meant that it is used in certain contexts as a place-holder for the entire dharma, that it is meant to carry multiple meanings and traditions simultaneously, not in the service of finessing and confounding real differences, but as a potentially skillful means for bringing the streams of life, embodies dharma understanding and of clinical medicine together.”¹⁵ By distancing the mindfulness movement such as MBSR from institutional or traditional Buddhism and by identifying the mindfulness meditation with the Dharma, Kabat Zinn was able to justify its medicalized practice.

Kabat Zinn downplayed the importance of any existing tradition and culture of Buddhism in the mindfulness practice of the MBSR. As early as in 1975, he declared “I really don’t care about Buddhism. It’s an interesting religion but it’s not what I most care about. What I value in Buddhism is that it brought me to the Dharma.”¹⁶ Again, in an article entitled “An Outpatient Program in Behavioral Medicine for Chronic Pain Patients Based on the Practice of Mindfulness Meditation: Theoretical Considerations and Preliminary Results,” written in 1982, Kabat Zinn revealed: “All meditation practices used in the SR&RP [MBSR] were taught independent of the religious and cultural beliefs associated with them in their countries and traditions of origin.”¹⁷ In 1990, he published a popular book entitled *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, in which he even shunned to present mindfulness technique in Buddhist term, as he said: “From the beginning of MBSR, I bent over backward to structure it and find ways to speak about it that avoided as much

¹⁵ Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR, Skillful Means, and the Trouble with Maps,” *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12: 1, (2011): 290.

¹⁶ Kabat-Zinn, “Toward the Mainstreaming of American Dharma Practice,” in *Buddhism in America: Proceedings of the First Buddhism in America*, Al Rappaport and Brian Hotchkiss, eds., (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, 1998), 515.

¹⁷ Jon Kabat-Zinn. “An Outpatient Program in Behavioral Medicine for Chronic Pain Patients Based on the Practice of Mindfulness Meditation: Theoretical Considerations and Preliminary Results.” *General Hospital Psychiatry*, 4.1 (1982): 33-47.

as possible the risks of it being seen as Buddhist, ‘New Age,’ ‘Eastern Mysticism’ or just plain ‘flakey.’ To my mind this was a constant and serious risk that would have undermined our attempts to present it as commonsensical, evidence-based, and ordinary, and ultimately a legitimate element of mainstream medical care.”¹⁸ In 2005, he published another book *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*, Kabat Zinn acknowledged Buddhist teachings as an important source for his understanding of the mindfulness meditation and founding of the MBSR, yet he never said openly they were part of Buddhism.

By disassociating with traditional Buddhism, Kabat Zinn was able to transcend the cultural boundary and present the mindfulness meditation in more humanistic form, recreating new practice not as a Buddhist but as a practitioner of the Dharma. Meanwhile, teaching the mindfulness meditation would not be the same as advocating Buddhism, but as promoting the teaching of the Buddha or the Dharma. “[mindfulness] has nothing to do with Buddhism per se or with becoming a Buddhist, but it has everything to do with waking up and living in harmony with the world. It has to do with examining who we are, with questioning our view of the world and our place in it, and with cultivating some appreciation for the fullness of each moment we are alive”¹⁹

The Dharma as the universal truth taught by the Buddha could manifest itself in various forms at different times. To Kabat Zinn, the medicalization of the mindfulness as practiced in the West was not the decontextualization of traditional Buddhism, but recontextualizing the dharma in a new environment. He said: “Why not try to make meditation so commonsensical that anyone would be drawn to it? Why not develop an American vocabulary that spoke to the heart of the matter, and didn’t focus on the cultural aspects of the traditions out of which the dharma emerged, however beautiful they might be, or on centuries-old scholarly debates concerning fine distinctions in the Abhidharma. This was not because they weren’t ultimately important, but because they would likely cause unnecessary impediments for people who were basically dealing with suffering and seeking some kind of release from it.”²⁰ The mindfulness meditation is the teaching of the Buddha most relevant for the contemporary world as it could be medicalized to help people in dealing with their suffering.

If the mindfulness meditation is not Buddhism, then, what is the relationship between the mindfulness movement and traditional Buddhism or the mindfulness

¹⁸ Jon Kabat Zinn, “Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR,” 282.

¹⁹ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 3.

²⁰ Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR,” 288.

meditation and other forms of meditation in traditional Buddhism? Kabat Zinn would claim that both the mindfulness meditation and other meditation practices in traditional Buddhism are equally embodiment of the Dharma, the only difference between them was that the mindfulness meditation is much needed today so that it is the most apt practical form of the Dharma. According to Kabat Zinn, other forms of Buddhism may also be the embodiment of the Dhamma suitable for certain times and places in the past, yet such forms may not be appropriate any more today. He said: “This means that we cannot follow a strict Theravadan approach, nor a strict Mahayana approach, nor a strict Vajrayana approach, although elements of all these great traditions and the sub-lineages within them are relevant and might inform how we, as a unique person with a unique dharma history, approach specific teaching moments in both practice, guided meditations, and dialogue about the experiences that arise in formal and informal practice among the people in our class. But we are never appealing to authority or tradition, only to the richness of the present moment held gently in awareness, and the profound and authentic authority of each person’s own experience, equally held with kindness in awareness.”²¹

While disassociating the mindfulness meditation with traditional Buddhism, Kabat Zinn reidentified its Dharmic nature. Dharma or Dhamma means that which is established, sustained, or upheld. It implies the righteousness, principle, norm, quality, duty, law, and phenomena in the religious and cultural context of ancient India. The Buddha adopted the term to indicate the universal truth and his teaching as often seen in the phrase Buddhadharma. Kabat Zinn said: “The word Dharma refers to both the teachings of the buddha and also the way things are, the fundamental lawfulness of the universe. So, although the Buddha articulated the Dharma, the Dharma itself can’t be Buddhist any more that the law of gravity is English because of Newton or Italian because of Galileo. It is a universal law.”²² Dharma is the universal law, and the mindfulness meditation is the embodiment of the Dharma and the application of the law for dealing with human suffering today.

In Theravada tradition, Dhamma could be both the path to and the end of enlightenment; the vipassana could be a means of wisdom as well as the realization of wisdom, vipassana meditation as a mean would finally turn to be the wisdom for enlightenment. Accordingly, Jon Kabat Zinn claimed that the mindfulness meditation is both the means and the end itself. In reference to a passage in the writings of

²¹ Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR,” 299.

²² Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Why Mindfulness Matters,” *The Mindfulness Revolution: Leading Psychologists, Scientists, Artists, and Meditation Teachers on the Power of Mindfulness in Daily Life*, Barry Boyce, ed., (Boston: Shambhala, 2011), 57.

Nyanaponika Thera (1962), Kabat Zinn declared that mindfulness is “the unfailing master key for knowing the mind, and is thus the starting point; the perfect tool for shaping the mind, and is thus the focal point; the lofty manifestation of the achieved freedom of the mind, and is thus the culminating point...Seen in this way, mindfulness is the view, the path, and the fruit all in one.”²³ By highlighting the oneness of the means and the end, Kabat Zinn was able to transcend duality of spiritual enlightenment and psychosomatic well-beings, expanding the practice in secular setting.

Dharma as the universal truth transcends cultural boundary so that it could manifest itself in any social and cultural context. The mindfulness meditation as a new embodiment of the Dharma also transcends any Buddhist identity, demonstrating itself as cognitive science and psychotherapy to deal with mental disease. “Since Buddhist meditative practices are concerned with embodied awareness and the cultivation of clarity, emotional balance (equanimity) and compassion, and since all of these capacities can be refined and developed via the honing and intentional deployment of attention, the roots of Buddhist meditation practices are de facto universal.”²⁴

If the mindfulness is the embodiment of the Dharma, the founding of MBSR would be a skillful means to maximize medical benefit. Kabat Zinn said: “The MBSR was developed as one of a possibly infinite number of skillful means for bringing the dharma into mainstream setting.”²⁵ In contemporary America, the mainstream setting is science and technology, the mindfulness meditation promoted by MBSR thus makes use of modern science so that it turns to be the knowledge of neuroscience and cognitive psychotherapy to have better understanding of human brain and mind, to more effectively deal with mental diseases. “Mindfulness and dharma are best thought of as universal descriptions of the functioning of the human mind regarding the quality of one’s attention in relationship to the experience of suffering and the potential for happiness.”²⁶ In summarizing the practice of the MBSR in the last 30 years, Kabat Zinn said: “We can observe an accelerating confluence of dharma with mainstream medicine, healthcare, cognitive science, affective neuroscience, neuroeconomics, business,

²³ Jon Kabat Zinn, “Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR,” 291.

²⁴ M.J.G. Williams & J. Kabat-Zinn, “Mindfulness: Diverse perspectives on its meaning, origins, and multiple applications at the intersection of science and dharma,” *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12(01), p. 3 (2011): 1-18.

²⁵ Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR,” 281.

²⁶ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*, (New York: Hyperion, 2005), 136-137.

leadership, primary and secondary education, higher education, the law, indeed, in society as a whole, in this now very rapidly changing world.”²⁷

Since the mindfulness meditation could serve as medicine to deal with suffering of people, it is duty of the practitioners or followers of the Dharma to promote it in society. To Kabat Zinn, it is right livelihood and duty-bound for him and others to teach and practice mindfulness meditation for self-benefit and benefiting others, as the Buddha did 2500 years ago. He said: “To my mind, when each of us who cares about this work [teaching MBSR], who loves this work, takes care of the dharma through our practice and our love, then the dharma that is at the heart of the work flourishes and takes care of itself.”²⁸ The ideal place to teach and practice the mindfulness would be hospitals and clinics, where the MBSR could provide with the complementary healing, enabling patients to understand the reality of their mental problems and suffering of the world. Kabat Zinn said: “After all, hospitals do function as ‘dukkha magnets’ in our society, pulling for stress, pain of all kinds, disease and illness, especially when they have reached levels where it is impossible to ignore them.”²⁹ Early in 1979, Kabat Zinn and others founded the Stress Reduction and Relaxation Program, and a few years later, it moved to the Massachusetts University Hospital and renamed it the Stress Reduction Clinic with a mission to “normalize it [mindfulness meditation] by emphasizing that it was a clinical service, like any other, in the Department of Medicine.”

By identifying the mindfulness meditation with the Dharma, Kabat Zinn thus discharged the accusation of secularizing Buddhism and decontextualizing Buddhist culture. He insisted that medicalization of the mindfulness is different from decontextualization or deculturalization of Buddhism, it is in fact returning to the Dharma or original teaching of the Buddha. Not only that it did not desacralize Buddhism but also it brought the Dharma into people’s life. “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 who might find it extraordinarily useful and liberative.”³⁰ The mindfulness addressed itself as an

²⁷ Jon Kabat Zinn, “Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR,” 284.

²⁸ Jon Kabat Zinn, “Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR,” 295.

²⁹ Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR,” 288.

³⁰ Jon Kabat Zinn, “Indra’s Net at Work: The Mainstreaming of Dharma Practice in Society.” In *The Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Science, and Our Day to Day Lives*, edited by Gay Watson and Stephen Batchelor (York Beach, ME: S. Weiser, 2000), 227.

alternative to alleviate human suffering, catalyzing greater compassion and wisdom to release one from suffering. Kabat Zinn said: “The intention and approach behind MBSR were never meant to exploit, fragment, or decontextualize the dharma, but rather to recontextualize it within the frameworks of science, medicine (including psychiatry and psychology), and healthcare so that it would be maximally useful to people who could not hear it or enter into it through the more traditional dharma gates, whether they were doctors or medical patients, hospital administrators, or insurance companies.”³¹

In traditional Buddhism, the Buddha is understood as a doctor who taught the Dharma as if prescribing the medicine for patients to eliminate suffering. Following this tradition, Kabat Zinn claimed, “The Buddha himself was not a Buddhist,” but a doctor who diagnoses the symptom and prescribes medicine. “He was a healer and a revolutionary, albeit a quiet and inward one. He diagnosed our collective human dis-ease and prescribed a benevolent medicine for sanity and well-being.”³² Mindfulness meditation is kind of medicine prescribed to deal with sick mind, yet its efficiency could only be realized inside just as patients must take medicine themselves. Similarly, mindfulness meditation provides a way for patients to heal their mental problem, yet the practitioners must carry out such work themselves. In his book *Full Catastrophe Living*, he said: “*Healing*, as we are using the word here, does not mean ‘curing,’ although the two words are often used interchangeably. ...there are few if any outright cures for chronic diseases or for stress-related disorders. While it may not be possible for us to cure ourselves or to find someone who can, it is possible to heal ourselves. Healing implies the possibility for us to relate differently to illness, disability, even death as we learn to see with the eyes of wholeness. As we have seen, this comes from practicing such basic skills as going into and dwelling in states of deep psychological relaxation and seeing and transcending our fears and our boundaries of body and mind. In moments of stillness, you come to realize that you are already whole, already complete in your being, even if your body has cancer or heart disease or AIDS or pain.”³³ Healing is done within associated with one’s mind, mindfulness meditation is to purify the mind which has been sick of depression and anxiety.

The medicalization of the mindfulness meditation in America evolved from the vipassana meditation in Asia could be understood in the light of the Buddhist history in connection with the principle of the dependent origination. From a phenomenological

³¹ Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR,” 288.

³² Jon Kabat-Zinn. *Coming to Our Senses*, 137.

³³ Jon Kabat Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* (New York: Random House, 1990), 173.

perfective, Buddhist history of more than 2500 years could be considered as the manifestations of the Dharma, undergoing series paradigm shifts and giving rise to variety of Buddhisms—such as so-called primitive Buddhism, sectarian Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Tantric Buddhism, as well as Indian Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism, and American Buddhism. Each of them could be the embodiment of the Dharma at different times and places, showing some special features. The leaders of the mindfulness movement made efforts to disassociate themselves from existing Buddhisms without identifying themselves as Buddhists. This kind of practice could be understood in comparison with early Chan Buddhism where Chan masters denied its connection with traditional Buddhism, rebuking the Buddha and patriarchs, burning Buddha-statues. They justified their efforts by claiming to have embraced the Dharma intuitively, practicing beyond what the Buddha taught. Similarly, the mindfulness movement as its leaders claimed transcends Buddhist history, philosophy, and cultures directly drawn from the Dharma specifically beneficial for cotemporary world.

The Dharma, being the teaching of the Buddha or law of causality as given in Pali Buddhism, is full of dynamic creativity consistently conditioning new practices and cultures in accordance with the time and space. Buddhists often use the term Yana or vehicle to indicate different embodiments of the Dharma in history, such as the Vehicle of Hearers, the Vehicle of Bodhisattva, and the Vehicle of Vajra. The mindfulness movement as new embodiment of the Dharma is said to have given rise to so called the Third Wave of Cognitive Science, and scholars have coined a new term Mindfulness Vehicle or the Fourth Yana. All these Yanas are equally embodiments of the Dharma, the value of each Yana is not drawn from any comparison with the others but based on its suitability and beneficial efficiency in deal with the suffering of the world. The mindfulness movement as the fourth yana focuses on psychosomatic well-being of people, thus it sounds to have disregarded the ultimate goal of enlightenment or nirvana. Yet, as all yanas are the skillful means for achieving the perfect enlightenment, the mindfulness could be a way for the final goal.

Dharma in Buddhism is not dogmatic but often compared as medicine in dealing with suffering as shown in the format of the Four Noble Truths, liberation from the suffering is the ultimate goal of Buddhist meditation. In early Buddhism, only monastics are expected to liberate themselves from the suffering of rebirth in this life through meditation while lay Buddhists are supposed to practice morality and generosity to win better rebirth. Change occurred in Mahayana Buddhism as the gap between the monastics and lay Buddhists in spiritual practice and achievement disappeared, and in Chan

Buddhism, anyone could attain sudden enlightenment in this life only if seeing into one's own Buddha nature. A similar change took place in modern Theravada Buddhism as the vipassana meditation in connection with Abhidhamma study was extended to lay Buddhists who could achieve the similar spirit goal as monastics would. Eventually, the mindfulness meditation in the West as recreation of the vipassana meditation emerged, highlighting the importance of sati and medicalized the practice for dealing with psychosomatic diseases. By examining the mindfulness movement in the West today in connection with the historical developments of Buddhism in the past, one may realize that the leaders of the mindfulness movement may have inherited the Buddhist spirit of recreating new culture by reinterpreting the Dharma.

Conclusion

Before the widespread of mindfulness meditation, Buddhism(s) in America had already undergone self-transformation and self-recreation for a century, actively participating in social, intellectual, and cultural activities, seeking dialogue with modern science, contributing to New Cultural Movement, and eventually shaping new forms of Zen Buddhism, engaged Buddhism, cultural Buddhism, intellectual Buddhism, and scientific Buddhism with western characteristics. Toward the end of the 20th century, the mindfulness movement originated from the Vipassana of Theravada Buddhism in combination with other forms of meditation practice in Mahayana Buddhism became a mainstream of American Buddhism thanks to the scientific study of Buddhism and medicalization of the meditation practice. The rising and development of the mindfulness movement is conditioned by the varieties of factors, inside and outside, the social and cultural environment of the West influenced by secularization, individualization, and de-spiritualization, may have also laid down a sound foundation. Yet, the most important factors would be the Dharma, very essence of Buddhism, demonstrating the self-transformation and self-recreation in serving the need of the world.

【摘要】 本文以靜觀默想在美國日益流行為背景，重新檢視佛教在近二千五百年歷史中，與不同文化相遇時所採取的去情境化和再情境化的概念和實踐。本文將分析當今美國的靜觀默想如何將其目標從傳統佛教的涅槃轉變為強調改善修煉者心理健康的實用功能，透過檢視這種轉變如何導致佛教的世俗化和世俗的神聖化，並進一步討論佛教關於神聖與世俗非二元性的觀點。