

*Contemporary Understandings of Buddhism*  
Oxford Mindfulness Centre Research Meetings  
Oxford, May 4th 2016

These days there is a lot of talk about mindfulness and Buddhism, and about how these two relate to each other. This nature of this relationship will depend not only on how we conceptualize mindfulness but also on how we come to understand Buddhism. And just like mindfulness, Buddhism today means many things. So I thought it would perhaps be helpful to address the senior partner in this conversation and to show how Buddhism has come to mean so many different things to different people. In the process I hope to highlight some of those understandings that are most helpful in carrying forth this conversation in an appropriate and considerate manner. [⇒ slide 2]

Let me start off by stating that there are two very different ways of talking about Buddhism, namely as a Buddhist practitioner from within the Buddhist tradition or from an outside and scholarly standpoint. The Buddhist tradition itself presents Buddhism as an individual path to awakening or enlightenment. This path is based upon a set of philosophical views, ethical guidelines and contemplative practices, which are centered around the figure of the Buddha, religious teachings (*dharma*) and a spiritual community (*sangha*). These central Buddhist concepts are understood and interpreted in quite different ways in the various Buddhist traditions, yet each of them usually claims its path to be identical to some “original” or “authentic” practice taught by the Buddha. I will refer to this claim as “the rhetoric of authenticity”. [⇒ slide 3]

The academic study of Buddhism, on the other hand, views the tradition as a dynamic and pluralistic set of cultural traditions. These traditions cover a history of 2.500 years in which they spread from South Asia to South East, Central, and East Asia – and most recently to the West. Here, Buddhism is taken as an object of academic study which may be approached from within different methodological frameworks. These are based either on textual sources, material culture, the social life of people, or, more recently, on the contemplative practices of the tradition. Note that while these two understandings rarely occur together, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive by definition. In fact, there are a few scholar-practitioners, such as John Peacock and Stephen Batchelor amongst others, who do a great job at looking at Buddhist texts as historical sources *as well as* instructions for practice. [⇒ slide 4]

From this scholarly standpoint, the Buddhist rhetoric of authenticity is problematic for two reasons. First, because it ignores the diversity of views across the Buddhist tradition, and secondly because it ignores the historical development of individual traditions themselves, because Buddhist traditions necessarily change over time and in response to changes within their own cultural contexts. This dynamic and pluralistic view of Buddhism has a number of important implications. First of all, it implies that there can be no single authoritative Buddhist account of mindfulness. Then, it also implies that the relationship of the tradition to mindfulness is not direct and linear, and this is evident also from the fact that mindfulness draws upon multiple Buddhist traditions (and when I speak of mindfulness here I am referring to MBSR as presented by Jon Kabat Zinn.) Finally, it implies that when we as researchers or clinicians engage with Buddhism implicitly or explicitly, we do so not with the tradition as a whole but with a part of it; and we do so not in some unmediated way, but through a process of framing, and each of these frames privileges certain phenomena over others. [⇒ slide 5]

In order to approach the relationship of Buddhism to mindfulness with a greater awareness of context on the Buddhist side of things, it would be helpful to give a very brief historical overview of the development and the spread of the tradition. For this purpose, I will distinguish three broad phases of its development, namely, Buddhism in India, its spread to other parts of Asia, and most recently its modernist transformations in Asia and the West.

Again, just to note that this is very much an outsider's view on the tradition and Buddhism itself would put things quite differently.

As you know, Buddhism originates in India with the life of the Buddha in the 4th-5th century BCE. However, the tradition as we know it today in its plurality cannot be reduced simply to the teachings of the historical Buddha, since it also includes a number of doctrinal developments and Buddhist schools that evolve at later stages, first in India and later on in other Asian countries. These later developments are accompanied by the emergence of new interpretations of the nature of Buddha and his teachings, new philosophical views as well as new texts and practices, all of which are accepted as authoritative by some Buddhist communities but rejected or ignored by others. Notice here that any engagement with the tradition really calls for a delicate approach because, as a scholar or researcher, you do not want to end up taking sides in these century-old religious debates, perhaps even unknowingly. [→ slide 6]

In India, we may distinguish three distinct forms of the tradition which develop after the life of the Buddha and up to its demise in the 12th century as a result of the Muslim conquests. While these developments are very much interconnected and intertwined with each other, I will have to present them here in a very simplified form. As a first major development, we have Early Buddhism which is characterized by the emergence of Buddhist Scholasticism and the Abhidharma literature (~Theravāda, 3rd century BCE). This is followed by the rise of "The great vehicle" (Mahāyāna: 1st century BCE) which comes with the development new philosophical schools such as the Middle Way and Mind-only school (Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, 1st-2nd and 3rd-4th century CE). Finally, we have the rise of esoteric forms of Buddhism and Buddhist tantric literature in the 7th century CE (Vajrayāna). These developments act as important reference points for the later transmission of the tradition in different Asian countries and they also demonstrate the plurality of Buddhism already in its country of origin. Unfortunately, I do not have time here to go into the distinguishing features and characteristics of these developments. [→ slide 7]

In the course of time, these earlier and later developments then spread to other Asian countries in which they act as the foundation for the emergence of their own indigenous Buddhist traditions. For example, Early Buddhism spreads to Sri Lanka in the 2nd century BCE and from there further on to South East Asia (Theravāda Buddhism). The Mahāyāna later spreads first to China in the 3rd century CE, and from there it later spreads further to East Asia (Zen Buddhism). Finally, tantric forms of Buddhism spread to Tibet in the 7th century CE and from there further to Mongolia (Tibetan Buddhism). It's important to note here that this spread across Asia is not simply a transplantation of Indian traditions into other Asian countries, but it is much more a process of translation and transformation and unique Buddhist cultures are created in the process. From all these different countries Buddhist cultures later spreads to the West in the 19th and 20th century.

Thus we have a threefold process of the spread and development of Buddhism: the major developments in India, the adaptations and transformations in the receiving cultures, and finally the meeting of these Buddhist traditions with modernity in Asia and the West. And out of this meeting emerges transformed practices, first in Asia and then in the West, that seem to be among some of the forerunners of mindfulness practices. I will address these in more detail later, but first we need to have a closer look at the transformations that arise as a result of this meeting of Buddhism and Modernity. [→ slide 8]

The processes of modernization in the West and in Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries deeply destabilizes traditional forms and creates novel cultural situations. These effects lead to the emergence of new and modern forms of Buddhism, as more traditional forms are rearticulated in the language of modernity. This gives rise to what is referred to as "Buddhist Modernism" or simply "modern Buddhism." This concept of Buddhist Modernism does not refer

simply to all forms of Buddhism that exist in the modern era, but rather specifically to those that have emerged out of the engagement with the cultural and intellectual forces of modernity. The concept is particularly helpful because it allows us to appreciate the extent to which modernity transforms Buddhist traditions and creates novel Buddhist cultures. The uniqueness of these cultures is something that is generally unappreciated by even some of the very serious practitioners in the West. Take, for example, the idea of meditation as *the* central Buddhist practice, which in fact is a relatively modern development. [→ slide 9]

It is tempting to think of these modern forms as a kind of “Western Buddhism.” Indeed, there are many ways in which they are quite different from what Buddhism has meant to Asians throughout their history. The West certainly plays an important role in this process, particularly through the influences of Western science, philosophy and psychology, as well as through the contemporary Buddhist writings of European and American authors. In fact, this leads to a highly selective transformation of Buddhism through the categories, the ideologies and the narratives of Western culture. [→ slide 10] However, this modernization process has not been an exclusively western project. Likewise essential are Asian reformers who were educated in Western and Buddhist thought (e.g. Thich Nath Hanh, the Dalai Lama). In this sense, Buddhist Modernism is more of a co-creation of Asians, Europeans and Americans and thus may be understood as a kind of transnational Buddhist school that cannot be reduced to one geographical or cultural setting. [→ slide 11]

Some of the early forms of Buddhism Modernism manifest in Buddhist revival movements which span a number of areas and schools as well as in social reforms and nationalist movements especially in Burma and Sri Lanka. Here, Buddhism is presented as a rational way of thought that emphasizes reason, meditation, and the study of canonical texts, while it deemphasized ritual, image worship, and folk beliefs and practices – notice here the affinity to Western assumptions and beliefs. Some examples of later forms are the global Vipassanā or Insight movement, Socially Engaged Buddhism, and Secular Buddhism.

With the presentation of Buddhist Modernism, our overview of the three major developments of Buddhism is complete. This overview now allows us to differentiate between various Buddhist traditions, and to see how these have a closer or more remote relationship to mindfulness in terms of their histories and cultures. In a descriptive understanding of this relationship, the Vipassanā movement – together modern Zen Buddhism – is especially relevant, because it is central in the formulation of mindfulness by Jon Kabat Zinn. This is not to say, however, that the more traditional developments of Buddhism are irrelevant. In fact, these often are the subject of more normative attempts at understand this relationship, which turn to ideas and theories found in traditional Buddhist literature. [→ slide 13]

I would like to conclude with a brief look at the Vipassanā movement and its origins in Burma, because this is one of the source traditions of mindfulness, and its reformulation of meditation is a forerunner to contemporary forms of practice. Its earlier formulations are still deeply embedded in a traditional Theravāda context. However, this context gradually recedes as the practice is made more widely accessible, until in later formulations in Western settings it eventually disappears all together. Thus, over time, the associated practices fall along a spectrum from the more traditionally Buddhist over the more modernized to, perhaps, the fully secular. In the following you will naturally begin to recognize some familiarity with mindfulness and the practicalities of its teaching.

Now this will perhaps come as a surprise to you, but prior to the colonial era, meditation was not a widespread practice in Theravāda countries. In fact, the literature suggest that the tradition of meditation has actually died out completely. However, things change after the British conquest of Burma in the mid-19th century. In an attempt to protect the Buddhist religion from colonial influence, there arises a Buddhist reform movement which develops simplified forms of meditation and empowers regular people to study Buddhist literature.

This includes a number of innovations. First of all, meditation is presented as having potential public benefit. Furthermore, people are encouraged to directly pursue the advanced practice of insight without first cultivating calm and concentration, although at this stage study is still necessary to prepare for practice. Also, meditation on a mass scale is made possible by collective lay study and practice. Finally, ordinary life and everyday reality are seen as a place for meditation. Here you can already clearly see some of the central themes of mindfulness, however please note that the emphasis here is on the innovative nature of these themes in comparison to more traditional forms of practice. [→ slide 14]

The method devised by Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982) is a good example of practice at this earlier stage. He stresses the observation of impermanence in the body. The instructions are to focus on the observation of the breath at the abdomen and then to expand observation to all the processes of perception through the six senses; noting cognitive events with a simple label before letting it go. This leads the meditator to develop a deconstructive moment-to-moment awareness and to see reality in ultimate terms, understood in the sense of the Abhidharma. [→ slide 15]

Later teachers then simplify this practice even further. They downplay the value of study for the purpose of practice and thus make the practices even more widely accessible. This strict emphasis on practice also downplays other aspects of the Theravāda tradition so that eventually the practice can be more readily applied as a technique and to any religious or cultural context, up to a point where meditation is no longer taught as part of Buddhism. [→ slide 16]

This is certainly the case when Westerners such as Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield – who later become the teachers of JKZ – train in this lineage in Asia and then return to the West. Outside of a Theravāda culture, they disperse with all rituals and activities other than meditation as well as any serious engagement with Theravāda doctrine. Thus they emphasize bare practice even to a greater degree than their Asian teachers. Practice is now framed as a therapeutic tool with emphasis on the psychological health it brings in the here and now, even though Asian teachers have not justified practice in therapeutic terms. Mindfulness now becomes a separate healing practice in its own right, and, for many, this presentation of mindfulness has moved the practice beyond the Buddhist tradition. [→ slide 17]

One step further down from these developments we now find Jon Kabat Zinn. He was a student of Kornfield and Goldstein, and also received instruction from a Western disciple of U Ba Khin, Robert Hoover. Interestingly, he was also as a student of Korean Son (~Zen) master Seung Sahn. This places him directly into the succession of this Vipassanā practice lineage and thus within the context of Buddhist Modernism. However, as JKZ developed MBSR as a clinical practice, the history of Buddhist reform movements and their critics was probably not very central in his thinking. [→ slide 18]

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# Contemporary Understandings of Buddhism

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# Understanding Buddhism

From within the tradition:

- A path to awakening
- A set of views, ethical guidelines, contemplative practice
- Centered around the Buddha, religious teachings, a spiritual community

→ “original” or “authentic” practice taught by the Buddha

→ “rhetoric of authenticity”



# Understanding Buddhism



- From a scholarly standpoint:
- A dynamic and pluralistic set of cultural traditions
  - A history of 2.500 years
  - Spreads from South Asia to South East, Central, and East Asia
- object of academic study  
→ different methodological frameworks

# Understanding Buddhism(s)

Rhetoric of authenticity:

- Ignores diversity of views across Buddhist traditions
- Ignores the historical development of individual traditions

Implications:

- no single authoritative Buddhist account of mindfulness
- mindfulness draws upon multiple Buddhist traditions
- engagement is always with a part of the tradition and not unmediated but through a process of framing

# The History of Buddhism

Three phases of development:

- Buddhism in India
- Spread to other parts of Asia
- Modernist transformations

Evolutions of doctrine and  
Buddhist schools:

- new interpretations of the Buddha and his teachings
- new philosophical views
- new texts and practices



# The History of Buddhism

- [The life of the Buddha (4th-5th century BCE)]
- Early Buddhism: Buddhist Scholasticism and Abhidharma (~Theravāda, 3rd century BCE)
- The Mahāyāna movement: Madhyamaka and Yogācāra philosophy (1st century BCE to 3rd-4th century CE)
- Esoteric forms of Buddhism: Tantric literature (Vajrayāna, 7th century CE)
- [Decline of Buddhism in India (12th century CE)]



# Buddhist Modernism

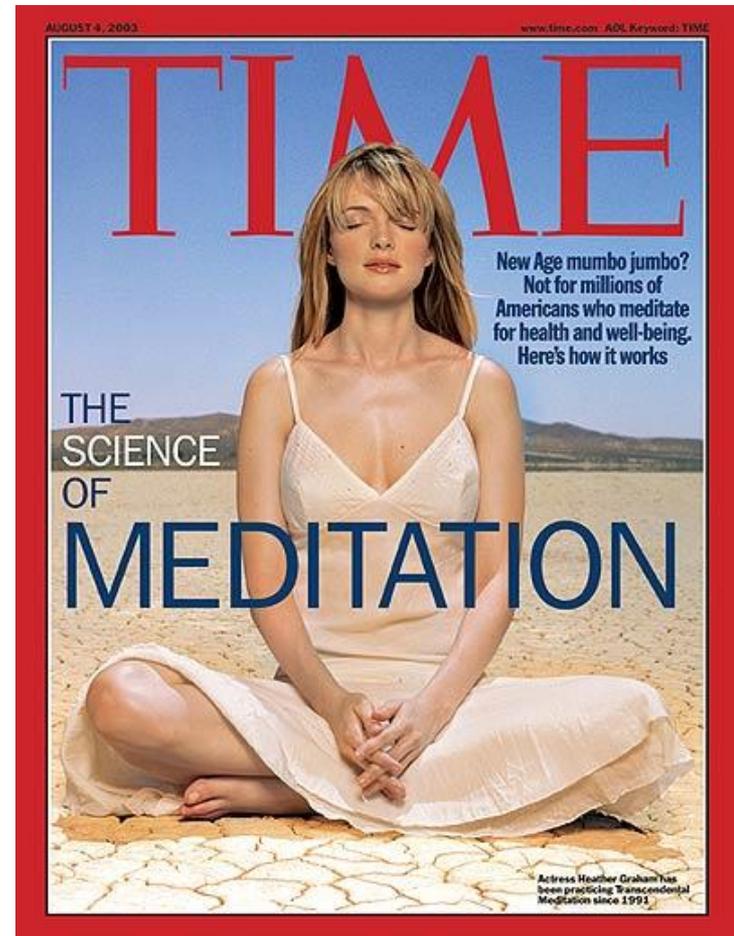
Modernization in the West and in Asia in 19th-20th century:  
→ destabilization of traditions and novel cultural situations

- New and modern forms of Buddhism
- An articulation of Buddhism in the language of modernity

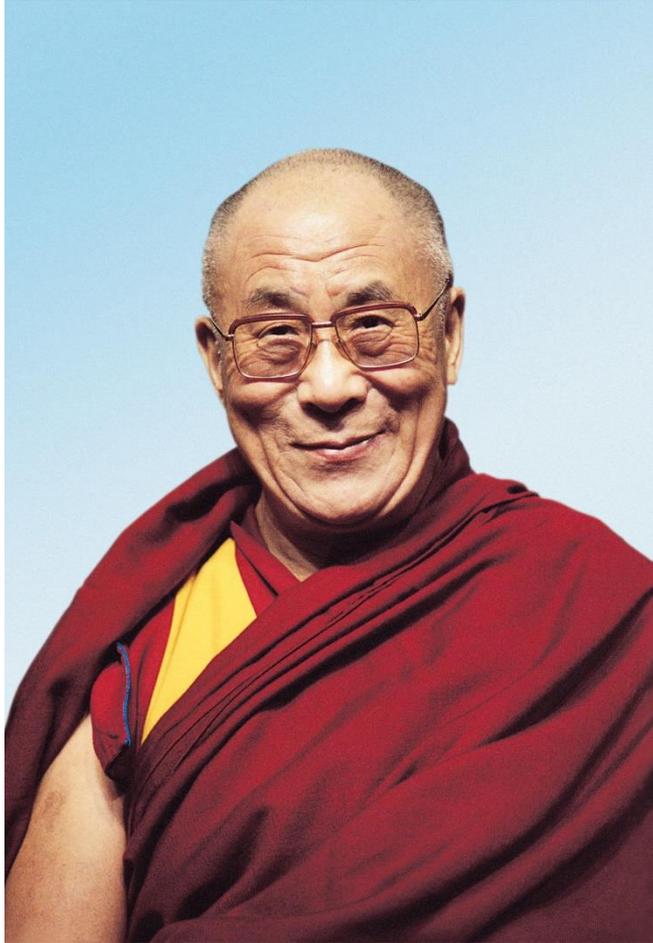
≠ All forms of Buddhism that exist in the modern era  
= Those that have emerged out of the engagement with modernity

- modern transformations of Buddhist traditions
- creation of novel Buddhist cultures
- generally unappreciated by Western practitioners

# Buddhist Modernism



# Buddhist Modernism



# Buddhist Modernism

Earlier forms:

→ revival movements of number of areas and schools

→ linked to social reform and nationalist movements

- Buddhism as a rational way of thought
- Emphasis on reason, meditation, canonical texts
- De-emphasis of ritual, image worship, folk beliefs

Later forms: The Vipassanā (Insight) Movement,  
Socially Engaged Buddhism, Secular Buddhism, ...

# Buddhism(s) and Mindfulness

Three major developments of Buddhism:

- Differentiation of traditions
- Closer relationship to mindfulness
- More remote relationship to mindfulness

→ descriptive understanding (modern Vipassanā, Zen)

→ normative understanding (traditional developments)

# The Vipassanā Movement

- A source tradition of mindfulness
  - earlier, middle and later formulations of practices
  - spectrum from traditional over modernized to secular

Innovations of the Buddhist reform movement:

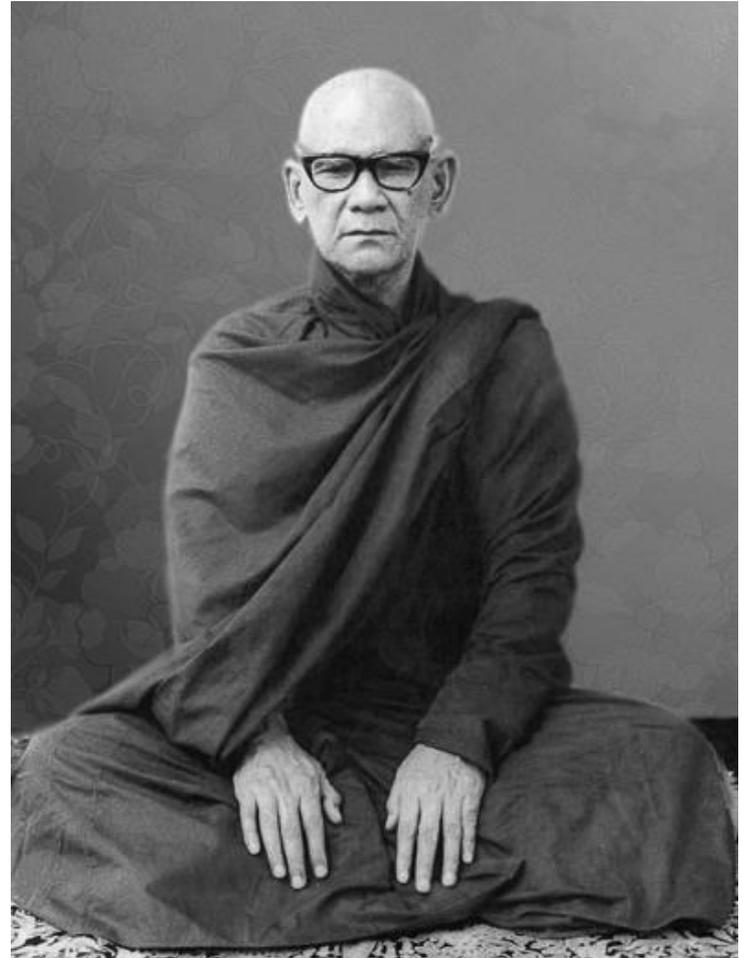
- Formulates simple forms of meditation
- Empowers regular people to study Buddhist literature
  - the public benefit of meditation
  - the encouragement to pursue insight
  - collective lay study and practice
  - everyday life as a place for meditation

# The Vipassanā Movement: Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-82)

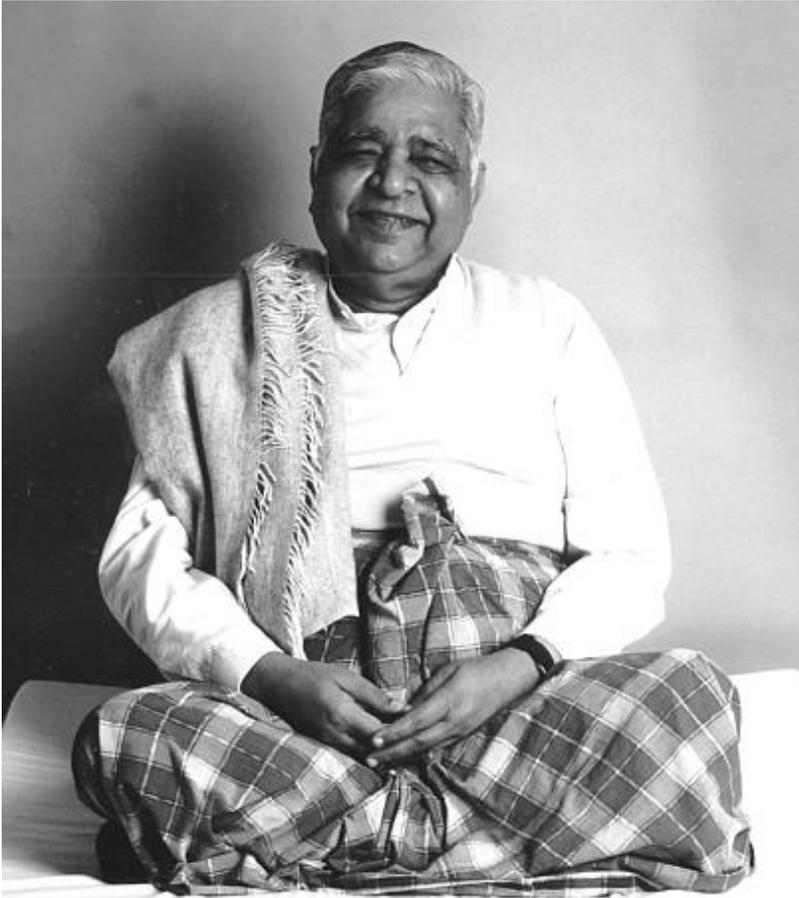
The Mahasi method:

- Observation of impermanence in the body
- Observation of the breath at the abdomen
- Observation of the six senses
- Noting cognitive events before letting go

→ reality is seen in its ultimate terms (in an Abhidharma sense)



# The Vipassanā Movement: S.N. Goenka (\*1924)



- Further simplification of the technique
- Downplays value of study
- Downplays other aspects of Theravāda

→ practice applies to any religious or cultural context  
→ meditation is no longer taught as part of Buddhism

# The Vipassanā Movement: Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield



# The Vipassanā Movement:

Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield

- Disperse with activities other than meditation
- No engagement with Theravāda doctrine
- Emphasized bare practice to a greater degree

→ a therapeutic tool for psychological health

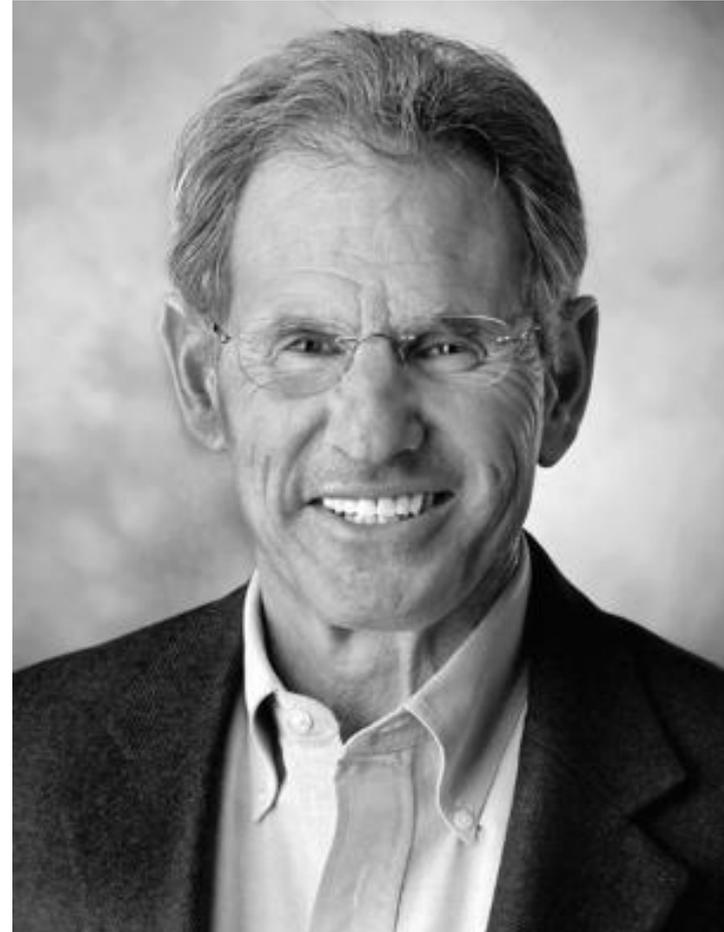
→ a separate healing practice in its own right

= beyond Buddhism (?)

# MBSR: Jon Kabat-Zinn (\*1944)

## Teachers:

- Kornfield and Goldstein
- Robert Hover (disciple of U Ba Khin, Mahasi)
- Korean Son (~Zen) master Seung Sahn
- MBSR = “mostly vipassanā practice (in the Theravāda sense as taught by people like Joseph [Goldstein] and Jack [Kornfield] etc.) with a Zen attitude.”



# Take-home Exercises

Buddhism  $\neq$  Buddhism

Buddhism  $\neq$  = Buddhist Modernism

Buddhism  $\leftrightarrow$  Buddhist Studies

Descriptive  $\leftrightarrow$  Normative

Watch out for traditional Buddhist understandings in research

Watch out for contemporary Buddhist counter-reforms

Watch out for a continuing discussion

# Thank you for your attention

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प्रघट्टकार्थप्रतिचारुत्वात् यद्येनाहसमिति दुःखपंकात् संसारकर्ममाद्भुतान् समुद्धृत्य संसारपंकमपनीयत्वात् प्रघट्टात्  
पयित्वा चेत्पर्यः चित्तसुखे प्रकाशान् देवित्ये धाम्नि प्रविशति रात्रे रात्मना च नयति यः प्रवेत्नायति प्रियां स्तान् तिला र्धमपिकालं  
विमोक्तं यत्कुनैवेच्छति प्रसादेव सुज्ञे रूपनिष्ठ इहस्य वेदिमिनिषेवोत्तरे तद्विलक्षणः श्रितिकंठदिरिति भावः अच्युतः स्वस्व  
गुणान् विभुः च यो विदति न च न वेत्ति निषेवागं देवः शिष्येण स्वयमसवलितत्वात् आनसवलितान् समुद्धृत्य मलमिति चोत्तरे  
गाठरागादित्युभयत्र यो ज्ञाम् अथैतद्वाचाधिकारिणोऽर्चीयति श्रीति अनेनो गोविंदे देवतां तगणि च साम्प्रियो पाप्मीने म् इय  
र्थः न चान्यनिवारणं तथा वचनभयादिति वाच्यम् अथस्य सुच्युत्यनैर्निखद्यतया गृहीतत्वात् किंतु वेदनिमित्ते पि गोविंदपारतम्ये त

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Dunne, John D. 2015. Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach. In: *Handbook of Mindfulness and Self-Regulation*, ed. by B. Ostafin, B. Meier & M. Robinson. New York: Springer.

**Table 18.1** Traditional sources of mindfulness with geographical origin

<i>Classical</i>
Vipassanā (mainstream Theravāda in Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka)
Śamatha (Tibetan; especially Gelugpa approach)
Mind Training (as formal practice; Tibetan)
<i>Nondual</i>
Chan (China)
Zen (Japan; derived from Chan)
Seon (Korea; derived from Chan)
Mahāmudrā (Tibetan)
Dzogchen (Tibetan)
Thai Forest Tradition (Thailand; Nondual with Classical features)

**Table 18.2** Classical and nondual: features of target state in formal practice

	Classical	Nondual
<i>Object focus</i>	Meditative states always have an object	Novices may use an object, but eventually all objects are dropped
<i>Ethical judgment</i>	Required	Suspended
<i>Conceptual schemas</i>	Vows recollected and Abhidharma categories used	All conceptual schemas suspended
<i>Present-centeredness</i>	Not fully present-centered so as to allow for ethical judgment and recollection of vows and Abhidharma schema	Always present-centered