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British Buddhism, secular mindfulness, and the politics of sustainability

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ABSTRACT

The environment for Buddhist organisations in Britain has changed since the period of their initial establishment. As a result of the rise in popularity of secular mindfulness and the spread of Buddhist teachings, Buddhist groups in Britain are forced to consider their sustainability in a crowded spiritual marketplace. This article examines the recent growth of secular mindfulness teaching by Buddhist groups in Britain, drawing on new qualitative research with British Buddhist groups and teachers. I argue that 'secular meditation' approaches have been variously adopted by Buddhist groups to appeal to a wider range of people, bringing in much-needed revenue for financial sustainability as well as carving out greater cultural relevance. However, the boundaries between the 'secular' and the 'Buddhist' are not always clearly demarcated. As ideas and labels they operate in symbiosis, enabling Buddhist groups to navigate multiple audiences simultaneously, sustaining and developing their position in the public sphere.

KEYWORDS

Buddhism; Britain; secular mindfulness; meditation; meditation courses; sustainability; secular; economics

Introduction, methods, and key concepts

Over the last decade, a growing number of Buddhist organisations in Britain have begun to offer self-styled 'secular' meditation courses, classes, and retreats to the general public, alongside their more explicitly Buddhist offerings such as *dhamma* talks, textual study, and *puja* (ritual). These 'secular' courses are targeted at non-Buddhists and include residential retreats, day-long workshops, and weekly classes. They typically focus on forms of secular mindfulness meditation, teaching techniques for de-stressing, happiness, and compassion, as well as offering opportunities to reconnect with the natural world through meditative walking or gardening. The courses are popular (sometimes with waiting lists) and are offered regularly in the annual teaching schedule of Buddhist centres. Many Buddhist groups successfully pivoted online during the Covid-19 pandemic, including on social media platforms, expanding their target market beyond their immediate local areas. Although variously described as 'secular', 'universal' or 'non-Buddhist' by Buddhist organisations, courses are often taught in Buddhist temple

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and centre spaces and/or by Buddhist teachers. The classes are marketed and advertised carefully, minimising or removing Buddhist terminology and imagery, and offering wide-ranging help in the development of personal tranquillity, life satisfaction, health and wellbeing. The increasing availability of courses labelled as 'secular' is notable in Buddhist organisations who have historically catered to British converts, although more recently a smaller number of groups closely connected to specific communities (such as Thai or Sri Lankan) have also begun to adopt this dual-track 'secular' and 'Buddhist' approach to their public provision.

This is qualitatively different from what was offered in the earlier days of the establishment of Buddhist groups in the British context. Although Buddhism has a long history of connection with the British Isles and Ireland (Almond 2008; Cox 2013), it was only post-WWII that an increasing number of Buddhist organisations, centres, and temples became a firm part of the religious landscape (Starkey and Tomalin 2016). Up until about the year 2000, Buddhists in Britain were concerned primarily with setting up groups, buying and adapting properties in order to establish monastic and non-monastic communities, and offering spaces for Buddhist practice, including meditation, chanting, and teaching the *dharma*. That said, the adaptation and translation of practice, ritual, and teaching has always been a key feature of the establishment of Buddhism in Britain as elsewhere (Bluck 2006), but adopting self-defined 'secular' language and style, and deliberately marketing courses as such, is a more recent development.

The appearance of what is termed 'secular' in British Buddhist contexts is responsive to the national rise in popularity of secular mindfulness and associated activities to promote mental and physical wellbeing, including Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) which is now provided in a range of publicly funded statutory institutions such as hospitals and community health services (Arat 2017; Cook 2021). Mindfulness and meditation apps, such as Headspace, are now readily available and well-used across Britain, fuelled by the growing cultural trend of valorising individual health and wellbeing. Developing alongside this, starting in the 1970s, there has been a substantial increase in the number of Buddhist groups now operational across British towns and cities, offering a plethora of choices. For potential converts or those interested in Buddhism and meditation, where once information was limited to finding a dusty book in a local library or meeting Buddhist teachers and devotees on the hippie trail[1] connections to all manner of Buddhist groups, teachings, practises and discussions are now easily facilitated digitally and on the British High Street. In contrast with the early days of Buddhist organisational establishment, where groups operated with low budgets in renovated buildings or domestic settings, Buddhist centres in Britain that have established themselves with large owned premises and (paid) staff members have no choice but to give increasing attention to financial and cultural sustainability in what has become a crowded Buddhist and Buddhist-inspired marketplace. What needs to be offered now by a typical Buddhist centre is, by necessity, very different to what was deemed appropriate by those in the 1960s and 1970s. Buddhist teachers and organisations must devise various ways to respond to this changing context, balancing economic sustainability, cultural relevance, and ideas of religious tradition.

[1]The 'Hippie Trail' refers to the overland passage from Europe to India, taken by young people embracing a counter-cultural lifestyle, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s.

This article draws on new research conducted with a range of Buddhist groups and teachers in Britain and the Republic of Ireland who provide courses to the general public that they label as 'secular', 'non-Buddhist', or 'universal'.[2] I undertook fifteen interviews in 2021–2022, of approximately an hour each, with teachers and Buddhist centre management from groups connected with specific Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana lineages, as well as non-affiliated, independent Buddhist organisations and teachers. The organisations themselves are varied: some were established in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, others are relative newcomers to the British Buddhist scene, including large transnational Buddhist organisations alongside those run by individuals and small groups and who only operate in one British/ROI location. As I discuss further below, participants were approached after an online search of Buddhist organisational websites and social media and further participants were recommended to me during interviews.[3] Although the majority of my participants were lay Buddhist teachers (with varying levels of institutional religious commitment), I also interviewed two monastic practitioners who wore robes and followed specific ordination vows. All but three of my participants were female and all but one was white. Alongside formal interviews, which were transcribed in full and later amended by interviewees for accuracy, I also attended and participated in several courses and events, including a mindful writing workshop, a secular mindfulness group walk, a compassion festival, a 'mindfulness for challenging times' day-long retreat, and two three-day residential retreats: 'relax and destress' and 'mindful movement'. Due to restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic some of these were online (via Zoom) but I also attended events in person, including the residential retreats. Participating in these events enabled me to see teachers and organisations in action, thus complementing the data gathered during interviews.

The questions that drove this research were: why would Buddhist organisations and teachers want to facilitate self-styled 'secular' or 'non-Buddhist' programmes? How is the idea of the secular understood and operationalised by Buddhist groups in this context? Finally, in what ways does this understanding of the secular relate to, and interact with, Buddhist teaching and practice in the lived experiences of teachers and organisations? It is important to analyse contemporary developments in relation to historical trajectory and therefore in the article that follows, I will outline briefly the establishment of Buddhism in Britain (particularly post-1960s), before looking more closely at the rise of secular mindfulness and its subsequent impact. Given the context of the growth and diversification of Buddhist organisations in contemporary Britain, coupled with the wide availability of mindfulness and secular meditation beyond Buddhist groups, I will then explore how Buddhist organisations in Britain are variously grappling with concerns about economic sustainability and continued cultural relevance. I will show how offering 'secular' meditation and mindfulness courses have been used to reach out to wider audiences beyond those typically interested in a Buddhist centre, bringing in resources for financial survival as well as trying to cement a place in the public sphere.

[2]In this study, the majority of my interlocutors were based in England, Wales and Scotland, with a more limited number of participants from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The term 'Britain' is used in this article to reflect this dominant demographic. However, it is important to note the differences between the areas that make up the British Isles in the way that Buddhism has become established, and currently operates (see Cox 2013).

[3]As the British Buddhist scene is a relatively small one, in order to protect participants' identities, I will not indicate which specific organisation my interlocutors were drawn from, nor will I give enhanced detail about the organisations and their locations where this might compromise anonymity.

In the final section of the article, whilst I highlight that Buddhist groups engage what they label as 'secular' and 'Buddhist' schemas using either a distinction or an integration approach, there remains difficulty in drawing too firm a boundary between so-called Buddhist or secular teaching, at least in the ways they are articulated and enacted within Buddhist organisations in Britain. Despite economic necessity and the deliberate framing of teaching approaches and contents, the motivation for providing 'secular' courses is inextricable from the motivation to provide 'Buddhist' teaching and practises. Indeed, the 'secular' and the 'Buddhist' operate in this context as notional ideas in careful symbiosis, with Buddhist lineage and experience giving a sense of legitimacy to 'secular' meditation teaching, and a 'secular' framing seemingly providing the opportunity to attract a wider range of people to help sustain the Buddhist centre in a competitive spiritual marketplace.

However, applying the term 'secular' or 'non-Buddhist' to the activities of Buddhist groups in Britain, particularly in an undefined way, is replete with challenges. In a work of forensic precision, Lois Lee (2015, 8, 6) highlights that terms like 'secular', 'religion' and 'non-religion' are ' … frequently treated as self-explanatory and left unarticulated and unscrutinised', leading to conceptual 'fuzziness'. This is because, as Charles Taylor (2007, 2–3) explains, the idea of the 'secular' is imbued with multiple meanings that operate variously at the level of public discourse and individual experience. 'Secular' can refer to social apparatuses and structures that have been disconnected from religious affiliation and are bound up with this-worldly concerns, as well as when religion has been relegated to 'one human possibility amongst others' and given no soteriological priority (Taylor 2007, 3). Whilst defining terms such as secular and religious have been the subject to much scholarly debate, Joseph Blankholm (2021, 594), in a special issue of *Religion* exploring the relationship between anthropology and the secular, asserts that the secular 'denies the reality of the supernatural and refuses to make the self-understanding of practices like magic and witchcraft its own', and, also citing Taylor, highlights that the secular condition implies 'a loss of transcendence'. Although appreciating the concerns raised by Blankholm (2021, 596) that 'Words like 'secular' and 'religious' should be held gently because the harder we squeeze them the more their meanings squish between our fingers', having some kind of conceptual definition is important for a project like this one, when academic debates about terms come face to face with emic ones put forward by interlocutors.

Lee's (2015, 204) definition of the secular as 'a condition in which religion is a subordinate cultural or political authority or concern' has been a useful starting point for this project, particularly in relation to method and the classification of key concepts. To identify potential participants, I searched the websites (particularly the online calendars or programmes) of multiple Buddhist organisations in Britain, large and small, looking for whether they used the exact term 'secular' to describe any teachings, classes, or courses that they offered. I was then able to construct a list of organisations that operated in this way, and conducted ten interviews, this group forming the majority of my participants. As I explain further as the article progresses, and drawing on the definition offered by Lee, in the courses labelled 'secular', the Buddhist organisations subordinated Buddhist imagery, terms, concepts, and cosmology in their course descriptions online and they de-emphasised any need for religious affiliation, prior belief, or belonging amongst participants, or any need for future belief or belonging, alongside emphasising

the day-to-day and this-worldly applicability of the teaching. In most, if not all of the advertisements for 'secular' teaching in Buddhist centres or by Buddhist teachers the emphasis was placed on relaxation, taking time out from the daily grind, and managing individual anxiety levels. To showcase one example of an online advertisement for a 'secular' labelled course at a British Buddhist centre:

> … secular meditation sessions are a great way to relax and create some space for reflection in the middle of your day. Slow down, take some time for yourself in your busy schedule, meet with others in community, tackle anxiety, stress, depression, issues with daily living.

By way of contrast, the same organisation when describing Buddhist teachings and ceremonies that they offered (which are delineated into separate sub-sections on their public facing website), made prominent reference to the Buddha and his teachings, key Buddhist teachers and lineages, and the value of specific Buddhist prayers, mantras, and ceremonies to help to overcome material and spiritual obstacles, in this life and the next.

From the initial ten interviewees, I was given further names of individuals and organisations that were deemed to be doing similar types of work (or who were interested in the same ideas) even though they might not use the exact term 'secular' in their advertised programmes. However, as I found out both online and through interviews, like those explicitly describing their teaching as 'secular', these subsequent interviewees differentiated between types of teaching that was seen to be Buddhist-focused, and that which was targeted to non-Buddhists or the wider public. Similarly, in the wider public provision offered, they also de-emphasised any requirement for specific belief or affiliation removing Buddhist imagery, cosmology, and references to specific lineages or practices in certain teachings or retreats. Whilst these teachers might not have specifically employed the term 'secular' in their publicity, they appeared to subordinate religious articulations or understandings of the world in their course descriptions in a similar way to those who did. A more fine grained analysis of the different approaches between organisations and individuals will be explored as the article progresses, but what is important to note at this stage is that during my interviews I was careful in using the 'secular' (and, indeed, 'Buddhist' or 'non Buddhist') term without qualification and instead questioned participants as to what they meant when certain words were employed (or not), in an attempt to appreciate how, where, and why particular labels for teaching practices had been adopted.

For both those explicitly employing the term 'secular' to describe teaching and those that did not (albeit with similar approaches), none of my participants described *themselves* as 'secular'. Each participant affiliated as a Buddhist (from various lineages and traditions) and even though they might deliver formally accredited secular mindfulness teaching (such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction), they were not individuals who were determined to promote 'Secular Buddhism' (as coined by Stephen Batchelor (2017), for example) or 'secularism,' defined by Blankholm (2021, 596) as the 'belief in a secular worldview'. What I found at interview and through observation, was not Buddhist teachers pushing a political or ideological form of secularism where the goal was for religion to be removed from the public sphere, but instead, organisational participation in a growing trend which attempted to segregate certain types of teaching into 'Buddhist' and 'secular' schemas in order to engage the British public in alternative ways.

Furthermore, my ultimate intention in this article is not to debate whether specific teachings or practices are definitively 'secular' or 'Buddhist', but to show how and why

Buddhist groups have recently begun to adopt these labels, in part, to promote financial and cultural sustainability.[4] Also, as I will show in the section that follows, although the term sustainability is now more often used in relation to climate and the environment, I am using this concept to refer to both economic as well as cultural viability, and use it to explore the ways that Buddhist organisations try to survive in a competitive religious and spiritual milieu. Overall, the aim of this article is to analyse how Buddhist groups, once the sole purveyors of a specific brand of mindfulness, are now responding to wider cultural trends in Britain that have seen these practises de-institutionalised from Buddhist custodianship, examining the ongoing implications and tensions of this for the integrity of Buddhist organisations and teachers operating in a much changed environment from where they began (Gleig 2016, 10; McMahan and Braun 2017).

Buddhism in Britain

National census data indicates that Buddhism has increasingly grown in popularity in England, Wales, and Scotland and to a lesser extent Northern Ireland (although the number of Buddhists recorded here still remains low). In England and Wales, between the 2001 and 2011 census, there was a roughly 100,000 person increase in self-identified affiliation with Buddhism, from 144,453 Buddhists in 2001, to 238,636 in 2011. The number of Buddhists in Scotland also doubled, approximately, in the same period.[5] In the 2021 census, there was a further increase in Buddhists in England and Wales, to 272, 508.[6] Yet, as Robert Bluck (2004, 91) states, census 'figures should be treated with caution' due to the non-completion of census questions relating to religion, and a lack of certainty about how identification with Buddhism on the census relates to lived experience, practice, and group affiliation. In terms of the ethnic background of Buddhists in England and Wales, just over 83,000 Buddhists who participated in the 2011 census are listed as white, with approximately 148,000 listed as Asian/Asian British.[7] The majority of Buddhists in England and Wales, therefore, are not ethnically white, although there has been proportionately more research conducted on white Buddhists who have converted to Buddhism from their natal religion (or 'non-heritage' Buddhists, to use Jessica Falcone's (2018) terms) than with diaspora or 'heritage' Buddhists who have Sri Lankan, Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, Japanese, Laotian or Burmese origin (Bluck 2006, 16; Falcone 2018; Starkey and Tomalin 2016, 328). These terms, 'convert' or 'diaspora' or 'heritage' are not always straightforward to apply to complex organisations in the British context as I, and others, have argued previously (Bluck 2006; Starkey and Tomalin 2016). However, I distinguish between 'heritage' and 'non-heritage' focused organisations in this article because, as I will show, there are differences in approach relating to the adoption of the label 'secular' by organisations who are concerned primarily with supporting the cultural and religious needs of specific heritage Buddhist

[4]In the article that follows, I will place terms like 'secular' or 'non Buddhist' in quotation marks (or use other indicative markers) when I want to be clear that I am reflecting the functional emic use of the term or concept by my participants, rather than indicating my academic judgement of whether a certain teaching is secular or otherwise.
[5]The statistics for England and Wales, and Scotland and Northern Ireland are separated here, as the census process differs.
[6]https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021. Last accessed 5 January 2023.
[7]The combination of religion and ethnicity data from the 2021 census was not available at the time of writing.

communities, and those who are keen to appeal to the wider population of those less likely to be born to Buddhist families.

Although the rise in Buddhist adherents noted between the 2001 and 2021 census marks a change, there has been a much longer fascination with Buddhism in Britain and Ireland, particularly in relation to aesthetics and the figure of the Buddha (Cox 2013). Victorian colonialists and scholars brought Pali texts to England to translate and there are numerous stories of people from the British Isles and Ireland travelling to Asia in order to take ordination, with some attempting to bring Buddhist monastic life and culture back home (Turner, Cox, and Bocking 2010; 2020). However, it wasn't until after the Second World War (and particularly post-1960s) that Buddhist groups and lineages became established in Britain in any great number, a move which coincided with increased migration (particularly from Buddhist contexts like Sri Lanka), a growing public dissatisfaction with the Christian church and a recognition of alternative forms of religious expression (Bluck 2006; Starkey 2019; Starkey and Tomalin 2016). Bluck provides further evidence of this expansion, showing that in the mid-1960s The Buddhist Society (established in 1924) advertised approximately twenty Buddhist groups in England and Wales, but this grew to nearly 1000 by the millennium (Bluck 2006, 13). Although there are very different stories to tell of how Buddhist groups established themselves across the British Isles over the past fifty years (Azzopardi 2010; Bluck 2006; Kay 2007; Starkey and Tomalin 2016; Waterhouse 1997), Buddhist organisations have begun to take up more physical space on the British landscape, with numerous Buddhist temples, monasteries, and centres operating across Britain's urban and rural areas (Starkey and Tomalin 2016).

Alongside the increased numbers of adherents and places to practise, since the 1960s Buddhism in Britain has also witnessed a growing diversity of lineages and traditions. Whilst Theravada Buddhism dominated in the earliest days of Buddhist establishment in Britain, reflecting the geographic trajectory of colonialism by the British state, there is now representation from teachers and lineages from across the Buddhist world, including Sri Lanka, Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Tibet, Vietnam, China, and Burma, as well as non-sectarian groups, such as Triratna (formerly known as the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order), established in London in 1967 and now spread internationally (Vajragupta 2010). This growing diversity deepened during the Covid-19 pandemic, where there was a rise in online Buddhist prayer groups, global initiations, and regular online meditation and chanting practices delivered into British homes from across the world.[8] There is currently a booming Buddhist scene in Britain, and much more ready access to teachings, information, and varieties of practice and ritual than there ever has been previously. Amongst the female Buddhists I interviewed for my earlier monograph (Starkey 2019), several told stories of how difficult it was to find out about Buddhism in the 1960s and 1970s (and even later), particularly if you were living in a rural area, and many had to establish practice groups themselves in order to build spiritual community. Cox (2013, 313) charts a similar picture in Ireland and he cites an interview participant who states: 'when I started, the problem was finding a Buddhist group; now the problem is choosing between all the different Buddhist groups there are'.

[8]To appreciate this further, see the research undertaken during the British Ritual Innovation Under Covid-19 Project (BRIC-19), https://bric19.mmu.ac.uk/. Last accessed 29 June 2022.

In addition to this picture of numerical expansion and diversification should also be noted the wider cultural presence of Buddhism on British shores, reflective of what Cox terms the 'move from counterculture to respectability' (Cox 2013, 315). Although it remains a minority faith in terms of the numerical data on self-identified religious affiliation across the various national censuses, Buddhism has achieved far wider cultural purchase than the percentage of adherents might suggest, and it could now be considered omnipresent in the British public sphere and psyche. Buddha images can readily be purchased from garden centres and supermarkets, there is a widespread recognition of key Buddhist figures and popular consumption of their many publications amongst non-Buddhists (for example, the works of the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh) and (as in other global minority contexts) Buddhist imagery is regularly used to advertise a very wide range of products from make-up to beer (Arjana 2020; Iwamura 2011; Prohl 2020). This is not to imply that the British public necessarily have a deep understanding of Buddhist practice and soteriology, but simply that Buddhist figures and imagery are increasingly commonplace in popular places and spaces – a point in a trajectory that began several hundred years ago. This cultural resonance may well have facilitated the acceptance of particular Buddhist organisations on the British religious landscape and helped to promote their offering to the public. Beyond the ubiquity of popular Buddhist imagery is the growing perception of the psychological benefits of meditation (particularly mindfulness) that has enabled the increased mainstreaming of certain forms of Buddhist practice amongst the British population, something that has also occurred in the United States and elsewhere (Gleig 2019; Helderman 2019; Schedneck 2013; Wilson 2014). It is to this cultural development, and its impact on Buddhist organisations in Britain, that I now turn.

The rise of secular mindfulness and the shaping of British Buddhist centres

The popular recognition of Buddhism across Britain is fuelled by the acknowledgement of the impact of stress on well being, the role that Buddhism might play in alleviating mental suffering, and the subsequent boom in mindfulness practices. Mindfulness is typically described as a practice of paying attention to the present moment in order to, as C. K. Germer (2013, 3) argues, 'lessen the sting of life's difficulties'. Many mindfulness practitioners and commentators highlight the roots of the practice in Buddhism (particularly the concept of *sati* – awareness), but they operate from within a self-identified 'secular' framework which might be orientated around Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), a therapeutic approach popularised by Jon Kabat-Zinn that is now widely adopted in Britain (Kabat-Zinn 2011).

Joanna Cook posits that the growth in mindfulness, manifest in multiple public and private settings in the UK (including schools, prisons, hospitals, private businesses) started in earnest 'around the mid-2000s' in Britain and the United States (Cook 2021, 83). As a result of its public success, Cook (2021, 85), citing the Mindfulness All Party Parliamentary Group, goes as far as to argue that, 'it would be possible to make a case for Britain as the most "Mindful Nation"'. Alp Arat (2017, 167) also noticed the significant impact of the mindfulness trend in Britain, stating that 'the present ubiquity of meditation represents the latest ripple in the easternisation of the West'. Writing about North

America, Jeff Wilson (2014, 132) reflects that secular mindfulness is a key means by which Buddhism is 'domesticating' itself outside Asia and is a contemporary example of Buddhism's historic adaptability. The specific trajectories of what is now well-known as 'secular mindfulness' have been covered in detail in scholarship, particularly in the US context, including Jeff Wilson (2014), Ann Gleig (2019), David L. McMahan (2008; 2017), Ira Helderman (2019), Jessie Sun (2014), Julia L. Cassaniti (2021) and Masoumeh Rahmani (2020) amongst others, all of whom contribute to the significant cross-disciplinary uptake in scholarship on mindfulness and its impacts, from religious studies, sociology, psychology, nursing, social care, medicine, education, business, and criminology. Joanna Cook (2021) demonstrates that the current explosion of mindfulness in Britain started with Victorian philologists and reformers from Asia, moving to Theosophists interested in ideas of interconnectedness, and building to an increased interest in Buddhism's relationship to psychology (also discussed in depth by Helderman 2019). She highlights deepening engagements with meditation as the key Buddhist practice, something that has been argued by others to explicitly exclude much Asian Buddhist experience (Hsu 2016). Cook (2021, 98) reminds us that the growth of mindfulness in Britain does not 'transcend historical determination' for it is 'constituted in and constitutive of broader historical and political context'.

In response, both academic and popular Buddhist critiques of the secular mindfulness movement have been made. These critiques have centred on a perceived lack of ethics in the secular mindfulness training, a lack of sufficient acknowledgment of the history and roots of the practice, and the potential psychological dangers of mindfulness (see, for example, discussions by Alex Gooch (2014), Bhikkhu Anālayo (2020), Jake H. Davis (2015), Lynette Monteiro, R. F. Musten and Jane Compson (2015), and the often-quoted 'McMindfulness' critique by Ron Purser and David Loy (2013)). Much of this scholarship has focused on the appearance of mindfulness in so-called secular settings (such as hospitals, schools, or corporations) but comparatively little attention has been given to Buddhists and Buddhist organisations engaging with the same trends.[9] In 2017, Steve Bruce focused a chapter of his book, *Secular Beats Spiritual: The Westernisation of the Easternisation of the West,* on Buddhism. In this chapter, Bruce notes the popular spread of mindfulness across the United Kingdom and highlights that organisations such as the National Health Service sometimes fail to adequately recognise its religious heritage (Bruce 2017, 100). Bruce (2017, 100) argues there is 'seepage across the spiritual/secular divide' in relation to mindfulness in Britain and, crucially, he also surfaces the role that Buddhist organisations themselves have played. Drawing on the example of a Tibetan centre in Scotland, Samye Ling, he indicates certain Buddhist organisations in Britain, particularly those catering to converts, have promoted 'the secular psychotherapy of mindfulness' which he calls 'Buddhism without the religion' (Bruce 2017). Whilst he does not interrogate this in much depth, Bruce provokes questions about the role of Buddhist organisations, and the ideas they are employing, that are worth examining further.

Most of my participants mentioned how different the current environment is for Buddhist organisations in comparison to the 1960s and 1970s. Many of them attributed this change to the increasing availability and popularity of Buddhist-adjacent practices in

[9]This is with the exception of Elisabeth Williams-Oerberg, Brooke Schedneck and Ann Gleig (2021) and their work in Ladakh will be discussed later in the article.

Britain such as secular mindfulness. As one participant from a non-heritage Buddhist group put simply: 'Mindfulness is a huge deal at the moment, and has been for some time, and so I teach mindfulness courses'. Another (again, non-heritage) told me:

> '*Headspace*, *Ten Percent Happier*, all those sorts of things.[10] Quite a lot of people are involved in one way or another with mindfulness through their work, or they've heard of mindfulness through their work, or they've done it as a participant because they've been suffering with depression'.

One teacher who had been involved with a well-established transnational Buddhist group which had integrated what they called a 'secular' strand to their institutional offering, described the uptake in numbers of people interested in mindfulness meditation as a 'zeitgeist'. They highlighted that Buddhist organisations had to adapt to meet this demand, or they would be consigned to cultural irrelevance. Others indicated that the audience at British Buddhist centres had changed dramatically in twenty years, moving from the early days where very little knowledge of meditation was noted in beginners groups, to most now having some understanding or awareness of mindfulness, either accessed through work, the health service, or online.

The teachers and organisations I spoke to had been involved in the delivery of what they called 'secular' provision for differing lengths of time. The longest was twenty years (with several teachers having been involved for about fifteen years), but the most recent adopted a 'secular' labelled teaching approach in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. For most organisations (particularly those serving predominantly non-heritage Buddhist populations), 'secular' identified teaching is not a fringe activity, but is considered an important part of their weekly public schedule. However, what is offered by Buddhist groups in Britain differs. Some teachers I interviewed – the minority – were formally trained in approaches such as MBSR, Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT) or 16 Guidelines, and offer these short courses on Buddhist centre premises (as well as elsewhere) in accordance with the specifics of the internationally recognised training programmes.[11] Others – the majority – had less formal training or accreditation (outside their experience as Buddhist practitioners), and offer stress management, mindful walking, gardening, cooking, or writing retreats and classes, or combine yoga or Tai Chi with what they label as introductory 'secular' mindful meditation sessions. Their approach usually reflects their own particular interests and skills (for example, in creative writing). For Buddhist organisations like the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana tradition (FPMT) who have seven Buddhist centres and projects in Britain and who have a formal 'secular' or 'universal' pillar of service to their offering,[12] decisions

[10]Both *Headspace* and *Ten Percent Happier* are widely available online apps that offer support to learn and practice meditation. They both acknowledge the Buddhist roots and origins of certain practices (and the founder of Headspace, Andy Puddicombe, was a Buddhist monk), but they self-describe as secular.

[11]*Compassion Cultivation Training* is an eight-week programme, developed at Stanford University by Buddhist monk Thupten Jinpa, which teaches practices based on developing compassion for oneself and wider society in order to enhance emotional wellbeing (https://www.compassioninstitute.com/the-program/compassion-cultivation-training/). The *16 Guidelines* is a programme affiliated with the Buddhist organisation The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), initiated in London in 2005, and offers courses focusing on the development of 'universal values such as humility, kindness, courage, compassion, empathy' (https://www.compassionandwisdom.org/about-us).

[12]For a description of the FPMT's universal education pillar (one of five pillars of service), see https://fpmt.org/education/secular/universal-education-for-compassion-and-wisdom/. For an exploration of the FPMT more widely see, Jessica Falcone (2018) and, in relation to Britain, David Kay (2007).

about what to include in the programmes of Buddhist centres are made in conjunction with international organisations as well as local teachers and centre's interests and needs. For smaller, newer groups (or teachers operating independently), decisions about what and how to teach are made based on personal skills, interests, and abilities and are not necessarily entirely driven by centralised organisational practice, although individual teachers often remain beholden to the complex decision making structures of management committees in organisations. Indeed, decisions about what to teach, when, why, and by whom are subject to change when different people rotate on and off the governing bodies of Buddhist centres and temples. Even so, the rise in provision labelled as 'secular', 'universal' or 'non-Buddhist' by Buddhist centres and teachers in Britain clearly reflects the now mainstream interest in secular mindfulness, and may well be responsive to the declining pattern of religious affiliation more generally and the ascendance of those stating they have 'no religion' in Britain as a whole (Lee 2015; Woodhead 2016). Where Buddhism originally influenced the development of secular mindfulness, now secular mindfulness influences the development of Buddhism.

For my participants, although recognising the changing cultural climate, their interest in adopting teaching labelled as 'secular' was articulated principally as a desire to 'give people what they need' and to provide help to alleviate mental suffering, something that Jeff Wilson also notes in relation to the motivations of American mindfulness teachers, particularly those who were Buddhist (Wilson 2014, 186), alongside Masoumeh Rahmani (2020) in relation to secular mindfulness teachers in Britain. As one of my participants, operating with a relatively new organisation connected to a Chinese Buddhist lineage, explained:

> I'm trying to help as many people as I can because I know this (meditation) works. I know to the bones of me, and anybody that has practised and been disciplined enough to do it, they also will know … I just want to help people.

Interestingly, very few of my participants described their desire to help others using Buddhist terms such as *upaya,* although there are some parallel motivations at play.[13] They wanted to provide readily accessible help, focused on supporting people to live a calmer, happier life with less mental and physical distress. Although Buddhist teachers were clear that their own Buddhist practice had helped them individually and spiritually, they seemed concerned that articulating something in solely 'Buddhist' terms might be off-putting and less accessible. As one suggested: 'only a small minority of people will come to something that has the label of a Buddhist course. So that's part of the answer … that explains why as a Buddhist centre we would also want to offer secular things'. One participant who had opened an independent Buddhist centre echoed this:

> So, let's say you're walking down the street, you see a (Buddhist) centre … and you think, 'that looks interesting, oh, it says 'Buddhist centre', I'm not a Buddhist, I'm not going', which is a shame actually. This is why we have to be careful with the messaging.

Another stated 'I think one of the main reasons I offer (secular courses) and that the Buddhist centres are interested in running them is because there are a range of people who

[13] *Upaya* typically translates as assistance along the Buddhist path (i.e. assistance towards spiritual liberation) using skilful means, whereby the teacher adapts the way they might deliver a message or teaching depending on the audience. This is something that the historical Buddha, Siddharta Gautama, is seen as doing and Rahmani (2020, 262) notes is an approach articulated by secular mindfulness teachers, including Kabat-Zinn.

wouldn't normally walk through the door of a Buddhist centre because they're not interested in 'religion', whatever we mean by that'. What these teachers are articulating is a desire to be of benefit to as wide a range of people in Britain as possible and a concern that although they felt Buddhist teachings were helpful to them personally, a less overtly religiously framed approach would attract more people to a centre and might be more inclusive.

However, several teachers highlighted that whilst the spread of secular mindfulness in British public life was a positive move, Buddhist organisations still had a role to play given the weight of experience that they had in relation to meditation and spiritual practice more generally. Although most felt the secular mindfulness phenomena was a positive one for society as a whole, some were critical that a person might be able to teach secular mindfulness after only doing a short training course. Their argument was that the weight of meditation experience that was held by some Buddhist teachers enabled them to teach more effectively, even in a so-called secular course. As one clearly articulated:

> … one of the reasons why we want to teach secular retreats is … to support people in their grounding and experience … some of the trainings for MBSR or mindfulness training you can have fairly limited experience as a practitioner and then be out there guiding people through a process … So, I feel what really supports me as a teacher is the fact that just I have a lot of experience, you know?

Whilst the desire to help people, to make support as widely accessible as possible, and to ensure that support came from a place of deep experience were all key motivating factors for Buddhist teachers in Britain, there was also a reluctant acceptance that the interest in providing teachings labelled as 'secular' also had a financial incentive. As one of the participants from an organisation predominantly focused on non-heritage Buddhists highlighted 'you need to keep numbers coming in to stay viable as a centre or a tradition'. As secular mindfulness has grown in popularity in Britain, and Buddhism has diversified and spread, Buddhist teachers and organisations have needed to rethink the kinds of services they offer to carve out a sustainable space for themselves, financially and culturally.

Financial and cultural sustainability in 'post merit' Britain

In a prescient article, Jeff Wilson (2019) examines what he sees as the primary issue facing contemporary Buddhist groups outside Asia. Drawing on observations of two groups in Canada, one serving a heritage Buddhist population and one focusing predominantly on non-heritage practitioners, he explores the impact of their different financial models. He argues that the traditional Buddhist 'merit economy' where lay practitioners support monastics (both financially and in-kind) for karmic benefits, ensures economic and social sustainability and relevance for Buddhist groups. In the movement of Buddhism to the West, Wilson (2019, 98–99) argues, these 'merit economies' have been abandoned by some in favour of a more rational soteriology and thus these groups now operate under a 'post merit Buddhism' that has significant economic ramifications. Without the idea of merit motivating donations, financial sustainability is weakened and a new approach is needed for Buddhist organisations to survive. As he warns, 'successful forms of Buddhism will be those that can be recast with non-merit logic' (Wilson 2019, 87). Using Wilson's theory as a departure point, I will argue that in relation to

Buddhist organisations and teachers in Britain, a so-called secular schema is engaged as a means to promote financial sustainability and cultural relevance in a context that does not, historically, have a history of donation for karmic merit. However, the picture in Britain is diverse and I will explore the tensions and disagreements inherent within this approach, as well as the ways two merit-focused heritage Buddhist organisations have adopted 'secular' teaching that is consciously distinguished from their Buddhist or *dharma* teaching as a means to become more visible in the British public sphere, where faith-based organisations take up a prominent role in social welfare service delivery.

All of the participants in this study offered their teaching either on a strict donation (or *dana*) basis (where participants chose what they were able to pay) or, more commonly, through a suggested donation amount that sometimes presented a sliding scale for those who could afford to pay more. This mirrors the situation Payne (2019) and Wilson (2014) found in Buddhist organisations outside Asia. For the smaller number of independent mindfulness teachers I interviewed who were paid by non-Buddhist affiliated organisations, they offered the teaching for free. Fixed-fees were most common for the residential retreats, where participants were provided with food and board alongside teaching. One non-heritage Buddhist organisation, well established in Britain, offers a substantial bursary system in order to make the teachings as accessible as possible, but this was less common, particularly for the newer organisations who might not have the same financial security or profile. Some teachers I interviewed explained that whilst they would ideally like to offer all the teachings (labelled 'secular', 'non-Buddhist', 'universal', or otherwise) for free, this wasn't always possible, especially if they were renting premises and having to cover food costs, as well as having to make a living themselves. As one stated ' … as we have no government funding and have no income other than donations, we have to recover the initial cost of running certain courses or services.' In this case, they chose to levy a set charge for the teaching labelled as 'secular' rather than Buddhist *dharma* programming (which was offered on a *dana* basis) because they felt this was more in-keeping with Buddhist ethical principles.

Some Buddhist organisations in Britain (particularly those with large premises and paid employees) now have significant overheads and therefore charging for services (especially for the teaching marketed as secular, for example) provides a new revenue stream, tapping into a wider pool of people that might not ordinarily support a Buddhist centre. Offering a 'secular' strand to their teaching profile is not especially labour or cost intensive (over and above running a Buddhist course) for Buddhist centres can use the premises, teachers, and skills they often already have access to. Some of my participants articulated this approach as aligning with an ethical (or Right Livelihood)[14] sustainability plan. As one participant who had established a small independent meditation centre explained, 'there are not a hundred million people who want to go on retreat' in the local area, so they had to offer less Buddhist-sounding courses to widen the potential client base. Some Buddhist teachers had jobs outside meditation teaching, others

[14]Right Livelihood is one part of the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path to eliminate suffering. Although financial sustainability is essential for organisations and individuals, most of my participants were concerned with sustainability in the 'right' way, that could be deemed in accordance with Buddhist ethics (*sila*). For an exploration of how one prominent Buddhist organisation in Britain, Triratna, puts Right Livelihood into practice, see https://thebuddhistcentre.com/text/right-livelihood.

worked full-time for one or more Buddhist centres and temples, some were secular mindfulness teachers in non-Buddhist organisations. The money raised through teaching mindfulness beyond a traditional *dharma* course or retreat supports them as individual teachers, but also can support the organisation they are teaching for. As one participant highlighted, 'we rebranded as mindfulness teachers. It's a good way to make money, it's a good way to earn a living'. Interestingly, two teachers who ran relatively new non-heritage Buddhist organisations highlighted that they thought charging fees for teaching encouraged people in a capitalist society to better value what they were paying for, with one arguing 'people might be more inclined not to turn up or not value (teaching) as much if they don't pay for something'.

Having a strand to teaching provision labelled as 'secular' or 'non-Buddhist' also enables Buddhist organisations to engage more closely with the British state, including the National Health Service, in the form of bidding for grant funding. Not all of the participants in this study had, or would accept, government grants to provide services, not least because they assumed there would be onerous restrictions on what they were able to provide and how they might provide it. However, for those that did, it was an additional income stream and one that was seen as having some stability, particularly during the upheaval of the Covid-19 pandemic. One Buddhist teacher was offered a Local Authority grant to provide a three-month secular mindfulness course online to support people through the pandemic, as well as a national grant to provide sports-based mindfulness activities to the general population (such as Qigong). They highlighted that they were restricted by this grant structure, in that they were 'no way allowed to preach Buddhism', but this was a useful income stream during the pandemic when religious organisations were forced to close to in-person provision. Funding faith-based organisations has become an explicit part of UK local and national government community strategy since at least the 1990s and religious groups have been playing an increasingly significant role in public sector welfare provision (Jawad 2012). Given the popular status of mindfulness in Britain, several of my participants highlighted this as an opportunity for Buddhist organisations, providing they were able to offer what the state needed including the non-promotion of religious activities. As McMahan and Braun (2017, 12) explain, 'Representing meditation as a non-religious, non-sectarian technique is what allows it to function freely in secular contexts', something that Masoumeh Rahmani (2020, 255) has also argued with specific reference to secular mindfulness. What I argue here is that some Buddhist organisations in Britain are now becoming increasingly attuned to articulating their services in this way.

Yet, this is not without controversy. Although a potential quick win for some organisations, providing a so-called secular or non-Buddhist strand to teaching is not an inexorable path to long-term financial security. My participants were also at pains to point out that finances were not the only driving force behind decision making even though most recognised it as significant. As one stated, 'everybody and his dog is teaching MBSR now', and Buddhist organisations need to work smart and hard to carve out a space for themselves in the public sphere, which is not always possible or desirable when mindfulness teaching is available freely online, via apps, or in any number of public locations at low to no cost. Several indicated that they were a little uncomfortable with offering what they saw as 'secular' teaching alongside Buddhist teaching, and they worried they were, in Glenn Wallis's (2018, 43) terms, engaging in 'complicity with

current neoliberal reasoning' and selling out or watering down their spiritual credentials. Another said that they were conscious that they could be perceived to be either out to make a profit or to implement 'Buddhism through the back door'. Furthermore, although this was not an often repeated perspective, one participant (in a non-heritage organisation) was very conscious that in offering formal 'secular mindfulness' courses, they were mobilising what Funie Hsu (2016, 239) describes as 'White conquest'. They told me, promoting 'secular mindfulness' could be interpreted as ' … cultural appropriation of Asian teachings … without the acknowledgement of where it's coming from and, in fact, perhaps inadvertent dismissal of it in order for westerners to feel comfortable with it.' Whilst this perspective wasn't often articulated during my interviews, a larger number of participants in non-heritage groups raised adjacent concerns about the demographic they were serving, fearing it wasn't ethnically diverse enough.[15] Many indicated that the dominant audience in their classes (particularly those that were advertised as 'secular' or that had Buddhist imagery and terminology de-emphasised) were middle-aged, middle class white women. Indeed, this also reflected the majority of my participants and the middle class nature of mindfulness in Britain is something Bruce (2017, 102) also highlights. However, some of my participants recognised that the age profile in classes had recently shifted downwards with the advent of online apps for meditation, and they had a growing number of younger students who were interested in mindfulness and who were not white. Whilst middle-aged and middle-class is a group that might have more access to the time and disposable income needed to engage in well being related classes and courses, and they also might feel more welcome in organisations and with teachers that also reflected the same demographic (therefore, a prime target market), this was not a comfortable place to sit for all of my interlocutors. However, there wasn't always an explicit plan articulated as to how the current approach might be changed. Ethical realities sometimes exist in tension with economic ones.

As a final point, there is a difference between heritage and non-heritage Buddhist organisations in relation to financial and cultural sustainability and the use of a so-called secular label. In this study, I spent time with two organisations who existed to serve specific heritage Buddhist communities in Britain, namely Thai and Sri Lankan. Whilst in the main, and as far as I could tell, heritage-dominant Buddhist organisations in Britain do not appear to be working with the same kinds of 'secular-labelled' framing for particular teaching that non-heritage organisations do, these two groups bucked the trend. Yet, their rationale for wanting to offer courses advertised as 'secular' was slightly different from the non-heritage-dominant groups. Rather than being motivated by financial security or concerns about sustainability in a post-merit economy (they both operated in organisational merit-focused economies), they wanted to make stronger links in their local areas in order to become more firmly embedded in non-Buddhist communities and to become more visible to them, not least because both of these organisations operated from contexts where the wider local demographic was predominantly White British. This visibility was, for the Thai organisation in particular, partly about

[15]There is a growing debate about race, racism, and the diversity of non-heritage *sanghas* in American Buddhist communities, including in relation to the appropriation of secular mindfulness. For example, see the work of Nalika Gajaweera (2021) and Joseph Cheah (2011). However, this field of research is currently in its infancy in the UK context, although Sharon Smith (published posthumously) introduces these issues in relation to two British Buddhist groups (Smith, Munt, and Yip 2016).

acceptance but also about being seen as contributing to the needs of the local populace. This organisation had experienced at least one racist attack on their temple and being seen as a group who could serve the wider population's needs (as they were deemed to be either Christian or non-religious) was a move they hoped would foster better understanding and connectivity. There remained tensions here however, as both of the teachers connected to heritage organisations I spoke with indicated that the 'secular' teaching was not considered to be core temple business, and it was therefore under threat if some members of management committees did not want to continue with it. These organisations were also serving two distinctly different audiences, those who accessed their secular mindfulness teaching (who were predominantly White British) and the Buddhist crowd (predominantly of Thai, Laotian or Sri Lankan origin). There was spatial contestation at their temples as a result, something that was not as obvious in the non-heritage dominant organisations. Within the Sri Lankan temple, the teacher told me that 'secular' meditation needed a quiet space for individual reflection and relaxation, but that the heritage Buddhist community used their temple in a way that challenged assumptions about Buddhist ritual (being calm, quiet, seated) and this had the potential to cause conflict and misunderstanding. He said: 'Secular culture has a different picture of the Buddhist centre … and it takes time for them to get used to that culture' (i.e., the culture of a heritage Buddhist centre, which is typically bustling and vibrant). He wanted to build a separate 'secular' wing of the temple to house mindfulness meditation and psychotherapy, thereby appeasing both groups, although financially this wasn't yet possible. Instead, he did much of the secular-framed teaching via YouTube, and retained the Buddhist teaching and ritual in the temple space.

Distinction and integration the symbiosis of 'secular' and 'Buddhist'

The spatial separation seen at the Sri Lankan Buddhist temple begins to evince one of two broad organisational approaches to how the relationship between teaching labelled as 'secular' and that labelled as 'Buddhist' is constructed and operationalised within Buddhist centres in Britain: *distinction* or *integration*. Analysing these approaches in more detail enables a better appreciation of the different ways the ideas of 'secular' and 'Buddhist' are related to each other and how they are mobilised in this context, and what Buddhist organisations mean in practical terms when they say they are offering different types of teaching.

Distinction

Although the majority of participants in this study used the term 'secular' to describe aspects of the teaching they offered, not all did. Sometimes, 'non-Buddhist' or 'universal' were employed as alternative terms to indicate teaching that was targeted at the wider public which did not have a perceived 'Buddhist' shape in relation to reference to ritual, prayers, cosmology, soteriology, and lineage. Yet, whether the exact term 'secular' was employed or not, there was an effort made to distinguish between different approaches to teaching provision offered to committed Buddhists and to the wider public. This wider type of provision was distinguishable by three things (and this formed the basis of the functional definition of 'secular', 'non-Buddhist', or

'universal' employed by my participants): the removal of discussion of *karma* and rebirth from public teaching, the minimisation of Buddhist ritual, and the 'de-Buddafication' (Wilson 2014, 73) of 'Dharma' terms and images. Indeed, the largest change I noted for a 'secular' or 'non-Buddhist'-labelled course taught in a Buddhist centre or by a Buddhist teacher (and what often distinguished it from what they deemed to be 'Buddhist-oriented' teaching) was language use. For example, one participant from a well established non-heritage organisation explained that in their 'secular' teaching:

> I don't use the word *karma*. I have taught myself, hopefully, to not use any Dharma words when facilitating secular courses. Having had over 40, nearly 50 years of Buddhist practice and teachings, it was hard at first, because some terminology rolls off the tongue.

Another stated, 'I put all traditional language to one side' and instead used terms that might be more familiar with British audiences and relate more closely to their life experiences, something also noted by Wilson (2014, 55) in his discussion of secular mindfulness teaching in the US. Beyond language, other methods of distinction made in the 'secular' approaches included not expecting participants to bow or make an offering to the shrine (if one was present). One organisation, a well-established non-heritage group, removed or covered images of the Buddha or *bodhisattvas* during teaching advertised as 'secular', and did not encourage offering of flowers, candles, or incense before or after teaching, a practice which would commonly be expected during Buddhist events. Some Buddhist organisations routinely used a separate physical space for different types of teaching, sometimes hiring out a room from a local business or community centre, or using a separate room in the Buddhist centre for teaching labelled as 'secular' or 'non Buddhist'. This allowed them to physically segregate what they understood to be 'Buddhist' and 'non-Buddhist' teaching and enabled them to decorate their 'secular' teaching space without being bound to a more traditional Buddhist aesthetic. This spatial distinction was also reflected in online teaching, when some teachers would change their Zoom background (for example, from an image of the Buddha used in online Buddhist teaching, to a picture of a landscape or flowers used in the teaching deemed to be secular). Similar changes were made to the wearing of robes or prayer beads by teachers when undertaking secular-identified teaching, with several I interviewed stating that they would use or remove these depending on the type of teaching they were undertaking.

In theory, I was told that the principal focus of the secular-styled courses in Buddhist centres is on 'worldly' issues, including stress management, anxiety, relationships, and compassion rather than, for example, Buddhist cosmology. For those operating within a more strongly distinction-orientated approach, the 'secular' courses they run are open to all, without any requirement for belief, prior knowledge, or the necessity to engage further with the Buddhist organisation. This emphasis on the practical and pragmatic, is, as Wilson (2014) argues, a core aspect of how Buddhism has been interpreted outside of Asia more generally, in both Buddhist as well as secular meditation groups. Thus, offering practically focused 'secular' styled teaching within a Buddhist organisation in Britain appears to follow a predictable trajectory of modernist development, which will be discussed later. As I highlighted in the previous section, heritage Buddhist organisations (including Thai and Sri Lankan) operationalised the distinction approach more commonly (both spatially and in terms of not perceiving secular-labelled teaching as

core business) but they were also joined by certain specific non-heritage groups. These were typically those who were well-established in Britain, and who had been at the forefront of developing 'secular' teaching programmes, both in Britain and internationally. These non-heritage groups often had more physical space to delineate modes of teaching more carefully and more ready access to Buddhist teachers formally trained in secular mindfulness (including internationally) that they could draw on to enhance their course offering. Newer non-heritage groups, as I will now discuss, typically adopted a more integrated approach to 'secular' and 'Buddhist' teaching, most often due to necessity.

Integration

Whilst making clear and firm distinctions in terms of style and content between teachings labelled secular and those labelled Buddhist was one mode of operation adopted by Buddhist groups, others did not do this quite so clearly and consistently. Even on a self-styled and advertised 'secular' course, some teachers (particularly those from newer, smaller, non-heritage organisations) asked course attendees to abide by the Five Buddhist Precepts for the duration of the course, for example, and wore monastic robes to deliver 'secular' teaching or support.[16] Others asked for respect to be given to shrines or Buddhist images that might be present in the rooms, or presented offerings to them, and some discussed Buddhist soteriology and cosmology with course participants when asked to do so. For Buddhist organisations that operated using this more integrative approach, there was not always a clear dividing line between the expectations for behaviour on a 'secular' course and a 'Buddhist' one. Even on a course advertised as secular, it was difficult to tease out the practical differences between this and, for example, an open 'Introduction to Buddhism' course, typically run by organisations looking to attract non-Buddhists in Britain. Even for those teachers who told me they insisted on a very clear dividing line between their (and others) behaviour on what they called a 'secular' course and that on a 'Buddhist' course, it was still not always clear what differences there were in what was being taught, and how. As one participant stated, although they sometimes adjusted the language or examples used, 'the content of what I teach is fairly similar' between the Buddhist and the 'secular' course they offered. Another agreed, stating their advertised secular classes were 'not leaving anything out really … it's not diluted' from what they might teach to a Buddhist audience. Some even stated that they would include teaching on rebirth 'because I think it can be part of a secular worldview as well' but the difference was that 'I'm not giving one view as being truth' which accords with Taylor's (2007) conceptualisation of the development of the secular. As one participant stated:

> Everything that I actually teach, the contents of the courses, whether it's introduction to Buddhism or emotional resilience, the layout of the course is actually the same, the kind of things I talk about is the same … it's always from Buddhism.

This integrative approach is more common in Britain amongst smaller, newer, Buddhist organisations, particularly those with weaker transnational links. What it most typically entails is marketing a class as 'secular', 'non Buddhist' or 'universal' to the wider non-

[16]The Five Precepts are commonly articulated in British Buddhist circles as: Not killing, not taking what has not been freely given, no sexual misconduct, not lying, no taking intoxicants that cloud the mind.

Buddhist audience (and correspondingly emphasising this-worldly applications, such as working with anxiety), and predominantly drawing on secular mindfulness techniques during the class or course (in particular meditations focusing on the breath and noticing thoughts but not paying close attention to them). At the same time, however, also highlighting specific practices or *dhamma* stories from Buddhist teachers in order to deepen teachings or enhance ways of understanding. This integration is an expedient way to speak to a wider audience's familiarity with broad secular mindfulness approaches whilst also remaining connected to and reflecting the teacher's Buddhist lineages and connections. A more integrated approach also mitigates for a smaller organisation, with less space and fewer teachers to draw on to deliver classes, while also gaining maximum reach for the time and personnel they do have. Smaller, newer Buddhist organisations with less established transnational Buddhist connections or hierarchical management have comparatively more flexibility to make these kinds of fluid changes to teachings and practices. Most apparent for those organisations operating under the principles of integration is that they hoped that attracting people through teachings articulated as 'secular' or 'non-Buddhist' (or those reflecting these trends) might lead people to Buddhist classes or retreats that they offered, making them a more regular part of a singular community rather than supporting separate secular mindfulness and Buddhist groups under one roof.

Symbiosis

Offering 'secular' teaching in Buddhist organisations is one option that might support greater sustainability in a changing cultural environment. Is this, therefore, a type of 'strategic secularism', as Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg, Brooke Schedneck and Ann Gleig (2021, 2), drawing on Matthew Engelke's (2009) concept, noted at international meditation retreats in Ladakh, that enables 'Buddhist leaders (to) adapt their teachings to appeal to specific audiences with the underlying goal of preserving the tradition'?

Certainly this is reflected in the experiences that I present here, and parallels can be made with the Ladakhi organisations who use a similar approach 'to aid in broadening sources of support', in this case from international audiences in the face of declining local interest (Williams-Oerberg, Schedneck, and Gleig 2021, 3). The teachers I interviewed were certainly conscious of the possibilities that might open out to them by framing aspects of their teaching in this way, although they were typically focused on the local rather than international market. However, whilst they are consciously marketing certain courses as 'secular' or 'non-Buddhist' or de-emphasising Buddhist language, cosmology and iconography to appeal to the perceived needs of a wider audience (either integrated with or distinct from core Buddhist provision in centres), many participants acknowledged a strong sense of symbiosis between what they articulated as 'Buddhist' and 'secular' frameworks in their teaching and approach. Although some Buddhist teachers draw stronger dividing lines than others between what they might teach on a marketed 'secular' course and what (and how) they might teach on a Buddhist course, underpinning this there was often little discernible distinction in the motivation for what they were offering. The primary motivation was the alleviation of suffering for as many people as possible, both in this life and subsequent lives. As one interlocutor highlighted, as a result

of this ultimate motivation, the provision of 'secular' teaching should be seen as 'a completely direct expression of my Buddhist values'.

What sometimes separated a so-called secular schema from a 'Buddhist' one was the concern, in the words of one participant, not to provide 'a prescribed Buddhist route to enlightenment'. Yet beyond operational differences between integrative or distinction-based approaches, the motivation for providing 'secular' teaching (using this explicit term, or not) and 'Buddhist' teaching is fundamentally inextricable for Buddhist teachers. Furthermore, as ideas or concepts, both 'Buddhist' and 'secular' are mobilised in a symbiotic and mutually beneficial way, with Buddhist lineage and experience giving legitimacy to so-called secular teaching and the secular label providing an opportunity to attract a wider range of people, with a mind to economic and cultural sustainability. This may well be because contemporary Buddhism, in its alliance with modernity and rationalism, underwent a significant process of secularisation in the movement from Asia to the West (McMahan 2021, 60). Therefore, engaging established secular meditation techniques or labels does not feel especially radical to many practitioners, particularly those raised in non-heritage Buddhist circles. Indeed, as one of my participants argued, 'you're already on that translation trajectory, and this just felt like a … logical next step'. They went on to describe teaching secular mindfulness in a Buddhist organisation as having 'a certain pragmatism' in terms of sustainability and reflecting popular demand, but also as 'sort of a natural fit … as you try to explain what really matters to you to a wider audience'. Of course, this 'natural fit' didn't work in the same way for the heritage groups, who sometimes struggled to marry the different spheres of 'secular' and 'Buddhist' activity in their temple spaces and with their established communities. For newer, less established, non-heritage groups, the 'translation trajectory' appeared more integrated into how they operated overall.

Although it would clearly be incorrect to present 'Buddhist' and 'secular' teaching as precisely one and the same here, not least because participants themselves often wanted to make clear distinctions between them, it remains tricky to consistently delineate ideas and motivations. Whilst this blurring of boundaries is not unique to a British case-study and has been highlighted in other Buddhist or secular meditation groups both in Asia and outside (Brown 2016; McMahan 2017; 2020; Williams-Oerberg, Schedneck, and Gleig 2021), it remains important to understand how and why certain ideas and framings of the terms 'religious' or 'secular' gain purchase in specific contexts and to attempt to understand the functional relationship between them in practice. Although Bruce (2017) argues that the adoption of secular nomenclature is evidence for the secularisation thesis, it is likely to be more complicated than this, especially when taking Buddhist teachers' motivations and affiliations into account. In a detailed study of psychotherapists engagement with Buddhist ideas and practice, Ira Helderman (2019, 242) highlights 'the futility in seeking definitive interpretations of phenomena as cases of secularization or religious transmission' because the therapists in Helderman's case (or the Buddhist teachers in mine) have changeable and complex understandings of ideas such as Buddhist tradition or secular mindfulness, and different ways that they put them in practice. However, as Helderman argues, this does not mean that trying to ascertain *why* certain schemas and frameworks are adopted, or *how* they are articulated and understood by different groups is equally fruitless, an approach which has influenced this article.

Conclusion

Most Buddhist organisations and teachers in the British context who mobilise a so-called secular teaching mode do so because they feel it allows them to offer help and support to a greater number of people, including those who might be initially sceptical of entering a Buddhist centre or engaging with an overtly religious teaching content and style. For some, especially the newer organisations who are trying to carve out space for themselves in a busy spiritual marketplace, this is a strategic move, and one which also might offer greater financial sustainability. Although not all of my participants were comfortable with the economic drivers (and not all needed the financial sustainability in the same way), as Elisabeth Williams-Oerberg (2019, 21) has stated, despite assumptions to the contrary, 'material and economic engagement … has been a central aspect of Buddhist life since at least the fifth century BCE', and this is no less the case for contemporary organisations and teachers in Buddhist spaces in Britain. However, sustainability in this context incorporates more than just the financial, it also reflects the need for a continued cultural relevance. In an era where mindfulness apps can be downloaded within minutes and a mindfulness programme can be accessed through the National Health Service or the workplace, many Buddhist teachers and organisations recognise that they need to be engaging with the current 'zeitgeist', and competing to meet wider need and demand to promote organisational stability and survival.

Whilst criticisms have been levelled at the secular mindfulness movement by Buddhists, I have shown that Buddhist organisations in Britain are not immune from articulating their approach using what they often call 'secular' language and style. This is not a move isolated to Buddhist organisations in Britain. Indeed, McMahan (2017, 126; 2020, 45) encourages us to think more carefully about the possibility of a productive relationship between 'Buddhist' and 'secular discourses' and how the ideas and frameworks (however they might be defined) might be consciously 'deployed for particular social, political and indeed religious ends' across various global contexts. Whether British Buddhist teachers and groups adopt 'secular' as a term in their course advertisements (or whether they distinguish certain types of teaching from others by de-emphasising Buddhist language, ritual, imagery and cosmology), they are attempting to appeal to an audience beyond the Buddhist-affiliated who still only comprise a small percentage of the overall UK and ROI population.

However, even for those Buddhist organisations who explicitly use the specific term 'secular' to describe what they are offering, there is little sense that what they see as 'Buddhist' and 'secular' teaching are entirely segregated at their core. This is not without issue, including for some Buddhist teachers who want to ensure a more careful distinction between their perception of the different approaches, but also in relation to the state who might want to enforce certain parameters in relation to their engagement with religious organisations. There are also further questions to be asked about the perspectives of students on the 'secular' or 'non Buddhist' courses in Buddhist centres and whether they recognise the boundaries in the same way as Buddhist organisations and teachers, something which might lead to further productive analysis. Yet, whether students agree or not with the definitions that organisations operationalise, for many Buddhist groups in Britain offering a 'secular-styled' strand to their teaching provision presents an opportunity to work towards economic and cultural sustainability and enables them to think about ways they might live out their Buddhist values in the context of late-stage capitalism.

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