Presenting the Dharma Essence in an American Vocabulary: Apologetic Strategies in the Writings of Jon Kabat-Zinn

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This essay explores the apologetic strategies of Jon Kabat-Zinn, developer of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, with particular attention paid to two essays published in 2011 and 2017, respectively. I argue that the core of Kabat-Zinn's apologetic strategy to defend MBSR from accusations of "watering-down" Buddhism lies with his understanding of the "essence" of the dharma as the Buddha's expression of the Four Noble Truths. This expression by the Buddha is taken by Kabat-Zinn to be based on the Buddha's own experience, and hence to be universal, unconstrained by cultural and historical context—even by Buddhism itself. By first tracing the development of Kabat-Zinn's understanding and placing it within the broader intellectual context of Buddhist modernism, this paper demonstrates the logic at work in Kabat-Zinn's apologetic strategy for MBSR. Having established the logic at play, the paper then turns to elucidating how this logic functions in two of his articles and how it has developed in light of the changing political climate between 2011 and 2017. This paper concludes with a consideration regarding whether Kabat-Zinn's apologetic strategy can be considered Buddhist or if it something altogether different—a "transcultural collage," as Thomas A. Tweed puts it.

Keywords: MBSR, mindfulness, Kabat-Zinn, apologetics, *buddha-dharma*, spirituality

INTRODUCTION[1]

In his article, "Buddhism, Art, and Transcultural Collage," Thomas A. Tweed argued that, since the end of the Second World War, Buddhism has become part of the "soul" of America just as much as natural beauty or the auto industry. America, in Tweed's terms, has undergone not only industrialization and beautification but "Buddhification" as well. Buddhification, according to Tweed, "refers to the complex transcultural process whereby a confluence of forces that originated in the late nineteenth century and intensified between the 1940s and the 1960s allowed some decontextualized Buddhist beliefs, practices, and artifacts to circulate widely, especially among Americans who did not identify with that tradition."[2] Though Buddhism came to be increasingly identified with violent conflict in the imagination of the American public during the era of the Vietnam War, Tweed notes that Asian and American promoters of Buddhism were able to combat the stigma of this representational link, allowing it to appear as "as a tolerant spiritual alternative and an adaptable cultural implement."[3] According to Tweed, key to the success of these popularizers was their ability to remove these ideas and practices from their "institutional contexts" and "ritual forms."[4] Once removed from the binds of traditional interpretation, Buddhism, Tweed states, "could become *almost anything* in the transnational flow of representations."[5]

Tweed's example of Buddhification in his article is "Suzuki Zen," which he treats as the product of a series of decontextualizing techniques. He traces this process of decontextualization carefully from its beginnings with Japanese Buddhist thinker Daisetsu Teitarō Suzuki

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1. This essay is part of a special issue in Pacific World on "Buddhist Apologetics." I am deeply grateful to Dr. Kendall Marchman for bringing together a diverse body of scholars to explore the topic from various disciplinary and thematic perspectives. My thanks also go to the reviewers who gave insightful feedback on earlier drafts of this essay and to the senior editor, Dr. Natalie Quli, for graciously opening Pacific World to our research.
2. Thomas A. Tweed, "Buddhism, Art, and Transcultural Collage: Toward a Cultural History of Buddhism in the United States, 1945–2000," in *Gods in America: Religious Pluralism in the United States*, ed. Charles L. Cohen and Ronald L. Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 193.
3. Ibid., 194.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., emphasis added.

(1870–1966).[6] Suzuki, alongside others inspired by him, such as the American writer Alan Watts (1915–1973) and the composer John Cage (1912–1992), helped introduce "Zen" to the American public "as a tradition that centered experience, eschewed constraints, encouraged spontaneity, shaped culture, and inspired art."[7] For Tweed, "it does not matter that the received representations did not faithfully portray the complexities of Zen as it had been practiced by monks and laity in Japanese temples for centuries." Rather, what is most crucial is that "this decontextualized Zen emerged as a tradition that seemed to be applicable to all aspects of everyday life."[8] This is to say that decontextualized Buddhist ideas and practices take hold in the American social imaginary when they can be understood as widely applicable to various activities in everyday life.

Though certain vestiges of Suzuki Zen remain in contemporary American culture, the rage for all-things-Zen has long since passed. From the late 1980s to the end of the twentieth century, Tibetan Buddhism, and its representative on the world stage, the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, captured the American imagination and thrust Buddhist ideas and practices back into the spotlight. The last two decades have seen the ascendancy of "mindfulness" meditation, particularly in the popularity of the "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction" (MBSR) program and related "mindfulness-based" therapies and protocols. As is often noted, mindfulness techniques have been applied to nearly all aspects to modern life through an ever-growing corpus of popular literature as well as by an equally expansive body of scientific studies on mindfulness meditation.[9]

The figure most identified as the architect of the "mindfulness boom" is Jon Kabat-Zinn (b. 1944), now professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, who developed the MBSR program in the late 1970s. According to Kabat-Zinn, the vision for his program came to him during a retreat he was undertaking at the

6. Ibid., 201–203.
7. Ibid., 203.
8. Ibid.
9. Perhaps the most comprehensive examination of how mindfulness has been so applied is Jeff Wilson's monograph studying mindfulness in American culture. See Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 104–132.

Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. Kabat-Zinn says that he "saw in a flash" a model of sorts, one that not only could be implemented and tested in clinical setting, but could perhaps spark new fields of scientific inquiry and provide "right livelihood" for many in the fields of science and medicine. [10] The "basic idea" here is to "share the essence of meditation and yoga practices as I had been learning and practicing them ... with those who would never come to a place like IMS or a Zen Center, and who would never be able to hear it through the words and form that were being used at meditation centres, or even, back in those days, at yoga centres, which were few and far-between, and very foreign as well."[11]

This vision of bringing the "essence of meditation and yoga practices" prompted Kabat-Zinn to ask: "why not try to make meditation so commonsensical that anyone would be drawn to it? Why not develop an American vocabulary that spoke to the heart of the matter, and didn't focus on the cultural aspects of the traditions out of which the dharma emerged, however beautiful they might be, or on centuries-old scholarly debates concerning fine distinctions in the Abhidharma."[12] Further, he realized that the best place to implement his vision was the hospital at which he was already working. Kabat-Zinn believed that the hospital setting would be the best place to implement his vision, since, in his words "the entire raison d'être of the dharma is to elucidate the nature of suffering and its root causes, as well as provide a practical path to liberation from suffering."[13] According to Kabat-Zinn, implementing this vision could be done without any mention of the dharma or any other tradition-specific terminology.[14]

As was mentioned above, MBSR and related mindfulness-based therapies and protocols have been massively popular in the last two decades—what I refer to as the "mindfulness boom." However, the mindfulness boom is not without its critics. Around 2014, as David McMahan and Erik Braun note, researchers, scholars, cultural critics, and Buddhist leaders alike began to consider if the introduction of

10. Jon Kabat-Zinn, "Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR, Skillful Means, and the Trouble with Maps," *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, no. 1 (2011): 281–306, 287.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 287–288.
13. Ibid., 288.
14. Ibid.

Buddhist meditation techniques into secular spaces opened them up to misuse. Such critics cite the way mindfulness-based practices have been used to desensitize soldiers to the violent acts they commit and to mentally adjust the working class to its increasing exploitation and precarity under neoliberal capitalism. They also began to question the scientific studies—in terms of their methods and their results—that claim mindfulness meditation is an effective treatment for several mental and physical ailments.[15] Regardless of what one makes of these criticisms—and it is not my intention in the present essay to come down on the issue one way or another—Kabat-Zinn and other promoters of mindfulness felt that they were put on the defense by such criticisms for their promotion of these programs over the decades.

In what follows, I explore the apologetic strategies developed by Kabat-Zinn not only in his development of the MBSR program but also in his defense of the program on light of such criticisms. Though Kabat-Zinn is a rather prolific author with many publications to his name (including several best-sellers), here I will focus on two articles—one published in 2011, just prior to the emergence of the criticisms, and one published in 2017, some years after them—that are explicitly reflective in nature, and in which he is actively defending his MBSR program. I will argue there is a basic apologetic strategy across these articles, the operative term for which is "essence," namely, the essence of the "dharma." As we saw in the quotations above, Kabat-Zinn's aim

15. David L. McMahan and Erik Braun, "Introduction," in *Meditation, Buddhism, and Science*, ed. David L. McMahan and Erik Braun (New York, Oxford University Press, 2017), 13–14. Ann Gleig provides a more elaborate chronicling of the "mindfulness backlash" as well as Buddhist defenses of mindfulness: Ann Gleig, *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 52–72. Bhikkhu Anālayo has recently argued that the appellation "McMindfulness" developed initially by Ronald Purser and David Loy to denote problematically over-simplified and commodified versions of mindfulness-based practices and protocols does not reasonably apply to Jon Kabat-Zinn's MBSR program. He also argues that mindfulness will be an important skill for dealing with environmental catastrophes caused by climate change and can allow for more incisive action in the present to mitigate future forms of environmental degradation. See Bhikkhu Anālayo, "The Myth of McMindfulness," *Mindfulness* 11 (2020): 472–479. For more on the concept of "McMindfulness," see Ronald Purser, *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (New York: Repeater, 2019).

in developing the MBSR program was to express the "essence" of his experiences with Buddhist meditation and yoga through a medium that would make them accessible and commonsensical to an American audience. Kabat-Zinn's apologetic strategy hinges on his own claim to know the essence of the dharma and to transmit it skillfully to others through the MBSR program.

What exactly does Kabat-Zinn mean when he claims to skillfully transmit the essence of the dharma? In the first section of this study, I will explore this question, drawing from several of his publications, but particularly the 2011 article, and will locate his understanding within broader intellectual currents. Following that, the next section will focus on the latter of the two works mentioned above with attention to how Kabat-Zinn's understanding of the essence of the dharma functions apologetically. Finally, I conclude my study by returning to Tweed's notion of Buddhification and considering Kabat-Zinn's apologetics for the MBSR program with that concept in mind.

COMING TO THE ESSENCE OF THE UNIVERSAL DHARMA

Others have described the MBSR program in detail, so I provide only a brief description here.[16] The program is a ten-week course that involves formal and informal training in mindfulness techniques as well as a week-long intensive retreat, discussions between course participants, and "dharma battle"-inspired one-on-one interviews between course participants and the instructor. My focus in this study is not on the program itself but on Kabat-Zinn's understanding of the essence of the dharma, which serves to legitimate the MBSR program as a form of skillful means (*upāya*). To better understand Kabat-Zinn's perspective, it is important to understand the experiences that brought him to it. In this section I will explore Kabat-Zinn's background and how it informs his understanding of the dharma. In his essay from 2011 entitled "Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR, Skillful Means, and the Trouble with Maps," Kabat-Zinn states that as a graduate student at MIT, he wondered about his purpose in life, what he refers to as his "karmic assignment" in life.[17] Despite the wishes of his mentor at MIT,

16. For example, see Richard Gilpin, "The Use of Theravāda Buddhist Practices and Perspectives in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy," *Contemporary Buddhism* 9, no. 2 (2008): 227–251, 234–235; and Wilson, *Mindful America*, 92–95.
17. Kabat-Zinn, "Some Reflections," 286.

the Nobel Laureate microbiologist Salvador Luria (1912–1991), and his father Elvin Abraham Kabat (1914–2000), an accomplished scientist in his own right, Kabat-Zinn did not long for a career in the sciences.

He recalls that he first encountered the dharma in 1966, while still a student at MIT, and began a regular meditation practice during that time. After completing his graduate work, he briefly joined the faculty at Brandeis University Department of Biology and taught courses on molecular genetics and sciences for non-science majors—the latter of these courses, Kabat-Zinn notes, "was an opportunity to teach meditation and yoga as pathways into a first-person experience of biology."[18] Following this, he took the position of director at the Cambridge Zen Center, practicing under the Korean Sŏn master Seung Sahn (1927–2004) and training to become a dharma teacher in Seung Sahn's tradition.[19] During this time, Kabat-Zinn also taught weekly classes on mindful yoga at a church in Harvard Square as well as the occasional meditation training and workshops on stretching and yoga for athletes.[20] We can see here that even prior to his creation of the MBSR program, Kabat-Zinn was actively teaching contemplative practices in secular settings and was gaining the spiritual training in the Buddhist tradition that would inform the underpinnings of the MBSR program.

In 1976, Kabat-Zinn began working at the newly established Medical School at the University of Massachusetts. Here still, he notes, "my koan about what I was really supposed to be doing with my life in terms of right livelihood was unfolding in the background."[21] Kabat-Zinn then recounts the vision he had while at the IMS in the spring of 1979, described in the introduction to this study. To reiterate it briefly, the vision Kabat-Zinn experienced prompted him to consider how to communicate the essence of what he had experienced in his thirteen years of contemplative practice in an American vocabulary, such that

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 286. This speaks to the Mahāyāna influences on Kabat-Zinn's MBSR program that are often less emphasized than the program's affinities with practices derived from the Theravāda-based insight or *vipassanā* movement. For more on the Mahāyāna influences on MBSR, see Ville Husgafvel, "The 'Universal Dharma Foundation' of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction: Non-Duality and Mahāyāna Buddhist Influences in the Work of Jon Kabat-Zinn," *Contemporary Buddhism* 19, no. 2 (2018): 275–326.

20. Ibid., 287.

21. Ibid.

meditation would seem utterly commonsensical, particularly for those who have little to no interest in Buddhism.

Kabat-Zinn provides an endnote to his term "American" in the passage quoted in the introduction, explaining that he used the term "American" at the time of his vision but that it may no longer be appropriate. He considers the term "secular," yet, for Kabat-Zinn, the term feels too dualistic, "in the sense of separating it from the sacred."[22] "I see the work of MBSR as sacred as well as secular," he goes on to say, "in the sense of both the Hippocratic Oath and the Bodhisattva Vow being sacred, and the doctor/patient relationship and teacher/student relationship as well."[23] Further, Kabat-Zinn claims that his use of the term "American" applies only to the U.S., and that other countries and cultures must engage in their own efforts to reshape the language of the dharma in meaningful way without denaturing it in the process.[24] From these statements we can gather that: (1) Kabat-Zinn views the work of communicating the essence of the dharma in an American vocabulary as an undertaking that complicates the secular-sacred binary; and (2) that Kabat-Zinn believes that various cultures and countries will have to develop a language for the dharma that, as he states, speaks to their own "heart-essence" but does not "denature the wholeness of the dharma."[25] As we will see, these sentiments allude to Kabat-Zinn's "transtraditional" approach to understanding the essence of the dharma, as the dharma for Kabat-Zinn is something that defies categorization and is grounded in the experience of the autonomous subject.

Of course, the endeavor to put the essence of the dharma into an American vocabulary was not a simple one. "From the beginning of MBSR," Kabat-Zinn states, "I bent over backward to structure it and find ways to speak about it that avoided as much as possible the risk of it being seen as Buddhist, 'New Age,' 'Eastern Mysticism' or just plain 'flakey'. To my mind this was a constant and serious risk that would have undermined our attempts to present it as commonsensical, evidenced-based, ordinary, and ultimately a legitimate element

22. Ibid., 301n5.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.

of mainstream medicine."[26] He recalls the internal difficulty he faced when given the opportunity to include an endorsement of his first book, *Full Catastrophe Living*, from Thich Nhat Hanh. Kabat-Zinn relays that this endorsement from Hanh caused him a crisis of sorts, not only because Hanh is clearly a Buddhist figure of acclaim but his frequent use of the term "dharma," a "very foreign word," in his endorsement may raise suspicions.[27] Nonetheless, the MBSR program aimed "to embody to whatever degree possible the dharma essence of the Buddha's teachings put into action and made accessible to mainstream Americans facing stress, pain, and illness."[28] Further, on Thich Nhat Hanh's endorsement, Kabat-Zinn recalls that it "spoke deeply and directly to the essence of the original vision and intention of MBSR."[29] Of course, all of this still begs the question of what exactly Kabat-Zinn means by the essence of the Dharma. In the following section I will not only explore what Kabat-Zinn means by this phrase but place it within a larger historical trajectory of Buddhist encounters with the discourses of modernity.

THE UNIVERSAL DHARMA BEYOND BUDDHISM

Kabat-Zinn makes his understanding of the dharma and its essence quite clear in a passage from his 2005 book *Coming to Our Senses*. In his view, what Buddhists refer to as "the Dharma" is "an ancient force in this world, much like the Gospels".[30] The Dharma as the "good news," however, has nothing to do with Buddhism—"if one wants to think of Buddhism as a religion at all."[31] Kabat-Zinn further explains that:

> *The dharma was originally articulated by the Buddha in what he called the Four Noble Truths.* It was elaborated on throughout his lifetime of teaching, and passed down today in unbroken lineages and streams within the various Buddhist traditions. In some ways it is appropriate to characterized dharma as resembling scientific knowledge, ever growing, ever changing, yet with a core body of methods, observations and natural laws distilled from thousands of years of inner

26. Ibid., 282.
27. Ibid., 282–283.
28. Ibid., 283.
29. Ibid.
30. Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World through Mindfulness* (New York: Hachette, 2005), 136.
31. Ibid.

> exploration through highly disciplined self-observation and self-inquiry, a careful and precise recording and mapping of experiences encountered in investigating the nature of the mind, and direct empirical testing and confirming of the results.[32]

We can see in this passage that the essence of the dharma for Kabat-Zinn is encapsulated in the four noble truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of its cause, the truth of its cessation, and the truth of a path that leads from the causes of suffering to the cessation thereof. In identifying this as the essence of the dharma, Kabat-Zinn is stressing the alleviation of suffering. This resonates well with his own stated sympathies we saw above for the sacred-secular Hippocratic Oath to "first, do no harm." Though the majority of the passage above is dedicated to aligning the Buddhist tradition with the disciplinary forms of the modern sciences (which we will explore below), the first sentence expresses what could be arguably stated as uniquely pragmatic and hence uniquely American orientation to understanding Buddhism: since the essence of the dharma is the path towards the cessation of suffering, what accords best with that essence may not be traditional Buddhist beliefs but rather whatever "works" for new audiences to be freed from suffering.

Importantly, "the lawfulness of the dharma," Kabat-Zinn states, "is such that, *in order for it to be dharma*, *it cannot be exclusively Buddhist*, any more than the law of gravity is English because of Newton or Italian because of Galileo, or the laws of thermodynamics Austrian because of Boltzmann."[33] The discoveries and breakthroughs of these scientists transcend their particular historical and culture moments, as they point to the real lawfulness of the universe. And just as the laws of physics apply universally, in all circumstances in space and time, according to Kabat-Zinn, the dharma likewise applies universally "wherever there are human minds."[34] Transitively, as a universal science of the mind, the Buddha's dharma "transcends his particular time and culture of origin in the same way."[35] The Buddha himself was neither a Buddhist nor the founder of any religion, according to Kabat-Zinn. Rather, the Buddha was a sort of quiet revolutionary, a healer who

32. Ibid., emphasis added.
33. Ibid., emphasis added.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 137.

"diagnosed our collective human dis-ease and prescribed a benevolent medicine for sanity and well-being."[36] This is to say, for Kabat-Zinn, the cultural and historical dimensions of Buddhism can be meaningfully differentiated from its therapeutic, scientific essence.

Given that the essence of the dharma *can* be differentiated from its cultural and historical iterations leads Kabat-Zinn to consider that perhaps it *ought* to be so. Kabat-Zinn suggests that for Buddhism, as a "dharma vehicle," to be maximally effective, "it may have to give up being Buddhism in any formal religious sense, or at least, give up any attachment to it in name or form."[37] Since, for Kabat-Zinn, the Buddha's teachings were never *really* a religion anyhow—though how it became one in the first place is not something he seems to consider at any length—the essence of the dharma can be expressed through many forms, even ones that have no overt connection to the Buddhist traditions as they have come to be known.

Kabat-Zinn's project hinges fundamentally on the distinction he makes between the essence of the dharma (that is, the "universal dharma" as he refers to it) and its expression historically across different cultures ("Buddhadharma" in his words).[38] This distinction justifies his creation of an "American" vocabulary, which he believes will allow the dharma to be maximally effective in the United States. Wilson puts the basic argument this way: "because [in Kabat-Zinn's view] no one owns the dharma, not even Buddhists, it is therefore free for appropriation by anyone, so long as the person remains faithful to the universal truths it expresses."[39] Further, Wilson states that this act of separation is not seen by advocates as a violent one but rather a freeing one, one which liberates from the stifling nature of pre-modern Buddhist ideas and traditions.[40] He notes finally that Kabat-Zinn's own sense of accountability to the Buddhist tradition over the years seems checkered, as he sometimes seems not to care about Buddhism but about the universal dharma and other times has sought out affirmation from Buddhist figures regarding his formulation of the MBSR program.[41]

36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Wilson, *Mindful America*, 86.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 86–87.

Here we should note two things: (1) Kabat-Zinn's formulation of the dharma as a universal spiritual truth not unlike the physical laws of the universe disclosed by modern science is not a novel one—in fact, it has considerable historical precedent; and (2), the analogy to science itself is no accident, as it legitimates his articulation of the universal dharma essence in scientific terms. As McMahan has noted, the notion of a universal or "transtraditional" spirituality that exists beyond and outside of religious institutions has its roots in American Transcendentalism, particularly the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), and heavily influenced modernizing Buddhist figures such as Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864–1933), and Daisetsu Teitarō Suzuki.[42] According to McMahan, as a phenomenon of modernity, this universal spirituality is structured on the logic of secularity, in which the private *experience* of the autonomous subject mirrors the public *experiment* of the objective sciences. "Bolstered by the various discourses of the autonomous subject," McMahan states, "which in turn entwine with the meditative disciplines of Buddhism, *experience* becomes the spiritual counterpart to the *experiment*, and like the experiment also aspires to universal, verifiable knowledge—its own 'facts.'"[43] Just like the facts of science, *experience* is understood to transcend traditional authority; experience as such was not the domain of a particular church or other authority but an open space for the experimental discovery of truth.[44] Experience so conceived, McMahan claims, is the condition through which the "Buddhism and science" as we know it presently was able to emerge. This is to say, it was the condition for understanding Buddhism as a "science of mind" or "internal science" that is now prevalent in certain circles.[45]

Experience so conceived is critical to Kabat-Zinn's understanding of the essence of the dharma. As we saw in his description of the Buddha's dharma, it is construed in terms of the Buddha's *experience*—his insights

42. David L. McMahan, "The Enchanted Secular: Buddhism and the Emergence of Transtraditional 'Spirituality,'" *The Eastern Buddhist* 43, nos. 1 & 2 (2012): 1–19.

43. Ibid., 13. Robert H. Sharf has also explored the rhetorical function of "experience" in Buddhist modernist literature, see Robert H. Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," *Numen* 42 (1995): 288–283.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

into the lawfulness of the universe—and described as analogous to scientific knowledge produced in a laboratory. During a conversation in 2013 with the neuroscientists Richard Davidson and Amishi Jha, Kabat-Zinn goes so far as to say "one could think of the Buddha as more like a great scientist—a Galileo or an Einstein—somebody with very deep insight into the nature of his own *experience*, who developed the language, frameworks, methods, laboratory tools, and so forth for doing something special, which is what all these meditative practices have been about."[46] The Buddha's experience in realizing the dharma, again, as we saw above, transcends culture, history, and even the Buddhist tradition itself. For Kabat-Zinn, it is this *experience*, the very essence of the Buddha's dharma, which is introduced by meditation teachers in the MBSR program. Though Kabat-Zinn states that it is "virtually essential and indispensable" that teachers of the MBSR program have a "strong personal grounding" in Buddhist teachings, he is quick to explain that these teachings cannot be brought into the classroom "*except in essence*."[47] As Kabat-Zinn explains, the implication here is:

> We cannot follow a strict Theravadan approach, nor a strict Mahayana approach, nor a strict Vajrayana approach, although elements of all these great traditions and the sub-lineages within them are relevant and might inform how we [MBSR teachers], as a unique person with a unique dharma history, approach specific teaching moments in both practice, guided meditations, and dialogue about the experiences that arise in formal and informal practice among the people in our class. *But we are never appealing to authority or tradition, only the richness of the present moment held gently in awareness, and the profound authentic authority of each person's own experience, equally held with kindness in awareness.*[48]

For Kabat-Zinn, transtraditional *experience* is the genuine authority rather than any one Buddhist lineage or set of lineages. And though each lineage is included in the MBSR program, *experience* is the source of discretion for MBSR instructors to apply various teachings skillfully.

So long as the essence of the dharma is transmitted skillfully in the setting of the MBSR program, those in the course will catch on to that

46. Steven Paulson, Richard Davidson, Amishi Jha, and Jon Kabat-Zinn, "Becoming Conscious: The Science of Mindfulness," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1301, no. 3 (2013): 87–104, 95, emphasis added.
47. Kabat-Zinn, "Some Reflections," 299.
48. Ibid., emphasis added.

essence. Kabat-Zinn notes that even novice practitioners can see that the mind has a life of its own, and once they learn to cultivate their attention—if only slightly—they can better witness and apprehend the flux of impermanent sensations.[49] This further leads the practitioners to the "direct experience" that "my pain is not me" and thus the option to no longer identify with their pain. Such realizations can lead them to "become intimate with the nature of thoughts and emotions, and mental states such as aversion, frustration, restlessness, greed, doubt, sloth and torpor, and boredom, to name a few," which "constitutes the territory of the third foundation of mindfulness, *without ever mentioning the classical map of the four foundations of mindfulness, nor the five hindrances, nor the seven factors of enlightenment*."[50] This is to say, for Kabat-Zinn, when a teacher is effective, they can explain the essence of the dharma without ever appealing to traditional schemas—the "classical map" of the four foundations of mindfulness and so on; rather, they appeal to the *experience* of the practitioner as they progress in the MBSR program.

However, if the *experience* of the dharma is not there, then the *essence* of it is likewise not there. "If," for Kabat-Zinn, "the *essence* is absent, then whatever one is doing or thinks one is doing, it is certainly not mindfulness-based in the way that we understand the term."[51] Indeed, Kabat-Zinn is quite serious about this matter. In an interview with *Inquiring Mind*, Kabat-Zinn reflects on the claims made by a member of the Mind & Life Dialogues in 1990 to the effect that MBSR and other programs presented a half-baked, reductive version of Buddhism as the whole thing, and that these presentations contribute the decline of the dharma: "I thought to myself, if that were true, I would quit tomorrow."[52] We have no reason to believe that Kabat-Zinn is being disingenuous in any way here; he does not appear to be a cynical actor.

Now, having explored the experiences that led Kabat-Zinn to his understanding of the essence of the dharma and having outlined the

49. Ibid., 298.

50. Ibid., emphasis added.

51. Ibid., 299.

52. Barbara Gates and Wes Nisker, "Bringing Mindfulness into Mainstream America: An Interview with Jon Kabat-Zinn," in *The Best of Inquiring Mind: 25 Years of Dharma, Drama, and Uncommon Insight*, ed. Barbara Gates and Wes Nisker (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), 39.

basic argument behind his approach in the MBSR program, in the following section we will turn to his defense of the program from criticisms like the one he mentions and those that were mentioned in the introduction to this study. In order to do so, I will shift focus from Kabat-Zinn's 2011 article "Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR" to his 2017 article entitled "Too Early to Tell: The Potential Impact and Challenges—Ethical and Otherwise—Inherent in the Mainstreaming of Dharma in an Increasingly Dystopian World." Not only does Kabat-Zinn engage these criticisms in this article, but he also builds on his vision of the importance of mindfulness for American society, which will be the focus of the conclusion to this study.

DEFENDING MBSR AND THE UNIVERSAL DHARMA

As we have seen above, according to Kabat-Zinn, for the dharma to be maximally effective to an American audience, its essence must be transmitted skillfully in a new "languaging" unique to American culture and sensibilities. Further, Kabat-Zinn himself has stated that his intention for the MBSR program was to *recontextualize* the dharma rather than to decontextualize it. And while he may well believe that, when it is done right, his program not only helps those who participate but also skillfully transmits the essence of the dharma to them in an accessible way, what does he have to say to those who *do not* believe as he does? Let me state again here that it is not my aim to come down on one side or another, but only to understand Kabat-Zinn's response. And with that being said, in this section, I explore Kabat-Zinn's response to his critics through an article published in 2017 in the journal *Mindfulness*. His stated intention in the article is to "offer a non-exhaustive perspective on the original core aspirations, as I experienced them, behind introducing mindfulness as a practice and as a way of being into the mainstream world."[53] Part of this offering is his own explanation about why it is that the mainstreaming of mindfulness has gone awry in the manner which the critics mentioned above have identified.

According to Kabat-Zinn, the problem lies with "a small minority of people" who, in an ignorant and acquisitive spirit, apply mindfulness to all manner of dubious products that have little or nothing

53. Jon Kabat-Zinn, "Too Early to Tell: The Potential Impact and Challenges—Ethical and Otherwise—Inherent in the Mainstreaming of Dharma in an Increasingly Dystopian World," *Mindfulness* 8 (2017): 1125–1135, 1126.

to do with the term to cover for their exploitative agendas.[54] "In all likelihood," Kabat-Zinn states, those in this small minority "have no idea that mindfulness is rooted in an ancient and arduous meditation practice and ethical soil."[55] Kabat-Zinn hopes that the appropriations of mindfulness meditation that he and his critics alike denounce are a "temporary and self-limiting phenomenon," one that will eventually remedy itself as mindfulness and the dharma becomes more mainstream.[56] Elsewhere in the essay he states that he the current hype around mindfulness is "a passing fad," one which will soon bore those with more opportunistic motivations, and having become bored, they will move on to the next thing quickly enough.[57]

What we can see here is that Kabat-Zinn chalks up seeming misappropriations of these "ancient and arduous" (and yet, we should note, not *explicitly* Buddhist) practices such as mindfulness meditation as the acts of those who simply do not know any better, or of those who do yet seek to profit from slapping the term on all manner of commodities nonetheless. He simply hopes that this issue will go away as the "universal dharma" becomes more and more mainstream, and that more conversation and debate on the matter will contribute to this end as well.[58] Kabat-Zinn believes that the creation of greater community of mindfulness practitioners, who are increasingly influential in mainstream society, will help prevent future misappropriations of the ancient and arduous practice of mindfulness meditation.

What does Kabat-Zinn say when confronted with the accusation that his MBSR program and similar mindfulness-based interventions are "watered-down dharma"? Kabat-Zinn recalls being asked this question initially in 1991 by a journalist working for *Tricycle*, a Buddhist periodical. The journalist asked: "What are the implications of taking mindfulness practice outside of its formal traditions and historical context? Is there a danger of watering it down too much, of endangering its integrity?"[59] Kabat-Zinn replied then that there is a danger to the integrity of a tradition when it is in the hands of "someone whose

54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., 1126–1127.
57. Ibid., 1132.
58. Ibid., 1127.
59. Ibid., 1128.

understanding is limited," but far worse, according to him, is the danger posed by tradition itself. Tradition is dangerous when it gets in the way of considerations for human suffering and the elimination thereof.[60] Kabat-Zinn relates the tendency of many Buddhists to go on "ego trips" about the superiority and authenticity of their own practice: " 'My practice is better, deeper, faster, more complete, or more spiritual than your practice.' "[61] He is basically making the argument that the Buddhist tradition is only getting in the way of itself when the concern for "formal tradition" and "historical context" overrides that for the alleviation of suffering. Some twenty-five years later, in the 2017 article, we find Kabat-Zinn reconsidering his own answer to this question.

Though he does not recant his prior statements, he does take a more thoughtful approach to the question itself. Kabat-Zinn points out, and rightly so, that the question posed to him in 1991 by the journalist from *Tricycle* holds implicitly that MBSR and related programs do in fact "water down" the dharma; the *Tricycle* journalist's concern then simply became a matter of "how much is too much?"[62] Recognizing this, Kabat-Zinn attempts to turn this kind of thinking on its head by posing another question, or, rather, set of questions:

> What if we posited for a moment that, *in essence*, the dharma (the lawfulness that the Buddha discovered, described, and offered skillful methods for developing [*bhavana*]) is not being watered down ... and that whatever we might mean by "historical, cultural, or religious context" is era-dependent? What if in this era, mindfulness has been contextualized adequately and appropriately—or adequately and appropriately enough—in the domains within which mindfulness training of one kind or another, some of it nascent, is taking place in mainstream settings ... at least up to now?[63]

Revisiting the question, according to Kabat-Zinn, is rather important, since, in the interim quarter-century, a lot has happened to mainstream the dharma: he mentions the reach of *Tricycle* and other Buddhist publications, the prominence of the Dalai Lama on the global stage, and the influential research of the Mind & Life Institute, among

60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., 1129, emphasis added.

other things.[64] More pressing perhaps than the need to consider how things have developed in the past twenty-five years for Kabat-Zinn is the need to consider the dystopian nature of the present and what mainstreaming mindfulness can do to help it.

To be more precise, the dystopian present Kabat-Zinn refers to here is not only the Trump administration and its far-right program, but also the more perpetual problems of police brutality and violence against communities of color, of environmental degradation, and of the violation of the rights of indigenous communities in the United States. These dark realities of the present for Kabat-Zinn may present "a pivotal moment for our species to come to its senses literally and metaphorically," one in which the "liberating virtues" of mindfulness can be the catalyst towards a brighter future.[65] This is to say, in Kabat-Zinn's view, not only is the matter of whether or not his MBSR program is a "watered down" version of the dharma an outdated one (as so much has happened to bring Buddhist ideas and practices into the mainstream since then), it is in fact a distraction from what the mainstreaming of mindfulness *could* offer to contemporary issues in American society. What mindfulness can offer is nothing short of complete liberation for the human species. Kabat-Zinn states that "the underlying motive force for this work [that is, the mainstreaming of mindfulness and the dharma] is the intuition, the longing, and the *very real possibility* of liberation from greed, aversion, and delusion on the individual, institutional, and global level, *nothing less*."[66]

For the political realm, the mainstreaming of mindfulness and the dharma entails the development of a "democracy 2.0" based in the Hippocratic principle to first do no harm and grounded "in the lawfulness that a universal dharma foundation based on widespread embodied practice *might* provide."[67] A democratic system based on such principles and grounded in the universal dharma *might* be just the thing we need to wrestle our impulse to be driven by fear and ignorance and to uproot these tendencies from the structure of our laws and

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., emphasis added.

67. Ibid., emphasis added. Kabat-Zinn first develops his vision of the "ascendancy of the mindful," what he calls here "democracy 2.0," in *Coming to Our Senses*, 499–580.

institutions.[68] If, for Kabat-Zinn, we can see the incredible potential that the mainstreaming of mindfulness and the dharma *could* have for the American political system, then surely we will no longer fuss over the red herring of whether or not the MBSR program is "watering down" the dharma. "In the face of suffering," Kabat-Zinn states, "how much exposure to mindfulness ... would be too little, or too 'decontextualized,' if it inspired or propelled somebody who was suffering in one fashion or another to practice mindfulness both formally and informally ...?"[69] Again, his basic argument here is that the need to address suffering should supplant concerns over tradition and history.

Arguably, the intention of the MBSR program, as Kabat-Zinn conceived of it, was never to remain beholden to a tradition; he saw that as precisely the thing which was getting in the way. "MBSR," Kabat-Zinn claims, "was always meant to be a skillful means for making the universal essence of dharma, or at least a first taste of it, accessible to virtually anybody who cared to explore it.[70] Though he does not state as much explicitly, at least one "barrier" to virtually anyone accessing the practice of mindfulness for Kabat-Zinn is the Buddhist tradition itself. He goes so far as to ask whether one can genuinely differentiate the *buddhadharma* from "a more universal articulation of the very same dharma" that can serve as an entryway into the dharma "for those for whom the Buddhist doors are not going to be readily accessible?"[71] And yet, Kabat-Zinn also states that MBSR was never meant to be a form of "stealth Buddhism."[72] While the *buddhadharma* is not different than the "more universal articulation" found in the MBSR program, the latter, according to Kabat-Zinn, *is not* Buddhism presented stealthily or in disguise. The maneuver necessary to make sense of this is to recall that the dharma is not Buddhist, and, importantly, that "the Buddha himself was ... not a Buddhist."[73]

Though there are common themes across his articles from 2011 and 2017 in terms of their apologetic strategies, the promise of mainstreaming mindfulness and the universal dharma is more strongly

68. Ibid., 1129, emphasis added.
69. Ibid., 1130.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid., 1130.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid., 1130; Kabat-Zinn, "Some Reflections," 283.

emphasized in the latter of the two. Though Kabat-Zinn retains his argument about the essence of the dharma in this latter piece, he adds rhetorical questions to it: What have we got to lose? What do we have to gain? Essentially, dire circumstances call for dire measures, and that for Kabat-Zinn means throwing our attachments by the wayside to benefit the maximal amount of people. He advocates taking the risk of mainstreaming mindfulness, assuming that the gains for everyone will be greater than the supposed losses for the Buddhist tradition. As he puts it:

> Taking certain risks to go beyond any parochial and fundamentalist perspectives we might harbor and deal directly with our own fears and our attachment to favored *but necessarily limited views* is what is called for in this era. And that includes our tendencies to fall into dogmatic, sectarian, hopelessly dualistic perspectives—for instance, making "Buddhists" and "non-Buddhists," or for that matter "us" and "them," "the good guys" and "the bad guys"—in our own minds and then being attached to those distinctions in an absolutist way. This is the opposite of wisdom.[74]

In quoting Kabat-Zinn, I have so far attempted to highlight the conditional character of his claims about the potential to be had through the mainstreaming of mindfulness—what *might* or *could* happen if mindfulness became even more widespread in American society. Wilson has referred to this as "an implicit further step" to the widespread adoption of mindfulness practices.[75] "It isn't simply that everyone will become mindful and therefore save the world through mindful consumption and mindful voting," Wilson states, "because mindfulness promotes compassion, it is expected that mindfulness will lead many into actual social justice, environmental conservation, and political activism."[76] Mindfulness is not simply about sitting down, as Wilson puts, it; "there is also the expectation that the meditator will eventually stand up energized to get to work on improving the world."[77] Here, with Kabat-Zinn, the implicit has become explicit and functions as a defense for the further mainstreaming of mindfulness and the universal dharma. Arguably, what Kabat-Zinn is attempting to

74. Ibid., 1133, emphasis added.
75. Wilson, *Mindful America*, 185.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.

secure is a future for his program and others like it: if he can convince more and more people to adopt his program, with the promise of nothing short of complete liberation at stake, the program will be sustained and grow further in influence.

CONCLUSION

I began this study by describing what Tweed refers to as the Buddhification of American culture, that is, the introduction of decontextualized ideas, artifacts, and practices to American culture through a complex process of transcultural exchange that began in the late nineteenth century and intensified in the mid-twentieth. Tweed likens the process of the re-contextualization of these ideas and practices to the assemblage of a collage. Just as artists like Marcel Duchamp and Robert Rauschenberg assembled collages from various materials, including found objects, Americans who were not born into Buddhist homes collaged together received representations of Buddhism into new cultural forms.[78] The product of this process of collaging was, according to Tweed, "an almost infinitely malleable Buddhism that exerted wide cultural influence and met multiple needs."[79] Arguably, Kabat-Zinn's MBSR program is a transcultural collage *par excellence*, as it not only assembles and affixes various Buddhist practices and ideas together in novel ways, but also it has exerted incredible cultural influence, an influence perhaps unmatched by any other re-packaging of Buddhist ideas and practices, present or past, and has served to meet a variety of needs for Americans.

As we saw in the sections above, Kabat-Zinn's MBSR program is premised on the notion that he could skillfully transmit the essence of the dharma to those who could benefit from it in an "American" vocabulary that makes no use of traditional terminology—the "classical map," as he would put it. He wished to make mindfulness meditation so commonsensical that it would be accessible to anyone, particularly to those who would be turned off by the "Buddhist door." His justification for the languaging of the MBSR program is that the program presents the essence of the dharma, which can be meaningfully differentiated from the *buddhadharma* and its terms. According to Kabat-Zinn, the dharma, or rather the "universal dharma," is not Buddhist exclusively

78. Tweed, "Buddhism, Art, and Transcultural Collage," 194–195.
79. Ibid., 213.

but is the objective lawfulness of the universe that was realized and taught by the Buddha. We noted that Kabat-Zinn's argument regarding the essence of the dharma has significant precedence among modernizing Buddhist figures, who sought to present Buddhism as centered on a transtraditional, universal spirituality. This kind of spirituality, as we saw, was grounded in the *experience* of the autonomous subject, which itself was posited as a parallel concept to the *experiment* of modern science. Transtraditional, universal spirituality in this view, not unlike science, has its own means of examining its object—*experience*—and produces its own facts. Kabat-Zinn's understanding of the essence of the universal dharma, we showed, emphasizes such *experience*—the Buddha's experience, the experience of MBSR teachers, and of practitioners—and considers *experience* as the basis of authority rather than the various Buddhist traditions and their prescriptions. Following this, we saw how Kabat-Zinn draws on his argumentation about the essence of the universal dharma to defend his program from its critics.

In his 2017 article, we saw that he not only continued to make the case for a differentiation between the universal dharma and the *buddhadharma*, but also that he employs other apologetic strategies as well. These strategies include, rather crucially, arguing that the potential benefits of the further mainstreaming of mindfulness and the universal dharma outweigh whatever consequences it might have. Kabat-Zinn urges his readers to set aside their attachments to certain traditions and cultural forms for the purpose of creating the maximum benefit for the maximum number of people. Furthermore, Kabat-Zinn believes that the more mainstream mindfulness can be, the greater potential there is for complete liberation through the emergence of a "democracy 2.0" based on the universal dharma and Hippocratic principle to first do no harm. What we drew from this is that Kabat-Zinn never viewed himself or his program as being beholden to the Buddhist tradition; on the contrary, he saw tradition as *possibly* getting the way of alleviating suffering. Considering all of this, particularly the fact that Kabat-Zinn is does not consider himself beholden to the Buddhist tradition, we might ask: Can we consider this a form of *Buddhist* apologetics?

Here again I think we can turn to Tweed, as his notion of transcultural collage can help us think through this question. As I stated above, if it is not exemplary of the phenomenon in question, the MBSR program can undoubtedly be considered a

"transcultural collage" for the reason that it pulls together disparate pieces—decontextualized Buddhist practices and ideas—into a new form that exerts immense cultural influence and meets the needs of Americans. Further, considering that, for Tweed, the Buddhification of American culture predominantly concerns those who neither grew up in a Buddhist household nor identify as Buddhists, the phenomenon seems to be happening in a manner parallel to Buddhist communities in America. This is to say, Buddhification does not necessarily involve American Buddhists but transcultural collages that have been assembled by and for non-Buddhists for a variety of purposes. Given this, we might consider Kabat-Zinn's apologetics as defending not Buddhism per se but his own transcultural collage that heavily utilizes Buddhist ideas and forms of rhetoric to justify itself.

Another question we can ask is how this relates to another aspect of the Buddhification of American culture, namely, does the success of the MBSR program and other mindfulness-based programs mean that Buddhism is further becoming part of the "soul" of America? I think the parameters of Tweed's concept can lead us to answer both in the affirmative and in the negative. On the one hand, if the mainstreaming of mindfulness means that Buddhist ideas and practices—albeit decontextualized ones—are more available to Americans to reshape for their own ends, then, yes, Buddhism is becoming a greater part of the "soul" of America. What exactly it means for Buddhism to become part of the soul of America is another question altogether, one which I cannot explore in great depth here. On the other hand, considering again that Kabat-Zinn is neither interested in promoting the *buddhadharma* nor sees himself as belonging to that tradition per se, it may be hard to describe this as an achievement for Buddhism or Buddhists, as it is not really a promotion of it despite the fact that it draws ideas and practices from it.

And yet, Kabat-Zinn has been praised by Buddhist leaders such as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh and has been given warm welcome by Chinese Buddhist monks who have found his program helpful in introducing Buddhist ideas to modern

audiences. Perhaps it is the case that Kabat-Zinn's notion of the essence of the dharma as the path toward freedom from suffering, presented as a transtraditional, experiential-yet-scientific spirituality, speaks powerfully not only to the non-Buddhist audiences it was designed for in the United States, but also to more "traditional" Buddhist figures across the world operating with similar sympathies as participants in modern society. Whether the MBSR program or any other mindfulness-based program is here to stay is hard to tell, but, as I have attempted to show here, Kabat-Zinn's apologetic strategies for his program draw on concepts and rhetorical forms that are generally familiar to American audiences, and studying his own reflections on his career can serve as a means to better understand the changing place of Buddhist ideas and practices in American culture in the twenty-first century.