What Is Secular Buddhism?

I have been practicing mindfulness meditation for over 40 years and teaching it for over 30; even though I was teaching Buddhist principles and practices, for many years I refused to identify myself as a Buddhist. This decision stems from my strong reluctance to identify with any religious institution, an attitude commonly found in contemporary culture. I was not raised in a family that demonstrated any religious affiliation or spiritual aspirations, but I consider myself to have been philosophically inclined beginning in high school, and spiritual development has been an organizing principle of my adult life.

I believe that the originators of the major religions—the Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed being the most well-known, did not set out to create a religion, but rather to go deeply into their own psyches and discovered profound truths about human nature, within the cultural constraints that prevailed during their lifetimes. After their passing, their followers created religious institutions to continue offering what the originators had realized. Unfortunately, over time, maintaining the authority of the institutions became more dominant for the leadership than the deeper spiritual aspirations, which requires a high degree of introspective training and discipline to realize. These organizations had to contend with cultural and sociopolitical pressures to survive. These circumstances caused core spiritual values to become marginalized and the clerical bureaucracies became aligned with their contemporary political organizations and as a result religions played at least a supportive role in the recurrent wars that have occurred over the centuries, if not directly involved in initiating them. I want nothing to do with such institutions.

The number of Americans who identify as Christian has been dropping since the 1970’s, with increasing numbers of young people refusing to identify with organized religions, but still considering themselves to be spiritually inclined. The University of Southern California’s Center for Religion and Civic Culture posted this commentary on their website:

Religious “nones”—those who answer “none of the above” on religious identification surveys—are the fastest-growing cohort of young adults in the United States, Western Europe and parts of Latin America. They are also among the most stigmatized groups in religiously conservative parts of the developing world. Yet many of them are deeply committed to values like tolerance, service and economic justice that are vital to healthy, stable societies.

Their sheer numbers in the West have already begun to reshape conversations about ethics and belief. And the deep penetration of social media in the global South, particularly among Millennials, will likely mean that individualism—the touchstone of both globalization and religious disaffiliation—will shape religious culture even in parts of the world where affiliation trends remains high.

People belong to religions for a variety of reasons, and my research indicates that generally individuals fit into one of the following categories, listed in a way that indicates a smaller population of people the further down the list you go:

1. People who attend a particular church because they were raised in that tradition. This represents, by far, the largest grouping of those who consider themselves to be religious. I recently talked with one of my meditation students who is retired and was raised in a particular Christian church. She is a very dedicated meditator but attends the services “Because I was raised in that denomination. I like the rituals and I love singing in the choir.”
2. Those who attend because they make interpersonal connections for social and business reasons, not because they are particularly spiritual. Their participation is concerned with the benefits of status that comes from their membership, and they are more likely to be hypocritical in their attitudes.
3. Those who attend out of fear or through seeking emotional security, including those I call “scared again Christians” who are afraid they will go to Hell if they don’t belong, or who are prepping themselves for Heaven after dying. In the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, their aspirations are organized to either avoid a troublesome rebirth or hope to earn a more benevolent rebirth.
4. The population who participate in a religion who represent the fewest numbers are truly spiritually inclined. They can be found among those who were born into a particular tradition, or who converted from another. These people might be monks or nuns in the various religions or dedicated lay participants who are spiritual seekers.

I believe Secular Buddhists likely are found to be spiritually inclined without any religious affiliation. Of course, over the upcoming generations, those who profess to being Secular Buddhists may be adversely affected by any institutionalization that will inevitably develop as cultural norms have an effect on the organizational structures of the tradition; however, in this transitional sociocultural environment, it is more likely that new significant innovators might emerge, especially considering the social interdependence fostered by internet media.

After several years, I realized that “If it walks like a duck and quacks like one, then it is a duck!”, and decided to describe my faith as Buddhism, but qualified it by comments I read or heard from contemporary commentators, who used the terms “Western Vipassana” or “Secular Buddhism”. The word *secular*, according to the Miriam-Webster dictionary has this origin: “*From Late Latin* saecularis*, from* saeculum *the present world, from Latin, generation, age, century, world*”. In contemporary usage, according to Miriam-Webster secularism refers to: “a) of or relating to the worldly or [temporal](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/temporal#h1) secular concerns; b) not overtly or specifically religious secular music; c) not [ecclesiastical](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ecclesiastical) or [clerical](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/clerical#h1)”.

Wikipedia provides an overview of Secular Buddhism:

“…a broad term for a form of [Buddhism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism) based on [humanist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanism), [skeptical](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophical_skepticism), and [agnostic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agnostic) values, valuing [pragmatism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pragmatism) and (often) [naturalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritual_naturalism), eschewing beliefs in the [supernatural](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supernatural) or [paranormal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paranormal). It can be described as the embrace of Buddhist rituals and philosophy for their secular benefits by people who are atheist or agnostic….

…The [Insight Meditation movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vipassana_movement) in the United States was founded on modernist secular values. [Jack Kornfield](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Kornfield), an American teacher and former [Theravadin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theravada) monk, stated that the [Insight Meditation Society](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insight_Meditation_Society) wanted to present Buddhist meditation "without the complications of rituals, robes, chanting and the whole religious tradition." [S. N. Goenka](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SN_Goenka), a popular teacher of Buddhist Vipassana meditation, taught that his practice was not a sectarian doctrine, but “something from which people of every background can benefit: an art of living.” This essentially treats Buddhism as an applied [philosophy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy), rather than a [religion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion), or relies on [Buddhist philosophy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist_philosophy) without [dogmatism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dogma). While recent scholarship has shown that such framings of Buddhist tradition were in large part rhetorical, and that teachers such as Goenka retained their traditional religious commitments in enacting their teachings and disseminating their meditation practices, such rhetorical reframing had a powerful impact on how Buddhism was appropriated and repackaged in the context of the emergent globalities of the latter part of the twentieth century.”

Jack Kornfield was a Buddhist monk for several years in Asia and, after leaving monastic commitments behind, earned a doctorate in Clinical Psychology, practicing psychotherapy influenced by his Buddhist training. He, Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg have been major instigators of Secular Buddhism for many years, founding the Insight Meditation Society in 1975, where I went for my first residential retreat in early 1982. Kornfield later participated in the organization of Spirit Rock, a similarly organized retreat center in Northern California.

Over recent years I have read several of the books by Stephen Batchelor, and while reading his book “After Buddhism—rethinking the dharma for a secular age”, I settled into Secular Buddhism as the label I could feel okay with. He was an ordained Buddhist monk for some years, studying and practicing with a variety of teachers in the Theravada, Tibetan Vajrayana and Zen traditions before disrobing and writing several very well-respected books commenting on Secular Buddhism such as “Buddhism Without Beliefs”, “Confession of a Buddhist Atheist”, and “The Faith to Doubt—Glimpses of Buddhist Uncertainty”, along with several translations of traditional Buddhist texts. He is still quite active as a teacher and author. Here is a relevant quote regarding Secular Buddhism from “After Buddhism— rethinking the dharma for a secular age”, on pp 321-322:

TEN THESES OF SECULAR DHARMA

1. A secular Buddhist is one who is committed to the practice the dharma for the sake of this world alone.
2. The practice of the dharma consists of four tasks: to embrace suffering, to let go of reactivity, to behold the ceasing of reactivity, and to cultivate an integrated way of life.
3. All human beings, irrespective of gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, nationality and religion, can practice these four tasks.
4. The practice of the dharma is as much concerned with how one speaks, acts, and works in the public realm as with how one performs spiritual practices in private.
5. The dharma serves the needs of people at specific times and places. Each form the dharma assumes is a transient human creation, contingent upon the historical, cultural, social and economic conditions that generated it.
6. The practitioner honors the dharma teachings that been passed down through different traditions while seeking to enact them creatively in ways appropriate to the world as it is now.
7. The community of practitioners is formed of autonomous persons who mutually support each other in the cultivation of their paths. In this network of like-minded individuals, members respect the equality of all members while honoring the specific knowledge and expertise each person brings.
8. A practitioner is committed to an ethics of care, founded on empathy, compassion, and love for all creatures who have evolved on this earth.
9. Practitioners seek to understand and diminish the structural violence of societies and institutions as well as the roots of violence that are present in themselves.
10. A practitioner of the dharma aspires to nurture a culture of awakening that finds its inspiration in Buddhist and non-Buddhist, religious and secular sources alike.

I believe that what I and tens of thousands of people, primarily in the West, are practicing is an authentic attempt to understand what the Buddha originally created before political and cultural pressures caused the original form to become a religion, primarily when the emperor Asoka actively supported it as a state institution, somewhat similarly to how the Roman emperor Augustus made Christianity an institution of the Roman Empire.

Siddhartha Gautama was raised in a culture dominated by the Brahman religion. He was in a different clan than the Brahman priests, who were the interpreters of religious doctrine, and we can presume that he found what they had to offer was insufficient for his deeply felt need to come to terms with the distress and confusion of life. He left his family and creature comforts in an effort to find a different way to resolve the issue—dukkha—and spent the next several years training his mind and body to fulfill his needs for resolution. It was a non-religious, secular endeavor, and, as we know, he succeeded and is now known as the Buddha—not intending to create a religion, but rather to teach liberation from dukkha systematically through the concepts and practices that we today call Buddhism. That term, by the way, is a Western construct—perhaps the better term would be *BodhiDharma*; the word *Bodhi* is translated as *Awakened*, and with *Dharma* translated as *the concepts and practices conducive to Awakening*.

An important aspect of Secular Buddhism is the degree to which contemporary neuroscientific and psychological research investigates and significantly supports the validity of basic tenets of Buddhist psychology and how mindfulness and lovingkindness meditation training alters the structures of the brain with demonstrable benefits for one’s well-being and pro-social actions. A good book that provides information regarding how this research has developed is “Altered Traits”, by Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson, who both have PhDs and have been practicing Buddhist meditation for 50 years or so.

There is a discipline of scientific research on epigenetics, which researches the effect of physical and social environments on the functions of the genetic structures of an organism. Basically, a received stimulation affects how DNA operates in the replication of cells in the body—a toxic substance can activate or deactivate cellular activity, which will subsequently affect the operations of that cell. Such processes can be associated with the onset of cancer, for example. Alternatively, research is beginning to investigate the affect of meditation training on DNA epigenetic functions, considering the possibility that when a person is well-trained and persistent in meditation practice, there is a resulting beneficial change in how that person’s body responds to environmental stress. It is also possible that such changes are capable of being transmitted from a mother to a developing fetus. This would be very hard to substantiate through research, but there are already some research that suggests the transmission of trauma-related effects from a mother to a fetus.

Another consideration regarding Secular Buddhism is how contemporary internet connections and world-wide travel has cultivated an important exchange of concepts and practices among the three main categories of Buddhism which were almost entirely isolated for thousands of years: Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. My teachers have been primarily trained in the Theravada/Southeast Asian tradition, but I have studied the teachings of the Dalai Lama, of the Vajrayana/Tibetan and Thich Nhat Hanh of the Mahayana/Zen traditions.

At this stage of development, Secular Buddhism can fit into the dynamically transformative nature of Western culture, and the increasing number of people who, like me, reject the inconsistencies and hypocrisies of contemporary religious institutions, including Buddhism. In this country, Buddhism is very much in the minority of religions, and typically falls into the following categories:

* Imported Buddhism, populated by immigrants who bring all the cultural norms from where they emigrated and construct the places of worship accordingly. These religious institutions can invite in Americans who are attracted to the way the rituals and concepts are presented.
* Buddhism practiced by westerners and largely led by westerners. One example is the Kwan Um School of Zen Buddhism, begun by Seung Sahn, a Korean immigrant monk. Members of that religious group have adapted some of the original rituals that they believe add to the potency of the principles and practices of Buddhism.
* Secular Buddhist organizations like the Insight Meditation Society, reviewed earlier in these notes. This is where I have participated in many residential retreats, including two 3-month retreats. Most of the teachers are not monastics, and a variety of approaches are taught, largely within the Theravadin conceptual and practice disciplines, with no ritual emphasis, except perhaps something provided by a guest teacher. Another of these secular organizations was established by S. N. Goenka, who described vipassana practice as a way of living organized around Buddhist principles and practices. Centers in this practice can be found all around the world.

I personally don’t practice Buddhist rituals, and I regard myself as atheistic, that is, I have no interest in personalizing ultimate reality, as I believe that anthropomorphism limits the potential for Awakening. We are “asleep” due to unregulated emotional reactivity and underdeveloped capacity for introspection; the concepts and practices of Buddhism support “waking up” to a higher level of functioning and insight regarding subjective experience. What drew me to Buddhism is the emphasis on introspective awareness and self-discipline, combined with a very psychological approach to spirituality.

The basic premise within Buddhism is categorized as the Four Noble Truths: Dukkha, the causes for Dukkha, liberation from Dukkha and the Noble Eightfold Path, which represents the ways and means for accomplishing Awakening. *Dukkha* traditionally is translated as *suffering*, but I prefer translating it as *distress and confusion*, which describes the emotional disruption and cognitive distortions we are subject to in life. The cause for Dukkha is craving and clinging; craving describes the emotional disruption and clinging brings attention to the cognitive distortions; together they represent the conditioning that requires ego defense or ego gratification. In my view, Awakening involves waking up from the emotional distress and mental confusion, an ongoing process, culminating for some in profoundly liberating insight into the transient and conditioned nature of subjectivity. The Eightfold Path is divided into three elements: Wisdom, which includes Right Understanding and Right Intention, Virtue, which involves Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood, and Mental Discipline, which includes Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. These teachings, when studied sufficiently to set aside cultural add-ons left over from an age that is not relevant to these extraordinary times, provide a very workable conceptual structure and training to enable beneficial psychological and spiritual development.

We are living through what is arguably the most radically transformative era in all of human history, in the context of ever-increasing numbers of people on the planet, which brings environmental degradation/global warming and the resulting sociopolitical conflicts, accelerated by social media. I also believe that the mental discipline and prosocial orientation of Secular Buddhism represents an evolutionary development in human history. There was a time when proto-humans developed the powerful evolutionary capacity for language and the ability to accumulate and share acquired information that one generation learned to another, and this was evolution in action. Several thousand years ago spirituality developed in human culture, which cultivated prosocial ethics and altruistic behaviors, which furthered civilization. It is possible that the combination of the mental discipline and insights provided by Secular Buddhism can further this evolution, validated by ongoing and sophisticated psychosocial research, accelerated by the internet. This sort of evolutionary development, applied in a secular setting as well as being introduced to already established religions, is sorely needed into the future.

There is a movement in various Christian traditions toward this end—contemplative prayer being one example—that can provide the same benefits for quieting the mind, but the more developed introspective techniques such as mindfulness meditation that are being validated by contemporary research, provide a more comprehensive approach to spiritual development.