

# 16 December 2021

29 participants from five countries participated: Costa Rica, the UK, Germany, Canada, and the U.S.

Here are the key points of the discussions in the four breakout sessions:

**Secular Buddhism and Psychotherapy** – The group discussed the centrality of care as the common ground of both practice and therapy. Looking ahead to 2022, the group identified some important topics for discussion, including dealing with difficult emotions, the relationship of therapy and meditation, and the nature of Buddhist psychology.

**The Future of Secular Buddhism** – Based on Stephen Batchelor's view that we need to create new forms of sangha, the group focused on the key characteristics of sanghas which are not hierarchical but still provide participants with education and support for their practice.

**Political Action and Secular, Socially Engaged Buddhism** – The group continued to examine the relationship of Marxism and Buddhism in developing a secular, engaged form of Buddhism. The group decided to include discussion of readings at the monthly sub-group meetings, beginning with a review of Martin Hagglund's recent work on secular faith.

**Exploring Key Concepts in Secular Buddhism** – The group discussed how each person can best respond to the tragedies that we face in contemporary society, how we can be Bodhisattvas from a secular perspective.



# 18 November 2021

31 participants from six countries participated: Costa Rica, the UK, Ireland, Germany, New Zealand, and the U.S.

Here are the key points of the discussions in the four breakout sessions:

**Secular Buddhism and Psychotherapy** – The group focused on the issue of aging and mortality and shared deep personal experiences with each other. The group explored how one can gain liberation through the process of aging.

**The Future of Secular Buddhism** – The group discussed the role of sangha for secular Buddhists, examining the impact of online versus in-person sanghas. In this context, the need for developing new forms of sangha was explored.

**Political Action and Secular, Socially Engaged Buddhism** – The group examined the relationship of Marxism and Buddhism in developing a secular, engaged form of Buddhism. The group also discussed the various types of social engagement available to secular Buddhists.

**Exploring Key Concepts in Secular Buddhism** – The group discussed how each person in the group was reacting to troubling, current events in our society, and how we can cultivate both a sense of non-attachment and active engagement in response to these events. The importance of an ethic of care as the basis of action was emphasized.



## 21 October 2021

25 participants from four countries participated: Costa Rica, the UK, New Zealand, and the U.S.

Here are the key points of the discussions in the four breakout sessions:

**Secular Buddhism and Psychotherapy** – The group discussed the natural alliance between psychotherapy and Buddhism. The group agreed that they complement each other by expanding our capacity to care for ourselves and others, allowing us to cultivate a sense of ‘space’, and enabling us to notice and investigate our conditioning in order to be less reactive.

**The Future of Secular Buddhism** – The group discussed the issue of anger in relation to disputes within Buddhism, including the angry reaction of some traditional Buddhists to Stephen Batchelor’s secular approach to Buddhism.

**Political Action and Secular, Socially Engaged Buddhism** – The group focused on the shame sometimes experienced by political activists over not doing enough to respond to social injustice or not acting in response to the compassion that we feel. In this regard the group identified the need to distinguish between healthy shame and unhealthy shame.

**Exploring Key Concepts in Secular Buddhism** – The group responded to a poem by Richard Epstein, focusing on what it means to engage in ‘right action’ in the midst of a very difficult situation, such as a violent conflict. How do we practice the ‘Middle Way’ prescribed by the Buddha in this setting?



## 16 September 2021

30 participants from eight countries participated: Costa Rica, Colombia, the UK, Germany, Austria, New Zealand, Ireland, and the U.S.

Here are the key points of the discussions in the four breakout sessions:

**Secular Buddhism and Psychotherapy** – The group decided to focus on ‘process’ issues to ensure that all members of the group have the opportunity to participate and that there is substantial discussion of particular topics. They agreed on a set of guidelines to facilitate productive discussions for future meetings.

**The Future of Secular Buddhism** – The group discussed the diversity of views and experiences among secular Buddhists and decided to discuss some readings for future meetings, including a chapter from Winton Higgins’s new collection of essays on secular Buddhism.

**Political Action and Secular, Socially Engaged Buddhism** – The group focused on the ways we experience anger and how to process that emotion in the context of the fight for social justice. The group distinguished skillful versus unskillful ways of processing anger .

**Exploring Key Concepts in Secular Buddhism** – The group raised a concern that there might be too much emphasis on Stephen Batchelor’s writings within secular

Buddhism, that we should recognize the value of other approaches. Whatever the approach, the important thing is to promote mindfulness and ethical actions.



## 19 August 2021

29 participants from eight countries participated: Costa Rica, Colombia, the UK, Germany, Austria, New Zealand, Ireland, and the U.S.

As usual, we had lively discussions in the four breakout sessions:

**Secular Buddhism and Psychotherapy** – The group discussed the challenge of accepting the ‘difficult’ in our lives, including the inquiry: What is most difficult? One person’s phrase – ‘This is what there is’. – resonated deeply as a way of framing the acceptance of the difficult.

**The Future of Secular Buddhism** – The group examined the three jewels of Buddhism (Buddha, dharma, sangha) and ‘played with’ the order of the jewels as a way of clarifying a secular approach to the dharma. They agreed that secular Buddhism must not become a rigid orthodoxy.

**Political Action and Secular, Socially Engaged Buddhism** – The group discussed Bhikkhu Bodhi’s article on ‘Socially Engaged Buddhism and the Trajectory of Buddhist Ethical Consciousness’. They explored how secular Buddhists can most fruitfully engage in political movements.

**Exploring Key Concepts in Secular Buddhism** – The group focused on the four tasks, Stephen Batchelor’s reinterpretation of the Four Noble Truths. There was a specific emphasis on the first task – embracing the totality of life, the good and the bad. The group members explored whether ‘embrace’ or ‘accept’ is the better term to describe this task.



## 15 July 2021

31 participants from eight countries participated: Costa Rica, Colombia, the UK, Germany, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, and the U.S.

This was a lively and energetic meeting, both within the whole group and in the four sub-groups that met in breakout sessions:

**Secular Buddhism and Psychotherapy** – The group discussed the challenge of dealing with sadness in our lives and the need to accept, in various ways and degrees, that this emotion is a part of our lives even if it is not culturally accepted.

**The Future of Secular Buddhism** – The group continued to discuss the role and meaning of sangha, and worked toward creating a ‘mission statement’ that reflects core principles. Recognizing that this will always be an ongoing discussion as we walk along the path, the group identified the three jewels, the four tasks, and the five precepts as core elements.

**Political Action and Secular, Socially Engaged Buddhism** – The group discussed one of David Loy’s article on engaged Buddhism and explored the challenge of how a spiritual path which emerged in a very different context can still be relevant today. The group also pondered the issue of what is the unique contribution of Buddhists to social change.

**Exploring Key Concepts in Secular Buddhism** – The group discussed Stephen Batchelor’s notion that the ‘mystical’ is not separate from the world we live in but saturates it. The ‘everyday sublime’ points to the mystery of life, the elusiveness of experience, and the limits of our knowledge.



# 17 June 2021

30 participants from seven countries participated: Costa Rica, Colombia, the UK, Germany, New Zealand, Canada, and the U.S.

We announced the formation of a new online meditation group to complement this discussion group. For more information, [click here](#).

The sub-groups discussed the following:

**Secular Buddhism and Psychotherapy** – As this group has evolved, they have come to see their meetings as itself a form of practice, where the group members practice mindful communication and self-honesty. They explored the meaning of dukkha for each person based on their personal experiences and discussed how mindfulness and psychotherapy complement each other.

**The Future of Secular Buddhism** – The group focused on the role and meaning of sangha for those interested in a secular approach to the dharma. One important question emerged: How can secular sanghas be ‘gateways’ to the dharma rather than ‘gatekeepers’ which require sangha members to have a particular orthodoxy?

**Political Action and Secular, Socially Engaged Buddhism** – The group discussed the various ways that secular Buddhists can engage with social problems, ranging from individual service to radical, political activism. They also explored the dual role of ‘identity’ in our lives – the ways in which an identity can lead to delusion but also how identity can serve as an important resource.

**Exploring Key Concepts in Secular Buddhism** – The group discussed how, in the context of an ethics of uncertainty, we can distinguish between necessary judgements and the problem of judgementalism. They also looked at the relationship of process vs. structure in developing a secular approach to the dharma.



# 20 May 2021

At our fifth meeting of the group, there were 26 participants from seven countries: Costa Rica, Ireland, the UK, Germany, New Zealand, Canada, and the U.S.

In addition to discussions among the whole group, we had a breakout session with four sub-groups discussing the following issues:

**Secular Buddhism and Psychotherapy** – The group explored several issues, including the need to have an individualized approach to dealing with dukkha, the importance of letting go of attachment and of the shame we sometimes experience in relation to unpleasant feelings, and the value of Stephen Batchelor’s new book, *The Art of Solitude*.

**The Future of Secular Buddhism** – The group once again grappled with the relationship of secular Buddhism to traditional forms of Buddhism, but also discussed the need both for more coordination among secular Buddhist projects and ‘teachers’ who can help facilitate the development of a secular approach to the dharma.

**Political Action and Secular, Socially Engaged Buddhism** – The group discussed the problem of getting stuck or attached to the outcomes of political activity and the value of Buddhism in providing a methodology for how individuals can work together productively and compassionately in activist groups. They also agreed that Buddhism lacks a structural analysis of social dukkha and thus other perspectives need to be incorporated into a socially engaged approach.

**Exploring Key Concepts in Secular Buddhism** – The group discussed how the basic concepts of a secular approach provide us with tools which we can embody in real life situations, including political action and working with our own sources of distress. The group discussed the value of Stephen Batchelor’s writings, but also agreed that they can only provide us with a guide, that many people need to be involved in developing a secular approach to the dharma.

One of the Planning Committee members, Lise Hull, proposed that we set up a separate online meditation group. There was definite interest in this idea. Lise will be the point person to organize this group.



# 15 April 2021

There were 25 participants from six countries: Costa Rica, Ireland, the UK, New Zealand, Canada, and the U.S.

In addition to discussions among the whole group, we had a breakout session with four sub-groups discussing the following issues:

**Secular Buddhism and Psychotherapy** – The group explored their personal experiences in dealing with dukkha and noted the importance of finding spaces of awareness or ‘sparkles of enlightenment,’ as one participant put it. Another issue is how to interrupt the habitual patterns which cause us so much suffering.

**The Future of Secular Buddhism** – There were several issues discussed, including how to create more egalitarian sanghas, the need to respect traditional perspectives/practices while renewing the dharma, and how to deal with divisions within sanghas.

**Political Action and Secular, Socially Engaged Buddhism** – The group discussed the problem of a lack of diversity in many sanghas, the ways in which a Buddhist perspective can sustain activism and help us avoid being overwhelmed, and the need to understand how anger at injustice can be transformed into ‘fierce compassion.’

**Exploring Key Concepts in Secular Buddhism** – Several new participants discussed their interest in and understanding of a secular approach to the dharma. There was a focus on exploring the Eightfold Path from a secular perspective. In particular, the group examined what ‘appropriate livelihood’ means in a modern context.



# 18 March 2021

There were 26 participants from eight countries: Costa Rica, Ireland, the UK, New Zealand, Australia, France, Canada, and the U.S.

During the meeting, we had a breakout session in which the participants chose among the following groups:

- Secular Buddhism and Psychotherapy
- Social Engagement/Political Activism and Secular Buddhism
- Exploring the Survival and Future of Secular Buddhism (sanghas and the role of secular Buddhism)
- Exploring Key Concepts in Secular Buddhism – The Fourfold Task & the Eightfold Path from a secular perspective

Each breakout group reported back to the whole after the breakout session and it was clear that the participants had lively, worthwhile discussions in each group.

At the next online meeting these breakout groups will continue to meet.



## 18 February 2021

There were 39 participants from eight countries: Costa Rica, Ireland, the UK, New Zealand, Australia, Germany, Canada, and the U.S.

The focus for most of the meeting was a discussion of Stephen Batchelor's 'ten theses of secular dharma,' which appears at the end of his 2015 book, ***After Buddhism: Rethinking the dharma for a secular age***. Stephen offers in the **ten theses** a summing up of his perspective on a secular approach to the dharma.

The discussion occurred in six breakout groups on Zoom. While the general consensus was that the ten theses do provide us with a good overview of the key elements of a secular dharma, the participants raised some important questions which we need to further explore:

- How can meditation practices inform our understanding of the structural violence which Stephen identified as a source of suffering in thesis #9?
- What other, non-Buddhist perspectives, both spiritual and secular, can contribute to the 'culture of awakening' mentioned in thesis #10?
- With respect to thesis #8, how does an ethics of care lead to social and political activism?

- Do we need to have a stronger role for spiritual transcendence in a secular version of the Eightfold Path?
- How do we confront death (and the fear death) in a secular context?
- How has mindfulness practice been corrupted in various social contexts?
- What is the role of compassionate anger in individual and collective transformation?
- Is there room for people with religious beliefs in secular Buddhism?

In addition, there were brief breakout sessions based on various topics.



## 21 January 2021

At our first meeting 41 people participated in the Zoom meeting from nine countries: Costa Rica, Ireland, the UK, New Zealand, France, Australia, Germany, Canada, and the U.S.

The purpose of the first meeting was to introduce the participants to each other and to begin to explore the relevance of secular Buddhism in our lives.

The meeting was structured around two breakout group sessions:

Breakout Session #1 – We explored three questions:

- What is your current practice or connection with Buddhism?
- What got you to join this group?
- What would you like this group to focus on? (meditation practice, discussions of relevant topics, building secular Buddhist sanghas, etc.)

Breakout Session #2 – We explored the following questions:

- What does secular Buddhism mean to you?
- What key questions do you have about a secular approach to the dharma?

The response to the participants to the meeting was very positive. In response to the meeting, **Kelly White, from Stroud, England**, offered this appraisal:

...It was wonderful to meet so many likeminded people, feel part of a community and get to explore other opinions and experiences.

I thought that the format of the meeting was great; by using the break out rooms, everyone got to participate and have a voice and this would be a good format to follow in the future.