

Introduction

Why I am a Buddhist. If I saw this book on the shelf, I might be tempted to reply, “Who cares? I’ve never even heard of you.” Maybe if I were Richard Gere, or Tina Turner, or Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys, people would muster more curiosity. But even then, readers probably want to know why they themselves should be Buddhists, or at least why they should be impressed with Buddhism. Why should anybody be impressed with Buddhism? Why should we care? How can we benefit from the teachings of a sixth-century Indian philosopher? These are the implicit questions contained in the title of this book. These are the questions I aim to answer.

The title of this book is a positive play on the famous polemical work by Bertrand Russell, *Why I am Not a Christian*. Positive or negative, praise or critique, such books are attempts to sketch the essence or core ideas of a worldview. Brush strokes are necessarily broad, but hopefully accurate. Exceptions to my generalizations will be inevitable, and the absence of someone’s favorite Buddhist story, thinker, or text will be maddening to the initiated. But no matter the flaws of such a format, such a book will hopefully do two things well: first, introduce unfamiliar ideas to the novice, and second, remind and inspire the old hand.

The third possible function of such a personal book is to show how someone applies, or puts into practice, the theoretical teachings.

Everyone knows that talking the talk is not the same as walking the walk, and, of course, each person will perambulate a little differently. But one value of such a book is to offer a model (albeit highly flawed) for how to translate the abstractions of Buddhism into concrete, usable life strategies.

Frankly, I probably seem like an odd Buddhist. Whenever I mention it in conversation, people respond with incredulity. Apparently, I should look more diminutive, speak in more hushed tones, and garland myself more with hippy swag. Many Westerners who have adopted Buddhism are remarkably humorless brown-rice eaters, who look like they wake up every morning and say “no” to life. In short, they are masochistic personalities. But this should not be taken, by the rest of us, as a strike against Buddhism. These characters would practice any religion in the same cheerless manner. I’m not one of these severe Buddhists. I’m not a monk, or even a member of a temple. I have studied Buddhism with some amazing scholars and practitioners, and I’ve taught Buddhism for many years in the States and Asia—but I think gurus are screwballs. I probably drink too much, and I’m not in the least bit interested in sexual abstinence. I like the White Sox, and I eat meat. If a guy like me can be a Buddhist . . . trust me, there’s room for you.

A Chicago Buddhism

In a previous book, I mentioned that one of my goals was to “take the California out of Buddhism.” Naturally, this got me in some hot water with Californians, and it appears to have endeared me to other grouchy cynics. But make no mistake, I like California and Californians. Unfortunately, the stereotype of their guileless, sunny affirmation of absolutely everything has become linked with Eastern spirituality. Beatniks and hippies have always been charmed by Buddhism. But Hollywood celebrities and San Francisco bohos have added a whole new dimension of credulity.

I’ve tried to offer a corrective counterbalance to all the hippy associations by suggesting a kind of blue-collar “Chicago Buddhism.” Poet Carl Sandburg famously referred to Chicago as the “city of big shoulders.” He called it “stormy, husky, brawling”—not to mention “crooked,” “brutal,” and “wicked.” Despite all that, he sneered at Chicago’s critics and said, “Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning.”

Of course, calling for a more Chicago-style Buddhism does not have much to do with actual geographical place, but more to do with frame of mind and disposition. I simply want to assure readers that one does not need to acquire hippy values in order to become a Buddhist. And, of course, this is also a wake-up call to the granola-types who think their prayer beads and Ravi Shankar records automatically qualify them for good standing with the dharma.

Buddhism as a Second Language, Buddhism as a First Language

Like many Western Buddhists, I first came to understand the fundamentals of the dharma by reading books. Most Western Buddhists have grown up in families that were monotheistic, culturally speaking, and we discovered our Buddhism via the printed word rather than at the neighborhood temple or wat or shrine. Religions are like languages—everyone has a first language, learned without much conscious effort and drawn upon like oxygen. But, if we're lucky we can adopt a second language, studying the grammar explicitly and memorizing the vocabulary until we feel comfortable in an entirely new atmosphere. Part of the attraction of Buddhism, for Westerners, has been its exotic character. Switching from Christianity to Islam, or vice versa, is dramatic, but not like adopting Buddhism. The basic metaphysical commitments of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are surprisingly similar, even if their differences on the messiah/prophet issue have engendered a history of bloodletting. But the metaphysical ideas in Buddhism are nothing like Western monotheism, and the whole system of Eastern beliefs has an undeniably bohemian attraction. For my generation, part of the allure of Buddhism was that it mystified and irritated our parents. Thankfully, there are better reasons for being Buddhist than simply annoying one's parents, or this would be a very short book. But it will be funny to watch as our own children yawn about our second-language Buddhism, and perhaps rebel by diving headlong into the monotheism of their grandparents' generation.

Book learning, however, was only my first phase of Buddhology, and I have been fortunate enough to subsequently study the dharma traditions in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and China. In these countries, Buddhism is the people's "first language." Like my own Christianity, they have imbibed their Buddhism with their mother's milk and they possess an almost unconscious cultural familiarity with it. Buddhism is not exotic to them. It has no bohemian attraction. And they do not learn their Buddhism from books, but usually just absorb it by osmosis. They are cultural Buddhists.

Buddhism looks very different in these two populations—the native and the adoptive. Westerners tend to stress the psychological aspects of Buddhism, and lay great emphasis upon meditation. In contrast, native Buddhists in the lay population (i.e., the majority of Buddhists) are rarely found meditating or musing upon psychology, and instead tend to stress the devotional and ritualistic aspects of their religion.

Throughout this book I will try to acknowledge some of the more interesting deviations between "first-language" (cultural) Buddhism and "second-language" Buddhism. Tracking some of these differences helps us decode a lot of confusing and contradictory impressions that crowd together under the umbrella of "Buddhism." How is it, for example, that pacifist monks like the Dalai Lama, but also ass-kicking Kung Fu masters, and Japanese calligraphers, and mantra-chanting mystics, and hard-nosed atheists, and ascetic vegetarians, and unapologetic meat-eaters can all live under the flag of Buddhism? I will try to untangle some of this elaborate knot, wherever it seems productive to do so. But generally speaking, my goal is to discuss the philosophical core ideas put forth by Siddhartha Gautama Buddha (563–483 BCE).

The Dharma in Our Consumer Culture

Buddhism has a core set of elements that inform its approach to life, and these were not just recommended on the authority of the Buddha's charismatic personality. They were put forth, using argument and evidence, as testable and verifiable truths that could be corroborated by anyone who cared to investigate them. In that sense,

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Buddhism is not a set of beliefs to be adopted by faith, but a set of practices and beliefs to be tested and then employed in our pursuit of the good life.

I will slowly unpack these elements of Buddhism (collectively referred to as the dharma) by looking at some specific challenges of our modern life. How can Buddhism be applied to our lives in the workplace? How can Buddhism inform and ameliorate our increasing biotech moral quandaries (genetic therapy, stem cell research, mood medications, nanotechnology, etc.)? How can Buddhism help Americans in the “war of the sexes” and the ongoing reformulation of the family? How can Buddhism, with its emphasis on conflict resolution, contribute to and clarify such issues as “nation-building,” “religious tolerance,” and the “war on terror”?

And how can Buddhism better educate or moderate our national pastimes of entertainment and consumption? Buddhism has beneficial wisdom to help us navigate even the most arduous aspects of modern life.

While I was writing this book, a news story filled the media—the same story that fills the media every year around Thanksgiving. The day after the holiday is celebrated as the high holy-day of consumerism—Black Friday. Consumers line up all night long outside retail stores, and when the stores open, the patrons, filled to the brim with cravings, actually trample each other in a stampede to get the consumer products. This time around an employee at a superstore was actually crushed to death. When patrons of the superstore were informed of the tragedy, they disregarded the management’s attempt to close the store and instead went on shopping—refusing to leave. Many lesser injuries ensued all around the country. While everyone in the media and the wider culture dutifully reported the death and the injuries with gravitas, there was no question or critique of the larger ideological assumption—furious consumption is healthy for America. If anyone doubts the relevance of Buddhism for Americans, I recommend they spend some time watching the depressing YouTube videos of people getting trampled in order to get TVs and video games.

Beginning to Hear the Real Music

I want to promote the idea that Buddhism, while born on the other side of the planet, is truly relevant and available to us. But real Buddhism is not for the dabbler—that is to say, it cannot be tried on for a week and then discarded. I’m not recommending that we all sell our stuff and head for the jungles of Thailand in order to demonstrate our seriousness about Buddhism. But Buddhism is not a “turn on, tune in, and drop out” philosophy that we can attain effortlessly. Learning to apply Buddhism is like learning to play an instrument. It takes a while to get the fundamentals—scales, chords, and fingering technique. Then it takes daily practice to learn melodies and progressions. Prolonged failure and frustration are inevitable, but very slowly one begins to hear real music. We don’t have to become virtuosos on our instruments or Buddhist sages to appreciate and employ the artform in our lives, but we can’t achieve anything without effort.

The Buddha offers a simile (Sedaka Sutta, SN 47.20) to demonstrate how difficult, demanding, and almost unnatural it is to achieve the state of mindfulness in daily life. Imagine, he says, that you have come to the town square and discover a big crowd of people gathered around a stage performance. The crowd is clamoring that the most beautiful celebrity has just arrived, and now she is performing a provocative dance. You are naturally drawn to witness the exciting show, but before you can glimpse anything you are pulled aside. You are informed that you must carry a bowl on your head filled to the brim with oil, and you must carry it on the narrow path between the beautiful celebrity and the writhing crowd. A man with a raised sword will follow directly behind you, and if you spill a drop he will cut off your head.

After relating this weird story, the Buddha asks us if we would let ourselves be distracted from the precarious oil bowl. Obviously, our necks are on the line, so there is much at stake. But it is this kind of intense focus and dedication that mindful meditation (sati) requires of us. The sword-wielding threat is an artificial and

metaphorical way of representing the drastic reorientation of our values and our actions—away from desire and idle curiosity and toward awareness and attention to the present moment.

The trained mind can rise above distraction and craving, but the normal mind is fraught with temptations, agitations, and diversions. The idea of not looking at a beautiful woman (or man) when we are clearly drawn in that direction may sound rather puritanical. But the point of the simile is not to denigrate beauty, but to isolate the tension between natural inclination and discipline. It is perfectly natural to look at beautiful people, and Buddhism doesn't require the forfeit of such trouble-free pleasures. I suspect that our very biology ensures that we'll take a quick gander at any attractive prospect, and such radar abilities probably had some evolutionary advantages for our ancestors. But if I simply cannot help myself from gawking at a stunning model on the street, then I have overturned a division of labor inside myself. I have become the servant of my desire, rather than being the master of my desire. I am being led, rather than leading.

Of course, this example of the wandering eye is rather frivolous. Every husband I know has mastered the art of blinder•vision when his vigilant wife and he pass by beautiful women on the street. If he hasn't trained himself yet, his wife will be happy to act as the head-chopping tutor. But even in this frivolous case, we can see the seeds of the more serious psychological tension between desire and discipline.

Buddhism attempts to give us a second nature—one that writes over the old genetic and psychological code. It never asks us to pretend that the old code doesn't exist. Unlike some other religions, it doesn't imagine humans in some unrealistic angelic form. Nor does it cast us as weak and fallen souls, incapable of any improvement save those delivered by an almighty deity. Buddhism acknowledges that we are filled with some pernicious stuff, but we can discipline our minds in a way that liberates us from our tendency to cause suffering. The benefits of this approach can be seen in our emotional, social, spiritual lives. One of the main reasons why we fail to attain our goals, for example, is because our own appetites pull us off our chosen path. Actualizing our potential is a large part of happiness, and Buddhism helps us chart realistic goals and also gives us tools for staying on course.

Achieving this second nature of mindfulness may ultimately be as urgent as keeping the bowl of oil steady, but mercifully we all get to try again if we screw it up. With regard to beautiful women and many other temptations, I have spilled the oil countless times. But I've also occasionally found some power and freedom in the ability to "check myself before I wreck myself."

This book is not going to stand behind you with sword at the ready. I haven't done that to myself, so I'm certainly not going to get preachy with you. I'm a fan of the gentle but persistent application of dharma—the Middle Way between the zealot and slacker approaches.