



ESSAY TITLE:

The unique nature of Buddhism in Britain.

Against the statement

- Some may disagree and argue that Buddhism has always changed to adapt to cultures (skilful means/no creeds central authority). Buddhism has to make sense and be practical for those who wish to follow it.
- Buddhism takes many different forms in different countries - for instance contrast Sri Lankan Theravada monasticism with lay Nichiren Buddhists in Japan who chant for mundane benefits. Differences in Britain could be said to be no different in scale than changes which have already happened.
- Many British Buddhists have a strong and life-changing commitment. The influence of Socially Engaged Buddhism is strong in Western/British contexts.
- Many organisations (e.g. the English Sangha Trust) preserve traditions as far as is possible in the forms found in Buddhist countries. For example, monastics wear robes, only slightly modified for different weather conditions; monastics do not own possessions or touch money. Monastics keep the patimokka precepts.
- Others may reject the premise of the question and suggest that the idea of a 'unique' Buddhism is merely a construction – there is no such thing. According to formulations of Buddhism based on Mahayana Philosophy – all Buddhism is merely skilful means, a finger pointing at the moon.
- They may also argue that the interpretations of Buddhism, and accommodations with Western culture, are precisely what has ensured Buddhism's popularity and wide appeal: for example meditation practices as treatment for stress.

In support of the statement

- It may be argued that mediating Buddhism through the English language means that the nuances of original languages are lost. For example, the translation of dukkha as 'suffering' has arguably led to deep misunderstandings of Buddhism, and the implication that it is pessimistic.
- It is possible to practise Buddhism without lifestyle changes or serious commitment and many



Buddhism

The unique nature of British Buddhism AO2 handout

British Buddhists, or British people with an interest in Buddhism, prioritise meditation and ignore wisdom and ethics.

- In doing so, it could be argued that they decontextualize the practice of meditation and practise Buddhism only partially.
- It also means they are looking for 'benefits' of Buddhism, without taking on any of the responsibilities, which in itself is selfish, and contrary to Buddhism.
- It could be argued (cf. Slavoj Zizek) that Buddhism has been dumbed down to 'fit in with' rather than to challenge Western capitalist consumerism. People see spirituality as something they can buy – in terms of paraphernalia (incense, cushions and iconography) and in terms of retreats and courses.



QUOTATIONS

The way of Buddhism is Middle Way between all extremes... It appeals to those in search of truth because it has no dogmas, satisfies the reason and the heart alike, insists on self-reliance coupled with tolerance for other points of view, embraces science, religion, philosophy, psychology, mysticism, ethics and art, and points to man alone as the creator of his present life and sole designer of his destiny (Humphreys)

As a student of comparative religions, I believe that Buddhism is the most perfect one the world has even seen... My task was to treat psychic suffering and it was this that impelled me to become acquainted with the views and methods of that great teacher of humanity, whose principal theme was the chain of suffering, old age, sickness and death. (Dr C.C. Jung)

The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) has made a conscious attempt to westernize Buddhism, presenting teachings and practices appropriate for modern Britain. (Bluck)

As well as being the most important, the practice dimension is probably the least adapted from Asian forms of Buddhism. Meditation practices appear little altered from their parent traditions... The most significant adaptation here is the greater involvement of lay people in meditation. (Bluck)

The ethical dimension often shows traditional moral codes modified to a greater or lesser extent by Western liberal ideas. The five or ten precepts adopted by all traditions except SGI-UK are usually seen as guidelines rather than specific prohibitions, especially by lay Buddhists, and there is often less distance between the monastic and lay communities in Britain than there is in Asia. (Bluck)

Most traditions have used Western commercial methods to some extent to support their activities, though the Forest Sangha, Samatha Trust and SRM still rely on donations rather than charges for their meditation retreats, and all Forest Sangha literature is distributed free of charge. (Bluck)

There is relatively little gender bias in much of British Buddhism, with both women and men becoming respected ordained and lay teachers. (Bluck)

The most widespread adaptation is seen within the social dimension. All but the Samatha Trust and SGI-UK have Buddhist communities, but with important differences from traditional monasticism. (Bluck)