



Key concepts

- Buddhism has frequently been presented in the West as a secular philosophy: in the 19th century, Victorians such as Huxley believed there was an original 'pure' form of Buddhism which was entirely atheistic; Noah Rasheta, the founder of SecularBuddhism.com, believes that Buddhism is not a religion but 'an experiential understanding of reality'.
- Stephen Batchelor sees Buddhism as a rational philosophy and way of life in After Buddhism: 'Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age' published in 2015.
- He follows Huxley in arguing that there is an original 'pure' form of Buddhism which can be recovered by removing the 'base admixture of foreign superstitions' found in it today.
- He applies a secular and pragmatic approach to the Pali Canon and the life of the Buddha and only focuses on the secular and pragmatic teachings he finds. Buddhism then has Four Principles: Conditionality (a person should examine their present life and circumstances in order to understand their past and the possibilities for their future), a Fourfold Task (comprehend suffering, let go of reactivity to it, observe that reactivity has ceased, develop an eightfold path of completion), Mindful Awareness (having a heightened attention to everything that is being done) and Self-Reliance (living 'a caring and care-full life, founded on personal responsibility and autonomy').
- Buddhists should aim to establish an egalitarian society where all are entirely equal irrespective of gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, nationality, and religion.' Secular Buddhists should then work within society in the type of ways encouraged by Socially Engaged Buddhism.
- David Brazier counters Batchelor by arguing that Buddhism is a religion in 'Buddhism is a Religion: You Can Believe It' published in 2014.
- He believes that the West has wrongly followed the lead of Huxley in trying to make Buddhism fit into the modern age based on secularism, humanism and materialism.
- He uses the analogy of secular Buddhists trying to fit an eagle into a canary cage which will kill the eagle: ignoring and removing devotional, supernatural and metaphysical aspects from Buddhism destroys true Buddhism.
- Any understanding of an original, pure and authentic Buddhism has to accept that the Buddha was a religious organiser not a secular teacher as shown by the institution of the monastic sangha.
- Buddha is recognised as being the teacher of the gods; the Buddha's metaphysical and supernatural qualities can be found in the Trikaya doctrine of the three bodies of the Buddha: dharmakaya (dharma body), sambhogakaya (enjoyment body) and nirmanakaya (transformation body).
- Buddhist shrines to bodhisattvas, the Buddha's teaching about pilgrimage to the four holy places, circumambulation of stupas, and Buddhist belief that having a pure mind full of the Buddha brings sukha all show Buddhism to be a religion and not just a rational philosophy or a way of life.

'The secret of Buddhism is to remove all ideas, all concepts, in order for the truth to have a chance to penetrate, to reveal itself.' (Thich Nhat Hanh)

'While paying heed to the different voices in the canon, I am drawn to the sceptical and pragmatic ones. They stand out as most distinctive and original in Gotama's teaching.' (Batchelor)

'Each form the dharma assumes is a transient human creation, contingent upon the historical, cultural, social, and economic conditions that generated it.' (Batchelor)

'Looking at a Buddhist text, the Westerner seems not to notice the references to rebirth, to conversations with deities, to supernatural occurrences, to faith, to past aeons, to celestial Buddhas, and to anything else that does not fit into the modernist paradigm.' (Brazier)

Key words

dharmakaya egalitarian
humanism metaphysical
pragmatic secular
Self-Reliance
Conditionality

Key arguments/debates

Some focus on anything supernatural as being a latter addition to Buddhism.

Others focus on Buddhism as having from the start all the attributes of a religion.

Key questions

To what extent does each person look for and find a reflection of their own beliefs and approach to life in Buddhism?

Is stating that Buddhists do not believe in a creator God or God in the usual sense of the word, enough to make Buddhism atheistic and secular?

Issues for analysis and evaluation