

Buddhism in an Era of Secularism

The world is becoming a much more secularized world. This is especially true in the Western world since the late eighteenth century. In the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe, this process of secularization has advanced rapidly and may be seen as being near completion. While religion remains important, a secularist perspective now shapes almost all aspects of people's lives, including their religious lives.

Almost every religion today has had to grapple with the challenge of agnosticism, atheism, humanism, as well as simple indifference to religion due to the accessibility and attraction of worldly pleasures.

“Traditional Buddhism” is any school or doctrinal system that operates within the salvationist world view of ancient India. This includes Theravada and Mahayana schools as both forms of Buddhism have as the ultimate goal of their practice the attainment of *nirvana*. *Nirvana* is the complete cessation of the craving that drives the vicious cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. (Batchelor 2018)

Modern Buddhism has responded to the challenges posed by secularist forces and agnosticism, atheism, and humanism in various ways.

One response accepts the constructive criticisms of the agnostics, skeptics, and humanists, and admits that religion in the past has had some serious flaws. But rather than reject religion, it endeavours to arrive at a new perspective of what it means to be religious in the contemporary world. Progressive or liberal

Secular Buddhism

Secular Buddhism is a general term for a new or emergent form of Buddhism or secular spirituality that is based on humanist, skeptical, and/or agnostic values, but draws on Buddhist practice. Secular Buddhists reject the religious beliefs associated with traditional forms of Buddhism. In other words, they specifically reject supernatural, paranormal, or mystical beliefs. This form of Buddhism encourages a naturalistic and pragmatic approach to the teaching, to provide a framework for personal and social development within the contemporary cultures and time.

It may also be referred to as agnostic Buddhism, pragmatic Buddhism, atheistic Buddhism, or other names.



Figure 68: Secular Buddhism composite image

adherents arrive at a new understanding of religion as primarily a way to find one's appropriate or correct orientation in life. It serves to guide one's daily struggles with the challenges, conflicts, and uncertainties that mark modern lives, including one's sense of inevitable mortality. Thus, the religious quest is not to pass from this world to a transcendent world beyond, but to discover a transcendent dimension of life here and now: to shed a new light and develop a new understanding of the ultimate meaning within the turmoil of everyday existence.

This has led to attempts at modernizing and reconfiguring traditional forms of Asian Buddhism. Some examples of such developments include the following:

- Reformed Theravada Buddhism such as the Vipassanā movement
- Reformed Tibetan tradition such as Shambhala Buddhism
- Reformed Nichiren school such as the Soka Gakkai
- Reformed Zen lineage such as the Order of Interbeing
- Dharmapala's Protestant Buddhism
- Sri Lanka's Sarvodaya Shramadana movement
- India's Ambedkar Buddhists
- Thailand's Young Buddhist Association
- A reformed hybrid or combination of some or all of the above such as the Triratna Order (formerly the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order)

(Batchelor 2012, Akincano Weber 2013)

Another way that religions have responded to the secularist challenge is by developing a synthesis of what may be called "spiritual secularity" or "secular spirituality." (Bhikkhu Bodhi) Secular Buddhism is a term for an emerging form of Buddhism and secular spirituality that is based on humanist, skeptical, and agnostic values. It rejects the supernatural aspects of traditional Buddhism that are prominent in the doctrines such as rebirth, *karma*, and beliefs in spirits or gods.

Stephen Batchelor, for example, describes his notion of secular Buddhism, as follows:

I see the aim of Buddhist practice to be not the attainment of a final nirvana but rather the moment-to-moment flourishing of human life within the ethical framework of the Eightfold Path here on earth. Given what is known about the biological evolution of human beings, the emergence of self-awareness and language, the sublime complexity of the brain, and the embeddedness of such creatures in the fragile biosphere that envelops this planet, I cannot understand how after physical death there can be continuity of any personal consciousness or self, propelled by the unrelenting force of acts (*karma*) committed in this or previous lives. (Batchelor 2012)

Other aspects of traditional Buddhism often rejected by secular Buddhists include the strong emphasis on ritual, beliefs about the power of amulets

and relics, and ideas of extremely powerful teacher-student relationships. (Whitaker) As well, secular Buddhism often rejects other aspects of some forms of traditional Buddhism, including the marginalization of women, male monastic primacy, and the hierarchical organization and relationships. They seek a form of Buddhism that is rational, democratic, and more supportive of gender equality. (Higgins)

Secular Buddhism may be seen to provide a guide for ethical living and morality in today's world and becoming more present without causing harm to others.

Secular Buddhism is concerned with the practice of Siddhattha Gotama's four noble truths in this world. It encourages a naturalistic and pragmatic approach to the teaching, seeking to provide a framework for personal and social development within the cultural context of our time.

Mindfulness meditation is a key aspect of secular Buddhism. Buddhists practice the *Dharma* to better understand their own minds, find greater happiness and peace in the moment, tap their creativity, be more efficient in their work, be more loving in their relationships, and be more compassionate in their dealings with others. Buddhist practice is not so much about leaving this world behind but fully participating in the world more joyfully and with greater spontaneity. Mindfulness meditation allows one to stand back from life temporarily so as to better delve into life and deal with the constantly shifting flow of events and the challenges of life.

The popularity of mindfulness and meditation programs in the West and beyond demonstrate the appeal of secular Buddhism. Such programs are quite diverse. Some have a firm foundation in The Buddha's teachings while others do not refer to Buddhism at all.

Mindfulness-based meditation programs are being offered in many different settings and locations, both in the East and West, as a secular tool to help practitioners shift from blind reaction to life to skillful response. Increasingly, there is evidence of the value of mindfulness meditation for individuals and groups. The research undertaken at the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, has contributed greatly to the promotion of Buddhist meditation and practice in mainstream science and medicine.

There are some secular Buddhists who are concerned with some of the trends and aspects of secular Buddhism and mindfulness programs. They fear that some forms of secular Buddhism may simply become a form of convenient or 'easy' Buddhism. They fear that secular Buddhism gets reduced to the level of a wellness-school. One that is attractive because it does not threaten Western values, existing beliefs, and cultural sensitivities. Its attraction lies in its inoffensive nature and the fact that it does not require from the follower significant effort, difficult changes, deep thinking, or anything challenging. It often takes an oversimplification of the *Dharma* approach. It does not stress

engagement with difficult texts nor strenuous, deep, and critical thinking. The focus is on just being kind, nice, and a little more mindful. (Batchelor 2012).

The secularization of Buddhism has had a significant impact in Western and other societies. Those that are drawn to this approach to Buddhism do so because it aligns well with the secularization of life that is pervasive in Western culture. Equally important, they believe that it addresses concerns that arise out of living in the contemporary world: how to find happiness, peace, and meaning in a complex, confused, conflictual, and congested world.

References

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Impact on Manitoba and Canada

Buddhist Canadians and Buddhism have contributed to the shaping of contemporary Canadian society and communities. Like many other groups, they have added to the diversity of perspectives and to our cultural and social mosaic.

The following are questions for exploration and discussion with respect to Buddhism and Buddhists in Manitoba and Canada.

1. In what ways has Buddhism positively contributed to the development of society in Manitoba and Canada? Provide some examples.
2. Do Canadians in general have a good understanding of Buddhism and Buddhist cultures or do they hold stereotypical and misinformed views and understandings about Buddhism?
3. How have you benefited from the opportunity to explore Buddhism?



Figure 69: The initiation by Dilgo Khyentse Yangsi Rinpoche holding a bell on the throne, Rabjam Rinpoche, Changling Rinpoche, and Mathieu Ricard sitting. Lotus Speech Canada, First Nations Longhouse, UBC, Vancouver, British Columbia.