

Introduction to Buddhism



Most of us as Westerners have been raised in one of the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in which there is a supreme being, God or Allah, as a person, thought of like the gray-haired gentleman painted on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. People who follow the Abrahamic religions therefore are theists. Westerners might be surprised to learn that Buddhists don't believe in God; they aren't theists. Buddhists have a different view, that the entire universe, including you and me, is an enormous, living super-organism. Buddhists follow the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, but when Buddhists refer to the Buddha, 99 times out of 100 they are referring to the living universe, not the historical Siddhartha Gautama.

A study of Buddhism encompasses almost innumerable aspects: the founder, history, culture, beliefs, geography, denominations, etc., but perhaps the nut of Buddhism is the noetic quality – how Buddhists think. We as Westerners can easily recognize the bodily functions that are on automatic pilot, said to be the workings of our autonomic nervous systems. We breathe, but when we are focused on something other than our breathing we continue to breathe. So, we could say *it* breathes us. Likewise, *it* beats our hearts, circulating our blood, *it* digests our food, *it* heals our wounds, and thousands of other bodily functions that we are unaware of. Some may attribute these as being directed by the autonomic nervous system but what drives that? *It* is the Buddha. We are conditioned from birth to accept that we are separate and distinct subjects and must take responsibility for our actions. However, Buddhists do not believe in a separate self. In other words, *it* thinks us too! One of the fundamental Buddhist beliefs is called “no-self.”

The Abrahamic religions focus on sin, but Buddhism focuses on suffering or “un-satisfactoriness” from craving, aversion and ignorance. The Dharma spells out how to find relief. That is not to say that Buddhists do not have moral precepts; they do but Buddhism is not threatening and oppressive.

In Introduction to Buddhism, we will discuss not only the foregoing but also Buddhist thinking as to prayer, heaven, enlightenment, mindfulness, meditation, as well as reference material for continued study.

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