

## 12 Misperceptions About Buddhism

by Gabriel Cohen



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Herewith, a counter to some common misconceptions.

### 1. Buddhism is a foreign, exotic religion

We might well ask if Buddhism is any more foreign to Western soil than certain major religions that originated in the deserts of the Middle East. And while a number of other religions offer supernatural explanations of how the world originated or what might happen to us after death, Buddhism centers on one practical and very human issue: How does the way in which we think about life shape our experience of it? Psychiatrist Mark Epstein calls it “the most psychological of religions, and the most spiritual of psychologies.”

### 2. Western Buddhism is just a sort of “Buddhism lite”

Buddhism has become one of the world’s most popular religions largely because it has proven adaptable to many different cultures. A number of significant Asian teachers and practitioners, such as Zen master Sunryu Suzuki and Tibetan lama Chogyam Trungpa, have been attracted by the West’s relative openness to and enthusiasm for the dharma, whereas Buddhism has stagnated or even withered in some of the places where it was born, including India and Japan. As Perry Garfinkel points out in his book *Buddha or Bust*, the channels sometimes flow in the opposite direction—that is, the new Western interest has fueled a resurgence of Buddhism in some Asian countries.

### 3. Buddhists try to dull or repress their emotions

More than a few serenity-seeking New Agers are actually seething volcanoes on the inside, but Buddhism in no way encourages the denial or repression of powerful emotions such as anger. Trungpa and his renowned student Pema Chodron actually advise “leaning into the sharp points”; instead of engaging in the usual fight-or-flight reaction to difficult emotions, we can just sit with them, and learn to recognize that they are only temporary thoughts with no existence outside the mind. Eventually, we can reduce their powerful hold over our minds and our behavior; we can find a helpful breathing space between thought and impulsive reaction.

### 4. Buddhism is about “blissing out.”

If this means a diminution of conscious awareness, then Buddhism is not about this at all. In fact, it encourages greater awareness of how the mind works and the way it engages with the world. It’s about mindfulness.

### 5. Buddhists see desire as the root of all human troubles

Buddhists are not against sexual desire, for example, nor the desire to be happy. But problems come with desirous attachment, the tendency to view external things as intrinsic sources of pleasure, which causes us to exaggerate their perceived good qualities, to get mentally agitated, and to try to merge ourselves with them. Next thing we know, we’re ruining someone else’s marriage, or addicted to some harmful substance, or in debt. The real problem is our tendency to seek happiness in external sources, which are notoriously unreliable and hard to control.

### 6. Buddhism is a narcissistic religion

The traditional meditation pose may have led to the uncomplimentary term “navel gazer,” describing a practitioner totally wrapped up in his or her own concerns. Some Buddhist traditions do focus on the individual path to enlightenment, but others argue that a large part of the point of becoming enlightened is that such wisdom enables you to help others.

### 7. Buddhists see life as essentially meaningless and empty

Buddhists believe that all people, events, and objects are “empty” of inherent meaning. That’s not the same as saying that everything is pointless or meaningless. Meaning is something we attach to things—it comes not from the objects themselves, but from our own minds. This might seem like it could lead to a swampy and disastrous moral relativism, but in fact many Buddhists work to alleviate suffering in the world and to increase the happiness of others. Buddhists evaluate actions practically, in terms of whether they promote happiness or suffering.

### 8. Because they see problems as all in the mind, Buddhists don’t bother with political engagement

A common misperception holds that Buddhists are passive and disengaged from worldly affairs, but the opposite of attachment is not detachment. A rapidly growing movement, spearheaded by Thich Nhat Hanh and others, is called engaged Buddhism, and its proponents actively work for social, political, economic, and environmental justice.

### 9. Tantric Buddhism centers on secret and exotic sexual practices

A small number of Tantric practices involve a spiritual channeling of sexual energy, but many do not. The emphasis in tantra is on using visualization to increase the effectiveness and depth of spiritual practice. By imagining yourself as a buddha, for example, you can work toward developing a buddha’s positive qualities.

### 10. You need to fundamentally transform yourself in order to become an enlightened being

Many Buddhists believe that everyone already is an enlightened being deep inside—that we’re all endowed with something called Buddha nature. This is a central core of goodness and peace that is available to everyone at all times. What prevents us from tapping into it is ignorance, which leads to delusions, which obscure that inherent light. The Buddhist path involves learning how to open up to your true nature, rather than changing into someone else.

### 11. To be a serious Buddhist, you should renounce a normal life and become a lone ascetic

The Buddha himself tried this approach: he became a wandering mendicant and deprived himself of food and clothing. The result? He almost died—and then decided that Buddhism should chart a Middle Way, a path between self-indulgence and self-mortification. This path can be followed by anyone, from monks to businesspeople, from singles to spouses with families. Indeed, relationships with others provide some of our greatest spiritual challenges and lessons (as anyone who has been in a romantic relationship for a while knows quite well).

### 12. Buddhism requires a lot of esoteric rituals, like chanting and bowing

Some people associate Buddhism with the chanting of the mantra *nam myoho renge kyo*, but in fact this is the central practice of just one sect of Buddhism (Japanese Nichiren). Rather than focusing on traditional religious rituals, many Western Buddhists choose to concentrate more on the psychological elements of Buddhist practice, such as mindfulness.

### Bonus misconception: Buddhist are humorless people

What did the Buddhist say to the hot dog vendor?

Make me one with everything.

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About the Author

Gabriel Cohen is the author of *Storms Can’t Hurt the Sky: a Buddhist Path Through Divorce*, as well as five novels.

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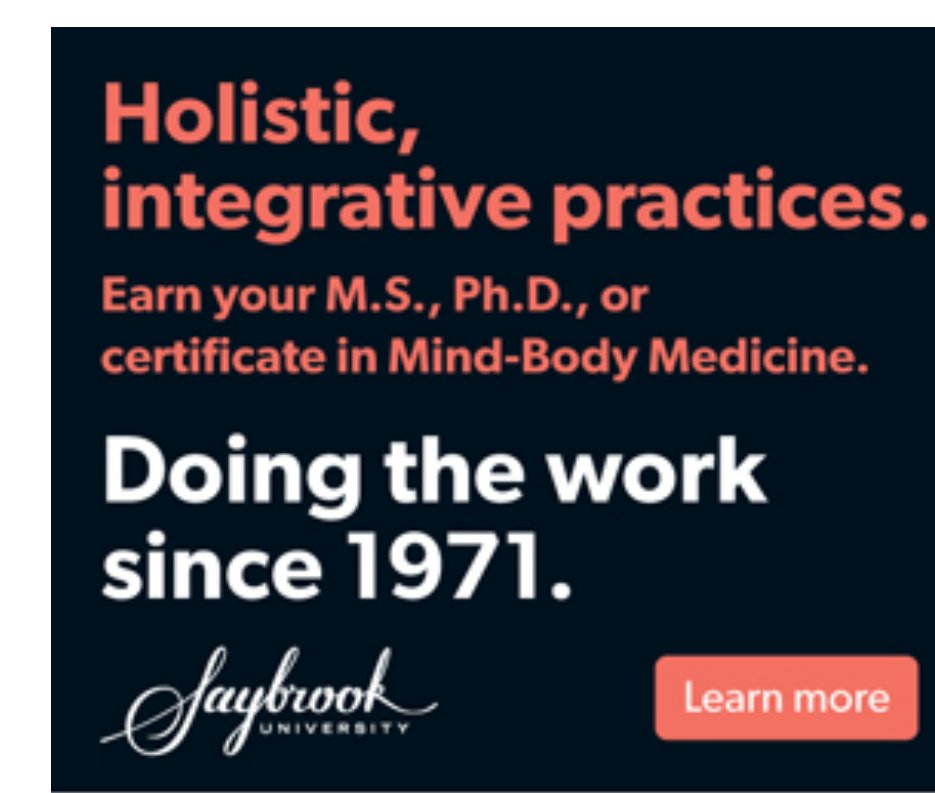
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