

Embodying the heart of the buddha

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Everybody believes what they want to believe. They believe in God, or the universe, or Allah, or science, or simply in nothing at all. But can a person believe in something, and at the same time integrate practices of another religion into their life? Can a person believe in a higher power, but not practice any religious customs? In this world, there are no limitations to how someone can practice their spiritual beliefs. One person can do it all.

In a world where there is such hate, cruelty, violence, and crime it might be difficult to be fully at peace. Whether a person believes in God or in Allah or in nothing at all, everyone yearns to be happy and at peace in the end (Ahlefeldt); there is one religion that specifically has this as its goal in life, and that is Buddhism. It is a religion that is supposed to set people free because it's peaceful, spiritual, and helps a person with self-growth and self-love (Epstein). The Buddha teaches oneself to love, to decrease greed and want in order to stop suffering and to enjoy the things that he or she has now, in this moment (Ravi). When a person's journey comes to an end they are supposed to be liberated and be in a place where suffering does not exist: Nirvana, a place of peace and happiness (Ravi).

It has been said that if all people were Buddhists perhaps everyone would live in a much better world than this one; however, a person doesn't have to be a Buddhist to be able to learn what the Buddha teaches (Soto). Anybody can be catholic or christian and still be influenced by other beliefs, like the ones of Buddhism, by choice, but where did Buddhism come from? How did it manifest into the powerful and peaceful religion that it is today? Siddhartha Gautama was the originator of what is known today as Buddhism. He was a man that experimented with different religions and found that none were

able to fully satisfy him. One day, he decided to sit in deep meditation under a Bodhi tree and claimed that he would not leave that place until he achieved full awareness. After one night, he became the Buddha, meaning “enlightened one” or “the awakened”, and everything he learned during his deep meditation, he decided to teach to others. His ultimate goal is to relieve universal suffering (Biography).

Suffering is said to come from greed, selfish longing, and desire (Kurtus par. 1); however, Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh stated, “without suffering you cannot grow, without suffering you cannot get the peace and joy you deserve.” The Buddha taught how human relations can be guided by kindness, selflessness, and decency (Ravi par. 15). He was meant to teach people how to be kinder and showed people that every action, good or bad, had consequences through karma.

In this religion, it is believed that once a person has died, they are reborn. With karma, bad actions in one’s previous life can follow a person into their next life which can determine whether one is reborn as a human or as an animal (BBC par. 8). Even though there is an endless cycle of rebirth, the buddhist goal is to break that constant cycle and reach Nirvana (Belden). Buddhism makes one realize that everything is in constant change because no good or bad times last forever. The Buddha’s teachings are never-ending and they’re open to anyone, whether they are a follower of the religion or not (Soto).

All a person needs to do is open themselves up to the possibility of self-improvement and the possibility of true happiness and liberation (Hanh).

Buddhists are naturally calmer and more peaceful than other people. The root of their actions is kindness resulting in their goal which is to make suffering cease to exist (Ravi par. 31). Buddhism is a choice, one doesn't have to be born into it or be an actual follower to practice this way of living (Belden).

So, what is it like to be an actual buddhist? In Bobby Belden's case, he chose to become a follower after studying the religion during his university years. He decided that the logic of the Buddha's teachings made sense and that it was practical. Since Buddhism is an extremely liberating and peaceful way of life to most people, practicing this religion can change the way that a person sees life and could potentially transform that person. Mr. Belden pointed out that Buddhism has given him a lot to reflect about decisions he makes in life, helping him make better ones overall.

This is influential because "buddhism has changed the way that I relate to the bigger questions in life, like life and death; and has helped me feel more comfortable with just existing on earth." (Belden). Similarly Tony Sharp said, "I find Buddhism to be very relaxing, comforting, and inspiring. Problems don't bother me as much as they used to, I no longer panic at the thought of death, and I've been inspired to be a more efficient person" (Sharp). It could be beneficial to experiment with the religion first to see whether or a person connects with the practices; "Most people actually start by learning about Buddhism and applying certain parts of the teaching to their lives, testing it out before they actually become buddhists, that's the typical way people start on the path" (Belden). In other words, most people decide to see what

it's like to engage in this religion by practicing certain concepts before eventually considering themselves a buddhist.

Nevertheless, this lifestyle can still have an impact in people's life, even if that person does not consider themselves a buddhist. Each year, labels are becoming more and more irrelevant, and as part of that, the label of being a "buddhist" does not necessarily mean that only followers can practice Buddhism. Paulo Soto, a World Religions teacher, is a perfect example of not being part of any label. Whether he is catholic or practices Christianity, he still takes the time to learn about Buddhism and teach it to his students." Nowadays I feel many students are kind of lost and they do not dedicate a lot of time to introspection or to self-reflection, so teaching about Buddhism and the importance of keeping balance in their lives is important because sometimes they don't have any free time to actually learn about these things and practice them.

"What Mr. Soto hopes to accomplish by teaching students about Buddhism is to get the students interested enough to apply some buddhist practices to their daily lives. Even though he does not consider himself to be a buddhist, he still finds the time to put himself in a buddhist mindset by thinking about how nothing is permanent. Life is constantly changing, so it is important to detach from everything, especially because "we don't possess anything or anyone. Everything is in constant evolution so if we insist on keeping things in a certain way or in obtaining certain results in our lives, we will always feel frustrated and sad and dissatisfied" (Soto).

The fact that life is temporary makes people treasure life in the moment much more than usual. Humans are constantly thinking about plans for the weekend or obsessing over the past and wondering what would've happened if they had done something differently (Hill). Furthermore, these practices are essential in one's daily life because, "once we realize that life is so fragile and impermanent we appreciate the present much more" (Lin). Another buddhist practice that he makes sure to apply to his daily life is to always "go with the flow, and to understand that it is not the things around you that affect you but the way that you see things" (Soto). Soto's philosophy could apply to others because it can be a way to learn how to live in the moment rather than in the unchangeable past and unpredictable future. It's not necessary to be a buddhist to learn how to love oneself and others.

Anybody can open themselves up to life's endless opportunities for self-growth. Every single person on this earth has to go through self-growth one way or another. Buddhism simply helps people get there in a much calmer and efficient way. It helps people because from the start, this religion makes them realize that it is not the world around them that has the answers to life, the answers lie within themselves. The Buddha is something internal, meaning that all people are doing is letting themselves be changed to become the better version of them. The Buddha inside a person helps dig a bit deeper, awakens that part of that person, and enlightens his or her life.

Something important to consider is that perfect peace and happiness is something that is not attainable because there's no such thing as perfect. Everything is flawed in its own imperfect way. Every single thing on this

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planet has imperfections because nothing can truly be perfect, can it? The answer is no, nothing can truly be perfect cause that's not real, is it? Being perfect is not real, it's just an illusion set by insecure people. They make other people think that they are perfect when in reality it's the exact opposite. They try to seem perfect to protect themselves so that nobody around them can perceive their flaws.

Nobody can recognize their flaws because people hide them behind the mask of being perfect. This connects to Buddhism because it makes people realize that it's okay to be imperfect because a person's flaws are a part of who they really are, the people are the ones who get to decide if they let their flaws define them or not. It's okay to be scared and to suffer because it's that suffering that will set a person free; it is that suffering that will make the pain go away and make a person realize that no matter how hard they try on their own, it's impossible. When people turn to Buddhism they are not alone. The Buddha within their hearts is leading them every step of the way whether they are wholly buddhist or not.