

# [Religion essays - buddhism in the west](https://assignbuster.com/religion-essays-buddhism-in-the-west/)

## There are multitudinous challenges faced by the contemporary Buddhist, not the least of which includes the fact that he is contemporary in the first place. For, the contemporary world is overcome by numerous characteristics, which arealtogether incommensurate with Buddhism.

The world of today, insofar as it has been industrialized and further digitized, is one of runaway technology, sound bites, and ubiquitously sought-after shortcuts to everything. The meditative and contemplative nature of Buddhism is rather at odds with the fast-paced West. However, it could not be said that this is the only, nor even the primary, challenge to contemporary Buddhism. There is also a strong sense of its minority nature in the West.

TWO UNFORTUNATE OUTCOMES OF THE FAST-PACED WORLD

The Anti-Contemplative Nature of the Fast-Paced World

Thetraditions of contemplation/meditation in Buddhism are very basic to thereligion itself. When meditation occurs, contemplation seems to go with alongwith it. Meditation is that instrument which allows a Buddhist to withdrawfrom the ceaseless stream of relentless memories, daydreams, fears, andfantasies, (Jeffery Paine, Re-Enchantment , 132). In other words, meditation takes one out of those events and things (such as memories) whichare inextricably bound up in the world of suffering (i. e., of dukkha ). But, upon this withdrawal from the world, one is able to engage in a type ofcontemplation, which can be conceived as the ability to perceive things asthey are in themselves. That is, there is a distinction between reality asit is (which an enlightened person can see) and reality as it seems to us(which is how those who are still in the endless cycle of rebirth, known as samsara , see things). It is the very goal of Buddhism to see things as they are. This is precisely inwhat enlightenment of a Buddha consists. The seeing of the whole of realityas it is is the very moment of enlightenment, the very moment of attainingBuddhahood. Therefore, the fast-paced world being not at all amenable to theslow nature of meditation/contemplation shows its inability to mesh withBuddhism.

The Necessity of Samsara in a Fast-Paced World

In hisconcluding thoughts on Buddhism in the West , religion scholar Roger Corlesstakes note of the intrinsically samsaric nature of a fast-paced world. The industrialized anddigitized world is one of addiction. This is one thing that characterizes itmost truly. People especially in these types of countries are addicted to allmanner of things sought to provide a quick fix – a way out of the misery ofsamsara. Whether the addiction is toward greed for money, toward lust, drugs, alcohol, or even to psychotherapy, it makes no fundamental difference. In animportant way, one should see that Buddhism itself teaches that staying insamsara is like being in an addiction. Corless states, For Buddhism, it issamsara itself that is the basic drug, and addiction to samsara is the basicaddiction, ( Vision of Buddhism, 81-2). Inasmuch as the contemporaryworld is overrun by various addictions to all manner of things which merelyhelp one cope with the reality of the harshness of samsara, to that extent itremains at odds with the fundamental goal of Buddhism, which is release fromall addition-release from samsara itself.

CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH A MINORITY POSITION IN THE WEST

Trying to Advance or Defend Buddhism in the Theistic West

Therecould be no used denying or downplaying the overall theistic nature of theWest. Whereas Zoroastrianism is a theistic religion of the East, which seemsnot to have had a very lasting effect (R. C. Zaehner, Encyclopedia of theWorld’s Religions , 200), contrariwise, the there have been three greattheistic religions of the West, and they have all thrived. The most basic ofthe three, Judaism, has thrived amidst enormous difficulties (e. g., by being, like Zoroastrianism, in its origin a national religion). It has notthrived in the sense of vast numbers of converts throughout the ages. Rather, it has endured through the ages and its own several dispersions from theland originally inhabited by the people, and today it has tens of millions ofadherents throughout the world. Christianity, especially the ancientChristianity of Catholicism and Orthodoxy, has thrived in all manner of ways, including vast amounts of converts ever since its very modest beginnings. Todayit remains the largest religion of the world and has a strong foothold in bothWest and East. Moreover, a distinctive characteristic of historicChristianityis its own self-understanding as the completion or fulfillment of Judaism. Islam, being the last of the three great theistic religions, has mirrored much ofChristianity’s success in terms of size and growth through the centuries, eventhough it has no such self-understanding. Though its Western influence has not been quite as strong as that of theoverall Judeo-Christian underpinnings of many Western European and North/SouthAmerican countries, it nevertheless has become today a religion that gives afurther bolstering effect to the already strong sense of theism in the West.

Sincewe are using this term theism so much, it might prove useful to give aworking definition of it. Two American scholars in a general critique of allthings pantheistic (including Zen Buddhism) offer in their glossary thefollowing as a definition of theism: belief in one infinite, eternal, andpersonal God who as Creator is distinct from but rules over creation; distinctfrom atheism, deism, pantheism, and polytheism, ( Apologeticsin the New Age , 242). It is true that all three major theistic religions ofthe West would equally assent to this definition as a working one with regardto their respective religions. That is, it is adequate as a definition of Godin Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Buddhism, by stark contrast, could not atall be said to be theistic. In Buddhism, there is no belief in one, infinite, and personal God who exists, with reference to everything outside of himself, as Creator of it all. Buddhism would probably be best described as eitherstrictly atheistic, pantheistic, or perhaps provisionally polytheistic. Finite gods, known as devas and asuras, are said to exist in various branches ofBuddhism (Roger Corless, Vision of Buddhism , 142), hence itsprovisionally polytheistic nature. However, it seems that these days, giventhat the atheism of the West is nearly always linked in with the scientisticmaterialism of it, one could see how in this situation, a Buddhist woulddistance himself from atheism.

The New Age Stigma in America

AlanWatts, Marilyn Ferguson, and Harvey Cox have each, though in very differentways, been indicating that ever since at least the 1960’s the West has beenturning toward the East. However, since many of those who first were the largest advocates of such a recentturning Eastward were of quite varying faiths themselves and/or wereprogressives in their understanding of the development of religion, all the great faiths of theancient East somehow were combined with the contemporary thoughts of thesepopularizers of Eastern thought and what was born was the New Age. Various media advocates ofEastern thought (e. g., George Lucas of Star Wars and George Harrison of theBeatles) also helped to usher in the New Age movement by lending popularsupport to it and a widespread familiarity with it.

Theproblem for Buddhism in this cultural climate is to distinguish itself from NewAge as an overarching umbrella under which it goes. Buddhism faces the acutechallenge of distancing itself from that which first brought it recently and enmasse to the West. Buddhism in America, for example, has no intrinsic core, and it is thus relianton falling into one or another foreign tradition of Buddhism in order forBuddhists to find expressions of their practice. This, perhaps, only tends toobscure in the public’s mind just what is Buddhism. There are so manyvariations of American Buddhism imported from so many Eastern countries thatthe tendency is to simplify them all and place them under an Eastern or NewAge heading, just to roughly categorize them. Buddhism thus has a dualchallenge in many countries in the West in which it is still relatively new. Ithas to define itself relative to the culture in which it finds itself, and itfurther has to distinguish itself from any generically Eastern religioussystem.

Reincarnation: a Hard Sell to Some

Relatedto the Western propensity to simplify things is the doctrine of continuation insamsara, as either reincarnation or rebirth. First, a brief note on the commonWestern view of the soul is in order. Two corollaries of theism (which again, is firmly entrenched in the West) are the ideas that every human person has asubstantial soul and there is a permanent afterlife awaiting everysubstantial soul, whether an afterlife for the good (e. g., Heaven) or one forthe evil (e. g., Hell). Within such a framework, therefore, reincarnation (whichis the re-birth of an individual soul) does not sit well. In fact, likeBuddhism’s inherent non-theism, there is an incommensurability here too. Therecan be no resolution between the theistic idea of one life to live and theBuddhistic/Hinduistic idea of everlasting lives to live. As Scheck andGorgens note, It is important for every Western novice to remember thisfundamental difference: The West has always sought eternal life, the BuddhistEast, the end of the cycle of rebirths, ( Buddhism, 183).

The Idea that a Person Does Not Have a Substantial Soul

Relatedly, to suggest that reincarnation occurs is to have an idea of a substantial soulincarnating over and over. At least, this is the view in Hinduism, whichSiddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) inherits. However, it seems that the Buddhaadvocated a slightly different doctrine, perhaps better phrased as rebirththan reincarnation. In rebirth, it is true that births of the same personsare occurring repeatedly over time. However, whereas reincarnation presupposesthe idea of a substantial soul which is incarnated repeatedly, rebirth does notnecessarily presuppose the idea of a substantial soul. In fact, it is likelytrue that Buddhism sees the idea of a substantial and individual soul a beliefwhich is inherently samsaric. That is, to think myself as a separated individual, apart from the whole andbasic nature of reality, is to believe something which is an illusion. However, the idea that one is truly an individual person is an extremely strongWestern belief, whether the Westerner who holds the belief is committed to onetheistic tradition or not.

Concluding Thoughts

Buddhismof today is faced by many and daunting challenges, and several have beenexplored in this paper. Its minority status is certainly something thancontributes to the challenges, but it also helps to foster a misperception ofits identity with other religious traditions or umbrellas under which Easternthought goes (e. g., New Age). Its challenges to not only consist it this, however. We have also explored the inherently opposed characteristics of muchof the affluent world, whether Western or not. Those countries that areindustrialized and digitized have many quick fixes for the masses to providethem with all manner of temporary relief from the suffering of samsara. Theirony for the Buddhist to explain is that these various devices thought tobring relief are the very things keeping the ones participating in them withinthe bonds of samsara itself.

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