

Stereotypes and Prejudices on Buddhism

Intellectual Output 2, Unit III



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Pacifism, egalitarianism and tolerance

Buddhism is generally considered to be one of the richest religious traditions of ethical values. **It is often identified as a non-fundamentalist and pacifist tradition**, that is placed in antithesis with other religious traditions which are considered prone to violence, war, militarism and intolerance.

More information on:

- [Buddhism and society](#)

esp. par. "Main doctrinal tenets: Precepts for lay people and for monks" in the Teacher's Section.

Such a stereotyped interpretation of Buddhism is very widespread in the world, especially in Western culture, thanks also to the mass media broadcast and, in particular, to **the New Age culture which has associated Buddhism to pacifism** in the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, not to mention Buddhist leaders who have become enormously popular public figures as advocates of peace like the 14th **Dalai Lama**, winner of the **Nobel Peace Prize** in 1989.

More information on:

- [Buddhism and modernity](#)

During the nineteenth century, the **Western rediscovery** of Buddhism forged the stereotyped idea that Buddhism can be interpreted as a sentimental **doctrine of universal love and compassion** (*karuna*), a doctrine made up of democracy and tolerance based on the fundamental concept of *ahimsā* ('not to injure') and the idea that violence towards other living beings is morally polluting because it brings bad *karman*.

More information on:

- [Main doctrines \(1\). Karma and Samsara](#)

esp. Source 2: Excerpts from "Cula-Kammavibhanga Sutta: the Shorter Exposition of Kamma" and the analysis and explanation of karmic mechanism in the Teacher's Section.

- [Main doctrinal traditions \(2\). Mahayana developments](#)

esp. Source 2: "The Bodhisattva" and, in Teacher's Section, the par. "Main doctrinal tenets: Wisdom, compassion and skillful means"

Strictly connected to the idea that Buddhism is a peaceful religion, another dominant stereotype of Buddhism is the common idea that such tradition praises **tolerance and egalitarianism**. According to the main teachings of Buddhism, salvation is potentially accessible to all living beings, asserting that human beings are all equal.

However, despite the aura of pacifism, egalitarianism and tolerance that surrounds it, Buddhism represents instead a **contradictory universe**, which often contradicts this stereotyped vision of a serene Asian tradition. There are episodes in the history of Asia where **Buddhism has been exploited for political ends**, for justifying military campaigns among Buddhist monasteries, including also conflicts between Buddhists and non-Buddhists. An **example: the Japanese warrior monks** called *sōhei* (*sō* means 'monk' and *hei* 'war')

who were paramilitary groups associated with Buddhist temples in the Middle Ages. In other geographical contexts, there have been historical events in which Buddhist monks embraced weapons against foreign forces, as in the case of **Tibetan Buddhist monks fighting against the British forces**. In other cases, Buddhist monks supported the nationalist ideology, as in the case of **Zen monks who supported the military expansion** of the Japanese empire during World War II. Episodes of **violence** have also occurred in **Myanmar**. Since the 1990s, radicalized Buddhist monks have voiced an aggressive anti-Muslim message. **Anti-Muslim riots** in 2001-2002 and again in 2011-2012 and 2017 left dozens of Rohingya, a muslim minority, dead and hundreds of thousands displaced by what some scholars call Buddhist terrorism.

More information on:

- [Buddhism and modernity](#)

esp. Source 3: “A Zen master’s pro-war thoughts” and relative analysis in Teacher’s Section.

Interestingly, the fundamental concept of *ahimsā* professed by Buddhism can also be questioned by a ritual point of view: in many traditions Buddhism, through its rituals, created a real ‘symbolic violence’ against other religious traditions. Even the traditional Buddhist position on **women’s condition** poses some ethical problems. From a philosophical point of view, many Buddhist texts in the Mahayana tradition state equality between men and women, even if the **social status of nuns is considered inferior** to that of monks, trapping them within regulations that force them to live in a state of poverty and economic dependence. In some *Theravada* traditions, for example in **Thailand**, Buddhist monastic institutions are well rooted within society but **not open to women**.

More information on:

- [Buddhism in Sri Lanka and South-east Asia](#)

esp. Sources 3 and 4: “Thai Monks” and relative commentary in Teacher’s Section.

Spirituality, meditation and Zen Buddhism

Meditation is the main and most ancient practice aimed at attaining liberation. The study and the exposition of the doctrines were traditionally handed down by the monastic order (*sangha*), while meditation was mandated only to an intellectual and educated elite; only from the twentieth century meditative practices spread among the laity. The fact that Buddhism is essentially **understood as a philosophical and meditation-based tradition** is due to the fact that this tradition is somehow **in tune with some of the important Western contemporary currents of thought**. The so-called ‘modernist Buddhism’ is the fruit of this Western interpretation of Buddhism, even though it **neglects some aspects** that have been present since its origins and are **less compatible** with Western culture. The belief in miracles, the effectiveness of tantric mantras, magic, and magic formulas are some examples.

More information on:

- [Buddhism and modernity](#)
- [Buddhist practice \(1\). Meditation and transfer of merit](#)
- [Buddhist practice \(2\). Funerary rites, feasts, exorcisms](#)

Because of this close association of Buddhism with meditation, Western culture has often **associated Buddhism with Zen Buddhism** (from Sanskrit *dhyana*, or 'meditation') which is "only" a school of Japanese Buddhism that actually originated in China and then came to in the 12th century.

More info on Zen in China (Zen in Chinese is *Chan*)

- [Buddhism in China](#)
esp. Source 3: Excerpts from the "Record Of Linji", Source 5: "Poet Strolling by a Marshy Bank" and the analysis of the sources in Teacher's Section.

More info on Zen in Japan

- [Buddhism in Japan](#)
esp. Source 3: "Excerpt from the Shōbōgenzō", Source 5: "Sand Garden at Ryoanji" and the analysis of the sources in Teacher's Section.

Modern Western culture has witnessed, since the 60s and 70s, the progressive spread and disclosure of Zen Buddhism in the hippy counter-culture inspiring and influencing also many Western writers and scholars. Among the authors who were most interested in the connections between psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism we must mention Carl Gustav Jung and Erik Fromm who personally knew **Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki** (1870-1966) who was extremely active and successful in the **modernization and dissemination of Zen in the West**.

More info on Zen in the West (and its adaptations)

- [Buddhism and modernity](#)
esp. Source 5: "Trailer Of Zen Buddhism in America" and the analysis of the sources in Teacher's Section.

Vegetarianism

A very common idea about Buddhism is that Buddhists respect scrupulously all living things, considering the use of violence incomprehensible. For this reason, Buddhist tradition has led many of its followers to become vegetarians. However, affirming that **all Buddhists are vegetarians** is a **generalization** since the **same historical Buddha and his monks ate meat**. In fact, monks originally begged every day and ate everything that was donated, including meat. It is also important to note that, the question of vegetarianism changes according to the Buddhist school. For example, in Buddhism *Theravāda* the practice of vegetarianism is completely separate from the Buddhist doctrine and only a few monasteries encourage this practice.