

# **BUDDHISH**

A GUIDE TO  
THE 20 MOST  
IMPORTANT  
BUDDHIST IDEAS  
FOR THE CURIOUS  
AND SKEPTICAL

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## NOTE ON BUDDHIST LANGUAGES

A general book on Buddhism is complicated by the fact that there are many languages to navigate. In this book, I have defaulted to Sanskrit when I am speaking in a general way about Buddhist terminology. If there is a culturally specific reference, however, I default to the language from that culture instead. In a few cases, I've overridden these defaults and opted to use whatever term is most widely used in English-language literature instead. All of this is to facilitate the reader's ongoing research and exploration of these concepts.

While it goes against my scholarly instincts, I have removed all diacritical marks from the foreign languages used here. In the interests of readability, I have also used standard phonetic transcriptions for Tibetan.

All translations throughout the book are my own unless otherwise attributed.



## INTRODUCTION

**A**re you curious about Buddhism? Wondering what the hubbub is all about but roll your eyes every time you try to read a book about it? Well, if so, relax. This is not your ordinary introduction to Buddhism. This is not a book that teaches you how to practice meditation, and it's not a self-help guide. There are none of the saccharine platitudes, high-minded moralizing, or dense pontification that you may have come to expect from a book on Buddhism. Nor is it a dry scholarly treatment of Buddhism filled with academic terminology and concepts. It is meant for open-minded or even skeptical readers who have no interest in professing faith in a new religion or adopting a new ideology.

This book presents a balanced introduction to twenty of the central principles of Buddhism, as I understand them and as I have experienced them. By the end of the book, you will have toured the Buddhist world and learned about how certain Buddhist ideas have been understood in China, Korea, Japan, Thailand, Tibet, and other cultures, including the West. You will know about some of the current trends in the academic study of Buddhism. You might even see how certain Buddhist ideas apply to your own situation and help to navigate challenges in your own life. What you won't get is indoctrination. I promise in these pages I will not try to convince you to practice Buddhism or to become Buddhist.

Who am I? Why should you trust me as your tour guide? Well, let me start by confessing that I am not Buddhist. I have no Asian

heritage or family connections to Buddhism either. In fact, I come from a bilingual and transnational Latino family with roots in Colombia, Uruguay, Spain, England, and the United States. I spent my early childhood in Canada and Paraguay, and moved to the US during elementary school. There's a lot of Catholicism and Protestantism in my family tree, as well as some native Amerindian blood; yet when I was growing up, we never talked about religion at all. To be honest, I don't even remember the first time I heard of Buddhism, but I imagine it must have been when I was in high school, when I started to become interested in several Asian spiritual traditions. Yet, somehow, Buddhism sparked my interest most of all, and it drew me in.

In the thirty years since that interest first took root, I have developed a long-term relationship with Buddhism by experiencing it and engaging with it in many different ways. I can honestly say I have come to have an enormous amount of interest, respect, and affection for this tradition, and it has been a constant companion throughout basically all of my adult life.

Here in this book, I will share with you my own personal perspective on Buddhism. I will weave in anecdotes from when I spent the summer in a monastery in a rural temple in the rainforest of eastern Thailand. I will bring in insights from the five years that I was a serious practitioner of *vipassana* meditation and the decade or so I have spent living in various parts of Asia (including not only Thailand but also India and Taiwan). I will also draw a lot on my fifteen years of experience studying Buddhism as an academic, during which time I have read extensively about its history and even learned to read medieval Chinese so that I could understand certain Buddhist texts in their original language. I will reflect on both the ways that Buddhist ideas and practices have helped me to navigate my own life and the ways that I have seen it help others.

Despite this extensive background, I repeat, I am not Buddhist. I am not a meditation teacher or a model practitioner. When asked to identify my religion, I like to joke that I might be "Buddhist." I think Buddhism has had a lot to offer me, and I have cared about it

for a long time, but I don't believe most of the stories, don't engage in most of the practices, and don't even agree with most of the philosophies. I have learned a lot from the tradition, but I have used my own judgment to evaluate what is useful and what is right for me. I have accepted some ideas and practices, but I have rejected many of the basic premises of the tradition. I am a student, friend, and fan of Buddhism but also a critic.

So, to be clear, what I am offering you here is a Buddhish book, not a Buddhist one. It is a Buddhish book. It is not a book written for Buddhists or for scholars of Buddhism. If you have an extensive background in Buddhism already, yet you insist on reading this book, then I assure you that you will find it objectionable. You'll say that it's oversimplified, that it's skewed, that it's idiosyncratic, and that it doesn't do justice to your own particular understanding of or approach to Buddhism. So, if that's you, please look elsewhere. This book is intended for people who are complete newcomers, who don't already have a strong view about Buddhism one way or the other, and who are curious to learn what it's all about in a lighthearted way without any doctrinal heavy lifting.

Why am I writing this book? Well, I think we need this kind of introduction to Buddhism. With mindfulness on the covers of magazines in the grocery store checkout lane and Dalai Lama memes all over the Internet, Buddhism is seemingly everywhere these days. Even so, it's difficult to find a good introduction that speaks to ordinary people. Bookstore shelves are piled high with how-tos written by monks and meditators who preach the virtues of devoting your life to Buddhist practices. On the other end of the shelf, there are thick academic tomes that detail the history and doctrine in mind-numbing detail (some of which I myself have written!). This book is intended to fill a niche between these extremes. If you are curious about Buddhism and are looking for an accessible introduction in plain English, if you are open-minded to learning about what Buddhists think and say but don't necessarily want to be pressured to commit yourself to adopting these convictions yourself, then this is a book for you.

Before we start, I would like to ask for something from you. Even if you don't know very much at all about Buddhism, I am sure that you already have some preconceptions. Just by virtue of being a literate person alive in the twenty-first century, you have, I am pretty certain, already absorbed certain stereotypes about it. You probably associate Buddhism with peace, with mental health, with friendliness, and with harmony. When I say "Buddhism," the first image that comes to mind is likely the smiling face of the Dalai Lama, a meditation teacher sitting on a cushion in lotus posture, or a golden Buddha statue from one Asian country or another. You may already have a feeling that Buddhism is a philosophy or a science of the mind or a lifestyle that attracts certain kinds of people. I am going to ask you to try to leave all of these preconceptions behind before you start reading. As I will demonstrate, a lot of these ideas are based on superficial or even wrongheaded notions of Buddhism. I am going to ask that you, as much as possible, try to start this book with a blank slate. In the words of the pioneering Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki (1904–1971), do your best to bring a "beginner's mind" to this endeavor. Please let these pages take you on a journey to an unfamiliar land, and allow yourself to be surprised and expanded by the new sights you find there.

This journey will introduce you, in twenty brief chapters, to what I think are the twenty most important ideas from the Buddhist tradition. Each chapter includes an introduction to the idea in plain English, based on my own understanding and experience. It may also include a discussion of how this concept has been understood or applied by practicing Buddhists in certain times and places, or how it has been understood by scholars of Buddhist studies (of course, always using accessible terms), or how it played a role in an anecdote from my past, or how it can be illustrated by a thought experiment or an everyday situation.

These chapters build upon one another, so it is a good idea to read them in order the first time. You will see that there's a general arc to the book: The first half largely focuses on Buddhism's promise that

we can be liberated from suffering if we learn to see the truth about what's real and what's not. The second half focuses on the many ways that Buddhism has been practiced in the everyday world. While I have limited the use of technical Buddhist terminology, throughout the book I have provided some key Buddhist terms in *italics* on first reference, so that you can look them up on Wikipedia or another encyclopedia for further study. I mention books and other resources throughout these pages, but at the very end, I also have provided a list of some of my favorites, if you are interested in digging even deeper into the ideas presented here.

With those preliminaries aside, as your guide, let me be the first to welcome you to this brand-new world! As you turn the page, you will be meeting a rich tradition with lots of things to say about what reality is like and how we should live life. Buddhism has a deep history of cultural diversity, and many beautiful stories and inspirational sentiments. Along the way, I'll also point out some of the biases and contradictions. My intention isn't to judge Buddhism's track record one way or the other but rather to give you an introduction to the most salient features of the tradition, to give you the lay of the land—including the good, the bad, and the ugly—and to invite you to decide for yourself what to think about it all. If that sounds good to you, hop on board this tour bus, and let's get started!

