

Is Buddhism a Religion?

Is it a religion, psychology, or way of life?
The “religion without God” has baffled Western thinkers for hundreds of years. Our three experts join the debate.

re·li·gion (ri lij'ən), *n.* **1.** a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, esp. when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs. **2.** a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a number of persons or sects: *the Christian religion; the Buddhist religion.* **3.** the body of persons adhering to a particular set of beliefs and practices: *a world council of religions.* **4.** the life or state of a monk, nun, etc.: *to enter religion.* **5.** the practice of religious beliefs; ritual observance of faith. **6.** something one believes in and follows devotedly; a point or matter of ethics or conscience: *to make a religion of fighting prejudice.* **7.** *reliance; a solemn religious rite.* **8.** Archaic. strict faith-

Yes

IF YOU GOT TOGETHER a big room of religious studies scholars and asked each of them to offer their own definition of religion, you'd likely get as many different answers as there were people in the room. There would be similarities, but also a lot of differences.

Therein lies the problem. People who say, "Buddhism is a religion" and people who say, "Buddhism is *not* a religion" may not be using the same standards and criteria.

So the first challenge is finding a reasonable definition of religion. For me, the definition that has always made the most sense is the one offered by the late Buddhologist Frederick Streng. In his classic book *Understanding Religious Life*, he said, "Religion is a means to ultimate transformation."

This definition sounds almost too easy, but it really isn't. It was designed to offer a common set of standards by which to measure potential religions, without making value judgments regarding theological, practical, or ethical concerns. In this definition, theism is not favored over non-theism; prayer is not favored over meditation; one set of ethical standards is not preferred over another.

What Streng meant to say was that for something to be considered a religion, it must posit a clear and distinct ultimate reality. That ultimate reality can be a God or gods, an impersonal absolute, a force of nature, a ground of being, or some other entity or experience. But without something ultimate—beyond which it is impossible to go—the system at hand is not a religion.

In addition, in order to be considered a religion, the system must offer some clear and distinct path, or choice of paths, to the experience of that ultimate reality. While it doesn't matter whether that path is prayer, ritual, yoga, meditation, some other method, or some combination thereof, there must be a straightforward way for the religious aspirant to gain the experience of the ultimate reality.

Finally, for something to be a religion, there must be a personal transformation that results from the individual's experi-



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ence of ultimate reality. This is most usually demonstrated by a positive change in morality and/or ethics, expressions of compassion, kindness, or similar forms of conduct.

If we apply this definition, it's clear that Buddhism *is* a religion. First of all, Buddhism absolutely offers an ultimate reality. Some forms of Buddhism may call this nirvana, others buddhahood, and so forth, but all schools and sects of Buddhism do have a notion of ultimacy.

Second, all schools and sects of Buddhism offer a clear path to the attainment of ultimate reality. Whether it's the eightfold path that we find in Theravada, the bodhisattva

path of Mahayana, or something else altogether, Buddhist practitioners are always provided with a straightforward series of practices that culminate in enlightenment.

Finally, are Buddhists who attain the experience of ultimate reality "transformed" by their experience? Of course they are. Their ethics and behaviors are changed. This may yield more compassionate behavior or finer social engagement. The person is now manifesting their buddhanature.

I found in my forty years of classroom teaching that a lot of my students started off presuming that Buddhism was not a religion but a "way of life." Once confronted with the above, most changed their opinion. Those students who started from the assumption that Buddhism was indeed a religion now had some logical basis to support their assumption. The same was true with practitioners I met in the various Buddhist communities I visited during my time researching and practicing American Buddhism.

Yet do bear in mind that some researchers, scholars, and practitioners who subscribe to a different definition of religion than the one I cited may come to the opposite conclusion.

Professor emeritus CHARLES PREBISH has written and edited numerous books on Buddhism, including Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America.

No

IF YOU SEARCH “WORLD RELIGIONS,” you’ll find “Buddhism” on every list. Does that make Buddhism a religion? Not necessarily. I can argue that Buddhism is a science of mind—a way of exploring how we think, feel, and act that leads us to profound truths about who we are. I can also say that Buddhism is a philosophy of life—a way to live that maximizes our chances for happiness.

What Buddhism is, at this point, is out of the Buddha’s hands. His teachings passed into the hands of his followers thousands of years ago. They passed from wandering beggars to monastic institutions, from the illiterate to the learned, from the esoteric East to the outspoken West. In its travels, Buddhism has been many things to many people. But what did the Buddha intend when he taught?

At the start of his own spiritual quest, Siddhartha left his royal home determined to find answers to life’s most perplexing questions. Are we born into the world just to suffer, grow old, and die? What’s the meaning of it all? After years of experimenting with different forms of religious practice, he abandoned his austerities and all his concepts about his spiritual journey—all the beliefs and doctrines that had led him to where he was. Then, with only an open and curious mind, he discovered what he was looking for: the great mind of enlightenment. He saw beyond all belief systems to the profound reality of the mind itself, a state of clear awareness and supreme happiness. Along with that knowledge came an understanding of how to lead a meaningful and compassionate life. For the next forty-five years, he taught how to work with the mind: how to look at it, how to free it from misunderstandings, and how to realize the greatness of its potential.

Today those teachings still describe an inner journey that’s spiritual, yes, but not religious. The Buddha wasn’t a god; he wasn’t even a Buddhist. You’re not required to have more faith in the Buddha than you do in yourself. His power lies in his teachings, which show us how to work with our minds to realize our full capacity for wakefulness and happiness. These teachings can help us satisfy our search for the truth—our need to know who and what we really are.

Where do we find this truth? We start by bringing an open, inquisitive, and skeptical mind to whatever we hear, read, or see that presents itself as the truth. We examine it with reason and



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PONLOP RINPOCHE

we put it to the test in meditation and in our lives. As we gain insight into the workings of the mind, we learn how to recognize and deal with our day-to-day experiences of thoughts and emotions. We uncover inaccurate and unhelpful habits of thinking and begin to correct them. Eventually we’re able to overcome the confusion that makes it so hard to see the mind’s naturally brilliant awareness. In this sense, the Buddha’s teachings are a method of investigation, or a science of mind.

Religion, on the other hand, often provides us with answers to life’s big questions from the start. We learn what to think and believe, and our job is to live up to that, not to question it. If we relate to the Buddha’s teachings as final

answers that don’t need to be examined, then we’re practicing Buddhism as a religion.

In any case, we still have to live our lives. We can’t escape having a “philosophy of life” because we’re challenged every day to choose one action over another—kindness or indifference, generosity or selfishness, patience or blame. When our decisions and actions reflect the knowledge we’ve gained by working with our minds, that’s adopting Buddhism as a way of life.

As the teachings of the Buddha pass into our hands, what determines what they will be for us? It’s all in how we use them. As long as they help clear up our confusion and inspire confidence that we can fulfill our potential, then they’re doing the job that the Buddha intended.

Siddhartha was a truth seeker, nothing more. He wasn’t looking for religion, as such; he wasn’t particularly interested in religion. He was searching for the truth. He was looking for a genuine path to freedom from suffering. Aren’t all of us searching for the same thing? If we look at the life of Siddhartha, we can see that he found the truth and freedom he was seeking only after he abandoned religious practices. Isn’t that significant? The one who became the Buddha, the Awakened One, didn’t find enlightenment through religion—he found it when he began to leave religion behind.

A widely respected teacher in the Vajrayana school of Buddhism, DZOGCHEN PONLOP RINPOCHE is the founder of Nalandabodhi and Nitartha International. His most recent book is Rebel Buddha: On the Road to Freedom.

Kind of

BUDDHISM COVERS many traditions, evolving over vast stretches of geography and time and accommodating everything from a statue of Lord Buddha on a taxi dashboard to some of the most abstruse philosophical treatises ever written. The religious, the agnostic, and the completely irreligious, as well as those inclined psychologically, mystically, shamanically, or sociopolitically, can all find a home in the very big tent of Buddhism.

So is Buddhism a religion? My seat under the tent is in the Chan and Zen koan section. From this perspective, the answer is a resounding “Yes-no-kind-of,” inside of which might be one of Buddhism’s most powerful possibilities.

At its etymological root, religion is what rebinds or reunites us with the sacred. Many of us long for this return from exile and then discover that it leads us toward existential danger—the deconstruction and rearrangement of our very sense of self and reality. In common usage, religion often refers to the belief systems and institutions that surround this longing. These religious structures can sometimes be attempts to control the inherent wildness and risk of the root religious impulse. Is it possible to stay true to that first meaning of religion without calling into being the empires of the second?

The religious event at the heart of the koan tradition is awakening, which reunites us with the sacred, or true, nature of things. The revelation of awakening is of the universe as one undivided whole, simultaneously eternal and shimmering in and out of existence. Awakening deepens as we integrate that revelation with our experiences in the everyday world of cause and effect, and in the nonlinear world of myth and dream. It’s an instantaneous reunion followed by a lifelong rebinding of our lives to the life of the world.

The koan tradition supports this by way of a culture of awakening rather than through organized religion. Instead of infallible scriptures, there’s a body of conversations, stories, commentaries,



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songs, poetry, jokes—whatever has proven helpful in waking people up over the centuries. Quotes from Buddhist sutras are turned into koans, sometimes upending their traditional meanings. If there is a sacred text, it’s the world itself, which is called the Great Sutra, something we’re learning to interpret.

Zhaozhou said of reading the Great Sutra, “When I come upon an unfamiliar word, I might not know the meaning yet, but I recognize the handwriting.” We don’t always understand why something’s happening or what it means, but we come to trust that we, and it, are part of the same sutra. Then our response in any circumstance begins with something like *Notice what happens*, a deceptively simple, easily portable, and gorgeously subversive suggestion.

This doesn’t require or deny God or any other form of divinity. The koans are constantly urging us to see the radiance of each thing, galaxies to earthworms. Divinities, spirits, and mythological figures shine with the same light as everything else. Authority comes from how clearly the voice of awakening speaks through someone, regardless of title or position. Awakening is as likely to be sparked by a tree in sudden bloom as by a famous teacher. Interposing as few filters and preconceptions as possible between ourselves and our experiences, we become a welcoming home for all the moments of the day, including teachers and companions in whatever forms they arrive.

Being crazy in love with awakening and committed to it for every being in the universe is a pretty strong religious impulse. Yet the koans and other traditions in the Buddhist big tent undermine attempts to solidify religion around that impulse. We don’t always succeed, but the fact that some keep trying is one of the powerful potentials of Buddhism: being deeply religious, without religion. ♦

JOAN SUTHERLAND ROSHI is a teacher in the Zen koan tradition. She lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where she teaches and leads the *Awakened Life* community.