

Why Buddhism?

Buddhism has gained enormous ground in the West over the past 30 years. Recently it was hailed as the fastest growing religion in both Great Britain and Australia, and centers are being established throughout the United States.

There is every indication that the interest in Buddhism will continue to grow, for it is clearly meeting some deep spiritual need in the people of the Western world, a need that established religious traditions seem to be failing to meet.

So, the question is: "What does Buddhism possess that is especially valuable and helpful?"

Freedom from Dogma and Finding the Truth for Oneself

Buddhism does not demand that anyone accepts its teachings on trust. The practitioner is instead invited to try them out, to experiment with them. If he/she finds they work in practice, then by all means he can take them onboard. But there is no compulsion, and if truth is found elsewhere or otherwise, all is well and good.

Tolerance

If one reserves the right to find the truth for oneself, one must logically afford the same right to others - and also respect them if they come to different conclusions. From this comes basic tolerance (that the world so acutely needs today).

Practical Method

If the Buddhist emphasis is on finding out for oneself, this necessarily places emphasis on direct religious experience, as opposed to belief or blind faith. But this direct experience does not necessarily fall from the sky, one has to make a conscious effort. So Buddhism does not so much offer things to believe as it does things to do: a vast array of spiritual practices, ranging from moral precepts that one can apply in everyday life and virtues that one can cultivate, to meditative practices that help to develop untapped spiritual resources: faculties like profound wisdom or clear-seeing and an all-embracing selfless compassion. Put in Western terms, the ultimate aim of Buddhist practice is to engineer mystical experience, and be transformed by the wisdom gained therefrom..

Healing and Transformation

C.G. Jung once wrote: "The whole world wants peace and the whole world prepares for war. Mankind is powerless against mankind." This is a succinct summary of our contemporary dilemma. The world remains beset by many grave problems - social, psychological, ecological, economic, political -- and one cannot help but feel our planet has literally become a time-bomb.

Sometimes we project the problematic causes outward and lay the blame on other people and groups. But if we are honest, we see that the root causes lie in the individual human heart, in our hearts, where a primitive but fanatical self-centeredness holds sway. It is our own personal greed, hatred and delusion, amplified on a massive scale, that causes our planet's grave problems.

Yet just to see this is not enough. The "dark forces" within each of us must be recognized, acknowledged and brought up into the light. Then, through awareness and understanding, they can be transformed into the stuff of true wisdom and compassion. Buddhism offers us ways and means of doing this.

(above adapted from "The Buddhist Handbook" by John Snelling)