

Misconceptions About Buddhism

Sources: livingdharma.org/Misconceptions.html

Tricycle.com/columns/from-the-academy-top-ten-list

<http://www.ashidakim.com/zenkoans/12happychinaman.html>

Tonight I wanted to do a short discussion on certain misconceptions that have arisen about Buddhism, especially in the West. Many of these misconceptions are understandable since the majority religion in most Western countries is not Buddhism. Some of them, I find, are also meant as some form of attack against Buddhism which is usually not worth losing sleep over. I will briefly pause after each example for questions. These are only a few examples and after I am finished would like to discuss some of our own misconceptions we might have had in the past or may have now about Buddhism.

The first misconception I would like to address is the Buddhism and gods issue. Some people claim that Buddhism is an atheist religion and others say it is a pagan religion. Which one is correct? Neither really applies. Buddhists are typically not concerned with any god or gods. We acknowledge their existence, as there are many planes in which they can exist, but we do not pray for their assistance for salvation. In short, Buddhists generally believe in gods, but not as a vehicle toward salvation.

Secondly, I wanted to address the reincarnation issue. Since Buddhism does not believe in an eternal soul that is being reborn, reincarnation is not a term we tend to use. We use the term rebirth, because it takes away the soul entity issue with reincarnation. As best as I can describe it, rebirth occurs because of a relinking consciousness fueled by the craving and clinging for continued existence. When craving and clinging are fully eliminated then there is no longer

rebirth and there is the achievement of Nibbana. As a result, Buddhism doesn't believe in an eternal soul that is reincarnated but does believe in the process of rebirth which can be stopped when craving and clinging to continued existence is fully eliminated.

Next is the practice of prostrating. Some have come to believe that we are worshipping the Buddha when we do this in the presence of a Buddha statue or worshipping a monk if one is present. Others claim that when we do this we are praying for some kind of good fortune. This might have come about as a result of some people mixing Buddhism and Christianity. For a Buddhist, prostration is not really a form of worship or prayer but an act of humility and respect to our teacher(s) as well as an act of thanksgiving for the opportunity to practice the Dhamma.

Another misconception is that all Buddhists are vegetarians. It is true that some Buddhists do practice vegetarianism, but the Buddha's view was that this is optional. This arose when Devadatta, Buddha's cousin and stepbrother, attempted to claim power over the Sangha. He proposed five rules to the Buddha he knew would be denied and one of these rules included that all monks would not eat meat. The purpose for the Buddha's decision was pretty reasonable. As monks were supposed to eat what was given, sometimes the only offering might be meat. However, if a monk so chose, he could abstain from eating the meat and could share it with his fellow monks if he chose to do so. This was one of my misconceptions about Buddhism when I first started studying Buddhism.

I suppose another misconception that arises is when someone says with enthusiasm "Buddha is that fat guy, right?" This, of course, defies reason as the Buddha only ate one meal per day. Most statues of "fat Buddha" is a figure of the popular monk Pu-tai in Chinese (Ch'an

especially) Buddhism. He shows up in a Zen koan and is known as Hotei or the Laughing Buddha, who would give gifts to children out of his hemp-bag.

Another misconception is also a tricky misconception. There is the idea that all Buddhists are pacifists. There have been wars between those practicing Buddhism as well as between Buddhist practitioners and non-Buddhists. This occurred during the Buddha's time and more recently with the situations in Tibet and Sri Lanka. To my knowledge there have not been any wars in the name of Buddhism. In general, the Theravada tradition does not advocate violence of any kind as harmlessness is strongly promoted. If the intention is to prevent suffering for others, then perhaps a violent action could be taken by a layperson. Violent actions based on intentions filled with greed, hatred, and delusion could still be undertaken, but would not be considered wise and would have a strong possibility of negative kamma. Monks are expected to avoid all violent actions in order to practice the perfections of patience, renunciation, and goodwill which also fulfills part of right intention of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Next is the thought that Buddhism is a philosophy and not a religion. Some have even said that Buddhism is just a way of life. This argument, however, lacks any concrete footing since the terms "philosophy," "religion," and "way of life" cannot be adequately defined. It is highly unlikely that we would all agree on one strict definition for any of these terms. Professor Donald Lopez says this on the subject "But to claim that Buddhism is not a religion because it is really about no-self and nirvana is to demean the daily life of millions of Asians across the centuries. Buddhism is a religion, by any definition of that indefinable term."

Another misconception is that rebirth is something fun. I remember Chris mentioning this one time in our memorable discussions and he was like "I have to tell people, oh, god no." You

might think it would be cool to be reborn as a bird because you could fly. If you don't mind having to peck the ground for worms, build a nest, and migrate long distances maybe. Buddhism, however, has the animal plane near the bottom of the 31 planes of existence. Why? Because, in general, animals do not have the capacity to understand and realize the Dhamma. As a result, liberation for an animal usually is not as likely as someone in the human plane. The general rule is that as long as rebirth takes place, suffering is present. And the goal is to be released from the round of rebirths (AKA samsara). This provides a good lead into the last misconception.

Lastly is the misconception that Buddhists welcome suffering. The argument here is that Buddhists are only true to their faith if they are poor and suffering in some way. This is not the full truth. First, living in "poverty", is a choice monks make. It is easier to achieve liberation if you have few things than if you have many things. Second, Buddhists do not go around saying "I want to suffer!" We don't look forward to suffering, and if we did that goes against the goal of the cessation of suffering for ourselves and others. Lastly, suffering can be looked upon as a teacher and a humbling experience. I know during and after my intestinal resection surgery, for example, it was both a learning experience and a humbling one as well.

Any other misconceptions, stories, or questions?