

Why I am a Buddhist

Perhaps I should have titled this essay: *Am I a Buddhist?* After all, compared to my firm self-identification as an Epicurean (which few would contest) or a feminist (which might provoke some debate, due to my identity, but generally finds acceptance), my relationship with Buddhism is more complicated. The version of Buddhism I adhere to and promote diverges in key ways from how the tradition has historically been understood and practiced by many who have called themselves Buddhists. Still, despite these divergences, I've come to call myself a Buddhist—more specifically, a *critical*, even *radical*, Buddhist. This is the story of how and why.

I was raised in an Anglo-Catholic household in a small, conservative, predominantly white city in Maritime Canada. I knew nothing of Buddhism until I moved to Montréal to attend McGill University. There, I quickly encountered feminism through my new social circles. But it wasn't until graduate school, in McGill's Faculty of Religious Studies, that I first encountered Buddhist thought. Professors Victor Sōgen Hori, Arvind Sharma, and Richard Hayes introduced me to Buddhist ideas through their distinct interpretive lenses. Their courses didn't just intrigue me—they subtly reoriented my thinking, and eventually, the very core of my being.

Initially, I was drawn to what I considered “classical” Buddhist philosophy—early Indian texts that aligned more naturally with my background in Western philosophy. The humanism I found at the core of Buddhist thought and ethics resonated deeply. Concepts like the explanation of the origins of suffering, the doctrine of no-self, interdependent arising, and resistance to ideological stupefaction (including religious dogma) were intellectually stimulating. Like many young Westerners, I was moved by the clarity and compassion of these teachings.

Still, there were aspects I struggled with. The asceticism of texts like the *Dhammapada*, the subtle hints of idealism and mind-body dualism, the casual sexism occasionally verging into outright misogyny, didn't sit easily with me. While I didn't find the early texts *pessimistic*, they lacked a certain joy or sensual appreciation of life. The Epicurean in me wanted more vitality, more *zing*. I found some of that in the postwar Western Buddhist canon: D.T. and Shunryū Suzuki, Christmas Humphreys, Alan Watts, Gary Snyder and the Beats. These writers emphasized the playful and pragmatic dimensions of Buddhism, especially Zen. Around this time, Stephen Batchelor's *Buddhism Without Beliefs* introduced me to *secular* Buddhism—a perspective that allowed critical distance from metaphysical claims while embracing core ethical and contemplative practices.

My professors, especially Hori-sensei, warned against romanticized Western appropriations of Buddhism. These hybrid forms often combined selective readings of classical texts with modern sensibilities in ways that would have been alien to premodern Asian practitioners. Their caution stayed with me. And yet, I remained captivated. Despite knowing it would delay my PhD by years, I committed to an extended course of study in Buddhist thought—comparatively, so as not to abandon my earlier training in Western philosophy and political theory.

My philosophical and political interests naturally steered me toward thinkers and movements that interrogated not just doctrine, but history and power. Eventually, I chose to focus on the Critical Buddhist movement. At the time, it was generating significant debate in Japanese and Western religious

studies circles. These thinkers argued that East Asian Buddhism—especially Zen—had accrued doctrinal layers that compromised its ethical and political integrity. They pointed, for instance, to Japanese Buddhist support for wartime ideology (a history I was also learning from my friend and fellow provocateur Brian Victoria). For the first time in my studies, I encountered Buddhist scholarship that directly engaged with politics, critiquing not just ideas but institutions and historical complicity. My background in social and political theory, and my growing alignment with leftist thought, made this focus feel inevitable.

This decision led me to Japan, where I immersed myself in language training for two years at Kyoto University before moving to Tokyo to teach full time, while (somehow) completing my PhD thesis on Critical Buddhism. Five years in Japan fundamentally reshaped both my worldview and my sense of (no-)self. At some point—likely during my time in Kyoto—the boundaries between what I believed and what I studied began to dissolve. By the time I returned to North America, I had begun to identify as a Buddhist—a critical, and sometimes radical, one.

Drawing both from traditional teachings and contemporary political theory, I see Critical/Radical Buddhism as rooted in five commitments or *ennobling truths*:

1. Suffering is widespread and often invisible, especially to the privileged.
2. While rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion, suffering frequently manifests in structural and material, not merely personal and psychological, forms.
3. Suffering can be significantly ameliorated; it is our collective responsibility to do so.
4. This task demands a critical analysis of the historical and material causes of suffering—including systems that perpetuate it, such as imperialism and capitalism—and a commitment to dismantling them.
5. Human flourishing is the goal of Buddhism, and this requires solidarity with other movements dedicated to collective liberation and well-being.

The radicalism of Buddhism, for me, lies in the first three ennobling truths: *that suffering is widespread, has various causes, and must be overcome*. Mainstream Buddhist traditions have rarely made the leap from this foundation toward a historical materialist analysis and resulting politics. Religious institutions tend, by nature, toward moral and political conservatism. Moreover, even Buddhist modernists have understandably hesitated to embrace Western forms of materialism, which can lean toward mechanistic determinism. Such ideologies often reduce human agency and contribute to systems of domination.

Yet Buddhism has something vital to contribute here. Its insights into interdependence and impermanence offer the scaffolding for a new kind of materialism—one that is dynamic, processual, even *hylozoic*: a vision of matter as lively and relational rather than inert. This resonates with emerging philosophical movements that seek to revise Enlightenment materialism in light of ecological and existential concerns. As with Epicureanism and feminism, I understand Buddhism not merely as a belief system but as a *practice*: one that refines desire, transforms habit, and reshapes our relations with each other and the sentient world. So, am I a Buddhist? Not in a traditional sense. But in striving to understand and alleviate suffering, to challenge its systemic roots, and to live in compassionate solidarity with others, I aspire to practice Buddhism in its most vital, and yes, *radical* form.