

Preparing for A105: refresh your ideas about Buddhism from the chapter on the Dalai Lama

From Book 1, *Reputations*, Chapter 7 The Dalai Lama, pp. 204-5.

Buddhism is and always has been a missionary religion. Ever since the time of the Buddha in India, Buddhists have believed that they follow the best possible religious teaching and there are structures within the tradition for the instruction of others. It is a diverse and adaptable tradition, spread across contrasting Asian cultures, and it has many different schools which have developed over its long history and now teach contrasting versions of doctrine and practice. All these versions of Buddhism have the same broad aims, which can be summarised as happiness and understanding.

The Dalai Lama's reputation in the West is based partly on the kinds of qualities that won him the Nobel Prize, but it is enhanced by the fact that Buddhism is enjoying a high profile. It is associated in many people's minds with the allure of the Orient and linked with a positive – if rather vague – notion of 'spirituality'. Without knowing too much about it, western people often assume that Buddhism is a model for peacefulness and wisdom.

Aspects of Buddhist teaching and practice have become absorbed by western culture. In the material sphere, Buddha statues have become home, restaurant and garden furnishing items. Buddhist techniques for training the mind have been adopted and adapted for therapeutic purposes on all levels of counselling and psychology. But it is difficult to pinpoint simple reasons for the appeal of Buddhism, partly because Buddhism itself is diverse, coming to the West as it does from diverse Asian roots.

... Westerners have looked East for wisdom and understanding and at the same time, in an era in which travel is easy, Buddhist teachers from across the Buddhist world (not just Tibet) have been keen to enter new areas. In the case of the Tibetans, this has coincided with the migration of large numbers from their traditional homelands into India and beyond. The West has become a new mission field. Since Buddhism has always seen its message as relevant for everyone, not just for a clearly defined ethnic population, this portable and adaptable religion has moved readily and been welcomed in places where traditional religious positions – for example, belief in a personal, all-powerful God – have waned. Buddhism offers an explanation for suffering and evil which is very different from that offered by monotheistic traditions (which believe in one God) and many find eastern ideas more acceptable than traditional, western, religious or non-religious ideologies.

Another reason why some westerners find Buddhism attractive is that it teaches that faith, though important, is not the way to salvation, as it is in Christianity. Instead, Buddhism emphasises practice built on questioning and experience, and this has caught the spirit of the time. Its promoters argue that Buddhism offers practical ways to improve the experience of life. These methods, such as meditation, can be embraced on different levels so that even active Christians and Jews, as well as those who identify with no religion, can and do incorporate techniques derived from Buddhism into their lives. However, comparatively few westerners have been so convinced by the teachings and practices of the religion that they now identify themselves as Buddhists. Buddhists were active in the West throughout the twentieth century, but a 'qualitative shift' (Batchelor, 1994, p. 93) occurred with the counter-culture of the 1960s which enthusiastically embraced eastern ideas. Since that time there have

been high-profile 'celebrity' Buddhists who may have added to its appeal. The reputation of the Dalai Lama has been enhanced by his position as a representative of an important form of this tradition.