

## Creating Buddhism

It is helpful (it facilitates learning, adjusting and growing) by accepting that what we know right now are simply “views.” These are our (I don’t think I’m alone here) ways of looking at ourself, Buddhism, the world, life itself. As long as we are unawakened, we are forming views all the way until our very last breath.

And we keep changing our views. Just check what we thought of things (such as the politics of our country), and notice how our views have changed since a year ago or before that. We feared the dark when we were kids but now we know better (perhaps).

However, we tend to think that our Buddhist views are the only and fully right ones right now, and perhaps everyone else (those who view differently) are wrong. But then, even our views of Buddhism have evolved and changed. It is helpful to notice this. It prevents us from feeling threatened or the need to threaten others when we find they have different Buddhist views.

For many of us – especially temple-goers and ethnic Buddhists (Buddhist by race, birth, marriage or adoption) – our Buddhist views are likely to be conditioned by the tradition we follow and by the teachers and speakers we listen to and believe in. Such sources of Buddhism are understandably conditioned and defined by that race, community, peers or leaders. In short, it is a sectarian form of Buddhism where the race, culture or teacher comes before the teaching of the historical Buddha.

Some of the teachers and speakers we listen to, however, may claim to teach “original” Buddhism – especially teachers from Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand and their related traditions, and teachers who are trained or influenced by them. Some of these are grounded in meditation traditions – of which there are different schools – the best known of which are the Vipassana, the Samatha and the Forest methods. The teachers and followers of these methods are at their best when they are meditating, but not so helpful when they are not meditating but talking about how well they are meditating.

The situation gets more complicated when we are specialists (in some way) of Buddhism or aspects of Buddhism. I have been studying Buddhism since I was in my late teens, and I will be 70 soon – some 45 years (the duration of the Buddha’s public ministry). I am often convinced that what I know now is the right thing – at least according to the suttas and what I accept as “early Buddhism” or the “early Buddhist texts” (EBT). I also fear that I may be wrong.

Some people even reject the very idea of “early Buddhism.” The scholars do so perhaps because this is the latest trend that they know of Buddhism. The reality is that not enough candidates are taking up courses in early Buddhism. Hence, it is difficult to find employment there. Other forms of Buddhism – especially the later more world-savvy ones – are very wealthy and often sponsor studies in later Buddhism.

We then have more scholars studying later Buddhism in greater detail, none of which are really useful except for the glory of academia. Scholars also find it acceptable to knock down other scholars' theories whenever they can; this is great for academic mileage. Or better, find some new angle to approach Buddhism – like claiming that the Buddha was a “businessman,” or that he was from Africa, or even that he did not exist! We are more likely to get a tenure, or at least employment as lecturer if we can prove ourself to be “sustainably” innovative in our Buddhist ideas. It keeps us employed.

This means that it would be foolish for us to bank on academic Buddhism as a spiritual practice. Nevertheless, there are certain aspects of academic efforts, such as in archaeology, philosophy, Buddhology, and philology, that helps us understand better the historical background and worldly contexts of Buddhism. As such, we should not disregard academic contributions to our understanding of Buddhism.

The latest form of Buddhism is “**western Buddhism**,” a blanket term for any kind of Buddhism that have arisen in the west, including Australia-New Zealand, or are rooted in western values and ways. Unlike “ethnic Buddhism” (or Asian forms of Buddhism), western Buddhism is less race-based. Western Buddhism and westernized Buddhism are more open to innovations, even to adapt themselves, depending on their founders, gurus and leaders.

However, if we observe closely enough, we may notice that the teachers and leaders of western Buddhist groups tend to borrow the external formalities and traditional structures of ethnic Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism or Chinese Buddhism. In such cases, there are significant aspects of their religiosity that is ethnic, even worldly, especially in the manner they regard the validity of lineage and the authenticity of their teachings and practices. In this sense, there are simply western or westernized forms of ethnic Buddhism. This is a case of accepting the easternization of the west.

There are also individuals – more in the West than elsewhere – who seek ordination or induction into some dominant sect of Buddhism, especially those of Japan (such the Zen and Japanese Pure Land traditions). Such a move may be a part of a self-legitimization or to value-add his curriculum vitae as a religious teacher or progressive scholar, or to retire as a guru with his own sect of Buddhism.

This is what is most attractive with Buddhism: it allows us to do what we like with it. It is simply some kind of Lego pieces to express our personality and needs with. We can start anywhere and keep on going like a person in Escher's “Relativity” (1953) and his “Ascending and Descending” (1960). The point is that we have to look for an exit, a breakthrough. To that extent, Buddhism has served us its purpose.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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