

You don't get it

The big mistakes we believe in
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Most Buddhists don't get it: we think that Buddhism is something we **do** with our body, speech and mind, and that's **it**. Notice that the foundation of Buddhist training is **keeping the precepts**, which is **don't** do 5 things: don't kill, don't steal, don't commit sexual misconduct, don't lie or pretend, and don't mess up our mind.

The irony here is that we must **intend** not to do these 5 wrong things. This means that we best keep the precepts by showing **love** (*mettā*) to life, other people's property, their bodies, the good they should know, and helping them keep a calm and clear mind.

The body

There are 5 other **common but serious mistakes** we often make with Buddhism. We tend to see it in terms of a **body**, like our body. So, we believe a Buddha image is actually "real": we think it's powerful (we wear it and think we are bullet-proof). Or, it is "holy" (so we should not point our feet to it: it only upset some people but the Buddha is unmoved).

Then, we have so many statues today that we tend to forget how they started. Wise Buddhists are calmly relieved when those who hate Buddhism bomb our huge status and destroy the images. These are what the images are teaching us—that is why good Buddhists never fight back.

The proper way is seeing the Buddha is in our mind and heart: Imagine how we would feel in the radiant presence of our teacher whose teachings are still with us. In fact, this seeing of the mental "image" of the Buddha is one of the best ways to respect him and strengthen our heart and open our mind. It keeps us joyful, healthy and calmly energized.

Sight

The Buddha, however, allows us to look at the Bodhi tree to recall him. We can, for example, picture him sitting under the Bodhi tree. One of my favourite practices is to respect any big tree with some space underneath it. With my heart, I **see** the Buddha sitting radiantly there.

I thank him for giving us the Dhamma; I remind myself to keep to it; I aspire to reach the path of awakening in this life itself.

I also try to look with Dhamma at the people I love, even those who do not love me, who hate me. This means that everyone changes. When we don't see this, or we reject it, it is probably because we keep imagining the past, dreaming of the future. We are not present even with the people close to us.

Notice sometimes when someone may look at us but don't see us! We should not make this same mistake because this will prevent us from really knowing anyone in a positive way.

Sound

Another unhelpful bad habit we have is to think that sounds are “holy,” especially chanting. Some monks who don't follow the Vinaya, and try to “simplify” the Dhamma (for their own benefit, out of their own ignorance or hubris), teach us “powerful” chants. Some of us may be misled to believe all this: that such chants can prevent or cure a sickness or pandemic. In that case, we don't need any health workers, nurses, doctors, scientists, medicines and health care!

Chanting is important to Buddhism, but for other reasons, not the superstitious ones.

Superstition is the belief that something physical or outside, or someone outside us can solve problems that have arisen inside our own minds. To reject superstition is to see **sound** (in this case) as being **impermanent**: this is a kind of meditation called “the perception of impermanence.”

We can do this ourselves, without the need for monks to act like priests and brahmins to us. Now, just think why some monks want us to chant parittas and mantras, instead of teaching us all this self-help self-reliance, healing ourselves with the mental medicine that the Buddha has prescribed us.

Chanting is good when we practise it mindfully to remember the **suttas**, the words of the Buddha's teaching. Then, we study them to find out what they really mean. As our understanding grows, we notice how their meanings deepen and widen for us. We begin to see more and more of what the Buddha himself has seen: awakening. Notice, again, why we need to do this ourselves.

Not even the most famous or holiest monk or nun can do this for us: often they are those who stunt our spiritual growth when we place the teacher above the teaching. We have become their **fans**, we become idol worshippers. The Buddha teaches that we can and must see and hear the Dhamma for ourselves.

Smell

Almost everyone loves flowers: they look beautiful, smell sweet. But we cut and pluck them and so they die and rot before Buddha shrines. We should let the flowers grow and love them right where they are. Then we can see how they grow and change.

Perhaps it is better to present pots of living flower-plants in our Dhamma halls and shrines. Anyway, the Vinaya does not allow monastics to plant or pluck any flowers, even leaves. They are reminded to respect nature and health in every way.

We also often offer incense and perfume. When done properly, this gives a sweet smell that helps us to be calm, to listen to the Dhamma, to practise meditation, or just spend quiet time. When the smell is too strong, or worse, when there is too much smoke or particulates in the air, this is not good for our breath and health.

Remember that in the Buddha's time, when these offerings were made it was mostly in the open air. Today, we make use of closed buildings. Hence, we must adjust such acts, by seeing their meaning and purpose, and not take them as mere **rituals** (which actually prevents us from seeing impermanence, so that we are not able to attain even streamwinning).

Touch

Touch — a very touchy thing! We like the touch of those whom we like. We dislike even the nearness of those whom we dislike. But remember that the Buddha helps even those who hate him enough to try to kill him. We may not be buddhas, but it helps to have this wrong idea of touch to be replaced by **lovingkindness**. Like it or not, there are those whom we like, do not like, and do not care about, all around us. They all have some positive role to play in society; they all have their own **karma** (just like us) to deal with.

Social distance or social space, is an important teaching since the Buddha's time. Vinaya rules remind monastics and us that we should not "socialize" with monastics. This rule is easier kept among Asians than amongst Westerners. Respectful and loving hugs are good when we know their purpose and limits and keep to them.

The idea of social distance in Buddhism is that there must always be some **space** even with those whom we love or respect. This is less problematic with lay people: they hug, fall in love, have sex, have children, and so on. This is problematic when monastics hug, even when it is a "political" hug to win popularity and followers. When a monastic hugs us, what's next: we like, then love, that monastic; we have sex; have children, and so on. What is a monastic then? Why be a monastic then?

Minding

Finally, we come to what the mind does. Simply, let us say it gives us **ideas** or **views**. For most of us, Buddhism is nothing but our own ideas and views, which we think are the best and only right ones. We rarely notice how, over time, even these ideas change with us. If they don't, then, we have a bigger problem: we have not really learned anything about the Dhamma. We are just a dog in our manger, barking at others; or we throw stones at other barking dogs.

We often have wrong views because we do not make an effort to understand **impermanence**, and see it for what it really is. When people say, "This will pass," for example, they often wrongly hope that they do not have to face any problem, and so learn nothing from it. Indeed, everything **will** pass, and we praise the great wise teacher who pilfered those words from some other wise men.

But our greed, hate and delusion have not passed: they are still stuck with us. These 3 unwholesome roots are what that really need to pass away in us. Then, we will be wiser, and we do not even need to read this reflection.

We don't get it by Piya Tan

Remember: we don't **get** Buddhism; we can and must let it go by being in the presence or oneness of the moment. Notice how much of our mind is not here with this reading: work with that. It's a good place to start.

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

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