

Buddhist Practices for Your Health

**FREE
GIFT**

How to Meditate

EASY-TO-FOLLOW PRACTICES

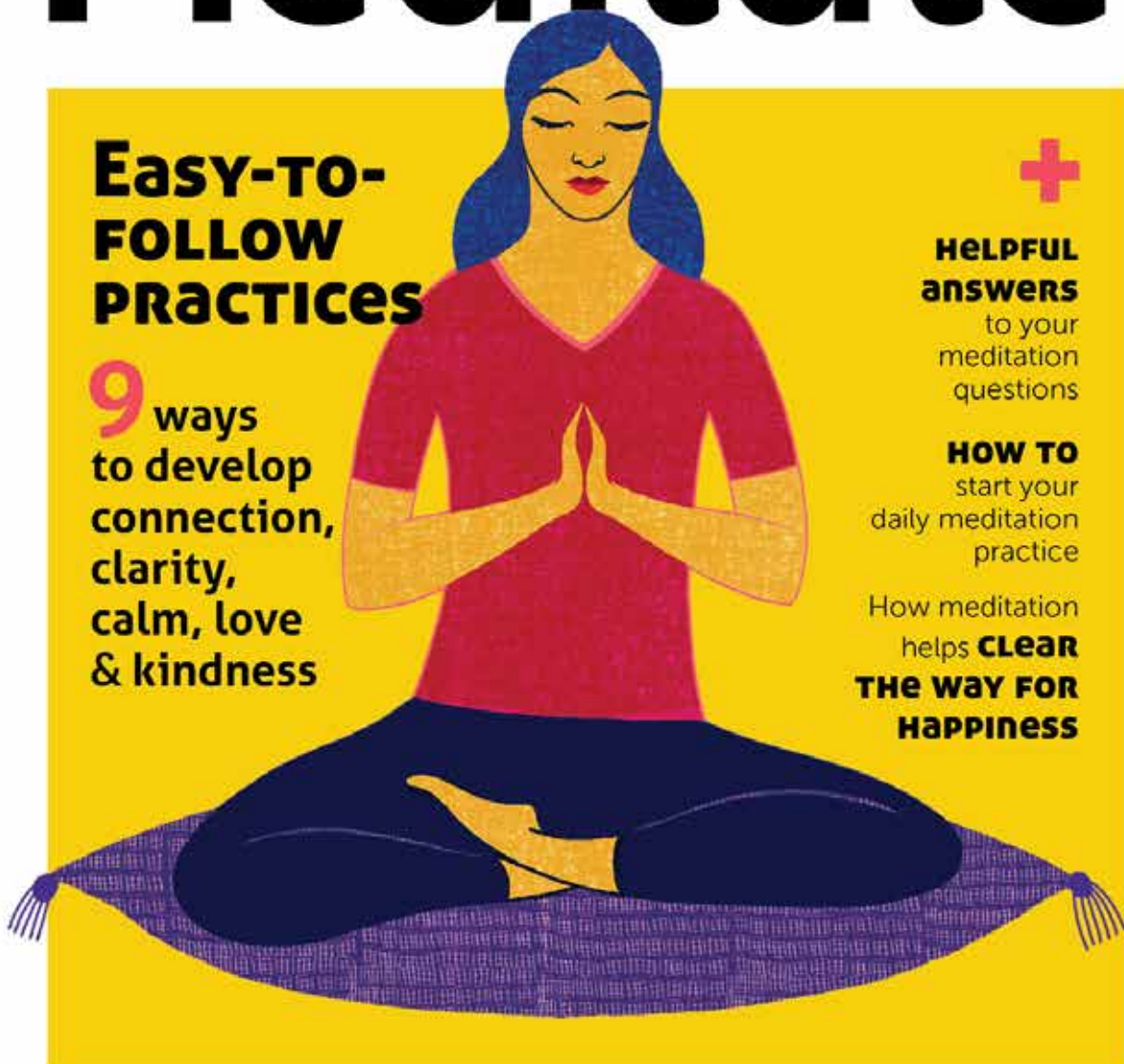
9 ways to develop connection, clarity, calm, love & kindness



HELPFUL answers to your meditation questions

HOW TO start your daily meditation practice

How meditation helps **CLEAR THE WAY FOR HAPPINESS**



Lion's Roar **SPECIAL EDITIONS**

5

MINUTES

5 SIMPLE STEPS

Your First Experience of Meditation

You have questions about meditation—and we'll cover them all. But first, let us show you just how simple doing it can be. Just follow along and you'll be doing basic breath meditation, also known as "calm abiding," *shamatha*, or mindfulness meditation, the foundation of Buddhist meditation practice across traditions.

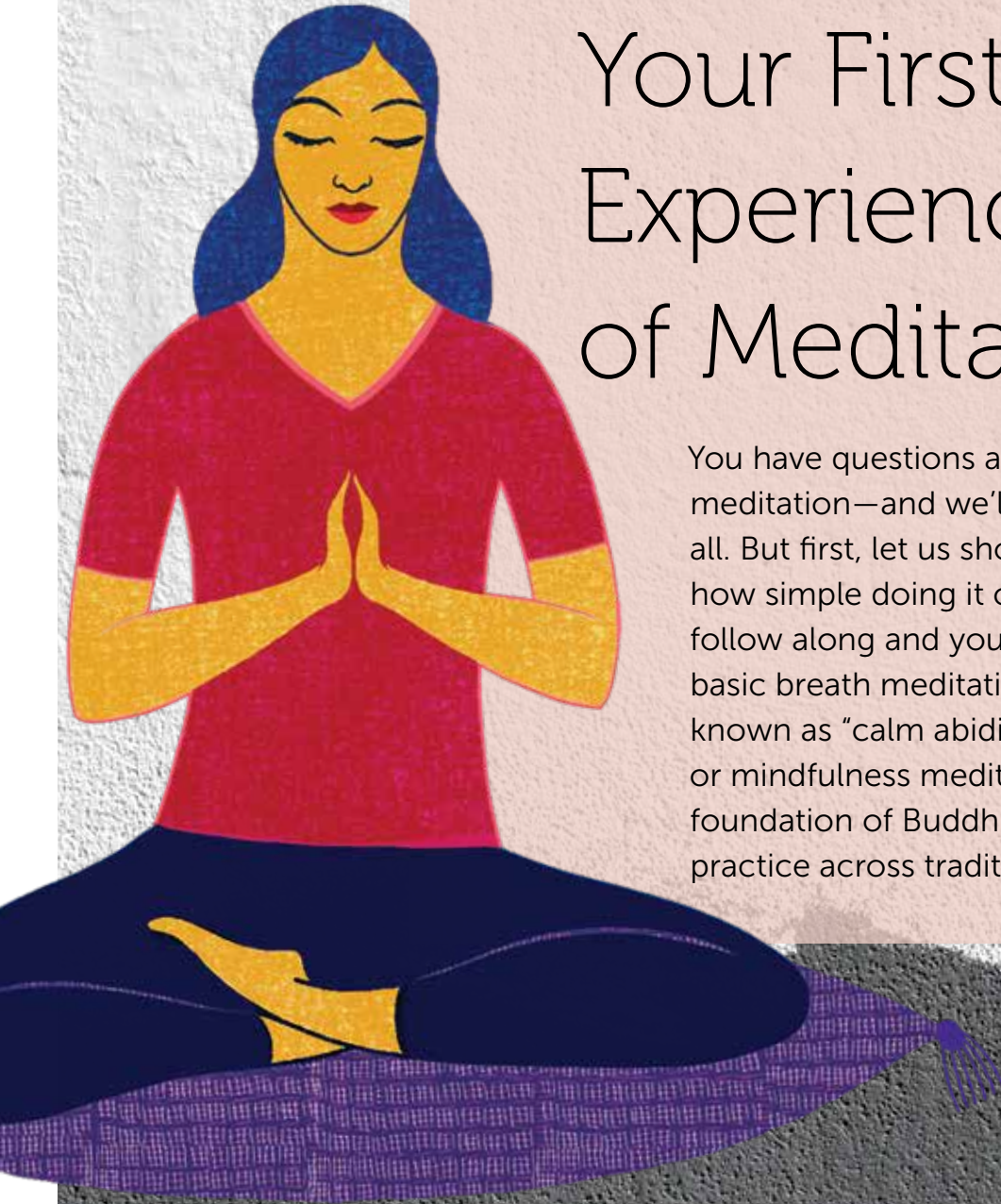


Illustration by Carole Hénaff. Photograph by Samuel Zeller

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IRST, YOU'LL WANT TO find a quiet and uplifted place where you can do your meditation practice. Once you've done that, just follow these simple instructions. See if you can allow yourself 5 minutes. You can revisit this practice and increase that amount over time.

STEP 1

TAKE YOUR SEAT.

Sit cross-legged on a meditation cushion, or if you prefer, on a straight-backed chair with your feet flat on the floor, without leaning against the back of the chair. In either case, your hips should be higher than, not level with, your knees. You may wish to place a pillow or other cushioning on your chair to achieve this effect.

STEP 2

FIND YOUR SITTING POSTURE.

Place your hands palms-down on your thighs and sit in an upright posture with a straight back—relaxed yet dignified. With your eyes open, let your gaze rest comfortably as you look slightly downward about six feet in front of you. You're ready to start meditating.

STEP 3

NOTICE AND FOLLOW YOUR BREATH.

Place your attention lightly on your out-breath, while remaining aware your environment. Be with each breath as the air goes out through your mouth and nostrils and dissolves into the space around you. At the end of each out-breath, simply rest until the next in-breath naturally begins. For a more focused meditation, you can follow both the out-breaths and in-breaths.

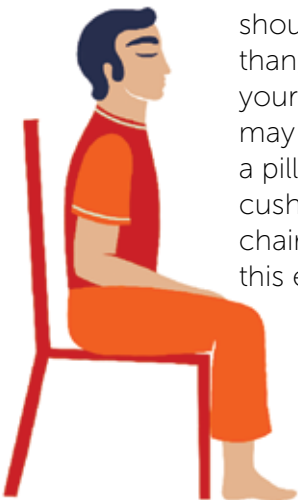


Illustration by Carole Hénaff


STEP 4

NOTE THE THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS THAT ARISE.

Whenever you notice that a thought, feeling, or perception has taken your attention away from the breath, just say to yourself, “thinking,” and return to following the breath. No need to judge yourself when this happens; just gently note it and attend to your breath and posture. Keep going for the time allotted.

STEP 5

WELL DONE! YOU’VE JUST HAD YOUR FIRST EXPERIENCE OF MEDITATION.

After completing your meditation-practice period, see if you can consciously allow any sense of calm, mindfulness, or openness you’ve experienced to remain present through the rest of your day. 

THE PRACTICE at a GLANCE

1. Sit comfortably, but solidly.
2. Incorporate your hands and eyes, with restful awareness, into the sitting posture.
3. Notice and follow your in- and out-breaths.
4. Note arising thoughts and feelings.
5. Finish the meditation after the time you’ve allowed, doing your best to retain any positive qualities it’s helped cultivate.

Read more on LionsRoar.com:

“You Can’t Fail at Meditation”





Long or Short Meditation Periods: One Buddhist Teacher's Advice

WHETHER YOU SHOULD SHORTEN YOUR MEDI- TATION PERIODS OR NOT

depends on why you are having a hard time meditating. If the reason is that you lack inspiration and confidence to meditate—whether because you don't have enough physical or mental energy, your concentration span tends to be short, or you are under the pressure of strong, persistent, mental and emotional resistance—then it is better to meditate for shorter, more frequent periods. Once you start to get a real taste for meditation and experience its benefits, your inspiration to do it will grow, as will your meditation energy. When that happens, you must expand the period of meditation and unite your life as one with the meditation.

However, if the reason you're having trouble meditating is that you are letting your mind indulge in pleasures and other distractions or that you have let your mind become a lazy "couch potato" and made little effort to get into the habit of meditating, then you must force yourself to sit in meditation. Also, think about the rareness of the precious human life that you are enjoying. Contemplate the impermanence of life, suffering, and the amazing blessings of liberation. Such thoughts will propel and inspire your mind to meditate. Reading exalted scriptures, or biographies of great masters, and witnessing or experiencing suffering, are also great sources of inspiration.

We must use all skillful means to inspire ourselves.

—Tulku Thondup Rinpoche

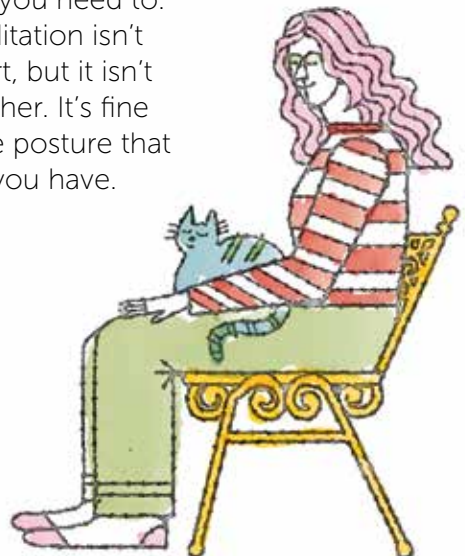


GOOD QUESTION!

“I have a bad back and it really hurts when I meditate sitting on a cushion. Is it okay if I sit in a chair to meditate?”

WE MEDITATE WITH THE BODY WE HAVE, not the one we think we’re supposed to have. The best way to meditate might be in full lotus posture, but how many of us can do that? There are all kinds of ways to sit when doing Buddhist meditation. Many people sit cross-legged on a cushion, some traditions recommend kneeling, and if you need to sit on a chair, that’s fine. What all these postures have in common is feeling firmly grounded, with a straight spine and a sense of

relaxed dignity. So sit in the chair with your back straight and your feet flat on the ground. As with the other postures, your hips should be higher than your knees, so put a pillow on the seat if you need to. Buddhist meditation isn’t about comfort, but it isn’t about pain either. It’s fine to choose the posture that fits the body you have.



“Spiritual But Not Religious?”

10 Reasons Why Buddhism Can Work for You, Too

However you define your personal path, you can find a lot in Buddhism to help you on your way, and you're free to take what you wish. Lion's Roar editor-in-chief **Melvin McLeod** explains.

Photograph by David Gabriel Fischer



Photograph by Ian Schneider

SOME THIRTY MILLION

AMERICANS maintain some type of spiritual belief and practice, even though they no longer feel at home in a church, synagogue, or mosque. These are the “spiritual but not religious,” philosophically the fastest-growing U.S. demographic. Generally, they’re educated, liberal, and open-minded, with a deep sense of connection to the Earth and a belief that there’s more to life than what appears on the surface.

If you’re reading this, you likely identify with at least some of those descriptors, and you should know that those who think of themselves as spiritual but not religious can find a lot in Buddhism to help them on their personal path, however they define it.

Buddhism is unique among the world’s major world religions. (Some people debate whether Buddhism is in fact a religion, but for now let’s assume it is.) It is the one world religion that has no God. It is the nontheistic religion.

That changes everything. Yes, like other religions Buddhism describes a nonmaterial, spiritual reality (perhaps the realer reality) and addresses what happens after we die. But at the same time, it is down-to-earth and practical: it is about us, our minds, and our suffering. It's about being fully and deeply human, and it has something to offer everyone: Buddhists of course; but also the spiritual but not religious, members of other religions, and even those who don't think they're spiritual at all. Because who doesn't know the value of being present and aware?

First, a couple of cautions. Like other religions, Buddhism is practiced at different levels of subtlety, and sometimes it can be just as theistic as any other religion. Buddhism is practiced by people, so there's good and bad. We come to Buddhism as we are, so there's definitely going to be ego involved. That's no problem—it's the working basis of the path. The key is where we go from there.

Also, much of what I'm saying about Buddhism also applies to the

contemplative traditions of other religions. In fact, contemplatives of different faiths often have more in common with each other than they do with practitioners of their own religion. It comes down to how much we personify or solidify the absolute—whether it's a supreme being who passes judgment on us or an open expanse of love and awareness. In their experience of God, Thomas Merton, Rumi, and Martin Buber had more in common with the Buddha (and each other) than with most practitioners of their own faith.

The difference is that meditation is the very essence of Buddhism, not just the practice of a rarified elite of mystics. It's fair to say that Buddhism is the most contemplative of the world's major religions, which is a reflection of its basic nontheism.

Buddhism is about realization and experience, not institutions or divine authority. This makes it especially suited to those who consider themselves spiritual but not religious. Here are ten reasons why:

1 . There is no Buddhist God.

DIFFERENT SCHOOLS OF BUDDHISM have different views about who the Buddha was. Some say he was an ordinary human being who discovered the path to awakening; others say he was already enlightened but followed the path to show us how it's done. But one thing is certain: he was not a God, deity, or divine being. His faculties were purely human, any of us can follow his path, and our enlightenment will be exactly the same as his. Ultimately, we are no different from him, and vice versa.

Admittedly, there are lots of Buddhist images that look like gods and deities, all

kinds of colorful and exotic beings. The Buddhist cosmos is a vast one, containing infinite beings of different minds, bodies, faculties, and realms. Some are more subtle and awakened, and others are grosser and more confused. Yet these are just the endless variations on the reality we experience right now. It may be infinitely vast and profoundly deep, it may be mysterious beyond concept, it may be far different than we think it is, but whatever reality is, this is it. There is nothing and nobody fundamentally different from or outside of it.

2 . It's about your basic goodness.

BUDDHISM IS NOT ABOUT SALVATION or original sin. It's not about becoming somebody different or going somewhere else. Because both you and your world are basically good. With all its ups and downs, this world of ours works. It warms us; it feeds us; it offers us color, sound, and touch. We don't have to struggle against our world. It is neither for us nor against us. It is a simple, vivid world of direct experience we can investigate, care for, enjoy, make love to.

We are basically good as well, confused as we may be. In Buddhism, our true nature

has many names, such as buddhanature, ordinary mind, *sugatagarbha*, Vajradhara, or just plain Buddha—fundamental awareness. The thing is, we can't solidify, identify, or conceptualize it in any way. Then it's just the same old game we're stuck in now. We do not own this basic goodness. It is not inside of us, it is not outside of us, it is beyond the reach of conventional mind. It is empty of all form, yet everything we experience is its manifestation. It is nothing and the source of everything—how do you wrap your mind around that? All you can do is look directly, relax, and let go.



3. The problem is suffering. The answer is waking up.

BUDDHISM EXISTS TO ADDRESS ONE PROBLEM: suffering. The Buddha called the truth of suffering “noble,” because recognizing our suffering is the starting place and inspiration of the spiritual path.

His second noble truth was the cause of suffering. In the West, Buddhists call this “ego.” It’s a small word that encompasses pretty much everything that’s wrong with the world. Because according to the Buddha, all suffering, large and small, starts with our false belief in a solid,

separate, and continuous “I,” whose survival we devote our lives to.

It feels like we’re hopelessly caught in this bad dream of “me and them” we’ve created, but we can wake up from it. This is the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering. We do this by recognizing our ignorance, the falseness of our belief in this “I.” Finally, the Buddha told us that there is a concrete way we can get there, which basically consists of discipline, effort, meditation, and wisdom. This is the fourth noble truth, the truth of the path.

Photograph by Mourad Saadi

4. The way to do that is by working with your mind.

SO, ACCORDING TO THE BUDDHA, the problem is suffering, the cause is ignorance, the remedy is waking up, and the path is living mindfully, meditating, and cultivating our wisdom. There's really only one place all that happens: in our minds. The mind is the source of both our suffering and our joy. Meditation—taming the mind—is what gets us from one to the other. Meditation is Buddhism's basic remedy for the human condition, and its special genius.

The Buddhist path of meditation begins with practices to calm our wild mind. Once the mind is focused enough to look undistractedly into reality, we develop insight into the nature of our experience, which is marked by impermanence, suffering, nonego, and emptiness. We naturally develop compassion for ourselves and all beings who suffer, and our insight allows us to help them skillfully. Finally, we experience ourselves and our world for what they have been since beginningless time, are right now, and always will be—nothing but enlightenment itself, great perfection in every way.

5. No one can do it for you. But you can do it.

IN BUDDHISM, THERE IS NO SAVIOR. There's no one who's going to do it for us, no place we can hide out for safety. We have to face reality squarely, and we have to do it alone. Even when Buddhists take refuge in the Buddha, what they're really taking refuge in is the truth that there's no refuge. Not seeking protection is the only real protection.

So that's the bad news—we have to do it alone. The good news is, we can do it. As human beings, we have the resources we need: intelligence, strength, loving hearts, and proven, effective methods. Because of that, we can rouse our confidence and renounce our depression and resentment.

But while no one can do that for us, help and guidance is available. There are teachers—women and men who are further along the path—who offer us instruction and inspiration. They prove to us it can be done. Our fellow practitioners support our path, while never allowing us to use them as crutches. The Buddhist teachings offer us wisdom that goes back 2,600 years to the Buddha himself. We can go right to the source, because the lineage that started with Gautama Buddha is unbroken to this day.

6. There is a spiritual, non-material reality.

SOME PEOPLE DESCRIBE BUDDHISM as the rational, “scientific” religion, helping us lead better and more caring lives without contradicting our modern worldview. It is certainly true that many Buddhist practices work very nicely in the modern world, don’t require any exotic beliefs, and bring demonstrable benefit to people’s lives. But that’s only part of the story.

Buddhism definitely asserts there is a reality that is not material. Other religions say that too; the difference is that in Buddhism this spiritual reality is not God. It is mind.

This is something you can investigate for yourself:

Is my mind made of matter or is it something else?

Does my mind have characteristics, like thoughts, feelings, and identity, or is it the space within which these things arise?

Does my mind change constantly or is it continuous? Is it one thing or many?

Where is the boundary of my mind? Is it large or small? Is it inside me looking at the material world outside? Or are my perceptions and my experience of them both mind? (And if so, perhaps it’s the material world we should be questioning the reality of.)

7. But you don’t have to take anything on faith.

THERE IS NO RECEIVED WISDOM IN BUDDHISM, nothing we must accept purely on the basis of somebody else’s spiritual authority. The Dalai Lama has said that Buddhism must give up any belief that modern science disproves. The Buddha himself famously said, “Be a lamp unto yourselves,” and told his students they must test everything he said against their own experience. But it is easy to misinterpret this advice. Our modern egos are keen to take advantage of it. While we shouldn’t accept what others say at face value, this doesn’t mean we should just accept what we tell ourselves. We have to test the teachings of Buddhism against our direct life experience, not against our opinions.

And while modern science can prove or disprove old beliefs about astronomy or human physiology, it cannot measure or test the nonmaterial. Buddhism values the rational mind and seeks not to contradict it in its own sphere. But it doesn’t tell the whole story.

Finally, it is the rare person who can navigate the spiritual path alone. While retaining our self-respect and judgment, we must be willing to accept the guidance, even leadership, of those who are further along the path. In a society that exalts the individual and questions the hierarchy of the teacher-student relationship, it is a challenge to find a middle way between too much self and not enough.

8 Buddhism offers a wealth of skillful means for different people's needs.

BUDDHISM IS NOT A ONE-PATH-FITS-ALL RELIGION. It's highly pragmatic, because it's about whatever helps reduce suffering.

Beings are infinite. So are their problems and states of mind. Buddhism offers a wealth of skillful means to meet their different needs. If people are not ready for the final truth, but a partial truth will help, that's no problem—as long as it actually helps. The problem is that things that feel helpful—like going along with our usual tricks—can sometimes make things worse. So the Buddhist teachings are gentle, but they can also be tough. We need to face the ways we cause ourselves and others suffering.

Buddhist meditators have been studying the mind for thousand of years. In that time, they've tested and proven many techniques to tame the mind, lessen our suffering, and discover who we are and what is real (and not). There are meditations to calm and focus the mind, contemplations to open the heart, and ways to bring ease and grace to the body. It's fair to say, as many people have, that Buddhism is the world's most developed science of mind.

Today, people who want to explore Buddhism have many resources at their disposal. For the first time in history, all the schools and traditions of Buddhism are gathered in one place. There are fine



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books, excellent teachers (many of them now American), practice centers, communities, and indeed, magazines.

These are all available for you to explore according to your own needs and path. You can practice meditation at home or go to a local center and practice with others. You can read a book, attend classes, or hear a lecture by a Buddhist teacher. Whatever works for you—no pressure.

9. It's open, progressive, and not institutional.

WHILE BUDDHISM IN ITS ASIAN HOMELANDS can be conservative, convert Buddhists in the West are generally liberal, both socially and politically. Whether this is an accident of history or a natural reflection of the Buddhist teachings, Buddhist communities embrace diversity and work against sexism and racism.

Identities of all sorts, including gender, nationality, ethnicity, and even religion, are not seen as fixed and ultimately true. Yet they are not denied; differences are acknowledged, celebrated, and enjoyed. Of course, Buddhists are still people and still part of a society, so it's a work in progress. But they're trying.

Many Americans have turned away from organized religion because it feels like just another bureaucracy, rigid and self-serving. Buddhism has been described as disorganized religion. There's no Buddhist pope. (No, the Dalai Lama is not the head of world Buddhism. He's not even the head of all Tibetan Buddhism, just of one sect.) There is no overarching church, just a loose collection of different schools and communities. As you'll quickly discover if you go to your local Buddhist center, things may run smoothly (or not), but the atmosphere is likely to be open and relaxed. It probably won't feel institutional.


10. And it works.

WE CAN'T SEE OR MEASURE SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE, so we can't judge directly the effect Buddhism is having on someone else's mind and heart. But we can see how they act and treat other people. We can hear what they say about what they're experiencing inside.

What we find is that Buddhism works. For millennia, Buddhism has been making people more aware, caring, and skillful. All you have to do is meet someone who's been practicing meditation a lot to know that. In our own time, hundreds of thousands of Americans are reporting that even a modest Buddhist practice has made their life better—they're calmer, happier, and not as carried away when strong emotions arise. They're kinder to themselves and others.

But it's really important not to burden ourselves with unrealistic expectations. Change comes very slowly. You'll also see that when you meet a Buddhist meditator, even one who's been at it for a long time. Don't expect perfection. We're working with patterns of ignorance, greed, and anger that have developed over a lifetime—if not much longer. Change comes slowly for most of us. But it does come. If you stick with it, that's guaranteed. Buddhism works.

This is not an attempt to convert anyone to Buddhism. There is no need for that. But those who think of themselves as spiritual but not religious can find a lot in Buddhism to help them on their personal path, however they define it.

When I first encountered Buddhism, what struck me was its absolute integrity. I saw that it was not trying to manipulate me by telling me what I wanted to hear. It always tells the truth. Sometimes that truth is gentle, softening our hearts and bringing tears to our eyes. Sometimes it is tough, forcing us to face our problems and cutting through our comfortable illusions. But always it is skillful. Always it offers us what we need. We are free to take what we wish. 

Melvin McLeod is editor-in-chief of *Lion's Roar*, and the editor of several books including *Mindful Politics* and *21st Century Buddhists in Conversation*.



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