

Is Buddhist meditation compatible with other religions? ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 The question is often asked, is Buddhist meditation compatible with other religions?

00:00:12 In other words, can you be a Christian of a certain denomination, or a Muslim, a Jew,

00:00:19 a Hindu, and so forth, and still practice, quote, Buddhist meditation?

00:00:26 You'll get different answers from different Buddhist teachers, but I think if you took

00:00:33 a consensus, the answer that you would get is yes. And certainly, if you were to ask

00:00:40 me, the answer would be yes big time. Not only is it compatible with any belief system

00:00:47 or lack of belief system, it's compatible with a rationalist, humanist, skeptical point

00:00:54 of view, and I would say it's compatible with any religion that I know of, including the

00:01:03 more fundamentalist forms of religion, believe it or not. You might think that that's a little

00:01:08 strange, but I see it as compatible. I would say that it's compatible with any religion

00:01:15 and I see it as compatible. I remember a teacher that I knew in L.A. He was of the Shingon

00:01:28 School, which is the school that I was ordained in, originally as a Buddhist monk in Japan,

00:01:35 and he's the one that gave me my letter of introduction to go to Japan. His name was

00:01:42 Bishop Takahashi. They used bishop in English to translate a Japanese term. He was the head

00:01:51 of the Koyasan Betsuin, or Koyasan Branch Temple in Los Angeles. So he wrote me this

00:01:58 letter of introduction that allowed me to get into the original Koyasan in Japan in

00:02:04 1970 to be ordained as a Buddhist monk in that tradition. One of the things I remember

00:02:09 him saying was that what Buddhism was about was vis-a-vis other religions, was not we

00:02:19 want you to be a Buddhist, convert to Buddhism, etc. It was about, let's see

if I can remember

00:02:27 the exact words he used in Japanese, kaisyusuru yorimo jibun no michi wo fukameyo, I think

00:02:34 was what he said. This was a long, long time ago. Meaning, we're not interested in converting

00:02:44 people. We're interested in allowing them to deepen the path they already have. And

00:02:53 that's a very interesting perspective, an interesting way to put it. After his lifetime

00:02:59 of living in the United States, teaching Buddhism in this country, and of course encountering

00:03:06 all the religions that already exist here, that was sort of his take on it. I'm not trying

00:03:12 to get people to be Buddhist, I'm trying to help them deepen the path they're already

00:03:18 on. And I totally concur with that way of looking at things. If you look at what is

00:03:25 core in Buddhism, you'll see that it's about developing concentration power, it's about

00:03:37 developing sensory clarity, it's about developing equanimity, it's about using those qualities

00:03:44 to become free from one's, quote, ego, to become free from suffering, and to become

00:03:55 free from the screwed up behaviors that are the result of suffering.

Certainly no one

00:04:01 can object to this kind of core endeavor. And it would be useful, applicable, appropriate

00:04:08 for a follower of any religion. All around the world, you'll see that there's a core

00:04:17 mystical tradition in each of the major spiritual traditions. Early Buddhism simply extracted

00:04:28 that core essence. Then later on, around that, grew up a religion called Buddhism that can

00:04:35 stand in contradistinction to other religions. I think it is perfectly valid to eliminate

00:04:43 the religious aspects of the Buddhist religion, and go back to the original core, which is

00:04:51 compatible with, or at least the original core practice, which is compatible with any

00:04:58 religion. The Buddha believed things that are not compatible with every religion. He

00:05:07 believed in reincarnation, he believed in the gods, and so forth. He was a

person of

00:05:15 the 6th century BC, his culture. So some of the Buddha's beliefs, I would not say are

00:05:22 compatible with all religions. But one of the refreshing things about the Buddhist tradition,

00:05:32 which makes it utterly distinct from others, is it doesn't require a complete buy-in. You

00:05:39 don't have to buy the whole package. All you have to, we say, well, take what works for

00:05:46 you. Take what works for you. If you don't believe in reincarnation, then fine. Don't

00:05:53 believe in reincarnation. At least I, as a teacher who has been strongly influenced by

00:05:58 Buddhism, would say that. Maybe other Buddhist teachers would disagree, and that's fine.

00:06:03 But I would say, take the parts that work for you. I'm not alone in this regard. Mr.

00:06:08 Goenka, for example, a very prominent and in some ways very traditional Buddhist teacher

00:06:15 in the Vipassana lineage, says essentially the same thing to everyone in their first

00:06:20 retreat. He said, well, you might not buy into the whole system. Just take the parts

00:06:25 that work for you. He has a very nice metaphor for that. If a child was eating porridge,

00:06:33 and the child thought there was a stone in the porridge, but it was actually the cardamom

00:06:38 spice, what would the mother do? The child says, I don't want to eat the porridge. It

00:06:44 has a stone. The mother knows, well, it's not really a stone. But the child thinks it's

00:06:49 a stone, sees it as a stone, so fine. The mother would say, just take it out. You don't

00:06:56 have to eat it with the stone. Maybe someday in the future that stone will have a taste

00:07:02 for you, and you'll like that. Or maybe not. Maybe you'd prefer the porridge without ever

00:07:06 having that stone. So I think if we take the core practice of early Buddhism and define

00:07:13 it in terms of concentration, clarity, equanimity, and positive behavior changes associated with

00:07:21 those, then that's compatible everywhere. It is possible to be a

fundamentalist Christian

00:07:33 and be profoundly influenced by Buddhist practice. So I would give as an example of a very conservative

00:07:40 Christian who was profoundly influenced in his spiritual experience by Buddhism, I would

00:07:50 give the example of the Anglo-American poet T.S. Eliot. I highly recommend his poetry.

00:07:57 It's a little bit heady, but it's very deep, and he was absolutely a conservative Christian

00:08:04 and absolutely profoundly Buddhist in his practice.