

## Is Buddhism a Religion, Art, or Science?

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So good morning, everyone. So there was a time when I was in conversations where the question was: is Buddhism a religion or not?

And it made some sense to have those questions because, oddly enough for me, who my background is, I have a PhD in religion. So, and that's the area where, you know, where that question comes up, you know. And I was there studying Buddhist studies, so was I in the right place. Yeah. And oddly for me, because I did not grow up religious, and oddly enough being, you know, maybe now you're all abandoned IMC, but in some ways I don't, I'm not so interested in religion in some ways, maybe.

Maybe it doesn't look like that. And but, so is Buddhism a religion or not? So there's all kinds of questions, debates about that and. The funnest way of referring to that, the kind of humorous way, I think, maybe, is that it definitely is in United States because then you get all kinds of tax benefits. Whereas I was told in the Soviet Union it was definitely not a religion because there were benefits because they were back then kind of anti-religion.

So Buddhism is quite flexible that way. But I think what's more interesting for me as I've navigated my own practice in Buddhism and practiced in different schools of Buddhism and had different kind of philosophies in a sense of what Buddhist practice is, what the Buddhism is, is... Buddhism more an art, form of art, or is it more a form of medical research? But I think what's more interesting for me as I've navigated my own practice in Buddhism and practiced in different schools of Buddhism and had different kind of philosophies in a sense of what Buddhist practice is, what the Buddhism is, is... Buddhism more an art, form of art, or is it more a form of medical research?

Is it more medical science? And the reason for that distinction is that there are forms of Buddhism where the emphasis predominantly, the rhetoric predominantly is, about just being in the present moment and allowing some deep expression to come out of us. And some people have this will often refer to something like the Buddha nature, something profound within us that gets freed and can move through us and respond to the world. And it's more like the response, more like the expression of an

artist like someone who's a dancer, who dances just to dance, to express something in the dancing, and they're allowing something from inside to come forth.

Or a singer maybe just singing for the singing. Not singing in order to do something else. Maybe some painters are that way, maybe some painters are not. Some painters are painting to have a perfect picture, you know, for the results, but some people are painting just for the expression that's there. And in kind of close to Buddhism in Japan, the representation of this sometimes is in tea ceremony.

And associated arts, where it's really the beauty and the art, what gets born, what arises in the care, the love, the attention to detail, the quieting of the mind and the heart, to be really there for the activity itself that is the purpose of it, and it's more of an art than it is in order to. And associated arts, where it's really the beauty and the art, what gets born, what arises in the care, the love, the attention to detail, the quieting of the mind and the heart, to be really there for the activity itself that is the purpose of it, and it's more of an art than it is in order to. Medical research or medical science, has a bias, or maybe we call it a preference. It's doing it for a purpose to have a result. When people are unhealthy, the purpose is to find a way to help people become healthy.

And there might be some deep, upwelling of compassion that dwells up from the Buddha nature of the researcher that inspires it. But still, the research is all about looking for understanding something in order to bring health to someone. So is Buddhism more an art or is it more a kind of personal research into yourself to understand how you live unhealthily? Maybe if you prefer a spiritual way, but, you know, I once got criticized when I was a Zen priest for never using the word spiritual. Now I do it, use it more often.

I don't know if that's better or worse, but it kind of touches something, I think, in the hearts to use that word. And so is it, you know, is it some kind of some spiritual health? Some people have become, have an unhealthy relationship to spirituality because they've been maybe been betrayed by their religion. There are spiritual or ethical wounds that people carry because of, you know, how they live their life or how people associated with them have lived their life that they carry for a long time. There are spiritual or ethical wounds that people carry because of, you know, how they live their life or how people associated with them have lived their life that they carry for a long time.

So, you know, sometimes there's deep psychological healing, repair, corrections that people are involved in. And to simply say, just kind of express your Buddha nature, just sit here and just be. Sometimes the school of art often has the wonderful and challenging instruction, just be. And that's a wonderful antidote to people who are overdoers, who are always straining and working and doing. But you don't tell a medical researcher, just be.

It's okay. Just sit there in your office and just be and everything will work out fine. The researcher needs to be in a lab, needs to engage. There's something they have to do. And sometimes the just being school is a wonderful correction for some people.

They finally relax and settle. And then at some point, when they really settle into the being, then

they're ready to do in a beneficial way, to find the right doing that moves along. But sometimes the over-emphasis and being I've seen, the emphasis then becomes what's completely okay just to be neurotic. I'm so glad I found Buddhism because now I can just go along and just keep thinking and fantasy. I think a lot.

Just be, okay. For me, that means just daydream and think and plan and worry. And that's what I'm supposed to do because that's what being is for me. For me, that means just daydream and think and plan and worry. And that's what I'm supposed to do because that's what being is for me.

And that's a little bit unfortunate. It's kind of like saying, you know, that if you have a scab, just be with picking the scab. You know, and just, you know, everything will be great. But the scab just gets, the wound just gets bigger and bigger the more you pick it. So there's something about...

But then the people who are the medical research side of Buddhism, some of them just research all the time. And some people never get around taking the medicine. Or they are just... There's never any real healing from being human. You know, it just comes with its challenges.

It comes with its tensions. It comes with difficulties. And, you know, I mean... The classic difficulties that Buddhism highlights is that a few people will eventually experience sickness, old age, and death. And so that's a challenge.

And so how do we live with that and find our way with it? And so if we're constantly looking for the cure for those things, then you never really get to the heart of the matter, which maybe has more to do with the metaphorical heart. And so both directions can be problematic, but also in both approaches I've seen in Buddhism can be at odds with each other. We're the better way, you're the lousy way, you know. But I think maybe they need each other.

And so both directions can be problematic, but also in both approaches I've seen in Buddhism can be at odds with each other. We're the better way, you're the lousy way, you know. But I think maybe they need each other. Maybe they really should go together. And that's really the best of all possible worlds.

I loved, I didn't think of it before I did it, but the fact that I put my hands together when I said that in this Anjali, you know, That's kind of symbolic of how I see these two coming together. And maybe in a reverent way, a respectful way. They both need each other in some way. The school of Theravāda and Buddhism that we teach here at IMC is more on the medical research direction. And the core teaching of this tradition goes way back to the Buddha.

Is very simple. So simple that this is where some people would look and say, is this really religion? Really? This can't be enough. This can't be the core. And that is to not cause harm.

A radical life of non-harming. And the Buddha defined a wise person as someone who doesn't harm themselves, doesn't harm others, doesn't harm self or others, doesn't harm the whole world. That's an unwise person. A wise person is someone who does the opposite. A wise person is someone who

benefits themselves, brings about the welfare of oneself, is involved with the welfare of others, involved in the welfare of both self and others, and welfare of the whole world.

A wise person is someone who benefits themselves, brings about the welfare of oneself, is involved with the welfare of others, involved in the welfare of both self and others, and welfare of the whole world. Is that religious? What is that? Maybe Buddhism is form of therapy. Medical therapy, psychological therapy, maybe that's what it is. It shouldn't be a religion.

Because if that's the heart of it, everything follows from that. The core principle, ethical principle in Buddhism is don't cause harm. And this is a beautiful way that this is expressed, I believe, for me. Abandoning the taking of life, one abstains from taking life. This gives freedom from danger, hostility, and oppression to limitless numbers of living beings.

In giving others freedom from danger, hostility, and oppression, one gains a share of unlimited freedom from danger, hostility, and oppression. This is a great gift. So a number of things, that this is the first ethical principle. All the Buddhism, in a sense, follows from this one principle, one ethical principle. And don't cause harm.

And we learn in meditation how not to cause harm to ourselves. And in some ways, the four noble truths are often held up as the Buddhist primary teaching. And usually they have this very big... complicated, confusing word suffering that it's worded. But maybe if it's word, the first noble truth is a truth of harm.

The second noble truth is a truth of how harm appears, how it arises. The second is that it's possible to stop harming. The second noble truth is a truth of how harm appears, how it arises. The second is that it's possible to stop harming. And the third is this is the way to not harm faithful path.

And so we learn not to harm. And meditation is a phenomenal place to learn how not to harm ourselves. One of the things that I learned, primarily I think through Vipassanā practice, when I first started doing it in Thailand, was that if I wanted to harm others, I was harming myself. It became so glaringly obvious as the mind got quieter and stiller. As I started sensing and more feeling of being more embodied in my body, sensing what was going on in deeper, quiet, or more peaceful ways, that if there was a thought of causing, you know, being angry with someone or being lustful for someone or being, you know, resentful to someone or all kinds of things, that I could feel that I was harming myself directly.

I hadn't been able to feel that earlier in my life because my whole sense of... I was so activated with all my preoccupations, concerns, desires, feelings, busy mind, that I didn't... I wasn't that sensitive. But meditation taught this deep sensitivity that sometimes I like to call ethical sensitivity because you feel so deeply the impact... of certain kind of ways of being, that if there's greed or hatred, delusion, it limits us, it harms ourselves to do that, not to speak of if we act it out and harm others.

But meditation taught this deep sensitivity that sometimes I like to call ethical sensitivity because you feel so deeply the impact... of certain kind of ways of being, that if there's greed or hatred, delusion,

it limits us, it harms ourselves to do that, not to speak of if we act it out and harm others. And also with this deep ethical sensitivity, deep sensitivity, we're much more attuned to others. We much more closely feel their pain. How they are, it kind of harms ourselves.

You kind of feel the pain in a certain kind of way when we harm other people or we around people who have been harmed and who suffer and to care for that. And so one of the things I discovered through this kind of deep, subtleness in meditation was that, in a sense, this place of just being, that from that was this deep sensitivity. And from this deep sensitivity, there came compassion. Right. And to my surprise, that that started to become who I am more than any other way I ever had thought of who I was as a human being before that.

That if someone had asked me, I think nobody's ever really asked me this maybe, but if one of you asked me, Gil, who are you? I could sincerely say, maybe I don't want to say it because... It sounds a little bit conceited or too much. So I'll kind of whisper it. I'm compassion.

The compassionate response, or if I want to kind of make it a little bit more simple, I would say I'm the appropriate response. The compassionate response, or if I want to kind of make it a little bit more simple, I would say I'm the appropriate response. I'm the beneficial response. And when I was at the Zen monastery, I found myself spontaneously saying to my Zen teacher, when we pass each other on the trail one day, on the path one day, and I said, I'm becoming a response machine.

And so you have to forgive the word machine because that doesn't sound so human or something. But it was just what came out that was just expressing how I, you know, this change that had come over me. So that was just the language I used. But I was becoming just a response. And that response is very much centered in compassion.

But that response of compassion, care is both. Something that just is, it's a being-ness, it's the art, it's the dance, it's the song that we sing, of course. But built into it is the medical researcher, the medical scientist. Built into it is, well, if there is harm here, if there is hurt here, if there is suffering here, let's understand it. Let's see how it can come to an end.

We don't just say, oh, you're suffering? Right. Just be suffering. Just suffer better. Something, you know, it's kind of what we don't say, even though I do tell people that sometimes.

I'll explain why in a minute. But, you know, the idea is not just to continue perpetuating the suffering. The idea is what does it take to end it? But, you know, the idea is not just to continue perpetuating the suffering. The idea is what does it take to end it?

What's the medicine? What's the cure? Yeah. And there are things that Buddhism teaches. There are things that therapists can do.

There are things lots of people can help with. And the Buddhism is to really, and the reason I chose Buddhism is in my youth, I knew nothing that went as deep into the human heart as Buddhism. I knew

nothing that addressed the issues of being attached to self as Buddhism addresses that self-attachment. Right. And I saw that when I was young.

It was kind of the deepest attachment we have. So I wanted to be able to kind of come with that medicine to the world or have that medicine for myself. And so we want to bring suffering to the end. So it's not just, you know, just be as you are. Be as you are, but there is a way that that being as we are has within it the movement, the desire, to the end of suffering, the end of harm, causing it and experiencing it and living with it.

And that's phenomenal. Is that religion? If it is, that's my religion. Dalai Lama said, my religion is kindness. So if he could say that, I can say that my religion is the end of harm.

And the reason sometimes I say, you know, to tell people, you know, you need to just suffer better. It's kind of outrageous, right? And the reason sometimes I say, you know, to tell people, you know, you need to just suffer better. It's kind of outrageous, right? But the reason is sometimes we actually need to understand and feel and experience our suffering to really understand it, to really be motivated to bring it to an end.

And usually I say this to people, if they're struggling with something and they know that it's not healthy for them and they're trying to find a way, when I get a sense that they actually have never stopped to look at it, they're always kind of recoiling from it or trying to find a solution from it. But the solution is by going through it, rather than avoiding it or finding a cure. And so if the idea is to go through it, I say, you need to suffer better. You have to really experience it fully. And I usually explain what I mean.

I don't just, it's kind of cruel, just say suffer better. But Buddhist teachers have certain permission to say certain things. One of the things I feel like I've permission to say, this is also done in context, and usually people are willing to go along with it when I say this. Sometimes it's kind of a wonderful job because some of the things you can say in order to help people. That's the whole purpose, right?

So it makes me glad that I can help people. But occasionally I tell people, you know, you're conceded. Well, where do you get away with that? So it makes me glad that I can help people. But occasionally I tell people, you know, you're conceded.

Well, where do you get away with that? You know, that's kind of insulting to some people. But usually it's in context. I prepare people for it. And usually they appreciate it because it's true.

And so is Buddhism a religion or not? Is it an art? Right? Or is it a form of medical research? Is it more like that? And I kind of like to think of it as both an art and medical research, the way I said, that if we understand it as art, if you really do it well, if you really become a dancer or singer well, I think it requires a deep, deep sensitivity to oneself, to one's emotionality, to one's expressivity.

A deep ability to let go of the inhibitions and the preoccupations and the hindrances that get in the way of really being the art, which hopefully provides us deep sensitivity that what lives in us is compassion, is care, is a desire for health, is a desire for wholesomeness, is the desire for our goodness, is a desire

for freedom. And then it becomes... more, the little bit more, the medical research side of Buddhism. Okay, now let's work for that. Conversely, you know, if you start with it being medical research and you do that really well, then you start finding the cure for your hindrances, the five hindrances, you start finding the cure for a preoccupied mind and start finding a cure from all kinds of things.

Conversely, you know, if you start with it being medical research and you do that really well, then you start finding the cure for your hindrances, the five hindrances, you start finding the cure for a preoccupied mind and start finding a cure from all kinds of things. And you settle and relax and get these stressed. And that reveals this place of deep inner sensitivity. That's the birthplace of, you know, this deep, you know, deep, healthy, wholesome source within us. That we in our school, we don't call Buddha nature.

But sometimes we can call it the literal word for it sometimes in our school, which is the womb. So that's kind of nice, maybe. That there's this profound place within us. That's something beautiful and wonderful can be born that can be expressed. So we have these two areas, two approaches.

And it's interesting, I've been involved with different Buddhist traditions. And it seems like the rhetoric can be one or the other. But in practice, they both kind of come together. They both contain both within them. These are not, in practice, are not so separate from each other.

But it's kind of nice to know both and to appreciate both so that you don't become overly complacent and you don't become overly striving. And you find the middle way between complacency and striving. And so the over-striving is the medical approach. The complacency can be the art approach. But so they have neither one, they come together.

So that's my hope for how we practice. The complacency can be the art approach. But so they have neither one, they come together. So that's my hope for how we practice. So...

So it might be interesting now for either the art approach or the medical research approach, for you to have a chance to say a few words about where you fit in this spectrum. Where do you fit? How do you understand yourself if there is a spectrum between art and research, medical research? Where are you in this spectrum in your practice or your life and your engagement? What struck you about this talk?

And so you're welcome to sit quietly and not participate in a conversation with someone. You're welcome to leave if you're more comfortable with that. But the idea is to take about 10 minutes for a conversation with maybe a couple of people next to you, groups of three perhaps, and have a little conversation. The idea is not for any one person to tell a long story. You know, a 10-minute story to make your point, no one has any chance.

But actually, the art of this kind of conversing is to say, just one, and don't say all that you could say. Just make one point, make it well, but somewhat succinct. Because the fascinating things about these conversations is not what you say, but what you hear. Right. So you have to give a chance for others to hear something.

But you want to speak too long because you want to be impacted by what you hear from others. So you have to give a chance for others to hear something. But you want to speak too long because you want to be impacted by what you hear from others. And then you might learn more about yourself. And you might find yourself, and it's your turn again, to say things you've never, what I've dreamt you would say.

Something new arises. Right. So that's, you know, and then we'll come back to the whole group for a few minutes and maybe have a little more discussion as a total group. And then at 1045, we'll stop for the potluck or the formal ending. So if you don't mind, if you're up for it, to turn to someone near you and look around, make sure no one, sometimes people, one person's in the middle and people turn away just because, coincidentally, just look around and make sure everyone's included.

Hmm. Well, that felt like a lot of energy in here. It felt like happy energy for the most part. I hope that was nice for you. Maybe given all the energy, maybe we take 30 seconds to sit quietly.

So in the silence, I'll read two quotes from the Buddha. If desiring happiness you use violence on others desiring happiness, then you won't find happiness. One who neither kills or makes others kill, who neither steals nor makes others steal. Is one who has love for all beings. So it's a religion of love, a religion of non-harming, of happiness, or it's not a religion.

Is one who has love for all beings. So it's a religion of love, a religion of non-harming, of happiness, or it's not a religion. It's about love and happiness and non-harming. Whatever that is, it's good. So we have a couple of minutes before we...

Any last words, any questions or comments that anyone wants to briefly make before we Break for the potluck? Yes. What's the Polly word for womb? Oh, it's *yonī*. Thank you. Womb.

Yeah, *yonī*. And it doesn't literally mean womb. It just means womb for humans. It's the source for where life comes from. So like the egg is the *yonī* for a chicken.

So there's, you know, so, so there are different living beings come out of some other various, various things. But for humans, it's just, *yonī* happens to be the womb. There's a wonderful story of what I've told this maybe too many times, but the Buddha said something like, if a chicken sits on its eggs. Yeah. And properly, and incubates them just like supposed to, even if the chicken does not want the eggs to hatch, the eggs will hatch.

In the same way, if you live properly with the Eightfold path, even if you don't want to be enlightened, you will become enlightened. Right? So maybe like, so if in that metaphor, it's not a womb, it's your eggs. Sit on your eggs. Incubate.

You incubate. Let something gestate. Let something kind of be nourished and supported. Thank you, Gil. Could you say a little bit about how you think about or how you would recommend we think about?



Thank you, Gil. Could you say a little bit about how you think about or how you would recommend we think about? So oftentimes we're trying to not do harm, but it feels that we're embedded in a system that is either intent or designed to do harm. So how do you think about not doing harm when embedded in a system that feels like it wants to push us towards doing harm or is built to do harm? Many years ago I was at a kind of a panelist on a conference about Buddhism and ethics.

And the panelists were all asked a question about, what's your biggest ethical challenge as a Buddhist teacher? And there was a Burmese monk who lived in Bay Area for a long time, Yūsīlinanda, until he died. Lovely man. And he was there, and he said, yes, my biggest ethical challenge is that... When the Burmese immigrants come to the United States, it's hard for them to find work to take care of their family.

And some of them only can find work in the military industrial industry. And they come to me and ask me, is this ethical or not that I do this? And I know it's unethical, but I can't, I don't want to, I know how hard it is to find work and take care of their family. So I don't know what they say to them. So, I mean, this is a challenge many people have.

And so I just want to appreciate the challenge. So I don't know what they say to them. So, I mean, this is a challenge many people have. And so I just want to appreciate the challenge. I don't know if I have a good answer.

But that's a kind of question that's really important to keep and reflect and analyze and think about. And certainly, a small solution would be, can I make the difference? Can I make a difference within it? Many years ago, I was teaching a class on Buddhism. I think it was an academic class.

And one of the students was a police officer, and he said, my department is kind of corrupt. And I said, well, why don't you leave? And he said, no, I feel like I have to be there and try to make a difference, make it better. So that's one answer. And the other answer, that's one end of the extreme, I guess the other end is to leave it, find another way to have a life.

And then everything in between. I want to thank you for that question. I appreciate very much that sensitivity you have. Okay. Well, thank you all very much.

So we have a potluck, which means that everyone's welcome to stay. It really doesn't matter how much food there is or isn't. It just matters that we're here together in a friendly way and have a chance to hang out. And so... We'll serve the monk who's here, Agadama.

Thank you for being here at first, as the custom, and then I hope you enjoy your company. And so... We'll serve the monk who's here, Agadama. Thank you for being here at first, as the custom, and then I hope you enjoy your company. Thank you.