

Secular Buddhism

<http://secularbuddhism.org/2012/07/09/what-is-a-secular-buddhist-and-what-do-they-believe/>

Secular Buddhism is new on the block compared to our sister traditions, and secular Buddhists' approaches to practice is almost as varied as the people themselves. Yet, I would like to take Gotama's approach to *self* and say what secular Buddhists are *not*:

- Secular Buddhists are not Stephen Batchelor clones. Not all secular Buddhists know about Stephen Batchelor, and while many do, not all are in 100% agreement with him.
- We do not all approach practice the same way, nor do we all view the suttas in the same light, and many of us don't even agree on Gotama himself (more on this in beliefs below).
- Secular Buddhists do not feel the need to erase the colorful rich, history of Buddhism, nor do we want to destroy traditions, their practices, their rituals, or their beliefs. Most secular Buddhists do not consider traditional Buddhism as "wrong" and secular Buddhism as "right".

It's impossible to say a secular Buddhist is *this*. In doing so, we'd create a stereotype that simply wouldn't fit many secular Buddhists, and frankly secular Buddhism does not exist in and of itself any more than anything else. However, we do have some commonalities, but again, these are not going to apply to all secular Buddhists:

- Many secular Buddhists approach Buddhism from a practice point of view only.
- Many secular Buddhists are not dogmatic about the suttas but have great respect for the teachings.
- Many secular Buddhists consider the most relevant teachings to be the four noble truths, the eightfold path, and the ethics and compassion that comes out of both of those. However, there is much variation on how they define these teachings and put them into practice. In fact, we have a lot of healthy discussion and disagreement on these topics with each other.
- Many secular Buddhist approach the sutta translations enthusiastically, skillfully, and skeptically. There is also much disagreement and agreement over the suttas.
- Many secular Buddhists don't care at all about the suttas, Buddhist history, or even Buddha. What they want is the practice itself; they want to know what to do.

What do they believe?

Many Buddhists, if they have worked with meditation and mindfulness much, get to the point where they are good at discovering their own beliefs, dissecting them, and letting go of them where appropriate. Belief, after all, is simply an idea that one clings to, in some cases with compelling evidence, and in other cases with no evidence at all. We all have beliefs. It's how human beings form world views, but this Buddhist practice is wonderful in helping us examine them.

- Some secular Buddhists believe Buddha was a historical figure and his authenticity is of importance to their practice.
- Some secular Buddhists don't believe Buddha was a historical figure, and view Gotama as a myth and the teachings as full of wisdom, and some nonsense.
- Some secular Buddhists have never thought about whether Gotama is a historical person or a myth, and some don't care either way.
- Some secular Buddhists practice rituals they learned in traditional Buddhism, while other secular Buddhists reject those very same rituals.
- Some secular Buddhists believe all the teachings should be approached with scientific scrutiny, tested in real life, and they let go of anything in the suttas that can not be practiced in life.
- Some secular Buddhists believe in rebirth or reincarnation, while many do not.
- Some secular Buddhists believe one can reach a fixed state of enlightenment and end suffering completely, while others do not.
- Some secular Buddhists view enlightenment as moments of being awake, mindful in the present without mental embellishments and the suffering that creates.
- Some secular Buddhists believe it's *unBuddhist* to call oneself a Buddhist of any sort.

I could go on, but I'm hoping you'll see that defining secular Buddhists is difficult and perhaps unnecessary. The one thing we do share is an interest in Buddhism, the practice, and we want to suffer less or not at all. We agree we are practicing or learning about Buddhism on some level, even if it's just an interest in mindfulness.

Secular is a controversial word that is gaining a variety of definitions. Secular is sometimes defined as *not* religious or *not*supernatural; concerning this world and this single lifetime; or allowing for *all* traditions and religions and not adhering to any single one in particular....

I'd like to give warning by using a phrase from the suttas I really like: *don't get caught in a thicket of views*. As soon as you say, secular Buddhists believe such and such, you'll come across a person who doesn't believe that. If you define secular Buddhists in one particular way, you'll come across someone else who defines it another way. The secular Buddhists (with all other Buddhist types) have countless differences. What we all have in common is we are human beings who suffer, who want to be free of suffering. Let's just start from that foundation, have compassion for one another, enjoy healthy disagreements, the sharing of information, and enjoy the benefits of this practice.

May we all be free of suffering!