

Secular Buddhists

also known as “Atheist Buddhists”

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Entry tags: Buddhist Traditions, Secularism, Religious Group

Since the end of the 20th century, Secular Buddhist communities have been gathering in-person and growing through English-language online spaces with audiences in the UK, continental Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the US. The communities with a large online presence include the Secular Buddhist Association and the Secular Buddhist Podcast, founded by Americans Ted Meissner and Noah Rasheta, respectively, and the Secular Buddhist Network, which has a team based primarily in Europe. Secular Buddhists settled on this term over other ways to present themselves, such as atheist Buddhist or agnostic Buddhist. All three terms owe their popularity to the work of Stephen Batchelor, who is based in the UK. His 1997 publication, *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening*, mentions “agnostic Buddhist” and “secular agnosticism.” Those who identify as secular Buddhists typically subscribe to a form of Buddhist modernism that denies metaphysical interpretations of rebirth and karma (though some would allow for psychological interpretations), and the existence of Buddhist deities such as the Medicine Buddha, devas, or wish-granting bodhisattvas. Secular Buddhists tend to focus on teachings found in the Pali Nikayas, neglecting other portions of the Buddhist canon such as Mahayana texts or the vinaya. An earlier motto of the Secular Buddhist Association sums up secular Buddhism as a “natural, pragmatic approach” to the theory and practice found in the Nikayas. Natural denotes the rejection of the “supernatural” from the standpoint of modern materialist physicalism. By pragmatic, they mean the central practice of quiet sitting meditation is elevated, while Buddhist practices of chanting spells to deities, prostration to statues, and circumambulation around relics are dismissed as unnecessary “superstitious” ritual. They tend to argue their interpretation of Buddhism is scientific and more of a philosophy than a religion, without the need for belief of faith. The goal of quiet sitting is to cultivate insight into the nature of reality, such as three marks of existence: dukkha (suffering or dis-ease), annica (impermanence), and anatta (non-self). This type of meditation is also used to develop focused attention and concentration. The Secular Buddhist Network recommends a reading that distinguishes secular meditation as different from “traditional Buddhist lineages” because “the purpose of meditation for Secular Buddhists is to cultivate certain virtues and insights which are crucial to promoting human flourishing in this world, not the attainment of nirvana.” Nirvana and the liberation from the cycle of samara are part of the “the cultural and supernatural overlays” that Secular Buddhists reject. Rasheta, of the Secular Buddhist Podcast, focuses on what works for him and repackages his personal experience with Tibetan and Japanese Buddhist lineages into a form that is “accessible and easy to understand for secular-minded, ‘westerners’ like [him].” In other words, he presents Secular Buddhism as “ancient wisdom” that can help everyone, including those who identify as “Christian, Muslim, Atheist, Hindu, Believer, Non-believer,” etc.



Date Range: 1997 CE - 2022 CE

Region: Anglophone North America, Europe, and Australasia

Region tags: Europe, North America, United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Transnational, United Kingdom

English speaking communities throughout North America, Europe, and Australasia.

Status of Participants:

- ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Rasheta, Noah. 2016. *Secular Buddhism: Eastern Thought for Western Minds*. San Francisco: Blurb.
- Source 2: ——. 2018. *No-Nonsense Buddhism for Beginners: Clear Answers to Burning Questions About Core Buddhist Teachings*. Emeryville, CA: Althea Press.
- Source 3: Yancy, George, and Emily McRae, eds. 2019. *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Source 1: Batchelor, Stephen. 1997. *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Source 2: ——. 2010. *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.
- Source 3: ——. 2016. *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Source 1: Batchelor, Stephen. 2018. *Secular Buddhism: Imagining the Dharma in an Uncertain World*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Source 2: Durazzo, Leandro Marques. 2015. "Post-Religional Perspective and Secular Buddhism: Stephen Batchelor and the Post-Metaphysical Religion." *Horizonte* 13 (37): 592–604.
- Source 3: Flanagan, Owen. 2011. *The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Source 1: Gleig, Ann. 2019a. *American Dharma: Buddhism beyond Modernity*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Source 2: ——. 2019b. "Undoing Whiteness in American Buddhism." In *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*, edited by George Yancy and Emily McRae, 21–42. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Source 3: Harris, Sam. 2015. *Waking up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Source 1: McMahan, David. 2017. "Buddhism and Global Secularisms." *Journal of Global Buddhism* 18 (0): 112–28. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1251845>.
- Source 2: Mitchell, Scott A. 2016. *Buddhism in America: Global Religion, Local Contexts*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Source 3: Payne, Richard K. 2019. "Religion, Self-Help, Science: Three Economies of Western/ized Buddhism." *Journal of Global Buddhism* 20: 69–86.

Online sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: <https://secularbuddhism.org/what-is-a-secular-buddhist-and-what-do-they-believe/>
- Source 1 Description: Dana Nourie explains what is a Secular Buddhist, and what they believe.
- Source 2 URL: <https://secularbuddhistnetwork.org/>
- Source 2 Description: The Secular Buddhist Network homepage links to general information, a

newsletter, groups and sanghas, courses and retreats, books and talks, and more.

– Source 3 URL: <https://secularbuddhistnetwork.org/about/>

– Source 3 Description: The page explains the goals of the Secular Buddhist Network and what they wish to provide.

– Source 1 URL: <https://secularbuddhism.org/>

– Source 1 Description: Ted Meissner has officially registered the Secular Buddhist Association as a 501(c)(3) organization, which indicates a section of the US federal tax code that allows exemption for nonprofits, specifically those that are considered public charities, private foundations or private operating foundations. This includes religious organizations and churches. This website provides articles, online forums for discussion, and a podcast (not to be confused with the podcast started by Noah Rasheta).

– Source 2 URL: <https://secularbuddhism.org/starting-out/>

– Source 2 Description: Ted Meissner gives a description of what they mean by secular.

– Source 3 URL: <https://secularbuddhism.org/faq/>

– Source 3 Description: Jennifer Hawkins provides answers to FAQs on Secular Buddhism

– Source 1 URL: <https://secularbuddhism.com/what-is-secular-buddhism/>

– Source 1 Description: Noah Rasheta explains what is Secular Buddhism.

– Source 2 URL: <https://mormonstories.org/podcast/noah-rasheta-secular-buddhism/>

– Source 2 Description: Josh Dehlin (2017) interviews Noah Rasheta on his founding of secularbuddhism.com and the Secular Buddhist Podcast.

– Source 3 URL: <https://blog.lemonadestand.org/noah-rasheta-paramotoring-master-and-host-of-the-secular-buddhism-podcast/>

– Source 3 Description: Chemain Evans (2020) interviews Noah Rasheta on Secular Buddhism and Rasheta's experience in business, marketing, and entrepreneurship.

Relevant online primary textual corpora (original languages and/or translations):

– Source 1 URL: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063918616968>

– Source 1 Description: Facebook Page of the Secular Buddhist Association with 15k followers.

– Source 2 URL: <https://www.facebook.com/Secularbuddhism>

– Source 2 Description: Facebook Page of the Secular Buddhism Podcast with over 91k "likes."

General Variables

Membership/Group Interactions

Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:

– Yes



Is the cultural contact competitive:

– No

↳ Is the cultural contact accommodating/pluralistic:

– Yes

Notes: Some Secular Buddhists, especially the main founders of the Secular Buddhist Association, Secular Buddhist Podcast, and Secular Buddhist Network have experienced training under Tibetan, Japanese, and Southeast Asian Buddhist teachers. However, they ultimately decided to leave their particular lineages in order to participate in Secular Buddhist communities.

↳ Is the cultural contact neutral:

– Yes

↳ Is there violent conflict (within sample region):

– No

↳ Is there violent conflict (with groups outside the sample region):

– No

Does the religious group have a general process/system for assigning religious affiliation:

– No

Does the religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members:

– Yes

Notes: Although they might not frame their work as proselytization or recruiting new members. Rather, they see themselves, their organization, and resources as providing information and guidance for the curious and interested.

↳ Is proselytizing mandated for religious professionals:

– No

↳ Is proselytizing mandated for all adherents:

– No

↳ Is missionary work mandated for religious professionals:

– No

↳ Is missionary work mandated for all adherents:

– No



Is proselytization coercive:

– No

Does the religion have official political support

– No

Is there a conception of apostasy in the religious group:

– No

Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population, numerical):

– Estimated population, numeric: 100000

Notes: This is just a estimate from the number of followers of the Secular Buddhist Association's Facebook page (15000, as of 2022.08.29) and the number of "likes" on the Secular Buddhism Podcast's Facebook page (91897, as of 2022.08.29). The first few episodes of the Secular Buddhism Podcast have been played over two hundred thousand times each, and a typical episode has approximately fifty thousand plays.

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (% of sample region population, numerical):

– Estimated population, percentage of sample region: 1

Notes: Less than 1% is my best estimate.

Scripture

Does the religious group have scriptures:

Scripture is a generic term used to designate revered texts that are considered particularly authoritative and sacred relative to other texts. Strictly speaking, it refers to written texts, but there are also "oral scriptures" (e.g. the Vedas of India).

– Yes



Are they written:

– Yes

Notes: The Pali Nikayas are read mainly in English translation. Some Secular Buddhists, especially the main founders of the Secular Buddhist Association, Secular Buddhist Podcast, and Secular Buddhist Network have experienced training under Tibetan, Japanese, and

Southeast Asian Buddhist teachers and have the ability to read the Buddhist canon in Asian languages.

↳ Are they oral:

– No

Notes: Their podcasts are not considered scripture, only informal conversation around belief and practice.

↳ Is there a story (or a set of stories) associated with the origin of scripture:

– No

Architecture, Geography

Is monumental religious architecture present:

– No

Are there different types of religious monumental architecture:

– No

Is iconography present:

– No

Beliefs

Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:

Answer “no” only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body. Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.

– No

Belief in afterlife:

– No

Notes: In their rejection of rebirth, samara, and wish-fulfilling bodhisattvas, some Secular Buddhists understand themselves as advancing and adapting Buddhist teachings to modernity and natural science.

Reincarnation in this world:

– No

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses:

– No

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

– No

Are grave goods present:

– No

Are formal burials present:

– No

Supernatural Beings

Are supernatural beings present:

– No

Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present:

This refers to surveillance by supernatural beings of humans' behaviour and/or thought particularly as it relates to social norms or potential norm violations.

– No

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:

– No

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards:

– No

Messianism/Eschatology

Are messianic beliefs present:

– No

Norms and Moral Realism

Are general social norms prescribed by the religious group:

– No

Is there a conventional vs. moral distinction in the religious group:

– No

Practices

Membership Costs and Practices

Does membership in this religious group require celibacy (full sexual abstinence):

– No

Does membership in this religious group require constraints on sexual activity (partial sexual abstinence):

– No

Does membership in this religious group require castration:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require fasting:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods):

– No

Does membership in this religious group require permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require painful physical positions or transitory painful wounds:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of adults:

"Adults" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition of a human who is 18-years-old or older and who is legally responsible for his/her actions, then please specify that difference in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of children:

"Children" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition, please specify that different in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of property/valuable items:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of time (e.g., attendance at meetings or services, regular prayer, etc.):

– No

Does membership in this religious group require physical risk taking:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require accepting ethical precepts:

– Yes

Notes: The five lay Buddhist precepts are important to Secular Buddhists although they are free to interpret and adapt these to their individual wishes without needing to consult with any religious authority.

Does membership in this religious group require marginalization by out-group members:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require participation in small-scale rituals (private, household):

– No

Notes: Secular Buddhists do not consider their practice of quiet sitting meditation ritual.

– Yes

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↳ What is the average interval of time between performances (in hours):

Performances here refers to small-scale rituals.

– I don't know

Notes: From an outsider perspective, daily individual and weekly or monthly group quiet sitting meditation are ritual practices. The time between sittings can vary widely. They can sit as short as a few minutes to upper ranges of an hour or more.

Does membership in this religious group require participation in large-scale rituals:

I.e. involving two or more households; includes large-scale “ceremonies” and “festivals.”

– No

Are extra-ritual in-group markers present:

E.g. special changes to appearance such as circumcision, tattoos, scarification, etc.

– No

Does the group employ fictive kinship terminology:

– No

Society and Institutions

Levels of Social Complexity

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose one):

– Other [specify in comments]

Notes: They form in-person practice communities and online communities.

Welfare

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized famine relief:

– No

Is famine relief available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized poverty relief:

– No

Is poverty relief available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm:

– No

Is institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Education

Does the religious group provide formal education to its adherents:

– No

Is formal education available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group:

– Yes



Is extra-religious education open to both males and females:

– I don't know

Notes: It depends on the laws of the adherent's nation state.

Bureaucracy

Do the group's adherents interact with a formal bureaucracy within their group:

– No

Do the group's adherents interact with other institutional bureaucracies:

– Yes

Public Works

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:

– No

Is public food storage provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the

religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question provide water management (irrigation, flood control):

– No

Is water management provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Does the religious group in question provide transportation infrastructure:

– No

Is transportation infrastructure provided for the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Taxation

Does the religious group in question levy taxes or tithes:

– No

Are taxes levied on the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: The majority of adherents are citizens are their respective Anglophone nations.

Enforcement

Does the religious group in question provide an institutionalized police force:

– No

Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized police force provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized judges:

– No

Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized judicial system provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Does the religious group in question enforce institutionalized punishment:

– No

Are the group's adherents subject to institutionalized punishment enforced by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include execution:

– I don't know

Notes: It depends on the laws of the adherent's nation state.

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include exile:

– I don't know

Notes: It depends on the laws of the adherent's nation state.

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include corporal punishments:

– I don't know

Notes: It depends on the laws of the adherent's nation state.

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include ostracism:

– I don't know

Notes: It depends on the laws of the adherent's nation state.

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include seizure of property:

– I don't know

Notes: It depends on the laws of the adherent's nation state.

Does the religious group in question have a formal legal code:

– No

Are the group's adherents subject to a formal legal code provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Warfare

Does religious group in question possess an institutionalized military:

– No

Do the group's adherents participate in an institutionalized military provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– I don't know

Notes: It depends on the laws of the adherent's nation state.

Are the group's adherents protected by or subject to an institutionalized military provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– I don't know

Notes: It depends on the laws of the adherent's nation state.

Written Language

Does the religious group in question possess its own distinct written language:

– No

Is a non-religion-specific written language available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Is a non-religion-specific written language used by the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Calendar

Does the religious group in question possess a formal calendar:

– No

Is a formal calendar provided for the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Food Production

Does the religious group in question provide food for themselves:

– No

Is food provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes



Please characterize the forms/levels of food production [choose all that apply]:

– I don't know

Notes: It depends on the adherent's nation state.

Bibliography

General References

Reference: Kin Cheung undefined. Buddhism and Secularism. (Ann Gleig , Scott Mitchell A., Ann Gleig , Scott Mitchell A., Ed.), The Oxford Handbook of American Buddhism. Oxford University Press.

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Reference: Yaseen Ackerman The Secular Buddhist Movement and Cultural Appropriation. *Buddhism, but Better(?)*

Reference: Yaseen Ackerman Secular Buddhism and the Superior Whiteness of Being