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Exposure To Buddhist Beliefs Reduces Prejudice; Have You Heard About Nirvana?

Apr 6, 2015 03:08 PM [By Justin Caba](#)

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Hearing words tied to Buddhism can increase our prosociality and reduce our prejudice.

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Buddhism has become an increasingly popular religion in Western countries thanks to attractive concepts, including how to lead a moral life, mindfulness, and a developed wisdom and understanding. A recent [study](#) published in the April issue of the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* has found that being exposed to Buddhist concepts, such as “Dharma

and “Nirvana,” can reduce our prejudice and increase our prosocial behaviors.

“Unlike Christian and other monotheistic religious systems that paradoxically seem to encourage not only prosociality but also prejudice, Buddhist ideas favor both prosociality and outgroup tolerance, and these ideals seem particularly efficient (in leading to action) for people with relevant personality dispositions,” the research [explained](#).

Researchers from Belgium and Taiwan recruited 355 people from both Western and exotic backgrounds, including Western Christians, Western Buddhists, Taiwanese Buddhists, and Taiwanese Taoists, who were asked to participate in three different experiments. Participants were asked to fill out crossword puzzles that subliminally exposed them to religious buzzwords tied to Buddhism, like “Dharma” and “Nirvana,” as well as words with no ties to religion, such as “freedom.”

After being subliminally exposed to Buddhist words, Westerners from a Christian background reported having fewer negative feelings toward people from another group. Westerner Christians also scored higher on prosociality tests and were more tolerant of other cultures after being exposed to Buddhist concepts compared to those who were exposed to Christian concepts. Similar findings were observed among people from Taiwan.

“Emotional (compassion) and cognitive (tolerance of contradictions) mechanisms explain, to some extent, how Buddhist concepts, across cultural and religious contexts, enhance prosocial and tolerant attitudes and behavioral tendencies,” the team added. “Religious and cultural characteristics ‘travel’ and influence people’s attitudes and behavior in a globalized world even at the implicit level of consciousness.”

The effect Buddhist concepts have on feelings of prejudice and prosociality among Westerners can be explained by a phenomenon known as [priming](#), a subconscious form of memory where words or objects cause us to think to act in a certain way. For example, someone who sees the word “red” has an easier time recognizing the word “apple.”

“To conclude, we think that this work provides, for the first time, experimental evidence in favor of the idea that in both the East and the West, across people from both Christian and Eastern Asian religious traditions, Buddhist concepts automatically activate positive social behavioral outcomes, that is, prosociality and low prejudice, in particular among people with personal dispositions of socio-cognitive openness,” the researchers concluded.