

A Western Christian Look at Buddhism

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Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563-483 B.C.) of the Sakya clan in India was born a prince, an heir to his father's small kingdom in northern India. Tradition tells that at his birth a prophecy was made that he would either be a great emperor or a Buddha. His father, more of political orientation than religious, opted to shelter his son from the hardships of the world by offering him opulent living, surrounded by a high wall in the castle. Gautama's father feared that if he saw the suffering of the world, he would prefer to save humankind rather than to rule it. The young child matured, married and had a son, all the while experiencing every human pleasure possible, still sheltered from the world outside. But curiosity prevailed. To see what the outside was like, Gautama took four trips out of the castle. In those trips saw: an aged man, a sick man, a dead man, and a wandering monk who appeared content.

Deciding to seek out the secrets of such contentment, he left his wife and son and at age 29 set out in search of truth, having known only the good life to this point. In his search for truth and the path that leads to the ending of all impermanence and anguish, he worked with teachers of trance meditation and went the route of extreme asceticism, but by age 35 this still did not produce what he was seeking. It is taught that he went back to a reasonable diet, and with returned strength one afternoon decided to sit down under a tree and there meditate until he achieved enlightenment. Throughout the night he struggled with many thoughts, passing thorough several trance-like states and stages of awareness, seeing clearly all his past lives, and finally, according to legend, arrived at the clear understanding he was seeking. He had, in Buddhist' teaching, reached "the other shore" that is Permanent True Reality—Nirvana." He had become a "Buddha"— an "enlightened One", "One who is Awake." In this

meditation he realized the *Four Noble Truths* and the *Eightfold Noble Path*. For the next 45 years, the Buddha would travel about, recruit followers, teach his spiritual insights, and pursue a Middle Path of life—neither too indulgent or too ascetic.

I. What the Buddha Taught

The main sources today for the Buddha’s teaching are the *Middle Length Sayings*, Volumes 1, 2 and 3. There are also five volumes of *Kindred Sayings*, five volumes of *Gradual Sayings*, and three volumes of *Dialogues of the Buddha*. These books form a part of the “Pali Canon.” (“Pali” was the language of the original writings.)

A. The Four Noble Truths

Gautama’s Four Noble Truths are the basis for all other Buddhist understandings:

- 1) all life is suffering** (all creation is impermanent and inherently ill)
- 2) suffering is caused by desire** (due to humanity’s own ignorance, craving sensuality and sensations)
- 3) there can be an end to desire** (that end is to reach Nirvana, which is the true realized Reality)
- 4) the way to this end is in the Eightfold Path.**

The Buddhist Instruction Retreat on the Internet states that these present an “explicit explanation of Buddhism based on the Pali Canon . . . Benefits [of such teaching are:] Ending Anguish, Despair, Suffering, Pain, Peace of Mind, Self-Realization of the Ultimate Truth.”

B. The Eightfold Noble Path

The second major teaching of Buddhism is The Eightfold Noble Path. This is the means of

reaching Nirvana, the completion of the path of Buddhism, where the “true permanent state of reality” is achieved via self-enlightenment. This path embodies three qualities of the mind: Wisdom, Morality and Meditation.

Quality of Mind

Wisdom (*panna*)

Morality (*sila*)

Meditation (*samadhi*)

Step in the Noble Path

1. Right Understanding of the Four Noble Truths

2. Right Thought—working to obtain a perfect wisdom that will lead the follower to the ultimate true reality

3. Right Speech—avoiding lying, evil and frivolous speech

4. Right Action—which includes abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, evil acts and intoxicants (which are the Five Precepts for lay-followers)

5. Right Vocation—to abstain from evil ways of living or livelihoods, not earning a livelihood in any way that causes others to suffer

6. Right Effort, achieved by eliminating evil states of mind and developing good states of mind which include love of all creatures, pity and compassion for all creatures and a sympathetic joy

7. Right Mindfulness, achieved by recognizing as impermanent all things and decay that relate to this world, working to become detached from worldly concerns and temptations

8. Right Contemplation, shaping the mind for right thought processes

Meditation is only one part of the Buddhist path, but it is accessible to anyone, anywhere. Though Buddhist meditation cannot be learned in any depth without a teacher, the basic practice is simple. By following the Eightfold Noble Path, Buddhists claim to pass through eight higher states of consciousness which produce increased wisdom, the ability to see things as they really are, and with exceptional effort, achieve Self-Enlightenment.

C. The Three Refuges

Upon entering a Buddhist religious order, each new disciple takes on Three Refuges (also called Three Assertions or Three Jewels): ‘**I take refuge in the Buddha** (the one who has shown the way), **I take refuge in the dharma** (Buddha’s teachings about the way of understanding and love), and **I take refuge in the samgha** (the order of monks that lives in harmony and mindfulness)...We see here Buddhism taking the three forms of religious expression: an intellectual teaching [*dharma*]; an emerging object of worship and a formal act of submission [refuge in the Buddha]; and a sociological expression [the *samgha*].’ (Ellwood, page 121)

D. Helps Along The Way

1. The Buddha taught ‘**The Middle Way**’ as an aid to proper meditation. He reasoned that if the individual lives so austere as to lack necessary nourishment, the mind cannot adequately think in proper meditation. On the other side, if the individual lives too much in the here-and-now, attached to worldly sensuality, the mind will lack the ability to understand the Buddhist teachings. Thus, a Middle Way, living modestly—free from ill and also free from worldly joy or happiness—is the enabling attitude that finds the proper balance in this manifestation of life.

2. The life of Buddhist monks is structured around **Ten Prohibitions**: “1) taking life, 2) taking what is not given, 3) sexual misconduct, 4) lying, 5) taking intoxicants, 6) eating after noon, 7) watching or participating in dancing, singing and shows, 8) adorning oneself with garlands, perfumes, and ointments, 9) sleeping in a soft bed, and 10) receiving gold or silver.” (Ellwood, page 122)

3. A lay-person of the Buddhist religion is directed to follow a Middle Way of life, and as closely as possible, the first five of these prohibitions. They are also to be an example of the **four unlimited virtues**: unlimited friendliness, unlimited compassion, unlimited sympathetic joy and unlimited even-mindedness.

4. The force of **Karma** (the law of cause and effect) to the Buddhist is that universal force that keeps everything moving and changing. Karma is what keeps reincarnation going, one lifetime-manifestation after another in an endless cycle of reincarnations, until the individual through right-living and meditation is able on their own to transcend the levels of consciousness and achieve the end of the journey: Nirvana. Buddhists teach that there is no specific heaven or hell, but that the reincarnation cycle continues through endless heavens and hells to reach its journey’s end in ultimate reality.

II. Divisions of Buddhism Today

Modern Buddhism is divided into two major traditions: **Theravada** (the path of the Elders) Buddhism, found in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, and **Mahayana** (“Great Vessel”) Buddhism, found in China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal, Bhutan, Vietnam, and parts of India and Russia; plus the **Vajrayana** sect concentrated in Nepal. Though founded in India, Buddhism claims less than 1% of the Indian population as adherents. The majority religion in India is Hinduism. Buddhism world-wide is the fourth largest religion with 338,621,000 followers or 6% of the

world's population (1994 figures), behind Christianity (34%, 1,900,174,000), Islam (18%, 1,033,453,000) and Hinduism (14%, 764,000,000) (Manske, B) An estimated 2,132,000 Buddhists live in North America with about 780,000 of these in the United States in 199 congregations. (Neighbor's Faith, 19) Buddhism is rapidly gaining adherents in the United States, a result of the postmodern self-enlightenment trend in American thought and the scepticism and mysticism of our modern age.

Theravada (also called *Hinayana*) Buddhism has far-reaching impact on the society in which it exists. This form of Buddhism emphasizes attaining enlightenment through meditation and self-power as the Buddha taught. *Theravada* monks in their saffron-yellow sleeveless robes roam the streets with their begging bowls. This form of Buddhism is older and of a more conservative nature.

Mahayana Buddhism traces its origins to around 200 A.D.—about 600 years after the Buddha lived—a split from the *Theravada* teachings. This more liberal form of Buddhism emphasizes the need to receive help from another power, rather than self-attainment. The central teaching in *Mahayana* thought is that anyone, through proper training and practice, can become a *bodhisattva*, “one who has reached the enlightened form but remains in bodily form to teach others the path.” Anything of any significance in *Mahayana* Buddhism is related to the *bodhisattva*. What is called the “Pure Land” sect of *Mahayana* Buddhism, emphasizing pure faith, is commonly found in American Buddhism. *Mahayana* first sent Buddhist missionaries to North America 1889, establishing what is now called Buddhist Churches of America.

The *Vajrayana* (meaning Thunderbolt Vessel or Diamond Vessel) sect of Buddhism is an offshoot of *Mahayana*. It emphasizes three forms of existence: “truth body,” “bliss body” and

“marvelous transformation body.” This is a more zealous sect of Buddhism, often with adherents assigned a patron *bodhisattva*.

Most Americans are most familiar with another sect that practices **Zen Buddhism**, with their familiar emphasis on meditation as the path to enlightenment. Many Americans equate Buddhism only with meditation. This sect puts its emphasis on the more dramatic forms of Buddhism including long meditation retreats and seeking enlightenment as the primary goal—all of which appeal to American competitiveness and individuality.

Another American permutation of Buddhism, quite different from Zen Buddhism in **Shin Buddhism**, with its origins from Japanese immigrants to the United States. The emphasis of Shin Buddhism is that the key to reaching Nirvana is faith, rather than strict religious practice. It is mostly an ethnic religious practice of Americanized Japanese.

III. Buddhism and Other World-Views

Generally Buddhists are conciliatory to people of other faiths. They would equally recognize Plato, Socrates, Moses, Christ and Mohamad all as great world teachers, maybe even as *bodhisattvas* (those who had attained enlightenment). Thus, Buddhism has wide appeal in today’s world. The American excitement about achieving new “experiences” plays into the Buddhist’s emphasis on meditation and achieving new levels of consciousness. The lack of any creation emphasis (and hence no “Great Creator”) parallels much of America’s scientific, evolutionistic world-view. To the Buddhist’s world-view, life is a series of ill manifestations caused by desire. As such, life as it exists has little value, and while one cannot willfully take life, a person also doesn’t have to inordinately work to maintain or sustain other life that would perish on its own. Buddhists have a ready willingness to share their

teachings with people of other faiths. They are generally non-combative or confrontational, preferring instead to live quiet, contemplative lives.

In Buddhist teaching, all that is perceived to exist, all that is temporal, all that is perishable are conditioned states and not really true existence. The one true existence is to leave all this that is ultimately ill and transcend to that which is really ultimately true, real, and permanent—Nirvana. Buddhists teach that all individuals have a “spark” of this divine truth, but few have any means at striving more fully towards it, but endlessly repeat themselves in varying manifestations of life, until guided by right meditation, they transcend one realm of consciousness for higher realms, ultimately arriving at Nirvana. The goal is by self-achievement and right practice to transcend mortal existence to arrive at what truly is real. There is no great “creator God” in Buddhism. There is no body and soul. All have only that “spark” of what is real Truth.

IV. Responding to Buddhist Teachings

Buddhist Teaching

Noble Truth: **All life is suffering** (all creation is impermanent and inherently ill)

Christian Response

Christians, Jews and Muslims would agree with part of Buddhism’s First Noble Truth. Psalm 90: 10 attests to this: “The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow...”

But when they claim that life is inherently ill, Christians, Jews and Muslims should certainly object, for Genesis 1 states, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth... and it was good.”

Buddhist Teaching

Noble Truth: **suffering is caused by desire** (which is due to humanity’s own ignorance, craving sensuality and sensations)

Christian Response

Suffering in this world is caused by sin. Evil desires and cravings are sin. With this understanding,

Christians agree with this Noble Truth. When Adam and Eve were created , God said that “it was very good.” They were perfect, without sin, without cravings, without desire. Life was imperishable. But when they were tempted by Satan to sin, life was no longer perfect. Suffering and death entered the world. Mankind, on its own, has no way out.

Buddhist Teaching

Noble Truth: **there can be an end to desire** (that end is to reach Nirvana, which is the true realized Reality)

Christian Response

There is **an end to desire** : not by a self-realization of Nirvana, but by faith in the forgiveness of sins that Jesus won for all mankind on the cross. St. Paul writes of this transition in quite a different way:

Listen, I tell you a mystery... the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality... then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory...’ Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 15:51-57)

Christians don’t speak about “Nirvana”, but have a parallel term: heaven. Heaven indeed is the “true realized Reality”. It is perfect; without end; without ill, suffering, desire or craving.

Buddhist Teaching

Noble Truth: **the way to this end is in the Eightfold Path.**

Christian Response

Heaven is not earned by right meditation or right actions of following a prescribed path. A person on their own cannot work their way to perfection. It is the gift of a kind and loving God. The Bible teaches:

A Righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known... This righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ... There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ. (Romans 3:21-25)

Christians call this righteousness “justification” or “redemption.” We are declared “justified” before God, not because of anything we have done but because what Jesus did—He redeemed us or “paid the price” to buy us back from sin death and eternal suffering in Hell.

Buddhist Teaching

The Eightfold Noble Path
right understanding
right thought
right speech

right action
right vocation
right effort
right mindfulness
right contemplation

Christian Response

The Christian's walk through life is also a "**Noble Path,**" not as a means of meriting a future life in Nirvana, but in response to a loving God who promises forgiveness and eternal life. Heaven is a free gift of God, simply through faith in Jesus Christ, received through the working of God the Holy Spirit. **The Christian's Noble Path is faith in action!** It is spoken of as "the Fruit of the Spirit...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." (Galatians 5:22-23). It is our response back to God for all He has done for us.

The Christian's Noble Path may properly be called "Sanctification": "being made holy" or "set apart." In the context of sanctification, Christians might even use the same or similar terms as the Buddhist in their Eightfold Noble Path, although with a Christian understanding of such terms.

By daily choices of life's alternatives, Christians participate in their own sanctification. These acts of faith or "good works" are personal, visible evidence of a living faith. (James 2:17)

Buddhist Teaching

The Three Refuges

I take Refuge in the Buddha
I take refuge in the teachings
I take refuge in the community

Christian Response

The Three Refuges offer some parallel to the Christian Apostles' Creed.

“I believe in God the Father...” the one who shows the way

“I believe in Jesus Christ...” the Word made flesh

“I believe in... the Holy Christian church...”

But there are striking differences! Buddha never was nor ever will be God. There is but one true God: the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Belief is different than refuge, although Christians do take refuge in God the Father. The teachings of Buddhism are radically different than the teachings of Christianity. The Holy Christian church is not an earthly community as the Buddhist community, but the invisible, heavenly eternal community that includes all who know and believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Buddhist Teaching

The Middle Way

Christian Response

Christians agree with “The Middle Way” of properly caring for the body—not overly indulging and not overly abstaining—but not as a way to be free from ill or worldly happiness and joy. Christians know that all these things will come—they are a part of God’s blessings. Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10:10)

Buddhist Teaching

The Ten Prohibitions

Christian Response

The Ten Prohibitions are a remarkable parallel to the Judaeo-Christian Ten Commandments as a great moral code, the first four roughly equivalent to four of the commandments. While Buddhism established their ten as a way of achieving the meditative life, God gave the Ten Commandments as His expectations of how we are to live in respect to Him and to all creation.

V. Christian Dialogue With Buddhism

1. Finding Common Ground

Buddhism has some practices that can be commended. The ascetic, even monastic, life-style undertaken by many Buddhists can be a commendable way of life. It has a strong parallel in Christian

monastic systems. In the Bible, Matthew, Mark and Luke all record Jesus' directive: "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me." (Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34 and Luke 9:23) The Middle Way of Buddhist life can be a recommended living standard for Christians—neither too withdrawn or too indulgent with society.

Both groups also seek eternity. Buddhism however doesn't recognize the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Buddha's teachings claim that people are sentenced to endless repetitions of life-manifestations until they get it right and reach Nirvana. God's Holy Bible teaches that there is only one way to eternal life. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." (John 14:6)

Christians could also readily accept the first three of the Four Noble Truths, at least within their own world-view. The Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes offers a Christian parallel: "The Teacher" in Ecclesiastes has experienced all there was to experience in life—similar to what the Buddha had experienced in his early years. The Teacher, like the Buddha concludes that "all is meaningless vanity, a chasing after the wind." Unlike the Buddha, The Teacher sees that even wisdom is meaningless. And then The Teacher tells about all of the self-enlightenment efforts he has made, all to no avail. His conclusion is quite different than the Buddha's. The Buddha says "you have to walk this eight-fold path by yourself in ever deeper meditation to reach eternity." The Teacher in Ecclesiastes advises, "... here is the conclusion of the matter [two steps]: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. for God will bring every deed into judgement." (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

Both Buddhism and Christianity teach about reaching eternity. Buddhists call that state "Nirvana" while Christians call it "heaven." While these concepts are not exactly interchangeable they

do have certain parallels. For the Buddhist however, reaching Nirvana requires a deep, life-time concentration and meditation, seeking to achieve this level by self-enlightenment. The Christian however has a more straight-forward road: simply by believing in Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sin and salvation that He won. Buddhist's Nirvana is cold, sterile, alone, simply the end to delusion and anguish. The heaven that Christ has prepared is also the end to delusion and anguish, but it is warmth, love, happiness, unity, companionship and in the presence of the eternal God.

Christians will agree that The Eightfold Noble Path offers a good way to live a moral life, and is similar in some respects to much of Jesus' moral teaching. Buddhists even agree with Christians that Jesus was a good moral teacher, even a *bodhisattva*. But even following that path, no matter how perfectly, doesn't merit salvation. Also in Buddhist teachings, their Ten Prohibitions are strikingly similar to the Ten Commandments. And as stated earlier, the Buddhist's Three Refuges offer some parallel to the Christian Apostles' Creed. Indeed there is much common ground for dialogue between Buddhists and Christians.

2. Recognizing Areas of Tension

Christians and Buddhists certainly do not agree on the path to eternal life. Buddhists teach that it is self-realized through much meditation. Christians teach that it is a free gift of God to all those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior (although many Christians mistakenly feel that somehow they might work their way to heaven through right living and good works)

Buddhists and Christians also disagree on the origins of the world. Buddhists teach that all creation is impermanent and inherently ill, a fabrication of the mind, and the goal of life is to escape to the true reality, Nirvana. Christians know that "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the

earth... [and] God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:1, 4). The purpose of the Christian’s existence is to serve God and tend to His creation. The goal of the Christian’s life is to be with Jesus in heaven, by God’s grace alone!

Other areas of tension include radically different worship practices, and the Buddhist’s generally low esteem for women, human life, family values and individual initiative. Buddhism is a self-centered religion. Christianity (in its ideal) is altruistic and God-centered.

3. Areas of Most Difficulty

Certainly the major conflict between Buddhists and Christians is over the person of Jesus Christ. While Buddhists recognize Jesus as an historical figure, they do not accept him as the only way to salvation. Nor do they recognize God as the creator of the universe or acknowledge anything like the Holy Spirit. They do not recognize that the world/universe was created; they claim it to be a fabrication of the mind.

Buddhists work to achieve salvation by their own effort. Christians know salvation comes only by faith in Jesus. Buddhists also do not recognize the concepts of sin or forgiveness, only that certain actions produce bad or disturbed Karma. Buddhism teaches that life is an endless cycle of reincarnations until one reaches Nirvana. The Bible teaches that “...man is destined to die once, and after that face judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). For the Christian, judgment of heaven or hell rests solely on whether or not an individual has faith in Jesus Christ—not a faith achieved on one’s own, but placed in the soul through the work and power of the Holy Spirit alone.

Buddhism is certainly a very different religion than Christianity. It does not offer the hope of salvation in Jesus Christ that Christianity does. It supports a good moral life while at the same time it

denies the Great Creator of moral life. It gives the wrong answer to the great question of the purpose of life. It provides no light for the path, only cold emptiness and non-existence. Jesus Christ said, “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6).

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