



## Buddhism Basics

### *A look at a religion settling in our country*

A Buddhist, trying to give other Buddhists an overview of Christianity, faces a daunting task. The history of Christianity is extensive; its doctrines cover a broad range; and each branch of Christianity has its own peculiar history and doctrines to be considered.

A Reformed Christian faces the same difficulty in giving Reformed Christians an overview of Buddhism. The various branches of Buddhists each have their own peculiarities of thought and life. Two Buddhists will not always agree on what is fundamental to their religion.

The attempt, though difficult, will be beneficial. Because Buddhism is a growing force in western countries, Buddhists might very well be the neighbours who cross our paths and whom we are called to love. We show this love by showing them the deceit and hopelessness of Buddhism, speaking to them of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and calling them to repentance and faith in Christ, who alone is the way, the truth, and the life.

### **History**

Buddhism originated with Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, the “Enlightened One.”

He was born about 563 BC in what is now Nepal. His father, a prince, raised him in luxury and sheltered him from seeing any form of suffering. In his adulthood, having travelled from the palace, he discovered four forms of suffering – a man suffering from old age; a sick man; a dead man; and a poor monk, begging for bread. Gautama concluded that happiness was an illusion. To search for the cause of suffering and the way to eliminate it, he left his wife and child when he was 29. For six years he lived ascetically, depriving himself of food, sleeping on hard beds, and not sitting down. When he almost died from his self-deprivation, he realised that this was not the way to eliminate suffering. Other teachers did not help him find the answer either. One day he sat down, vowing not to rise again until he found the cause of suffering. Meditating deeply, he found his answer, which he called the “Middle Way,” because it avoided both extremes of self-indulgence and self-deprivation. This moment is called his enlightenment. Until his death around 483 BC, he taught others what he had discovered. The heart of Buddhism is the understanding and practising of this Middle Way, and sharing this way with others.

After the Buddha’s death, monks continued teaching his ideas throughout India. King Ashoka embraced Buddhism in the 200’s BC and sent missionaries to other lands to teach it. As Buddhism spread, two main branches developed – Theravada Buddhism (spreading to southeast Asia) and Mahayana Buddhism (northeast Asia).

Theravada Buddhism holds that Gautama was the only Buddha; that his writings alone constitute their Scriptures; that enlightenment is limited to monks and other elite; and that one ought be concerned only with his own enlightenment.

Mahayana Buddhism teaches that other Buddha’s have existed; that the Buddhist Scriptures include many writings from other good Buddhists, and are even still being written today; that everyone can be enlightened; and that one ought to try to help others reach enlightenment. Even within these two main groups there are smaller divisions.

In the 1800s, Chinese and Japanese immigrants brought Mahayana Buddhism (especially Zen and Tibetan Buddhism) to America's western shores. The religion became very popular in the mid 1900s. The main Buddhist organisation in North America is the Buddhist Church of America, but many Buddhists are not affiliated with any organisation.

Buddhism is a growing force in America. Scholars estimate that between a half million and six million Buddhists live in America. That it has affected our culture is evident from the fact that Hollywood has popularised the religion in a number of movies (Red Corner and Seven Years in Tibet, for example).

### **Fundamental teachings**

The Four Noble Truths set forth the basic principles underlying Buddhism. First, life consists of suffering. Second, the cause of suffering is our desire for things which are not permanent (material things which can be lost, food which will not prevent hunger from returning, etc.). Third, this suffering will end when one eliminates his desires and attains enlightenment. Fourth, the way to enlightenment is set forth in the Middle Path.

The Middle Path consists of eight steps. The first two deal with wisdom. They are Right Understanding (knowing the four noble truths, and rejecting wrong ideas about suffering's cause and elimination) and Right Thought (freeing our mind of all evil desires, and focusing on the Middle Path). The next three deal with ethical conduct. Right Speech means speaking well of others, and refraining from slander and gossip. Right Action requires one to refrain from killing men or animals, from stealing, from lying, from drinking intoxicants, and from unchastity (sex outside marriage is forbidden; in marriage it is permitted, but one must not let one's sexual desires prevent one from following the Middle Path). Right Livelihood means that a Buddhist's occupation must be one which is productive and helpful to others, and which does not violate religious principles (for example, he must not be a butcher or brewer). The last three steps of the Middle Path deal with mental discipline. The Buddhist must put forth Right Effort, trying to overcome evil, and developing one's powers of thinking. Right Awareness requires him to understand things as they really are, and to be aware of minute details in his life, such as his breathing and the moment he falls asleep. Right Meditation, finally, requires him to meditate on a particular object until he falls into a trance, is free from distractions and sensations of suffering, and becomes enlightened.

This survey of Buddhism's main teachings shows us three things. First, the religion is based very much on legalism and works. One must live a certain kind of life to be "saved." Second, consistent Buddhists must teach that theirs is the only way of "salvation." Following the Middle Path is the only way Buddha found enlightenment, and is the only way others can find it. Third, this "only way" is far different from the only way of Jesus Christ, His saving work, and faith in Him.

### **Contrasts with Christianity**

I suppose one could find similarities between Buddhism and Christianity. Both encourage their followers to know certain truths and to live ethical lives. Both realise the existence of suffering and speak of salvation in terms of the end of suffering. But these similarities are only superficial. In substance, the two religions are very different.

In their view of God, the two differ greatly. The Buddha himself taught that gods exist, but they are merely spirits who also must know the Four Noble Truths and follow the Middle Path to attain enlightenment. One must not worship these gods, or any other being. Some branches of Buddhism consider the Buddha to be a god; others do not. Among those who do, some worship him, others do not.

How different from the Christian faith! Scripture begins, "*In the beginning God...*" (Genesis 1:1). Scripture reveals God as being eternal, sovereign and independent, unchanging, wise, all-knowing, gracious, loving, merciful, just, Triune – and much more. This God is not an impersonal, nameless God – He is Jehovah God! Eternal life is to know Him (John 17:3). We depend on Him for all things

related to our earthly and spiritual existence. Him alone we serve, for He commanded us to have no other gods before Him (Exodus 20:3). Faith in God is not merely part of our faith; it is the whole of our faith.

Rejecting faith in the true God, Buddhism also rejects faith in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit, who are also divine. Of course Buddhists do not deny that Jesus lived on earth; some would even consider Him to be one who attained enlightenment. But they consider Him just a man. Any “salvation” that He provided consisted only of teaching others who were alive when He was how to become enlightened. Having left earth, He plays no further saving role.

How different from Scripture’s revelation of Jesus Christ as being God come in our flesh (John 1:1, 14)! And that our salvation is based on His atoning work on the cross alone (Romans 3:24-25; 2 Corinthians 5:19; Galatians 3:6)! And that He arose again, ascended into heaven, sits at God’s right hand governing all things, and sent His Holy Spirit into the church and hearts of believers, to apply to us all the blessings of salvation which He earned for us on the cross! How different from Christ’s own claim to be the promised Messiah, the only saviour of the world (Luke 4:21; John 4:26; John 14:6).

Buddhism’s lack of faith in any god, let alone Jehovah God and Jesus Christ, is due to its thinking that man can save himself. Of course, if man can save himself by his own right thinking and works, who needs God? And who needs Jesus Christ? In fact, Buddhism makes man God – thereby committing the great sin of unbelief and pride. Buddhism is idolatry.

As part of “right understanding,” Buddhism teaches regarding man that he has no soul. That man has a soul is a lie which Christians invented in their quest to escape suffering. Rather, man consists of five things: body, feeling, perception, disposition, and consciousness. These five things are united in one human being as long as that human is alive. At death, these five parts separate from each other, and reassemble with parts of other dead humans, to make another human – just as one might use different parts of five cars to make one car. This is the Buddhist view of reincarnation – quite different from the doctrine of reincarnation as taught by other religions. Because of this reincarnation, Buddhists teach that suffering is endless, unless it is stopped.

Enlightenment, Buddhism’s conception of salvation, is the only thing that will make this suffering cease. This enlightenment is the end to suffering in this life. It does not change the objective facts of life, which include hunger, pain, sorrow, etc. But the enlightened one does not experience suffering on account of them. At death, the five parts of the enlightened person are not reincarnated, but cease to exist. Salvation consists of nothing more. It does not consist of covenantal communion with God. It is not enjoyed everlastingly. It is only the end of suffering and of existence.

While all branches of Buddhism seem to agree that the means to such enlightenment and “salvation” involves following the Middle Path, some branches teach that more is necessary. Theravada Buddhism requires one to renounce the world and become a monk. Zen Buddhism requires one to practice meditation regularly. Tibetan Buddhism requires, in addition to regular meditation, the use of mantras (chants by which one communicates with divine spirits), certain body gestures, the prayer wheel, and other techniques. In one branch of Buddhism, Amida Buddhism, this salvation is obtained through reliance on the Amida Buddha.

By contrast, Christianity, on the basis of Scripture, teaches that man consists of body and soul (Genesis 2:7), both of which are derived from one’s parents at conception and birth. Both body and soul were totally corrupted by sin, so that apart from God’s saving grace we experience only His wrath (even good material and earthly things are given in preparation for Him justly to destroy us, Psalm 73:3-20), and are able only to sin more, bringing upon us even more greatly the experience of His wrath (Romans 3:10-18). Our life consists of suffering, but that suffering is due to sin.

Salvation consists not only in the removing of sin’s guilt (so that we no longer need fear God’s wrath) and corruption (so that we can begin to obey God’s law again), but even more in the positive enjoyment of fellowship with God, as members of His covenant. That salvation is based on

the work of Christ, bearing the wrath of God in our stead. It is given us through faith in Christ. This faith is worked by two means: the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the (two) sacraments. And this salvation, which we begin to enjoy in this life, is enjoyed perfectly after death, when in our soul we are brought into the presence of God in heaven, and even more perfectly after Christ's return and the resurrection of the body, when we and the whole church of the elect are glorified as the body of Christ, made perfectly sinless, and serve God with praise and thanksgiving to all eternity.

Indeed, Buddhism and Christianity have no essential similarities. Buddhism denies the truth of Scripture, and teaches instead the lies and inventions of a man. It is really Pelagianism (an old heresy which our church fathers battled in the early centuries of the Christian church), in that it denies that man's suffering is due to his inherent sinfulness, and claims that man is able to deliver himself from his suffering by his *own* works, entirely apart from Christ. Buddhism begins with a different starting point than does true faith in Christ, leads one along an entirely different path, and brings one to an entirely different destination. I say with sorrow, but not with any hesitancy, that a Buddhist who holds yet to his ideas on his deathbed awakes in hell. Salvation cannot be for him, for he has not known nor confessed salvation from sin to be found in the crucified and resurrected Christ alone (Romans 10:9).

### **Witnessing suggestions**

Because Buddhists disagree among themselves on the way to enlightenment and other issues, one who desires to witness effectively to a Buddhist should not assume to know what he believes, but should ask him to state his faith himself.

The fundamental difficulty in witnessing to Buddhists is that by nature they, like all of us, are blind to the truth. Before witnessing, one should pray to God to use our words to accomplish His purpose, and if it is His will, to use them to bring the Buddhist to sorrow for sin and faith in Christ. Not always is this His purpose. However, we must remember that His word never returns to Him void (Isaiah 55:11).

Witnessing to Buddhists is also difficult because the Buddhist views negatively certain concepts which are fundamental to the Christian faith. We speak of salvation as being life with God, ultimately enjoyed in heaven, a place of permanent existence; they consider "salvation" to be a matter of not existing. We speak of regeneration as being an aspect of salvation. They see it as the Christian counterpart to reincarnation, which they desire to escape. We speak of the need to search the Scriptures, and to think through the doctrines of the Christian faith. Their goal in meditation is to be released from and rise above the thought processes. So a Christian witness to a Buddhist will require patience on the part of the Christian, a willingness on the part of the Buddhist to allow his own faith to be challenged, and perhaps repeated attempts at witnessing for the Buddhist to begin to understand.

Clearly, to witness to Buddhists the Christian must know and be firmly convinced of the truth of Christianity. One must know and experience the suffering of sin, the sure relief of that suffering through faith in Christ, and the certain hope of blessed existence with God after death, in order to witness with earnestness. Then we must express our Christian faith clearly, appealing to Scripture, and consciously showing how our faith is contrasted with Buddhism.

Responding to the Buddhist's view that all things are everlasting but impermanent, the Christian would do well to teach that God is permanent, and His love for His people is a permanent, faithful love. Picking up on the idea that suffering will end when desires are eliminated, the Christian should show that God requires us, not to eliminate our desires, but to put away our evil desires and to desire Him (Psalm 73:25). Recognising that the Buddhist has no real conception of sin, and views lapses in moral conduct as only a weakness, the Christian ought to emphasise the reality of sin, sin's consequences, and Christ as the only way of deliverance from sin.

The Christian must always witness by living his faith. However, the Buddhist does the same. We could explain why we live ethically, and how we are able to do so – in these areas, we differ. But

perhaps the most effective practical witness to the Buddhist would be to live our faith consistently when we suffer. Scripture often commands us to contentment and joy in suffering (Philippians 4:11; James 1:2; 1 Peter 2:19ff, 4:12ff). Should the Buddhist notice that, rather than complaining or trying to eliminating our suffering, we have found joy in it, he might question us as to the reason for our faith and hope.

Should that happen, let us have an answer!

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