

# Missionary Encounters with Other Faiths

## Engaging the Heart of Buddhism

### Opening Question

What types of unhelpful things have you heard from Christians about suffering? Have you ever struggled with the origin's of evil?

### Introduction and History

#### Origin Story

6<sup>th</sup> century BC there lived a handsome prince (Siddhartha Gautama who had a beautiful wife and baby boy. His father kept him in the palace lest he be tempted to become a monk. Gautama ventured beyond the palace several times. In a series of encounters—known in Buddhist literature as the **four sights**—he learned of the suffering of ordinary people, encountering an old man, a sick man, a corpse and, finally, an ascetic holy man, apparently content and at peace with the world. These experiences prompted Gautama to abandon royal life and take up a spiritual quest.

Gautama first went to study with famous religious teachers of the day, and mastered the meditative attainments they taught. But he found that they did not provide a permanent end to suffering, so he continued his quest. He next attempted an **extreme asceticism**. Gautama underwent prolonged fasting, breath-holding, and exposure to pain. He almost starved himself to death in the process. He realized that he had taken this kind of practice to its limit, and had not put an end to suffering. So in a pivotal moment he accepted milk and rice from a village girl and changed his approach.

He devoted himself to meditation, through which he discovered what Buddhists call the **Middle Way** (Skt. *madhyamā-pratipad*): a path of moderation between the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification.

Siddhartha's enlightenment is said to have come in three stages:

1. He was said to be able to remember his previous reincarnations.
2. He was able to understand the cycles of birth, death and rebirth.
3. The Four Noble Truths were revealed to him.

Siddhartha was now done with his reincarnation cycle and he was now able to attain Nirvana. He was now “the Buddha” – the enlightened one.

#### Key Facts

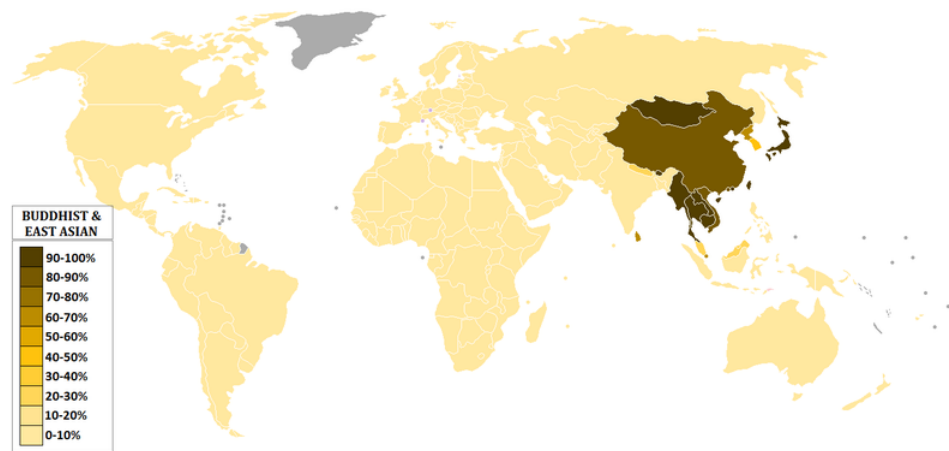
- Buddha means “Enlightened One”
- With 350-700 million followers it ranks 4<sup>th</sup> behind Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism

- It is an Asian religion. Originated in India and spread to Southeast Asia (Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia) and has taken on various forms in Tibet, Korea, China, and Japan.

## Major Split

It was around the mid 3rd century BC that a **major division** happened within Buddhism.

- *Mahayana* (the greater vehicle), are Buddhists who believe that “enlightenment” is accessible to everyone called. (China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore)
- *Theravada* (the teaching elders or the lesser vehicle), believe that enlightenment is only for a committed few, called monks. (Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar)
- There are other branches under these two main categories such as Tendai, Vajrayana, Nichiren, Pure Land, Zen (Japanese Buddhism) as well as others.



## Basic Beliefs

*Disclaimers:*

1. This brief introduction is not comprehensive, and I don't claim to be an expert. I've just done some research on general themes. It is a starting point for individual conversations you may have with Buddhists.

### 2. *Not All Buddhists...*

...are vegetarian

...venerate Buddha or venerate him the same way

...understand Nirvana the same way

3. For many Asian Buddhists their faith is linked to their cultural, ethnic, and family loyalties, to jettison faith is to deny family, friends, and culture.

4. Yet, many do not limit themselves to one religion, often combining Buddhism with Confucianism and Daoism, even Christianity.

### **Four Noble Truths**

- 1) Dukkha: To live is evil in itself because it involves suffering.
- 2) Samudaya: Thirst that leads from birth to birth. The thirst is for pleasures and power. The origin of our suffering is from the “Three Fires”: lust, ill-will, and ignorance (desire, hatred, and delusion)
- 3) Nirodha: In order to be delivered from suffering, one must separate himself from desire, letting it go
- 4) Marga: The way which leads to the extinction of suffering is called the “Eight-fold Noble Path”

\*Do you resonate with the concept that suffering comes from desires or thirsts? How does this play out in your life?

### **Eight-fold Noble Path**

The Eightfold Path are not steps that must be taken in the sequential order in which they are listed but are considered wisdom, conduct and a mental discipline that are to be developed simultaneously with each other.

**Wheel with eight spokes:** It generally stands for the eightfold path. No matter where a human is on the outer circle, he or she is at the same distance from the center, which is nirvana.



1. Right view: rejecting unworthy attitudes like coveting, lying, and gossip
2. Right desire: free from lust, hatred, and cruelty
3. Right speech: abhorring lying and harsh talk, rather being gentle
4. Right conduct: charity, pacifism, refrain from stealing or fornication
5. Right mode of livelihood: free from luxury, harming no one, taking up work that is useful to mankind
6. Right effort: self-control, self-discipline
7. Right thought: dedication to Buddha’s doctrines
8. Right meditation: finally passing beyond sensation of pleasure and pain, into a state of transcending consciousness, the highest state of perfection, attaining full-enlightenment

### **Ten Fetters**

1. Delusion of self
2. Doubt
3. Ritual
4. Sensuality
5. Ill-will
6. Love of life on earth

7. Desire for a future life in Heaven
8. Pride
9. Self-righteousness
10. Ignorance

### **Reincarnation, Karma, and Nirvana**

*Reincarnation* or *samsara* literally means “in the flesh” or “to come again in the flesh” and refers to the cyclical wheel of man’s soul as it passes into another body after death.

*Karma* is the concept that what one sows in this life, they will reap in this or the next life. A man is not only living in this generation but in three generations: past, present, and future

Karma is not personal, that it’s not retaliation from a force that we cannot see or outside of ourselves and thus, karma is more akin to a “natural law”, like the law of gravity. Karma involves only actions that are intentional.

*Nirvana* means “blowing out” or cooling off the “Three Fires”: lust, hatred, and self-delusion

\*What do you notice about the concept of God in Buddhism?

### **God and Personal “Being”**

Buddhism does not teach the concept of, or the belief in, a personal God and although Buddha did not deny the existence of God, he did teach that the universe was over seen by a “Supreme Power.”

There is no being, only a becoming. Just as soon as there is a beginning, decay begins—the beginning of the end is at hand. All that exists passes through the cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death.

It is all a delusion to think there is such a thing as a person or a chair. What you call a chair is but a name you give to a temporary collection of parts, a seeming unity of qualities which, when brought together, may perform a useful function. In reality there is no chair.

### **Perspective on Christianity**

Christianity is considered a cheap and unsatisfactory way to solve the great questions of life.

Western Buddhism: revolt against the rationalistic character of Western culture, the allegedly dogmatic exclusiveness of Christianity, cultural and religious snobbery, and a chase after the exotic

Some Buddhists claim that the great world wars were fought by the so-called Christian nations.

## Engaging the Heart of Buddhism

\*What do you appreciate about Buddhism? What are “conversation starters” or things with which you can agree?

### 1. Suffering

We can appreciate a religion that cares deeply about suffering and longs to do something to help us deal with its presence in our life. Sickness, decay, and death are inevitable in this life and Buddhism accounts for and responds to this. It also shows how suffering can be caused by selfishness and moral corruption. One who is drawn to Buddhism longs to see peace and an end to decay.

Christians can share the frustrations with suffering, decay, and death, but deny that it is the way life was intended. Pain and suffering was not part of the creation plan, it was a result sin and the curse. We see that seven times in the creation account in the first chapter of Genesis that God created and saw that “it was good” what He had created. (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31)

But, we also can conceive of a God who uses pain for meaningful and positive purposes.

- Paul, when speaking of his pain said in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, “a thorn in the flesh was given me...concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness’...Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”
- James 1:2-4, 12 says, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing...Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him”

“We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

### 2. Desires as a cause of Pain

Christians would partially agree that often our desires lead to our misery. Our desires can produce greed, lust, laziness, pride etc., which we call sin. Yet,

for the Christian, the problem is not that we desire, but having wrongly ordered desires.

C.S. Lewis' famous quote rings true to the biblical understanding of desire: "It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." *Weight of Glory*

### 3. Self-improvement and Simple Justice

Many of us long for a clear, one-to-one correlation between evil and punishment. In Buddhism, those who do good will receive a proper reward; those who do evil will suffer for it. What can be dangerous about this line of thinking?

And, many people have a sincere desire to conquer their ego and selfish desires.

Yet, we know the sad truth of our human condition. The Bible accurately paints man's inability to pick himself up by his own moral bootstraps. We need grace, not karma.

### 4. Mystery

Christians are at fault when we try to too quickly or simplistically answer life's profound questions. Ecclesiastes rebukes us many times for trying to present a shallow understanding of how the world works. Yet, God does offer us all the light we need to trust him and generally understand our purpose.

\*What are some things we can say for certain about Christian's answer to the problem of evil?

\*What kind of topics would be helpful or unhelpful in speaking with a Buddhist?