

Buddhism

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Introduction

“What attracted me most toward Buddhism was the freshness of its teaching. It was like a gust of air blowing into a stuffy room. Something I could grasp and understand. A plan to live by. Buddha's message places squarely on the individual complete moral accountability for his actions. You either make good or bad karma in this life according to what you do each day. The *sanga* (the brotherhood of monks) does not assure success in achieving *nirvana* by doing Buddha's Eightfold Path, but it offers an ideal environment in which to seek it. Here I find happiness that increases every day.”

The above quotation comes from the lips of Bhikku Dhamaramo, born Douglas Johnson from Midland, Michigan. Although these words were spoken in the early 1970s during the fascination with Eastern Religions spawned by the Beatles rock group, many still today in America are attracted to such religions as Buddhism or at least some form of it. Shirley Maclaine pulls together some of the basic tenets in Hinduism and Buddhism to promote her “new” religion of reincarnation.

As we consider this segment of Eastern Religions on the subject of Buddhism, we might want to start our thought process working by considering these questions: Why are Americans attracted to the Eastern Religions? How can we witness to the people blinded by the false teachings, not only of the Buddhist religion, but of all Eastern Religions?

This paper will not seek to answer these questions directly, but indirectly by first of all noting the myths surrounding Buddha and the similarity with Christian teachings about Jesus, and secondly by a study of some of Buddhist “theology.”

The Background

The immediate question arises: “What phenomenon gave impetus to the rise of Buddhism?” According to the scholars, many people in the northern India area were disenchanted with Brahmanic teaching, the central teaching of Hinduism. Especially discouraging were the sacrifices and “salvation through knowledge” dispensed to only a chosen few. Add to this that in northern India, the birthplace of Buddhism was a “ferment of religious and political turmoil and experimentation.”

However, Buddhism is and was built on the old faith of Brahm. In Hindu theology, Brahm is eternal, infinite, unknowable, sexless, etc. Buddhism simply developed its own “Dhamma” or own doctrines and code of “living” and its own unique legends surrounding its founder: Siddhartha or The “Enlightened One.”

In contrast to Hinduism, Buddhism recognized man as the *individual*, and “showed” him a way to end suffering. This appears to be the central teaching of early Buddhist teaching. Modern Buddhist theology is more difficult to assess since it is so extremely diverse in its teachings.

The Life of Buddha

According to many Eastern religion scholars, Buddha is considered as the greatest Indian teacher. His philosophy was, “As each man creates for himself his own person, so may he also acquire a power superior to that of the gods.”

Buddha came from a clan known as the *Gotama* through which he received his own name – *Gautama*. During his lifetime, he responded to several other names. His birth name was *Siddhartha* which meant “he who has accomplished his objectives.” Later literature referred to him by the name *Sakyamuni* which meant: “the

sage of the Sakya tribe.” The most well-known of his names, *Buddha*, implied one who had attained to *Bodhi* or in English “enlightenment.” Thus, the Buddha is “the Enlightened One.”

Often Buddha claimed the name *Tathagata*, which means “teacher.” This name means that this individual had reached the culmination of enlightenment and realized it for himself. Later on, men who followed the Buddhist thought and had taken vows to become the “enlightened ones,” became *Bodhisatta*, a being destined for enlightenment.

The much disputed date of Buddha’s birth is somewhere around 536 B.C. The date problem is inherent in the poor historical record keeping of the Indians. Even the text used in this course notes the problem of establishing a fixed date of birth.

His death seems to be established with a bit more accuracy. History states that in 483 B.C. he “reached the coveted state of ‘the zero and infinity’” (*Nirvana*).

Unfortunately, not much is known historically about his parents. His mother was *Maya* and his father *Suddhodama* from the *Kahatriva* tribe. Buddha himself was born in southern Nepal. In 3 B.C. a pillar was erected to commemorate the site.

Perhaps of more interest are the legends that developed over the years surrounding his birth and many of the “strange” resemblances to the birth and life of Jesus. For example, a medallion in the Calcutta museum shows a picture of Maya, the mother of Buddha, lying down, head to the left of the spectator, surrounded by her attendants. Around their heads floats an elephant much larger in size than Maya, ready to enter the left side of the future mother. (Could this be the Buddhist view of the immaculate conception of Christ?) It is said that the future Buddha viewed the world and when he had found conditions ripe for his descent to earth (a resemblance to Gal. 4:4), to be born for the last time, he changed himself into a white elephant and entered the womb of Maya while she was sleeping.

Another example of a strange resemblance to the birth of Jesus is what might be called the prediction of his greatness. Legend says that when a sage saw that the child was endowed with thirty-two major and eighty minor marks of a great man, he knew Buddha would become a great monarch or an “enlightened one.” The story of *Asita* the sage predicting the future of the Bodhisatta is often paralleled with Luke 2:25 and accepted by scholars to show the interchange of ideas between the Christian and Buddhist “traditions.”

The events and phenomenon surrounding the death of “the Buddha’s” mother also resembles teachings in the Christian faith. Maya, Buddha’s mother is said to have died seven days after his birth. According to the legend, she then ascended to one of the Buddhist “heavens” to be reborn as a deity. It is probably true that her sister, *Suddhodamas’* second wife raised the child. But legend was later re-written to say that the mother of the Buddha must die seven days after the birth for three reasons: 1) The “true” Buddha would know what woman would die seven days after giving birth (this sounds like the “Buddha” is omniscient). 2) The womb occupied by the future Buddha could not have another occupant (Virgin-Birth, Immaculate conception?). 3) The mother must die early in order not to have her heart broken because the Buddha would leave home. This last point will be cleared up more precisely as the paper goes into the early life of Buddha. But here the scholars say is an allusion to the Luke 2:34-35.

Events in his early life also resemble events in the life of Jesus. However, before inspecting the myths surrounding his early life, this paper first looks at earlier historical records about his factual life.

According to the more accurate historical accounts, Siddhartha actually grew up in total splendor and luxury carefully surrounded by these from misery by his father. His father had three palaces; winter, summer, and one for the rainy season. This will be of more significance later in the paper.

His education included studies in the Indian language, classical literature, physical exercise, and the four arts necessary for a gentleman: 1) horsemanship, 2) the art of mounting an elephant, 3) the conduct of chariots, 4) the deployment of armies.

Nevertheless, the legend added to this part of his early life goes something like this. One day while sitting under a tree, he fell asleep. When his nurses came to take him away, they found that the shadows of all the other trees had moved, but that of his tree remained still for the purpose of shadowing or giving him shade. This was an obvious later attempt to embellish the premise that Buddha was a god.

Unfortunately, not much is mentioned about the marriage of Buddha. History simply says he married at the age of sixteen a girl named *Yasodhara* who gave him one son.

Now, keeping in mind the earlier point of leaving home and breaking his mother's heart, another myth with a resemblance to the early life of Jesus arises. History says that at age twenty-nine, Buddha left home and family and set out to discover the "essential truth." The legend behind his leaving goes like this: A prophecy stated that when he saw four signs, he would leave. Those four signs were: 1) an old man, 2) a sick man, 3) a dead corpse, 4) an ascetic in rags.

In order to prevent Siddhartha from seeing these sad things of life or these signs, legend says his father took careful preparation to keep him in seclusion amid a life of luxury. If his mother had lived, says the legend, her heart would have been broken for the reason for his leaving. This again closely resembles the account in Luke 2:34-35 where the prophecy of Simeon predicts that the soul of Mary would be pierced by a sword because of the suffering of Jesus.

The reason again that "Buddha" left home was to search for essential truth. History records that Buddha spent six years in this search. He tried two years of Yoga and four years of extreme asceticism. On page 172 of the text, *Religions of the World* by Lewis M. Hopfe, he quotes the words of Buddha which reflect these years of extreme asceticism:

To such a pitch of asceticism have I gone that naked was I, flouting life's decencies, licking my hands after meals, never heeding when folks called to me to come or to stop, never accepting food brought to me before my rounds or cooked expressly for me.

However, these four years of asceticism still did not satisfy Siddhartha's search for "essential truth." It was not until his experience under "the Bo tree," that Buddha finally achieved his "enlightenment." Once again, this experience is now a mixture of fact and fiction.

The early accounts of this experience say that during the span of the night, he acquired the "divine eye" by which he envisaged the death and life of all creatures according to the deeds which they had done. Finally, during the last part of the night he achieved the knowledge of "the four noble truths" of the destruction of the things of life that keep one from achieving deliverance, namely, sensual desires, desires for existence, ignorance, and false views. From this time on he was then called "the Buddha" or "Enlightened One."

The later accounts of the "Bo tree" experience become what might be called "more romantic." One account, known as the "Golden Dish" experience, tells of a young girl named *Sujata* who challenged Buddha to throw a golden dish into a rushing river during the evening of the "Bo tree" event. If the dish would float upstream he was the Buddha. The legend, of course, has the dish float upstream and Siddhartha is proclaimed as "the Buddha."

Perhaps more interesting for a comparison between Christ and Buddha is the legend of "Mara the Tempter." According to this account, a severe mental struggle was raging within the "Bodhisatta" (Buddha) during the night of the "Bo tree" event. *Mara*, the spirit of evil, the lord of desires, and father of the three daughters, Desire, Discontent, and Passion, came to him with the hope of thwarting the "Bodhisatta" from reaching his goal. In this struggle, the account speaks of three "temptations."

The first temptation was an attack of "a whirlwind, rainstorm, showers, hot rocks, live coal, sand and mud." But Siddhartha stood his ground. The second attack involved darkness. Buddha did not give in. The third temptation was an attack of spears, clubs, axes, etc. Buddha is said to have withstood the three temptations. When Mara finally acknowledged defeat, the "Bodhisatta" resumed his concentration, realized his "omniscience" and set out to preach his doctrine to others.

While the later accounts of the "Bo tree" event were most certainly influenced by Christianity, the event which took place immediately after his "enlightened" state appears to remain fairly historically accurate. This event is the so-called "*Benares* Sermon." In this sermon his topic was "The discourse of the turning of the wheel of the law." This sermon contained the fundamental doctrines of Buddha's system. Now he began a life

of wandering in the eastern portions of the Ganges Valley, preaching the law and establishing a community of monks.

In the Benares Sermon, Buddha revealed his doctrine or *dhamma* of the “Middle Way,” “The Eight-fold Path,” and the “Four Sacred Truths.” Again, his central point stressed that sorrow arises from the craving of sensual pleasure, continued life, and power.

Just before his death, which has also been embellished over the centuries, no doubt again by influence from Christianity, Buddha announced that he wanted four sites honored after his “passing.”

- 1) Lumbini Grove: The place of his birth in Nepal.
- 2) Bodhgaya: The site where he attained “enlightenment.”
- 3) Benares: The location of his first sermon.
- 4) Kusinara: The locality of his entrance into *Nirvana*.

The Buddha died at the age of 80 and according to the most accurate guesswork, the year was 483 B.C. One of his followers declared, “His body like a worn out cart, died.” His last words reflect his whole line of thinking: “Decay is inherent in all... things. Work out your own salvation with all diligence.” The influence of Christianity in later accounts can be observed in the legend that at the Buddha’s death there also were earthquakes, darkened skies, men weeping and trees losing their leaves.

The Teachings of Buddha

While Buddhism did have its roots in the older religion of Hinduism, Buddha clearly deviated from “orthodox” Hindu thought. The following is a brief summary outline of the basic tenets of Buddha’s teachings or “The Four Noble Truths.”

- I. Life is Suffering. Birth is sorrow. Death is sorrow. All of life is sorrow and suffering.
- II. Suffering has a cause. All suffering stems from craving the pleasures of the world.
- III. Suffering can be suppressed. The end of suffering can come only by ending craving.
- IV. Suppression or the way to end craving lies in following the “Eightfold Path.”
 - A. Right views
 - B. Right resolve
 - C. Right speech
 - D. Right conduct
 - E. Right livelihood
 - F. Right effort
 - G. Right mindfulness
 - H. Right concentration

In a sense, following the therapy of the arduous self-discipline prescribed in the Eightfold Path was a teaching of Atheism. No prayers to the gods could be offered for enlightenment, and there was no recourse to the supernatural for relief. This godless “discipline” came to be known as the “Middle Way.” Thus, often Buddha himself characterized his “discipline” as one of a middle path. He steered a course that avoided the extremes of austerities and self-torture on the one hand, and the pursuit of sensual pleasure on the other.

The “Path” stressed the “mindful concentration” (insight through meditation) in gaining understanding. It is the “Middle Way” then between asceticism and worldliness. The goal of this discipline is the cessation of

the ceaseless rounds of rebirth, and the way to do this is to extinguish the fires of lust and desires that generate *karma* and keep the individual wishing for a continued life. The outline of the “Middle Way” is as follows.

- I. It unseals the eyes of the spirit.
- II. It leads to peace of mind.
- III. It leads to knowledge.
- IV. It leads to enlightenment.
- V. It finally leads to *Nirvana*.

However, while Buddha’s teachings on the “Four Noble Truths,” were somewhat unique to Buddhism, much of Buddhist “theology” simply reiterates Hindu teaching perhaps with a slight twist here and there.

One of these Hindu teachings that slipped into Buddhist thought was the concept of *Karma*. In eastern religious thought, *Karma* simply means “deeds” whether good or bad. Perhaps the twist Buddhism gave *Karma* can be explained in that *Karma* provided for a moralistic and rationalistic explanation of the diversity of human beings. Good deeds are rewarded and evil deeds punished with no room for a theological agency to enter. Once again the “atheistic” nature of Buddhism can be observed.

As a result of the deeds performed in the past or present, a living being would continue in the cycle of rebirth and assume a different form in each rebirth. Thus the aim of Buddha was to break this cycle so that one would not have to struggle with the things that tie one down. Once the cycle is broken, the individual has “achieved” freedom. Therefore, since the form of each successive rebirth is determined by *Karma*, the greatest stress is placed upon *Karma* in both Hinduism and Buddhism.

A uniqueness in Buddhistic *Karma*, however, is the teaching that *not only the deed*, but the *intention or volition* behind the deed is important. *Karma*, then, is generated only when intention is present. This is why Buddha attached so much importance to the discipline of the mind. Thus, Buddhistic *Karma* may be summed up in the equation – Intention + Bodily Action = *Karma*.

In addition, the Buddhist definition of *Karma* has a direct implication on their confession of and definition of “sin.” According to Buddhist discipline, one must be disciplined “Not to commit any sin, to do good, to purify one’s own mind.” The Buddha taught that any act that is harmful to oneself or to another is sin. Buddha looked upon sin, not as a transgression of some “divine” law, but more of a violation of the human body, which originated in the minds and deeds of man.

Therefore, Buddha was most anxious to prevent the arising of evil thoughts and actions. One of the greatest sins, then, was *Tanha*, or “craving.”

The definition of Buddhistic *Karma* which saw no violation of “divine law” had its impact also upon “confession.” In Buddha’s thinking “confession” does not remove the sin of wrongdoing but merely is a repentance or affirmation that the doer would not repeat the offensive act.

The concept of *Karma* in Buddha’s thinking also dictated what he called “states of existence.” These states were really more on the line of Hindu levels of reincarnation. The outline of these five levels is as follows:

- I. **Deity:** Rebirth as a deity is not everlasting for even deities are subject to *Karma*, and once fruits of meritorious *Karma* have been exhausted, the deities will fall from their high state and be reborn in a lowly one.
- II. **Man:** Rebirth as a man is considered the most desirable because only man can achieve salvation and *nirvana*. However, to be reborn a man is extremely difficult.
- III. **Animal:** While *Karma* plays into rebirth as an animal, *nirvana* is not a possibility for animals.

- IV. **Hungry Ghosts:** This is a creature resigned to continued torment and hunger as a result of evil *Karma*. He is called a “hungry” ghost because he has a head the size of a pin sitting on top of a huge belly.
- V. **Deizen Hell:** No information could be found describing this state.

In addition to the Four Noble Truths and the unique teaching of *Karma*, Buddhist “theology” holds to a number of other interesting premises. One of these is the view on the beginning of the world. Buddhists believe that everything is “becoming,” without beginning or end. Yet, Buddha himself often discouraged his followers from speculating about the beginnings of life, warning that such speculations were “fruitless” and “devoid of religious merit.”

In his third basic truth, Buddha taught a rather odd concept of the soul. He taught the doctrine of *Anatta* – the teaching that there is *no self* or *soul*. Buddha so clearly denied the existence of the soul that he described a belief in the soul as one of the most deceitful delusions ever held by man.

Yet, following Buddha’s logic in the Four Noble Truths, his denial of the soul is fairly consistent. He insisted that belief in the soul gives rise to attachment, attachment to egoism, egoism to cravings for pleasure and fame, which in turn led to suffering.

In his book, *Buddhism*, by Peter A. Pardue, the quote from Buddha illustrates this point:

Once we accept this truth of the non-existence of a permanent self, when we see that what we call the self is nothing but a stream of perishing physical phenomenon, then we destroy our selfish desires and self-interests, and instead of suffering from anxieties and disappointments, we will enjoy peace of mind and tranquility.

However, while Buddha denied the existence of the soul, he reaffirmed the reincarnation cycle not only in “the five states of existence,” but in something called the “five aggregates.” In this concept, the Buddhist belief in the regularity of the operation of *Karma* is so strong that there can be no interference with its operation. The force of *Karma* then, causes a new being to come into existence, a new collection of the five aggregates, material body, feelings, perception, predispositions, consciousness.

Again, this fits well with Buddha’s teaching of no soul. Peter A. Pardue explains this in his book, *Buddhism*:

There is no self, no soul, there is only a living complex of mental and physical elements succeeding one another continuously living on the fruit of its acts. Because of this, it can control itself, and can exert efforts to better itself, so that by proper discipline, it is able to attain *nirvana*, or deliverance. In *nirvana*, this living composite dissolves to be reborn no more, for there is no more *Karma* to bring about a rebirth.

“The Law of causation or dependent origination,” was another Buddhist teaching formulated to present an explanation of the origin of suffering. According to this doctrine, no phenomenon arises without a cause. Things and acts are not isolated but are connected with other things and acts in the universe.

A thorough understanding of these fundamental doctrines of Buddhism, then, finally leads to wisdom or “intuitive insight,” or the ability to see things as they really are. According to Buddhist teaching one of the byproducts of this acquisition of wisdom is the attainment of the supernatural, or better still supranormal faculties, which in turn consists of the following five characteristics:

- I. Divine eyes: which can see over long distances.
- II. Divine ears: the ability to hear sounds far away.
- III. Knowledge: of the former existences not only of oneself but of others.

- IV. Knowledge: of other peoples thoughts.
- V. Magic Powers: such as the ability to fly through the air, walk over water, tunnel through mountains, etc.

With this description of the five characteristics of “intuitive insight,” one must wonder if the Superman series of shows, comic books, and movies didn’t receive influence from Buddhist thought.

Finally, one who has attained the Eightfold path of Buddhist thought, one who has finally “arrived” at “intuitive insight” has reached *Arhatship*. An *Arhat* is no longer subject to rebirth, for he has destroyed completely all cravings that lead to *Karma*. When the *Arhat* passes away after his last existence, he enters into *nirvana*. Buddha held that *nirvana* was the very reason for the propagation of his religion.

According to Buddha, in contrast to Hinduism where *nirvana* is defined as “unity with Brahman,” *nirvana* can mean one of two slightly different things. *Nirvana* can be the condition of the perfect living *Arhat*. Thus, all desires for existence are destroyed, all *karma* exhausted and there is no more reason for rebirth. *Nirvana* can also simply be the “cessation of all existence.” This is attained by escaping the wheel of rebirth.

Conclusion

In attempting to answer the two questions posed at the beginning of this paper, many things play into why modern-day Americans are attracted to the tenets of the eastern philosophies. All the reasons finally converge on the fact that Satan still holds them in the bondage of sin and darkness. The second question, How an we witness to the “believer” of an eastern religion continues to be a touchy one since eastern culture is so often directly connected with the religion. Carefully and lovingly the Christian must help the devotee of an eastern religion see that man’s problem is not merely a lack of enlightenment as to the Eightfold Path, but a total blindness in regard to the salvation God has created in Christ Jesus. May God help us witness to those blinded by Satan in the eastern religions.

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