

Christian Outreach and World Religions: Buddhism
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church – Pastor Michael Walther

The Founding of Buddhism

1. Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama during the sixth century B.C. His life coincides with the Babylonian captivity of Judah.
2. Buddha's life can be divided into three periods: enjoyment, enquiry, and enlightenment.
3. Enjoyment: He was born into the Shakya warrior tribe in what is now Nepal. Tradition says he was put in a palace so that he would never see suffering (old age, sickness, death, or poverty). One day he ventured away and encountered all four kinds of suffering. He renounced his wealth and became deeply concerned about the issue of suffering.
4. Enquiry: Siddhartha left his family (including his wife and child) and became an ascetic. He became so weak that he almost drowned bathing in a river. He realized the extreme asceticism did not produce the enlightenment he was seeking.
5. Enlightenment: Siddhartha walked to a city named Bohd Gaya, sat under a fig tree, and vowed not to rise until he attained enlightenment. He was severely tempted by Mara, the evil one, but he resisted her and after a period of time attained enlightenment. He became Buddha, which means the enlightened one." Buddha called his path to enlightenment the Middle Way because it avoided affluence and asceticism.

The Spread and Splits of Buddhism

1. For two centuries Buddhism did not spread beyond the borders of India. Under the reign of King Ashoka (274-232 B.C.) missionaries carried it to Syria, Egypt, Cyrene, Greece, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand. At this time two major divisions developed.
2. Mahayana "the greater vehicle": Those practiced this version said enlightenment was available all. They were found in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, and Vietnam. They see Buddha as a historical manifestation of a universal Absolute, or Buddha essence. According to their point of view there have been many manifestations of Buddha.
3. Hinayana "the lesser vehicle": Those who practiced this form of the religion said enlightenment was the committed few. They refer to themselves as Theravada Buddhists, which means "the teaching of the elders." Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka and Thailand. They see Buddha as being a man only and not a god. According to their point of view there can only be one Buddha.
4. A third type developed in connection to Hindu called Vajrayana or Tantra. Vajrayana means "diamond vehicle." They claim to be able to cut through illusions quickly to obtain enlightenment. They have produced the most visible living symbol of Buddhism, the Dalai Lama.

The Beliefs of Buddhism

1. The First Noble Truth: Life consists of suffering, pain, misery, sorrow, and unfulfillment.
2. The Second Noble Truth: Everything is impermanent and ever-changing. We suffer because we desire those things that are impermanent.
3. The Third Noble Truth: The way to liberate oneself from suffering is by eliminating all desire.
4. The Fourth Noble Truth: Desire can be eliminated by following the Eightfold Path

WISDOM

1. Right Understanding
2. Right Thought

ETHICAL CONDUCT

3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood

MENTAL DISCIPLINE

6. Right Effort
7. Right Awareness
8. Right Meditation



Objections to the Gospel

1. Misunderstanding: Most Buddhists have never heard the Gospel because they have misheard it. It often takes several attempts to learn how to communicate the Gospel clearly to a Buddhist.
2. Many Paths to God: “Just as there are many paths to the top of the mountain, so there are many paths to God.” The emphasis is placed on the *path* that *we* must walk. Salvation is based on human effort. Use the Biblical image of reconciliation. “Assume that you are responsible for having broken a relationship with a friend because of a wrong that you committed against him or her. How many ways are there to restore that relationship? Only by confessing our guilt and requesting forgiveness (Colossians 1.21-23).”
3. Jesus is not Unique: Buddhists may consider Jesus a great Buddhist teacher. A good book to suggest for study would be the Gospel of John which addresses the uniqueness of Jesus.

Suggestions For Evangelism

1. Find common ground: desire can cause suffering, personal peace will be found when we abide in that which is permanent, it is best to live a moral life, self-discipline has spiritual value, meditation and prayer are important, compassion is a virtue that should be nurtured.
2. Focus on the issue of desire: Buddha taught we must eliminate desire. But how? If we want to eliminate desire we then have a desire. Point to Jesus, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5.6). Jesus teaches that we need to have the right desire.
3. Focus on the personal God: Buddhists believe that ultimate reality is an impersonal Void or Emptiness. Yet the Bible teaches that God cares about our suffering (Exodus 3.7; Hebrews 4.15).
4. Point to God’s Permanence: Buddhists view permanence as a void. If we find permanence we have to disappear in the void. Focus on God’s changeless character (Malachi 3.6; James 1.17), or God’s changeless promises (Lamentations 3.23; Hebrews 13.5). Work for food that endures (John 6.27-29).
5. Be clear about sin and forgiveness: The Buddhist concept of sin has no vertical dimension. Sin is a matter of ignorance or karma. Karma, something like the law of nature, is an impersonal principle that says the consequences of our moral or immoral actions are inevitable. 1 John 1.8-9 and Romans 6.23 addresses the problem of sin and the promise of forgiveness.

Most of the information for these Bible studies has been drawn from *The Compact Guide to World Religions* by Dean C. Halverson, Bethany House Publishers, 1996.