

Buddhism - You yourself must make the effort

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Unlike the Hindu religion, Buddhism can point to an individual founder and can look back to a date for its beginnings. The man who formulated Buddhism was Siddhartha Gautama, who was born a Hindu about 560 B.C., at Lumbini near the border of India in what is now Nepal.

Tradition says that when Gautama was born, a seer prophesied that he would become the greatest ruler in human history. The seer added that if Gautama ever saw four things — sickness, old age, death and a monk who had renounced the world — the boy would give up his earthly rule and discover a way of salvation for all mankind.

To refute the prophecy, Gautama's father built a palace for his son, giving orders that neither the sick, the old, a dead body nor a monk be allowed near the palace. Gautama grew up in this way, protected from the world. He later married a beautiful girl named Yasodhara, who bore him a son.

But the "gods" had other plans for Gautama. One day, as he rode through the park that surrounded his palace, he saw a man who was covered with terrible sores, a man who tottered with age, a corpse being carried to its grave and a begging monk who appeared to be peaceful and happy.

That night, as Gautama reported later, he began to think about the look of peace on the face of the monk. He began to wonder if there was more to life than the luxuries of his palace. Late that night he took a last look at his sleeping wife and child, then left the palace for ever.

Gautama, 29 years old, was determined to solve the riddle of life. He shaved his head, put on a yellow robe and wandered the countryside as a beggar monk. First he studied the Upanishads with the finest teachers, but he could find no satisfaction in these writings. Then he tried to find salvation through self-denial. He starved himself until he was a walking skeleton, but this brought him no happiness either.

Gautama becomes the "enlightened one"

Finally, he sat under a tree for 40 days and nights. He swore that he would not move until he found what he was searching for. During this time, Mara, the evil one,

tried to make him give up his quest. At the end of the 40 days, he experienced the highest degree of Godconsciousness — nirvana: literally, the "blowing out" of the flame of desire and the negation of suffering. Through this experience, Gautama felt he had found "salvation." From then on, he was known as Buddha or the "enlightened one."

After his life-changing experience, Gautama Buddha went back to the world of man. He began to preach and teach about the meaning of life and his way to nirvana. Soon he founded the Sangha, an order of monks. By the time Gautama Buddha died, 45 years later, many thousands had adopted his teachings.'

In some ways, Buddhism is similar to the Hinduism from which it evolved. In other ways, it is quite different, and many of Buddha's teachings were rejected as heresies by the dominant teachers of Hinduism, the Brahmin priests. For example, Buddha denied that the Vedas and the Upanishads were divine writings, saying they were of no help in finding the way to nirvana. He also denied that man has an atman (soul), which is part of the Brahman (world soul), and that the present world is maya (unreal).

Other Hindu concepts Buddha rejected included the Brahmin priesthood and the entire Hindu sacrificial system; instead, he emphasized ethics over ritual. He rejected the caste system and taught that enlightenment was open to anyone - including women - not just Brahmin males. Finally, Buddha radically challenged all the different Hindu gods and goddesses, saying they were essentially unimportant in the quest for enlightenment.

Buddha did accept the Hindu teachings on reincarnation, along with karma (the soul gains merits or demerits according to how one lives his life) and dharma (the duty one has to perform according to his station in life). Buddha taught that one could be reborn as a human, an animal, a hungry ghost, a demon or even as a Hindu god. He also incorporated yoga and meditation, which were highly developed skills in Hinduism, into his teachings.

The middle way and the eightfold path

One of Buddha's most important teachings was his theory of the Middle Way. For Buddha, the Middle

Way was a spiritual path of salvation, winding between the extreme asceticism and the unrestrained sensuality he had known while a Hindu. To describe his Middle Way, Buddha offered four main principles, which have come to be called the Four Noble Truths:

1. **Suffering is universal.** Buddha taught that the very act of living involves suffering from birth until death. Even death brings no relief, however, because of the cycle of rebirth, suffering and death. Salvation (nirvana) is to be released from this unending cycle of suffering.
2. **The cause of suffering is craving (selfish desire).** People remain in this endless cycle, because they are too attached to their health, wealth, status and physical comfort. This is because they are ignorant of the nature of reality and they fall victim to what Buddha called *tanha* (attachment, desire).
3. **The cure for suffering is to overcome ignorance and eliminate craving.** Since to live is to suffer and suffering is caused by craving, if a person could remove craving from his or her life, suffering would end.
4. **Suppress craving by following the Middle Way, the Noble Eightfold Path.** First, Buddha isolated the cause, *tanha*, humanity's inability to escape from the squirrel cage of death and rebirth. Next he worked out a system called the Eightfold Path by which a Buddhist could rid himself of *tanha*. The Eightfold Path consists of eight ways of right living:
 - (1) right viewpoint,
 - (2) right aspiration,
 - (3) right speech,
 - (4) right behavior,
 - (5) right occupation,
 - (6) right effort,
 - (7) right mindfulness and
 - (8) right meditation.

Buddha claimed that whoever could follow this Eightfold Path would eventually reach nirvana, a release from the endless cycle of death and rebirth. When Buddha was asked to define the state of nirvana, he replied that he had never tried to solve this question. His mission was to show man the way to escape the suffering of life, not to describe what he would find once he had been liberated.

The Hinduism that Buddha rejected said that life in this world is *maya* (illusion); thus, suffering, which is part of this world, is also illusion. Buddha, however, proclaimed that life in this world is quite real. It involves real suffering; because of this suffering, the world must be escaped by following Buddha's Eightfold Path.

Buddhism has always had great appeal for the peoples of the East. Unlike the elitist ideas of Hinduism, Buddhism offers a precise definition of man's problem, along with an exact "plan of salvation" for everyone.

Major branches of Buddhism

Buddhism was popular in India for several centuries until it was absorbed by Hinduism. The Brahmin priests even promoted the Buddha to an incarnation of Vishnu. During the first thousand years of Christianity, while the gospel was being carried all over Europe, Buddhist monks spread their religion throughout the Orient. Today, from Ceylon to Japan, over 350 million people follow the teachings of Buddha.

Buddhism takes a wide variety of forms, but the three main kinds are Hinayana, Mahayana and Tantrism. Hinayana means "the doctrine of the lesser way," referring to the belief that, for all intents and purposes, only a fortunate few lifelong monks can find nirvana by absolutely following the way of Buddha. Since the term "lesser way" was a derogatory name given by critics, proponents of this path later changed the name to Theravada Buddhism ("way of the elders"). The best that lay people can hope for in Theravada Buddhism is to rise to a higher level when reborn in their next life so they may become monks. The Theravada branch of Buddhism has become very wealthy through gifts of land and money for monasteries and is dominant today in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos and Kampuchea.

Mahayana Buddhism, the doctrine of the "greater way," teaches that Buddha believed that nirvana is available to all people. Buddha originally taught that the only person who can save you is you, but Mahayana developed the idea of savior-gods or Bodhisattvas.

Followers of Mahayana reasoned that Buddha had remained on the earth for 45 years when he could have gone straight to nirvana. He decided, however, to stay to save mankind and became the first and supreme Bodhisattva, a savior to mankind who can be called on by the faithful. Other Buddhist monks who achieve nirvana and become enlightened as Buddha did are also Bodhisattvas.

From all this, you can gather that Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism differ radically in their opinion of Buddha. To Theravada, Buddha was only a teacher (as Buddha himself claimed), but Mahayana has raised him to the position of a savior-god for all people. Because of this, Mahayana Buddhism is by far the more popular. It is influential in Nepal, China, Tibet, Japan, Vietnam and Korea.

A popular form of Mahayana Buddhism in the West is Zen, a discipline with the primary goal of experiencing enlightenment through meditation (reaching *satori*). Zen teachers emphasize the saying of the Buddha: "Look within, you are the Buddha."

After World War II, Zen made significant inroads in the West through the influence of the Japanese scholar D.T. Suzuki (1870-1966), as well as through influential artists, philosophers and psychologists. Hundreds of thousands of Americans converted to Buddhism, including notable entertainers and film stars such as Joan Baez, Tina Turner, Richard Gere, Larry Hagman and Harrison Ford.

The third major division of Buddhism is called Tantrism, a blending of Mahayana Buddhism with the ancient occult practices of Tibet. Tantric Buddhism uses incantations and occult signs. It contains strong elements of animism (attributing conscious life to inanimate objects or objects in nature) and is one of many false religions that can leave its followers open to demonic activity. Tantrism is considered the official religion of Tibet and is practiced extensively in Nepal.

Comparing Buddha's teachings with the Bible

Five hundred and twenty years after the death of Buddha, Jesus came to bring full and abundant life, not only in the world to come but also in this world. Buddha claimed to have found a way, but Jesus claimed that He is the way. How do these two claims compare?

Buddha said that "to live is to suffer," and he said that the reasons for suffering were ignorance and craving. The Bible agrees that suffering is everywhere and that a good deal of suffering is due to misplaced desire, but at the core, the Bible provides a very different explanation for suffering. The Bible explains that the entire world "groans" and that all men suffer because of sin (see Romans 8:18-23). All of us have put our own personal desires ahead of God's. All of us are sinners by choice. We decide to live our lives independently of God and His laws (see Isaiah 53:6).

Buddha observed that suffering comes from craving: desire or attachment of any kind. For Buddha, all desire was bad and had to be eradicated. The Bible, however, teaches that, while there are bad desires, there are also good ones. For example, we are encouraged to have great desire for God, His glory in our lives and for His kingdom (see Ps. 27:4; Matt. 6:33).

As for bad desires, James 1:13-15 points out that a man is enticed from within by "lusts", passions or appetites that tend to get out of control. When a person yields to these temptations, he sins. The result of sin is spiritual suffering, and death (see Romans 6:23). Christians agree that the cause of much suffering is selfish desire, but they disagree with Buddhism's way of removing this desire.

Buddha taught that the only way to rid oneself of selfish desire was through self-effort. For centuries his followers have tried to stay on the Eightfold Path, but many have found that "the heart is deceitful above all

things" and will sabotage the best of human intentions (Jer. 17:9).

For a person to master himself, he must have a higher source of strength. But Buddha was agnostic. He ignored the possibility of help from God. The apostle Paul (see Titus 3:3-8) reminds us that every Christian was once a slave to desire and selfish hungers but that Christ came into the world as God and as man to supply the strength to overcome these desires. Without the help of God, the only way to end desire is to die. But with God, we can become "new creatures" who die (figuratively) to selfish desires (see John 3:5; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 2:20).

Christianity goes beyond Buddhism

Buddha said that to end desire one must follow the Eightfold Path, a noble goal that must be pursued solely through one's own determination and resources. Jesus gave a similar set of standards in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matt. 5), but He also promised to give us His personal strength through the Holy Spirit so that we might live this kind of God-pleasing life (see John 16:7-15; Romans 8; Galatians 5).

Christ shares in the life of the true believer and gives His followers two vital ingredients for effective living: power and authority. The Christian increases or limits that power in direct proportion to how much of his life he really shares with and submits to his Lord (see John 15:1-8).

The choice everyone must make

The Theravada Buddhist has eight guidelines for the right way to live, but Buddha promised him no power to live that way. Also, the Buddha had no authority for saying these eight steps are right, as noble as they may sound. Mahayana Buddhists find the Eightfold Path a lonely one and look to the Bodhisattvas for help.

Buddha taught that you yourself must make the effort. Christ teaches us to turn ourselves over to Him and He will give us power to live successfully. Christ does not simply give the Christian a list of commandments and orders to obey. He promises to help the Christian grow, change and develop.

Every person, Christian or otherwise, faces a choice: self-effort or yielding everything to Christ as Savior and Lord [...].

Summing up major differences between Buddhists and Christians

Regarding God and Jesus Christ:

- Buddhists deny the existence of a personal God or say that God's existence is irrelevant;

- Christians say that God is personal, omniscient and omnipotent (see Job 42:1-6; Ps. 139:3; Matt. 19:26);
- Buddhists identify Christ as a good teacher, but less important than Buddha;
- Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God who died for mankind's sin (see Matt. 14:33; John 1:34; Rom. 5:6-8).

Regarding Sin and Salvation:

- Buddhists believe that sin is the lust that arises in one's life, and they seek to rid themselves of

lustful desires by self-effort or by calling on Bodhisattvas for help;

- Christians believe that sin is any thought, deed or desire contrary to God's will, and that salvation comes only through faith in what Christ has done for us (see Acts 4:12; Rom. 3:10, 23; Eph. 2:8-10). Through faith and the gracious working of the Holy Spirit, God transforms our desires to be more and more in conformity with God's desires (see Rom. 12:1,2).

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