



A BIBLICAL VIEW ON

Buddhism



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Buddhism



Buddhism is the world's fourth largest religion. It continues to have an impact because it has been the dominant religion in the Eastern world. As more Asians move to the U.S., we are also seeing the growing impact of Buddhism in this country as well.

There are about 500 million Buddhists in the world and about 3.5 million in the U.S. It is the dominant religion in Hawaii. Many celebrities and prominent Americans have accepted Buddhism as their religious preference, including Tina Turner, Coach Phil Jackson, Richard Gere, and Steven Segal. We can see its influence in films like *Seven Years in Tibet* and in books like *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

Origin of Buddhism

Buddhism can be linked to Hinduism because the founder, Siddhartha Gautama first learned Hindu thought. He was born in the sixth century BC to parents who ruled a small kingdom in what today is Nepal. Much of his life is shrouded in mystery since the first biography of him didn't occur until 500 years after his death.

He was considered a special child because of a vision his mother had. His father sought to protect him from the suffering in the world, so he grew up behind palace walls. One day, out of curiosity, he left his secluded life and went into the surrounding village. There he saw the dark side of humanity that changed his life. He saw an old man, a sick man, a dead man about to be cremated, and an ascetic holy man.

He struggled greatly with the stark contrast between his life behind the palace walls and the painful existence outside those walls. He left his family, shaved his head, and began a homeless life that has come to be known as the Great Renunciation. He devoted his life to extreme asceticism but concluded that it merely weakened his mind and body.

Enlightenment supposedly came when he chose to meditate under a lone Bodhi tree. There, he experienced the highest degree of God consciousness. That is when he came to be known as the Buddha (“the enlightened one”) and began to share his message with the world.

Four Noble Truths

Buddhism rests upon the Four Noble Truths that he began to teach after his awakening. He wanted to answer the question: “Why is there pain and suffering?”

The First Noble Truth is: Life is all about pain and suffering in the world. He explained that reincarnation offers no escape from this struggle. You will return in the next life in a higher or lower form according to your good or bad deeds.

The Second Noble Truth is: The cause of suffering is desire. It is our craving for wealth, power, and influence. We are motivated by greed, hatred, and selfishness.

The Third Noble Truth is: Suffering will cease when one can overcome these human tendencies toward greed and selfishness. Eventually, that person can achieve nirvana and escape the endless cycle of suffering.

The Fourth Noble Truth is: To achieve nirvana and escape suffering, someone must follow the Eightfold Path. This system is designed to develop habits that will release someone from these temptations.

The Eightfold Path

These eight aspects are interdependent values that aid someone

to reach higher levels until they reach nirvana.

1. Right Views – are considered the beginning and end of the path. It involves not only intellectual ability but also begins with the insight that all things are subject to suffering.
2. Right Intentions – refers to the mental aspect of wisdom and the renunciation of all pleasures of the senses.
3. Right Speech – teaches us not to lie, slander, or abuse anyone. We are to tell the truth, speak graciously, and only talk when necessary.
4. Right Behavior – this involves abstinence from harming or killing another and from dishonesty and theft.
5. Right Occupation – one should

earn a living in a positive and peaceful way.

6. Right Effort – one must eliminate evil qualities and seek to attain good and moral qualities.
7. Right Contemplation – implies controlled thinking and the mental ability to see things as they are.
8. Right Meditation – refers to the development of concentration and the focus of the mind.

Buddhist Beliefs

Meditation – is the eighth element of the Eightfold Path. Meditation is central to Buddhism. It is through meditation and self-effort that one can attain the eternal state of nirvana.

Karma – is the law of cause and effect in one's life. You reap what you sow. Buddhists believe you

travel through a lengthy process of birth and rebirth until you break that cycle and reach the state of nirvana. What one is in the current incarnation will determine what one will be in the next incarnation.

Samsara – is also called “transmigration” and is the belief that everything is in a birth and rebirth cycle. Buddha taught that people do not have individual souls. Personalities are not permanent because they are shared over many lifetimes in multiple forms.

Nirvana – Buddha never gave an exact definition of nirvana. It has often been described as the “blowing out” of existence. It’s an eternal state of being where the birth and rebirth cycle come to an end. Suffering comes to an end, and there are no desires. As you can see, it is very different from the Christian concept of heaven.

Two Schools of Buddhism

Almost from the beginning, two branches of Buddhism developed as the teachings of Buddha spread. The conservative school is known as Theravada Buddhism. It has become the dominant form of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. The liberal school is Mahayana Buddhism and is found in China, Japan, Korea, and Tibet.

Theravada Buddhism – remains closer to the original form of Buddhism and follows the Pali Canon of scripture. The followers of this school see Buddha as a man, since he never claimed to be a deity. Instead, he wanted to show the way to enlightenment. This school also teaches that each person must attain salvation through individual effort. It requires devotion to these teachings and relinquishing all

earthly desires.

Mahayana Buddhism – this school of Buddhism incorporates many beliefs and practices from local religions of the land. The followers worship Buddha as a manifestation of the divine. They also believe that many other manifestations or bodhisattvas have appeared. One example would be the Dalai Lama, who is revered as a bodhisattva.

When you are speaking to a Buddhist, be willing to listen and learn to which school of Buddhism he or she may belong. In my booklet on *A Biblical View on Hinduism*, I quoted world religion scholar Winfried Corduan. He warns: “Knowing that someone is Hindu tells you little about that person’s beliefs and practices.” That is also true about Buddhism. There are many different views and practices.

The Buddha, Jesus, and Salvation

Christianity and Buddhism differ on many major theological issues. The first is the different view of God. Most Buddhist teaching denies the existence of a personal God. Other Buddhists may even be atheistic. This contrasts with the biblical teaching of the triune God (Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14). Likewise, there is no concept in Buddhism about personal sin (Romans 3:23; 6:23) against a holy God (1 Peter 1:14-16).

Reincarnation is another difference. Hebrews 9:27 teaches that “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.” The Bible does not teach reincarnation and even refutes the idea by teaching that we will one day be resurrected into a new body (Philippians 3:20-21).

Buddhism teaches that we must work out our salvation by following the Eightfold Path, and that our ultimate destination is nirvana. Christianity teaches that we are saved by grace, not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9) and that we are destined either for eternal fellowship with God or eternal separation from God. The Buddhist concept of nirvana is very different from the Christian view of a new heavens and a new earth (Isaiah 65:17,18; Revelation 21:1).

Another way to understand the differences between Buddhism and Christianity is to examine the differences between Buddha and Jesus. We may admire many of the practices of Buddhists, but the key issue is what they believe about Jesus Christ.

First, Buddha never claimed to

be divine. Theravada Buddhism is closer to the original teaching, while Mahayana Buddhism only developed the idea Buddha was divine 700 years after his death. Jesus did not claim to be merely a manifestation of the divine. Jesus claimed to be the one and only Son of God (Matthew 16:13-17; John 20:30-31).

Second, Buddha claimed to be a way shower. He showed his followers the way to nirvana, but also expected that each person must find his or her own path. Jesus came not just to show the way but taught that He is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). He alone can save us through our belief in Him.

Third, Buddha taught that the way to eliminate suffering and attain enlightenment was to eliminate

desire. Jesus did teach that we should avoid wrong desires (Matthew 5:21-18) but He also taught that we should pursue right desires: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6).

Fourth, Buddha performed no miracles. Jesus affirmed His claims to deity by performing numerous miracles. He demonstrated that He has power to manipulate natural laws, power to replicate items, power to cast demons out of people, power to heal diseases, and power to raise the dead. Of course, His greatest miracle was His resurrection.

Finally, Buddha is buried in a grave at the foot of the Himalaya Mountains. Jesus Christ was buried in a grave but rose again. He is alive

and conquered sin and death.
Because of that we can have a
personal relationship with God
and have eternal life.



Additional Resources

Norman Anderson, ed., *The World's Religions*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975.

Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: Christian Introduction to World Religions*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012.

Pat Zukeran, *God, Eternity, and Spirituality: World Religions Through A Christian Worldview*, Honolulu, HI: 2013.

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