

Buddhism essay



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Buddhism

In reading this account on Buddhism, the goal is, for you (the reader) to understand a fascinating belief system, that has been around since before Christ ever set foot on this earth. This will provide a connection to the minds and hearts of the people who live and die in this sacred world, so that an understanding may be aroused and ultimately give an acceptance as well as a clear path to minister to these people. The most important aspect of reaching out to people of other cults or religions could possibly be an understanding and common ground with your neighbor. Therefore, knowing Buddhism and learning about it will help give you a stepping stone in your mission on spreading the gospel of Christianity, plus expose you to some of the profoundly interesting culture of Asia. (Yamamoto 1)

History

We have all seen and heard about Buddha and the yin and yang, do to the exploitation of an ancient religion, however aside from this popular fad is a complex and ancient religion deriving from a place called Kapilavastu located in southern Nepal. It began with a man named Siddhartha Gautama, who in fact was the son of a chieftain of the Sakya Clan. Basically he was a prince, enjoying all the luxuries accompanying it. He was born in at about 560 BC, it is debatable as to the exact history of his life, because of the many different forms of Buddhism, however there are substantial bits and pieces that are agreed on among the different Buddhists. (Mead 23)

He grew up in a sheltered type of life, in that his father refused to let him see any human misery, so he was secluded from the outside world he was never

meant know. However, one day at the age of twenty-nine he came to the conclusion of how empty his life had become. As an effect of this, he decided to renounce all his worldly possessions and break all attachments he had in order to set out on a journey. A journey in search of peace and enlightenment. He then, on one fateful day set out on his voyage, eluding the royal attendants his father had contained him with. When reaching the outside, he experienced the effects of human suffering, by viewing an old man, a leper, a corpse, and an ascetic. With this newfound truth he had discovered he realized that worldly happiness was merely an illusion. After his departing from captivity he decided to give up everything and become a wandering monk. During this time Gautama practiced many forms of extreme austerity or painful rituals, such as sleeping on brambles to mortify the desires of his body and denying his body of sitting by instead crouching on his heels to develop his concentration. He did these things for six or seven years in order, so he believed, to attain truth. One day while on his pilgrimage of enlightenment he came to the realization that his life as an ascetic was of no greater value than that of his previous existence as a prince. His self-torturing acts were then viewed by him as vain and fruitless, just as a life with worldly pleasures would be described as. Once he discovered the importance of the “middle way”, (the way to truth, which averts both worldly pleasures and extreme austerities) he abandoned his life of extreme austerities and moved on in his search for truth. (Mead 30)

Later on in his life, it is not certain exactly when, Gautama sat under a particular fig tree in Gaya, which now is christened the Bodhi-tree. Gautama sat at the foot of that tree and meditated, he meditated until he became

enlightened. At the point of enlightenment he discovered the “ Four Noble Truths”, which became the focal point of his teachings, and of his Buddhist philosophy. This marked perhaps the most important point in his spiritual journey, where he became the Buddha or “ the Enlightened One”.

With his newly found title as the Buddha he decided to set out and share the enlightenment he experienced and the “ Four Noble Truths” to all who would be willing to receive his message. Buddha’s (Gautama) choice to share his teaching rather than withdrawing from all human contact, as did many holy men had done symbolized a very important point in the Buddha’s teaching and philosophy. The decision symbolized the compassion of Buddha or his unselfish concern for others. Therefore establishing the Buddhist teachings on wisdom and compassion. Shortly after his enlightenment, approximately two months, Buddha gave his first sermon, in the Deer Park at Rishipatana. This brings us to another concept, it is believed that this event sparked the motion that Buddhists call the “ Wheel of the Law” (stages in comprehending ultimate reality). Consequently his actions inspired people to begin to believe in his sermons and eventually follow him; thus a community of beggar monks called Sangha was formed. Unique from many religions, Buddha’s followers did not have to be submissive to him nor give any vow of any sort. The people merely followed because of faith rather than leadership. Buddha devoted his life to the creation and growing of the Buddhist faith. He was dedicated to his ministry in full force up until his death at the ripe old age of eighty. (Encarta Eyclopedia, Buddhism 3)

Despite the great Buddha’s death, the religion continued on and growing quite considerably as well. His followers continued his work, of spreading the

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gospel of Buddhism to all people. They wandered from village to village seeking out and obtaining more and more followers. However as the Sangha grew larger, the monks had different opinions and ways of interpreting the religion and Buddha's word. Hence, a separation was eminent; the monks now formed numerous groups each interpreting the Buddha's teachings differently from one another, however still spreading the similar word more quickly. The monks eventually grew to such a significant number that they created monasteries, evolving from, a time when the wealthy landowners would invite the monks into their homes and provide shelters during the rainy season. Buddhism therefore continued to grow by leaps and bounds spreading like a fire run of control. King Asoka was responsible for many conversions, do to the fact that he used his great power and wealth to vigorously promote the campaign to spread the Buddhist doctrine throughout Asia and the East. During this time Buddhism graduated into a world religion, being etched in the stone of history forever. (Laymen 45)

Buddhism soon grew to such a large number of believers that a leadership or organizer would have to be formed. There was a grouping of leaders referred to as the moralistic order, they met periodically to discuss and reach agreements on the matters of the doctrine and the practice. These meetings were known as major councils. There were four of these large and very important meetings throughout Buddhist history. The first occurred after Buddha's death at Rajagrha. A monk named Mahakasyapa ordered the meeting, calling it to order; in order to go over and come to an agreement on the actual teaching of the Buddha. The second happened about a century later, it is believed that this council met at Vaihall. Its sole purpose was to

discuss ten practices, more specifically the ten questionable monastic practices. The first being use of money, then the drinking of palm wine, and other practiced that were called to be questionable by the higher Buddhist monks. This meeting was very influential in that it was said to have cause one of the first major splits in the religion, as spoken of prior. Later meetings occurred and eventually two major groups emerged out of the disagreements. Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. (Mead 35)

Theravada Buddhism is said to be the purest or most traditional branch of Buddhism because of its great effort in conserving the original nature of the Buddhist teachings. At about the first century BC, some of the first Buddhist scriptures arose, by the Theravada Buddhists, they were written in the Pali language, a vernacular that descended from Indian Sanskrit. These scriptures then became known as the Pali Canon, they provided a written basis for the Theravada belief system and practices. According to the Tharavadians this written document is an accurate account as to what the Buddha taught. (Encarta 4-5)

There are major points in the beliefs of the Tharavadains that differ from that of the Mahayana beliefs. Most importantly, the teaching that Buddha was a man, but a great man who was an ethical teacher, contrary to the Mahayanains who say he is a god. Secondly they reserve their teachings just for the saints (arhants), their most holy people, the common Buddhist believers are forbidden from the teachings. Coinciding with this it is a belief that only a saint may obtain ultimate deliverance or Nirvana, in order for a common person to obtain Nirvana he/ she must accumulate merits or in other words gain good Karma and possibly be reincarnate as saint in his or

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her next life. One of the most influential persons in the Theravadin Buddhists was Buddhaghos who composed compiled an extensive encyclopedia of Buddhist literature written in the Pali language. He was born in the latter half of the latter half of the fourth century AD into a Brahman family, but had converted away from his family to the Buddhist faith. Theravadins regard this scholar as one of the most important writers of there faith. Theravada Buddhism today primarily thrives in Sri Lanka while at the same time also residing in parts of Southeast Asia and India. While receiving opposition and discrimination from other religions, the Theravadains have a surprisingly peaceful relationship with the Mahayana Buddhists. (Yamamoto 8-10)

In reaction against the severe austerity and individualism of the early Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhists emerged; they had a newer radical view of the Buddhist faith. In this denomination of Buddhism a more relaxed modern view is taken as well as gives the common man a chance to have faith in and for the devotion of Buddha. In the Mahayana belief, nirvana (the attainment of enlightenment during life) is reached by the realization that the essence of suffering is empty. Mahayana Buddhism, sometimes called the Northern School of Buddhism, is yet again divided up into two even smaller and more concentrated denominations called the Madhyamika School and the Yogacara School. These two schools basically are just conflicting ideas that have been broken up and peace back together into two separate groupings. (Yamamoto 10-12)

The importance of the many groups and branches of Buddhism, including; Amida, Zen, Nichiren, as well as Taoism and Confucianism, Bon, and Shinto,
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are for the most part similar to the basic Buddhist belief. The importance of them is quite trivial in learning about general Buddhist beliefs because they break down the realigion and change vital bits and peace's so much that it really takes away from traditional Buddhist teachings. For the most part most of Asia is Buddhist not a collection of smaller Buddhist branches, except for the small noted exceptions. In fact, worldwide there are about 314, 939, 000 Buddhists (approximately 313, 000, 000 in Asia alone), and only 19, 000, 000 other Buddhist branches, with the exception of Toaists ranging from about 180, 000, 000, however, the reason being that they are not very similar to Buddhist teachings. (Yamamoto 22)

Theology

The beliefs and values of the Buddhists are very different from the tradition Christian based realigns of the west we know so well. Their religion is based more on nature and the world around us, or the mysterious force that drives nature. Any real religion will answer many questions and enlighten on various concepts. These concepts include the obvious mysteries people struggle to solve every day in every form possible. Such things as human suffering, the idea of a soul, in the Buddhists case they have a concept called “ Emptiness”. As well as other topics including, the way to salvation or forgiveness, and probably the biggest issue of all: God. Who and what is he? Does he exist? Buddhism, like Christianity has its story on these subjects and they differ greatly from that of a Christians, however the basses of this belief is thousands upon thousands of years old and has today developed into a complex network of people coming together in the belief of Buddhism. So what do they believe?

Lets begin with the idea of suffering, in the Christian world and Buddhist as well as all others, suffering is present, it is not a thing you can run or hide from and is a part of life. Every being suffers. So how do explain why bad things happen to obviously good people or why some people even need to suffer. Well Christianity simply says it is Gods intricate plan at work and we have neither the brain power nor the logic that God has to understand it, so they believe it to be all part of the big picture. This, however, is hugely different form that of the Buddhists. The Buddhists believe that one suffers because of there past lives, if they have done bad they will be punished in the present life. They also have the idea that all human life is really not important there are much higher things then it, this is about as close as Buddhism comes to Christians, in that they believe God is above all. Moving on, Buddhists use something they call the “ Four Noble Truths”, in other words the way the world goes. (Yamamoto 27) (Rahula 56)

The first of four noble truths is what Buddhists call dukkha. Dukkha basically means suffering, pain or misery, sorrow. This translation is very loose, it does get the basic meaning, but still does not portray the word as it is meant in its native language, thereby giving the Buddhists a bit of a deceptive look. So from our vantage point there is no full proof translation for this word, however the concept of it can be explained. The Buddha’s outlook on suffering is described as realistic. A good explanation of this is, how Buddhists priests would describe Buddha, they say that he is a doctor who tells you the absolute truth, by not giving the whole truth to make you feel better nor tell you such bad news you will as if you were dyeing. The Buddha simply tells the truth, understanding the cause of and effect of our problems.

Dukkha has three major aspects, one; it is all forms of suffering whether it be mental or physical. Two; it is change, and the third is the essence of life, this is the equivalent to what we would describe as the soul. (Yamamoto 27)

(Rahula 56)

The Second Noble Truth is “samudaya” or the origin of suffering; this is where dukkha comes from, samudaya. This concept reveals that suffering is originated from this idea, that a craving or thirst (sin) called Tanha is one of the causes of suffering. Within samudaya is the Twelfefold Chain of Causation, this is Buddha’s explanation of suffering and where it is arisen from. (Yamamoto 28)

The Third Noble Truth is called nirodha, nirodha is yet again in relation to dukkha, and it is described as the cessation of dukkha or the feeling of the dukkha. This reveal in some way that there is a liberation from suffering. The term Nirvana (nothingness) comes into play with nirodha because when one attains Nirvana he is experiencing nirodha. Nirodha is the annihilation of the false ideas of the world or the so-called soul you have on earth, because they believe in no soul. The only way to achieve Nirvana (which is like salvation) is to illiminate craving or coveting (like sin) called tanha. Once you have eliminated craving and experienced nirodha, a way is paved for you to achieve your salvation or deliverance from the ignorance of the world. (Yamamoto 29)

The Fourth and last Noble Truth is “magga”, this is the path paved I spoke of. The magga is made up of Buddhist ethics called the Noble Eightfold Path. This is like the right way; similar to Jesus this is what to follow how to live

you live the difference between right and wrong. This concept is taught to perfect Buddhist tradition of discipline and wisdom, their way of life. The Eightfold Path spoke of is a sort of new dimension a new way of life rather than a path, this can guide a person away from selfish desires which cause suffering. So put into simple terms magga is a guidance of what is needed for deliverance. (Yamamoto 30)

Another big issue is the idea of humans having a soul an unseen life force that drives them. Buddhists have the idea that the soul does not exist, otherwise called anatta to them. “ All the factors of a human personality form, feeling, perception, dispositions, and consciousness are not identified with the self” (David J. Kalupahana). What this means is that the human as a self is merely a collection of parts working in unison. However, you may take parts away to construct a new living being when it is reborn, much as an automobile is put together with parts and can be dismantled and used for other cars. People are weak beings and the fear and desire cause people want or in fact need a feeling of having something more than just the obvious physical appearances. When a person searches for a soul he or she really is searching for truth as Buddha explains, this truth is eventually received at the point of enlightenment. This idea astonishes unique, being that this is the only religion that rejects any idea of a soul. (Yamamoto 36)

The Buddhists have the idea that in having no soul nothing is permanent all is Empty to them this is known as shunyata or openness, the void or simply put absolute nothingness.

Finally, Salvation, how is it achieved in the Buddhist faith? Salvation is achieved, briefly stated, by renouncing the world and becoming a monk so

that in being a monk you give up everything and your selfish desires are annihilated and you are saved. Also going along with this concept, meditation is very important to the salvation of an individual because it connects them with the truth, and truth leads to deliverance, then to salvation. To be saved, you must first attain the highest level of perfection called arhant, this is the end of the Eightfold Path one who is free from all ignorance, selfish desires and so on. After dying as an arhant you achieve nirvana, and simply die out and fade away into nothingness. However when speaking of your salvation, God should be in the game, well in Buddhism God is non-existent he is a hindrance in a person's quest for knowledge he is yet another one of the false teachings of the world.

God to the Buddha is not only non-existent, but is on equal plain with man. Therefore, Buddhism is not atheistic because they believe a race of gods inhabit the cosmos and as we do have to achieve Nirvana for salvation. Gods are not to be worshiped in this religion, though, because the faith focuses on the self and the attainment of knowledge, god is not needed. Even Buddha who is viewed as a godlike figure is not worshipped or served just as no other gods are, Buddha was a teacher not a god. To them God is pointless. (Rahula 60)

Evangelizing

These people in the Buddhist religion are being lead astray, so how would a Christian onlooker try and evangelize and help the people. Well first of all, look at who you are talking to, most Buddhists are speaking a different language than you and I, so try to talk to the new generations of Buddhists.

People who speak the English language are easier to communicate with obviously, so begin with them. So now that you have found your target group and know that a language barrier does not protect them, find out what you will say, because in all honesty you need a plan. If preaching the gospel word for word out of the Bible is your plan, then just give up now, because the people you talk to will have no real concept of your religion just as you do not with them because of the major differences. Therefore, approach in a different manner; explain it as if it were a part of their everyday life, relate the books of the Bible to for instance the teaching of Buddha. Telling stories is the universal language, telling a story of a great man named Jesus who saved so many from sin will surely spark anyone's interest and give them hope. Speaking of hope, it is a very powerful tool in evangelizing, especially when people need hope and something to believe in. With Buddhism people cannot interest there lives in a secure figure like God, they are left to toil in the mysteries of ignorance and searching for truth, why search for truth if all you are called is ignorant, there is no hope in that. Heaven is especially influential because heaven is beautiful and full of life. In comparison to the Buddhist Nirvana of nothingness and complete voidness, people will understand that there is no hope in nothingness. Shouldn't we be searching for something if we are looking for truth? Not just a final answer of nothingness, it poses no real reward or incentive to love or obey. As with all religions they will fight back it is not unheard of. A spiritual warfare battle is eminent because we need to let them get out their side, which is good and fair. (Yamamoto 30-40) The only thing you need to know is how to respond and know all the basis of what they believe so that you can refute it. There

are millions of unsaved souls in the world; helping just one is a task we should all take on if not more.