

“CHRISTIANITY & WORLD RELIGIONS (#3): BUDDHISM”

(Matthew 6:25-34; Philippians 4:6-7)

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-I-

1. [9:30am] MSG Text “Read” as VideoClip [11am] NRSV Text: Matt. 6:25-34; Phil.4:6-7 & Pray.

2. We all want inner peace in life, don’t we – freedom from pain, suffering, anxiety and stress. But how do we find it?

A–Well, that’s what we’re going to be talking about today as we continue our series Christianity and World Religions, exploring what it means to be a follower of Jesus in the midst of a multi-religious world.

B–Let me remind you that our purpose is not to learn all there is to know about other world faiths, but merely to provide some handles so we can better understand them and be better equipped to dialogue with those who practice them. (*Find Bulletin Sermon Notes*)

3. Today our focus turns to Buddhism, a religion that developed out of Hinduism (that we discussed last week) in much the same way that Christianity later developed out of Judaism.<sup>1</sup>

A–It’s **ORIGINS** date back to the 5th-6th centuries BCE, which in our biblical time line is about when the Jews were in exile in Babylon (about 500 years before the birth of Jesus).<sup>2</sup>

B–It begins with *the story of Siddhartha (“Sidarta”) Gautama*, a young Hindu prince living in what is now Nepal, who once rode into the countryside and saw four things that he’d been sheltered from growing up that changed him forever: an elderly man; a sick person; a funeral procession; and someone who’d given up all their possessions.

1–As a result of these experiences with the suffering and “angst” of old age, sickness, and death, he left his family, renounced all *his* possessions, and spend the next few years as a wandering Hindu holy man, practicing self-denial and extreme forms of asceticism in search of truth.

2–But none of this gave him peace... until one day he finally found it after meditating for 40 days and 40 nights under a tree (that was later called the *Bo* tree).

3–He began teaching others what he’d discovered, and was soon known as “*the Buddha*” (or “*Enlightened One*”) because of the spiritual enlightenment he’d received.<sup>3</sup>

C–Today over 350 million people follow his teachings within two major branches and many sub-divisions of Buddhism, each slightly different in their appropriation and application of Buddha’s teachings<sup>4</sup> – Buddhists are found mostly in eastern Asia (China, Japan, Indonesia), but also increasingly in America and the West.<sup>5</sup>

4. So, let's talk about what this "Enlightenment" *was* that Siddhartha discovered, and how it eventually formed **THE BASIC BELIEFS** of Buddhism.

A–Well, first of all, remember that because Siddhartha himself was Hindu, his teachings assume many of the same beliefs as Hinduism, including:.. an understanding of God as an unknowable, impersonal life force; the concept of *samsara*/reincarnation; and the belief that our *karma* (our deeds) determine our future lives. <sup>6</sup>

B–But Siddhartha's great discovery under the *Bo* tree (what set it apart from Hinduism) is what came to be called the "**Four Noble Truths.**"

1–The first is called *dukkha* ("suffering"), an awareness that life contains suffering, which is the source of all negative things like pain, anxiety, stress, sickness, and even hurt feelings – so, if we want to find "peace" and get off the *samsara*/reincarnation cycle, then we have to find a way to end suffering.

2–The second truth is *samudya* ("desire/attachment"), which refers to the belief that all suffering is caused by our attachment to/selfish desire for things that do not last (like pleasure, fame, success, and even good things like health and relationships).

3–So, third is *narodha*, which teaches that we can end suffering & can reach *nirvana* ("salvation/peace") <sup>7</sup> when we end our attachment to/desire for things.

4–And the way we achieve this *nirvana* is through the fourth truth: *magga*, called the "**Eightfold Path**" to overcoming suffering – it says that *meditation* is the way we achieve "*right... (1) understanding, (2) intentions, (3) speech, (4) behavior, (5) livelihood, (6) effort, (7) awareness, and (8) concentration.*" <sup>8</sup>

5. So, **HOW DOES ALL THIS COMPARE WITH CHRISTIANITY?** Well, for the sake of time, let me just highlight *one* major difference and *one* point of commonality (and as we talk about these, I think you'll see that they're both merely two sides to the same coin).

–II–

6. The *difference* I want to highlight involves ***the role of suffering in life, and the solution to it.***

A–***In Buddhism***, suffering is at the very *heart* of the human condition – all negative things are caused by it, and Buddhism claims that the solution is found in learning "detachment" from the things of this world that contain it.

B–And the "Eightfold Path" of Meditation explains how we do this – "God" is not involved in the process at all (it *is*, after all, "meditation" *not* "prayer"). <sup>9</sup>

C–This is why Buddhism is officially "*Non-Theistic*" – meaning that the question of God's very existence is *irrelevant and unnecessary* – God has nothing to do with the ending of suffering, which is why you don't even have to believe there *is* a God to be Buddhist! <sup>10</sup>

7. But of course, *in Christianity* we see the role of suffering and the place of God in helping us solve it very differently.<sup>11</sup>

A—First of all, we say that *suffering is just one of many conditions* that we experience as human beings, rather than being the “one and only” or the “primary” condition.

B—Second, we would agree with Buddha’s first and second truths – that suffering *is* a very real part of life; & that at least *some* suffering is the result of our *own* selfish desires & choices.

1—But we would *not* agree that *all* suffering is inherently evil or bad – listen to what some of our scriptures say:

2—Romans 5:3-5, “[Let us] *boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us...*”

3—And James 1:2-4 even says “*Count it all as joy whenever you face trials of any kind... because the testing of your faith produces endurance,... so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.*”<sup>12</sup>

4—In other words, some of the most profound experiences in life often involve suffering –God doesn’t *cause* it, but God *uses* it to change us into better people.<sup>13</sup>

5—So, we don’t believe we always need to *flee from* life’s pain and suffering (like in Buddhism) – sometimes we need *embrace* it and give it to God so He can use it in redemptive ways to transform our lives..

C—And third, to answer the initial question at the beginning of this sermon, we Christians believe that the *way* to inner peace (i.e.,the “solution” to suffering) is *not* through *detachment from* the world, but through *attachment to* God.<sup>14</sup> Do you remember today’s 2 scriptures?

1—Matthew 6, (MSG) “*If you decide for God... it follows that you don’t fuss about [life]... [but] steep yourself in life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don’t worry about missing out. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.*”  
(NRSV) “*Do not worry about your life...But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*” (Vss 25 & 33).

2—And the Philippians text says (MSG) “*Don’t fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray... Let God know your concerns. Before you know it a sense of God’s wholeness... will come and settle you down. It’s wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.*” (NRSV) “*Do not worry about anything, but in everything... let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God... will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*” (Verses 6-7).<sup>15</sup>

3—In other words, for the Christian, relief from anxiety and stress does *not* come from meditation centered in *ourselves*, but from trusting *in God* who loves us – not by being detached, but by being attached *first* to God, who then helps us reorder all other attachments of life in their proper place.<sup>16</sup>

8. Finally, despite our differences, Christianity and Buddhism do share many *points of commonality*. And there's one in particular that I think can help us be better Christians.

A—Remember that one of the “*Four Noble Truths*” of Buddhism is that all bad things in life are rooted in the attachments/desire we have for things that are not of lasting importance, so that the more attached we are, the more anxiety and suffering comes with it.

B—Well, we Christians agree with this. In fact, we sometimes call these “*temptations*” or “*cares of the world*” – remember what our own scriptures teach us here:

1—Luke 21:34, Jesus himself said “*Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life...*”

2—Hebrews 12:1-2, “*Let us lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely, and... run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.*”<sup>17</sup>

C—You see, even our own scriptures affirm that when we place inordinate and improper value on things that are *not* of ultimate concern, it causes problems – and we can agree with (and I think even learn from) our Buddhist friends in this regard.

–III–

9. The bottom line for all we've discussed today is that while there are many things Christianity and Buddhism can affirm together, they are (in the end) two very different and distinct ways of understanding and interpreting life.

A—From Buddhism, we Christians can learn to be more still and live in the moment, to be more mindful of the power of prayer and meditation, to avoid wrong attachments, to recognize that our world is transient and not get so upset about things that don't really matter, and to be better committed to the ideals of non-violence, justice and righteousness.

B—But we Christians can offer our Buddhist friends a hope and a solution to suffering that *doesn't* come from the uncertainty and exertion of individual self-effort, but from trust in a loving God who took the suffering of the world upon *Himself* through his son Jesus.

C—And it's *that* good news of trust and faith and hope in God that *we* believe can bring genuine peace to the hearts and lives of *all* people..

10. [PRAYER: “*O God, we thank you for our Buddhist friends who are so diligent and committed to being people of peace and justice, who seek to free not only themselves but also the world from the pain and ‘angst’ of suffering. But we thank you even more that in your son Jesus, we’re taught not simply to avoid all suffering, but to seek you in it – not so much to seek detachment from the world, but to seek attachment to you as the way to inner wholeness and peace. So, for those of us here today who’ve come carrying a burden or a weight of heaviness in our lives, help us to see we don’t have to carry it alone, but instead to give it to you so that Christ’s peace can rest upon us. And we pray this in the name of the one who came to earth, and entered into the world’s suffering on our behalf, so that we wouldn’t have to, the name of Jesus, Amen.”]*

## ENDNOTES:

1. That is: Buddhism eventually became a religion separate and independent from Hinduism, but it's beliefs are still built upon the basic foundational belief structures of Hinduism, just like Christianity's beliefs are built upon the basic structure of Judaism.
2. Learn more about the origins and development of Buddhism from the following sources: Lewis M. Hopfe, World Religions (Growing Christians Series) (Nashville: Graded Press, 1987), Chapters 5-7, pp.37-64; Paul Stroble, What Do Other Faiths Believe? A Study of World Religions (FaithQuestions Series) (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2003), pp. 58-60; Sean O'Callaghan, The Compact Guide to World Religions (Oxford, England: Lion Books, 2010), pp. 143-147; Adam Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions: Wrestling with Questions People Ask (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), pp. 50-54; and Fritz Redenhour, So What's The Difference? (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1976), pp.83-85 & 87-88.
3. The story of Siddhartha/Buddha and his teachings were later recorded in what is known as the "Pali Canon," which is form of Buddhist scripture.
4. As with many religions, Buddhism eventually grew to have two main branches: **Theravada** Buddhism (practiced in places like Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia) – the more conservative/orthodox branch that strives to follow the teachings of Buddha more literally, and is more *monastic* in nature; and **Mahayana** Buddhism (practiced in places like China, Japan and Tibet)– the more "liberal" branch which seeks to make the teachings of Buddha more accessible to common, "everyday" people.
5. It is estimated that there are over 1 million practicing Buddhists in America, and around 3 million in Europe.
6. As often happens with new faiths, Siddhartha probably never intended to start a new religion. To his dying day, he most likely considered himself a Hindu. However, his teachings were eventually seen as heretical in Hinduism, and so they did not spread as much in his own native land (Nepal and India) as they did finding more fertile spiritual "soil" in the people of eastern Asia.
7. It should be noted that the Buddhist concept of *nirvana* is different from both the Christian idea of "heaven" (a state of eternal existence with God) and the Hindu idea of "moksha" (a state of unity and oneness with God/Brahman, but without any sense of self-identity). Buddhism does not believe humans have souls, so there is nothing to "join" with God in the afterlife. Instead, *nirvana* (which means "*extinction*") is more accurately the extinction of our personal identity altogether, along with it being joined *not* to God, but to the kinetic energy of the universe itself. Our energy is united with and merged into all other energy. We no longer exist – our self-being is "extinguished," just like the snuffing out of a candle – we cease to be [Read more about this in Adam Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions, p. 58, 64-65; and Paul Stroble, What Do Other Faiths Believe?, p. 67].
8. To borrow Christian language... in Buddhism, the human problem is not "sin" but *suffering* caused by "*attachment*," and the solution (salvation) is through *non-attachment* by way of practicing the "Eightfold Path" of meditation. For more information about the "Four Noble Truths" and the "Eightfold Path," read generally Sean O'Callaghan, World Religions, pp. 150-153; Lewis M. Hopfe, World Religions, pp. 42-44; Paul Stroble, What Do Other Faiths Believe?, pp. 60-63; Fritz Ridenour, So What's the Difference?, pp.85-86; and Adam Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions, pp. 55-57.
9. This is not surprising if one considers the fact that Buddha's concept of God came from Hinduism, which views God as an impersonal, abstract consciousness that is unknowable and inaccessible to all but a few very holy humans high up the *samsara* ladder. Consequently, for Buddha, the answer to suffering was not found in some impersonal, inaccessible, abstract "God," but in *self-generated* detachment from the world. In fact,

some Buddhists today would say that belief in God may be yet another form of “attachment” that one needs to rid themselves of in their quest to find *nirvana*!

10. Because of this, some religious studies scholars question whether or not Buddhism can be properly classified as a “Religion” at all because it doesn’t claim belief in God as pertinent to the human issues that it attempts to address – some argue that it’s merely a life philosophy, or a code of ethics instead of a “religion” [Read more about this in Sean O’Callaghan, World Religions, p. 141; Also Adam Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions, pp. 55, 59-61; Paul Stroble, What Do Other Faiths Believe?, p. 66-67]. So, where Buddhism says that God’s existence is irrelevant to life and the issue of suffering, Christianity says that God is at the very center of faith and of our ability to find inner peace. This is why the “Eightfold Path” is about “Meditation” (which is non-theistic), rather than “Prayer” (which assumes a divine being).

11. For an excellent overview of the differences in this area, read Adam Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions, pp. 61-64.

12. Another great scripture emphasizing this point is Romans 8:18 & 28, *“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.... We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, and who are called according to His purpose.”*

13. The cliché here is true: *“No pain. No gain.”* If we’ll allow it, pain and suffering can be used in redemptive ways by God to draw us closer both to Him, to Christ, and to other people so that we can be complete and mature in God.

14. We believe in a God who not only doesn’t turn away from our suffering, but who actually enters into it and suffers on our behalf. We believe that this is precisely what Jesus did – God became human and experienced the same things as Buddha (aging, sickness, death and angst) so we could see that the solution to these things doesn’t lie within ourselves or in any meditative practice that *we do*, but lies instead in us turning our sufferings over *to God*. This answer is not merely a “just say no,” self-effort mentality. Instead, it is a recognition of, and calling upon, a source of strength *beyond* and *higher than* ourselves (God) – it is allowing God to give us the strength and power to be a victor over the suffering and evil in our world, rather than merely being a victim of it.

15. Read also 1 Peter 5:7, *“Cast all your anxiety on him, because He cares for you....”*

16. After all, we believe that some “attachments” in life are specifically *given* to us *from* God (like our spouse, family, and friends) and – viewed in the right way – these can actually *help us* cope with the sufferings of this life (vs. *being* part of the problem, as in Buddhism).

17. Read also Matthew 13:22 (where the seed sown in the thorns is the one who hears God’s word but gets choked out by the cares of the world and “desire” for “worldly things”) and also James 1:13-15.