

## Buddhism

By Ellen DeWitt

- *How did Buddhism originate?*
- *What is the message of Buddhism?*
- *How does this compare to the Bible?*

### The History of Buddhism

Buddhism is ranked as the world's fourth-largest religion (behind Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism). Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama (563-483 B.C.) in Nepal. Born a prince, a seer prophesied Gautama would be the world's greatest ruler if he was kept from seeing four things, but if he saw them, he would instead discover a way of salvation for all mankind. His father kept him in a palace to keep him from seeing the four things. But one day Gautama rode outside the palace and saw them, the effects of human suffering: (1) sickness, (2) old age, (3) death, and (4) an ascetic. He then realized worldly happiness was an illusion, renounced his worldly life, and pursued a quest for truth as a wandering monk.

He practiced the life of an ascetic (self-denial) but realized this was of no greater value than his previous life as a prince. He then understood the importance of the Middle Way, thus abandoning his life of extremes.

Later he sat for 40 days at the foot of a fig tree, meditating until he became Buddha ("the enlightened one"), discovering the Four Noble Truths, which became the central teachings of Buddhism. He decided to share his teachings, thus establishing the Buddhist faith both on his wisdom and unselfish concern for others. Buddha was the spiritual guide and teacher for his followers, but he did not demand submission nor require a vow of obedience to himself. He died about at age 80.

After Buddha's death, his followers continued to wander from village to village, spreading the Buddha's doctrine of deliverance from suffering. Since a systematic Buddhist theology was not put into written form for four centuries after Buddha's death, schisms split the Buddhists. Two major branches of Buddhism eventually developed:

(1) Theravada is the fundamentalist branch because it has presumably preserved the original nature of Buddhism. They believe Buddha was a great ethical teacher (not a god). Their teachings are reserved for the saints not for the common people. They emphasized strenuous ascetic discipline for the elite few. They believe that Nirvana (ultimate deliverance) is achieved by eradicating one's own karma (suffering) through self-denial. Today it is called southern Buddhism, being mainly in Sri Lanka and southeast Asia, such as Cambodia and Laos, and through immigration to Los Angeles and Seattle.

(2) Mahayana Buddhism teaches that everyone can have faith in and devotion for the Buddha. They believe all existing things are "empty" (*sunya*) and that the Buddhist ideal is nonattachment to any idea, emotion, behavior, or physical entity. Only the mind is real and the intense practice of meditative yoga results in the realization of the Absolute, transcending worldly experience. Sometimes called Northern Buddhism, it is dominant in Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, and Japan. In Tibet some emphasize mystical and occultic practices to achieve quick enlightenment. The key figure in Tibetan Buddhism is the priest-teacher known as the Dalai lama ("ocean of wisdom").

Zen is a meditation discipline practiced by both groups of Buddhists. Zen means "meditation." It teaches that enlightenment is achieved through continuous effort at reaching deeper levels of awareness. Zen is most appealing to Westerners, among psychotherapists, poets, and movie stars, as the vehicle that will transport them to an ultimate experience. [See the Concepts' brochure called "A Biblical Perspective on Karate and the Martial Arts" for further information on Zen.]

## Buddhism's Teachings, Beliefs, and Practices

Gautama embraced the idea of reincarnation. Salvation is an ultimate escape from the cycle of rebirth. Ignorance is the root of all evil. Passions and desires need to be destroyed. Neither hedonism (excess) nor asceticism (self-denial) will destroy these. His philosophy is contained in the Four Noble Truths:

1. Suffering is universal.
2. Suffering is caused by desire.
3. To eliminate suffering is to eliminate desire.
4. An "Eightfold Path" must be followed in order to end rebirth: (1) right belief, (2) right feelings, (3) right speech, (4) right conduct, (5) right livelihood, (6) right effort, (7) right memory, and (8) right meditation.

If one follows these principles, ignorance is now eliminated, the Buddhist is free to enter Nirvana (ultimate deliverance from the craving that you exist), karma (suffering) is "blown out" (like a candle), and the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is ended, thus dissolving all personality into the life force.

Buddhism distinguishes between five modes of being:

1. Buddha or those who have become Buddhas
2. Bodhisattvas, future Buddhas
3. Pratyeka Buddhas, those who have sought enlightenment personally but have yet to pass such great knowledge on to others
4. Arhants, those on the road leading to Nirvana
5. Prithagjanas, the majority of disciples who do not aspire to the lofty goals of the arhants.

The Buddhist monk follows ten commandments forbidding: (1) murder, (2) theft, (3) fornication, (4) lying, (5) drinking alcoholic beverages, (6) eating when abstinence is in force, (7) dancing, singing, worldly entertainment, (8) using perfumes and/or ornamental attire, (9) sleeping on beds not on the floor, and (10) accepting alms of gold or silver. These commandments are of equal importance.

## Buddhism vs. the Bible

**God**--There is no absolute God in Buddhism. The Buddha did not deny the existence of God outright but said the question of His existence "tends not to edification." Those seeking enlightenment need to concentrate on their own spiritual paths themselves rather than relying on an outside support. The Buddha did not claim divinity or even a divine source for his teachings. He saw himself as only an example to fellow monks. The Bible teaches that God is the absolute (Jeremiah 10:10).

**Desire**--For the Buddhist, any and all desire results in suffering. Deliverance from suffering can be achieved through enlightenment by obeying the Buddhist ethic, especially meditation. The Bible says only those desires contrary to God's character are sin (Romans 3:23), and desire for righteousness is good (Matthew 5:6).

**Man and the Universe**--Both the beginning and the ultimate nature of the world are left unexplained by Buddha. He said that all creatures, including man, are fictions; there is really no "self." Individuals are enlightened when they finally destroy this desire for soul. The Bible says man was created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and will exist as an eternal being (Rev. 20:4). There is no reincarnation. It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27).

**Salvation**--Buddhism sees ignorance (belief that the world and self truly exists) rather than sin as the roadblock to salvation. The Theravada Buddhists emphasize the individual monk working through self-control and meditative practices to progressively lead him to the annihilation of his grasping illusion of self. The Mahayana Buddhists saw that the monk striving only for his own salvation was selfish and did little for others. They eventually believed in a number of Buddhas (heroes of the faith) who reached Nirvana but refused to enter it until the rest of mankind did. To varying degrees they can graciously grant aids to salvation to those who petition them. The Bible says, "*Jesus Christ ... there is salvation in no one else*" (Acts 4:10-12; John 14:6).

**Worship**--In most cases, what looks like worship before a statue or image is really a sort of paying respects. Buddha is revered as an example of a saintly life and as the one who brought the teachings of Buddhism (although some actually do worship Buddha as a god.) The Bible says, "*I am the Lord your God, ... you shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on earth beneath. You shall not worship them or serve them*" (Exodus 20:1-5).

Meditation in Buddhism can focus on one's breathing, one's own attitudes, a neutral object, or future Buddhas. In each case, the purpose is to divest oneself of craving and a sense of self and thus ultimately meditate on nothing. We are not to meditate on nothing. The Bible says to meditate on God's words. *I will meditate on Thy precepts, and regard Thy ways. I shall delight in Thy statutes; I shall not forget Thy Word* (Psalm 119:15-16, 23, 48, 78; Joshua 1:8).

## Questions and Answers

**Q:** *How did Buddhism originate?*

**A:** In Nepal in the 500s B.C. with the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (re-named Buddha, "the enlightened one").

**Q:** *What is the message of Buddhism?*

**A:** Ignorance is eliminated through meditation and self-denial. The Buddhist is then free to enter Nirvana (ultimate deliverance from the craving that you exist). Karma (suffering) is "blown out" (like a candle), and the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is ended, thus dissolving all personality into the life force.

**Q:** *How does this compare to the Bible?*

**A:** It is contrary to the Bible. The Bible says people will exist forever, salvation and deliverance from sin is only through the blood of Jesus Christ, there is no reincarnation, after death comes judgment, and *I am the Lord your God. You shall not make for yourself an idol. You shall not worship them or serve them* (Exodus 20:1-5).