

Buddhism Encounter

By Dr Philip Hughes*

The Origins of Buddhism

About 2500 years ago important changes in religion began occurring in many parts of the world. Between 550 and 450 B.C. many great prophets arose in such places as China, India, Greece, and Palestine. Many of their names are still familiar to us: Confucius in China, the Buddha in India, Plato and Socrates in Greece, and Zoroaster in Persia. This was the period of the Jewish exile in Babylon and their return to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem. There were certain themes that were common to most of these prophets. For example, they began to develop the idea that there was another form of existence, a perfect form, very different from what we know now. Prophets spoke to the Jews of a new era, a new order of peace and harmony in which God would reign. The Buddha spoke of "Nirvana", a state of perfect bliss beyond all sorrow and sadness.

A second theme common to these prophets was their rejection of popular, superstitious religion. The Jewish prophets, for example, exhorted the people to leave their idols and the false prophets. It was not enough to perform religious rituals or go to the temple regularly. God required people to live moral and just lives. The Buddha rejected the popular superstitions of Hinduism. The Hindu gods, he said, were limited beings who had not yet attained perfection. One must rise above the level of the gods. Religious rituals were of no value in themselves. The Buddha taught that ethical living was of fundamental importance.

The Buddha

"The Buddha" is not a name but a title which means "The Enlightened One". The name of the man we call the Buddha was Siddhattha Gotama. He was an Indian prince. According to tradition, as a young man, Gotama was driving in his chariot one day when he saw a sick person, an old decrepit person, a corpse, and a monk. This made Gotama think very deeply about the meaning of life. To him sickness, old age, and death were signs of suffering. They showed how unhappy this life is. Life is not even good for the young and the strong, he thought, for we know that what we enjoy now will pass. Perfect existence will only be found where there is no sickness, no decay, no death, and where joy is permanent.

So Gotama began his search for this perfect existence. He left his home and family and began trying the ways of other religious teachers of his time. He lived for some time as an ascetic monk, meditating for many hours every day, and fasting until he was almost at the point of death. But he did not find the peace that he was seeking. However, while meditating, he did have a tremendous religious experience which the Buddhists call "attaining enlightenment". Through this experience, he came to feel that he understood the nature of existence, and the way to attain the perfect life.

Following this experience, Gotama left his ascetic life. He began travelling around India teaching his insights about the nature of existence and how to attain the perfect existence. He gathered a group of disciples around him to whom he gave his teachings.

The Teaching of the Buddha

The Buddha summarized the essence of his teaching in four basic statements known as *the four Noble Truths*. The first noble truth states that this life is one of suffering, or, rather, is deeply unsatisfactory. We experience this suffering or “unsatisfactoriness” in birth, old age, sickness, and death, when we are faced with unpleasant things, and when we are separated from what is pleasant.

The second noble truth states the cause of this suffering. The cause is “desire”. We always want what we consider to be pleasant. We attach ourselves to what is pleasant, and thus find separation unpleasant. Indeed, the Buddha said that part of the problem is that we *are attached to particular images of ourselves, failing to recognize that we are just an ever-changing set of feelings and sensations*.

The third noble truth states the way to overcome suffering by overcoming desire. If we are able to cease clinging to things, to other people, and finally cease clinging to ourselves or particular images of ourselves, then we will be able to overcome suffering.

The fourth noble truth describes the way of overcoming desire and suffering. This way is described by eight characteristics, and is thus known as the noble eightfold path. This eightfold path involves having right views, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Buddhists have continued to hold the Hindu belief in “karma”. The law of karma is understood as the great moral law of the universe: whenever a person does something which involves desire or attachment, that person will receive consequences of equivalent moral value. If one does something good, one will enjoy good rewards. If one does evil, one will experience evil consequences. In Thailand, this law of karma is often expressed “Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil”. However, everyone knows that one does not always receive good immediately after doing good, and one may get away with doing evil for a long time.

Indeed, when a person dies, the law of karma still has affect. According to one’s good or bad deeds, one may enter heaven or hell for a time. It is believed that everyone, in heaven, hell or on earth, is re-born sooner or later on earth. The consequences of one’s actions may follow one through many lives. If one lives without any attachment or desire, then there are no consequences of one’s actions which will cause one to be re-born. In that way one can escape from the great “wheel of existence”, the continual round of birth, death, and rebirth in this world of suffering. Instead, the perfect person enters Nirvana, a state of perfect bliss, from which one will never return.

The Two Types of Buddhism

Buddhism has split into two major types. One type is known as *Mahayana Buddhism*, and is round in the north of Asia, in such countries as China (including what was Tibet), Japan, Taiwan, and Korea. The second type is known as *Theravada Buddhism*, and is found today particularly in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand.

One basic difference between these two types of Buddhism is that Mahayana Buddhists believe in a “Buddha spirit” or “nature” which has been present in many people, especially, but not only Gotama. These many Buddhas can help those who have faith in them to attain Buddhahood.

Theravada Buddhists believe that the essence of their religion is the teaching of Gotama. It is up to the individual to do his or her best to follow that teaching. Theravada Buddhists do not consider spiritual forces to be capable of giving salvation. They tend to be indifferent to and agnostic about the existence of a supreme God, although most believe in lesser gods who live in the heavens.

Being a Buddhist Today

What does it mean to be a Buddhist Today?

The practice of Buddhism varies from country to country. Let us consider, as an example, what it means to be a Buddhist in Thailand. *About 95% of the population of Thailand consider themselves Buddhists.* Throughout Thailand, in every little village, one finds Buddhist temples. Buddhism is taught in all the schools, and *most Thai people think that being a Buddhist is part of what it means to be a Thai.* Very few Thai Buddhists believe that they have any chance of attaining Nirvana. By doing good, they hope for a better life now and when they are reborn after death.

There are five basic rules which they must keep.

- 1/Abstain from killing living beings
- 2/Abstain from taking things not given
- 3/Abstain from sexual misconduct
- 4/Abstain from false speech
- 5/Abstain from intoxicating drinks and drugs

Many become Monks...

A large percentage of Thai men become monks for a while. Most do so in their teens before getting married. They remain monks as long as they feel they are able. Some stay a few weeks, others several years, and a few a life-time. The monks live in the temples for this period. While monks, they vow to keep 227 rules. They are not allowed any private possessions. They are not allowed to touch women; nor are they meant to handle any money.

Every morning the monks leave the temples and walk round to the homes of the people near-by who give them food. The monks eat two meals a day, both before noon. Back in the temples, the monks study the Buddhist scriptures, and learn the Buddhist ceremonies. The ceremonies involve long chants in the holy language of Theravada Buddhism, Pali.

Four times a month, there is a Holy Day, when services for everyone are held at the temples. The monks and the congregation chant their respects to the Buddha and his teaching. Then one of the monks preaches a sermon. Attending a service, giving food to the monks, and becoming a monk are three important ways in which the Thai believe they can “earn merit”. In other words, these are recognised as actions which are especially good, and will have good results. Such actions will lead towards a better life.

Christ and Buddha

There is no doubt but that Buddhism calls men to a higher and better kind of life. The difficulty about the path offered by the Buddha is that it goes beyond man's ability to reach. Jesus Christ too offers a better way of living. The difference lies in that Jesus offers the needed strength to live that better life.

In a little book called *What's the difference?* edited by Fritz Ridenour (Regal, 1969) the author of the section on Buddhism says "Christ shares the life of the true believer. On the night before He was crucified, Jesus gave his disciples a perfect illustration of how to be a successful Christian."

He compared Himself to a grapevine and His follower's to a grapevine's branches..” The author then went on to quote John 15:4-7 and added, "Jesus Christ 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 His Lord and how obedient he is to his Lord."

There is one other factor which must never be lost sight of. Sidattha Gotama lived, taught and died. Only his teaching lives on in the Buddhist faith. Jesus of Nazareth lived, taught and died. But He rose again! And it was the living Lord who gave command that His people should go into every nation with the message of redeeming love and power.

FACT BOX

*Number of Foreign Missionaries per million people in major cultural blocks**

Christian 185.6

Jewish 58.2

Tribal 50.91

Non-religious 10.51

Other 9.91

Chinese 5.88

Hindu 5.64

******Buddhist 5.29******

Muslim 2.73

* Source: Mission Frontiers June 2000

Notes and further reading

1. The Theravada Buddhist Scriptures, known as the Tipitaka, are extensive. So far 39 volumes have been published in English. A useful selection from them is Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translations*. Atheneum, New York, 1977.

2. For a basic outline of Buddhist beliefs see Edward Conze, *Buddhism. Its Essence and Development*. Bruno Cassirer, Oxford. 1951.

3. Bhikkhu Buddhadasa is a contemporary Thai Buddhist who has published a number of books in English including one on the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism. An introduction

to him and a selection of his writings can be found in Donald Swearer, (editor), *Toward the Truth*. Buddhadasa. Westminster Press, Philadelphia. 1971.

4. There are many books on the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism. See, for example, George Appleton, *On the Eightfold Path - Christian Presence Amid Buddhism*. S.C.M., London, 1961. Ten series of lectures, known as the Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lectures, have been published by the theological seminary of the Church of Christ in Thailand on this subject.

5. Most Theravada Buddhists also believe in spirits. For many people the ideas about spirits and spiritual powers are mixed with ideas about Buddhism. For anthropological studies of village people in Theravada Buddhist countries, and Richard F. Gombrich, *Precept and Practice. Traditional Buddhism in the Rural Highlands of Ceylon*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. 1971; Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society. A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*. Harper & Row, New York, 1970; S.J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit-Cults in North-east Thailand*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970; and B.J. Terwiel, *Monks and Magic. An Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Central Thailand*. Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph no. 24, Craftsman Press, Bangkok, 1975.

* This material was prepared by Dr Philip Hughes who was in Thailand in 1981/82. He is the author of "Proclamation and Response" - a study of the History of the Christian faith in northern Thailand. It was originally published as "Faiths We Encounter" in the Global Interaction Mission Scene Pamphlet Series.