

The Basics Of Buddhism #1

Over my career of preaching, Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism have grown in popularity. A lot of people, giving up on "orthodox" or "organized" religion, have become what they term as "spiritual." Sadly, some Christians have left the true worship of God and the scriptures for these groups, seeking "enlightenment." Because of this, it is useful to know about Buddhism, and then to compare it to the Bible.

Siddhartha Gautama, the first "Buddha," was born a Hindu about 560 B.C. in Lumbini, India (now part of Nepal) to a rajah (ruler) and grew up in luxury. A seer at the time of Gautama's birth prophesied that he would be the greatest ruler in human history. The seer prophesied that if Gautama saw sickness, old age, death, and a monk who had renounced the world, he would discover a way of salvation for all mankind. As a result of this prophecy, Gautama's father, wanting him to become a great earthly ruler, refused to allow any of these four to come near the palace.

According to Buddhist tradition, the gods had other ideas. One day while riding through the park surrounding the palace, Gautama saw a man covered with terrible sores, a man tottering with age, a corpse being carried to its grave, and a begging monk who appeared peaceful and happy. Moved by the peacefulness of the monk, Gautama left his wife and child, and at age 29 set out to solve the riddle of life. He shaved his head, put on a yellow robe, and wandered the countryside as a beggar monk. While wandering the countryside, he studied the Hindu scriptures, but found only frustration in them. Next, he tried to find salvation through self-denial and nearly starved himself to death. Yet, this did not bring him happiness or peace.

After failing to find happiness or peace in the Hindu scriptures or self-denial, Gautama sat under a fig tree for 40 days and nights swearing that he would not move until he found what he was searching for. At the end of 40 days, he experienced "Nirvana" (the final state). Though the experience supposedly defies words, it meant man's desire for personal existence and its attractions is the root cause of the cycles of life and reincarnation. Escape is effected and the passionless peace of "Nirvana" is discovered when all desire is extinguished. "Nirvana" means "to blow out" or "extinguish." Extinction of personal desire and personal existence releases the nebulous life force from rebirth. Like a drop of spray from an ocean wave, the individual life loses its desire and identity by rejoining the larger ocean of all life. From this point on Gautama was known as "Buddha" -- the "Enlightened One." For the next 45 years, Gautama Buddha taught all who would listen about his way of salvation.

Gautama Buddha died at the age of 80. Sometime after his death, the "Buddha" was deified by some of his followers. Even though this is directly against his teaching, his followers came to speak of him as having exceedingly great virtue, a physical radiance that rivaled gold, and wisdom that was unfathomable. Buddha statues evolved after his death as a cult devotion. The offerings of his worshipers now include flowers, incense, and praise to the image.

Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world with an estimated 300 million adherents. It is an influential religion in the Far East and a powerful political force. It is a growing religious force in the U.S. Buddhists have even opened Buddhist-themed Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. They openly oppose and criticize the gospel of Christ. People looking for subjective concepts of truth and a religion that does not speak of sin and eternal hell find Buddhism appealing. Many splits, with varying beliefs, have occurred over the centuries.

Ancient India had two philosophical streams of religious thought: the Shramana and the Vedic. These two religions have shared paralleled beliefs and have existed side by side for thousands of years. Buddhism is a continuation of the Shramana belief while modern Hinduism is a continuation of the Vedic belief. The beginning forms of Hinduism and the teachings of Buddha have pronounced differences, while the more modern forms of Buddhism and Hinduism have more similarities than differences. Although they are close, there are five significant differences. First, Buddhism denies that the Vedas and Upanishads (from Hinduism) are divine writings and therefore are of no value in finding salvation. Second, Buddhism denies that man has a soul. Third, Gautama protested the idea that one is born into a class of society from which he cannot escape except by reincarnation. Oddly enough, in light of how popular his idol-like figure is, he rejected the many Hindu gods, their idols, and superstitious rites. Fourth, it does accept the Hindu doctrine of karma (the duty one has to perform according to his station in life) and reincarnation. Fifth, determined to change the religion of his day, Buddha preached a religion that was devoid of authority, ritual, speculation, tradition, and the supernatural.

At the heart of Buddhism are the "Four Noble Truths," which are as follows: 1) Suffering is universal -- by this the Buddhist means that the very act of living must include suffering. In each of a person's incarnations, he must suffer. Salvation ("Nirvana") is to be released from this unending cycle of suffering; 2) the cause of suffering is craving (selfish desire) -- man remains in this endless cycle of suffering because he is too attached to the world; 3) the cure for suffering is to be eliminate craving -- since to live is to suffer,

and since suffering is caused by craving, if craving were removed, suffering would be over; and, 4) eliminate craving by following the "Middle Way" (a spiritual path of salvation that winds between the complicated religion of the Hindus and the world of sensuality that he had known) -- the "Noble Eightfold Path." This was Buddha's great discovery: if a person could put an end to craving, he would put an end to suffering. The "Eightfold Path" is as follows:

- Right viewpoint -- accept validity of the "Four Noble Truths" and the "Eightfold Path."
- Right aspiration -- renounce all sensual pleasures; harbor no ill-will; harm no living thing.
- Right speech -- do not lie, slander, use abusive speech, or idle talk.
- Right behavior -- destroy nothing; take only what is given you; commit no sexually indecent act.
- Right occupation -- earn your livelihood in a way that will harm no one.
- Right effort -- strive to eliminate evil and promote good within yourself.
- Right mindfulness -- be observant, strenuous, alert, contemplative, free of desire, and sorrow.
- Right meditation -- enter into four degrees of meditation.

Buddha claimed that whoever would follow this "Eightfold Path" would eventually reach "Nirvana," a release from the endless cycle of death and rebirth. Buddha made no effort to describe or discover what one would find when they were liberated from the suffering of this life. Negatively, "Nirvana" is the state where all desire is extinguished. Affirmatively, "Nirvana" is a continued existence that cannot be described. Buddha said "Nirvana" was like the wind; it is there but you cannot show it.

Zen Buddhism is the most popular sect of Buddhism in America. It was developed in China and Japan during the 12th century. It broke off from the Mahayana Buddhists who were the more liberal of two basic schools of Buddhist thought. The Mahayans believed that Buddha was a savior and that all men could be saved. The basic beliefs of the Zen Buddhists include complete submission to a Zen Master who directs the seeker in years of disciplined and silent meditation. The student meditates on such questions as, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Questions such as, "Who is the Buddha?" may be answered, "The cat climbs the post." The point is to so frustrate the seeker's mind that he finally experiences a flash of intuition. The mind emptied and the illusion of personal existence and identity broken, the enlightened one realizes, "Buddha is all and I am Buddha." The Zen Buddhists stresses a direct approach to "Buddhahood" through meditation without the aid or necessity of Buddhist writings or images. Huston Smith

gives an insightful evaluation of Zen belief: "Entering the Zen outlook is like stepping through Alice's looking glass. One finds oneself in a topsy-turvy wonderland in which everything seems quite mad -- charmingly mad for the most part, but mad all the same. It is world of bewildering dialogues, obscure conundrums, stunning paradoxes, and flagrant contradictions, all carried off in the most urbane, cheerful, and innocent style." Much of Zen's attraction is that one is not required to be responsible in evaluating anything in the world, even in his own thoughts.

To become a Buddhist, a person just has to believe that he is a Buddhist. Nothing else is necessary. But to believe that he is a Buddhist, a person will have to live according to the teachings of Buddha. Then he will be expected to come and listen regularly to Buddhist lectures. Next week, we will look at the teachings of Buddhism compared to the Bible.

Adapted From Whit Sasser