

AMERICA SMILES ON THE BUDDHA—PART 2

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The Buddha and His Teaching

According to Buddhist history, Siddhartha Gautama was raised in a wealthy family, sheltered and protected from life's unpleasantness and tragedies. One day, however, he saw the world as it really was. In observing a decrepit old man, a corpse, a diseased man and a beggar, he realized the fundamental condition of man was one of suffering. For the Buddha, the essential problem of humanity was not really one of sin or selfishness or rebellion against God, as Christianity teaches. It was suffering and misery. But how could suffering be alleviated? This occupied the Buddha's thoughts and he eventually received "enlightenment" on the matter. Buddha formulated the foundation of Buddhism: the four noble truths and the eightfold path.⁴

The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path

From a Christian perspective, Siddhartha attempted to find a solution to the *symptoms* of man's problem instead of the basic or underlying problem itself. Thus, suffering and misery in life are caused largely by sin and rebellion against God. By rejecting God and the dynamics of man's relationship to God, Buddha's only option was to deal with symptoms (e.g., suffering) instead of causes (e.g., sin). This basic misdiagnosis conditions everything subsequent in Buddhism.

In brief, the four noble truths are, 1) all life involves suffering, 2) suffering is caused by desire (e.g., "selfish" craving defined, in part, as the desire to exist as an independent self), 3) desire can be overcome, and 4) the means to overcome desire is the eightfold path.

The eightfold path consists of the proper or correct exercise of eight conditions or actions which aim at eliminating desire and hence suffering. These include 1) right vision (knowledge or views), 2) right conception (aspirations), 3) right speech, 4) right behavior (conduct), 5) right livelihood, 6) right effort, 7) right concentration or mindfulness, and 8) right one-pointed contemplation (or meditation). However, we must remember to interpret these eight requirements from a *Buddhist* rather than a Western or Christian perspective. Since these are defined in light of a Buddhist worldview and its presuppositions, they take on distinctly Buddhist implications. As such, they are implicitly or explicitly non-Christian. In fact, given Buddhist premises, the Christian worldview is easily considered a spiritual detriment.⁵ For example, right understanding is the correct understanding and acceptance of the four noble truths and the Buddhist perception of the world and self. Right concentration or mindfulness in the sense of awareness of one's own actions is achieved by meditation (often leading to occult states of trance and/or development of psychic powers). Right morality "does not consist in passive obedience to a code imposed by a God..." but is determined by tradition (ultimately determined by the Buddha, i.e., the first Buddhist traditions).⁶

The Law of Dependent Origination

The dilemma of man's suffering is exemplified by the Buddhist "law of dependent origination" which asserts that, in a vicious cycle, existence itself perpetuates suffering. Thus, existence itself (which is comprised of an ever impermanent flux of phenomena, both mental and physical) causes corresponding effects. These effects result in more imperma-

nent phenomena. These in turn cause ignorance of the permanent state (nirvana). Such ignorance of reality brings more harmful desires—which results in suffering—which brings karmic rebirth. All this causes the perpetuation of a bondage to individual existence from which there is no escape. So how does the Buddhist escape from the endless round of desire, karma and more desire? In order to understand the Buddhist solution, we must first understand how Buddhism views reality.

In Buddhism, existence is believed to be made up of extremely temporary, ever changing phenomena or aggregates. These are termed *dhammas* or *skandhas*. *Dhammas* constitute experiential moments, i.e., the building blocks of existence. (In another definition, *Dharma* means Buddhist Law, i.e., Buddha's teachings). ⁷ *Skandhas* refer to the five aggregates making up the person—1) the body, 2) feelings, 3) perceptions, 4) volition, impulses and emotions, 5) consciousness. ⁸ It is maintained that existence, by its very nature, is so fleeting that none of its components can, in any sense, be held to be permanent. Such phenomena (broken down to their constituent parts) exist for so short a time (e.g., nano-seconds) that they cannot be said to constitute anything even resembling permanence. However, reality must be something permanent if it is to be real. That which is impermanent cannot be real. Hence, one must transcend all impermanence and arrive at nirvana, the only permanent and real state of existence. ⁹

Naturally, if our existence is impermanent and “unreal,” the logical solution is to eradicate our personal existence and achieve permanence, that alone which is real. As noted, this is the Buddhist goal: to attain the state of nirvana.

Again, the Buddhist view of phenomenal existence (things, man, the universe) is that it is in such a state of constant flux and impermanence that, ultimately, it has no reality in any meaningful, personal, eternal sense. It is not, for example, that the ego does not exist; it “exists” as the sum of its various constituents which are in constant flux, and as such it can be perceived and distinguished as a separate entity. Still, our existence has no reality in the sense of being something permanent, for the Buddhist concept of impermanence does not believe anything phenomenal can be permanent long enough to be real. Thus, even the perception of the individual self is a delusion:

Separate individual existence is really an illusion, for the self has neither beginning nor ending, is eternally changing, and possesses only a phenomenal existence. ¹⁰

Existence consists of dhammas, things or objects, but what can be said of these objects? They are all impermanent and changing, and nothing can be said of them at one moment which is not false the next. They are as unreal as the atman [self] itself. ¹¹

One Buddhist scripture complains that the “foolish common people do not understand that what is seen is merely [the product of] their own mind. Being convinced that there exists outside a variety of objects...they produce false imaginings.” ¹² Reminiscent of *advaita* Vedanta, other scriptures liken conventional reality to a magical illusion, a mirage and a dream. ¹³ Buddhism tells us that since reality as we perceive it does *not* exist, one should arrive at this awareness and come to that state which alone is permanent, the state of nirvana. Ostensibly, this state lies somewhere “in-between” personal existence (which it isn't) and complete annihilation (which it also, allegedly, isn't). Recognition of this Buddhist truth is held to be an enlightened state of being, for one now understands what is real and what is not real.

Essentially, Buddhism is a religion with one principal goal: to eliminate individual suffering by attaining the permanent state. In attaining this goal it does not look to God for help,

but, paradoxically, only to the impermanent: to man himself. And in spite of its denial of any permanent reality to man, Buddhism is essentially, if paradoxically, a humanistic faith that, in the end, destroys what it virtually worships: man as man. As Hendrik Kraemer, former professor of the History of Religions at the University of Leiden, Netherlands, asserts:

Buddhism teaches with a kind of prophetic rigour that what really matters is man and his deliverance, and nothing else.... Behind the screen of sublime philosophies and mystical and ethical “ways” to deliverance, or in the garb of fantastic textures of magic and occultism, man remains the measure of all things. ¹⁴

In Buddhism, man has no savior but himself; hence men and women only need look inward for deliverance. “Since Buddhism does not have a God, it cannot have somebody who is regarded as God’s prophet or messiah.” ¹⁵ Buddhism, then, is 1) atheistic, practically speaking, 2) agnostic, in that most Buddhists don’t really care if a *supreme* God exists (irrespective of the polytheism of later Buddhism) and 3) anti-theistic, in that belief in a supreme Creator God as in Christianity tends to get in the way of personal liberation.

In the next article we will turn to a discussion of Buddhist philosophy where these ideas are discussed more fully.

Footnotes:

4. For a description of these in more detail see Richard A. Gard (ed.), *Buddhism* (NY: George Braziller, Inc., 1961), pp. 106-167.
5. F.L. Woodward, trans., *Some Sayings of the Buddha* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 124-125.
6. Alexandria David-Neel, *Buddhism: Its Doctrines and Its Methods* (NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1977), p. 25; Charles Prebish, “Doctrines of Early Buddhists,” in *Buddhism: A Modern Perspective* (ed.), Charles S. Prebish (University Park & London: Pennsylvania University Press, 1975), p. 30.
7. See e.g., T.O. Ling, *A Dictionary of Buddhism: A Guide to Thought and Tradition* (NY: Charles Scribners’ Sons, 1972), pp. 96-97.
- 8 Ibid., pp. 156-158.
9. Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary* (Colombo, Ceylon: Frewin and Company, Ltd., 1972), pp. 105-107.
10. J.N.D. Anderson (ed.), *The World’s Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), p. 124. See the Dhyayitamushti-sutra quoted in *The History of Buddhist Thought*, Edward J. Thomas, (London: Reutledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1975), p. 223.
11. Edward J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, p. 218. He cites, Sutta-Nipata 1119; Majjhima 121, 122 Samy. iv, 54; the two Prajnaparamita-hrdaya-sutras, etc.
12. Edward Conze et al. (eds.), *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages* (NY: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1954), p. 212 citing Lankavatara Sutra, 90-96.
13. Ibid., pp. 215-216 citing Asanga Mahayanasamgraha II, 27, including Vasubandhu’s comments.
14. Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publ., 1977), pp. 174-175, 177.
15. Walt Anderson, *Open Secrets, A Western Guide to Tibetan Buddhism* (NY: Viking Press, 1979), p. 23.