

## Christianity and World Religions: Buddhism

Long ago a man named Siddhartha Gautama lived in Nepal on the southern side of the Himalayan Mountains. His father was a wealthy prince, a tribal chief who ruled a small kingdom. Siddhartha's mother died in childbirth and so his father was extremely overprotective of his son. In fact, the prince did everything he could to keep his son from experiencing suffering. He made sure the boy was always surrounded by beautiful things and beautiful people in the beautiful palace where he lived. Siddhartha had everything he could ever need or want. He married at 16 and continued to live in luxury for ten more years. But by the time the prince was around 29 he was struggling to figure out the meaning of life -- both life in general and his life in particular. And so he told his father he wanted to leave the security and ease of life at the palace to find his own way -- to meet people and to have his own experiences.

When Siddhartha asked his father's permission to see the world to find answers to his deepest questions, his father allowed him to go. He left the palace with a chariot and a charioteer, and here's the story of what happened:

Siddhartha and his charioteer hadn't gone far when they came across a decrepit, elderly man bent over from age. Siddhartha who had been sheltered from every type of suffering in his life was deeply disturbed at seeing how old age had affected the poor man. And he asked the charioteer, "Is this the fate of all people?" "Yes, all of us grow old," he answered.

Siddhartha was so upset that he went back to the palace. But he decided to try again and ventured out into the world. In hopes of protecting him further, this time Siddhartha's father made sure there would be no old people along the road to upset his son. However, he encountered someone who was very ill---near death. Again Siddhartha asked the charioteer, "Is this the fate of all people?" Again the servant said, "Yes." He said: "All people will suffer illness at some point in their lives." The young man's spirit was so troubled that he went back to the security of the palace.

But then he ventured out a third time. His father ensured that there would be no old people or sick people along the way, but Siddhartha could not avoid seeing evidence of suffering in the world, and he came across a funeral procession. He had never seen a dead body, and he asked, "What is that?" The charioteer explained, "Somebody who died." And Siddhartha asked, "Is this the fate of all people?" The answer was "Yes. One day, all of us will experience death."

When Siddhartha returned home his father saw how distressed his son was with these shocking real-world experiences of suffering, and he threw a huge party to cheer his son up. But nothing helped. All the material pleasures in the world could not take away Siddhartha's despair. And since material possessions could not take away his suffering, he decided to go in the opposite direction. He renounced his life of wealth and power forever. He left the palace. He entered a monastery and lived a life of extreme asceticism (uh set a cism) -- he lived a life denying himself of all pleasures and even basic human needs. The story goes that at one point he even sought to live on one grain of rice a day.

But at the age of 35, after six years of living as a traveling monk, Siddhartha experienced what he was seeking -- he experienced an awakening. Siddhartha sat under a tree. He decided he would sit there and meditate -- that he would not get up until he learned the key to living without anxiety -- he would not get up until his soul became peaceful and the inner turmoil ended. So he sat there under the tree for 49 days. He fell into a deep trance. When he awakened he believed he finally understood the source of suffering and the path to overcome it, which he

called enlightenment. In the Pali language used in Siddhartha's day, the word *budh* meant enlightened, and so Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha -- the enlightened one.

Today we are halfway through our sermon series on Christianity and World Religions based on Adam Hamilton's book of the same name. Today we are learning about Buddhism -- the basics of that faith and how it might be similar and different to our own faith.

Today nearly 99% of Buddhists live in the Asia-Pacific region. China, Thailand and Japan are the countries with the most Buddhists. In North America 3.9 million of our neighbors are Buddhists. And so the hope for this series is that we might come to know and appreciate our neighbors more fully. And that in turn, we will come to love our neighbors more fully -- just as Christ loves us.

So, after his enlightenment, the Buddha spent the rest of his life teaching others how to achieve the same enlightenment. He taught his followers his philosophy and a system of meditation that was meant to liberate human beings. He did not claim to be a god and he wasn't worshiped as a god, but he was a teacher helping other humans to be free from suffering. His teachings were carried on after his death, and this became what today is the Buddhist religion or philosophy.

Let's look at the bulletin insert to get some basic terms and tenets of this faith.

Buddha -- a man named Siddhartha Gautama, born in Nepal around 563 BC, the son of a wealthy tribal prince

Budh -- the word for *enlightened* in the Pali language; came to be used to describe Siddhartha Gautama

Pali canon -- written summary of Buddhist teachings; within these writings are short wisdom sayings called Dhammapada.

Similar to book of Proverbs. Ex - "Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world. By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased." Sounds like MLK, Jr.'s words: "Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

Buddhism is nontheistic; it doesn't center on a supreme God.

Buddha was not a god. Buddha was agnostic (he was neutral about god - neither believed nor disbelieved in God). The point of the faith is not to draw folks to any particular god. This raises the issue of whether Buddhism is a religion or a philosophy. People of other religions might practice these principles and still believe in their own God. Some Buddhists might be atheist but some believe in a Supreme Being. Buddha is seen as a guide and example.

It is important to know that Buddhism and Hinduism are strongly connected because Hinduism was dominant in the place where Buddha lived. Hindus consider the Buddha a part of their religion, and so you will see similarities.

Reincarnation for example is a belief shared between Hinduism and Buddhism -- but the ultimate goal of reincarnation is a bit different with each. You may remember from last week that in Hinduism the long cycle of reincarnation is believed to ultimately result in moksha -- where

one's soul is reunited with God as a drop of water returning to the ocean. However, with Buddhism "one's life force is extinguished like the light of a candle being blown out." (Hamilton, 61-62).

### **Essential Teachings:**

#### **Four Noble Truths:**

1. Suffering is an \_\_\_\_\_ (integral part of life)
2. Suffering results from \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ (attachments and desires)
3. We can overcome suffering by \_\_\_\_\_. (overcoming attachments and desires)

The idea is we cling to people, possessions and life itself - and when we can detach from these things, we won't suffer.

4. Following the \_\_\_\_\_ is the way to find release from suffering. (Holy Eightfold Path)

#### **Holy Eightfold Path:** (show Buddhist symbol of wheel)

1. Right understanding.
2. Right thought.
3. Right speech.
4. Right action.
5. Right livelihood.
6. Right effort.
7. Right mindfulness.
8. Right concentration.

You may see some similarities between Buddhism and Christianity. Adam Hamilton pointed out in his book that the eight-fold path seems similar to John Wesley's three simple rules: avoid doing evil, do good in every way and attend to spiritual practices that will help one grow to love God and people. (Hamilton, 59). These teachings are the kinds of things that Jesus talked about during his time on earth. Jesus often taught that we ought not cling to our material possessions, our vocations, or even our family -- but that we ought to leave everything to follow Christ.

There are many admirable ideas in Buddhism. We can certainly admire the Buddha's emphasis on avoiding materialism and attachment to the things of this world. As followers of Jesus, we believe we are called to put God first in our lives. We believe in living ethically. And we would surely grow in our own faith if we engaged in meditation, mindfulness and silence before our God.

But there are some major differences, too. I want to focus on one in particular, and it is the focus of today's scripture from Romans which is titled "Our suffering and our hope."

Siddhartha's world was turned upside down when he ventured out into the reality of the world and discovered the deep suffering that we humans face. The reality of suffering in the world and the questions that it raises were and are core to the Buddha's philosophy and practices.

And the question of suffering plays a large role in our Christian faith, too. Think about this. God sent his only Son to earth -- to dwell with us -- God moved right into our neighborhood. And because Jesus was fully human (and fully divine at the same time), Jesus

suffered every single reality that we humans do. He experienced physical pain and emotional pain. He experienced rejection by his family and community and betrayal by one of his closest friends. He was despised by many, and he suffered immeasurably by death on a cross.

One message that Jesus teaches us is that we will face suffering in the world. Siddhartha felt it. We feel it, too. Adam Hamilton described this feeling as angst which comes from the ancient Greek word for anxiety meaning to strangle or to be unable to breathe. I can imagine that is how Siddhartha felt -- as if he were being strangled by the hopelessness of his life -- a life doomed to suffering. Most of us have felt this angst. This feeling of being strangled by life. Some of you who are hearing these words are suffering greatly this very moment.

For me as a person who follows Jesus, I don't think the answer to suffering is to detach from people, things or life; and I don't think I will find relief of suffering within myself. What I believe as a follower of Jesus is that there was a higher purpose for the life and the suffering and death of Jesus. Because you see, the **suffering** of Jesus is not the end of the story. The **death** of Jesus is not the end of the story. The point of the story is the resurrection of Jesus -- God provided us with hope in the midst of crazy hopelessness. We have our hope in the risen Lord. You see, God explained to us through Jesus and his life's experiences that there is ultimately a victory over death and suffering. In the end nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. God taught us through the life of Jesus that God is with us --- just as Jesus was literally God with us, so God even to this day is with us through the power of the third part of the Trinity -- God's Holy Spirit -- even when we are in deep suffering.

It is in our times of suffering that we can draw near to our God who knows us and experience this amazing hope! The suffering and the hope oddly go hand in hand! In my studying this week, I read a lot of stories about suffering and about hope. But I realized that we all have our own stories of suffering. And so I wanted to share just one of those stories with you today:

Listen to the way the Apostle Paul who wrote today's scripture described his sufferings in 2 Corinthians:

I've been imprisoned.... I've been beaten more times than I can count. I've faced death many times. **24** I received the "forty lashes minus one" from the Jews five times. **25** I was beaten with rods three times. I was stoned once. I was shipwrecked three times. I spent a day and a night on the open sea. **26** I've been on many journeys. I faced dangers from rivers, robbers, my people, and Gentiles. I faced dangers in the city, in the desert, on the sea, and from false brothers and sisters. **27** I faced these dangers with hard work and heavy labor, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, and in the cold without enough clothes. 2 Corinthians 11:23-27

And yet Paul preached hope through all that. So, I want you to hear this today. If you are suffering today---- do not give up hope. Even if you feel lost and alone, God is with you and God is for you. And God intends to turn your suffering upside down into something that is life-giving for you and for others. Paul says it like this:

**18** I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us.

If God is for us, who is against us?

28 We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.

35 Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 38 I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers 39 or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

Finally, one commentator said this: "Real hope is active, not passive. Hope has feet. The Jordan does not part until the priests are willing to put their feet in the water. Jesus does not know resurrection until he is willing to walk the way to the cross." (Dr. Gilbert W. Bowen) It is our job as followers of Jesus to give hope feet. We must go forward in faith. And then, it is our job to share hope with those who are feeling hopeless. When we experience the love of Christ in our lives and the hope of God's presence, we are called to do whatever we can to share that. Jesus made a point during his life to seek out and to save those who were suffering and without hope. He healed the sick. He touched the lepers. He ate with sinners. He stood up for adulterers, prostitutes, tax collectors and all kinds of people who were suffering. And he calls us to do the same.

I am so thankful that Jesus knows my suffering and walks with me through it all. I am so thankful for the resurrection hope -- for the knowledge of the victory that we are given over suffering and death as followers of Jesus. But what a wonderful conversation it would be to talk with our Buddhist neighbor about suffering and about hope. We have much to learn from our neighbors. So---may we learn to love fully. May we become more like Christ each day.