

**CHRISTIANITY AND  
WORLD RELIGIONS:  
Buddhism**

**Romans 8:18-28**

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W. H. Auden, the American poet, wrote a Pulitzer-Prize-winning poem in 1947 called *The Age of Anxiety*. Those were the good old days! I wonder what Auden would think of the state of our souls today?

Anxiety seems to be at an all-time high. All kinds of articles and studies are pointing to the increase in anxiety, worry, depression, and suicide in our contemporary world. A study last year by the American Psychiatric Association said that 57% of women and 38% of men ages 18-49 experience anxiety regularly. Four in ten American adults say they are more anxious this year than last year. About 20% of American adults have a diagnosable anxiety disorder requiring counseling or medication—or both! The percentage is even higher among teens.<sup>1</sup>

One of the speakers at the conference I attended this week, David Brooks of the New York Times, mentioned that suicide rates are up 30% in the last 20 years, and suicide rates among teenagers have skyrocketed by 70%. He said that managers in companies today, when asked what skills need to be added to their team, most often request counseling or psychological services.<sup>2</sup>

I believe one of our fundamental religious urges is the desire for inner peace. Nobody wants to be anxious or worried or depressed or certainly suicidal. These are normal emotions sometimes, but they are always negative emotions. If we let them control our lives, they can be very destructive. We want to experience freedom from these negative emotions. We want calmness in our spirit. We want to know inner peace.

Buddhism is the religion of inner peace. It seeks to relieve us of anxiety and suffering through a detachment from the world through the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha was an actual person, whose actual name was Siddhartha Gautama. He was born in the area we know today as Nepal, sometime around the 6<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century before Christ (about the time of the Hebrew exile in Babylon or a little later).

Siddhartha's father was a prince, and his mother died giving birth to him. So his father did everything he could to protect the young Siddhartha from any pain or suffering. He never left the palace, never wanted for anything. He married and had a son, but still he struggled to understand his life and his place in the world.

Finally, as a young man, Siddhartha asked to leave the palace to explore the world. His father agreed. On his first trip, Siddhartha saw an old person. He had never been allowed to see an old person, and when his charioteer told him everyone grows old, Siddhartha was so upset he returned to the palace.

Sometime later, he decided to venture out again. His father had the road cleared of all old people, but Siddhartha saw a person who was sick. He asked what that was, and the charioteer told him that everyone at times becomes ill. Again Siddhartha was so upset, he returned to the peaceful confines of the palace.

A third time Siddhartha left the palace; his father had cleared out all the old and sick people along the way. But this time he saw a funeral procession bearing a corpse to its burial. He had never witnessed death, and when he found out that everyone eventually dies, it created in him an existential crisis. He couldn't understand a world where people got old and sick and died. So Siddhartha left his wife and son and palace and joined a religious order. He renounced all worldly possessions and political power, and began to seek to understand life.

Finally, at the age of 35, Siddhartha had a revelation. He sat under a *bodhi* tree for 49 days, and then he had an experience of enlightenment. He understood. The word for enlightened is *budh*, so Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha, the enlightened one. For the next 45 years he wrote and taught about his experience, until he died at the age of 80 from food poisoning. His teachings were gathered into a book called the Pali Canon, but within that canon is a book of short wisdom sayings, sort of like our Proverbs, called the Dhammapada, that capture the essence of Buddhist teaching.

The essential teachings of Buddhism consist of **Four Noble Truths**. These are:

1. **Suffering is an integral part of life.** Everyone experiences what Buddhism calls *dukkha*—feelings of anxiety, pain, grief, and loss. This is suffering.
2. **Suffering results from attachment and desire.** We cling to possessions, relationships, and life itself.

3. **We can overcome suffering by minimizing our attachment and desire.** Suffering ends when we learn to let go of everything, even our sense of self.
4. **Following the Eight-Fold Path is the way to find release from suffering.** This path is often symbolized by a wheel with eight spokes. It is the Buddhist ethical program, sort of like our Ten Commandments. The eight-Fold Path is right (or wise) understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Buddhism was considered a reform movement within Hinduism for many years before it became a separate religion. There are still many similarities between Buddhism and Hinduism. Buddhists, like Hindus, believe in the cycle of life called *samsara*, which includes the reincarnation of the soul. Buddhists believe in *karma*, the deposits of good or evil that transfer from one life to another. But Hindus believe in one God, Brahman, over all, and Buddhists are non-theistic. That means that the existence of God is not necessary to follow the teachings of the Buddha, who was a man and never claimed to be a god. For Buddhists, the existence of God is a question for which we do not have an answer. That has led many people to say that Buddhism is not really a religion; it's more of a philosophy that can inform the practice of any other religion. You will find some Christians who say they are also Buddhists.

So what are the connections between Christianity and Buddhism? What sort of thoughts do we share in common?

First, we share a common desire for inner peace. Nobody likes to suffer, get old, get sick, and die. We all want something to ease our anxious and worried minds. We love to hear the words of Jesus: "*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*"<sup>3</sup> We want that "peace that passes all understanding" that Paul talks about: "*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*"<sup>4</sup>

Buddhism teaches that the way to avoid suffering is to detach ourselves from the world. There is certainly some Christian thought that would agree with that. In the sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*<sup>5</sup> Do not get entrapped by your possessions.

Then he went on to say, *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’”*<sup>6</sup> The Christian life, like the Buddhist path, teaches that the primary values in life are not material, but spiritual.

The Buddhist Eight-Fold Path has some resonance with Christian teaching as well. Both seek for an ethical life, following the practices and principles that lead toward enlightenment (Buddhist term) or salvation (Christian term). John Wesley gave his Methodists some general rules to follow that I think would fit in well with the Eight-Fold Path: *“Do no harm... Do good... Practice those things which bring you close to God...”* Although Methodist scholars now say that Wesley never said it, the spirit of Wesley is found in the quote, *“Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.”*<sup>7</sup> We might call this the Seven-Fold Path of Methodism.

There are some deep connections and similarities between Christianity and Buddhism. But there are also some significant differences. Both religions are very much in tune with human suffering, but for Buddhists, suffering comes because of attachments and desires of the world. For Christians, suffering is often a result of sin. The New Testament word for sin is *hamartia*, which means “missing the mark.” Sin is straying from the path. There is a correct path to follow, and when we stray from the path, it brings suffering on ourselves and others. We can stray from the path by being too attached to material things, but we also break relationships with God and other people. We hurt those we love. We do things that are destructive to ourselves. We fail to do things that would make life better for others. These sins cause suffering.

The Christian experience of enlightenment does not come through detachment, but through repentance. It is a sort of enlightenment when we are convicted of our sin, and we feel sorry for our sin. We confess our sin, and we receive the forgiveness of God; it’s like a whole new world opens up for us. We see life and the world clearly, and we are on the right path again.

And oh, by the way, we believe there is a God. There is no question about that. In contrast to both the Buddhist and Hindu theology, we believe God exists and is personally involved with each one of our lives. We believe that God loves us so much that God actually suffers with us. God feels the pain of our grief; God knows when we are broken; God is with us in the depths of our anxiety. And best of all, God gives us resources to make sense out of our suffering.

Some bad things that happen are the result of our sin. Some bad things that happen are just tragic and senseless. But whatever we suffer, God can bring good out of it: “*We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*”<sup>8</sup> With God’s help, suffering can teach us. Suffering can open up in us wellsprings of compassion. Suffering can deepen our relationships with family, friends and the community of faith. Paul says we can even “*boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us,*

*because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*"<sup>9</sup> Suffering can be redemptive.

The primary example of redemptive suffering is Jesus Christ. He did not seek to avoid suffering, but he loved us so much he embraced suffering, even suffering to death on the cross. Through that awful suffering, God saved the world.

So with all due respect to the Buddhist faith, we do not seek to avoid suffering, because through suffering, God can do amazing things. We do not seek to detach ourselves from the world or from our self, because we believe that we have a soul that is of infinite value to God. When we die, this eternal soul will not be reincarnated into another body, and it will not be extinguished into the ocean of universal being. This soul, my soul and your soul, will live with God in a home that has been prepared for us. As Paul said, "*For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.*"<sup>10</sup>

There are many ideas in the Buddhist religion that we can appreciate. In our ultra-materialistic world, the Buddhist emphasis on meditation, quietness, and inner peace is remarkable and inspiring. One of the Eight-Fold Pathways is "right mindfulness." We need to develop our mindfulness in the world. What that means is to be attentive, to pay attention to the world around us. If we are mindful, we can see the needs, see the people, and see the possibilities around us. Mindfulness can have all sorts of practical implications.

Several years ago, Google, one of the largest corporations in the world, started a mindfulness training program for its employees. In such a hard-driven business culture, the stress and anxiety were off the scale. So one of their engineers, Chade-Meng Tan, a Buddhist, created a program called "Search Inside Yourself," or "S.I.Y." for short. It includes three basic steps: "attention training, self-knowledge and self-mastery, and the creation of useful mental habits."<sup>11</sup> S.I.Y. even encourages workers to develop mindfulness as they answer emails. Since 2012, Tan's book has been published and S.I.Y. has spread to other businesses around the world. Christian blogger Mark Roberts said, "As a Christian, I find myself

challenged and intrigued by the example of S.I.Y. to consider what Christian faith and fellowship might have to offer to workers who are looking for meaning, balance, rest, and wholeness in life. If indeed Tan's book provokes, a 'new national conversation about work and what work means to us,' how will Christians contribute to the dialogue?"<sup>12</sup>

In a world too full of anxiety, worry, depression and fear, it's a conversation worth having.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/323454.php>. Alex Williams, "Prozac Nation Is Now the United States of Xanax," *New York Times* (6-10-17).

<sup>2</sup> David Brooks, "Moral Leadership in a Divided Society," speech given at the Church of the Resurrection Leadership Institute, September 26, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 11:28.

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 4:6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 6:19-21.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 6:25-31.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/12757-do-all-the-good-you-can-by-all-the-means>.

<sup>8</sup> Romans 8:28.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 5:3-5.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:1.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/markdroberts/2012/05/03/googles-secret-search-inside-yourself/>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*