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BUDDHISM

Buddhism is a prominent eastern religion founded in India about 500 years before Christ by a man named Siddhartha Gautama, who came to be known as the "Buddha" or "enlightened one." With roughly 500 million adherents, Buddhism is one of the world's largest religions. While by far most concentrated in Asia, Buddhism has been on the rise in the West since the 1960s, particularly in the Western United States. Not only does Buddhism differ from Christianity on individual claims such as who or what is God or what happens to us when we die, Buddhism and Christianity present entirely different views of the world that touch on every subject of importance.

WHAT IS BUDDHISM?

Buddhism is a group of religious movements that derive from the philosophy and teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, who came to be known as "the Buddha," or "the enlightened one." Buddhism began in India around the late 6th century B.C. Many views and teachings vary widely among the various Buddhist movements, but the central teachings summarized in what are called the "[four noble truths](#)" and the "[eightfold path](#)" are at the core of every expression of Buddhism. While different strands of Buddhism may nuance these teachings in differing ways, they nevertheless define what makes any sect "Buddhist."

Brief History of Buddhism

There is little that we can say with certainty about the life of Siddhartha Gautama, but the legends of his life that have been most foundational to Buddhist identity are as follows:

He was born a prince in 563 BC in what is today Nepal and was afforded a rather luxurious life. At his birth, a fortune teller predicted to his parents that he had two possible paths, both destined for greatness. If he remained a worldly man, he would be a great king and unite all the kingdoms of India under his rule. If he forsook a worldly life, however, he would transform the world with spiritual truth. His father desired him to be the former, and so he sought to keep him ensnared by all the worldly pleasures that his wealth and status could afford. He did everything in his power to shield him from any suffering or want.

As the legend goes, all was well with Gautama up to his early twenties, when, while walking outside the palace walls, he came upon four sights that would instill in him a discontent, thereby leading him to leave his life behind in search of a greater truth.

The four sights were:

1. That of a frail old man,
2. A person who was visibly diseased
3. A corpse
4. A poor monk walking about, bowl in hand, begging for alms.

From these sights, it is said, Gautama first came to know of old age, sickness, death, poverty, and the religious quest for truth. Once he learned that suffering and death were the inevitable fate of men, he was no longer satisfied with his decadent pleasures. He is said to have had a wife, his cousin Yosodhara, and a son who he named Rahula which means "fetters" or "shackles." One night, he could bear his discontent no more, and quietly left his wife, his child, and the comfortable life of his father's house to pursue the truth.

He studied with Hindu masters and learned the art of meditation and the best of Hindu philosophy, but he finally concluded that he had learned all he could from them and still had not found the truth he was seeking. He then joined a band of ascetics who pursued enlightenment through extreme discipline and bodily deprivation. The stories say that he outdid them all in his zeal, at one point reducing his diet to six grains of rice a day and pushing himself to the brink of starvation. In the end, he found this was also futile.

After years of these efforts, Gautama finally came to the place where he would become the Buddha. He sat under a tree, which came afterward to be known as the "Bodhi Tree" or "tree of enlightenment." The legends tell of an evil spirit attempting to distract Gautama with desire, pleasure, fear, and doubt. Nothing, however, could turn him from the path of enlightenment, and as he sat in meditation under the tree all through the night, he supposedly came to a new awareness, discovered the truth, and became the Buddha. The legends describe in cosmic terms how all things in existence rejoiced the next morning at the event of the Buddha's enlightenment.

The Buddha traveled about teaching the truth he had discovered, gathering to himself a faithful following of devotees, and challenging the Hindu authorities of the day. At eighty years old, the Buddha breathed his last somewhere around 483 B.C. Within a century of his death, different factions within Buddhism were already arising. By the time any of the Buddha's teachings were written down centuries later, there were already many rival schools and subgroups offering their own interpretations and unique traditions of Buddhist thought.

There is, however, an essential core of teachings that all Buddhist groups share and that certainly goes back to the earliest days of Buddhism's beginnings. That teaching is what are called the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path that they prescribe:

1. Right effort
2. Right Mindfulness
3. Right Concentration

Though Buddhist schools of thought all accept these central points, they divide over precisely how one ought to interpret them. They also divide over related issues such as the nature of "nirvana" and what role Buddha himself now plays after his physical death.

Anatta and Rebirth

All of this cannot entirely make sense without at least a general idea of the Buddhist picture of life. Unlike the Hindus, who believe there is a permanent divine essence that passes from one life to the next in the cycle of reincarnation, the Buddha rejected this idea. He believed that man is made up of a variety of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual factors, but that none of these are permanent. There is not, in fact, any aspect of a person that persists in this life or that passes on to the next life. The Hindu idea of the permanent, divine "self" was called "Atman," and so the Buddhist doctrine against this idea is called "Anatta" or "no Atman." The precise implications of this vary from one stream of Buddhism to another, but in some sense, all would deny that individual humans have what one would think of as an "enduring self." Your perception of such is an illusion that must be broken to abandon one's cravings and find release from suffering. Buddhists often prefer the term "rebirth" to "reincarnation" because, although they do believe in an ongoing series of past and future lives, they reject the idea that there is a constant essence or real "you" that passes continually from one life to the next. There is not any specific, ongoing being that is "incarnated" in each new life.

The Four Noble Truths Suffering and Salvation in Buddhism

The "Four Noble Truths" represent the central doctrines of all Buddhism. Buddha is reported to have said, "I teach only suffering and its ending." The "Four Noble Truths" represent precisely this Buddhist teaching; Suffering, the cause of suffering, the possibility of escape from suffering, and the method of attaining that escape.

1. Dukkha: The Universal Suffering

The first of these four central Buddhist teachings is that of "Dukkha," which is generally translated "Suffering." It is not, however, merely physical or emotional pain, though it certainly

includes such immediate and obvious suffering. In Buddhist teaching, the idea of "Dukkha" or "Suffering" conveys a deeper existential reality.

Everything is transitory, impermanent, and ever-changing. Because of this, even happiness, pleasure, love, and the other noble and desirable things in life are actually forms of suffering because they do not last and cannot ultimately satisfy us. Not only this, but we must necessarily become sick, grow old, and otherwise experience unavoidable loss and decay, so even life itself is suffering.

Even more, we are not what we believe we are. We believe that we are specific individuals with distinct identities that endure over time. We believe that, however much we change, we are in some meaningful sense that same person from the moment our human life begins until our heart beats its last. Buddhism, however, teaches that this is an illusion. We are a mere collection of physical and mental phenomena that each exist for only a moment and then give rise to new phenomena which combine, perhaps similarly, but still differently into what we presume to be ourselves in the next moment. There is no distinct thing that is an individual human person in any given moment, and there is no aspect of any presumed person that persists from one moment to the next. This too, Buddhism teaches, is Dukkha. Thus every aspect of life, indeed even life itself, is said to be tainted by this suffering. As one Buddhist scholar observed:

"For more than 2,000 years, Buddhists have been declaring that all objects of perception - all physical (table, sun, moon) and physiological phenomena and all wholesome, unwholesome, and neutral states of mind - are suffering. One hundred years after the Buddha passed away, practitioners were already repeating the formula, 'This is suffering. Life is suffering. Everything is suffering'"

This may sound on its face to be a pessimistic cry of hopeless woe and lamentation, but it is not intended that way. To the Buddhist, the doctrine of Dukkha is more like the diagnosis of a terrible yet treatable disease. One is not pessimistic to admit the presence of the disease if one does so to then provide the hope of a cure. This is what the remainder of these central Buddhist teachings go on to do; to try to understand the cause of the disease and then to offer an effective treatment. Buddhism teaches, however, that the greatest burden is to suffer and not know that you are suffering, and therefore even to begin by identifying the reality of suffering is a part of the treatment.

It must finally be noted that Buddhism rests on the assumption that life is a continual cycle of death and rebirth. If all of life is tainted by Dukkha, then to escape Dukkha means to break this cycle. Dukkha is not merely the particular suffering in this event or in that object. Dukkha permeates the eternal cycle of rebirth known as "samsara," and is inseparable from it. Buddhism is not seeking to reduce or remove the suffering that one may experience in a

particular lifetime but to escape samara's endless cycle of life and death that represents the perpetual renewal of Dukkha.

2. Tanha: The Source of Dukkha

The second of these four central Buddhist teachings is that the cause of Dukkha is "Tanha," which literally means "thirst," though most translators render it "desire" or "craving." As one Buddhist source laments:

"Where is the source of human grief, lamentation, pain, and agony? Is it not to be found in the fact that people are generally desirous?"

The idea is not that we have a misguided set of desires, and that craving the wrong things leads to life's suffering, but rather that desiring and yearning itself is the cause of suffering, regardless of the object. Because all things are impermanent and ever-changing, anything we desire will not last. Even if we managed to obtain all that we desire, and even if all our desires are "good" and "noble," they would bring with them suffering, dissatisfaction, and loss that would outweigh any fleeting pleasure or fulfillment we might receive.

According to Buddhism, our desires which bring the pain and suffering of the world are rooted in our delusion that we are distinct persons who can act on the world around us as a separate thing from ourselves. Any judgment that one thing should be sought after and another thing avoided, any "leaning into" one experience and away from another, any desire or any action of the will necessarily bring Dukkha with it. Our delusion of personal existence and our unwillingness to look at all things as an interconnected whole without any distinction or preference is what perpetually creates Dukkha in all things. As one Buddhist instructor explains it:

"In discovering the origins of our suffering, we uncover how the self was created. We see the suffering is self imposed and perpetuated by our unwillingness to look. The sense of 'you' and 'I' is created from our resistance to looking."

One can grasp the logic that connects desires, cravings, and attachments to the various forms of suffering in any given life, but it is not immediately clear how desires in this life would cause the rebirth of some future life, much less how they would contribute to suffering in that life. This difficulty is further magnified by the fact that, as we have noted, Buddhism is quite clear that the future life is not a continuation of "you" since "you" do not actually exist as a distinct and enduring person even in this life much less on into the next. Buddhist teaching answers this through the concept of "karma."

Unlike the improper way that westerners use the term, karma is not the good or bad things that happen to you because of what you have done. The word "karma" literally means "action" or "deeds" and in Buddhism refers to any volitional act of the will. Karma is the action itself, not the result of the action. While Buddhism acknowledges that there is karma that can have relatively positive effects and karma that can have relatively negative effects, all karma is said to have causal effects that bring about future lives.

These lives are not a continuation of the same individual being, since there is no such thing, but are rather connected by a chain of cause and effect relationships brought about by karma actions. The Buddhist, therefore, is not seeking to perform "good" karma, but rather no karma at all. The Buddhist doesn't want a better rebirth. Instead, the goal is to escape the cycle of rebirth and its inherent and all-encompassing suffering. All karma is action of the will, and "will" is inherently rooted in desire. All karma, even so-called "good" karma, ultimately perpetuates Dukkha.

3. Nirvana: An End of Dukkha

The third of these four central Buddhist teachings is that there is, in fact, freedom from samsara and the continuation of Dukkha. Following rather logically from the previous point, it is here claimed that since desire causes suffering, one can become free from suffering by becoming free of desires. One can, in turn, become free from desires by abandoning the illusion of a distinct, personal existence which gives personal will and desire its justification. When Tanha ceases, Dukkha ceases as well. When one fully grasps, embraces, and gives oneself up entirely to this understanding of the world, one realizes Nirvana.

Nirvana is not a place. It is not paradise or heaven or resurrection or eternal life. One does not "enter" Nirvana. Conversely, the consistent Buddhist cannot think of Nirvana as annihilation or extinction of existence. As Buddhist scholar Walpola Rahula puts it:

"There are many who have got a wrong idea that it is negative, and expresses self-annihilation. Nirvana is definitely no annihilation of self, because there is no self to annihilate. If at all, it is the annihilation of the illusion, of the false idea of self"

The word "nirvana" does indeed mean to "blow out" or "extinguish," like a flame deprived of fuel or air that then ceases to burn. But what extinguishes is not you personally, since Buddhism denies that there is any "you" to extinguish. In the Pali Canon, an ancient collection of Buddha's teaching, we find Nirvana described in terms such as:

A. "The abandoning of desire and craving,"

- B. "The cessation of continuity and becoming,"
- C. "The extinction of thirst,"
- D. "The uprooting of attachment,"
- E. "Reality,"
- F. "absolute truth."

It is, therefore, the annihilation of everything that makes you think of yourself as a "self" and that therefore makes you act as if you and other people and objects have distinct and enduring identities. It is the experiential realization of existence as it actually is; an interconnected reality where there are no distinctions or dualities.

Rahula again notes: "It is incorrect to say that Nirvana is negative or positive. The ideas 'negative' and 'positive' are relative and are within the realm of duality. These terms cannot be applied to Nirvana, Absolute Truth, which is beyond duality and relativity."

Never mind for the moment that Rahula himself even here necessarily speaks of an actual duality between relative truth and absolute truth and puts Nirvana plainly on one side of this duality and not on the other. The point is that Buddhism understands Nirvana as a truth to be realized. The world is known without distinctions and divisions, and thus self is impossible, and there are no "things" to be desired over other "things," there simply is what "is." Realization of Nirvana can, therefore, be, in a meaningful sense, attained in this life by purging oneself of all desires and ideas of distinction. Such a person will go on living in this life in many ways as before, though without desire or attachment, and when he dies there will be no resultant rebirth, and he thus attains the full and final realization of Nirvana. This is the end of suffering to which all Buddhist teaching is aiming.

4. The Way to Nirvana

While it cannot be overstated that Nirvana is not a place or any sort of future state to which the Buddhist is seeking to arrive, the fourth of these four central Buddhist teachings, figuratively speaking, lays out the "way" or the "path" to the end of the suffering of Dukkha. Buddhism expresses this path to enlightenment and liberation in eight points, thus it is commonly called the "eightfold path." The eight points are:

1. Right view
2. Right Intention

3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

Detailing the specifics of each point in the path and the various ways each school of Buddhism understands and applies them is beyond the scope of this teaching. We must note, however, that these eight aspects of the path, taken together, are designed to reshape every facet of one's thought, life, and worldview in light of the previous three "truths" and toward the end of attaining Nirvana through the abandonment of desire and sense of self. As a mere reading of the points above would likely indicate, this is not expected to typically happen through an instant and immediate epiphany. Rather, it requires years of careful self-discipline, training one's mind and body for enlightenment the way an athlete does for an Olympic competition or a tradesman for a career. Some forms of Buddhism may believe that there are other elements to the path or sources of help outside oneself along the way. All, however, would uphold this central path to Liberation from Dukkha and realization of Nirvana through the disciplined adherence to the Eightfold path the Buddha prescribed.

THE GOD PROBLEM

The system articulated above entirely depends on a set of starting assumptions:

1. All things are impermanent, transitory, and fleeting
2. Therefore, no real, permanent person or thing can endure through time
3. And as a further result, no desires can be meaningfully and lastingly fulfilled.

The God of the Bible, however, is eternal and unchanging. For example, the Scriptures tell us that:

Psalm 90:2 *"Before the mountains were born or You gave birth to the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God."* (NASB)

Malachi 3:6 *"For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed."* (ESV)

Hebrews 13:8 *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."*(ESV)

The Buddhist, therefore, is forced to bet his or her whole system on the claim that the biblical God does not exist. Buddha himself obviously never made this claim. He lived his entire life in the Hindu culture of ancient India, where the Biblical God was unheard of, and the idea of a single, distinct, personal, eternal, transcendent, creator God was not a part of public discourse. Interestingly, Buddha did accept the existence of the Hindu gods, but as these gods were themselves temporal and mortal, he considered them to be within the cycle of death and rebirth in samsara and thus suffering Dukkha like everything else. Such transitory gods fit well in the Buddhist system and created no controversy. The eternal and unchanging God of Christianity, however, is another matter entirely.

The Dalai Lama has stated emphatically that the Buddhist worldview leaves no place for an atemporal, eternal, absolute or a divine creation. Walpola Rahula asserts that belief in God is a human invention and is empty and false. The Society for the Promotion of Buddhism lists belief in a sovereign, creator God as one of the three wrong viewpoints in the world that deny us enlightenment. They defend this claim simply by restating that everything is merely a succession of temporal appearances connected by causes and effects. In other words, belief in God is wrong ultimately because the Buddhist system can't allow for His existence.

The Buddhist presupposes a conception of reality that is entirely undone if they accept the existence of the eternal God. If God exists eternally and unchangingly, and even more if He can ultimately fulfill righteous desires and promise eternal life to the faithful, the four noble truths turn out not to be true or noble, and Buddhism unravels.

The "Eightfold Path" in Buddhism is the way prescribed by Buddha to live a holistic life of self-discipline by which one can reach enlightenment and realize nirvana. It is the last of the so-called "[four noble truths](#)" that make up the central core of Buddhist doctrine. These eight aspects of Buddhist self-discipline should not be thought of as sequential "steps," as one does not complete the first then begin the second and so on. There is, however, a logical progression that does make the order significant.

The eight concepts in the path are:

- 1. Right View:** The Buddhist must understand all things the way that Buddhism teaches them truly to be. This does not mean to merely accept a set of doctrines, though it certainly includes that. It means to see every aspect of life and every object from a Buddhist perspective. It means to hold a consistent Buddhist worldview at any given moment. It means to view everything as impermanent and to fully and consistently believe that you are not a personal and enduring self and that all things are interconnected and to accept all the implications of that on every experience.

- 2. Right Intention:** The Buddhist's motives must be appropriate. The westerner who promotes the supposed personal physical and emotional benefits of Buddhist meditation has missed this point. If your intentions are rooted in the benefits to a personal self, the end cannot be enlightenment since enlightenment involves the denial that you exist as a personal self. If one's intention is to fulfill some deep longing or desire, one will never reach enlightenment, because enlightenment is the abandonment of all desires. If one's intention in Buddhist pursuit and practice is itself contrary to the stated goals of Buddhist teaching and practice, you will never reach enlightenment. One's intention must be commensurate with the aim of Nirvana, the realization of the nonexistence of self, and the abandonment of all desire.
- 3. Right Speech:** One must avoid idle talk, deceit, slander, gossip, and the like. This is not because these things are wrong, but rather because they are centered in the existence of personal selves and employed in the attainment of desires or in the quest to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. Such talk gets in the way of the Buddhist goal of enlightenment, and therefore ought to be avoided. Indeed, one does not need to read very far in many Buddhist publications to find warnings about words and language in general. As Walpola Rahula put it, "Language is considered deceptive and misleading in the matter of understanding truth."¹
- 4. Right Action:** One must avoid killing, stealing, lying, unchastity, and consuming intoxicants. Again, this is not because these things are morally wrong. Buddhism is not here concerned with what is good, righteous, or just. It is simply, again, that these things are necessarily rooted in assumptions and motivations about self and others and objects and desires that take one away from the Buddhist goal. They are contrary to the purpose of enlightenment. Indeed, all volitional actions of purpose and will are Karma and therefore fuel the cycle of rebirth and suffering. Even if my purpose is selfless and helpful, to act on a purpose of the will is contrary to the Buddhist ideal. As one Buddhist instructor explains, "wise action is spontaneous and immediate,"¹ and again, "actions governed by thought are commonly based on considerations of the appropriateness and safety of the situation. Our thinking is one step removed from the immediate action."¹
- 5. Right Livelihood:** It should come as no surprise that, if one's worldview, intentions, words, and actions all must be reevaluated and disciplined in accordance with Buddhist teaching, one's choice of career and vocation necessarily must be in line with this as well. There are, of course, careers that require one to think and act in ways that rule them out up front. Buddha himself specifically listed trades such as poison peddler, slave trader, prostitute, butcher, brewer, arms maker, tax collector, and caravan trader.¹ There are also motivations in choosing a career which are not conducive with right intention. Right Livelihood is the natural extension of all the previous points.

It is impossible not to note the difficult position of Buddhism regarding the subject of livelihood, in that working is innately the task to pursuing our material wants and needs. Buddhism cannot teach everyone to simply not work, else all will starve and die. Yet Buddhism must also be careful how it encourages work because work is innately linked to our personal survival and the personal survival of our families and dependents, our acquiring of material wages, and our pursuit of desires. Buddhism denies a personal self or others and decries any material or personal attachment and any fulfillment of desire. When it comes to livelihood, however, even Buddhist writers often cannot help but smuggle these concepts back in, speaking of proper concern for things like the "needs of our household, including our own financial wellbeing, and the needs of the community."¹

- 6. Right Effort:** The Buddhist does not believe that one makes a snap decision or just thinks the right thing at the right time and then finds instant enlightenment. It takes effort and discipline over the course of life to reshape one's views, thoughts, and perspectives rightly. Buddhism sees the quest for enlightenment as one of careful balance in one's long-term effort, like pacing oneself for a marathon run. Buddha himself is quoted as saying:

"If effort is applied too strongly it will lead to restlessness, if too slack it will lead to lassitude. Therefore, keep your effort balanced."¹

Without effort, one cannot make any of the changes Buddhism prescribes. Intense self-effort, however, has a tendency to reassert the idea of a "self" who is undergoing the discipline and effort. If one begins to think of oneself as personally bearing certain burdens, overcoming certain obstacles, or making certain changes, the effort has the opposite effect than the Buddhist intends. Therefore, the Buddhist teacher here strives to walk the impossible road of teaching one how to engage in self-discipline without a self and put in personal effort without personhood. This is the paradox of effort that the Buddhist must necessarily grapple with. As one Buddhist expresses the dilemma: "We have to be full hearted in our determination to end a problem that does not exist."²

- 7. Right Mindfulness:** If one is fully to surrender to the assumptions of Buddhism, it must change what such a person is mindful of from one moment to the next. The thought life is central. The Dhammapada, one of the most famous and authoritative ancient Buddhist texts, says:

"All that we are is the result of what we have thought. Our life is shaped by our mind; we become what we think. Suffering follows unwholesome thought as the wheels of a cart follow the oxen that draw it. Joy follows wholesome thought like the shadow that never leaves."¹

Buddhist mindfulness is having ever before one's mind the impermanence of all things, including things like thoughts and states of consciousness that give one the perception of being a distinct, personal self. As Buddha described it:

"A man is composed of **six elements**: solidity, fluidity, heat, motion, space, and consciousness. He analyzes them and finds that none of them are 'mine' or 'me' or 'myself'. He understands how consciousness appears and disappears; how pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral sensations appear and disappear. Through this knowledge, his mind becomes detached."¹

While Buddhist mindfulness is often associated with Buddhist meditation exercises, the goal of Buddhism is to be consistently mindful of these things. Meditation is merely one of the tools the Buddhist uses to work toward this aim.

- 8. Right Samadhi (Concentration):** Buddhism emphasizes the practice of Samadhi, a kind of focused attention on the present moment or an aspect therein. If everything is fleeting and nothing truly endures from one moment to the next, one must learn to focus on this moment alone without thoughts of the past or considerations of the future. Nothing that is present in this moment was present a moment before, nor will it be present a moment from now. The Buddhist must learn to concentrate on this moment without distraction by the false perceptions of past or future or distinct, enduring identities. Buddhist concentration is not to be confused with thinking deeply about a thing. It is learning to perceive and experience the moment without thinking about it and thus without becoming attached to it or coming to conceive of its objects as distinct and enduring things.

As one Buddhist writes:

"Discerning the difference between thinking about something and directly experiencing it is the function of Samadhi. Through the quiet, abiding attention of Samadhi, we see clearly how the self comes into being through the commentary we infuse and the narrative we create."

Buddhist concentration is undistracted, focused experience rather than thoughtful consideration. If one can simply be and know of only the moment one is in, the Buddhist believes, it will demonstrate the fact that there is nothing permanent at that moment and nothing that can be thought of as a distinct self that is experiencing it. Samadhi, therefore, is essential to the Buddhist in attaining what they believe to be true enlightenment and the realization of Nirvana.

IS BUDDHISM COMPATIBLE WITH CHRISTIANITY?

Buddhism and Christianity make mutually exclusive truth claims at nearly every essential point. There is simply no way to combine these two systems without completely redefining one or both of them. Since the 1960s, however, as Buddhism has made increasing inroads into western life and as American culture has become more and more pluralistic, one can increasingly find people who self-identify as being both Buddhist and Christian. The argument for this (when one articulates an argument at all) usually goes something like this: Buddhism (it is claimed) is agnostic on the issue of God. There is nothing (it is further claimed) inherently contrary to Christianity in Buddhist thought and practice, and so one can be devoted to the Christian God by following the Buddhist path to enlightenment. These claims are both entirely false, however, and thus the conclusion that follows from them is also false.

1. Buddhist Agnosticism?

Historic Buddhism acknowledged the existence of a variety of gods and demigods above and beyond humanity but taught that they were mortal creatures which were a part of the same cycle of death and rebirth as men and animals. They were a part of the Buddhist cosmos but were not prescribed as objects of Buddhist devotion. They were bound in the world of suffering and needed enlightenment to realize Nirvana just as men do.¹

Regarding such gods, Buddhism can truly be agnostic. Many modern, western Buddhists reject the notion of gods, and it does not in any way hinder them from being Buddhist. Such gods are not central to any Buddhist teaching, and it makes no difference to Buddhist doctrines whether or not they are there any more than the existence or nonexistence of a particular type of animal would. The gods are merely one of the varieties of beings suffering in the cycle of death and rebirth from which Buddhism seeks liberation.

The Christian God is not like this, however. When Christians speak of God, they are not speaking of a mortal, finite, suffering being like any other being. They are not speaking of a being in need of liberation from anything. They are not speaking of a being that is merely a part of the system of things. They are not speaking of a being that may or may not exist. They are speaking of an eternal, perfect, unchanging, all-sufficient creator of everything that is and to whom we all owe our worship and answer to as our Judge and King. In this sense, [Buddhism does not believe in God](#). Indeed, Buddhism cannot possibly allow for such a God's existence.¹

Central to Buddhism is the impermanence of all things and the doctrine of no distinct and enduring self in existence.¹ If there is anything eternal and unchanging, Buddhism is false. If, as [Colossians 1:16-17](#) says, "***all things have been created through Him and for***

Him. He is before all things, and in Him, all things hold together," then one cannot say that all things are impermanent and do not hold together at all, or that there are no actual things. Anyone claiming to be both Buddhist and Christian must either radically alter Buddhist teaching on almost every possible subject, or else they must drastically change what they mean by "God" to such a degree that it is no longer recognizable as anything remotely Christian.

2. A Comparison of Buddhist and Christian Teaching

- A. **Man:** Buddhism teaches that personal self is an illusion. There is no "I" or "you" even now, and certainly no soul or spirit of man that transcends this physical life.¹

Christianity teaches that men and women are created in the image of God and are distinct from and have dominion over other living things on the earth, (Genesis 1:26-28). The person developing in the womb is the same person all the days of their life (Psalms 139:13-16). There is conscious existence after death (Luke 16:19-31), and these same personal selves will rise again on the last day (Acts 24:15), some to eternal life and others to eternal condemnation, (John 5:28-29).

- B. **Sin:** Buddhism teaches that there is no moral right and wrong. Good and evil are a false duality that the enlightened must overcome.⁵ Rightness and wrongness are merely subjective,¹ a distinction we make artificially out of convenience.⁷ Justice and injustice, Buddhism explains, are potentially dangerous concepts rooted in the false notion that there is a Creator God who rules and judges us all.¹

Christianity teaches that there is such a God and that there is indeed objective right and wrong. Evil, or sin, is breaking the commands of God (1 John 3:4) and falling short of His standard (Romans 3:23). We have a duty not only to avoid evil but also to do what is good (Galatians 6:9-10) even to those who hate us (Luke 6:27). Indeed, knowing what is good and not doing it is itself evil (James 4:17). The concepts of righteousness and wickedness, good and evil, obedience and sin; these are quite central to everything that Christianity has to say.

- C. **Suffering:** In Buddhism suffering comes from our illusion of being a personal self and our actions in accordance with that illusion.¹ Because we think we exist as distinct and enduring selves separate from other objects, we desire things and become attached to things that are, in fact, fleeting and illusory. From this comes suffering. It is not merely unhealthy or improper desires, but rather all personal desires that cause our suffering.¹

Every volition, every act of the will, is karma and perpetuates "samsara," or the cycle of death and rebirth. The Buddhist must learn to be free from all desires, no longer pursuing what is pleasant and avoiding what is painful or thinking of one experience as preferable to another.¹ He must cease to praise what is good or bemoan what is evil, abandoning all such duality.¹ This is the Buddhist freedom from suffering.

In Christianity, it is human evil and disobedience to God that first brought suffering and death into the world, ([Romans 5:12](#)). What man needs most is to be washed of his guilt and to turn from his sin. While Christians believe that selfish human desires are what lead us into temptation and sin ([James 1:14](#)) and that much suffering and strife come from wrong-headed desires that go unfulfilled ([James 4:1-3](#)), nevertheless there are also righteous desires that ought to be cultivated. There is blessing for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness ([Matthew 5:6](#)), and we are to seek earnestly and consistently after the kingdom of God ([Matthew 6:33](#)). In the end, God will satisfy the righteous desires of those who are in Christ. He will bless them with eternal life and remove their suffering forever, ([Revelation 21:3-4](#)).

- D. Salvation:** Different [Buddhist branches](#) prescribe a variety of differing things regarding the most effective path to enlightenment and escape from the suffering of life and the cycle of death and rebirth. At a minimum, however, all hold to the centrality of adherence to [The Eightfold path](#) laid out by Buddha for one to escape the suffering cycle through the self-disciplined reshaping of one's thoughts, views, speech, and actions. As one ceases from karmic action, personal desire, and the illusion of self-existence, one attains to enlightenment, realizes Nirvana, and thus transcends suffering and the cycle of rebirth.

In Christianity, salvation is the forgiveness of sins and bodily resurrection unto eternal life with God. This is not earned or merited but is the gracious gift of God which we receive through repentance and faith. ([John 3:16-21](#))

- E. Eternity:** The Buddhist hope is for the realization of Nirvana. Nirvana means to blow out or extinguish, like a flame deprived of air or exhausting its fuel.¹ It is not the extinguishing of one's personal existence since Buddhism insists there never was any personal existence to extinguish, but rather the extinguishing of the illusion of personal existence.¹ It is an end to desire, longing, craving, or the idea of oneself as a distinct and separate thing.¹ It is not a place that one enters or a state one acquires. It is simply the realization of what is already the ultimate reality. Rebirth is then at an end, suffering ceases, desires are done away with, and all simply "is."

The Christian eternity could not be more opposite. Personal existence continues for all, some to everlasting life and others to everlasting judgment, ([John 5:28-29](#)). Those who are saved from their sins in Jesus Christ have eternal bodily life without pain or suffering in the very presence of God, ([Revelation 21:3-4](#)). Those who remain in the guilt of their sins are punished for their evil forever in hell, "And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night," ([Revelation 14:11](#)).

IN CONCLUSION

This mere sampling from some of the most central teachings of Buddhism and Christianity is by no means exhaustive of the differences but should suffice to show that these two religions are utterly incompatible. Indeed, it would be difficult to conceive of two belief systems that more fundamentally disagreed on even the most basic concepts of foundational truth. Any professing Christian seeking to embrace the philosophy of Buddha is necessarily also seeking to deny the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is no trifling matter.