

JESUS AND BUDDHA

Christian 'Bodhi - citta'

A 'user-friendly' article by Elaine M. Robson.

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Just as practising Buddhists have a strong aspiration to share the Buddhist dharma with those around them, so too Christians want to share their faith in Jesus Christ with others. Sharing one's beliefs with others is not always easy. It requires respect for the other person who has a different faith persuasion from your own.

I write this article in response to a request to help Christians understand a little more about the basics of Tibetan Buddhism. Of course those who are Buddhists are very welcome to read my essay and comment on any of the points.

Some important differences between Christianity and Buddhism

In a nutshell, Buddhism is the study of the mind. It is not the study of God. Christians frequently fail to understand this. Buddhism aims to re-program the mind to enable it to respond to what it perceives naturally in a different way.

Buddhism's focus is on the difference between appearance and reality. It teaches that unenlightened people think of everyday phenomena (things) as permanent, i.e. not that they don't decay but that people naturally view things as having intrinsic existence. That is, they are not 'dependent' – not part of the cause and effect process. But somehow they exist independently.

Christians, on the other hand, already think in a different way from what Buddhism describes as the 'normal unenlightened mind'. When we have discovered Truth in the Bible, in conjunction with the renewing of our minds by the Holy Spirit, we find it difficult to relate to these Buddhist assertions. Our mind has already been re-programmed! Christians already understand everything as being dependent – as part of the cause and effect process and therefore lacking in intrinsic existence. The Buddhist claim that all human beings are searching for happiness can seem inadequate for the Christian. He/she sees the quest for significance as equally relevant. Answers to questions such as 'Why am I here?', 'Who made me?', 'What is the purpose of life?' supersede the 'I want to be happy' syndrome.

The fundamental difference between Buddhism and Christianity is that Christians believe everything is the result of the cause and effect process, and that ultimately everything depends upon God the Creator, who is Himself outside time and space. He is not part of the causal process. It makes no sense to ask 'Who caused God?' He is unique and is the very initiator of causality.

Buddhists however disagree, seeing the cause and effect process as an infinite process. They teach that it is without any initiating or starting-off point. Therefore the question 'How did everything begin?' is seen as totally irrelevant and not worth discussing!

Instead a more pertinent question to ask would be, 'Look around and ask yourself why is there something (anything at all) rather than nothing (at all)?' Because things actually do exist it is relevant to ask such a question. But what is meant by the statement 'Things exist!?' The Buddhist describes things as merely existing *conventionally* (everyday existence as perceived through our senses) and not *ultimately*. The Christian is able to understand this statement since he/she too sees everything about him/her as having a causal relationship. And the Christian would also say that there is nothing that inherently – in and of itself – has the ability to remain permanently. He/she responds to the question, 'Why is there something rather than

nothing?’ by saying that the something that exists is enabled to do so because of God's sustaining power which upholds all dependent phenomena. There is nothing which is a result (a product) of the cause and effect process that exists intrinsically in and of itself. And if the self-existent Creator God withdrew His sustaining power (support), then every single causally dependent thing would immediately fall apart. He who created everything is able to cause the total annihilation (if He so wished) of each and every dependent phenomenon. But God, who does not have the nature of dependency, is eternal.

Buddhist world view however is very different from the Christian one. It adamantly rejects the concept of an intrinsically self-existent God – the initial cause and sustainer of all things. The belief in multiple universes that come and go – arise – abide – disintegrate – is a core Buddhist doctrine. The suffering situation in which we find ourselves – *Samsara* – is said to have had no beginning. Suffering is seen as intrinsic to the birth, life and death process. The word in Tibetan for universe or world is *jikden* which means ‘possessing destruction’.

This word presents no problem to the Christian if used post Adam and Eve's fall into sin. In fact it is an excellent word to describe our current world, which is most definitely in the grip of disintegration.

However it makes no sense to translate the biblical words in Genesis ch.1 about God creating a good world and then use the word *jikden* for that good world! (Translators have yet to find or coin a new word to solve this dilemma – any suggestions?!)

As I have already stated, for the Buddhist, the cause and effect process is viewed as infinite, (i.e. as far as a backward regression is concerned). Therefore if a Christian in the early stages of a dialogue tries to centre the discussion on what might be an initial cause, the results may not be very productive!

What is mind programming all about?

To re-program the mind is a fundamental aim in Buddhist practice.

- 1 It is aided by various meditational practices and (in Tibetan Buddhism) the use of visualisation.
- 2 The natural mind is considered to be unenlightened, i.e. it doesn't see reality as it really is but fabricates its own false interpretation of the everyday (conventional) world it engages with. Nor does the natural mind grasp the ultimate reality (true nature) of things, i.e. their emptiness or non-substantiality.
- 3 To be enlightened is to be set free from the repetitive cycle of birth, death and rebirth. This release is said to occur only as the true nature of things is realised. (See note below.) Meditational practice is considered to be integral to the process of realisation.

What is Buddhist meditation?

Damien Keown, in his excellent little book entitled *Buddhism – A Very Short Introduction* (pp98-100) explains that the Buddha considered mere trance-like states to be only a diversion in the goal of removing suffering. He developed a completely new meditational technique: first the practice of *Samatha* or 'calming meditation' where there is a cessation of intellectual activity; secondly, *vispassana* or 'insight meditation' where the aim is not that of peace and tranquillity but the generation of penetrating and critical insight whereby the critical faculties are brought fully into play in a *detailed reflexive analysis* of the meditator's own state of mind.

Thus Buddhism teaches that a deep philosophical insight into the nature of things is needed for complete liberation from the wheel of life.

So what is the Christian's good news to the Buddhist?

‘*Jesus Saves!*’ But what does that really mean to your Buddhist friend?

1 What we say must be relevant. No-one wants to listen to a viewpoint that is not engaging with issues that are pertinent to the listener.

2 It is important not to get side-tracked. One needs to focus on the basic ideas (doctrines) of Buddhism and not get bogged down in the details of meditational techniques, nor in a drawn out recounting of unsubstantiated mythological events.

3 The issue of suffering is central to Buddhist thought and may well provide common ground for discussion. But we need to know how the Buddhist antidote to suffering is at variance with the antidote explained in the teachings of Jesus and demonstrated in His earthly life. We also need to appreciate any similarities.

4 The issue of *appearance* and *reality* is foundational to Buddhism. Do you know what a Buddhist understands by these terms? Find relevant passages in the Bible and use these as a basis in your discussions.

5 Your personal testimony is important but needs to be expressed in a way that can be understood by your listener.

What is Buddhist reality?

The doctrine of 'no self' also needs to be discussed. Hindus understand the *atman* as some kind of soul, essence or thing that is passed on from one life to the next as a consequence of rebirth. There is considered to be some kind of permanency or substantiality associated with it.

Buddha rejected this permanency and substantiality and emphasised the intrinsic emptiness (non-substantiality) of everything, including the self – the *I* that we all refer to in conversation.

As Christians we can certainly agree with our Buddhist friends if emptiness is viewed as dependency, i.e. a product of the cause and effect process. But where we must part company and profoundly disagree is with the Buddhist statement that 'all things *without exception* are a result of causes and conditions' and that there is absolutely nothing at all that exists intrinsically, meaning in and of itself, separate from and outside the cause and effect process.

Christians see God as the exception! As explained earlier not only is He the sustainer of all life, He is the One who brought phenomena into existence in the first place. God is seen as the answer to the question, 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' This question is dealt with more fully in the autobiography of an English philosopher and professor, Paul Williams, who was a practising Tibetan Buddhist for nearly twenty years. He recently converted to Christianity, much to the surprise and amazement of his Buddhist friends. His account is entitled *The Unexpected Way – On converting from Buddhism to Catholicism*. ISBN 0 567 08830 8 (T & T Clark International)

A pertinent question which a Buddhist may well ask of a Christian is, 'If you, like us, do not accept the Hindu concept of 'soul' what do you *mean* when you talk about a Christian having a soul?'

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Should Christians meditate?

Christians do indeed meditate but the question is, "Should Christians engage deliberately in meditational practices that will induce altered states of consciousness? - in other words, override the natural processes of the mind?"

One aim of Buddhist meditation is to remove the division between subject and object (you and me / he / she / it / they). Such a separation is viewed as a consequence of being unenlightened. The natural mind is said to view things as having some sort of intrinsic existence and this is definitely considered to be a wrong view. It

is taught that the enlightened mind does not differentiate between you and me, good and bad etc, and there is said to be a '*knowing*' that is beyond the reach and experience of the natural human mind.

A Christian response

As Christians, what do we know about '*knowing*'? Consider these questions below.

A Have you experienced *oneness* with the Lord that is not an activity of your intellectual gymnastics, i.e. that is not a result of conceptualisation?

B What did Adam and Eve experience before the Fall? How was their relationship with God different from ours?

C What do you think about Near Death experiences (NDE)? People claim to have experienced a knowing of what others were thinking. A blind patient who was a crash victim was able to describe in detail the whole operating procedure after he became conscious again. He was still blind. It would seem that our limited understanding of the nature of the human mind is definitely challenged by such events.

D The renewing of our minds is both an event and a process. The initial event is being 'born again' (John ch3 v3). The process is continued as we submit gladly to and co-operate with the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, i.e. God the Holy Spirit as He is poured out upon us (Acts ch2 v3-4).

E Finally, there is a *mystery* (i.e. the secret and hidden wisdom of God. RSV) to the Gospel (1 Corinthians ch2 v7). We need to explore this *mystery* at a much greater depth and ask ourselves if we have the keys that will help us unlock something of that *mystery* so that it will become deeply relevant, not only for us but also for our dialogue partners?

Submission to Christ means deliverance from Satan's part-truths. I believe that as Christians and Buddhists embark on the journey of interfaith dialogue, many new doors of understanding and appreciation will start to open. Jesus Christ said, 'You will know the truth and the truth will set you free' (John ch8 v32).

There is a '*knowing*' possible through Christ that has the power to liberate us totally from our own self-orientated and egotistical thinking. A power that can set us free from the inner negative 'conversation' we all have as individuals going on within our minds*.

(*Reader's Digest. September 2006. Listen to What You're Saying. By Phillip McGraw.)

Christ came to recreate that 'conversation'. He is able to destroy its negativity, a negativity that came as a result of Adam and Eve's deliberate disobedience and self-orientated behaviour.

Buddhists are acutely aware of the destructive nature of human existence. Christians can learn by seeking to respond biblically to the issues that preoccupy the thinking of their Buddhist friends and neighbours.

May God bring His enlightenment to us all as we search for Him – either knowingly or unknowingly.

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