

BUDDHISM

Overview: Buddhism has many common teachings with Hinduism because Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, grew up in a Hindu clan born to the warrior caste. But the suffering he witnessed dramatically changed Siddhartha and led him to seek a way to resolve the most immediate goal, which was to eliminate suffering. He tried extreme asceticism after having grown up in luxury and found that neither extreme had the path to eliminating suffering. After he received enlightenment he called the path the Middle Way, avoiding the extremes of asceticism and affluence. After his enlightenment his first sermon consisted of what is now called the Four Noble Truths, with the Fourth Noble Truth consisting of The Eight-fold Path to eliminate desire, which he said was the root of all suffering.

History:

Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama (563-483 B.C.) during the sixth century BC. His life is often understood by dividing it into three phases: enjoyment, enquiry, and enlightenment.

The Period of Enjoyment (563-534 B.C.)

He was born into the warrior caste of the Shakya tribe in the town of Kapilavastu of northeastern India, but is now part of Nepal.

Tradition says that his father tried to shelter him in a palace from any form of suffering, such as sickness, death, old age, and the poverty of an ascetic. One day however he ventured away from the palace and encountered all four kinds of suffering. This experience had a profound effect on him and caused him to become disillusioned with his wealth and caused him to be concerned about the issue of suffering.

The Period of Enlightenment (534-528 B.C.)

As a result of Siddhartha's encounter with suffering he left his family – including a wife and child- and his luxurious life. He committed himself to find the source of suffering and to eliminate it.

He began to practice an extreme form of asceticism. After six years his body became so weak because of eating so little that he almost drowned while bathing in a river. He realized that extreme asceticism did not produce the enlightenment he sought.

The Period of Enlightenment (528-483 B.C.)

After his near drowning he ate some food and walked to a city named Bodh Gaya, where he sat under a fig tree by the edge of a river. He vowed not to rise again until he had attained enlightenment, and then went into a deep state of meditation.

During his meditation, Siddhartha was severely tempted by Mara, the evil one. He resisted her temptations though and after a period of time (some say one night, others as many as forty-nine days) he attained enlightenment and became the Buddha, which means “the enlightened one”. Bodh Gaya is now the site of the holiest shrine in the Buddhist world, the Mahabodhi (“great enlightenment”) Temple.

Buddha called his path to enlightenment the Middle Way, because it avoided the extremes of both affluence and asceticism, both of which caused him to suffer.

After his enlightenment Buddha preached his first sermon, the contents of which have come to be known as the *Four Noble Truths*.

After forty-five years of preaching Buddha died, probably of food poisoning. His last words were, “Decay is inherent in all component things! Work out your salvation with diligence.”

For two centuries Buddhism did not spread beyond India until the reign of King Ashoka who ruled India from 274-232 BC. The king was so revolted by the bloodshed during a battle he resolved to renounce all such fighting. The king then converted to Buddhism and devoted his resources to the propagation of Buddhism, commissioning missionaries to go to other parts of India as well as Syria, Egypt, Cyrene, Greece, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand.

During this same time frame a major division occurred within Buddhism. The primary issue was whether enlightenment is available to everyone or to only a few. Those Buddhists who said enlightenment was available to all were called the Mahayana, the ones who said it was only available to the few (for instance, monks) were called the Hinayana, but due to the negative connotation of the term Hinayana they began referring to themselves as Theraveda Buddhists, which means “the teaching of the elders”.

The Mahayana Buddhists see Buddha as a manifestation of the universal absolute where as Theraveda Buddhists see him as being a man only. The Mahayanas believe there will be at least one more manifestation of the Buddha essence called the “Maitreya Buddha”, where as the Theravedas believe that can only be one Buddha. Theravedas believe one must attain enlightenment solely through one’s own effort, where as the Mahayanas teach that *bodhisattvas* (enlightened ones who remain to help others along the path) can help people along the path to enlightenment and transfer some of their own extra Karma merit to seekers.

From India Theraveda Buddhism spread toward the southeastern parts of Asia and Mahayana spread to the northeastern parts of Asia.

An Indian Buddhist scholar Bodhidharma introduced Ch’an Buddhism to China, it is the predecessor to Zen Buddhism which developed in Japan after Ch’an Buddhism was introduced in the twelfth century AD. Japanese scholar D.T. Suzuki introduced Zen Buddhism to America during the early part of the twentieth century.

Besides the two branches already discussed, there is a third branch known as Vajrayana or Tantra Buddhism. It emphasizes occultic techniques for the development of spiritual power. This form of Buddhism is the primary religion of Tibet where one of the most famous Buddhists, the Dalai Lama, is from. The Dalai Lama is Tibet’s exiled spiritual

and political leader. The Tibetans consider him to be the fourteenth reincarnation Avalokiteshvara, the *bodhisattva* of compassion. Besides these three there exist an “unofficial” form of Buddhism called “folk” Buddhism. It is quite different from the other sects of Buddhism, it is animistic, that the spirits are controlling peoples lives and they must appease these spirits to have success in life and they should seek the spirits advice through various forms of divination.

Views of God:

Nirvana, an abstract void

Views of Humanity:

An impermanent collection of aggregates (*skandhas* which include the physical body, emotions, perception, volition, and consciousness). Death causes these aggregates to be dismantled like taking a car apart piece by piece. When they are taken apart they cease to be a collective unit.

Humanity’s Problem:

We suffer because we desire that which is temporary

Views of Scripture:

The Theravada Buddhists believe the canon is closed and consists of the Pali *Tripitaka*. Pali is the language it is written in and *Tripitaka* means the “three baskets” of teachings, which include Buddha’s sermon’s, rules for monks, and philosophical teachings. The length of the *Tripitaka* is about seventy times longer than the Bible. The Mahayanas believe that the canon remains open and thus include writings from Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan sources.

The scriptures of the Vajrayana are the Kanjur (108 volumes) and the Tanjur (225 volumes)

Views of Salvation:

The salvation or goal of Buddha was essentially the same as Hinduism, the liberation from the wheel of life, death, and rebirth (*samsara*). But his more immediate goal was the elimination of suffering.

Major Teachings:

- The Four Noble Truths;
 - The First Noble Truth: Life consists of suffering. This concept includes the experiences of pain, misery, sorrow, and unfulfillment.
 - The Second Noble Truth: Everything is impermanent and ever-changing. We suffer because we desire those things which are impermanent.
 - The Third Noble Truth: The way to liberate oneself from suffering is by eliminating all desire. We must stop craving that which is impermanent.
 - The Fourth Noble Truth: Desire can be eliminated by following the Eight-fold Path. These eight points can be categorized according to three major sections:

- Wisdom (Panna)
 1. Right Understanding
 2. Right Thought
- Ethical Conduct (Sila)
 3. Right Speech
 4. Right Action
 5. Right Livelihood
- Mental Discipline (Samadhi)
 6. Right Effort
 7. Right Awareness
 8. Right Meditation

These eight points are not steps to be taken sequentially but instead developed simultaneously with each other.

- Samsara (reincarnation) ~ This refers to the ever-revolving wheel of life, death, and rebirth. Buddha taught unlike Hinduism that there is no unified life to exist from life to life but that each life one lives is a composite of aggregates.
- The *sila* or moral precepts command each to refrain from::
 - Taking any life.
 - Stealing
 - Immoral sexual behavior (monks must be celibate)
 - Lying
 - Taking intoxicants

Approaching Buddhists With The Gospel:

- Acknowledge your common ground:
 - Desire can cause suffering
 - Peace is Important
 - Living a moral life
 - Self-Discipline is important
 - Meditation and prayer are important
 - Compassion is a virtue
- Point to the Issue of Desire:

Buddha taught desire is the root of all suffering, but Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” Mt 5:6. According to Jesus then the issue is the right desires not eliminating them all together.
- Show God’s personal nature.

Show how we hurt him. Such as grieve the Holy Spirit
 Show how he loves us. Sent his Son to die for us.
 How he is aware of and can empathize with our suffering (Ex 3:7; Heb 4:15)
- Point to God’s Permanence
- Focus on Forgiveness of our sin rather than working towards perfection.

Works Consulted

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