
CAMPUS LIFE

The Reflective Path

How to Share Christianity With a Buddhist Friend

Jon Dybdahl

Mr. Nakamura's visit taught me two key things about Buddhism. I won't forget them, for they form the very basis for Christian sharing with Buddhists.

Mr. Nakamura lived next door to a professor colleague of mine and taught at a prestigious college, not far from the Adventist college where I lectured. He regularly invited his students to Buddhist tea ceremonies at his house. When I met Mr. Nakamura, the truth dawned that a Buddhist missionary lived in my small, out-of-the-way northeastern United States town and actually conducted "evangelistic meetings" there.

Just a generation ago, few Westerners personally knew Buddhists unless they were missionaries, businessmen, or diplomats who lived in Asia. The presence of Asian students at universities worldwide, the dispersion of southeast Asian refugees, and the interest in and conversion to Buddhism in some Western circles have combined with the new missionary zeal of Buddhism to make Buddhism a global phenomenon. You can't share with people unless you recognize their presence. You probably live near a Buddhist or go to school with some of them.

After Mr. Nakamura lectured to my World Religions class, I took him on a walking tour of our campus. That stroll taught me more about the essence of Buddhism than my textbook ever did. I could not keep from getting ahead of Mr. Nakamura. No matter how hard I tried, I walked too fast. I slowed down repeatedly, but as soon as I started talking habit took over and I always ended up five to six paces in front of him. The tour of the campus took at least twice as long as it normally did. Mr.

Nakamura probably noticed three times as much as the average visitor.

A Reflective Approach

Unhurried, thoughtful, reflective, are all good words to describe Buddhism. Anything rushed, hurried, impatient, does not fit. Most Buddha faces or images mirror serenity, quiet, and peace. Meditation, which is quiet in itself, plays a key role in Buddhism. Mr. Nakamura taught me that in order to communicate with him I needed to slow down and become more deliberate. I needed to be awake and sensitive to him and to all that was going on around us. Only then could he begin to hear me.

For this reason I begin all my specific suggestions of faith sharing with Buddhists with the word *reflect*. It is an appeal to be thoughtful, sensitive, and peaceful so that we may become like a Buddhist to the Buddhists, following the apostle Paul's wise counsel.

I now suggest the following reflective steps in reaching Buddhists:

1. Reflect on the type of Buddhist you are dealing with. Although Buddhists come in endless varieties, most fit into two major categories. The first group are those whose cultural and social background is Buddhist. Most of these are Asians whose country or family espouse the religion. Some of these people know the history and beliefs of their faith well, but for many religion is simply part of their cultural identity. Buddhism is an element of being Thai, Lao, or Japanese. Their reasons for remaining Buddhists have to do

with family, friends, and self-identity, rather than philosophy or evidence for belief.

The second major group are those who as adults became convinced Buddhists through study. Most Buddhists from Europe and America fit into this category.

The cultural Buddhists need love and acceptance and practical reasons for faith rather than intellectual discussion. The second group may enjoy and need social acceptance and support as well, but will also demand sound evidence and a philosophical basis for whatever is shared about Christianity.

The Life of Gautama

2. Reflect on the history of Buddhism. To reach Buddhists we must know something about their faith. The facts concerning the life of Siddharta Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, were written down hundreds of years after his death and are in dispute, but most accept the following basics:

Siddharta (personal name) Gautama (family name) was born about 560 B.C. into the rich family of a clan chief who lived near the Nepalese-Indian border area. "Buddha" is not his name but a title meaning "enlightened" or "mentally aware." This title was used by people long before Siddharta's birth. The situation parallels that of Jesus in that the title "Christ" or "Messiah" (anointed one) was known long before it was applied to Jesus (personal name) of Nazareth.

Many miracle stories surround Gautama's birth. Some claim he was born of a virgin. Gautama's mother died seven days after the birth and he was raised by his

mother's sister. Gautama's father planned a political career for his son and tried to keep him from seeing the miseries of life. At the age of 16 Gautama was married to the only daughter of a nearby area ruler. A son was born into the family. To all appearances Gautama was headed toward a career in government and a life of luxury.

Then came a major turning point. Siddharta saw four visions. Whether the visions were like spiritual experiences or dreams or were the result of a sneak visit to villages nearby is not certain, but the experiences changed Gautama's life. He saw an old man bent over and weakened by age. He saw a sick person overcome by a horrible disease. He saw a funeral procession and viewed the corpse. He saw a recluse, or monk, with a calm, serene face. The rich, pampered prince saw in these four visions a whole, new, different reality. He saw the transitory nature of life and the power of religion. Leaving his wife and his newborn son, Gautama renounced his throne and decided to enter the monastic life. He was 29 years old.

The four visions not only affected Gautama's life but also shaped his doctrine. He saw that suffering was basic to all life and that religion must provide a way to escape that suffering. Reflecting under a bo tree one day, Gautama was enlightened on the true nature of life and became the Buddha, or enlightened one. The Buddha's main insight was that there was a middle path or way. Self-indulgence was wrong, but so was extreme asceticism. His way was the truth, the middle path between these two false extremes.

In summary, Buddha taught that all human beings, in fact all beings, suffered. This suffering came from desire. If one dealt with desire, then suf-

fering was eliminated. Desire could be eliminated by following his eightfold middle path of (1) right understanding, (2) right thought, (3) right speech, (4) right action, (5) right livelihood, (6) right effort, (7) right mindfulness, (8) right concentration. Following this noble eightfold path led to a cessation of desire. That led to an end of suffering and to the continuous recycle of birth, death, rebirth, and death. That escape was *nirvana*, no longer being bound by the suffering of existence and the cycle of rebirth. Buddha's teaching ministry lasted until the age of 80 when he died, supposedly after a meal of pork.

Three Major Groups

From this rather simple background have developed numerous Buddhist sects. These sects differ quite markedly in belief and practice, at least as much, if not more than the various Christian denominations. An excellent question to ask your Buddhist friend is this: What are the specific charac-

teristics of your branch of Buddhism? The various sects are often grouped into three main families, much like Christians are often categorized as Catholics, Protestants or Orthodox. The most traditional Buddhist sects are usually called Hinayana (the small vehicle). Most also call this group Theravada (tradition of the elders), although a few scholars draw a distinction between the two terms. Adherents of these sects try to stay as close as they can to the original teachings of Siddharta Gautama. They are also called Southern or South Asian Buddhists because they are concentrated in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Burma, Laos, and Cambodia.

The second major Buddhist family of sects is called Mahayana (the big vehicle). Some call the family the Northern or North Asian Buddhist family since adherents come mainly from Japan, China, and Korea. This type of Buddhism is more open to change and development than Hinayana and believes in further revelations after the time of Gautama. Most

of the Buddhism popular in the West is of this type. Zen is, in fact, a sect of Mahayana Buddhism.

The third Buddhist family of sects is much smaller than the other two. Some class it as part of the Mahayana group, but it is so different that I, along with others, think it needs a separate category. This family is variously called Vajrayana (the thunderbolt vehicle), Tantric Buddhism, or Tibetan Buddhism. This Buddhism uses Mantras (repeated sacred syllables), Mandalas (symbolic visual figures), and various gestures and occult practices in its quest for enlightenment.

The persons desiring to share the gospel with a Buddhist friend will seek to gain much more specific knowledge about the beliefs of their friend. However,



everyone should know at least this much, so that he or she can begin an intelligent conversation.

Building Bridges

3. Reflect on how to build on common ground. Adventists often feel their religion is different from most others. In some ways this is true, if the "others" are lookalike Christian denominations. Strange as it may seem, Adventism has many areas of common ground with the world religions that other Christians don't have. Wise friends stress these commonalities, rather than launching a direct attack on the religious beliefs of others. Buddhism and Adventism have common areas that can lend themselves to discussion of mutual concerns. I will mention three of those areas.

First, many Buddhists are interested in health, particularly in vegetarianism. Not all Buddhists are vegetarians, but most see it as an ideal, just as Adventism does. One reason is that Buddhists have a general desire to refrain from killing. Some of the best vegetarian food I have eaten has been in Thai and Chinese restaurants operated by Buddhists. Many Buddhists would be delighted to try a vegetarian meal and/or hear a lecture on healthful eating or cooking without meat.

Second, most Buddhists are committed to pacifism. Again, not all live up to it, but even socialized Buddhists are not happy as soldiers. They don't want to kill people. A major problem faced by United States military planners during the war in Vietnam and Southeast Asia was that many bullets were not fired directly at the enemy, but at a safe distance over everyone's head. You can make a Buddhist a soldier, but many work their hardest at not becoming killers. Thai soldiers often become monks for a time when they leave military service as a way to atone for being violent and militant. Buddhists can easily relate to our stand on noncombatancy. One



major historical objection that many Buddhists have raised in connection with Christianity is that it is warlike and Buddhism is peace-loving. We can communicate to our Buddhist friends that not all Christians are warlike and that some have even taken strong stands against killing their fellow human beings.

Third, many Buddhists believe that a great teacher or deliverer is coming. In Thailand he is called *Praarayamaetrai*. Other places and other Buddhist sects have different names, but the belief in a deliverer is widespread. For some groups this coming one is a reincarnation of Gautama, for others simply a new Buddha. For yet others, the figure is a deliverer. Adventists, who also see the need of and expect a coming deliverer, can find this Buddhist hope a means of sharing their dreams and hopes for the future.

4. Reflect on how to share Jesus. Many Buddhists share with other 20th-century people a reservation about institutional religion. The very name of Christianity or Adventism raises questions about history and often brings to the front old problems and prejudices. Jesus is different. He is a person. We must remember to share him, not an institution or a

denomination. This is particularly true for Buddhists who already have an affection for a great religious personage, Siddharta Gautama. Buddhists are drawn by the stories of Jesus of Nazareth who was not only enlightened, but also "The Light." Like Buddha, Jesus had a great renunciation and went on a search, not for peace but for lost and suffering humanity. Simple stories of Jesus speak to Buddhists in a powerful way.

Real forgiveness for sin is lacking in traditional Buddhism. By the law of Karma, all sin and evil must have its result in this life or subsequent reincarnation. For Buddhists the free wiping out of sin does not make sense. The story of a savior, Jesus, who can do this, is a message of hope and good news that changes lives.

Providing Help

5. Reflect on practical ways to help people. To many people Buddhism seems very philosophical and intellectual. In some respects it is, but in others it is very practical. Siddharta Gautama set out to solve a very real, practical problem—the problem of human suffering. Buddhists still respond to people whose religion gives real help to people who suffer.

Through a series of providential events I was able to visit a military officer jailed on capital charges in a Thai prison. He had heard about Adventism through his correspondence with Adventist students and had been studying the material mailed to him in prison. He requested that we visit him and start Adventist meetings in the prison.

Sombat's background, of course, was Buddhist, and I was interested to hear about his spiritual journey. He told me that he had sought peace in Buddhism. His parents had joined a strict Buddhist sect, and he himself had diligently studied various Buddhist meditation practices and found no peace. He had heard about Christianity but thought most Christians were superficial,

illogical, and impractical. Then he began to study Christianity and discovered Jesus. Adventist literature taught him about the dangers of smoking and helped him get over the habit. He learned about exercise, water, and other simple health facts. Excited about these new concepts, he had already brought six fellow inmates to faith. Another Christian group offered him money to pastor as their representative in the prison. He refused. He said to me, "You people not only talk to me about Jesus, but you are the only ones who really help me in a practical way to live a better life here with less suffering now." Many Buddhists will respond to loving Christians who share gladly ways to escape suffering now.

Don't let Buddhists and Buddhism intimidate you. By God's Spirit, a willingness to reflect on and share with them can lead many to find Jesus, the only real, lasting answer to human suffering.

Jon Dybdaht (Ph.D. Fuller Theological Seminary) is a member of the Institute of World Mission, in Berrien Springs, Michigan. He served for nine years as a missionary and a teacher in Thailand and Singapore.

For Further Reading:

Richard H. Drummond, *Gautama the Buddha: An Essay in Religious Understanding*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974. An in-depth Christian analysis of Buddhism with theological response.

Allie M. Frazier, *Buddhism* (Readings in Eastern Religious Thought, Vol. 2). Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969. An inside view of Buddhism with Buddhist scripture sections.

William F. LaFleur, *Buddhism* (PH series on World Religions). New York: Prentice Hall, 1988. A short, clear, textbook explanation of Buddhism.

J. Isamu Yamamoto, *Beyond Buddhism*, Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity Press, 1982. A Christian's sympathetic summary of Buddhism with practical Christian response.

Interchange

Readers interested in establishing correspondence with Adventist college/university students and professionals in other parts of the world:

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