

On Buddhism

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As we continue our exploration of World Religions, we'll now turn to Buddhism. I said that I would go in order from oldest to youngest, so today should be Judaism. However, Buddhism came out of Hinduism so I'm breaking the rules to help us make connections. We'll begin with the foundations of the Buddhist faith.

The founder of Buddhism is sometimes called by his first name, Siddhartha, his family name, Gautama, or by his title, the Buddha which means Enlightened One.[1] The Buddha's life is overwhelmed by legend, but we know that Siddhartha Gautama lived around 563-483 BCE. The Buddha spent time searching the religious traditions of India we heard about last Sunday, and opted to leave home to find enlightenment by joining the ascetics. The ascetics believed that spiritual truth could be found through denial. As an aside, there are ascetics or practices of asceticism in most faiths; asceticism is marked by abstaining from worldly pleasures with the aim of pursuing spiritual goals.[2]

While still with the ascetics, Siddhartha Gautama sat under a tree one day and meditated. While meditating, he became the Enlightened One—he discovered the dangers of both asceticism and self-indulgence, and eventually taught that life is best lived in the Middle Way, the way between attachment and detachment. The Buddha taught that the Middle Way leads to enlightenment and then Nirvana or extinction. Buddhism can be described like this, "The Middle Way refers to the correct view of life that the Buddha teaches, and to the actions or attitudes that will create happiness for oneself and others. Thus, Buddhism itself is sometimes referred to as 'the Middle Way,' indicating a transcendence and reconciliation of the extremes of opposing views." [3]

While the Buddha was under that tree, he overcame temptations and realized the truth about life as he saw it, the Four Noble Truths that he taught his followers. That all life is suffering, suffering is caused by desire, if you stop the desire, you stop the suffering, and to stop the desire, you must follow the 8 Fold Path. The 8 Fold Path is often used synonymously with the Middle Way which is sometimes how folks refer to Buddhism in its entirety—I totally didn't understand this when I learned World Religions in college.

Moving on, the 8 Fold Path is about transforming your life through: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right conduct, right means of making a living, right mental attitude or effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. In general, the Middle Way emphasizes avoiding negative thoughts and emotions. For right mindfulness, one needs to have a clear sense of one's mental state and bodily health and feelings. Right concentration deals with using meditation to achieve the highest levels of enlightenment.[4]

Meditation is probably the most important spiritual practice in Buddhism. Dr. Moojan Momen relates that Meditation works "by stopping the normal flow of thoughts, thus allowing the individual to open himself or herself to concepts and ideas that would not have emerged otherwise." [5] Meditation is vital in both Hinduism and Buddhism, it involves controlling your breathing, concentrating on visual images, repetitive chanting of a word or phrase (a mantra), or a simple repetitive movement of your body. At its heart, Buddhism is about becoming in tune with existence; it's about learning to embrace existence, accept existence, and then let it all go. All life is impermanent, this concept is vital in Buddhism.

Moreover, this is what we see in the Story of Kisagotami. Her tale poignantly relates that everyone experiences loss and grief, no one is untouched by death, and we cannot live forever.

Kisagotami learns compassion by being with others in their loss and suffering and in so doing she comes to terms with her own grief. The ending is Buddhist to its core: "At length, she returned to seek Gautama. She found him waiting. She opened her empty hands. Neither spoke. Together they lifted the body of the child and carried him to the cremation grounds." [6] All life is impermanent.

Like most religions, there is diversity of belief and practice within Buddhism and various branches. There's Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. Within Mahayana Buddhism there's Tibetan Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism, and Zen Buddhism and even diverse Zen Buddhist sects that are unique in China, Japan, and Korea. In Theravada Buddhism, the main path for spiritual development is for men to become monks and then study, meditate, and practice the Middle Way taught by the Buddha. The ideal figure is the Arhat who achieves Nirvana through his spiritual practices. [7]

Nirvana means extinction, it's the goal of the human endeavor in Buddhism to achieve a state in which all human desires, hatreds, and delusions are extinguished, gone forever. This means that there is no more suffering. [8] Nirvana is similar to the Hindu view of moksha or release/bliss—that at the very end of your life, there will be no more you. Life is about embracing, accepting, and then ultimately letting go. Nirvana, extinction, is the ultimate goal of Buddhism.

This is important to note as we turn to Mahayana Buddhism, the branch that is likely more familiar to us because of Tibetan Buddhism and Zen Buddhism. The ultimate figure in this branch is the Bodhisattva who puts off reaching Nirvana in order to help others on the spiritual path. Since Nirvana is the ultimate goal for Buddhists, it's significant that Bodhisattvas are so close to letting go of all human desires and delusions and to be free from suffering, but they hold back to bring others along. Actually, some would say that Bodhisattvas are enlightened beings who choose to be reborn to serve humanity. No matter what view, Bodhisattvas are greatly respected and help differentiate Mahayana from Theravada Buddhism. It comes down to the Arhat versus the Bodhisattva (in addition to differences in sacred texts and teachings, of course.) [9]

However, like all faiths, Buddhism has a shadowy side. Religion scholar John Hick explains that Buddhism "has been indifferent until very recently to questions of social justice, so that many Buddhist lands have long remained in a state of feudal inequality." [10] When I stay with the sisters in India, there's actually a Tibetan Buddhist colony about twenty minutes up the road from their convent. There are 8,000 Tibetan monks that live in this beautiful walled compound, though the monks rarely go out into the community to be with the people. When I once asked the sisters about the monks, their response was that it must be nice to stay behind your walls and pray all day. Yikes! For me, John Hick's analysis of the shadowy side of Buddhism seems accurate. When a person has an inward focus on one's own spiritual journey and reaching enlightenment and nirvana, one could run the risk of indifference to questions of social justice.

Though speaking of Tibetan Buddhists, it's easy to end on a hopeful note. The Dalai Lama, the patron saint of Tibet, is probably the most famous Bodhisattva today. For Tibetan Buddhists, he is considered to be the Bodhisattva of Compassion. The Dalai Lama teaches Tibetan Buddhist practices at workshops all over the world and promotes peace and compassion. The Dalai Lama once said, "The purpose of our life needs to be positive. We weren't born with the purpose of causing trouble, harming others. For our life to be of value, I think we must develop basic good human qualities—warmth, kindness, compassion. Then our life becomes meaningful and more peaceful—happier." [11] When you have someone like the Dalai Lama as one face of Buddhism today, it's no wonder that many people are attracted to Buddhist beliefs and spiritual practices.

To summarize where we've been, Buddhism began when Siddhartha Gautama experienced enlightenment while meditating under a tree sometime around 563-483 BCE. The Buddha taught that life is best lived in the Middle Way—the way between attachment and detachment which leads to enlightenment and then Nirvana (extinction.) The Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths—that all life is suffering; suffering is caused by desire; if you stop the desire, you stop the suffering; and to stop the desire, you must follow the 8 Fold Path. The 8 Fold Path is also known as the Middle Way which can also refer to Buddhism itself—it comprises right understanding, right thought, right speech, right conduct, right means of making a living, right mental attitude or effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Meditation is an essential spiritual practice for Buddhists, and Buddhism is about becoming in tune with existence—learning to embrace existence, accept existence, and then let it all go. All life is impermanent. The main branches are Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. Within Mahayana Buddhism there's Tibetan Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism, and Zen Buddhism. One major difference in these branches is that Theravada Buddhism idealizes the Arhat who achieves Nirvana versus Mahayana idealizing the Bodhisattva who puts off reaching Nirvana in order to help others attain enlightenment. The shadowy side of Buddhism is the inward focus on one's own spiritual journey and therefore ignoring injustice. The most famous Bodhisattva today is the Dalai Lama, the Bodhisattva of Compassion and patron saint of Tibet, who promotes peace and compassion all over the world. And that, my friends, is Buddhism. Amen.

[1] Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach*, 9.

[2] Some of this sermon is from Dr. Jeffrey Pugh, *Introduction to Religious Studies Class Notes*, Elon University, Fall 2004

[3] Soka Gakki International, "The Middle Way," *SGI Quarterly*, July 2001, <http://www.sgi.org/buddhism/buddhist-concepts/the-middle-way.html>

[4] Rabbi Marc Gellman and Monsignor Thomas Hartman, *Part of the Religion For Dummies Cheat Sheet*, <http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/the-eightfold-path-of-buddhism.html>

[5] Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach*, 108.

[6] "The Story of Kisagotami," *A Buddhist Story*, <http://education.staffordshire.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/89F1F258-CD8A-40A2-AE21-413E0D817C0C/142547/ThestoryofKisagotami.pdf>

[7] Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach*, 9.

[8] Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach*, 543.

[9] Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach*, 9.

[10] John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, Eds. *The Myth of X Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religion*, 29.

[11] His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Howard C. Cutler, M.D., *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*, 64.