

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT BUDDHISM

Around the 5th century BC, a child was born to a King in northern India. He was given the name Siddhartha Gautama and a prophecy accompanied his birth. The prophecy declared that the boy would become either a great King or a great religious figure. His father determined he would be a great King and gave strict orders for the boy to be shielded from experiencing anything that would lead him to seek answers in religion. The boy grew up living an artificial life – smiles, happiness and harmony met his gaze wherever he went within the confines of the palace and surrounding areas. One day, the story goes, the young prince, who was now twenty-five years old, asked his charioteer what lay beyond the walls that surrounded the palace. His charioteer tried to dissuade him but the young prince was determined and so they secretly rode out into the real world. He was shocked to see, for the first time in his life, an old person, a sick person, a corpse, and finally, someone attempting to follow a spiritual path. These events so overwhelmed his senses that he secretly decided to leave everything he had, including his wife and child. He was determined to find answers to the problem of suffering (Sanskrit: *Dukkha*). We will pick up the thread of Siddhartha's spiritual quest later. Let us first grapple with the issues that led the young prince to abandon his privileged life.

We should first and foremost appreciate and applaud the young prince for his desire to know the cause of suffering and impermanence in this world. How many people enjoy riches and sensual pleasure without giving a thought to the meaning of life? How many are willing to inconvenience themselves in the quest for the truth? The Lord Jesus himself declared, "For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:25). It is a grievous sin to enjoy the works of the Creator and ignore the Creator! Among the people God promised to punish are those who never seek his face. "And them that are turned back from the LORD; and those that have not sought the LORD, nor enquired for him" (Zephaniah 1:6). We who live in Europe and other affluent nations must pay heed – God expects us to seek his face.

Matthew 6:31 *Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?*

Matthew 6:32 *(For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.*

Matthew 6:33 *But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.*

Let us return to the story of the young prince, Siddhartha. The story goes that the prince subjected his body and mind to the excruciating forms of discipline through fasting prayers, poverty and conversation with various gurus or “holy men” of India. Sadly, he gained nothing and almost starved to death at times. One day, however, while meditating under a tree in Bodh Gaya, Bihar, he received insight into the nature of reality and became the “enlightened one” or the Buddha. The teaching or *Dharma* of the Buddha is concerned with two main existential problems: sorrow (*dukkha*: Sanskrit for pain, suffering, disease) and the impermanence (*anicca*) of the material world. So far so good! Any religion that does not provide answers to these problems cannot be taken seriously. The Bible has much in common with Buddhism in this respect. In fact, the Book of Ecclesiastes is a commentary on the hollow and futile state of the world we live in.

Ecc 1:2 *Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.*

Ecc 1:18 *For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.*

Ecc 2:22 *For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun?*

Ecc 2:23 *For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.*

Ecc 3:19 *For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity.*

Several centuries before the Buddha, King Solomon, who was filled with the wisdom of God, already mentioned suffering and the impermanence of this world as vanity. When Adam and Eve saw these same forces at work in the fallen world that they had inherited, they called their son Abel or “vanity”: *hevel* or *hebel* in Hebrew means vanity and is the same word King Solomon employed to describe the condition of this world. However, this is where the parallels between the Bible and Buddhism ends. Buddha proposed a radical solution to the problem of sorrow and suffering – suppress and delete the cause of sorrow, which he identified as *craving* or *desire*. The Buddha believed that if one expunged or erased desire for anything, one would be free from sorrow and suffering. In other words, he who desires nothing will never be disappointed or experience sorrow. This is why Buddhist monks join a community called *Sangha* in which they take a vow of poverty, own nothing and receive alms from the people. Let us contrast this with the Bible. God did come in a body to avoid, suppress or obliterate sorrow and suffering. He assumed and took ownership of our sins, which is the cause of sorrow, suffering and the impermanence that preoccupied Buddha.

Isaiah 53:3 *He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

Isaiah 53:4 *Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.*

Isaiah 53:5 *But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.*

Why did the Lord Jesus Christ sigh, moan, mourn, weep and suffer? Indeed this was proof that he was atoning for our sins. Salvation in the Bible begins with a person acknowledging the source of sorrow, suffering and death. It is sin against the commandments of God. “Behold, the LORD’S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear” (Isaiah 59:1&2). Buddha, on the other hand, believed that one could suppress and eradicate desire, which is the source of sorrow. The closest Buddhists come to salvation is what they call *Nirvana* – a state of nothingness through meditation and following the Four Noble Truths and Noble Eightfold path, among others. They four truths are the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering. The steps of the Noble Eightfold Path are Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

Upon closer examination, *Nirvana* is a form of escapism from the real world. A Buddhist is indoctrinated to perceive this world as a source of pain and sorrow alone and will strive to disengage from it and even deny its existence. Buddhist *Dharma* teaches suspicion of whatever we perceive through the senses – cognition. The monk Bhikkhu Bodi says this about *māyā* or illusion.

Cognition is like a magical illusion (māyā) in the sense that it is insubstantial and cannot be grasped. Cognition is even more transient and fleeting than a magical illusion. For it gives the impression that a person comes and goes, stands and sits, with the same mind, but the mind is different in each of these activities. Cognition deceives the multitude like a magical illusion (māyā).¹

For instance, Buddhism extols the condition of being single because attachments to family will impede the progress to *Nirvana*. We conclude that Siddhartha escaped from one world of illusion (royal one) to another one. It is human to desire and crave. Buddhists

¹ Bodhi, Connected Discourses of the Buddha Vol I p. 1087, n. 194.

themselves have to desire and crave *Nirvana*. Desire is the precondition for finding truth. Jesus did not command his followers to suppress or deny desire, but to align desire with the will of God. “Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them” (Mark 11:24). This world has not been created as an illusion. Neither should the objective be to seek to escape from it. “For thus saith the LORD that created the heavens; God himself that formed the earth and made it; he hath established it, he created it not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited: I am the LORD; and there is none else” (Isaiah 45:18). After all, God promised a land flowing with milk and honey to the children of Israel. God faced the vanity in this world that King Solomon and the Buddha eloquently described by assuming our sins and its consequences. Buddhism has much to say about *Karma* – the law of cause and effect. Once the Lord Jesus willingly took our sins upon himself, he also accepted the consequences associated with sin. He was condemned to die on the Cross. God ransomed us from sin and death – not by escaping into a world of illusion, but confronting it head on. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Buddha did not deal with the problem of sorrow and impermanence; he philosophized his way into an illusion – an escape mechanism. This proves that the Buddha was not God; he himself never claimed divinity. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is God because he took our sins, sorrow, diseases and death upon himself and conquered them.

Eph 1:20 Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places,

Eph 1:21 Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come:

Eph 1:22 And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church,

We invite our Buddhist friends to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior. One does not need to engage in tortuous rituals and escape this world through *Nirvana*. God wants us to take responsibility for our sins. “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 2:38). Believe and obey the words of the Apostle Peter and you shall be saved. In baptism one dies to this world and the curse inherited from Adam. Once fulfilled, you will arise with the body of Jesus as your eternal clothing. The Bible declares (see the scriptures below) this new garment of salvation will never experience sorrow or suffering again, but “everlasting joy”. Come to Jesus today, right now!

Isaiah 51:11 *Therefore the redeemed of the LORD shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their head: they shall obtain gladness and joy; and sorrow and mourning shall flee away.*

Isaiah 61:10 *I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels.*