

Religions of the World Part II - Buddhism

It only makes sense that we started off today with Hinduism, as Buddhism is a little bit of an off-shoot of Hinduism.

Now Buddhist beliefs vary quite a bit they are subject to different interpretations.

If you were to ask the same theological question among members of different Buddhist groups, you would probably get slightly different answers, much the same that if you asked a theological question among different Christian denominations.

So I am going to share with you a basic general overview that I think you will find useful as we continue this series on religions of the world.

Buddhism begins with the story of a man named Siddhartha Gautama who was born around 563 BC. He was the sheltered son of a prince. He was sheltered because his father didn't want him to see the sufferings in the world.

Now Siddhartha's family was Hindu and they knew only of the non-personal God. And when Siddhartha as 29 years old he was having yearnings for answers to his questions about life. So he set out from his father's palace on a chariot looking for answers to life, because he couldn't get these answers through his religion.

As he was going, he saw an old man bent over – suffering from old age. And he asks his chariot driver, "Is this the fate of all of us – to get old?" To which the answer was, "yes, we all will get old." To which he felt a lot of anxiety.

Several days later he goes out for another chariot ride and now he sees a man very sick, almost dead, and he asks his chariot driver, "Is this the fate of all of us – to get sick like this?" To which the answer was, "Yes – we all will get sick." To which again, Siddhartha feels great anxiety and despair.

Several days later he goes out for yet another chariot ride and this time there is a funeral procession going by and he looks to his chariot driver and asks him, "Is this the fate of all of us – will all of us die?" To which the answer was, "yes – all of us will die someday." At this point you can almost feel his heart beating almost out of us chest.

He had lived such a sheltered life – he never had to think about these things in this way before.

He goes back to the palace experiencing great anxiety, fear and confusion like never before. He realized that he will suffer and die, his wife, his kids will suffer and die. He became overwhelmed with anxiety.

Many of us have experienced this at least a little before. The first day we look into a mirror and realize that we are getting older; that some day, they will be burying me. This same feeling can strike us at other times as well. My daughter loves to point out that I am starting to get a little grey – believe it or not, I do have a little grey starting up there. And now she like to point out this little bald spot.

Then it hit me – my future grandkids will never know me as the grandpa with a nice thick head of black hair - but more like the grandpa with the thinning grey hair.

This can cause us a little anxiety because we realize that we are getting a little older and we will have to face our own mortality someday.

So Siddhartha was having these feelings for the first time. He just realized that nothing is permanent in this world. it is all wasting away. He was faced with his and his family's future mortality. It had to be overwhelming.

His dad, the prince, saw that he had all of these anxieties and worries building up in him so his dad had a great party – a wonderful celebration for him. But that didn't take away the fear and anxiety.

So one night as his family was sleeping, Siddhartha left behind his family, his wealth, his prosperity - searching for an answer to human suffering. Looking for religious answers that would help remove this anxiety about life from him.

But remember his surroundings and his religion, they were Hindu – they don't believe that God can be known. In his mind, there was no way for him to search out a relationship with God to help him understand these feelings he was having.

He figured that since a wonderful party didn't help, he would try just the opposite. He decided he needed to destroy the wants and desires in himself. Maybe then he won't have the same type of anxiety. He thought that starving his body, almost destroying it, would remove that anxiety. He got to the point he was eating only one grain of rice a day.

Finally, on the verge of starvation, he realized that he still had the same anxiety, the same fears, the same sense of dread.

So he decided that starving wasn't the way and he started eating again and looked for another solution.

The story goes on to tell us that one day he stood under a tree and he started to meditate. He went into a deep trance and during this trance he saw the world like he had never seen it before. Through the visions he had and things he saw, and new insights he gained – when he awakened from his trance, he didn't have the anxiety – didn't have the internal suffering anymore.

He became Enlightened. In the dialect of the region, Pali, the word for enlightened is "Budh" B-U-D-H – Siddhartha had become the Buddha – The Enlightened One.

What did the Buddha learn on that night that alleviated the suffering, and what do Buddhists believe?

The first one is their belief in God. They are the only major religion that is non-theistic. They are not atheistic – they don't say there isn't a god. They simply say that the question of a God is irrelevant for ending human suffering. Buddhists neither deny nor affirm God's existence.

In most forms of the religion, they do not worship the Buddha – but they revere him. They look to him as a guide and example. They hope to reach the kind of enlightenment that he achieved.

Buddhists believe in Noble Truths:

- 1) Life is characterized by suffering. We get sick, feelings get hurt, we have painful experiences.
- 2) Suffering is caused by attachments. Buddhists believe that suffering is not from external sources, but by ourselves. We crave life, so we suffer when we face death. We crave love, so we suffer when love is withdrawn. We crave food, so we suffer when food is taken away.
- 3) We can overcome our attachments. Through detaching ourselves from people and things our suffering ceases – we no longer need to be reborn and enter another life of suffering.

A Buddhist would say that we have an attachment to remaining young, clinging to something that is temporary, and we will experience suffering as we grow old. If we could let go of those cravings and train our mind to see them as non-permanent, we might no longer feel pain – but find peace and joy.

Now, do we separate ourselves from places, things, hopes and desires? Well, according to Buddha, it would be through the fourth Noble Truth called the Holy Eightfold Path:

Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

The first six of these, as in Hinduism, we build up good and bad karma. As Christians, we would agree with these as well.

Now the Buddha did reject many teachings of Hinduism, but some remain the same. For example karma. He believed that if we generate bad karma, we may return to life as an animal – but if we do good, we will be reincarnated at a higher level. Buddhists and Hindus both believe that when we are reincarnated your life force immediately is transferred to a child being conceived in the womb.

Like Hindus, Buddhists want to stop this endless cycle – and Buddhists believe they do so by reaching Enlightenment.

As mentioned earlier, Hindus believe that once they reach that final stage - called Nirvana – they are like a drop of water back into the ocean that is God.

By contrast, Buddhists believe once they reach that state, the journey ends with the extinction of any sense of identity. Their karmic energy simply is united with or dissipated into all other energy – you cease to exist.

There are a lot of things we can take from the Buddhists, especially their emphasis on meditative practices.

There are, obviously, many differences. The first and foremost is God. The Buddha had a picture of God in his mind from his religious surroundings. An impersonal God. So Buddhism believes that if there is a God, he is irrelevant.

But for us, God is the very center of Christianity. The first words of the Bible are, “In the beginning GOD created ...” We believe our soul is not a piece of God but created by God. God is the center of our universe. We are God’s children.

Our faith believes that God does exist and can be known by all of us. God gave us a path as well – not an 8 fold path as the Buddha did, but a 2 fold path as Jesus tells us – to Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul and to love your neighbor as yourself.

We don’t believe that God turns away from our suffering. Actually we believe that God experienced that suffering through Jesus who suffered for our behalf.

As Christians, we don't deny the reality of suffering. In reality, most of us experience similar feelings the Buddha did about life and death. We also don't doubt that controlling our minds can help us calm our anxieties. I would even agree that sometimes our disappointment and suffering are caused by clinging and desire.

But we don't see it as detaching ourselves completely from everything. Jesus tells us to focus first on God and let the other things fall into place.

Evil is in our world. It isn't just because we are attached to things. Tomorrow we celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King shared the following in his eulogy of four little girls who were killed in a church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963: "God is able to bring good out of evil; God takes unmerited suffering and uses it for redemptive purposes."

Our religion is not a detached religion. We know that some of the most profound experiences in our lives involve suffering. God has proven time and time again that he can bring good out of Evil.

Our peace doesn't come from non-attachment, but through our trust in God. I feel the Apostle Paul says this best in Philippians 4: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

I really enjoyed studying these two religions. They both have a lot of beliefs that are attractive. But, for me, at the heart of these two religions, we have either an irrelevant God or an impersonal God. I can't agree with those views. Most of us here have felt God tugging at our hearts, or guiding us down our path in life, or he has been there, calming us in times of need.

We do have a wonderful and loving God – Let's remember to love him back.