

# **MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF KEY CONTRASTS BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY**

**Alex G. Smith**

*(Work in Progress)*

## **Introduction**

Karma, Nirvana, Reincarnation, the Dalai Lama, sand mandalas and the Buddha are well known and commonly used terms even among Christians in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Burgeoning Buddhism increasingly influences the cultures of our global village. In some countries it permeates all from education to environment. In the West “Buddhism in the boardroom” is common. The January 2000 issue of Civilization magazine claims a “Buddha boom” is saturating Western culture. Society and modern business integrate Buddhist practices if not its tenets. Its popularity is enhanced by its celebrity status in Hollywood. People’s identities are tied to it. Buddhist temples sprout like mushrooms in the West and East alike. The variegated mosaic of many varieties of Buddhism opens the door for popular “People’s Buddhism.” Followers of Folk Buddhism now number about one billion worldwide.

### **Contemporary Growth**

This considerable growth of Buddhism in the last half century is quite evident, especially in the West. Some of it rides on the wave of the popularity of

Folk Buddhism. Buddhist Exhibitions, such as the one in Sydney, Australia, in November 2001, focus on introducing people to “this multiple world of Buddha, this sense that Buddhahood is not a being, but it’s a state that exists within us all.” (The Courier Mail, Saturday, November 3, 2001). Buddhism is said to be the fastest growing religion in Australia today.

Some growth also comes from renewed efforts of missionary outreach by Buddhists. In 2001 a new Theravada Buddhist Missionary Training University was opened in Yangon, Myanmar. It is already drawing international students from many lands. In Thailand, the Bangkok Post in July of 2000 and also 2001 featured front cover pictures of mass ordinations of two hundred hilltribesmen entering the monkhood at Wat Benjamabopit in the Dusit district of Bangkok. These events were organized by the Public Welfare Department to promote Buddhism. Last year, a Thai woman was ordained in Sri Lanka into the Buddhist Order.

Growth has also been fostered through building huge, ornate and expensive temples. Malaysia, an Islamic State, now has the largest sitting Buddha in South East Asia. It was opened recently at Wat Machimmaram in Tumpat in the Eastern State of Kelantan (Bangkok Post, September 11, 2001). Around this same time, Muslim Taliban in Afghanistan were destroying two towering ancient Buddhist statues, while nearby Tajikistan, also an Islamic land, restored a huge terra cotta figure of a reclining “Buddha in Nirvana” (The Oregonian, Tuesday, March 27, 2001 / Wednesday, April 4, 2001). Last year while traveling about two hours South of Kunming, Yunnan, I observed massive

construction of a large Buddhist complex of three tiers up a mountainside. In the Buddhist State of Myanmar two thousand of the five thousand pagodas around ancient Pagan have been refurbished in recent years. On August 18, 2001,” the largest Buddhist temple outside Asia - the Great Stupa of Dharmakaya which Liberates Upon Seeing” was consecrated at the Rocky Mountain Shambhala Center in Red Feather Lakes, Colorado, USA, just two hours from Denver. This stupa commemorates the resting place of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the Tibetan meditation master and the father of Shambhala Buddhism. He was a powerful figure in spreading that religion in the Western World, first in Britain and later in North America. He also developed a network of 150 meditation centers around the world (The Economist, August 18, 2001).

Another significant movement into Buddhism in the last forty-five years occurred primarily in the four Indian states of Maharashtra, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. This is largely a New Buddhist movement in which ten million Dalit low caste Hindus have turned en mass to Buddhism. The movement is still growing. It was sparked by their leader, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a lawyer, statesman, activist and one of the drafters of India’s Constitution following its Independence from Britain. He is of the Dalit, or untouchable caste, and sparked this emancipation movement around 1956 by becoming a Buddhist just a few months before his death. (For details check [www.lclark.edu/~canwell/thali](http://www.lclark.edu/~canwell/thali) )

In China, many youth and young professionals can be seen making offerings of candles and incense sticks as they visit the Buddhist shrines

throughout the Peoples Republic of China. Possibly some of this overall growth of Buddhism is riding on the wave of the new spirituality.

### **Concerns for the Church**

Not only does this modern expansion of Buddhism raise difficulties for the traditional Buddhist hierarchy, but it also causes concerns for the Church. First is the question as to why many churches have failed to reach out effectively to droves of people experimenting with a new spirituality in this Post Modern Era.

Furthermore, some from the Christian camp are now calling themselves “Jesus Buddhists.” As Terry Muck pointed out, People’s Buddhism, particularly in the West, with its “emphasis on individual practice has led to a kind of eclectic spirituality that co-mingles Buddhist practice with Christian, Jewish and even Sufi forms of spirituality.” (Missiology: An International Review, Vol. XXVII No.1, January 2000, pg. 42.) Muck points out that some of these Buddhist-Christians use forms of Buddhist meditation as they worship in Christian churches.

Christian-Buddhists may attend Christian churches to embrace certain aspects of Christianity without abandoning Buddhism. Nowadays some denominations and churches in the USA are holding Christian-Buddhist seminars in Sunday School classes in their facilities. Some churches have been converted into Buddhist temples. “This interpenetration of Buddhism and Christianity” is what Arnold Toynbee predicted would mark the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This new fact

of pluralism raises tensions among traditional churches and theologians as the growing trend of folk religion, including eclectic folk Christianity, increases.

Third, many Christians are confused with such a mixture, lacking clarity of understanding of either true Buddhism or of real Christianity. Many terms used in both seem similar, whereas in fact when these terms are carefully defined, there is considerable discrepancy in meaning. Of grave concern is the question, "What attitudes should Christians have towards Buddhists and those of other faiths?" In the Spirit of Christ Christians should exhibit a merciful attitude, offer a loving apologetic, and yet humbly without shame maintain their biblical beliefs. In Christianity Among the Religions of the World Arnold Toynbee makes a crucial point suggesting "that we can have conviction without fanaticism, we can have belief and action without arrogance or self-centeredness or pride." (1957:110)

Lastly, the vital issue is communication. Can the church effectively communicate with Buddhists - whether in Asia, or in their own back yards? This is a real challenge, particularly for the Asian church, which is usually a tiny Christian pool in a huge majority Buddhist pond. More attention should be given to developing indigenous drama and music appropriate to those cultures, both for evangelism and for worship. Significant symbols and cultural festivals need also to be analyzed and addressed and, where appropriate, adequate functional substitutes should be developed. Above all, in Buddhist Asia, the mode of teaching, preaching and communicating should focus much more on the use of story telling, parables and riddles. Local drama and music are also valuable. A potent illustration of the power of this occurred two years ago when the Muang

Thai Church did an indigenous musical presentation adapted from Thai culture for a group of overseas people, myself Included. Afterwards one of the Thai Buddhist waiters who served our tables expressed his feelings: “As I listened the hairs on my arms stood up. I felt that music very deep down inside of me.”

## **Context of History**

A review of some selected broad strokes from history may help to understand the development of Buddhism, stemming from its Hindu roots. (Carling 1985) Around 1525 B.C. Aryans from Central Asia invaded and migrated throughout the Indus Valley during the beginning of the Verdic Age in India. (Around the same time the Hittites sacked Babylon and the Shang Dynasty ruled in China). By 1400 B.C. Hinduism had taken root in India. The Rig Veda was written in 1300 B.C., just before the Exodus of Israel from Egypt occurred.

Some key concepts developed in Hinduism became foundational to Buddhism later. In 900 B.C. the principle of Karma was developed and the Upanishads were written. By 800 B.C. the concept of “a single world spirit of Brahman” was prevalent. This Monistic concept became integral to many Eastern religions.

While Daniel, the Israelite prince, was in early exile in a palace in Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar, Siddharta Gautama was born as a Prince in a palace of Northern India. About forty years later, Gautama found Enlightenment in 525 B.C. His new religion of Buddhism became heavily influenced by the

parent beliefs of Hinduism. He borrowed Karma, adapted Transmigration of soul to become Reincarnation, and espoused Monistic ideas. He also rejected all gods, spiritual entities, and the Caste system.

Other Eastern religions arose around this same time. Later they received interaction with and influence from Buddhism. The Confucian tradition of morality and duty had already begun in 595 B.C., with Taoism following about 100 years later.

By 295 B.C. Buddhism had entered China. Shortly afterwards Emperor Asoka of India consolidated his vast conquests, and simultaneously sent Buddhist missionary priests throughout the kingdom, bringing that religion to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and spreading it eastwards into South East Asia.

Around 195 B.C. the Epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata arose. The Hindu poem Bhagavad Gita was written soon after. By about 95 B.C. India had developed a legal code, and the earlier class system instituted in 700 B.C., had become an entrenched Caste system. Buddhism was still a significant influence throughout the Indian sub-continent.

Within a decade or so of Christ's birth, Buddha had become deified in the East. By then Buddhist temples and sculptures were prevalent. Around 95 A.D. a new thrust of Buddhism into Central Asia and China occurred.

One hundred years later, while Buddhism was flourishing throughout much of Asia, it was in decline in India. Towards the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. the Golden Age of Hinduism arose. Hinduism continued to reclaim India over the next millennium.

Significantly, after the first few centuries of the early entrance of Christianity into India, in 495 A.D. several key new Hindu gods arose: notably Brahma (creator), Vishnu (preserver), Shiva (destroyer), and Parati (Shiva's wife). Then in 605 A.D., Khrisna, the incarnation of Vishnu, arrived on the scene, followed by multitudes of other gods and heroes.

By 700 A.D. the Buddhist kingdoms of Srivihaya in Indonesia, and the Khmer kingdom of Cambodia were in full swing. About that time, Buddhism also spread into Nepal and Tibet. In the 7<sup>th</sup> Century A.D., the Islamic religion arose and by early 8<sup>th</sup> Century invaded Northern India from Arabia, introducing Islam to India. The first Muslim ruler in India was established soon after. By 1200, Islam had started to replace Buddhism in Sumatra and Java, Indonesia.

Through the colonial periods, Asian religions continued to encounter Christianity, but remained largely entrenched, and relatively unaffected by it. The advance of Catholic Missions in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries saw only moderate response. The modern Protestant missionary movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century also encountered small increases for the Church in Asia. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, increased growth of Christianity occurred, but was still quite minimal among most Buddhist peoples, with the notable exception of Korea, and later, China.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century through the efforts of Colonel H.S. Olcott, along with Madam Blavatsky, a Buddhist renewal was sparked in Ceylon. This also influenced the strengthening of Buddhism throughout South East Asia.

In 1891 Olcott formulated fourteen "Fundamental Buddhistic Beliefs." Later Christmas Humphreys developed "Twelve Principles of Buddhism" in 1945.



These provided a foundational platform for agreement among all the Buddhist sects: Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana or Tibetan forms.

## **Concepts in Contrast**

Significant differences in foundational beliefs and teachings exist between Buddhism and Christianity. In other ways there are many similarities which have been observed and explored by writers elsewhere. In today's climate of eclectic choices and unfortunate ignorance of the fundamental teachings of these great religions, a chance to revisit them is warranted. Nine key contrasting elements are summarized below:

1. Source of Creation: Impersonal Karma or Personal God
2. Nature of Things: The Universe- transitory illusion or concrete reality.
3. Nature of Christ: Human only or God-man
4. Nature of Humans: No human soul or Eternal Soul/Spirit
5. Nature of Sin: Karmic consequences or Rebellion against the Holy God
6. Source of Salvation: Self or God
7. Provision of Redemption: Earned Merit or Christ's Substitution
8. Basis for Spiritual Life: Reincarnation or Regeneration
9. Destiny and Finality: Nirvana or Eternal life

### **1. Source of Creation: Impersonal Karma or Personal God.**

Buddhism has little specific teaching on creation. It primarily accepts an evolutionary viewpoint, if any. The universe resulted from Karma, a kind of cycle of cause and effect. In his helpful [What Buddhists Believe](#), Dr. K. Sri

Dhammananda, one of the leading Buddhist scholars of today, writes: “According to Buddha, it is inconceivable to find a first cause for life or anything else. For in common experience, the cause becomes the effect and the effect becomes the cause. In the circle of cause and effect, a first cause is incomprehensible.” He points out therefore that “Buddhism does not pay much attention to theories and beliefs about the origin of the world.” (1998: 113-114)

So the Christian God, the self-existent One, as personal Creator of the universes and of all things is inconceivable to Buddhists. Another leading Buddhist authority, Bhikkhu Buddhadasa Indapanno in his Christianity and Buddhism lectures equated God with impersonal Karma, thus rejecting God’s eternal personality and His purposeful relation to His created world. Indapanno argues that if God is the cause of all things then He must be equated with Karma. (1967:66-67) Instead of the Creator God being separate from and outside of His creation, Buddhists take a Monistic view that espouses Karma and all things as parts of creation itself.

Indapanno also proposed a second view of God, by equating Him with “avijja”, meaning lack of knowledge or ignorance. He argues that if God caused all things to exist, then He is the cause of suffering. In Buddhist views, suffering is caused by ignorance of the Four Noble Truths of the enlightened Buddha.

The Christian viewpoint of a supreme personal Creator God of holy character, infinite grace and eternal being, is found in Scripture from Genesis through Revelation. Genesis 1:1 declares “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth....” See also Revelation 10:6. Then, towards the end of

the Bible, an angel is sent to proclaim an eternal gospel to all nations and peoples on the earth saying, “Fear God and bring Him glory...and worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of water.” (Rev. 4:11)

The key issue at stake is the very existence of God. My interaction with students in Asia has often started by their challenge, “You show us God and then we will believe.”

I immediately ask for clarification, “By that do you mean that if you cannot see things, they do not exist?” Following the students affirmation, I then ask them to explain to me what the scent of a rose looks like. Then I encourage them to stop breathing, because the air they depend on cannot be seen, so does not exist! I ask, “Please explain to me what electricity actually looks like.” They usually describe the power poles and the electric lines, not the electricity, which is invisible. Finally, I ask them if they’ve ever seen a ghost or spirit. Their answer frequently is, “Well, no. But I have a friend who did.” Then I affirm that I believe in the spirits, both the demons and the Holy Spirit of God, who is the Creator of all. Usually by this, they realize that there are things that do exist though they cannot be seen.

A couple of missiological implications arise here. First, in approaching Buddhists, we need to be aware that the concept of God is very difficult for them to grasp. Often our evangelism starts with John 3:16 or the Four Laws, both of which start with the word “God”. We encourage people to accept Jesus without the context of the Creator God who sent Him.

Second, new believers need to be taught in terms that they can comprehend.

the theology of God, and His holy character, His powerful nature and His high attributes.

One of the most exciting indigenous contextualizations of the Person and power of God, especially showing Jesus as God, was produced in a circle of paintings created by a Sherpa in Nepal. The Buddhist cycle of life is portrayed, but the resurrected Christ is seen breaking out of that cycle of life. Inside that cycle are panels or sections of painted scenes portraying the miracles and key events in the life of Christ. Right in the center of the whole was a smaller circle, showing His power over nature. Christ is walking on the water in the midst of the storm. That is a powerful expression of contextualizing the all-powerful God of Creation. Unfortunately when this was printed as a poster well-meaning missionaries replaced that small central circle with a drawing of the cross, although the crucifixion scene was already in one of the panel pictures. Thus, the powerful Creator was sadly and inadvertently dismissed from the indigenous portrait of the God-Man.

## **2. Nature of Things: The Universe – transitory illusion, or concrete reality.**

The notable scholar Dr. Dhammananda summarizes Buddhist thinking on the state of the universe (1998: 86-87):

- As creation is an empty void of nothingness, so the nature of the universe and all within it is illusionary, and constantly changing.

- “The Buddha described the world as unending flux of becoming. All is changeable, continuous transformation, ceaseless mutation, and a moving stream. Everything exists from moment to moment. Everything is a recurring rotation of coming into being and then passing out of existence... life is one continuous movement of change towards death.
- “Nothing on earth partakes of the character of absolute reality.” By his law of impermanency “the Buddha” denies the existence of eternal substances.
- Both matter and spirit are regarded as “false abstractions” in Buddhism. “What exists is changeable, and what is not changeable does not exist.”
- All material forms, including human beings, animals and all gods – everything - is subject to the law of impermanency”. All vanishes away. Even perception is a mirage.

Within Christian cult circles are some mind science groups, such as Christian Scientists, who believe that disease, sin and death have no real existence, and are purely caused by mental error. Traditional Christians would hold to a view of a created material world and real universes, comprised of provable material elements and forces that make them up. They also believe in absolutes, eternal laws and truth, as well as things of substance and forces that are measurable scientifically.

I have often handed my wristwatch to my Buddhist friends during the discussion of the transitory illusion and changeable nature of all things. First, I suggest that this watch had no creator, it just came into being by itself. “That is

impossible,” they reply. Second, I ask them to handle it and see if it really works. They feel it, look at it and check it out. Third, I ask them if they understand the value of the watch, in terms of its usefulness. Finally, I remind them how important it is to care for the watch and use it wisely. Each of these items helps in discussing the nature of all things. Natural Revelation can also be useful in discussing the beauty of the created world, as well as its usefulness and value.

The conclusion of King Solomon in Ecclesiastes is helpful. Referring to death, Solomon says, “The dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. ‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the preacher. ‘All is vanity.’” (Ecclesiastes 12:7-8) His vital summary of this matter is potent: “The conclusion, when all has been heard, is ‘Fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.’” (12:13,14)

There are two issues for application concerning Nature. First, since many things in life are intangible and transient, humans should be careful not to be attached to the material world. On that point we can agree with the Buddhists.

A second missiological application relates to the possible connection for both Christians and Buddhists in the area of Ecology. Buddhists are careful about protecting all forms of life, though in practice they have done little better than Christians in exploiting God’s resources. Therefore working together in ecological projects, such as reforestation, cleaning up pollution and caring for the water are most admirable. In China, the government encourages Christians as good members of society to be involved in such activities. However, it is

important to remember that in the viewpoint that Buddhists hold are concepts of Monism here ,which is very different from the Christian Creationist view. Buddhists see only one ultimate substance in which all things are a dependent part. The Christians see the independent units of God's creation. The Lord said in Genesis 1 and 2 that He created each species to reproduce "after their kind." These differing viewpoints should not mitigate against Christians working with Buddhists in harmonious ecological projects.

### **3. Nature of Christ: Human only or God-man**

As I frequently discussed Christ with Thai-Buddhists, I often asked them the question, "Who do you think Jesus really is?" Common responses were "a good man,"- "the founder of the Christian religion,"- "a wonderful prophet,"- "a great leader like Buddha," or surprisingly, "the younger brother of Buddha." Thus Buddhists view Jesus only from the human side, not the divine. None of these responses ascribe any deity to Christ. In Jesus' day Peter responded to the same question, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16)

Among the Buryiat people of Mongolia and Siberia, is an old oral legend. Its source probably pre-dates the entrance of Buddhism among them, but has been influenced by it also. The Buryiat legend says that their god of light, called Tenger, looked down on the world and saw a great war going on between the East and the West. So, he sent Gesar, his beloved son, down to set the people free and to rescue humanity. King Gesar was born as a man, not a god, in a simple teepee. King Gesar did not use any of the weapons of heaven on the enemies of his people because he did not believe in killing. He achieved his

goals by other means (Becker 1992). This old Buryiat epic has many varieties of ending: some Buddhistic, some Shamanistic, others political. From the Buddhist viewpoint, of course, this King could only be human. (See Jasper Becker, The Lost Country, Mongolia Revealed, 1992)

But the Apostle Paul describes the Lord Jesus Christ as the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, the “creator of all things”, seen or unseen, and the One who pre-existed all things which are held together through Him. (Colossians 1:13-20)

The missiological implications of Buddhists viewing Christ as being human only, calls Christians to have great care and diligence in portraying Him more accurately during evangelism and discipling. True, we should emphasize the fact that He was very human, partaking of common suffering, such as temptation, and eventually the ultimate pain on the cross of death, but we must also teach and recognize Him as the God-man, the pre-existing One, creator of all, incarnated through the virgin birth, and without sin or Karma, qualifying Him to be the true Redeemer of mankind. This careful teaching of the nature and character of Christ, not only from the human side, but His divine side, is essential especially for seekers and new believers.

#### **4. Nature of Humans: No human soul or Eternal Soul/Spirit**

One of the oldest and most fundamental teachings of the Buddha concerns the Anatta doctrine. Anatta could be translated “ No-soul, No-Ego, No-Self or soullessness”. There is nothing eternal or unchangeable in humans. Buddhists believe there is no eternal ego-entity that exists in humans past death.



Dr. Dhammananda writes, “The Buddha taught that what we conceive as something eternal within us, is merely a combination of physical and mental aggregates or forces.” These comprise five Khandhas: body or matter, sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness. These forces are constantly in a state of “flux of momentary change”. Together they are the component forces “making up the psycho-physical life”. When the Buddha analyzed this, “He found only these five aggregates or forces. He did not find any eternal soul.” In the Mahayan School of Buddhism the Anatta doctrine is known as Sunyata or voidness. Buddha rejected the two concepts of Soul or Self, and the Creator God or eternal Spirit. (1998: 117-119)

In his Buddhism and the Claims of Christ, Dr. D.T. Niles gives excellent descriptions of understanding the Buddhist concepts. He clarifies the basic Buddhist doctrines of annicca (impermanence or transitoriness), anatta (soullessness or absence of self) and dukkha (sorrow, suffering). He writes:

“If we do not start with God we shall not end with Him, and when we start with Him, we do not end with the doctrines of annicca, anatta and dukkha.

The existence of God means the existence of an order of life, which is eternal – nicca (permanence). It means that there is postulated for the soul – natta – an identity which is guarded by God’s sovereignty, and that sorrow – dukkha – is seen to consist, not so much in the transitoriness of things, as in the perverseness of our wills, which seeks these things instead of the things that are eternal. The circle of the Christian faith can thus be described as that which starting with God leads man to the realization that God alone affords the most adequate base for a most meaningful explanation of life’s most significant facts.” (1967:27)

The classical Buddhist view of No-soul/spirit has produced some disagreement within the Buddhist priesthood. There are those that espouse some form of soul entity. In the last couple of years one of these groups at Wat

Dhammakaya in Bangkok was severely censored for “corrupting the doctrine and discipline of Theravada Buddhism.” Their teaching that “Nirvana is a permanent heaven, thus possessing Atta, or self” was judged to be negating the teachings of Buddha. Other charges proscribed their “commercialization of Buddhism, monk’s misconduct, and opaque business investments.” (Bangkok Post February 19, 1999)

Buddhists seem to have a spiritual hunger, recognized in their dedicated seeking after release from suffering, and by their great efforts in doing good works and making merit. Yet their Khandhas disintegrate at death, and no entity of self-soul, self-ego or self-spirit carries on into the next reincarnation. It seems, therefore, that since no personality of soul is reincarnated, the only thing that really is recycled is the accumulated Karma from past and present lives.

From the biblical perspective the creation of humans with soul or spirit indicates the high value and the great dignity that the Creator put on human beings, made in the *Imagio Deo*.

Here is another significant difference that Christians should observe. They need to treat their Buddhist neighbors and associates with the same human dignity and value as those created in that image of God. This will especially affect our attitudes and approaches to Buddhist peoples when relating to them or while presenting Christ to them humbly, meekly and respectably.

## **5. Nature of Sin: Karmic consequences or Rebellion against the Holy God**

The basic five laws or Sila that Buddhists commonly follow are often practiced only occasionally by many lay persons. I have often heard my Buddhist friends say, “Well, I followed the five laws today, being perfect in thought, word and deed.” But what about their overcoming their failures during the other 364 days of the year? There is no way to remit them.

I remember meeting one fine Buddhist woman in North Thailand who said, “I have never sinned.” Primarily when Buddhists say this they mean that they have not killed life. From the Buddhist viewpoint, man is neither sinful by nature nor seen to be in rebellion against God. “ In each human is a vast store of good as well as evil.” Dr. Dhammananda writes, “According to Buddhism, there is no such thing as sin as explained by other religions. To the Buddhists sin is unskillful or unwholesome action – *Akusala, Kamma*, which creates *Papa* – the downfall of man. The wicked man is an ignorant man. He needs instruction more than he needs punishment and condemnation. He is not regarded as violating God’s will or as a person who must beg for divine mercy and forgiveness. He needs only guidance for his enlightenment.” (1998: 183) The biblical teaching of the Fall of humankind whereby humans are sinful by nature and therefore produce sinful actions, words and deeds is thereby rejected by Buddhists. To Buddhists there is no accountability to any higher power, or to a Creator God. One is only accountable to oneself and one’s own Karma, which will affect future existences through any infractions of Sila or other laws.

In April 1977 I had the privilege to interview an elderly Thai Pastor in Chiang Mai, not long before he died. Reverend Boomee Rungruangwongs shared with me that he frequently cited the Buddhist Sila law in talking with his friends, to convict them of their sin and failure. Many admitted they had not kept even the five Sila, so to accept that they felt like sinners was no problem. Of course, biblical sin is much deeper than that. Significantly, there is a close parallel of the five Sila to the last five commandments of the Decalogue. Equally significant in Buddhism, there are no laws equivalent to the first five commandments which primarily focus on man's relationship to God.

Among folk Buddhists the feeling of sinfulness or failure is not hard to discover. Primarily this is produced by the high level of the fear of death and of being consigned to one of the seven Buddhist Hells. These are indeed most graphically and frighteningly portrayed, particularly in Mahayana Buddhism.

In a survey of many Christian Thai who came from Buddhist backgrounds, my research indicated that the fear of going to Hell was a high factor in their accepting the redemption that was offered in Christ Jesus - equal to 22.6% of them. (1977: 172-173) The influence of their Buddhist concepts of Hell prepared them to seek salvation in the Gospel, even though missionaries had done little preaching of "fire and brimstone" to them.

## **6. Source of Salvation: Self or God**

The first of the Twelve Principles of Buddhism, summarized by Christmas Humphreys sets the stage for all Buddhist practice: "Self-salvation is for any man the immediate task." Professor Dhammananda quotes "Each and every person

must make the effort to train and purify himself toward attaining his own salvation by following the guidance given by the Buddha.” (1998:19) Reaching Nirvana relies on his own efforts alone, causing the Buddhist to feel that both his present life and future lives depend completely on himself alone. “One’s self, indeed, is one’s saviour, what other saviour should there be?” (Dhammapada 166) In it Buddhists must rely entirely on themselves, not on any external god, saviour, or even the Buddha. One must overcome one’s own accumulated Karma himself *alone*.

In contrast, the Christian source of salvation is God alone. Works, merit, or personal goodness cannot abrogate sin, unrighteousness or wickedness. The Christian source of salvation is in God, and through His grace and unmerited favor it is freely given. “For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9) Succinctly stated, “The Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world.” (I John 4:14)

The Buddha taught that one must depend only on oneself. I often discuss this with my Buddhist friends. A brand new baby just born should therefore be taught to depend only on itself, with no help from mother, father, relatives, medical personnel, or anyone. “But that would be disastrous,” my friends say, “The baby will die.” I ask the Thai farmer, “Do you only depend on yourself?” “Of course,” he replies. “Then you have no need of the family to help in the planting? Or your friends to assist in the harvesting? Or the rice-millers to mill your grain? Or the merchant middle man to market your rice?” To those in financial need

and crisis, I ask, “Why do you go to the bank, or to your friends and relatives to borrow money? Is that not depending on others, instead of only on yourself?” Of course, in reality, these are normal circumstances that show us that it is impossible in life just to depend only on ones self.

Interestingly there is a hope among Buddhists about a future savior to come. Just before he passed away, the Buddha spoke to Ananda about a future Buddha known as Maitreya, saying, “I am not the first Buddhist to come on earth, nor shall I be the last. In due time, another Buddha will arise in this world, a Holy One, a Supremely Enlightened One, endowed with wisdom, in conduct auspicious, knowing the universe, an incomparable leader of men, a master of devas and men. He will reveal to you the same Eternal Truths which I have taught you. He will proclaim a religious life, wholly perfect and pure; such as I now proclaim.” (Dhammananda 1998: 45-46) Other words for this future saviour include Sian or Phra See An and Phra Pho Thi Sat, as well as Phra Sri Areya Maitreya. In Inta Chanthavongsouk’s booklet Buddha’s Prophecy of the Messiah he discusses this context and applies it to Christ the Messiah. Referring to the Tripitok Buddhist Scriptures, Inta describes the interview between Brahman and the Buddha, who said, “In the Saviour who will come to save the world, you will see puncture wounds like a wheel in the palms of his hands, and the bottom of his feet. In his side there is the mark of a stab wound, and his forehead is full of scars. (1999:25)

The Buddhist monk’s response in a chant to the devoted ones offering food early in the morning include “May all the charities you have done lift you up

to heaven. May you be filled with merit until you see the face of *Sian* (Messiah).” (Chanthavongsouk 1999: 36) Professor Dhammananda summarizes a further interesting belief of Buddhists who follow the meritorious deeds of the committed religious life. They “will have a chance to be reborn as human beings in the time of Maitreya Buddha, and will obtain Nibbana identical with that of Gautama Buddha.” (1998: 46) In Buddhism Through Christian Eyes I note this hope of the Maitreya Buddha which seemed to be particularly alive a century ago among the Lao people of Northern Thailand and Laos. (Smith 2001:15-18)

While some Christians see significant points of contact in this concept, and some Buddhists have studied it in relation to Christ, more discussion is needed. Many Buddhists would see Christ as a Buddha. Others would not accept Him as Maitreya Buddha, because they claim this is still the age of Gautama Buddha, and that Maitreya Buddha is still to come. In recent years some Buddhists have been teaching that the next Buddha will be a woman, and this has enhanced the popularity of Kwan Yin cult, although originally Kwan Yin was a male figure adopted from India.

## **7. Provision of Redemption: Earned Merit or Christ’s**

### **Substitution**

In Buddhist terms it is already noted that you are on your own. Your salvation depends entirely on yourself through thousands of reincarnations, hopefully working yourself up out of your Karma into achieving the perfection of Nirvana. No one can substitute for you. That is inconceivable. Technically no one can provide merit for you. In Mahayana Buddhism, however, the

Bodhisattvas are believed to have a way of helping by delaying their entry in Nirvana thus postponing their release from Samsara.

God's provision of redemption is in Christ our substitute, the one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. He is the Redeemer who shed His blood for the salvation of mankind.

As already stated, substitution is impossible and inconceivable to the Buddhist mind. However, I have discovered a few key illustrations within Thai history and legend that help lay a foundation for understanding the possibility of substitution. First, in Chiang Mai, North Thailand, there is a Chedi dedicated to Pi Ang near the bank of the river. Legend says that the king from the South once attacked the king of Chiang Mai. Not wanting to destroy the city, the two kings met and agreed that a contest would be held. One man each from North and South would participate in a diving contest to see who could remain under the water the longest. If the North won, Chiang Mai would be left alone. But if the South's representative won, then the city would capitulate to the forces of the South. Uncle Pi Ang volunteered for the North. The contest was held. After several long minutes the South's representative emerged, gasping for breath. The city was saved. But Uncle Pi Ang was nowhere to be found. The king sent divers in to discover what had happened. They found that Pi Ang had tied his leg to a submerged branch of a tree, and had literally given his life to save his beloved city.

The second key historical incident from the Ayuthaya Period of Thailand is found in most school books. The Burmese had attacked the old Thai capital, and



the Thai monarch came to fight the enemy. Unbeknown to the Thai king, his favorite Queen, Phra Nang Siriyothai, disguised herself as a warrior and rode out to the battle. At one stage the Burmese king was gaining the advantage over the Thai king and was about to cut him down. The Queen saw the danger and deliberately drove her elephant between the Burmese king and her Thai husband. She consequently was slain by the Burmese, but the Thai king escaped. In honor of her bravery and sacrifice the king built a special pagoda for her. It is still a busy tourist attraction to this day. In early 2002 a Thai film that had just been made about this heroine of Thai history was released. The Queen gave her life as a substitute for her royal husband.

A third illustration of substitution and grace usually occurs on the birthday of His Majesty, the King of Thailand. On that day the King often remits the sentences of certain criminals who are then allowed to go free. They are saved by His mercy and grace extended to them without paying the full penalty for their crimes, though condemned by the law.

These illustrations are good stepping- stones toward making the possibility of Christ's substitution conceivable to the Buddhist's mind.

Christian salvation is like a gift freely offered. The step of faith and acceptance appropriates that gift. Buddhists reject such a concept. In What Buddhists Believe, Dr. Dhammananda writes, "Faith in the theistic sense is not found in Buddhism because of its emphasis on understanding. Theistic faith is a drug for the emotional mind and demands belief in things which cannot be

known. Knowledge destroys faith and faith destroys itself when a mysterious belief is examined under the daylight of reason.” (1998: 197)

In the film “Indiana Jones” Harrison Ford portrays taking “a step of faith” while seeking the Holy Grail. Confronted with a seemingly impossible chasm that impedes his advance he remembers the word of faith from Scripture, and in obedience stepping forward into the air finds an invisible way by which he crosses the frightening chasm.

One of my South American friends once told me of a huge Condor that was captured in one of the villages. It had been hurt. The villagers decided to tie it to a stake in the middle of the square, so that everyone could observe it. After some time the huge bird seemed to be healed. Convicted about holding one of God’s beautiful creatures in captivity, the villagers decided to release the Condor. They untied the cord binding its leg to the stake. For weeks the Condor had walked in a circle at the extreme extension of that cord. It continued to walk around the stake as usual for quite some time, even though it had been freed. Eventually the Condor took some steps of faith beyond its formerly bounded circle. Seeing one of its fellows flying high above the mountain, it began to flap its wings. It was soon soaring high above the mountain.

## **8. Basis for Spiritual Life: Reincarnation, or Regeneration**

In Buddhism, Karma is the iron law from which there is no escape. Bad Karma might be equated with Sin. A common Buddhist’s expression is, “Do good, get good. Do evil, get evil.” During the discussion of Brahman with the Buddha on how men might save themselves from sin, the Buddha repeatedly

responded, “Even though you give alms, observe the five commandments governing everyone, the eight commandments governing a fervent Buddhist, and the 227 commandments governing the conduct of a bonze (a high Buddhist official), join your hands in prayer a billion times, and meditate five times a day, you will not be saved. Even if you do these things every day, you will only receive merit equal to one eighth of a split hair.” (1999: 24-25) This shows the difficulty of overcoming Karma, and therefore the necessity of endless reincarnation. The self-reliance and self-deliverance of Buddhists seems to be a very long road indeed before salvation is found.

In contrast, there is the instant regeneration available through Christ, and the total forgiveness for accumulated sins of the past. Accepting His vicarious atonement for us gives present peace and hope for the future. For spiritual growth, the Buddhist must depend only on himself. For Christians, that dependence is only on Christ. Here is another seemingly irreconcilable contrast which would make it truly impossible to be either a Buddhist-Christian, or a Christian-Buddhist.

## **9. Destiny and Finality: Nirvana or Eternal Life**

All Buddhists obviously believe in life after death through the process of reincarnation caused by Karma. They also strive for Nirvana, which is a most complex and difficult concept to grasp. Earlier definitions of Nirvana tended toward an extinction. Many scholars indicated that this is not entirely accurate. In his discussion of Nirvana / Nibbana, Christmas Humphreys in Buddhism writes that it “means to the Theravardin the dying out of the three fires of Greed, Anger

and Illusion. It is negatively expressed, being the extinction of undesirable qualities.” (1958: 157) Nirvana “is the end of woe. It is logically inexpressible.”... Nirvana “is the extinction of the not-Self in the completion of the Self.” (1958:127- 128) In the Mahayana viewpoint emphasis is laid on the Self to be obtained, rather than the Not-Self to be stamped out.” So Nirvana “is not the goal of escapism, a refuge from the turning Wheel; it is the Wheel.” (1958: 157) Professor Dhammananda says this final goal of Buddhism “is quite unexplainable, and quite indefinable.” It is not nothingness or extinction, nor is it paradise. It is not a place, but is more like a state or experience. “Nibbana is a supra-mundane state of unalloyed happiness.” It is “an end of the craving which caused all the sufferings.” It is “the extinction of those relative physical and mental sources.” (1998: 103-105) This is the goal of Buddhism - a kind of extinction cum nothingness “consciousness”.

Nor is there any resurrection from this state. “Buddhists do not believe that one day someone will come and awaken the departed persons spirits from their graveyards or the ashes from their urns, and decide who should go to heaven and who should go to hell.” (1998:176).

While Buddhists’ finality and destiny are epitomized in Nirvana, a kind of cessation of existence, the Christian’s destiny is everlasting life with the added anticipation of the resurrection. In Buddhism, no one is responsible or accountable to an external higher being. In Christianity we are accountable to God, before whom we shall all stand.

By way of contrast, “In Buddhism there is no personal judge either to condemn or to reward, but only the working of an impersonal moral causation and natural law.” (1998: 266) Again, here are a number of irreconcilable differences between Christianity and Buddhism. The Buddha rejected both extremes of eternalism and nihilism. (1998:111)

While Buddhists do not accept the Christian concepts of heaven and hell as eternal, they do believe there are heavens and hells - not only beyond this world, but also in this very world itself. But these are only temporary states or places where, on one hand, “those who have done good deeds experience more sensual pleasures for a longer period,” and “those evildoers experience more physical and mental suffering.” (Dhammananda1998: 303-304) These temporary states are therefore only part of the process of *Samsara* on the way to final Nirvana.

## **CONCLUSION**

These two systems of salvation are poles apart. Since their beliefs are diametrically opposed they seem irreconcilable, without destroying the foundational premises of each. These differences are significant and pose difficult missiological challenges.

Three suggestions for serious concentration and contemplation are proposed. First, a strong focus on the ultimates or end goals of each should be considered. In 1981 Dr Ninian Smart’s Beyond Ideology: Religion and the Future of Western Civilization already suggested that if they are to talk at all Christians and Buddhists “must talk about ultimates.” (Neill 1984:157) The goal of peaceful

bliss and finality rests in God for Christians and Nirvana for Buddhists. But how real is the possibility of reconciliation between the two?

Second, more study and discussion should be undertaken on enlightenment. This certainly speaks of the quest in seeking after truth, understanding it and especially acting upon it in both religions, though from differing sources. The “eyes of understanding being enlightened” is an intriguing focus as seen for instance in Psalms 19:8 and Ephesians 1:8. Buddhists are working towards ending Karma, erasing desire and passion, evading suffering, escaping endless rebirth and exiting to nirvana – all by enlightenment.

Third, Christians must be serious about expressing a life of love, not just about witnessing to their faith. They can do so by practicing being exemplary models of genuine concern, proclaiming this through their lives in meekness and humility, providing an understanding of God’s love by showing true gentle kindness, and by expressing with sensitivity the power of the Spirit of Christ who indwells them to those who differ in their belief orientation.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

BECKER, Jasper

1992 *The Lost Country, Mongolia Revealed.*

CARLING, R.H.

1985 *The World History Chart.* Vienna, VA, International Timeline Inc.

CHANTHAVONGSOUK, Inta

1999 *Buddha's Prophecy of the Messiah.* La Mirada, CA, The Lao Conference of Churches.

DHAMMANANDA, K. Sri

1998 *What Buddhists Believe.* Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Buddhist Missionary Society.

HUMPHREYS, Christmas

1958 *Buddhism.* London, Penguin Books.

INDAPANNO, Bhikkhu Buddhadasa

1967 *Christianity and Buddhism.* Bangkok, Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lectures, fifth Series.

MUCK, Terry C.

1999 "Missiological Issues in the Encounter with Emerging Buddhism," *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1.

NEILL, Stephen

1984 *Christian Faith and other Faiths.* Downers Grove, IL, IVF Press.

NILES, D. T.

1967 *Buddhism and the Claims of Christ.* Richmond, VA, John Knox Press.

SMART, Ninian

1981 *Beyond Ideology: Religion and the Future of Western Civilisation.* London.

SMITH, Alex

1977 *Strategy to Multiply Rural Churches (A Central Thailand Case Study).* Bangkok: OMF Publishers.

2000 *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes.* Littleton, CO, OMF International.

TOYNBEE, Arnold

1957 *Christianity Among the Religions of the World.* New York, Charles' Scribner's Sons.