

**A Traveler's
Guide**

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Chapter 01

INTRODUCTION

What is the purpose of suffering, why do humans experience it, and what can be done about it? Is suffering something to be avoided at all costs, or should it be embraced as a fact of life? How should humans respond in the face of suffering? These questions have plagued humanity for thousands of years. While there have been many answers offered, one worldview in particular tackles this problem through a process of negation – that is, to escape suffering by denying the ultimate existence of the world and the self and to detach oneself from all desire, which is itself the source of suffering. Among world religions, Buddhism is unique in this approach.

Buddhism is one of the oldest religions in the world and one of a few major religions that seek to convert the world to its ideas – the other two are Christianity and Islam. It has exerted incredible influence on Asia and shaped the cultures of many countries. Since the 20th century, Buddhist philosophy has garnered affection among many in the West as well, with many notable celebrities, athletes, and business leaders embracing its philosophy. It remains an enduring influence in both the East and the West, and given the rise of Asian societies as global economic powers, the influence of Buddhist thought continues to permeate other parts of the world. As followers of Christ find themselves in an increasingly diverse world, encountering Buddhist philosophy and its adherents is ever more likely, and therefore, thoughtful engagement is both necessary and timely.



1.1 What is Buddhism?

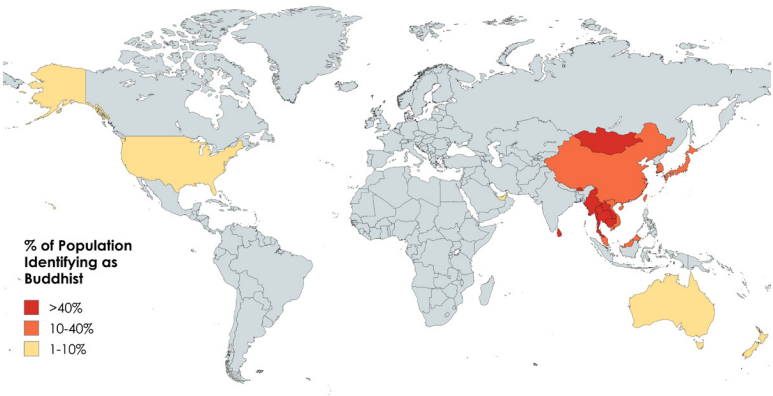
Buddhism is more of a philosophy than a religion. Technically, it is a non-theistic philosophy, but it has all the features of a major religion. Buddhism teaches that life is a sea of suffering and that human beings, though pure and good by nature, are plunged into suffering because of ignorance and greed. One can be free from worldly suffering through self-realization and elimination of desires. The path of cultivation (or salvation) lies in purifying one's heart, realizing the truth, and ultimately attaining Nirvāna – transcending the cycle of birth and death and realizing true spiritual awakening.

1.2 Statistics: Regions and Adherents

With 500 million adherents, Buddhists make up approximately 6.7% of the global population. Most Buddhists (481 million) live in the Asia Pacific region, while a small fraction live in Europe (1.3 million) and the United States (4 million).¹

Quick Facts:

- Religion:** Buddhism
- Adherents:** Buddhists
- Population:** 500 million
- Founder:** Siddhartha Gautama (circa 563-483 BC)
- Began:** Late 500s BC
- Type:** Non-theistic
- God:** None
- Scriptures:** Tripitaka
- Primary Sects:** Theraveda, Mahayana, Vajrayana, Tibetan



Chapter 02

THE HISTORY OF BUDDHISM

The origins of Buddhism can be traced back to the period between 563 BC and 483 BC when it was founded by Siddhartha Gautama.²

In the ancient kingdom of Nepal, Siddhartha was a prince who was born into a royal family. According to tradition, he was raised in a sheltered environment in his palace, shielded from the harsh realities of life. However, at the age of 19, he ventured outside the walls of the palace and witnessed suffering for the first time. He was deeply touched by the pain of four things: old age, sickness, death, and an ascetic who seemed content in life. Buddhism calls these the “four sights.” The first three sights shocked and troubled Siddhartha, but the fourth sight intrigued him and set him on a path of inquiry.



Siddhartha decided to leave his life in the palace and embark on the path of spiritual cultivation to discover the ultimate truth of relieving human suffering.³ He spent years practicing yoga and living as an ascetic in order to escape the cycle of reincarnation, but he only found disappointment until he vowed at the age of 35 to sit under the Bodhi tree in India until he achieved enlightenment. After forty-nine days, he gained insight into the universe and became The Buddha, or “the enlightened one.”

His key insight was realizing that the only law in the universe was the law of impermanence, of becoming and passing away. There is nothing outside of this law – no God, no underlying material world, and no soul. The key to eliminating suffering is to realize the implications of this insight for all of life. Evil and suffering result from desire (or attachment) to things. Once this attachment is removed, enlightenment is possible, and Nirvāna can be achieved.

Siddhartha embarked on a fifty-year-long ascetic and missionary journey, traveling around northeastern India and Nepal and spreading his teachings. His teachings were remarkably successful and attracted many followers. After his death, his disciples held two Buddhist assemblies, one to recall and organize the Buddha’s teachings and precepts and the other to discuss differences in practice and interpretation. These two conferences not only laid the foundation

for the systematization of Buddhist teachings but also led to the sprouting of different sects of Buddhism and promoted the adaptation and development of Buddhism in a multicultural society.



Buddhism spread rapidly with the unification of the Indian subcontinent and the rise of the Mauryan Dynasty (321-185 BC) and its third monarch, Ashoka, who became an important patron of Buddhism. Ashoka actively promoted Buddhism and sent Buddhist missionaries to various regions. Buddhism continued to expand into Central, North, and East Asia in the following centuries and eventually became a major faith in many East and Southeast Asian countries. Buddhism was introduced to China in 40 AD, Korea in 350 AD, Tibet in 575 AD, and Mongolia in 640 AD. The spread of Buddhism not only shaped the religious beliefs of these regions but also profoundly influenced their philosophies, cultures, and social structures.

Chapter 03

MAJOR BRANCHES OF BUDDHISM

I 3.1 The Theravada Tradition

Theravada Buddhism is the religion's oldest school of thought and is practiced primarily in countries such as Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar. This ancient lineage is anchored in the Pali Canon, believed to be the most authentic record of the Buddha's teachings. Theravada holds monasticism as the pinnacle of Buddhist practice and the sole path to Nirvāna. It places less emphasis on this ideal goal of becoming a Buddha and instead focuses on individual enlightenment through rigorous monastic discipline. This approach reflects a commitment to preserving what is considered the purest form of the Buddha's original teachings, emphasizing personal spiritual development and direct experiential insight. The centrality of the monastic path in Theravada underscores its dedication to renunciation and spiritual rigor, viewing these as essential elements in the quest for ultimate liberation from suffering.⁴



I 3.2 Mahayana Buddhism

This is the largest branch of Buddhism, predominantly in China, Japan, Tibet, Korea, and Vietnam. Several sects have developed within Mahayana Buddhism, including Pure Land Buddhism, Vajrayana, Tibetan Buddhism, and Zen. Mahayana Buddhism teaches that enlightenment is not limited to monks alone, but that all people have the potential to achieve it in this lifetime. Followers revere bodhisattvas, who are monks seeking to achieve enlightenment and to become Buddhas. Mahayana Buddhists anticipate the coming of Maitreya Buddha, who is seen as the future successor to Gautama Buddha.⁵



■ 3.3 Vajrayana Buddhism

Vajrayana Buddhism, also known as Tantric Buddhism, is a complex branch that focuses on the use of meditations, rituals, and mantras to accelerate the path to enlightenment. It is based on esoteric teachings attributed to the Buddha called tantras. A distinctive aspect of Vajrayana is its approach to transforming pleasure or desire into a means of attaining enlightenment, including the practice of “sexual yoga,” which is given to a variety of Western interpretations.⁶ These practices may involve physical consorts or spiritual consorts in the form of female goddesses. Vajrayana Buddhism flourishes primarily in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Mongolia, deeply influencing the spiritual and cultural landscapes.⁷

■ 3.4 Pure Land Buddhism

Pure Land Buddhism is a widely embraced school in China and Japan, centered on the worship of Amitabha Buddha. Amitabha is revered as a bodhisattva of great vows who presides over a paradise known as the “Pure Land.” Devotees aspire to be reborn in this Pure Land, escaping the three lower realms of rebirth. The distinctive practice of Pure Land followers involves meditation through the continuous recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name, expressing their devout faith. This approach has made Pure Land Buddhism an accessible form of Buddhist practice, attracting a wide following among lay practitioners.⁸

■ 3.5 Nichiren Buddhism

A distinctive Mahayana Buddhism, Nichiren is a school founded by a Japanese monk named Nichiren. This sect emphasizes personal spiritual transformation, holding the teachings of the Lotus Sutra as the sole path to enlightenment. The core practice of Nichiren Buddhism involves chanting the phrase known as the “Daimoku,” which in English translates as “I take refuge in the Lotus Sutra.”⁹

■ 3.6 Tibetan Buddhism

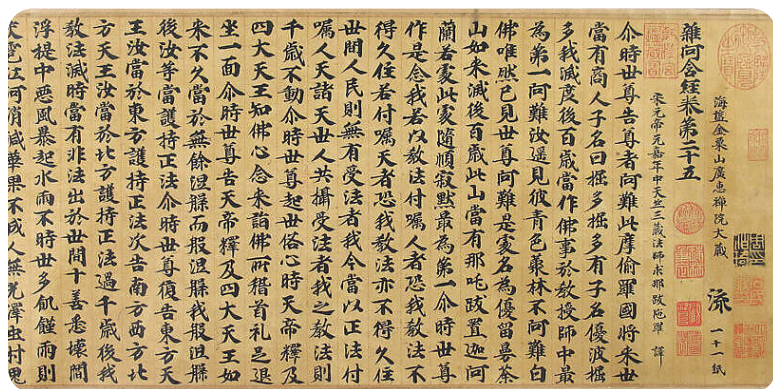
Tibetan is a branch of Mahayana Buddhism that evolved in relative isolation after its introduction to Tibet in the 7th century. This form of Buddhism is characterized by its emphasis on tantric practices and the use of mandalas, which are mystical diagrams used as aids in meditation. Tibetan Buddhism also combines elements of shamanism native to the region of Tibet. A distinctive feature of Tibetan Buddhism is the revered role of lamas, a special class of monks honored as enlightenment teachers. The leadership structure includes the Dalai Lama, who is believed to be a reincarnation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. The succession of Dalai Lamas has provided spiritual and temporal leadership in Tibet for the past three centuries. This unique blend of practices, beliefs, and hierarchical structure sets Tibetan Buddhism apart from other Buddhist traditions.¹⁰



Chapter 04

MAJOR BELIEFS AND TEACHINGS

4.1 Scriptures



Buddhist scriptures are diverse, with different schools and countries emphasizing different texts. The most revered collection in Buddhism is the TriPitaka (or TiPitaka), which contains the teachings of the Buddha and commentaries by his disciples. It is divided into three parts: the Sūtra Pitaka (discourses of the Buddha), the Vinaya Pitaka (monastic rules), and the Abhidharma Pitaka (philosophical and doctrinal analysis). Different Buddhist traditions have their own canonical texts, such as the Pāli Canon in Theravāda Buddhism, the Chinese Buddhist Canon in East Asian Buddhism, and the Kangyur and Tengyur in Tibetan Buddhism. These texts collectively form the doctrinal foundation of Buddhism.

4.2 Soul

The Buddha rejected the notion of an eternal soul or a fixed self, viewing consciousness and perception as illusory. He taught that in each cycle of death and rebirth, there is a continuously changing stream of consciousness. Moreover, the doctrine of Anattā (not-self) asserts that there is no permanent, unchanging soul or self-entity. Instead, an individual is a temporary aggregation of the five elements (skandhas): form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. These elements are in constant flux, meaning the “self” is merely a flowing process rather than a fixed entity. This perspective emphasizes dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda), which is the idea that all phenomena arise interdependently and lack an independent essence. Through practice and enlightenment, one can transcend attachment to the “self” and attain liberation, or Nirvāṇa.



■ 4.3 **Concept of Sin**

Buddhism does not have a concept of “sin” in relation to a deity but still emphasizes the consequences of actions (karma). Harmful actions, such as hurting others or violating moral precepts, lead to negative karmic results. Buddhism teaches practitioners to avoid unwholesome deeds through mindfulness and virtuous conduct, thereby reducing future suffering.

■ 4.4 **Karmic Retribution and the Cycle of Rebirth**



Buddhists believe that life is cyclical, with potentially endless rounds of birth, death, and rebirth. After death, one's next rebirth is determined by their past actions (karma). Virtuous individuals may be reborn as humans, while those who

commit evil deeds may be reborn as animals or insects. Through virtuous conduct and spiritual practice, one may eventually break the cycle of rebirth and attain Nirvāna. Conversely, those who commit grave misdeeds may be reborn in hellish realms. This cycle is driven by karma and is known as Samsāra. It is similar to the teachings of Hinduism, from which Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) gleaned much of his early religious views.

■ 4.5 **Nirvāna**

Nirvāna is the state of liberation from Samsāra, representing inner purity and transcendence. It is the ultimate peace and freedom, where “the self” is no longer bound by the material world. The mind becomes like a clear, undisturbed lake, free from the ripples of desire. Nirvāna is characterized by non-attachment to material things and accepting the impermanent nature of all phenomena. In this state, practitioners experience satisfaction beyond words; are liberated from the chains of desire, greed, hatred, and delusion; and attain a state of effortless freedom.

■ 4.6 **The Four Noble Truths**

These are the core teachings of the Buddha, serving as the foundation of Buddhist philosophy and practice. They reveal the nature of life and the path to liberation. The Four Noble Truths are not merely theoretical but serve as a practical guide, leading practitioners through introspection and practice to transcend suffering and achieve liberation.

1. **The Truth of Suffering (Dukkha):** The Buddha taught that life is inherently marked by suffering. This includes not only pain and sorrow but also dissatisfaction, unease, and discomfort caused by impermanence. Birth, aging, sickness, death, separation from loved ones, and unfulfilled desires are all manifestations of suffering.
2. **The Truth of the Origin of Suffering (Samudaya):** The root of suffering is craving and attachment. People suffer because of greed, hatred, and ignorance (avidyā), which lead to endless pursuit and dissatisfaction.
3. **The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (Nirodha):** The Buddha taught that by eliminating craving and attachment, one can achieve the cessation of suffering, which is Nirvāna. This is a state of peace beyond suffering and the complete liberation of the mind.

4. The Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering (Magga): The path to ending suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path. It requires right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. By following this path, practitioners can gradually eliminate ignorance and craving, ultimately attaining Nirvāna.

■ 4.7 The Noble Eightfold Path

This is the Buddha's practical path to liberation and Nirvāna, encompassing morality, meditation, and wisdom. It is the core guideline for Buddhist practice. The Eightfold Path is not a series of isolated steps but an interconnected whole. Through its practice, practitioners purify their minds, eliminate ignorance and defilements, and ultimately achieve liberation and enlightenment.

The Eightfold Path consists of:

1. Right View (Sammā Ditthi): Understanding the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, and the nature of anattā (not-self), free from wrong views and superstitions.
2. Right Intention (Sammā Sankappa): Cultivating thoughts of compassion, non-harm, renunciation, free from greed, ill will, and harmful intentions.
3. Right Speech (Sammā Vācā): Avoiding false speech, harsh words, divisive speech, idle chatter, and speaking truthfully, kindly, and harmoniously.
4. Right Action (Sammā Kammanta): Acting ethically by refraining from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct, and living with integrity.
5. Right Livelihood (Sammā Ājiva): Earning a living in a way that does not harm others or violate ethical principles.
6. Right Effort (Sammā Vāyāma): Diligently cultivating wholesome qualities and abandoning unwholesome ones, striving for spiritual progress.
7. Right Mindfulness (Sammā Sati): Maintaining awareness of the body, feelings, mind, and phenomena, staying present in the moment without being lost in the past or future.
8. Right Concentration (Sammā Samādhi): Developing deep meditative focus and mental tranquility, laying the foundation for wisdom.



The Wheel of Dharma:

"The Wheel of Dharma is the key symbol of Buddhism. The hub of the wheel represents Nirvana, the goal, and the eight spokes represent the Noble Eightfold Path explained by Buddha to be the way to salvation."

■ 4.8 Rebirth

In Buddhism, the concept of the afterlife is closely tied to Samsāra, the cycle of rebirth. Buddhists believe that life does not end at death but continues through rebirth in one of the six realms, determined by one's karma. These six realms are the hell realm, the realm of hungry ghosts, the animal realm, the human realm, the realm of asuras (demi-gods), and the heavenly realm (collectively known as the "six realms of existence"). Each realm represents a different state of being and corresponding experiences of suffering and happiness.

■ 4.9 The Middle Way (Madhyamā Pratipad)

This is a central concept in the Buddha's teachings, regarded as the essence of Buddhist wisdom. In his first sermon after enlightenment, the Buddha emphasized the importance of the Middle Way, which avoids the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. Through his own experience, the Buddha realized that indulgence in sensual pleasures only deepens desire and suffering, while extreme asceticism leads to physical and mental exhaustion, hindering true enlightenment. Thus, he advocated a balanced approach that maintains physical and mental health while focusing on spiritual cultivation. The Middle Way is embodied in the Noble Eightfold Path, which guides practitioners toward liberation and enlightenment. It is not only a method of practice but also a way of life, teaching balance and clarity in the face of life's challenges.

Chapter 05

COMMON PRACTICE AND CUSTOMS

I 5.1 Prayer and Meditation



Most Buddhists do not engage in prayer in the traditional sense of the form of dialogues with the gods but concentrate their thoughts during meditation. By adjusting the breath – “right breathing” (anapanasati) and focusing on “loving-kindness meditation” (metta bhavana) – a person can empty the mind to eliminate desires and realize the state of “no-self.” Meditation helps to clear the mind and understand the nature of the universe.¹²

I 5.2 Mantras



Mantras are repeated phrases used in Buddhist practice for meditation and mental focus, aimed at helping practitioners concentrate and purify their minds. They

can be simple phrases, such as chanting “Amitabha Buddha,” or complex Sanskrit mantras, like the six-syllable mantra “Om Mani Padme Hum.” The repetition of mantras not only aids in entering deep meditative states but is also believed to possess sacred power, bringing inner peace and wisdom.

■ 5.3 Shrines



Shrines are places where Buddhists express reverence and engage in practice, commonly found in temples and homes. They may be adorned with intricate Buddha statues or simple illustrations, symbolizing the Buddha’s wisdom and compassion. Shrines serve as central points for rituals, chanting, and meditation, as well as places for devotees to reflect on the qualities of the Buddha, such as compassion and wisdom. Through offerings and worship, practitioners deepen their spiritual connection to the Dharma.

■ 5.4 Viharas



Originally, viharas were shelters for Buddhist monks during the rainy season, but they later evolved into Buddhist monasteries. Today, viharas are not only places for monastic practice but also centers for community learning and Dharma practice. They typically include lecture halls, meditation rooms, and libraries, providing opportunities for devotees to study and practice, while also serving as important venues for spreading the teachings of Buddhism.

■ 5.5 Offerings and Almsgiving



Offerings are a way for Buddhists to express respect and gratitude. Common offerings include candles, incense, flowers, and food, symbolizing light, purity,

and the impermanence of life. Almsgiving is the tradition of laypeople providing material support to monks and nuns, such as food, clothing, or money. This not only helps sustain the monastic community but is also seen as a way to accumulate merit.

■ 5.6 Stupas



Stupas are Buddhist structures that house relics of the Buddha or commemorate significant events, often shaped as hemispheres or bells. They are important pilgrimage sites for Buddhists and symbolize the Buddha’s enlightenment and Nirvana. Walking around stupas is a way for devotees to show reverence and accumulate merit, while the stupas themselves serve as reminders to seek wisdom and liberation.

■ 5.7 Birth and Marriage Rituals

Buddhism does not have specific birth rituals, though some communities may hold blessing ceremonies to pray for the health and safety of newborns. Marriage is considered a secular matter in Buddhism, so wedding ceremonies vary by culture and region. They often include chanting, blessings, and offerings to monks, seeking happiness and harmony in the marriage.

■ 5.8 Confession/Purification



Buddhism holds that negative karma can be purified through confession and good deeds. Confession is an important practice for both monastics and lay practitioners, as sincerely reflecting on and acknowledging mistakes can lessen the negative effects of karma. Confession rituals often include chanting, prostrations, and making vows, helping practitioners purify their minds and return to the right path.

■ 5.9 Prayer Wheels and Singing Bowls

Prayer wheels are engraved cylindrical devices containing written prayers or mantras. Buddhists believe that spinning the wheel is equal to saying the mantras out loud, thus multiplying their power to purify karma or achieve merit. Singing bowls are used to invoke meditation and chanting through sounds and vibrations that emanate from the bowl when played. The bowls produce a smooth sound that is believed to promote healing and relaxation.



Chapter 06

THE SPREAD AND INTEGRATION OF BUDDHISM IN ASIA

Buddhism has spread broadly to different countries in East and Southeast Asia, becoming the primary religion in many of them. Traditional Buddhist teachings have evolved into unique cultural practices in different regions, influenced by both local traditions and Buddhist doctrines. Understanding how Buddhism integrates with a country's culture can help non-Buddhists better adapt to different cultural environments. Below is an overview of the distinctive Buddhist cultures in two major Buddhist countries: China and Thailand.

6.1 China

Buddhism was introduced to China by Indian monks during the late Han dynasty (around 150 AD) and gradually assimilated into Chinese culture over the next century. By the sixth century, Buddhism had gained significant influence. Over the following centuries, various schools of Chinese Buddhism emerged; today, with Pure Land and Chan (Zen) Buddhism remaining influential today. Over the past two millennia, Buddhism has become an integral part of Chinese culture, influencing various aspects of society, including philosophy, literature, art, architecture, and lifestyle. For foreigners visiting China, understanding Buddhism's impact on Chinese culture and related customs can help them better appreciate Chinese society and immerse themselves in its cultural richness.¹³

For example, the Hanshan Temple in Suzhou is famous for its Chinese Buddhist architecture, and the Ullambana Festival (Zhongyuan Festival) is an important Buddhist holiday in China, during which people pray for their ancestors and float river lanterns.



The spread and adaptation of Buddhism in China have shaped a distinctive cultural landscape. For foreigners, understanding Buddhism's influence on Chinese culture and its associated customs not only facilitates smoother cultural integration but also provides a deeper appreciation of China's rich traditions. Whether visiting temples, tasting vegetarian cuisine, or participating in Buddhist festivals, one can experience the profound impact of Buddhism on Chinese culture.¹⁴



■ 6.2 Thailand

The origins of Buddhism in Thailand can be traced back to the 3rd century B.C. when monks from India arrived and began to spread the Buddha's teachings. This period marked the initial establishment of Buddhism in Thailand and saw the emergence of famous stupa designs. Today, Thailand is one of the largest Buddhist countries in the world with a 95% Buddhist population. In Thailand, the king is considered the guardian of the faith, and therefore, the king must be a Buddhist. Over the centuries, Buddhism has played an important role in Thailand's history and has profoundly influenced every aspect of the Thai people's lives. It can be said that without Buddhism, Thailand would not be what it is today.¹⁵ Thai food, art, food, festivals, architecture, and social customs are deeply influenced by Buddhism.¹⁶



Thai temples (wat) are not only tourist attractions, but also important religious sites. The temple architecture usually includes a chedi (Buddhist pagoda) and murals depicting Buddhist stories. Compared to most temples in China, entering a temple in Thailand is a sacred act and must follow a certain code of conduct. When entering a temple, dress appropriately, make sure your shoulders and knees are covered, and remove your shoes before entering the building. Avoid pointing your feet at Buddha statues or monks, as the feet are considered the humblest part of the human body.



In everyday interactions, it is common for Thai people to greet each other with a wai (hands joined and a slight bow), which shows respect and humility. Also, unlike Western culture, communal dining is prevalent in Thailand. Several plates of food in the center of the table for all to share is a common way to eat.



Chapter 07

BARRIERS TO THE GOSPEL

I 7.1 Personal Sanctification

Both Christianity and Buddhism share similar thoughts about sanctification and the journey of life. For example, Buddhism emphasizes the suffering caused by desire, the impermanence of all things, the realization of no-self, and facing the world directly. Christianity proclaims similar teachings, explaining that the world is corrupted due to sin and that “there is nothing new under the sun, and everything has its purpose” (Eccl. 1:9). Both traditions acknowledge the brokenness and impermanence of the world, and the necessity of self-denial (Matt. 16:24), making it a common understanding in both Buddhism and Christianity.

However, when faced with the impermanence and suffering of this world, Buddhism stresses that individuals must continually strive to achieve enlightenment. Christianity, on the other hand, teaches that human beings, like the world itself, are hopeless on their own. Sanctification is a process of learning to become more like Christ in one’s thoughts, words, and actions, but sanctification is not possible by personal effort alone. It requires the continual work of God in a person’s life after they place their faith in Christ and live each day in obedience to Him. Christians are taught to abandon their own striving for holiness, to turn to Jesus Christ for salvation, and to rely on God’s help through the Holy Spirit to grow in righteousness.



I 7.2 Contrasting Views on Salvation

Buddhists believe in the process of “earning” salvation through good deeds, which generate positive karma and lead to better reincarnations until reaching Nirvāna. In contrast, Christianity emphasizes grace, which is freely given and not

bound by the cycles of samsara or the need to earn salvation through actions. The Buddhist doctrine of compassion is closely linked to the concept of karma. According to Buddhism, an individual's good deeds accumulate good karma, which ultimately leads to good results. This karmic relationship provides the means for people to practice self-cultivation and achieve salvation, atonement, or blessing. In contrast, Christianity views compassion as an expression of grace. The death and resurrection of Jesus symbolize grace, emphasizing that one cannot change anything through self-mastery but should simply accept and acknowledge the grace that Jesus brings. Grace is seen as an unmerited gift.¹⁷



■ 7.3 Foundation and Speculations

The history of Buddhism is deeply rooted in religious and philosophical inquiry. It has its origins in the teachings of the Buddha, which were themselves an expression of Indian dialectical philosophy, a highly speculative enterprise that prides itself on denying important laws of logic such as the law of non-contradiction. Over time, Buddhism gradually incorporated additional elements such as deities, metaphysics, intuitive experience, complex rituals, and deeper philosophical reflection. These changes made Buddhism a multi-layered religious system, rich in both philosophical inquiry and religious practice.

In contrast, Christianity certainly has its own discursive tradition and complex theology but is centered on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. The origins of Christianity are closely tied to the historical presence of Jesus, whose life, teachings, death, and resurrection are seen as central to the faith (1 Corinthians 15; 1 Peter 3:15). Although different theological schools and doctrinal controversies have arisen in the course of Christianity's development, these discussions

have always been based on the life of Jesus and the biblical account, rather than relying exclusively on philosophical speculation or abstract discernment.¹⁸

Moreover, the historicity of Jesus' life, work, death, and resurrection are central to the Christian faith. Christianity places fundamental importance on these events actually happening in history. Buddhism, on the other hand, does not concern itself with the historicity of its founding traditions so long as Buddha's teachings point the way to enlightenment.



Chapter 08

BRIDGES TO THE GOSPEL

I 8.1 The Historical Reliability of the Bible

Christians can demonstrate the solid factual foundation of Christianity through its historical context in the first century AD.¹⁹ Unlike Buddhism, the core beliefs of Christianity are deeply rooted in specific historical events, especially the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These events are not only the bedrock of faith but also the historical witness to Christian truth. While Buddhists are often open to other gods or religious theories and see value in any doctrine that leads to good deeds and freedom from suffering, they may need to be guided to understand the crucial role of history in their faith. To help Buddhists embrace the truths of Christianity, Christians can gradually lead them to realize that the historicity of Christianity is not merely background knowledge or trivia but a central path to truth. By emphasizing the close connection between historical facts and faith, Christians can more effectively engage Buddhists in a dialogue that demonstrates the uniqueness and reliability of Christianity in history and reality.²⁰

8.2 Assurance of Salvation

The best opportunity for dialogue with Buddhists may lie in certain ambiguities within Buddhist doctrine. Christians could start discussions by addressing concepts such as karma and reincarnation. Buddhism emphasizes that personal practice and good deeds lead to salvation and positive outcomes. However, one might question whether relying solely on personal virtue is truly virtuous or if it stems from desire. Can one's own efforts guarantee blessings in the afterlife?



In contrast, Christianity teaches that humans cannot rely on themselves because we are inherently flawed, just like the world around us. We need to depend entirely on God's complete salvation. No matter how hard we try to understand or transcend the imperfections of the world, we are still flawed and cannot

achieve ultimate salvation and peace on our own. The Christian faith believes that God, the Creator and Redeemer, is still watching over us, and through God's grace, believers can achieve salvation and find true peace.

Although these differences may pose challenges in communication, Christianity offers believers clear faith assurances for both this life and eternity – certainty that Buddhism cannot provide. By emphasizing the historical authenticity of Christianity and the uniqueness of its belief system, Christians can find common ground for dialogue with Buddhists, clearly presenting the core truths of Christianity.²¹

■ 8.3 The Problem of Desire and Suffering

At its core, Buddhism is a response to suffering. Suffering is unavoidable in this life, and the Christian can agree with the Buddhist that suffering is a core aspect of our experience on this earth. Buddhism attempts to escape suffering through detachment from things and an ultimate denial of the self's existence. According to Buddhism, desire and attachment are the source of all suffering and should be expunged from the mind. In contrast, Christianity counters this by showing that desire is part of human nature and that our deepest desires should not be ignored or denied but are directing us toward a relationship with God (Psalms 16:11, 63:1; Isa. 58:11; John 4:13-14). Moreover, Christianity explains the reality of suffering in terms of sinful human nature. The way to ultimately overcome suffering is through redemption in Jesus Christ, who suffered the consequences of sin on our behalf so that we might have fellowship with God (Romans 8:18; Colossians 1:20-22).



■ 8.4 The Longing for Inner Peace



Buddhism recognizes the frustration with life and the human desire for inner peace. Where Buddhism goes wrong is in concluding that life itself is the problem. For example, Zen Buddhism teaches that the path to inner peace is through acceptance of reality as it is and letting go of attachment and ego. Zen encourages practitioners to transcend their personal desires and self-consciousness to achieve enlightenment and true understanding through positive thinking and living in the present moment. However, this is ultimately a fruitless effort to rely on one's own power to transcend suffering.

Christianity teaches that one cannot transcend suffering in this life but must look to God for hope and peace (Isaiah 26:3; Matthew 11:28-30). Even when life is full of challenges and pain, our lives remain safe because of God's care and intervention. Instead of denying the existence of all things, Christianity affirms the intrinsic goodness of physical creation and that all things are being redeemed by God, especially the human condition (Romans 8:22-25). Hence, the meaning of life no longer depends on personal effort to transcend suffering through detachment from the world. The meaning of life is to live in fellowship with God, which begins with receiving, by grace, His salvation. Only through Jesus' grace and love – not Buddhist enlightenment – can we find ultimate peace and purpose.²²



Appendix

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

I Books and Articles

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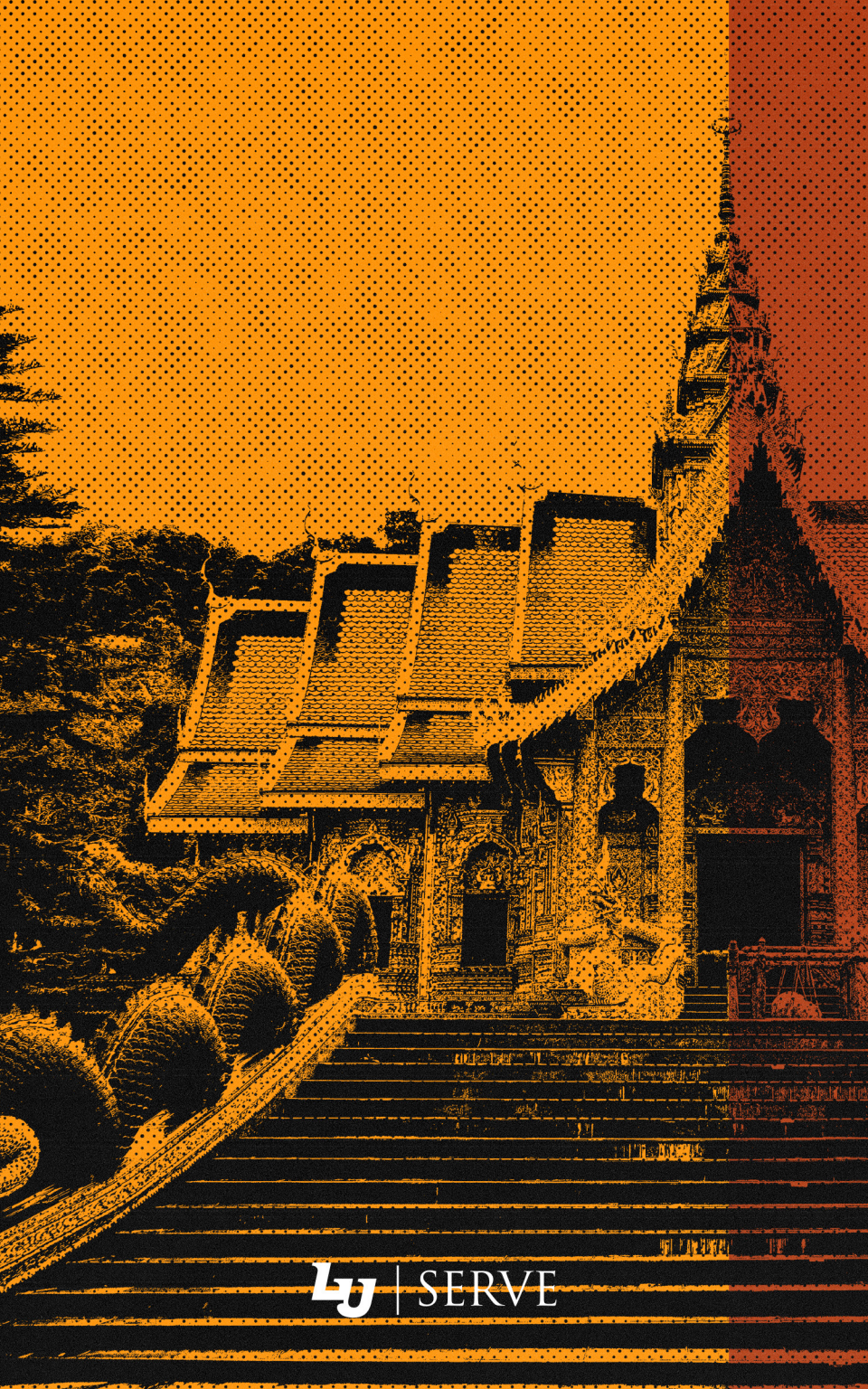
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