

Wonder

Volume: 1 Number: 4 Theme: **Can We Coexist?**

Title: **Coexisting With Buddhism** Author: **Fr. Brendan Pelphrey**

Many Christians, if they know anything about Buddhism at all, would probably say that there is no way for Christians to have fruitful dialogue with Buddhists. After all, Buddhists are atheists—right?

Not really. There are many different kinds of Buddhism, and their followers are as different from one another as snake-handling Pentecostals are from Roman Catholics. In Hong Kong, for example, what is more properly known as Chinese Folk Religion includes at least two hundred local gods, not counting the Nine Fairies and all sorts of local spirits and sprites that inhabit auspicious streams and forests. In this environment, whatever the historic Siddhartha the Buddha may have envisioned has been fully integrated with ancient Taoism—and, apparently, also with Christianity.

Ancient Buddhism, which calls itself Theravada (the “ancient path”) adheres closely to the Buddha’s insights, which are spelled out in the Tripitaka (holy books). These include the Buddha’s original insights (the “Four Noble Truths”) which includes the Eight-Fold Path, a prescription for daily living.

Siddhartha, the Buddha—who was a Hindu Brahmin prince but who for a time struggled ascetically—had the insight that severe ascetical struggles cannot in themselves release us from the sufferings of this life. Chiefly, these are poverty, illness, old age, and death. Pursuing this thought he realized that in a very real sense the struggle itself, along with everything around us, is illusory. We grasp after status and possessions that quickly become meaningless when we are confronted by illnesses or death; and in any case nothing persists after we die. So what should we do?

The way out of this conundrum (the second part of Buddha’s great insight or “enlightenment”) is to stop grasping altogether. Accept that you are passing through life very briefly. Accept that to think otherwise is an illusion that leaves you wanting. Through acceptance, you can become tranquil and stop the cycle of trying to get more and to be more. This “stopping” is called Nibbana (Nirvanha) which means, literally, blowing out the candle, i.e. the flame of desire.

The Buddha did not have much to say about God or the gods, since, as he pointed out, you cannot see them. Neither can you conceive of the Absolute. Better, he thought, to deal with the realities we can see and touch, especially the “sea of suffering” (samsara) that surrounds us in this life. A great calumny is to claim, as some Christian radio-evangelists do, that the Buddha thought he was a god. He not only did not think this, but among the first of his insights is that in some sense we ourselves do not truly exist; and if not we, then not the gods either.

Mahayana Buddhism (the “Greater Vehicle”) integrated the Buddha’s insights with Taoist culture, but also apparently borrowed from Christianity in China after the 6th century CE. Thus there was added the idea of a heaven (“Western Paradise”—why West?), savior-figures (the

Arhats), intercessors, merit, Hell (actually eighteen hells), and after-life. In this view there are many Buddhas who can help on the path towards enlightenment and total release. In Tibet, Nepal and Mongolia, the Buddha's insights were integrated with ancient cultural religion called Bon (or Pun) and Lamaism, so that modern lamas are living Buddhas.

An important feature of all this is the desire (there is desire again) to cease the cycle of birth and rebirth, or reincarnation. Americans do not seem to grasp this essential part of Buddhism: namely, that rebirth is a curse rather than an exciting New-Age opportunity. No one in Asia wants to be re-born; that is reserved for American Hollywood actresses. Everyone else is working to get out of it.

Now, how does any of this have anything in common with Orthodox Christianity? Actually, there are many "points of contact," as was pointed out historically by the Lutheran missionary Karl Ludvig Reichelt. On a superficial level, Mahayana Buddhists daily "take refuge" in the Buddha, the Dharma (the teachings of the Buddha), and the Sangha (the Buddhist monastic community). Orthodox Christians, on the other hand, take refuge in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; but we also depend upon the Christ (Jesus, the Word of God), His Dharma (teachings), and the Sangha (the Church).

Buddhist ascetical communities have much in common with the life-style of the early Desert Fathers and Mothers of the Church, a fact which was beautifully drawn out by the Japanese scholar and artist Yushi Nomura in his book, *Desert Wisdom: Sayings from the Desert Fathers*. Nomura used Zen-style illustrations and brief quotes from the Fathers to demonstrate the similarities. Both seek to extinguish the passions and to tame the flesh. Both seek tranquility (in Greek, *hesychia*). Both advocate radical simplicity of lifestyle and a total acceptance of what the day might bring.

On a deeper level, the Buddha said that the world is subject to suffering; so do we (we call it "evil," which leads to death). He said that this was due to desire; so do we (we call this "sin," that leads to fear and disappointment—the "passions"). He said that therefore, we must accept the transitory nature of life; so do we (we call this repentance and humility). He said, finally, that we do not truly exist; so do we (we say that only Christ is "He Who Is," Who exists truly; we are creatures who have fallen into death).

The Buddha said that we cannot see God or understand divine nature, the Absolute; we agree, but we believe that God revealed himself in the flesh, in Christ. Christ is above-thought, the "name above all names." But He rose from death and could be seen and touched and heard. This is proof of the Resurrection, which ends the cycle of birth and rebirth. Enlightenment is to realize that (the early Church called baptism, "enlightenment").

The Buddha said that everything is illusion; we do not say that. We believe that Christ restores everything so that everything can exist truly. God made it, God loves it, God keeps it. In that sense we are not-Buddhists.

The Buddha said that we must cease to be, in order to be free; we believe, rather, that we must be born again in Christ—effectively dying to our old life and being born into a different dimension.

Perhaps we should call it Nibbana: stopping all passions, existing in a new way which cannot be grasped or imagined. We, who are enlightened in Baptism, can say that our “Buddha-nature” has been realized in Christ: it is Christ-nature.

Fr. Brendan Pelphrey is the pastor at St. George Greek Orthodox Church in Shreveport, LA. He holds a PhD from the University of Edinburgh in Christian Dogmatics and Practical Theology. He has taught at numerous colleges and universities including Hellenic College, Southwestern University, and Texas State University. He was a missionary for several years in Hong Kong before his conversion to Orthodoxy.

Discussion Questions:

What were your perceptions of Buddhism before reading this article? Have they changed?

Are there any points of contact between Buddhism and your faith?

Many argue that Buddhism has many similarities to our own ascetic traditions, what are some of the main differences?