

**‘UNLIKE THE RELIGIONS OF MIDDLE EASTERN ORIGIN, THE IDEA OF AN ALMIGHTY GOD DOES NOT PLAY ANY PART IN BUDDHISM. NOT GOD OR GODS BUT MAN IS THE OBJECT OF BUDDHIST THOUGHT’ (SCHUMANN)  
HOW THEN DOES BUDDHISM DEAL WITH THE PROBLEMS OF HUMANKIND?**

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## **1 Introduction**

The religion of Buddhism as set out in the “three jewels” is based on the Buddha himself, the teachings of Buddha and the Buddhist community. Accordingly, in the core of the faith there is no mention of God, and the resolution of life’s problems is indeed man-centred. We outline the basis of the faith, summarise the way in which Buddhism seeks to address life’s problems and point out some difficulties seen from a Christian point of view.

## **2 Background**

In assessing and understanding Buddhism, it is useful to begin by comparing it with Hinduism from which it is derived. Hinduism is itself a pantheistic religion, with many gods. But the main continuation from Hinduism is not the pantheon of gods, but rather the concept of a cycle of life and rebirth, where each succeeding life is marked by the standard of behaviour adopted in the previous one. Furthermore, all things were seen as part of one supreme reality, as in the concept of Brahman in Hindu thought (monism). For Buddhists, as for Hindus, the idea of a creator or creation was seen as misconceived because there is no creator outside reality, all things are one in essence. But for Buddhists unlike for Hindus the nature of reality is itself an illusion, so it is also inappropriate to see reality itself as a god. The only reality is each individual’s consciousness.

Like Hindus, Buddha recognised that the cycle entails human suffering and considered that the main resolution would be to end this cycle of suffering. As do Hindus, Buddha consider that there was no role for God as a supreme judge of moral actions in the “karmic” cycle, because a judge is not needed when actions automatically reap their reward or punishment in the next life. Furthermore, unlike at least some Hindus (Bhakta Marga – the way of devotion) there is not a role in pure Buddhism for devotion to a god or gods as a way to escape the

cycle, whereby the god in question responds to human action, by allowing the person to escape the cycle of life in the material world (eliminating karma)<sup>1</sup>. Man has to find his own way without the help of gods, the aim not being returning to the “Brahman”, the Supreme monistic Reality from which the person is derived but rather escaping from reality (desire) entirely.

### **3 Dealing with the problems of life**

In this context, the focus of Buddhism is human suffering and seeking to find an explanation and solution of it. Suffering is defined widely to include “physical pain, aging, sickness, and death...emotional pain like fear, loss, jealousy, disappointment, and unrequited love, and also to the existential sense that, somehow, deep down, life is permanently out of joint” (Grow 1996). Such suffering is seen as a pervasive condition faced by all humans and is in turn related to change, whereby whenever we hope to find any lasting happiness by means of something that is changing, suffering results. This is of course reminiscent of the teacher in Ecclesiastes. Hence, it cannot be denied that Buddhism confronts key problem of life, even if one may disagree (following Cottrell 1990) that Buddhism provides the best way to address it.

Its basic teaching, as set out in the first sermon of Buddha, is that life devoted either to pleasure (as did the Brahmin Hindus) or to mortification (as did the Jains) is extreme and does not lead to satisfaction with life. Instead, it is crucial to follow a so-called “middle path” that leads to wisdom. At the core of this recommendation is a belief that desire (or “attachment”) is sustained both by indulgence and by asceticism. Desire is not just a question of greed or clinging to things but also one of pride and egoism, self centred isolation. In this sense, such desire is seen as sustaining the idea of self that is the basis of suffering, and hence of the general unsatisfactory nature of life (dukkha). This is because selfhood, holding other people

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<sup>1</sup> For Hindus, alternative forms of release from rebirth are the way of works, such as yoga, and the way of knowledge.

and the world as if they are separate, gives rise to “craving, jealousy, ill will, indifference, fear, and anxiety that fills the mind” (Spretnak 1991). Humans are alienated, living at a remove from the world, as also seen by Existentialists; the mind creates illusion and amplifies suffering.

The answer is to realise that the world of desire and indeed of the self is in the mind and not reality. The avoidance of extremes leads to ‘non self’ where peace of heart and mind can be found, a state of mystical unity with the cosmos. Buddha’s interpretation of the cycle of reincarnation in Hinduism, which entails suffering, is that it is desire that underlies it. Desire leads us to commit good or evil deeds and hence continue the cycle. The way to end the cycle is to avoid such desire and then the illusion of separate existence is ended – the state of nirvana.

Buddhism seeks to systematise these ideas – and hence address what it sees as the central problem of humankind - by providing a way to achieve the end of extinguishing desire. This is the so-called eight-fold path, which includes questions of attitude of mind (right view and aspirations), issues of morality (right speech, action and living) and aspects of thinking (right effort, mindfulness and concentration). In each case the word right implies an avoidance of extremes in the manner suggested above, and detachment from the world. This implies strict discipline. A way to develop along this path, Buddhists would argue, is meditation, seen as a way not of escaping the world but “a kind of awareness that enables them to be more fully present in the world” (Grow 1996).

Unlike Hinduism, it is not asserted that the person’s soul survives reincarnation, because the impression of being an independent person is itself an illusion. Indeed it is belief in being a separate person that leads to dukkha. Buddha suggested various reasons why we cling to the

belief in separate existence and hold back from nirvana. Significantly, besides various human passions, these include desire for a future life in heaven that would imply a god, also belief in good works, that could suggest a divine judge, and thirdly ignorance, which was thought to include belief in god and heaven per se. So belief in God is an obstacle. The middle path, centred on man and not God, is supposed to provide insight into the way we ourselves contribute to suffering and hence enabling us to develop the ability to avoid it.

The Buddhist links belief in the unsatisfactory nature of life with the explanation of evil, another key problem of humankind. There are three roots of moral evil, greed, ill-will and delusion, which are themselves forms of desire to be removed by enlightenment. Human ill-being can be resolved only by transforming these roots: greed into generosity, ill-will into loving-kindness, and delusion into wisdom. Such a shift if generalised (via acceptance of Buddhist teaching) would also lead to removal of poverty, according to Loy (1999), since these evils are the cause of poverty.

#### **4 A religion without God?**

It is clear that man, and more specifically the individual believer, is at the centre of the faith. It is only by his or her own efforts that a form of salvation from the cycle of apparent rebirth can be achieved. A priesthood is not needed in the faith, unlike for Hindus, as there is no necessary God for whom an intermediary is required. More precisely, following the point above, Buddha did not deny the existence of gods, he taught that the worship of gods obstructed one's quest for nirvana. To him the gods inhabit the cosmos and are impermanent like all of us, so they too must escape rebirth through nirvana.

Although this implies man must attain salvation alone, the religion does allow for altruism in that an individual who has attained nirvana, as did Buddha, is urged to stay alive so as to help others find the way (although spiritual rather than material help is provided). Also it is argued that meditation is, in an unexplained manner given there is no personal God, a means to improve the state of humanity, e.g. ending wars or poverty. Compassion is considered to develop for others since understanding the monistic nature of the world enables one to see for example that pain is not just "your" separate and individual pain; it is "the" pain that others, everywhere, feel. Buddhism is seen positively by some as an egalitarian religion, where anyone can become enlightened, in contrast to the caste system of Hinduism.

Whereas the above outlines the a-theistic approach of classical Buddhism, in answering the question we also need to allow for the fact that the religion has syncretised with many others leading to a number of further possibilities in respect of belief in God. These include polytheism, where all beings and objects are worthy of worship, and able to help the individual find nirvana. Some Buddhists participate in idol worship, the veneration of the spirits of deceased ancestors, and ceremonial rituals for the purpose of appeasing evil spirits. There are also types of monotheism where the Buddha is personalised and deemed worthy of worship. All of these step outside the strictly man centred approach and entail divine assistance in finding the way to avoid suffering – or at least acknowledgement of the supernatural world.

## **5 Some potential difficulties**

In my view, there are difficulties in Buddhism's approach to the problems of humankind. A man centred faith is obviously contrary to Christianity, adherents of which would see the idea of man himself seeking to resolve the problems of humankind as an enterprise doomed to

failure. Notably, the concept of the Fall implies that the search for perfection is misconceived; as noted by Jeremiah 17:19 “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”. Indeed, the individual desire for perfection is likely to foster the egotism that it seeks to avoid. It is a form of faith through works that is contrary to the teachings of Christianity (Ephesians 2:9). Despite claims to the contrary, it is also unlikely to promote the deeds of charity that can improve the human condition, as Christians are bidden to do out of gratitude for Christ’s sacrifice in Ephesians 2:10. This is because the core of seeking Nirvana is a selfish end contrary to the selflessness Christ preached. Indeed, it can be argued that Buddhism is contrary to the second as well as the first commandment. As noted by Aitken (2005) “Wherever the religion of Buddha has prevailed, it has proved singularly inefficient to lift society to a high standard of morality. It has not weaned the people of Tibet and Mongolia from the custom of abandoning the aged, nor the Chinese from the practice of infanticide.”

Furthermore, Christians would object to the Buddhist view that the world is essentially bad and not the product of a benevolent creator, a world from which we should be liberated and become indifferent. For Christians, the world is God's creation, redeemed by Christ. It is in the world that man meets God. Therefore he does not need to attain such an absolute detachment in order to find himself in the mystery of his deepest self. As noted by Messori (1995) quoting the late Pope, for Christianity, it does not make sense to speak of the world as a "radical" evil, since at the beginning of the world we find God the Creator who loves his creation, a God who "gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life' (John 3:16).

## **5 Conclusion**

We agree that Buddhism is a religion (or “ethical discipline”) without god, and that it puts man at the centre of what it sees as the core problem of humankind, the avoidance of suffering in the sense of the “general unsatisfactory nature of life”. We have noted that there have developed some alternative forms of Buddhism where god or gods – including Buddha himself – play a role in the process of attaining nirvana. We have also made some suggestions from a Christian point of view as to how Buddhism could be an unsatisfactory way of dealing with the problems of existence. As Jesus said in Matthew 15:9 “They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.”

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