

Buddhism: The View from the East

I. Introduction

- A. One notable characteristic of the counter cultural movement in the late Sixties and early Seventies, was its wholesale rejection of western values, and in particular, the Christian religion. To fill the vacuum, many turned to the religions of the East, one of which was Buddhism. After the Vietnam War a large influx of Asian immigrants brought with them the religion of Buddhism. These two factors, coupled with current movies, *Seven Years in Tibet*, and *Kundun*, which put Buddhism in a good light, prompted this brief overview of one of the world's five main organized religions. For a good overview of this intellectual switch to Eastern worldviews, see: *Turning East* by Harvey Cox, and *The East: No Exit* by Os Guinness.
- B. For its October 13, 1997 issue, *Time Magazine's* feature article was *America's Fascination with Buddhism*. According to *Time*, there are now currently 1200 books in print on the subject of Buddhism, and the number of English language Buddhist instruction centers has more than doubled since 1988 (from 429 to more than 1063). The thrust of the *Time* article is the Buddhist worldview permeating our pop culture, a rare example of excellent reporting!
- C. Why the sudden appeal of Eastern Mysticism?

The west is very young, we're not very wise, and I think we're hopeful that there is a place that is ancient and wise and open and filled with light.
Actor, Richard Gere.

The worldview of some of the Buddhist sects is very similar to other new age occultic beliefs. The attraction is for anything anti-western. Some have expressed their desire to escape a *father-god* who holds them responsible. Others like the serenity Buddhism gives them. Still others like its stress on world peace and ecological concern (It was not an accident that the recent Global Warming conference was held in Kyoto, Japan, a world center of Buddhism!). Aldous Huxley believed the religion of Buddhism would be the best for the environment. See his novel: *Island*.

II. The Background of Buddhism

- A. The religion of Buddhism began in the 6th Century B.C. in India near the Tibetan border, the foothills of the Himalaya mountains. Because of its

appeal to the common man (lower castes), as opposed to the tyrannical hold of early Hinduism, the doctrines of Buddhism spread rapidly over most nations in Asia.

- B. The founder of the religion was Siddhartha Gautama who was born in India of a royal family about 563 B.C. He is often called *Buddha*, but this is a title and means *enlightened one*. The earliest written accounts of him were written down over 300 years after his death. For this reason it is impossible to discern legend from historical fact.
- C. The Sacred Writings of Buddhism were first recorded by the followers of the Buddha in 80 B.C. They were written in the Pali language (the language of Nepal) and are referred to as the *Pali Canon*. They are divided into three parts called *The Three Baskets*, and they are approximately eleven times the size of the Bible.
- D. General Characteristics of Buddhism
 - 1. Its Outward Trappings: What comes to mind when one thinks of Buddhism? Monks and monasteries, colorful costumes, prayer wheels, chanting, meditation, incense, relics, reincarnation, lotus flowers, temples, pagodas, and images of the Buddha.
 - 2. Its Syncretism: Of all the religions of the world, Buddhism is probably the most syncretistic, that is, it is often combined with the beliefs of other religions and cultures. For example, Buddhism adopted (assimilated) many of the animistic beliefs of the Tibetans after it was first preached there. A similar phenomenon occurred in China and Japan. It is now happening in this country. American Buddhists call their meeting places *churches*, a term borrowed from Christianity.
 - 3. Its similarity to Hinduism: Buddhism emerged from Hinduism and is now a distinct religion, but it must be noted that there are many similarities in their overall worldview. Where they differ greatly is in their methods of achieving nirvana.

III. The Belief System of Buddhism (Worldview)

A. General

The Buddha taught that all suffering is caused by personal desire. Hence if desire, i.e., the person desiring, can be eliminated, the endless cycle of rebirths (reincarnations) can be broken, and enlightenment and nirvana can be achieved. Desire leads to bad karma which will affect the next incarnation. It is said that the Buddha himself suffered 550 reincarnations, but finally achieved enlightenment, and devoted the rest of his life to teaching others how to break the cycle. Buddha's method is referred to as *the Middle Way*. He realized it was not achieved by indulgence, since he was born into a royal family; he also discovered that it did not come by extreme asceticism. His enlightenment reportedly came one day after an extended period of meditation after which he discovered the Four Noble Truths.

B. Specific

1. A Cyclical View of Time and History

One of the most important concepts in understanding the basic Buddhist worldview is to fully comprehend their view of time. This is difficult for westerners who are influenced by the Judeo-Christian view. Time for Westerners is finite; there is a beginning and an end, and for the Christian, history has a planned culmination. Because of the Buddhist view of history, their symbol is understandably a wheel. It stands for their belief that history is cyclical, i.e., it repeats itself because of bad karma.

2. A View of Knowledge Based on Experience

Probably one of the biggest stumbling blocks in communicating with those of Eastern faiths is a failure to comprehend their distaste for western logic. Rationality, deductive logic, and even language (the ability to communicate thoughts) are based on the concept *A is not non-A*, or thesis and antithesis. For most Eastern worldviews, logical contradiction is not a problem. Knowledge is personal; experience is everything.

3. A Monistic View of Reality

Reality for a Buddhist is single (monistic). Westerners historically were dualists in that they believed reality is of two sorts: material and spiritual. For an Easterner, reality is only spiritual, i.e., eternal

spirit. The material world is illusionary (*maya*). For the Easterner all is one; the universe is eternal spirit and non-personal. Diversity is an illusion. To have a concept of myself as an individual is diversity, an illusion that hinders the quest for nirvana. There are no universals and no essence of things except the impersonal universal spirit. There are particulars, but they are illusions and constantly changing (the doctrine of impermanence).

4. The Law of Karma: It is the law of cause and effect, a doctrine that a person's actions in the past govern his present life. Your actions in the present will affect your future life. Bad karma hinders your journey toward nirvana. Good karma takes you nearer. It is this determinism of the law of karma that produces the fatalism so characteristic of Eastern philosophies.
5. Buddhist salvation (enlightenment) comes when one experiences oneness with all things, where self-consciousness gives way to cosmic consciousness. This state is also called *nirvana*. It occurs when the cycle of endless birth and death is finally broken. Salvation, as in most Eastern religions and New Age fads, is a matter of realizing *what you already are*, and not becoming *what you should be* as in Christianity. When a Buddhist realizes enlightenment it is *an experience* that cannot be expressed in words.

C. The Four Noble Truths

1. Suffering is the universal experience of all beings in existence. Life is a succession of suffering experiences.
2. The Cause of suffering is desire, desiring possessions, or the desire for every kind of enjoyment, and the desire to live forever. At the root of this is the desire for a separate individual existence.
3. The Cure for suffering is to eliminate desire. Genuine peace, or nirvana, is only achieved when all human passions have been extinguished.
4. The Fourth Truth is the Eight-fold Path which is the means or process to eliminate suffering. It is meant to be a course of self-improvement (or rather eliminating self!) that will ultimately lead to

the extinction of human desires resulting in moral perfection. The Buddha believed that if humans were to become detached from *the wheel* of birth and death they must follow this *Middle Way*, rather than self-indulgence and self-mortification.

D. The Eight-fold Path

1. Right Views: one must have the right philosophical viewpoint on such things as suffering, the self, and its destiny.
2. Right Intent: having the right goals, altruism in all acts.
3. Right Speech: speech should be gentle, kind and soothing to the ear.
4. Right Conduct: refers to moral living in the sexual realm and in relation to others, respecting their property, being charitable, etc.
5. Right Livelihood: being free from luxury, making sure no living thing is harmed, and being involved in activities which make one useful to mankind.
6. Right Endeavor: avoiding and overcoming evil.
7. Right Mindfulness: having the right attitude of detachment to physical things and the body, and to instead think of others and spiritual phenomena.
8. Right Meditation: This is the primary method of achieving the above state. In Christian meditation one concentrates his thoughts on God. It involves propositional thinking, ascribing qualities to God. Eastern meditation is almost the exact opposite. The goal is to become detached from the self or mind that is thinking. Remember, the fact that a person views himself as an independent self is the problem. Meditation then is usually a lengthy mental exercise whereby the devotee is purified of all distractions until he arrives at that trance-like state where he views himself as being one with the universe and not a transcendent self. To get to this state, where one is no longer conscious of self, is to achieve the highest form of perfection and enlightenment, i.e., *buddhahood*.

E Classical Buddhism is without doubt one of the most rigorous and radical

forms of self-deliverance (works-salvation) ever conceived. More modern forms tend to offer shortcuts, e.g., Zen Buddhism.

IV. The Branches of Buddhism

A. Theravada Buddhism (also called *Hinayana* which means *The Little Vehicle*.)

Some refer to this form as classical Buddhism, or *the hard, or austere way*. It is believed to be the purest form of the Buddha's teaching. It is popular in Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and other southeast Asian countries (which is why it is sometimes called *southern Buddhism*). This legalistic form of Buddhism emphasizes meditation and a rigorous observation of the Eight-Fold path. It holds the Buddha in high regard but does not ascribe deity to him.

B. Mahayana Buddhism (*The Great Vehicle*.)

It is referred to as *the Great Vehicle* because the movement is so diverse. There are literally dozens of movements that come under the umbrella of Mahayana Buddhism. It is the form found largely in China, Japan and Korea. Contrary to the previous form, MB does deify the Buddha. Prayers are directed to the Buddha that everyone may become as fully enlightened as he. A fully enlightened being who is reborn is referred to as a *bodhisattva*. This is a person who has won the right to nirvana but chooses to be re-born in this life in order to help others achieve enlightenment. One of the more popular sects of MB is Zen Buddhism which stresses a rapid attainment of enlightenment, though it is atypical in that the deity of Buddha is not stressed.

C. Vajayana Buddhism (*The Tantric Vehicle*.)

Vajayana is often referred to as *Tibetan Buddhism* or *Lamaism*. This form of Buddhism is the most syncretistic and occultic, as it incorporated the gods and demons of the ancient Tibetans. Magic and chanted mantras are employed to attain enlightenment. Because of the level of involvement necessary to really practice this form of Buddhism one needs to become a monk and live in a monastery. Contrary to other forms of Buddhism, VB tends to be more monolithic as it is ruled by a succession of reincarnated Lamas (The current Lama is a past winner of the Nobel Peace Prize). Needless to say, this is the form of Buddhism now being

romanticized by Hollywood.

V. Some Observations

From a Western perspective Buddhism would seem to suffer from some fatal contradictions:

- A. The first one has to do with desire and attaining nirvana. A state of desiring is said to be what keeps one from attaining enlightenment. But should one *desire* enlightenment? Isn't wanting to save oneself selfish? Later Buddhists have attempted to solve this paradox by the concept of a *bodhisattva*. As stated earlier, a *bodhisattva* is one who has met all the requirements for nirvana but choose instead to remain in the world to direct other lost souls. His choice to stay back is ultimate proof of his selflessness. But now we have another paradox: If only a *bodhisattva* can enter nirvana because only he is unselfish, then who *can* enter nirvana? A *bodhisattva* cannot enter or he would not be a *bodhisattva*.
- B. Secondly, If nirvana is the ultimate experience, and if it is only attained by the loss of the self, who is experiencing nirvana? How can you have an experience without an experiencer?
- C. If the law of karma results in determinism, and the self is an illusion, how can free choices be made to do what is right to build up a store of good karma?
- D. This one grows out of the previous, and it is a death blow to any kind of true moral system. In a monistic system where no infinite, personal, holy God exists, what can be good or evil? By what authority can one act be declared good and another evil? This is perhaps the major philosophical problem of all Eastern philosophies and religions. If good and evil are illusions then where does the authority come from to follow the Eight-Fold path? By contrast, the Christian does a compassionate act because it is good in itself. A classical Buddhist does the act to put up positive karma. But isn't this self-defeating since this makes it a selfish act?
- E. Readers should note a close resemblance between some forms of Buddhism (particularly Zen) and the philosophy of existentialism (see CIM Outline # 50). Heidegger and other existentialists admit their debt to Buddhism. A critique of the philosophy of existentialism may also apply to similar points in Buddhism philosophy.

- F. Though Buddhism is an irrational worldview they must resort to western methods to communicate their beliefs: they write books and give lectures. However, using language, writing books, etc. involves the use of reasoning and logic. The most consistent Buddhist is the one who refuses to speak. The Buddha himself when confronted with a contradiction would only answer in silence. Experience is what matters.

For Further Study:

Anderson, Sir Norman. *The World's Religions*. See Chapter 5.

Clark, David K. *The Pantheism of Alan Watts*.

Clements, R.D. *God and the Gurus*.

Corduan, Winfried. *Neighboring Faiths*. See Chapter 8.

Cox, Harvey. *Turning East: The Promise and Peril of the New Orientalism*.

Gard, Richard A. ed. *Buddhism*.

Hackett, Stuart C. *Oriental Philosophy*.

Johnson, David L. *Asian Religions*.

Lochhaas, Philip H. *How to Respond to... The Eastern Religions*.

Needleham, Jacob. *The New Religions: The Teachings of the East*.

Needleham, Jacob, and Baker, George. *Understanding the New Religions*.

Robinson, Richard H. *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction*.

Yamamoto, J. Isamu. *Beyond Buddhism*.