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Mission to Buddhists

Andy Owen & Phone Keo Keovilay

As I settled into the old cracked vinyl of the barber chair, I said a silent prayer to God: “Lord, lead our conversation today.” I (Andy) was making my regular visit to the barber shop, and had been looking forward to another conversation with my friend Phansaa. We always have lively discussions around a broad range of topics, from sports to politics to religion and everything in between. On this day, I steered the topic towards religion. Phansaa is a dedicated Buddhist, who sincerely tries to learn and practice the teaching of the Buddha. I asked him,

“Phansaa, suppose you were invited to an international gathering of Christians who sincerely wanted to learn about Buddhism. What would you say to them? Why are you a Buddhist?”



Andy Owen (M.A. Global Leadership, Fuller Theological Seminary) and wife Carmen were part of Team 2000, which began MB church planting in central Thailand in 2001. Andy now serves as Southeast Asia Regional Team Leader for MB Mission in Chiang Mai, Thailand, equipping missionaries and national leaders for holistic church planting to reach the least reached in a region which is predominantly Buddhist.

Phone Keo Keovilay was born in Laos and came to faith in a refugee camp in northern Thailand. Following immigration to California, USA, in 1992, he began a church plant to the Lao/Khmu community, in cooperation with Butler Church (MB) in Fresno. For many years he traveled back to Khmu villages in Southeast Asia to share the gospel. Today he lives in that region serving in church planting, leadership development and social ministries among the Khmu and Hmong people groups.

Phansaa put down his scissors for a moment and thought.

“That’s a good question,” he replied, “I would say I am a Buddhist because my father and mother were Buddhists, and their parents were Buddhists, and my ancestors as far back as I can remember have been Buddhists. However, even though it has been handed down to me, I would still choose to be a Buddhist because I believe what the Buddha taught is true.”

Today, there are 480 million followers of Buddhism worldwide. Some claim that the influence of Buddhism reaches over one billion people, including those who practice various forms of wider folk Buddhism. This would make it either the third or fourth largest religion in the world, depending on how you measure. Whether it was handed down to them, or because they believe that it is true, one out of seven people in the world are directly influenced by Buddhism. In this chapter, we will look to explore the historical development of Buddhism, its main teachings, and consider how Christians can effectively share their faith with their Buddhist friends.

History of Buddhism

Buddhism began through the journey of one man on a search for spiritual truth. Siddhartha Gautama was born near the present-day border of India and Nepal, in about the fifth century BC. During this period of time, Daniel was in a Babylonian palace and the Israelites were searching for identity after the temple had been destroyed. Others were searching for truth as well. This period of time saw the rise of eastern religions such as Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, and Jainism. As we study the life of Gautama, who later became known as Buddha, we can see parallels to our own pluralistic times and many who are on a search for truth.

Who was the Buddha?

The word *Buddha* comes from an ancient language called Sanskrit. It is an honorific title which refers to a person who is awakened, or enlightened (nirvana). Most of the time when people use the word Buddha, they are referring to the man who is believed to have reached enlightenment and founded the Buddhist community, Siddhartha Gautama. However, Buddhism today recognizes thousands of people who have reached nirvana and are also known as “Buddha.” This explains why there are different types of images of Buddha. The thinner statues of Buddha refer to the founder Gautama. The “fat” and “laughing” Buddha statues are actually of a different person, a monk named Hotei who came after Gautama and is related to a different branch of Buddhism. We will study the various branches of Buddhism later in the

chapter, but for now we will examine the three main periods in the life of the founder, Siddhartha Gautama.

Affluence. Gautama was born a Hindu prince. His mother passed away shortly after he was born, and his father received a prophecy from local noblemen that his son would become a great man. His father then pampered the young prince, not wanting him to suffer for any reason. He was surrounded by luxury and pleasure, and grew up completely unaware of the darker side of life. At the age of sixteen he married a young princess, lived in a comfortable palace, and had a son.

Ascetic Life of a Monk. The second period of Gautama's life began when one day the prince left his palace and observed four different people: an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a priest. Shaken by the sight, one night he quietly left his wife and son while they were sleeping. At the age of twenty-nine, he abandoned his life of luxury to become a monk and discover the cause and cure for suffering.

For the next six years, Gautama followed the rigorous austerity of an ascetic, disciplined life. Initially he tried to follow two Hindu teachers but felt Hinduism did not provide the answer. He left to find his own way, and soon had five disciples following him, punishing their bodies, fasting, meditating, and praying for the answers to the meaning of life. Ultimately he found that the ascetic life only added more suffering.

Middle Way and Enlightenment. Gautama rejected both complete self-denial and also a life of luxury, and pursued a middle way of balance between the two. The third period of his life began with Gautama, desperate and disillusioned, meditating underneath a Bo fig tree. He vowed not to get up until he was enlightened. Finally, after seven weeks of meditation, he received enlightenment, which included the Four Noble Truths (see below).

Gautama, now known as Buddha, rejected the worship of God or any gods. He began teaching that the karma (cause and effect) of our actions in this life and prior lives resulted in a constant cycle of birth, aging, sickness, death, and rebirth (reincarnation). The way out of this cycle comes through following Buddhist teaching (known as *Dhamma*) through meditation and discipline. Buddha then found disciples whom he taught and they eventually became the first Buddhist community. Gautama Buddha continued to teach his disciples until died at the age of eighty, most likely of food poisoning.

The Growth and Development of Buddhism

Buddha's teaching career spanned forty-five years, and reached around 2,000 disciples. For the next two hundred years or so, Buddhism was mostly confined to north India. However, under the reign of King Asoka (274-232 BC), Buddhism

became much more prevalent as the king sent out Buddhist missionaries to convert the people. King Asoka then sent missionaries to other countries and it spread east throughout Asia. Within 1,500 years it became the dominant religious influence in Asia as it remains to this day. In the twentieth century, Buddhism began making popular inroads into the West, through immigration as well as through conversion. Post-modern, humanistic thought relates well with the concepts of Buddhism, and in the United States alone there are estimated to be over 1 million practitioners.

Buddhism as its Practiced Today

Wherever Buddhism spread, it often did not reject the local customs and practices, but rather absorbed them. This assimilation caused a great deal of variety within different communities of Buddhism.

Major Schools

Today there are two main schools of Buddhism, with multiple smaller branches and sects. Theravada Buddhism is considered the more conservative branch, practiced mostly in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Mahayana Buddhism is considered the more liberal school of Buddhism, practiced in East Asia and around the world. As mentioned earlier, Theravada Buddhism is represented by the “skinny” Buddha statues, and represents the oldest, strictest, and purest form of Buddhism. Theravada means “the way of the elders”. Mahayana means “big vehicle,” and it represents a broader and less strict path to enlightenment, as represented by the fat and laughing Buddha images. A major branch which came out of Mahayana is Tibetan Buddhism

Buddhism:

Key Facts & Terms

- 480 million followers worldwide.
- Established in the 5th century B.C.
- Founded by the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, who became known as Gautama Buddha, “the enlightened one.”
- The two main sects are Theravada, mostly practiced in Southeast Asia, and Mahayana, mostly practiced in East Asia, Tibet, and parts of the West. Tibetan and Zen Buddhism are branches of Mahayana Buddhism.
- Buddhism believes there is no God, but each person must follow the path to enlightenment to escape the cycle of birth, aging, suffering, and death
- Buddhism ascribes to a karmic system of rebirth and reincarnation

* Statistics from *The World Factbook* 2013-14. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2013. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/e-world-factbook/index.html>

(also known as Vajrayana). Tibetan Buddhism acknowledges the Dalai Lama as its visible head. The Dalai Lama is arguably the most recognized Buddhist figure around the world, but his influence in the Buddhist world is limited.

Major Teachings

The basic beliefs of Buddhism are well known and held throughout all the major schools. Following is a brief summary of these teachings.

- ***The Three Jewels***—these are the pillars of Buddhism, consisting of the Buddha, the Dharma (teaching of the Buddha), and the Sangha (the Buddhist priesthood and community).
- ***The Four Noble Truths***—as described by the Buddha when he reached enlightenment.
 1. All of life is suffering—all existence is marked by the cycle of birth, decay, and death.
 2. The cause of suffering is desire—the desire to exist, to preserve self, and the desire for material things only cause more suffering.
 3. The solution is to extinguish desire.
 4. The way to extinguish desire is through the eightfold path.
- ***The Eight-Fold Path***
 1. Right vision/views
 2. Right thoughts/intentions
 3. Right speech
 4. Right action
 5. Right mode of livelihood
 6. Right effort
 7. Right awareness
 8. Right concentration/meditation
- ***The Five Sins***—in reality the common Buddhist does not completely understand the Four Noble Truths, and they can't fully practice the Eight-Fold path. However, they have some concept of the necessity to keep the moral precepts. The lower level of the Dharma (teaching) of the Buddha includes five prohibitions for the common person to avoid:
 1. Refrain from taking life
 2. Refrain from theft
 3. Refrain from sexual misconduct
 4. Refrain from lying
 5. Refrain from intoxicants (drugs and alcohol)

- ***Karma***—this is the iron law which influences one's path towards (or away from) enlightenment. Every deed, good or bad, is recorded and will determine one's fate in this life and the next. Many Buddhists, knowing they will not reach nirvana, often try to improve their karma by making merit. Making merit includes going to the temple, giving to the monks, doing something kind, or giving to a charitable cause. When pressed, most Thai Buddhists are not able to know if they have made enough merit to cover the bad deeds and improve their karma. It is an unchanging law of cause and effect which leads to the cycles of rebirth (reincarnation) and the consequent suffering.

Folk Buddhism & Idol Worship

The majority of Buddhists in East Asia are in fact folk Buddhists. Elements of Buddhism are mixed with local primal religions such as Brahmanism. The orientation of the folk Buddhist is not so much to follow the Eight-Fold path of classical Buddhism, but rather to improve their karma by making merit, and to manipulate the spirit world for their own benefit. This spirit-based world view leads to a lifestyle based more on ritual and superstition rather than meditation and following the Buddha's teaching. Most folk Buddhists are not aware of any difference between these animistic practices and the classical teachings.

One example of this is idol worship. Buddhist statues, spirit houses, and various idols abound in Thailand. The teachings of "pure" Buddhism insist that Gautama Buddha no longer exists, and therefore cannot be supplicated. The path to enlightenment (Nirvana), according to Buddha, was not through idol worship. However, one only has to make a trip to the most popular tourist destination in Thailand to see how many look for hope and direction from idol worship. Inside the grounds of Wat Phra Kaew in Bangkok sits the Emerald Buddha statue, the nation's talisman. Every day, Thai and foreign visitors come to sit solemnly in the large hall with the statue looking down upon them. Many Buddhists will pray to the spirit of the idol in order to gain luck, fortune, or assistance in their lives. This scene is replayed throughout Thailand, as people make supplications to various idols, amulets, statues, and charms in order to gain a better or safer life.

The syncretistic reality of the religious practice of most Buddhists can make it difficult to truly grasp the actual beliefs of Buddhist people. In some instances Buddhism has been described as a pie: the outside crust may be traditional Buddhism, but inside is a mix of Hindu gods, Brahmanism, and animism. Much of the daily

life routine, symbols, and rituals of the average Buddhist are more influenced by their animistic beliefs than by a desire to reach enlightenment through traditional Buddhist teachings.

Buddha and Jesus: “Point the Way” and “I am the Way”

In beginning to understand the complicated reality of actual Buddhist practices and beliefs, one can see the difficulty in witnessing to Buddhists. They often have adapted their religion to fit their current situation and are impervious to rational argument or attempts to convince them that Jesus is the way. That’s why Alex Smith, a veteran missionary to Thailand and author of several books about Thai culture, religion, and history, says: “Sharing the gospel with a Buddhist is like slicing water with a knife.” When talking with a Buddhist about Jesus, often the first response will be “all religions are good and teach you how to be a good person.” After all, the Dalai Lama himself, the unofficial spokesperson of Buddhism, said: “Religion is like food for the mind, and as we all have different tastes, we must take that which is most suitable to us.”

However, despite the complicated reality of actual Buddhist practices and beliefs, the gospel is taking root among Buddhist cultures. Recent church history has documented church planting movements among Buddhists in South Korea, Cambodia, and Laos. Individuals, families, and even entire communities are turning to God. What is happening in these places and is there anything we can learn in how to witness to a Buddhist? Consider the story of Khattanan, a Buddhist monk in northern Thailand.

Khattanan: Victory over Addiction and Fear

When Khattanan was a young man finishing high school, he realized he did not have enough money to continue his education. The only way to keep studying was to become a monk and go to the Buddhist university in Chiang Mai, which was free for monks. So he shaved his head, said his vows to follow the Buddhist teachings, and began to live the life of a monk in study and in service. He received a B.A. in Buddhism, and taught others about the Buddhist religion. After eight years as a monk, he resigned and became a teacher in a high school located in a Buddhist temple. After leaving the structure of the monkhood, Khattanan began to indulge in the liberties of a life without accountability, and began drinking, smoking, and living a secular life with his friends.

Khattanan lived in a guest house attached to the school where he was teaching. After moving in, he began to be tormented by an evil spirit every night. He found out that someone had died in the room he was staying in. As a monk, he had learned how to exorcise demons. However, he could not cast this demon out, and it was causing him much fear and sleepless nights.

He shared this story with his mother. His mother recalled that one of their relatives in their Khmu tribe was a Christian and perhaps he might be able to help. She contacted her cousin, Pastor Khun, from the north of Thailand. He explained that Jesus has power over all of the spirits, and we need to pray to him to cast this demon out. He volunteered to do so, and was able to cast out the demon that Khattanan could not.

This, of course, began to spark Khattanan's interest in Christianity. Initially he was very resentful of his uncle, Pastor Khun. He felt that his relative was betraying their family, their culture, and their religion. However, he could not argue with the power that was displayed. One day, Khattanan went back to his village and went to a meeting where this author (Phone Keo) was preaching. Phone Keo preached that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Something about this description of Jesus attracted Khattanan to go speak with Phone Keo. Phone Keo began to build a relationship with this young man, befriending him, understanding his dreams and aspirations, and answering many questions and objections about Christ. However, Phone Keo needed to travel back to the USA, so he then gave Khattanan a Bible with instructions to read the Gospel of John, and asked Pastor Khun to continue to follow up.

A few months later, Phone Keo heard from Pastor Khun: Khattanan has believed in Jesus! Phone Keo contacted Khattanan and asked him why he believed, and this was his response:

At first I was just trying to prove that Buddhism was superior to Christianity, so that I could convince my family. Buddhism is a good structure with good laws. But even I, a former monk, could not actually live by them. I could not stop smoking or drinking or doing things that I knew were destructive in my life. I kept thinking about Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life. So finally I asked Jesus to show me the way. After I gave my life to Jesus, I had no more desire to smoke or drink. When I would sleep, I used to feel tormented, but now I pray to Jesus and have no more fear of evil spirits. My life is full of joy and freedom now that I have experienced the power of God to help me win the battle against addiction and fear.”

After becoming a Christian, Khattanan lived in Pastor Khun's village and continued to grow in his faith. Currently, he is serving God among his fellow Khmu people in his village, among MB churches, and in the Changed Life Center, a youth hostel and leadership training center for MB Khmu. He is an associate pastor, and now has a BA in Theology as well as a BA in Buddhism.

Khattanan's story reminds us of one of the basic differences between Buddha and Jesus. Buddha saw his role as one who could point the way to enlightenment. Then it is up to each adherent of his teachings to walk their own path. In reality, however, the path to spiritual perfection is impossible. Even for a former monk, to follow all of the laws and teachings was hopeless. In contrast, Jesus says that he *is* the way. The gospel teaches that we must rely on his saving work on the cross to walk the path towards peace, wholeness, and eternal life with him. Religion is mankind's attempt to find God. Christianity, however, is God's attempt to find humanity, and to show him the way.

Sharing Your Faith with a Buddhist: A Relational Approach

When you share your faith with a Buddhist, the goal is not to begin by talking openly about the Bible or Jesus Christ. It is more important initially to find out about their life. Begin to build a relationship with them, finding out what their problems and struggles are. Let them see the problems in their lives first, because people will not be able to grasp the solution before they understand the problem. After sharing life with them, and understanding their issues, you can begin by sharing your own testimony of how you may have had similar problems, but now your life is changed because of Jesus Christ. Once you have shared your testimony, look for opportunities to show the love of Jesus through practical acts of service or help. Then begin to point them to specific scriptures and steps to take to receive Jesus as their Savior.

In the list below, Phone Keo shares some practical ways he has found success in sharing Christ with Buddhists:

- First, **get into their lives** enough to know their problems, their hopes, their dreams.
- Second, motivate them to begin to open the door of their heart as you **share your own testimony**.
- Third, **show them God's love**—put hands and feet on your testimony. Be an example. Show them who God is in you. When they see your life and the difference, they will be attracted to Jesus.
- Next, look for ways to **explain the attraction**—why are we different? Christians in their own strength cannot do good either, but God changed our lives.

- Then **bring them a Bible**—give them some specific verses and principles about how God can change their life and provide power to face their problems.
- Do not neglect to **pray for them!** Pray seriously for them—then tell them you care for them and are praying for them. Pray for them in person if possible. Ask them how they are doing after praying for them.
- Continue to **follow up** regularly. Be friends. Encourage them. Practice patience and understanding.
- Don't push them to come to church right away! This may be way out of their comfort zone and their ability to grasp what is going on.
- **Don't compare religions!** Intellectual debate rarely leads to conversion and life transformation.
- Don't try to rush them to pray to receive Christ! They may just be trying to help you save face.
- Begin to **connect them with other Christians**, if possible others who were former Buddhists, to help them see that Christianity is not just a religion for white people or foreigners.
- Help them to understand who God is, and what it means to follow him, through select scriptures as you study the Bible together. **Begin with creation**, explaining God and his purpose for creating the universe and humanity.
- Point them to see the root of problems in our lives and in the world: **sin**.
- From there, point them to the solution: **the cross of Jesus Christ**.
- **Invite them to pray to receive Christ** as the Spirit leads in your relationship. Begin to help them grow in their faith in the Christian community.
- Don't be discouraged if, even after committing to Christ, they say they are only 50% Christian! This is common as it takes time for them to give their lives fully to Jesus. Continue to follow up, show love, and model your own faith. **Walk them through the initial steps of discipleship**, including the very real possibility of needing to address issues of spiritual bondage as a result of their former practices.
- **Rejoice with the angels** when a lost soul is found and eternity is changed!

Conclusion: Hate Buddhism, Love the Buddhist

As I write this, I (Andy) am sitting in a crowded food court at a popular local mall in Thailand. I look around at the faces of the people around me: children enjoying their meal with mothers and grandmothers. Young couples are chatting about life over a bowl of noodle soup. Professionals are reviewing their latest business deals, while teenagers are checking their smart phones. I know that based on the statistics, it is likely that 96% of these people are Buddhist. Each of them has their own hopes

and fears, successes and failures, joys and sorrows. They are created by God and loved by him.

Some have said that Buddhism is the masterpiece of Satan—it is spirituality without God. So as we wrestle against the spiritual forces of darkness, we must pray for God to open the blind eyes of the millions upon millions of people who have been blinded by the lies of Buddhism. There is a God, and he loves the whole world. There is hope beyond ourselves to alleviate the sin and suffering we see around us. Jesus is calling us as his body to reach out to those who have not yet experienced his love and his grace, and proclaim his gospel through word and deed. As the Spirit empowers us, may we be his witnesses to Buddhist people both across the street and around the world.

Recommended Reading

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Study Questions

1. Consider and discuss the advice for engaging Buddhists as provided by Phone Keo—someone intimately acquainted with this religion. Follow lines of gifts: what personal gifts or personality have prepared you for engaging Buddhists? What do you lack—which will you need to study for, and pray for?
2. John 14:6 (“I am the way, truth and life”) was a key verse with unique power. Discuss other key scriptures that connect well with Buddhists.

