

## **Answering Buddhism**

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Buddhism is a religion based not only on personal experience (which takes a very prominent role in Buddhist apologetics), but deep philosophical reflection upon the problem of human suffering. Popular Buddhist philosophy emphasizes human intellectual and moral autonomy, thereby negating any felt need to submit to God or to feel shame over one's attitude or actions. Furthermore, Buddhism was polemical in its inception and continues to be so to this day. As such, Buddhism has given rise to an army of philosophically astute thinkers. Throughout the centuries, Buddhist apologists have erected impressive arguments in defence of Buddhism as the sole avenue to truth. Today Buddhism not only flourishes in the East where it was spawned, but also in the West, where a premium is placed on human autonomy and immediate happiness. Seemingly strong apologetics coupled with guaranteed success in defeating the problem of suffering, along with its non-theistic metaphysic, virtually assured Buddhism's success.<sup>1</sup> All these factors make Buddhism a chief competitor with Christianity in the West. The contemporary Christian apologist is therefore virtually obligated to understand, and be prepared to refute, Buddhist teaching.

Buddhist doctrine rests upon the claims of Siddartha Gautama, who was born around 566 B.C. in a region of the Indian subcontinent that now lies in southern Nepal.<sup>2</sup> According to tradition, Siddartha was raised in aristocracy and sheltered from all forms of evil and human suffering. At age 29, he ventured from the palace and encountered four

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<sup>1</sup>Tom Lowenstein, *The Vision of the Buddha* (Toronto, ON: Little, Brown & Company, 1996), p.6.

<sup>2</sup>Malcolm David Eckel, *Great World Religions: Buddhism* (Chantilly, VA: The Great Courses, 2003), p.8.

troubling sights: a crippled man, a sick man, a corpse, and a wandering holy man. He set his mind on finding the solution to the problem of human suffering for the next several years. At first he tried extreme asceticism, which he found ineffective in his quest for enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> Finally at age 35, he sat down under a tree and fell into a trance. It was there that he is said to have “woken up.” That is, his eyes were opened to the true nature of reality, and all of his desires were suddenly extinguished. In that moment he became the “Buddha” (enlightened one). He was suddenly aware of four important metaphysical truths: 1) existence is suffering, 2) desire was the cause of suffering, 3) desire could be eradicated, thereby ending human suffering, and 4) the eight-fold path as a prescriptive list of attitudes and actions which, if followed perfectly, will lead a person to nirvana (a “blowing out” of desire). These eight prescriptions are as follows: Right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mind, and right concentration.<sup>4</sup>

The doctrine of impermanence is the heart of Buddhist philosophy. On this view, ultimate reality is change or flux, and all apparent enduring identity is said to be illusory.<sup>5</sup> Enlightenment, or “waking up,” is “seeing” that there are no personal beings that retain an identity over time. Suffering is the result of desiring, and desiring only comes out of the mistaken belief that one is a distinct and enduring “someone.” When that mistaken

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<sup>3</sup>

Lowenstein, pp. 14-15

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H. Wayne House, *Charts of World Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), chart 67.

<sup>5</sup> Steve Hagen, *Buddhism Plain & Simple* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 1997), pp.134-135.

belief is expunged, desires fall away and suffering is brought to an end. The goal then, is to overcome the illusion of individuality by observing the eight-fold path.

The Buddha's teaching was similar to the prevailing Hindu philosophies of his time in several respects. First, in both Hinduism and Buddhism the problem that loomed large was the problem of reincarnation.<sup>6</sup> To the eastern mind, the idea of endless reincarnations into a world wracked with pain and suffering was positively nightmarish.<sup>7</sup> Second, both religions taught that reincarnation is the result of attitudes and actions of past lives. Third, both taught that the way to end the cycle is simply through seeing the truth about reality. Fourth, both taught that in order to see, one would have to commit to living in accordance with a prescribed set of ethical principles. In a general sense then, original Buddhism bears at least a superficial resemblance to popular Hindu philosophy. There are, however, marked differences between the two religions.

Within the Hindu religious tradition, there are two main views regarding the future of those who reach enlightenment and release from the cycle of reincarnation.

Houston Smith explains:

Some say the individual soul passes into complete identification with God [Brahman] and loses every trace of its former separateness. Others, wishing to taste sugar, not be sugar, cherish the hope that some slight differentiation between the soul and God will still remain—a thin line upon the ocean that provides nevertheless a remnant of a personal identity that some consider indispensable for beatific vision.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Madhu Bazaz Wangu, *World Religions: Buddhism, Fourth Edition* (New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 2009), p.24.

<sup>7</sup>John Snelling, *Buddhism: A Richly Illustrated Voyage in the Heart of the Buddhist Tradition* (Rockport, MA: Element Inc., 1996), p.8.

<sup>8</sup>Houston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1991), p.67.

On Hinduism, enlightenment either leads to a person's complete absorption into Brahman, much like a single drop of water falling into an endless ocean, or, for all eternity, that person will somehow retain individuality despite his merger with the divine. Buddhist philosophy denies both views. On Buddhism, since absolutely everything is in flux, individuality is an illusion. There is no enduring "self" in this life, much less when a person reaches nirvana. Whereas on monistic Hinduism an enlightened person's soul merges with Brahman like a drop of water in an endless ocean, the Buddha, realizing his own non-existence, merges with an "ocean" equally devoid of any enduring identity.

The exact reason for reincarnation and the manner in which it takes place also differ among the two religions. According to Hindu thought, inappropriate attitudes and actions in one life causes karmic debt to accrue. This debt is the reason why an individual soul (jiva) migrates into another body in the next life. Thus, the Hindu strives to live a good life in order to work off karmic debt. Doing so will ensure a better reincarnation, if not complete enlightenment and release. Buddhism, however, rejects the notion of individual personal entities that retain identity over time. On Buddhism, what migrates from one life to the next is not an individual soul, but strands of desire. It is not inappropriety and karmic debt in the Hindu sense that leads to rebirth. Rather, it is a bundle of unfulfilled cravings with a mistaken sense of self that experiences reincarnation.

Immediately following his enlightenment, the Buddha went about teaching his new doctrine. His insistence that his was the true way to enlightenment coupled with his innovations to popular Hinduism (e.g. rejection of the caste system and an emphasis on personal effort in achieving enlightenment) made his movement especially attractive. At this early stage, there was an emphasis on *the order*, that is, the body of devotees made

up of monks and nuns (samgha). On original Buddhism, only those who renounced all personal attachments and became part of the samgha could achieve enlightenment. Others, however, could work towards enlightenment by helping the monks (e.g. filling their begging bowls with food). In this way, the common person was moving toward selflessness in this life, which, though insufficient to achieve enlightenment, would help to ensure a better incarnation in the next life. King Asoka (r. 269-239 B.C.) was especially influential in this regard. Converted to the new faith, presumably out of remorse for his merciless slaughter of the Kalinga people, Asoka's missionary zeal contributed in no small way to Buddhism's widespread acceptance.<sup>9</sup> In terms both of philosophy and practise, Theravada Buddhism (dominant in Burma, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia) probably best represents what the Buddha actually taught.<sup>10</sup>

In the centuries following the Buddha's death, the emphasis within the Buddhist tradition began to shift from what the Buddha *taught* to his *motivation* for teaching.

David Noss explains:

“[The Buddha charged his disciples to love all humanity with a mother's love. . . . But here we are brought to a pause. Is this warmth of benevolent love consistent with the cloister-seeking motive that is so primary in the life of the monk yearning for nirvana? How can love issue from anyone so engrossed in self-liberation as to seek emotional detachment in every relationship? The question is a serious one. That there is at least a practical inconsistency here was recognized early in the history of Buddhism. In fact, it led, eventually . . . to the fundamental division within Buddhism between the Mahayana and the Theravada.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Smith, p. 126.

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Wangu, p. 56.

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David S. Noss, *A History of the World's Religions*, Eleventh Ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc., 2003), p. 183.

This second major division within the Buddhist tradition, known as Mahayana, brought many important innovations as shown in the following chart:<sup>12</sup>

Theravada	Mahayana
Attainment requires constant commitment and is achievable only by monks and nuns.	Religious practice is relevant to life in world. Laypeople may also achieve nirvana.
The ideal person is a saint who remains in nirvana after death.	The ideal person is one who purposely delays entering nirvana so that he may assist others in this life. This individual is a god-like being called a bodhisattva.
The Buddha is seen as a saint and the supreme teacher.	The Buddha is seen as a saviour.
Metaphysical speculation is discouraged. Practical knowledge pertaining to the elimination of personal suffering is emphasized.	Metaphysical speculation abounds. Various levels of heaven and hell and god-like bodhisattvas are contemplated.
Minimizes ritual	Emphasizes ritual
Practice centers on meditation	Includes petitionary prayer

Within Mahayana Buddhism there is widespread acceptance of the *Lotus Sutra* as an authoritative text. The *Lotus Sutra* contains the important “parable of the burning house,” which introduces the doctrine of “skilful means.” In the parable, a father (representing the Buddha) tries to lure his children out of a burning house by promising each of them a different cart. After the children escape, he only offers them one cart or “vehicle,” which represents the Mahayana tradition. Winfried Courduan explains:

The father did not tell the truth; however, only by enticing them with a falsehood could he make sure that they would escape from the flames and receive a toy of considerable value. This technique is *upaya* or “skilful means.” Similarly, the Buddha taught several messages, which cannot be reconciled with each other. Most significantly, he taught the Theravada message because it appealed to the self-interest of those who would become arhats and get their admission ticket to nirvana without caring for the fate of anyone else. The Lotus Sutra is extremely

<sup>12</sup>

Adapted from the chart in Smith, p.126.

disdainful of Theravada and its arhats. But [the Buddha] had to teach the Theravada message because that was the only way to teach the people at the time. It was not the truth, but he made use of upya, “skilful means,” so that they could eventually receive the truth, for which they were not yet prepared.”<sup>13</sup>

Buddhists who affirm the validity of “skilful means” should not be surprised if their message is met with skepticism; a person who accepts lying as an acceptable way of convincing others can hardly expect to be trusted as a reliable source of information. Nevertheless, Mahayana Buddhism spread quickly to China and Japan, where it was altered to reflect local beliefs and customs. In China, Buddhist doctrines that reflected popular Taoist thought were emphasized. Where possible, Buddhist doctrine was taught in Taoist terms.<sup>14</sup> In Japan, Mahayana Buddhism’s emphasis on the god-like bodhisattvas found an affinity with Shintoism.<sup>15</sup> Mahayana further developed into Vajrayana (popularly known as Tibetan Buddhism), which includes a plethora of Tantras (techniques and learning aids). Much of Vajrayana belief and practise remains shrouded in secrecy.<sup>16</sup>

Zen Buddhism, which arose in the tenth century A.D., in some ways represents a return to original Buddhism. Zen focuses on the individual and his own personal quest for nirvana. Unlike Theravada Buddhism, Zen devotees believe that nirvana is achievable without reincarnation. According to Zen teaching, the great hindrance to enlightenment is the rational mind. Zen practitioners utilize both seated meditation and the pondering of

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<sup>13</sup>Winfried Courduan, *Neighbouring Faiths, Second Ed.* (Downer’s Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012), p. 341.

<sup>14</sup>

Eckel, pp.50-52.

<sup>15</sup>

*Ibid.* p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> House, chart 71.

meaningless riddles in order to circumvent rational thought. Houston Smith explains that, “In Zen we are dealing with a perspective that is convinced that reason is limited and must be supplemented by another mode of knowing. . . . Once the mental barrier has been broken, it becomes intelligible. Like an alarm clock, it is set to awaken the mind from its dream of rationality.”<sup>17</sup>

Regarding the wide range of philosophies and practices that have developed within Buddhism, Eckel notes that:

Buddhism has changed so much that it is often difficult to see what makes it “Buddhist.” Buddhist teaching has evolved from the simple formulas of the Four Noble Truths to include traditions of devotion to celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas that would have been quite foreign to the early tradition, to say nothing of the immense philosophical complexities of Emptiness. . . . Is there anything that has not changed? Perhaps it is simply the serene image of the Buddha himself, who remains an island of calm throughout the turbulent history of tradition that bears his name.<sup>18</sup>

Buddhism’s success is largely due to its ability to innovate in order to appear relevant to a variety of cultures. It can hardly be denied that secularism dominates the public square in the modern West. Nevertheless, people know that the world is more than molecules in motion, and they are hopeful that there is a reason for, and hence a solution to, the problem of human suffering. Consequently, there is a growing interest in older Buddhist philosophy, which emphasizes human autonomy as much as it denies the existence (or at least the relevance) of a personal God. The result is a mixture of Theravada Buddhist philosophy, with its emphasis on personal enlightenment, with the Mahayana insistence that enlightenment is available to people outside of the priesthood. Into this mixture comes the demand of the Western mind for rational justification. Buddhist apologist

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<sup>17</sup> Smith, pp. 134, 135.

<sup>18</sup> Eckel, p. 63.

Kogen Mizuno declares that, “Religious practise without a sound rational basis tends to degenerate into superstition and error.”<sup>19</sup> He further states that, following the Buddha’s example when dealing with devotees of other religions, “...it is first necessary to show them the fallacies of other religions and philosophies and motivate them to abandon the mistaken practises encouraged by such systems.”<sup>20</sup> Mizuno’s demands for logical consistency ought to negate Buddhism as a worldview worth adopting. First, in the context of a religion that eschews duality and personal individuality, Mizuno affirms both. He draws a distinction between Buddhists and non Buddhists, and between rational thinkers and those guilty of fallacious reasoning. Secondly, though Mizuno rejects the notion of a personal creator God who obligates his intelligent creatures to obey his moral imperatives, his very statement demands that such a God actually exists. A two-part argument may be advanced first by positing that,

1. If an objective and prescriptive standard of rationality does not exist, fallacies do not exist.
2. Fallacies exist.
3. An objective and prescriptive standard of rationality exists.

Secondly,

1. If God does not exist, an objective and prescriptive standard of rationality does not exist.
2. An objective and prescriptive standard of rationality exists.
3. God exists.

In the second syllogism, premise #1 is at the very least more probably true than its negation. A personal creator God who calls for his creatures to reason in accordance with the laws of logic (which reflect his own immutable character) can certainly be conceived

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<sup>19</sup> Kogen Mizuno, *Basic Buddhist Concepts* (Tokyo, Japan: Kosei Publishing, 1987), 82.

<sup>20</sup> Mizuno, p.83.

of. It is much more difficult—perhaps impossible—to imagine impersonal forces *obligating* people. The Buddhist apologist demands logical consistency from competing worldviews, even though he cannot account for why consistency ought to be regarded as a reliable test for truth in the first place. The laws of logic that Mizuno appeals to in his defence of Buddhism are themselves evidence par excellence of Christianity’s rational necessity.

The Buddhist’s metaphysical commitments do not comport with his epistemology. On Buddhism, the universe is not the product of the Christian God, who upholds and sustains his creation and guarantees that natural processes will continue to unfold in a generally uniform way (Genesis 8:22; Luke 12:54-56). Nevertheless, according to the Buddha, the world is “one of lawful order in which events are governed by the pervading law of cause and effect.”<sup>21</sup> Mizuno concurs, further stating that, “the law of causation tells us that every phenomena [*sic*] in the universe is intimately related to all others.”<sup>22</sup>

If Mizuno is correct, it would be extremely difficult (again, perhaps impossible) to justify any knowledge claims. Buddhist metaphysics identifies man as just another part of a universe that was not intelligently designed. On this view, man was not intended to recognize, apprehend, appreciate, and communicate truth. If this view of man is adopted, it is difficult to see why exactly the deliverances of man’s rational and cognitive faculties should be trusted. This is a major point. Buddhist apologists insist on man’s intellectual autonomy and regard experience as the final court of appeal. Steven Hagen states that,

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<sup>21</sup> Smith, p. 119.

<sup>22</sup> Mizuno, p. 136.

“The Buddha repeatedly emphasized the impossibility of ever arriving at Truth by giving up your own authority and following the lights of others. Such a path will lead only to an opinion, whether your own or someone else’s.”<sup>23</sup>

Hagen’s statement is vitally important. It shows that *Buddhism, far from refuting Christianity’s claims, merely begs the question*. It assumes that Christianity is false by assuming that man is to be intellectually autonomous. This call for personal autonomy, however, not only contradicts the Buddhist denial of individual identity, but it inevitably leads to complete epistemological relativism. If man’s beliefs are the final court of appeal, then there is no way in which to adjudicate between conflicting beliefs. All beliefs could with equal validity be affirmed or denied; genuine knowledge acquisition would be impossible.

The Buddhist insistence that all legitimate knowledge is based upon personal experience creates two additional problems. First, the claim itself is not based upon personal experience and is therefore self-refuting. Second, since human experiences are limited, local, and temporal, the Buddhist’s *universal* claim that all things are interconnected cannot be regarded as legitimate knowledge. Given Buddhism’s epistemological commitments, the interconnectedness of all things must either be taken as an article of faith, which Buddhism rejects as an arbiter of truth, or be abandoned altogether. Even if the insistence that experience is the sole arbiter of truth and the doctrine of interconnectedness are somehow held in tension, the doctrine of interconnectedness itself poses an epistemological problem. If all things are interconnected the way that Buddhism maintains, one would have to know everything in

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<sup>23</sup>Hagen, p.9.

order to know anything. Buddhists who admit that they are less than omniscient therefore have no justification for any knowledge claims whatever.

The Christian worldview accounts for knowledge much better. Because God intends for his intelligent creatures recognize and apprehend truth, he has equipped them with the necessary rational and cognitive faculties. The psalmist writes:

Understand, ye brutish among the people: and *ye* fools, when will ye be wise? He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? he that formed the eye, shall he not see? He that chastiseth the heathen, shall not he correct? he that teacheth man knowledge, *shall not he know?* The LORD knoweth the thoughts of man, that they *are* vanity (Psalm 94:8-11).<sup>24</sup>

As a stream cannot run higher than its source, human reason can never be more authoritative than God's revelation. To ignore or deny God's role in epistemology is to reduce all human reasoning to vanity and foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:20). God has not only furnished man with the sensory capacities necessary to encounter the external world, he has also equipped man with certain innate knowledge. In his inspired prayer to God, David declared, "Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden *part* thou shalt make me to know wisdom" (Psalm 51:6). Though the Christian will readily admit that he doesn't know *everything*, he nevertheless can justify his claim to know *some* things. The Christian knows some things because the God who knows everything has informed him. He has done so by creating him with the necessary rational and cognitive faculties. He has done so by revealing himself in the created order (Romans 1:20), in the pages of the Bible (John 5:39), and in man's "heart of hearts" (Romans 2:14-15). The Christian worldview therefore not only accounts for why sense data may be regarded as generally reliable, but it also accounts for man's ability to properly interpret this data as well. Buddhist philosophy does neither.

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<sup>24</sup>Unless otherwise notes, all Scripture is from the *King James Version*

Contrary to the Buddhist's insistence on experience as the sole avenue to truth, causation, uniformity, and impermanence are accepted by the Buddhist as articles of faith *prior to* personal experience. These faith commitments act as the "lens" through which personal experiences are interpreted. If the Buddhist were consistent, he would admit that causal connections between events is not observed but inferred. Again The Christian finds justification for making such inferences because the God of the Bible endorses the causal notion (e.g. Matthew 7:27; Luke 13:4; Acts 14:17). Given Buddhist metaphysics, which denies the intelligent design and superintendence of the universe, it is difficult to see what justification the Buddhist could have for inferring causal connections between *any* observed events in a sequence. It is equally difficult to see what justification the Buddhist has for assuming that causal connections will continue to exist in the future. These faith commitments are even more dubious in light of the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence. If everything really is in flux, there is no reason to suspect that the assumed causal connection between desire and human suffering will continue to exist in the future. In fact, in a universe that was not intelligently designed, it is possible that in the future, desire will actually *alleviate* human suffering. Unless the Buddhist can rationally negate this possibility, Buddhism's central doctrine is in serious question.

The Christian understands that nothing happens apart from God's guidance and superintendence. Though the terms *randomness* and *chance* may be used to express human ignorance, they simply do not exist in a metaphysical sense. Buddhism, however, is different. Kogen Mizuno states:

Many factors over which the individual has little or no control also influence fate. . . . To these more or less identifiable forces must be added the element of

apparently pure chance. . . .a very thin line of chance is sometimes all the separates success from failure.<sup>25</sup>

If pure chance is accepted as a metaphysical truth, literally *anything* may have happened in the past or will happen in the future. In such a universe, even trying to determine the probability of certain events is a fruitless endeavour. In order determine probability, one must *assume* that natural processes will continue in a generally uniform way. Without justification for this assumption, the Buddhist worldview lacks the metaphysical resources to distinguish between what is probable and what is not. Buddhist philosophy therefore, like all anti-Christian systems of thought, cannot provide the metaphysical resources necessary for the acquisition of genuine knowledge. Though the Buddha's attempt to alleviate human suffering is commendable, his proposed solution contains many serious contradictions. By its own criteria, Buddhism must be rejected.

From a Christian perspective, human suffering is part of the just punishment for sin (Romans 5:12, 8:20-22). Nevertheless, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Christ's sacrifice on the cross was sufficient to redeem and restore the entire fallen creation. Though a person can receive forgiveness and eternal life right now by trusting in Jesus (John 6:47), universal restoration will take place upon Christ's return (Matthew 19:28; Acts 3:21). Though the Buddha was right to direct people away from *vain* desires, he was wrong to suggest extinguishing desire altogether. His insistence on human autonomy actually leads people away from the God of the Bible, who promises to grant the desires of the heart that delights in him (Psalm 37:4).

### **Bibliography**

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<sup>25</sup>Mizuno, p. 71.

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