

Buddhism on the Move

by Dr. Alex Smith (Spring, 2000)

Among the major world religions, Buddhism, with its emphasis on meditation, purity, peace, and compassion, appears to be the most non-threatening. Contrast this image with the common perception of Islam with its frequent threats of terrorism, bombings and hijackings. The picture most Westerners have of Buddhism is that of the Dalai Lama smiling, sophisticated, sweet and serene. Surprisingly, in some Christian seminaries in the USA, a large portrait of him has been placed prominently in their chapels, though photographs of Islamic leaders are never present.

A Burgeoning Billion

The phenomenal growth of Buddhism, particularly in the last quarter century, has made major inroads into the West. Historically Christianity was most popular in the West, and by the early 1900s the majority of Christians were still Westerners. But since then, major outreaches of missions have resulted in tremendous people movements, bringing multitudes on all continents into the Church. Consequently today the number of Christians located in the rest of the world is probably double that in the West.

Buddhism, on the other hand, was a major focus of the East, particularly in populous North, East, and Southeast Asia. Significantly only in recent decades has it spread like wildfire throughout the West. Today it claims ten million followers in the USA alone where over one thousand five hundred Buddhist temples are countable, and hundreds of Buddhist associations flourish. No wonder the notable historian Arnold Toynbee wrote that the latter half of the 20th century would be marked by "the inter-penetration of Buddhism and Christianity." According to Christianity Today (Dec. 6, 1999 p.34) University of Chicago sociologist Stephen R. Warner recently told Religion News Service, "The world of American religion is going through enormous change. It will be increasingly difficult to distinguish Christians and Buddhists." Today Buddhism strongly influences about a billion people, many of whom would be classified as "folk Buddhists." An estimated figure popularly quoted for Roman Catholics today is one billion. Protestants also claim one billion. Like the folk Buddhist billion, these are largely nominal "folk Christians."

A Syncretistic Mix

The impact from the spread of Buddhism may be illustrated by a product from a kitchen blender. Blend bananas - representing animism or Shintoism, apples - depicting indigenous religions like Taoism and Confucianism, and throw in pears - indicative of tribal belief structures. The composite mixture in the blender still remains a light, creamy color. Then add strawberries - symbolizing Buddhism, and the whole mixture is changed suddenly, saturated with a pink hue. That is precisely the effect of Buddhism.

It eclectically absorbed but did not alienate indigenous religions or animism. Under its "Doctrine of Assimilation", Buddhism dominated but did not dislodge these elements. In fact, in his excellent studies among Buddhist peoples, Dr. S.J. Tambiah of Cambridge University claims that while Westerners may analyze Buddhism into different religious elements -- Buddhist, animistic, Brahmanistic, Taoistic and others, the folk Buddhist sees those elements as one integrated whole, namely Buddhism. Like the mix in the blender, Buddhism permeates the whole and blends all together without losing the flavor of each element. Thus we find many variegated varieties of folk Buddhism throughout the world.

Major Schools and Cults

The plethora of Buddhist "denominations" with their innumerable cults is quite astounding. Here Buddhism certainly shows its tolerance, without sacrificing its basic integrative doctrinal foundations. Buddhism has many faces throughout the world. Primarily, however, there are two major schools: the conservative Theravada, known as Southern Buddhism, and the liberal Mahayana, known as Northern and Eastern Buddhism. Theravada tends to be focused mostly in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, though even there elements of Mahayana are commonly mixed in as well. Mahayana covers the globe, with major concentrations in East Asia. The Kwan Yin Buddhist cult, emphasizing a female bodhisattva of mercy, has revived and expanded worldwide, particularly in the latter 1900s.

Truly there is little pure Buddhism on earth, except among some dedicated intellectual Buddhists and long-term committed priests. Nevertheless, Buddhism is the integrating and identifying religion of approximately one billion. Buddhism is bigger than you think. Theravada accounts for about 150 million people. Mahayana accounts for approximately 850 million folk Buddhists, including around 16 million followers of Tantric Tibetan Buddhism, also known as Lamaism, Vajrayana, or Mantrayana. Tibetan Buddhism acknowledges the Dalai Lama as its visible head. It is quite popular in the USA because of the presence, policies and political cause of the Dalai Lama. Major branches of the Mahayana school include Tendai, Zen, Pure Land, Nichiren, Soka Gakkai and many others. Japan particularly has a proliferation of Buddhist cults. Probably 70% of the Japanese adhere to some form of Buddhism. In China on July 22, 1999 the P.R.C. authorities outlawed the Falun Gong cult, which incorporates Tai Chi with Buddhist meditation and practices.

Popular even among Communists government officials, this Buddhist cult claims over 160 million adherents. Currently Falun Gong is administered and run out of New York via the Internet.

Trouble in "Paradise"

Lately some cracks and crevices have appeared in Buddhism, though divisions and controversies are not new to this religion. The Bangkok Post of February 19, 1999 reported that, according to Phra Dhammapitaka, a highly respected Thai monk, aberrant schisms had arisen at Wat Dhammakaya. These were "corrupting the doctrine and discipline of Theravada Buddhism" and "negates Buddha." Such teachings and practices were contrary to the basic tenets of the Dhamma and the Sangha (Order of the Monks). Those who propagated divergent doctrines such as "Nirvana is a permanent heaven thus possessing atma, or self," were promptly disciplined and proscribed. Other charges included "commercialization of Buddhism, monks' misconduct and opaque business investments." Incidents of priests being defrocked for moral lapses or corruption are not uncommon. During the summer of 1999 in Japan, the Nichiren Shoshu High Priest ordered the destruction of the expensive and ornate Shohondo, the Grand Worship Hall at the foot of sacred Mt. Fuji. The festering cause was sparked by longtime internal conflicts and power struggles among the thirty Nichiren sects, especially with reference to the Soka Gakkai. Around 150,000 members left Shoshu. Bitter rivalries also still exist among sects in Tibetan and other groups. The Aum Shinrikyo (Supreme Truth) was a doomsday Buddhist cult in Japan that went awry when its leader, Shoko Asahara, began to call himself a Messiah. The result of their misinterpreting Buddhism sadly ended, according to Newsweek June 1, 1998, with the 1995 lethal attack on the Tokyo subway system, "releasing deadly sarin gas that killed a dozen people and made 5,000 others sick."

Beliefs and Behaviors

The basic beliefs of Buddhism are well known. Meditating on the Middle Way, Siddhartha Gautama intuitively realized the Four Noble Truths which focus on the condition, cause and cure of universal suffering. The Buddha taught that by following the Eight-fold Path of self-effort one would escape life's suffering, and its changing illusion. Attaining enlightenment by eliminating all desires (the cause of suffering), one enters Nirvana which primarily is a state of escape (a breaking free from the endless cycles of birth and rebirth). Underneath and behind Buddhist beliefs are strong concepts of karma and reincarnation, borrowed or adapted from Hinduism, out of which it was a reactionary renewal movement. From the start the Buddha rejected all gods and spiritual beings, including the concept of humans as living souls. He considered everything to be changing, illusionary and impermanent. Only by self deliverance and doing good can one hope to proceed to a better reincarnation and eventually, after tens of thousands of births and rebirths, hopefully attain Nirvana. Such kinds of ideal beliefs are common in many religions, but the "real" behavior of their followers is often quite different. Many follow basic Buddhist precepts, but the majority also practice many of the elements rejected by the Buddha, including belief in gods, spirits, ancestor worship, and many other indigenous forms of religion. Thus a multitude of forms of Buddhism have been proliferated. This population of a billion people is a crucial challenge for the Church of the 21st Century.

Buddhist peoples are the neglected giant in Mission. Even among the Christian community, many are unknowingly affected by subtle Buddhist ideas. Recently someone introduced herself to a relative of mine as a "Jesus Buddhist." Last year a friend received a Christmas card from a Christian associate signed "In Zen." Among Christians and occasionally from pulpits one hears Buddhist connotations commonly being spoken today such as "nirvana", "in a former life", "it's my karma", "my next reincarnation", "let your mind go blank", "dig deep down within you", and so on. This is a subtle effect of the "blender" of Buddhism.

Resurgence and Resistance

The First International Buddhist Propagation Conference was held in Kyoto, Japan April 8-13, 1998. A key discussion centered around the growing concern to protect existing Buddhist populations from religious change. Prominent Buddhist leaders from 17 Asian countries attended, although the notable absence of key representatives of Shinshu and Zen Buddhist sects in Japan was striking. Strong statements against those groups "proselytizing" Buddhists were made. The Venerable Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda, a leading Buddhist scholar and prolific author from Sri Lanka noted that "poverty and ignorance were exploited to convert innocent Buddhists and to disrupt their ancient cultures and practices. Many countries which were Buddhist (sic) are in danger of losing their Buddhist predominance due to these despicable methods employed by these so called 'evangelists'." In most Southeast Asian countries restrictions on spreading the Gospel are already legally in place, although not always strongly enforced. In Laos pressure is put on all Christians to attend anti-religion seminars propagating the government and party line.

authorities, affirming that they will resign from all foreign religions, involvement in which is interpreted as being illegal activity. Their signatures enjoin the government and Party to punish them appropriately for any infractions thereof.

Journal, October 1, 1999 reports that radical Buddhists in Myanmar (Burma) have declared Christian radio broadcasting a threat to Buddhism, and have specifically named some Christian agencies as culpable. The extremists with other Buddhist leaders have distributed documents listing systematic methods for eliminating Christianity.

Aggressive Buddhist outreach is also increasing, particularly in the West. A former Nichiren member says that the largest Buddhist temple in the USA located in Hacienda Heights, California, was built primarily as a Buddhist missionary training center to reach Westerners. Los Angeles Times, dated October 2, 1999, describes the new private Soka Buddhist University currently being constructed by Soka Gakkai International in Aliso Viejo, California. Twelve of the seventeen administrators are SGI members.

Early in 2000 Buddhist monks officially dedicated "Thai Town" in the Hollywood area of Los Angeles. About 70,000 Buddhist Thai live nearby. In Northern Thailand outreaches to tribal groups by the Buddhists resulted in whole villages of Karen and other tribes becoming Buddhist, including some former Christian villages. Buddhism is on the move.

Renewed Contextualization

With the Dalai Lama's example and encouragement, and in order to make Buddhism more palatable to North Americans, Tibetan Buddhists have endeavored to reduce the magic and Tantric elements, except for the sand mandalas which invoke the spirits and deities. Mandalas have already been set up in some American cities, including Los Angeles and Chicago. The Dalai Lama's 1996 book entitled "Jesus, The Good Heart: Buddhist Perspectives on the Teachings of Jesus" published by Wisdom, has attracted some Christians to Buddhism. His popular writings emphasize the new foci of Buddhism: ethics for the new millennium, happiness, liberation, tolerance and "peace without religion." Also played down is the fact that fundamental Buddhism relegates to women an inferior position. In Theravada Buddhism, until a woman is reborn as a man she has no hope of ever attaining Nirvana. This scaled back low key approach has influenced many unsuspecting Americans, especially as Hollywood films have publicly popularized Buddhist tenets and philosophies. Key well-liked actors, talk-show hosts, and even some high level politicians openly identify themselves with Buddhism. The January 2000 issue of Civilization magazine claimed a "Buddha boom" was progressing in the West. This described how big business and economics have been tied in, so that "Boardroom Buddhism" is now commonplace. New Buddhist approaches and outreach has also been contextualized by adopting Christian evangelistic methods and strategies. For example, in Korea the traditional Buddhist temples were isolated up in the mountains away from the population concentrations. Today, however, many Korean priests have moved down into the cities and urban centers to set up "house temples." This occurs also in the USA. Converts to Soka Gakkai have long used "the cell group" approach. In various Buddhist lands, in order to become more compatible with Christian response, some Buddhists adapt Christian forms of singing and music in their services, preach in the vernacular language, and add Sunday schools to their programs. In Myanmar some Buddhist priests even use the Bible selectively to preach and interpret their doctrines. In the West some Protestant church buildings have been converted into Buddhist Temples.

Practical Issues

This new explosion of the Buddhist world should awaken urgent responses from theologians and missiologists. First, it demands a critique of current Christianity so as to acknowledge our failures and to repent of our weaknesses. It calls for concerted efforts towards the renewal of the Church. Second, it requires a careful evaluation of the Christian ministry, especially service to those outside the Church. A redeployment of people and resources to catalyze an accelerated transformation of society is needed. New efforts to stimulate fresh energies in evangelism, practical social concern and cross-cultural mission must become the driving force and vision for

the world of the 21st Century. A new wave of compassion, consideration and love for fellow humans will sensitize the Church to the needs and opportunities that abound in all communities.

Buddhist neighbors and peoples around the globe are to be full recipients of God's love and His Gospel also. This task is not easy. Third, it calls for some to develop a deeper analytical understanding of folk Buddhism and to comprehend the ramifications for the Church's role and contribution in serving within Buddhist influenced societies. Here considerable research and experimentation is required.

Theological Concerns

While there may seem to be some congruency between Christianity and Buddhism, the contradictions are more glaring and significant. Certainly the Buddhists model examples for the Church in maintaining discipline within the clergy and in defending high standards of purity in their fundamental teachings. They discern deviant and divergent doctrine and discipline those who exceed acceptable limits. The Church should continue to do this also. However, the under-emphasized gift of discernment is probably more crucial for this time than ever before. Relativism, Humanism, Universalism and many other "isms" assail the Christian doctrine and message. Theological and missiological discerners are needed today. Vital distinctions and differentiations between Buddhism and Christianity call for clarification in order to avoid confusion and to sharpen clouded conceptualizations.

Some theological issues contrasting these two religions which need clear differentiation and exposition include: 1) divine revelation or human intuition, 2) the nature of God -personal Creator/controller or impersonal non-being (like Karma), 3) the nature of Christ -God/man or only human, redeeming substitute or impotent to help, 4) the nature of life -one single life or a circle of multiple lives via reincarnation, 5) sin - transgression or illusion, 6) the means of salvation -faith or works, grace or karmic merit, divine provision or self effort. Many other similar differences show that these two religious perspectives are truly diametrically opposed. Many suggested similarities are mostly superficial. Furthermore, meaning discrepancy is a serious semantic problem in discussions between Buddhists and Christians. Using similar words does not mean equivalent meanings in both religions. Even the same symbols may have very divergent definitions and connotations. For example some Buddhist scholars like Bhikku Buddhadasa Indapanno say Buddhists believe in God. In "The Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lectures: Christianity and Buddhism" printed in 1967, he interpreted God to be equivalent to karma (cause and effect) and also to ignorance (a source of suffering). For those engaged in dialogue or debate, careful identification of discrepancy in meaning will be crucial to full understanding. Not being on the same page guarantees failure to reach agreement or to arrive at adequate conclusions.

Missiological Challenges

With specific reference to folk Buddhists, missiological issues to be studied are numerous. I suggest three significant questions: 1) Can the Buddhist concept of transfer of merit from priests or bodhisattvas and other sources be compared with Christ's grace through His substitutionary sacrifice? Does human effort and merit equate with God's propitiation through Christ? 2) Can the concept of a future Maitreya Buddha be used as a redemptive analogy fulfilled in Jesus Christ, or only as a point of contact from which to proceed towards the Gospel? Does such a redemptive analogy give too high a credence of revelation to Buddhist scriptures? Is being a "Messianic Buddhist" acceptable to either the Church or to the Sangha? Buddhist scholars would deny such a possibility because this is still the Age of Gautama Buddha, so Christ's coming around 2000 years

ago already negates that possibility. 3) Can the Church and Missions maintain contextual credibility with the current threat of new syncretism in the Church at home and abroad? What dangers lie ahead because of confusing definitions and the clouding of distinctions between Christian and Buddhist perspectives and principles? What must be done to preserve the faith and foundations of Christianity in today's pluralistic climate? It seems that rough rapids of opposition and persecution will increasingly face the Church in the future. If she is to maintain her mandate to make disciples of all peoples, tongues, tribes and nations, a new genuineness in loving service and a heightened sensitivity in witness to the Savior will be required.