

THE BUDDHIST SCRIPTURES COMPARED WITH THE BIBLE

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Presented to
SYMPOSIUM: THE UNIQUENESS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES

Dr. Martin Luther College
New Ulm, MN
April 15-17, 1993

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Introduction

In regard to the title of this essay and the theme of the symposium, both of which refer to scriptures, it must be noted that there's a lot more material to be found on Buddhism than on Buddhist scriptures -- at least it's easier to find. Whole books as well as parts of books dealing with Buddhism often treat the matter of Buddhist scriptures only briefly or in passing. To be sure, there are Buddhist scriptures and reference is made to a Buddhist canon, but as we shall see, these are different than and not so clearly defined as are our Christian Scriptures and the Biblical canon.

An appreciation for the Bible may also be gained by just looking at the origin, history, and doctrine of Buddhism, and these areas are also important in considering the Buddhist scriptures. Thus we'll first look at those aspects of Buddhism as well as at some important terms and concepts.

1. History and Origin of Buddhism

The founder of Buddhism is Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 560-480 B.C.), a prince of the Sakyas, who became known as Sakyamuni, sage of the Sakya people, and as the Buddha, the Enlightened One. There are various stories about his birth and life and even his conception, but it is generally agreed that he grew up as a prince and a member of a privileged class, married, and had a son. It's also said that he was shielded by his father from the sorrows and disappointments of life.

Religion in India at that time was Bramanism, dominated by priests (bramanahs) and samanas (monks), an elitist religion with worldly goals and social structures (castes). It was also the time of Jainism which sought release from the material world by extreme asceticism and nonviolence. There was also a general belief in a constant reincarnation cycle from and to different forms and circumstances of life ranging from heaven, earth, and hell as well as from spiritual, human, and animal.

Whether it's because he became aware of those sorrows and disappointments of life or for another reason, at age 29 he renounced his position and privileges and left his family and took up the life of a religious ascetic (Jainism). After six years without finding what he was seeking, he finally became "enlightened." As the Buddha he taught for the next 45 years gathering disciples and founding communities of followers.

We'll look later at the content of that enlightenment. Here we'll briefly describe the development of Buddhism. It spread through India as Gautama's followers shared his teachings and with the help of the Emperor Asoka (ca. 274-232). Success in India also led to prosperity and corruption, and Buddhism gradually passed from India by 1500 A.D.), but meanwhile spread to Ceylon, Burma,

Thailand, Sri Lanka and the other countries of Southeast Asia as well as to China and Japan. Today it is making a comeback in India and also gaining followers in the United States and other Western nations.

The evolution of different schools or sects of Buddhism accompanied its spread and growth. The two main traditions are Theravada or Hinayana Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. The emphasis of the Theravada ("The Way of the Elders") tradition is on attaining the status of an arahat, one who has conquered the obstacles of life, and on sharing one's merit with others. The Theravada monks take vows, follow strict rules, and stress the monastic community. It's the type of Buddhism in Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. Mahayana ("The Great Vehicle") is the type of Buddhism found in China and Japan. As the meaning of the word implies, it's more inclusive with emphasis on self-discipline and relation with a teacher and on a concern for helping others. In addition there's Lamaism with its own special emphasis and practiced mainly in Tibet. Other types with special emphases are Zen or Chan, Pure Land, and Nichiren Buddhism. It's especially these latter which have found a following in the United States and Western nations though originating in China and Japan.

2. Buddhist Names and Terms

arahat. A holy one. One who has conquered all ten obstacles of life and reaches nirvana from this life. Condition/situation of world renouncing.

avidya. Ignorant craving. Cause of suffering of life. Buddha's second truth.

bodhisattva. One who has achieved Buddhahood and has a concern for others and foregoes nirvana to help others.

brahmana. Priest of ancient Aryan religion and later Hinduism. Highest caste. In Buddhist scriptures sometimes refers to any morally upright and learned person who is worthy of respect and gifts.

Brahmanism. An ancient religion of India, under the leadership of priests (brahmanas) who believed that their performance of fire rituals maintained the world and brought prosperity to human life. Basis of Hinduism.

Buddha. "Awakened one," "enlightened one," the title of the historical founder of Buddhism--Siddhartha Gautama.

Dharma (also Dhamma). "That which is firmly established." The doctrine and path taught by the Buddha.

dukkha. The condition of suffering all find themselves in. An out-of-jointness. Being ill-at-ease.

karma. "Action," the consequence or residual energy created by action, particularly, human thoughts, words, and deeds. Karma may be meritorious or demeritorious and causes desirable or undesirable rebirth.

koans. Words of earlier masters and questions or problems used in Zen Buddhism to stimulate thinking and meditation. Used as examinations for moving to a higher level.

nirvana. Lit. extinction. Result of enlightenment. Cessation of senses and suffering. Freedom from rebirth.

samsara. "Wandering through (lives)," the round or repeated births and deaths caused by karma.

Sangha/Sanga/Samga. "Community." Used for order or community of monks following the way of the Buddha.

satori. Zen term for enlightenment -- a new outlook and viewpoint regarding life and things.

sutra. "Discourses" attributed to the Buddha -- his teachings. A text embodying the words of the Buddha.

--yana. Doctrine. Lit. a "vehicle," "a ferryboat."

3. Buddhist Doctrine and Practice

Gautama found his answer to the cause of and end to suffering in finding a way to put an end to the constant cycle of rebirth and reincarnation a being is subject to. This end of rebirths and reincarnations is basically the state of nirvana described as the peaceful merging of a drop of water with the sea. It's not, however, annihilation. Gautama's enlightenment is based on four truths. 1.) Life is painful (dukkha). 2.) The origin of the pain of life is ignorant and selfish craving (avidya). 3.) The pain of life can be ended by ending that craving. 4.) The way to deliverance from pain is by the eight-fold path. The eight-fold path may be briefly described as right views, right intention, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and meditation. Following the path leads to shaping good karma and to nirvana.

Resources for following the path and shaping good karma are: 1.) the Buddha, 2.) the Dharma, and 3.) the Sangha. The Buddha is a heroic example and reservoir of merit. The Dharma might be summed up as doctrine, basically the path taught by the Buddha and all that the Buddha taught about it. The Sangha emphasizes community-communal living (monasticism) and communal learning. The various traditions or sects mentioned under history put different emphases on each. The basic differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism are also noted above under history. Theravada is more selfish and detached with each follower seeking personal nirvana and status as an arahat. Mahayana stresses the idea of the bodhisattva, an enlightened one who dedicates his life to helping others find nirvana as Gautama did. That's what the name, Mahayana, implies. The Mahayana sect is probably responsible for giving Theravada Buddhism a somewhat negative name, Hinayana, meaning 'the lesser vehicle.'

It may seem that practicing Buddhism requires taking up a monastic life, but monastic vows may be only on a short-term basis as well as for life. Buddhism does not demand asceticism. In fact Gautama was interested in happiness for himself and others, and material welfare is not necessarily incompatible with Buddhism. Gautama referred to his way as 'the middle way' between the extremes of worldly pleasure and Jainism. For the laity there are also various ceremonies in which they may participate, and there is a belief that the self-denial of the Buddha and his disciples created a reservoir of power that can be tapped by prayer and by the recitation and hearing of the Buddha's words, by practicing the teaching of the monks and by supporting them materially. That's the laity's hope for reaching nirvana-probably only after one or more rebirths. Both monks and lay Buddhists are encouraged to practice charity and moral discipline.

Buddha is not considered a god but a hero though the Enlightened One is revered in very special ways. Worship of Buddha is more a matter of honoring his memory and work and possibly a little related to ancestor worship. One Buddhist scholar (Ananda Coomaraswamy) says of Mahayana Buddhism: 'Even the attainment of Buddhahood does not involve indifference to the sorrow of the world; the work of salvation is perpetually carried on by the Bodhisattva emanations of the supreme Buddha, just as the work of the Father is done by Jesus' (Eastman, ed. The Way of Religion, 96). To Buddhists honoring Buddha is like our honoring Jesus--as they and others see it.

I have over-simplified the divisions in Buddhism and our purpose is not to go into detail. We might just note in closing that the emphasis in the present-day revival of Buddhism in India is on lay Buddhism with a social emphasis as well. Also the Zen Buddhism which has some following in the United States and in Western nations focuses more on personal meditation and on the discovery of ones self and on promoting a more positive attitude toward the world and life with hope for relief from suffering. It likewise encourages helping others. Nirvana does not seem to be stressed in Zen.

4. Buddhist Scriptures

As already mentioned, there are references to Buddhist scriptures and a Buddhist canon. In general Buddhist literature is voluminous and not all has been translated. The scriptures are written both in Pali, a classical, sacred dialect of Sanskrit, and in Sanskrit. Pali was used by the monks of the Theravada tradition and Sanskrit by the monks of the Mahayana tradition. Description and listings mention a Pali Canon. Reference to monks is significant because Buddha wrote nothing--at least nothing is claimed as being written by him. However, his words basically make up the Buddhist scriptures. They were Passed down orally and not committed to writing until the first century B.C. The following is an abbreviated listing omitting the many subdivisions.

The Theravada Texts:

Tipitaka ("Three Baskets")
Sutta Pitaka ("Basket of Discourses")
Vinaya Pitaka ("Basket of Discipline")
Abhidhamma Pitaka ("Basket of Higher Teachings")

Selected Mahayana Texts:

The Prajna-paramita sutras ("Perfection of Wisdom Discourses")
Sad-dharma-pundrika Sutra ("The Sutra of the Lotus of the True Dharma")
Sukhavati-vyuha ("Vision of the Pure Land")

The Sanskrit version of the Tipitaka is called Tripitaka and so is recognized also by the Mahayana tradition. The Mahayana, as listed above, recognizes a large number of texts besides the Tripitaka. The Theravada tradition, also recognizes, as authoritative treatises on the Buddha's teachings, other writings besides those listed. The Vinaya Pitaka alone outdoes the Bible in size. There is no claim of divine inspiration but the Buddhist scriptures do seem to have a certain authority--at least in directing Buddhists along the eight-fold path.

Of the discourses the most quoted and memorized are the Dhammapada which might be translated as "the path of truth, " "the way of righteousness," or "the path of virtue." It consists of 423 aphorisms attributed to the Buddha. We might call it a long Sermon on the Mount, There are, in fact, similarities to the Sermon on the Mount.

As rain penetrates
The poorly thatched dwelling,
So passion penetrates
The untented mind.

As rain does not penetrate
The well-thatched dwelling,
So passion does not penetrate
The well-tended mind.

If one, though reciting much of texts,
Is not a doer thereof, a heedless man;
He, like a cowherd counting others' cows,
Is not a partaker in the religious quest.

If one, though reciting little of texts,
Lives a life in accord with dhamma,
Having discarded passion, ill will, and unawareness,
Knowing full well, the mind well freed,
He, not grasping here, neither hereafter,
Is a partaker of the religious quest.

He, truly, is supreme in battle,
Who would conquer himself alone,
Rather than he who would conquer in battle
A thousand, thousand men.

In the discourses are also Jatakas or Birth Stories which tell of the Buddha in previous lives before his enlightenment. One tells of him as a rabbit who gave his life to feed a hungry brahmana.

There are rules similar to the Ten Commandments along with explanations which are much longer than Luther's. There are stories and discourses either illustrating Buddhist behavior or advising individuals as to what to do and how to act. Some seem to be historical but only for purpose of illustration. Let's conclude this part with words on the nature of nirvana.

Nirvana shares one quality with the lotus, two with water, three with medicine, ten with space, three with the wishing jewel, and five with a mountain peak. As the lotus is unstained by water, so is Nirvana unstained by all the defilements. As cool water allays feverish heat, so also Nirvana is cool and allays the fever of all the passions. Moreover, as water removes the thirst of men and beasts who are exhausted, parched, thirsty, and overpowered by heat, so also Nirvana removes the craving for sensuous enjoyments, the craving for-further becoming, the craving for the cessation of becoming. As medicine protects from the torments of poison, so Nirvana from the torments of the poisonous passions. Moreover, as medicine puts an end to sickness, so Nirvana to all sufferings. Finally, Nirvana and medicine both give security. And these are the ten qualities Nirvana shares with space. Neither is born, grows old, dies, passes away, or is reborn; both are unconquerable, cannot be stolen, are unsupported, are roads respectively for birds and Arhats to journey on, are unobstructed and infinite. Like the wishing jewel, Nirvana grants all one can desire, brings joy, and sheds light. As a mountain peak is lofty and exalted, so is Nirvana. As a mountain peak is unshakable, so is Nirvana. As a mountain peak is inaccessible, so is Nirvana inaccessible to all the passions. As no seeds can grow on a mountain peak, so the seeds of all the passions

cannot grow in Nirvana. And finally, as a mountain peak is free from all desire to please or displease, so is Nirvana.

5. Concluding Remarks

It's difficult to just compare Christian and Buddhist scriptures without also noting the obvious doctrinal differences. However, I'll try to focus on the role the Bible plays for Christians and Christian faith--especially for Lutherans.

We look to the Bible as the source and norm of what we believe, teach and confess. While Buddhist scriptures may be considered to have a certain authority, it's more a matter of trying to awaken intuitive wisdom. Buddhist scriptures are really just a lot of advice with the idea: try it and see if it works for you. The authority is the individual, making Buddhism at least somewhat existential.

There is no claim of divine inspiration or sufficiency made for the Buddhist scriptures, and there's no agreement as to the Buddhist Canon. Many writings are put on a plane with the Buddhist scriptures. While I have no specific example, I expect Buddhists would find much to like in the Bible: the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, moral advice, just to name a few examples.

Buddhist scriptures do not speak of or reveal God or anything about him such as his work of creation, preservation, or salvation. Buddhism is sometimes described as pantheistic and also atheistic. There is a belief in spirits and gods yet nothing of a God who has personality. Likewise no information is given about matters like creation, preservation, or salvation as we think of salvation.

That matter of salvation is perhaps the most important difference. Nirvana is nothing like the salvation revealed in the Bible. Nirvana depends on the individual and so teaches salvation by works. In this connection we can also note there is no reference to sin and a need for a payment for sin. For the Buddhist who has reached enlightenment sin is no longer an issue.

Buddhist scriptures further lack any sense of history and its meaning while the Bible gives history meaning and purpose. Since Buddhism does not know about God who revealed himself in history and his Word, history has no particular significance for the Buddhist beyond one's personal reincarnation cycles or of those who have reached Buddhahood.

This brief list of differences is not intended to be exhaustive. On the other hand we don't have to completely read the Buddhist scriptures to realize they have little in common with the Bible. For obvious reasons we do better to concentrate our attention on the Bible and God who has revealed himself therein plus what he has done for us by way of salvation that does not depend on our works, wisdom, or thinking. I hope that is the outcome of this essay as well as our symposium.