

Buddhism

Simply put, Buddhism is man's attempt to escape pain and suffering through self-perfection and meditation. The goal is to eliminate desires in an attempt to stop the endless cycle of reincarnation and karma by attaining enlightenment and thus extinguishing self, desire, and pain; while at the same time becoming one with the universe.

Buddhism is appealing because of its mystical aspects; it is also appealing to those who desire to escape from material reality.

One works to attain "salvation" which is achieved by practicing Buddhist teachings and thus we can categorize Buddhism as a religion of works.

Buddhism is gaining momentum in the west. This is partially due to the fact that some of the biggest names in Hollywood are practicing Buddhists. This intrigues many people who are caught up in the Hollywood fascination with shows such as *Entertainment Tonight*, *Access Hollywood* or *E! News*.

The *Gazette*, the campus newspaper of The University of Western Ontario said:

"It may not be the latest religious fad in L.A., but Buddhism has certainly continued to attract celebrity practitioners unsatisfied with their own religions...the adoption of Buddhism into celebrity culture has helped bring the Eastern religion into the Western conscience." ¹

Famous Hollywood actors and actresses that are said to practice Buddhism include not only Richard Gere and Orlando Bloom but also,

- Goldie Hawn (Oscar-winning actress)
- Kate Hudson (Goldie's daughter and actress)
- Phil Jackson (Head Coach of ten NBA Championships)
- George Lucas (Creator of *Star Wars* and in which we can see major themes and inspirations of eastern religion such as "The Force")
- Jennifer Lopez (singer, actress)
- Keanue Reeves (actor)

- Steven Segal (actor)
- Uma Thurman (actress)
- Mark Wahlberg (rap singer, actor)

Richard Gere is extremely outspoken in his Buddhist beliefs.

“Richard Gere makes his admiration for the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader in exile, well known. Gere periodically retreats to Tibet to brush up on his Buddhism. While there, the actor enjoys a very different existence than he does in Hollywood. According to Gere, he has a simple room and has to share a bathroom. There is a limited supply of water and no television, air conditioning or newspapers. Self-prescribed torture? For Gere, as he explains it, this is his time to relax, to meditate, to release.”²

The facts are these -- our friends, coworkers, and children see their movies, watch their videos, listen to their music or watch them coach from the sidelines and can easily be caught up and influenced by the lifestyle they lead including their belief systems.

Tonight, we’re here to discuss, contrast and compare Buddhism with Christianity, to see how it deviates from the historic Christian faith, but first, let’s look at Buddhism’s beginnings.

Beginnings of Buddhism

By definition, Buddhism is a “way of living based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. Buddhism focuses on personal spiritual development. Buddhists strive for a deep insight into the true nature of life.”³

Since we lack “primary source” material for the history of Buddhism, most modern scholars doubt the reliability of the traditional legends of the Buddha since many developed centuries after his death, so keep in mind that his life story is based on myths and speculation.

Siddhartha Gautama (563-483 BC) was born a Hindu in north-eastern India in what is now called Nepal.

[To give us a timeline that we can relate to Biblically, 563-483 BC coincides with the time when the people of Judah were exiled in Babylon.

In fact, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon died in 561 BC, a scant 2 years before Siddhartha was born while Daniel was serving in the Kingdom of Babylon.

It was around 536 BC that Cyrus the Persian allowed the Israelites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple and the city wall. Siddhartha would have been around 27 years old.]

Siddhartha, the name given to him by his parents, means "he who has reached his goal."

Gautama, according to tradition, was his family name and it's believed that it comes from a famous Indian teacher from whom it's believed he was descended.

Buddha, the nickname by which Siddhartha latter became known, means "the Enlightened One."

Siddhartha's father was a wealthy and prominent rajah (a king or a princely ruler). His mother died a week after giving birth to Siddhartha, so he was raised by an aunt.

Hinduism was the dominant religion of the day and it was into this religious world system that Siddhartha was born.

Since Siddhartha's family would have been born into the "warrior" caste, they would have had to approach their deities through the priestly caste known as the "Brahmans."

Because of his family's wealth, Siddhartha was isolated from the outside world by his over protective father and grew up knowing little or nothing about sickness, poverty, suffering or death, but was instead given an education in the arts and sciences.

Siddhartha was married possibly as early as sixteen and had one child, a boy named Rahula which means "chain."

At age twenty-nine and against his fathers' wishes, Siddhartha took a chariot ride outside of the royal enclosure and for the first time experienced the "real world."

"On the journey, he saw an old man, 'an aged man, as bent as a roof gable, decrepit, leaning on a staff...'. On a second journey, he saw 'a sick man, suffering and very ill.' On a third journey, he saw a funeral procession. Each time, Gautama's charioteer said to him that this was just the way life was: all people are subject to old age, illness and death...On a further chariot drive Gautama saw...a man: 'a shaven-headed man, a wanderer who has gone forth, wearing a yellow robe.' In spite of his poverty this man was serene and peaceful."⁴

This experience deeply disturbed Siddhartha. Obsessed and racked with "angst", an anxiety and dread about the pervasiveness of death and suffering, Siddhartha left his family, wife and child and taking the advice of an Indian ascetic, decided to follow a path of extreme asceticism.

Asceticism is defined as the practice of deliberate self-denial of bodily pleasures, usually in the form of food and sex but sometimes involves inflicting pain on ones self (e.g., throwing one's self in a thorn bush or striking one's self with a cats tail.)

At one point and to the detriment of his health, Siddhartha tried living on one grain of rice a day.

After about seven years of wanderings, meditating and searching he found what is called the "true path" or the "enlightenment" under an Indian fig-tree, other-wise known as a *bodhi*-tree or "tree of enlightenment."

Siddhartha's enlightenment is said to have come in three stages:

1. He was said to be able to remember his previous reincarnations.
2. He was able to understand the cycles of birth, death and rebirth.
3. The *Four Noble Truths* were revealed to him.

Siddhartha was now done with his reincarnation cycle and he was now able to attain Nirvana. He was now "the Buddha" – the enlightened one.

It's said that at this point, the demon *Mara* tempted the Buddha to enter Nirvana so that he could not pass on the knowledge that he had obtained but the Hindu god Brahma appeared and told him to teach others for the sake of the few who would follow.

Over the next forty-four years, the Buddha traveled throughout India teaching as he went.

As Dean Halverson, World Religions specialist for *International Students, Inc*, explains:

"Buddha's immediate goal was to eliminate the cause of suffering. His ultimate goal, though, was to become liberated from the cycle of death and rebirth by teaching how we can cease craving and thereby eliminate our attachment to and beliefs in the existence of the illusory self. As we are successful in eliminating such attachment, then the effects of karma will have nothing to attach themselves to, which releases the individual from the realm of illusion. At that moment of enlightenment, the person achieves the state of *nirvana* – the ultimate goal for the Buddhist, and Buddhism's equivalent to salvation."⁵

Buddha died suddenly at the age of eighty in 483 BC possibly as a result of food poisoning or dysentery.

It is said that his last words were, "Buddhas do but point the way; work out your salvation with diligence."⁶

It was around the mid 3rd century BC that a major division happened within Buddhism.

- *Mahayana* (the greater vehicle), are Buddhists who believe that "enlightenment" is accessible to everyone called.
- *Theravada Buddhists* (the teaching elders or the lesser vehicle), believe that enlightenment is only for a committed few (e.g., monks).
- There are other branches under these two main categories such as *Tendai, Vajrayana, Nichiren, Pure Land, Zen (Japanese Buddhism)* as well as others.

It is important than when we attempt to understand Buddhism that we do not presume to know all the particulars of a certain branch when we have only studied classical Buddhism.

Today, there are approximately 390 million Buddhists worldwide.

- That means that approximately 1 out of every 20 people consider themselves a Buddhist.
- China has the largest number of adherents with over 100 million.
- Japan follows second with around 90 million.
- Other countries with large Buddhist populations are Thailand, Vietnam, South Korea, Taiwan, Cambodia and India.
- Thailand has the highest percentage of Buddhists with 95% of the country practicing the belief.
- As of 2004, there were approximately 1.5 to 3 million practicing Buddhists in the United States with as many as 26 million utilizing Buddhist elements in their spiritual lives.

Beliefs of Buddhism compared to Christianity

Buddhists are quiet diverse and their beliefs vary widely. Although there are different sects of Buddhism; there are common beliefs that Buddhists share.

Those beliefs are *The Four Noble Truths* and *The Eightfold Path*.

Let's take a look at these beliefs and compare them to what the Bible, our *Final Court of Appeal* has to say.

The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism

1. The first noble truth has to do with the existence of pain and suffering.

Buddhism's Viewpoint

"Birth is painful, and death is painful; disease and old age are painful. Not having what we desire is painful, and having what we do not desire is also painful."⁷

Biblical Response to why there is pain

Pain and suffering was not part of the creation plan, it was a result of the curse. We see that seven times in the creation account in the first chapter of Genesis that God created and saw that "it was good" what He had created. (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31)

- Genesis 1:31 says, "Then God saw *everything* that He had made, and indeed it was very good." (emphasis added)

In the garden, we were originally created to be in fellowship and communion with God and to give glory and spiritual service. We were the only part of creation that was "created in His image."

- Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

But when they ate of the fruit they did not gain wisdom (Gen. 3:5) as the serpent had promised but had instead gained fear (Gen. 3:10).

Because of the disobedience of Eve, God's pronounces in Genesis 3:16 that "I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

Because of the disobedience of Adam, Gods pronounces in Genesis 3:17 that "Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return."

"The effects of sin are punishment and provision. Whereas the man and the woman had life, they now had death; whereas pleasure, now pain; whereas abundance, now a meager subsistence by toil; whereas perfect fellowship, now alienation and conflict."⁸

2. The second noble truth has to do with the cause of pain and suffering.

Buddhism's Viewpoint

"[Pain is caused by] the craving desire for the pleasures of the senses, which seeks satisfaction now here, now there; the craving for happiness and prosperity in this life and in future lives."⁹

Biblical Response to the cause of pain

We must point out that God did not create pain and suffering but God *created man with freewill* and opportunity to make choices that will affect their destinies.

We can Biblically demonstrate that we have choices and freewill.

- We can choose to believe or not:

John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that *whosoever believes* in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." (emphasis added)

Romans 10:11 says, "For Scripture says, "*Whoever* believes in Him will not be put to shame." (emphasis added)

- We can choose to be foolish or wise:

Matthew 7:26 says, "But everyone who *hears* these sayings of Mine, and *does not* do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand." (emphasis added)

- We can choose to believe or reject the Scriptures:

John 20:30, 31 says, "And truly Jesus did many other signs...not written in this book, but these are written that you *may believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that *believing* you may have life in His name. (emphasis added)

The pain, sin and suffering that we see in the world today is a direct result of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the garden.

- Romans 5:12 says, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men because all sinned."

It is true that many times our selfish desires and our motives are wrong and can get us into trouble or mad at God when we don't get what we want.

But Jesus said in Matthew 6:33, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness"

By keeping our eyes and our emphasis on God and His righteousness, it is easier to desire the things of God and not the things of the world or things that can harm us.

3. The third noble truth has to do with ending pain and suffering.

Buddhism's Viewpoint

"To be free of suffering one must give up, get rid of, extinguish this very craving, so that no passion and no desire remain." ¹⁰

Biblical Response of the need for pain

The fact of the matter is as we live in a fallen world we all will face pain and suffering no matter who we are, where we live or our status in life. This is a direct result of the "fall of man."

- In John 16:33, Jesus says, "In the world you will have tribulation" notice that God said "you will have tribulation."

The word *tribulation* [Greek: *thlipsis*], literally means "anguish, burdened, persecution, trouble."

It's undeniable that God uses pain and suffering for our benefit, for His sovereign purposes and for His glory. The following verses show one of the clearest examples found in Scripture:

- Psalm 119: 67, 71, and 75 - "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word...*It was good for me to be afflicted* so that I might learn your decrees...I know, O LORD, that your laws are righteous, *and in faithfulness you have afflicted me.*" (emphasis added)

We can also rejoice when we have suffering as the following verse shows:

- Romans 5:3 says, "We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

Please don't misunderstand me, I'm not trying to have a blasé attitude when it comes to pain and suffering. But we have hope in and through pain – Our hope is in the name of Jesus Christ.

- James 4:13 says, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray...Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord."

But, trials and tribulations do come with both a purpose and a reward to everyone regardless of who you are.

- James 1:2-4, 12 says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing...Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him"

4. The fourth noble truth has to do with *eliminating* pain and suffering by following *The Eightfold Path*.

Buddhism's Viewpoint

The Eightfold Path are not steps that must be taken in the sequential order in which they are listed but are considered wisdom, conduct and a mental discipline that are to be developed simultaneously with each other.

Biblical Response to the desire to eliminate pain

It's only natural for us as human beings to want to avoid as much pain and suffering in life as possible. We don't like pain, it hurts, it's uncomfortable yet God uses discomfort and pain to help us become more like Jesus.

- Paul, when speaking of his pain said in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, "a thorn in the flesh was given me...concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness'...Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

The Eightfold Path of Buddhism

By following the *Eightfold Path*, Buddhism teaches their equivalent of Christian salvation, called nirvana.

1. Right Understanding – In other words, you must accept the *Four Noble Truths* and the *Eightfold Path*.

Biblical Response

Jesus said that He is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6) and that there is no "salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

2. Right Thought – You must harbor no ill will toward people.

Biblical Response

Arguments, fights, and discontentment come from selfish and wrong motives and desires (James 4:1-3) while right desires and motives honor and glorify God (1 Cor. 10:31).

3. Right Speech – Do not lie, slander, gossip or indulge in idol talk.

Biblical Response

One day, God will hold men accountable, “for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.” (Matthew 12:36)

4. Right Action/Conduct – Don’t kill a living creature, take only what is given to you and don’t commit unlawful sexual acts.

Biblical Response

The ones who belong to Jesus will keep His commandments and obey Him (John 14:21), and those who live by His wisdom will produce “good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.” (James 3:17)

5. Right Livelihood – Your occupation must not harm anyone.

Biblical Response

God will take care of those who are His and put Him above all things (Matthew 6:31-33), and we should be “diligent to present ourselves approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15)

6. Right Effort – Resolve to abandon any qualities in you that are evil and strive to acquire only those qualities that are good and perfect.

Biblical Response

We should “lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1, 2).

7. Right Awareness – Be aware and alert and be free of any desires or sorrows.

Biblical Response

“Because the carnal mind is enmity against God” (Romans 8:7), we should have the “mind” of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:5) and we should meditate on “things that are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous and praiseworthy” (Philippians 4:8).

8. Right Meditation – When you have removed all pleasures, both sorrow and joy and all evil qualities, then you can enter the four degrees of meditation which is produced by concentration.

Biblical Response

There is only one way to have inner joy and peace and that is to follow Jesus for “He Himself is our peace” (Ephesians 2:14), and in Him “we have our peace” (John 16:33), and when we meditate on the things of God, the “peace of God will be with [us]” (Philippians 3:9).

We have gone through each of these eight, one by one and have given a Biblical response that reinforces the Christian belief. However, Jesus answered them all by using “a twofold path” when “a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him and saying, ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?’”

- Matthew 22:37-40 records Jesus’ reply, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) said, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”¹¹

To sum up, regardless of who you are, we’re all going to have some kind of sorrow and pain in our lives. With that being said, it is through faith in God, the good news of Jesus Christ, and the peace of the Holy Spirit that we can overcome “and do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:13)

The Veneration of Buddha

Buddhism does not teach the concept of, or the belief in, a personal God and although Buddha did not deny the existence of God, he did teach that the universe was over seen by a "Supreme Power."

The Buddha believed that the existence of God was irrelevant to the ending of human pain and suffering. It was simply a mute point.

Siddhartha came from a Hindu world view in which there are many gods and goddesses represented by idol worship.

Buddha was essentially non-theistic and held that the very belief in gods and goddesses held people to this physical world of suffering by karma.

Although Theravada Buddhism stays close to the teachings of the Buddha and maintains that he never claimed divinity, the more liberal branch of Buddhism, Mahayana has deified the Buddha as a savior.

Ironically, today, Buddha would be very disappointed in all the idolatry of the temple worship with the shrines and statues that represent the Buddha himself, because Buddha's purpose was to reform Hinduism, not to create a new religion.

Throughout the Philippines and Southeast Asia, it's not uncommon to see thousands of Buddha idols and "people bowing before dead statutes. For many of these people Buddha has become their god."¹²

In Kandy, Sri Lanka, there is a temple called the *Temple of the Tooth* and it's dedicated to Buddha's teeth.

The official website¹³ of the *Temple of the Tooth Relic* says:

“Ever since the four canine teeth of the Buddha after cremation came to be in the possession of devas, nagas and men, these were preciously guarded and received special veneration and worship.”

“The worship of corporeal remains of the Buddha...was sanctioned by the Buddha himself on the verge of his passing away...However, the four canine Teeth were said to have been separately enshrined and worshipped. The right canine was worshipped in the heavenly domain of the king of gods, Sakra, while another was worshipped by the king of Gandhara in modern Pakistan. The third was taken away by the Nagas and worshipped placing it in a golden shrine room. The fourth, the left canine was removed from the funerary ashes by a monk and was handed over to the king of Kalinga in Eastern India, as recorded in the Digha Nikaya.

Thenceforth, the Tooth relic of the Kalinga became an object of great veneration by generations of Kalinga kings until it earned the wrath of brahmanical followers, and consequently several attempts were made to destroy the Relic by the fanatical rulers. Yet, the Tooth relic was miraculously saved from such atrocities. For this reason, the kings of other states attempted to possess the Tooth relic for personal veneration. Thus, from the beginning itself, the Tooth relic came to be considered as an important symbol of veneration.”

Ron Carlson, president of *Christian Ministries International* says that he has personally watched as,

“people brought flowers and rice as offerings and bowed down to worship and pray to a gold box encrusted with jewels.”¹⁴

Rangoon, Burma boasts of the largest Buddha pagoda in the world, the Golden Pagoda. This Buddhist temple contains over 3500 idols of Buddha.

“Every day of the year, people parade up the winding steps of this 600-foot monument to place thin pieces of gold on the shrine, light candles and incense, and pray for their dead ancestors before these wood, stone, and metal statuettes.”¹⁵

This is a sad commentary of the depravity of the human condition when hundreds of millions of people bow and worship to idols instead of to the Personal Creator God of the Bible.

Over and over again, the Bible warns us of idolatry and that it's offensive to Jehovah God.

- Exodus 20:1-5 says, "And God spoke all these words, saying: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image--any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God'"
- Psalm 115: 3-8 says, "But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; eyes they have, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear; noses they have, but they do not smell; They have hands, but they do not handle; feet they have, but they do not walk; nor do they mutter through their throat. Those who make them are like them; so is everyone who trusts in them."
- God says in Isaiah 42:8, "I am the LORD, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise to carved images."
- 1 John 5:21 says, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen."

As Christians, we have the same responsibility as the apostle Paul did when he entered the city of Athens and the people there had also turned to idols in search of the truth.

Luke records for us in Acts 17:16-31 Paul's "defense of the Christian faith" in the city of Athens.

- Acts 17:16, 17 says, "Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him [NIV says "greatly distressed"] when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there."

Scripture says that Paul *reasoned* [Greek: *dialegomai*], we get our English word "dialogue", and it means to "say thoroughly, discuss, dispute, preach unto or reason with."

In Acts 17:2, 3 Paul "reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating" in Thessalonica.

In Acts 18:4 Paul "reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath" in Corinth.

In Acts 19:8 Paul "spoke boldly...reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom God" in Ephesus.

And finally, God makes it perfectly clear that not only does He exist, but we are to only worship Him.

- Isaiah 43:10, 11 says, "'You are my witnesses,' says the LORD... 'Before Me no God was formed. Nor shall there be after Me. I, even I, am the LORD, and besides Me there is no Savior.'"
- Isaiah 44:6 says, "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel... 'I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God.'"
- Matthew 4:10 records Jesus saying, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall worship.'"
- John 10:7-9 says, "Then Jesus said to them again, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who even came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.'"

Reincarnation and Karma

Reincarnation or *samsara* literally means "in the flesh" or "to come again in the flesh" and refers to the cyclical wheel of man's soul as it passes into another body after death.

Karma is the concept that what one sows in this life, they will reap in this or the next life.

In other words, every action that this life causes, a reaction in this or the next life is inextricably woven into the "rebirth" or "successive lives on earth."

According to Buddhism, depending on our actions, karma will determine the state we will occupy in the next life.

Buddhism teaches that karma is not personal, that it's not retaliation from a force that we cannot see or outside of ourselves and thus, karma is more akin to a "natural law", like the law of gravity. Karma involves only actions that are intentional.

These cycles of reincarnation and karma continue until one becomes enlightened and at which time you attain the supreme perfection of Buddhahood and either enter *nirvana* or you become a *bodhisattva*, denying yourself entry into nirvana and staying on earth helping others find their spiritual pilgrimage in this life.

Reincarnation and karma are not only prevalent in Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism but also the New Age movement here in America.

About one in four Americans believe in reincarnation and among college students the figure is nearly one in three.

The belief in reincarnation and karma has been pushed into the mainstream way of thinking in recent years with movies such as *The Reincarnation of Peter Proud* (1975), *Audrey Rose* (1977), *Heaven Can Wait* (1978), and *Birth* (2004).

Verses Buddhists use to Support Reincarnation

Reincarnation and karma advocates often point to specific Bible verses hoping to lend credence to their beliefs.

But of course the Bible never teaches reincarnation. It teaches resurrection. Let's go ahead and take a look at some of those supposed verses and answer them Biblically:

1. Jeremiah 1:5 says, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; and I ordained you a prophet to the nations."

Proponents of reincarnation believe that this verse supports their view since God "knew you" before you were born.

Biblical Response

The word *know* [Hebrew: *yada*] implies a special kind of relationship as in Amos 3:2 when God, speaking of Israel says, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth"

As Norman Geisler points out, "[this verse] is supported by words like *sanctified* and *ordained* which reveal that God had a special assignment for Jeremiah even before birth...Therefore, this verse does not imply Jeremiah's *preexistence*; rather it affirms Jeremiah's *preordination* to a special ministry."¹⁶

2. In Matthew 11:14, Jesus, when referring to John the Baptist says, "And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come."

Since Elijah had died centuries before, proponents of reincarnation will point out that this verse supports their belief that the Bible teaches reincarnation.

Biblical Response

When we look at John 1:21, we clearly see that when John is asked specifically if he is Elijah, "He said, 'I am not.'"

Luke 1:17 clearly tells us that John came "in the spirit and power of Elijah." – Jesus was simply saying that John was *like* Elijah.

3. John 3:3 says, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Proponents of reincarnation will use John 3:1-8 to say that being "born-again" is in fact the cycle of re-birth referred to by Jesus.

Biblical Response

If Jesus were advocating reincarnation, he should have said something to the effect of "unless someone is born again and again and again and again..."¹⁷

Biblically, being "born-again" is being cleansed from our sins and being given a new life in God by the Holy Spirit of God. It is a Spiritual re-birth by emphasizing God's requirements into entering the kingdom of heaven and not the endless cycle of re-birth and karma.

See Romans 3:21-26; Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:13

4. John 9:1-2 says, "Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him saying, 'Rabbi, who sinned, *this man* or his parents, that he was born blind?'" (emphasis added)

Proponents of reincarnation will point out that even Jesus' disciples recognized reincarnation was legitimate by asking if this man sinned "who was born blind from birth."

Biblical Response

Jesus' response in verse 3 was, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him."

If the Bible taught reincarnation, Jesus response would have been something to the effect that the man was born blind because of sin committed in a past life.

Jewish theologians living at that time gave two reasons for birth defects: *prenatal sin* (before birth) and *parental sin*. They thought that

when the mother worshiped in a heathen temple that the fetus committed idolatry as well and thus their assumption.

They also believed that the sins of the parents were visited upon the children (Exodus 30:5; Psalm 109:14; Isaiah 65:6, 7).

As demonstrated in the above examples, we can see that when verses are taken out of context and we don't use the *basic interpretive principle* that *Scripture interprets Scripture*, we can twist Scripture to mean anything we want.

The Bible teaches that human beings live once and die once.

- Hebrews 9:27 says, "And it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment."

While here on earth, people decide their eternal destiny in one single lifetime.

- Matthew 25:46 says, "And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

It's important to note here that the punishment is said to be everlasting or eternal [Greek: *aionios* - pronounced *ahee-o-nee-os*]. It's the same Greek word used to describe the righteous to eternal [*aionios*] life.

Other passages that can be used to refute the false teaching of re-birth or reincarnation:

- Philippians 1:21 says, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

The "gain" that Paul is speaking about is his longing to be with Jesus Christ.

- 2 Corinthians 5:8 says, "We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord."

This verse makes clear that to be “absent from the body” is to be “present with the Lord” and not jumping to the next lifetime to do it all over again.

- See also Eccles. 12:7; Luke 23:43; Acts 7:5-9; 17:31; 1 John 3:2; Revelation 3:21.

In summary, as Christians our hope lies in the resurrection of Christ and that one day, not after many births and deaths, but after one birth and death, we will be raised up with a new body.

- 1 Corinthians 15:12-14 says, “Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty.”
- 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 says, “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye...and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”

Nirvana

Nirvana literally means “extinction”, “extinguished” or “blown out.” This is the ultimate goal of Buddhists, characterized by the extinction of craving, the cessation of suffering and the separation of ego.

Other names for Nirvana are enlightenment, Buddhahood, the enlightened mind, the awakening, god-realization and expanded consciousness among others.

According to Buddhism, the cessation of suffering, the extinguishing of all illusions and desires can be accomplished by following *The Eightfold Path*.

Nirvana can be imagined as never wanting anything or never wanting for anything.

Nirvana is not a place but emptiness and a cessation of suffering. You disappear in the essence and become one with the essence.

Adam Hamilton, author of *Christianity and World Religions* says "Buddhism...says that we have no soul. There is no "you." We have only karmic energy that is transferred to us from our past life and is no longer generated when we are enlightened. Thus, the journey ends with the extinction of any sense of our personal identity. Our energy is united with, or dissipated into, all other energy. We no longer exist. For the Buddhist, this is nirvana."¹⁸

Biblically, Nirvana has no basis in reality. As Christians we don't check our brains at the door when we enter the church building and think deep thoughts about nothingness, the cosmos or "the sound of one hand clapping."

Life is real and Jesus dealt with life issues. For example:

- Jesus said in John 5:24, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears [implies intellectual thought and mental understanding], My words [words that contain truth and life] and believes [makes an intellectual decision to follow Jesus], in Him who sent Me has everlasting life [implying consciousness, not extinguishing of self], and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life."

Instead of seeking "enlightenment" we should seek Jesus since He claimed to be the light of the world:

- In John 8:12, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."

Why then would people prefer to try and attain a glimmer of self attained expanded consciousness when they could have the light of Christ?

- Jesus said in John 3:19-21, "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be

exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”

The closest place that we as Christians would equate to nirvana would of course be heaven. Heaven is real and it’s talked about in the Bible as a real place and a perfect environment and not as a place where your “self is extinguished and absorbed into the whole.” Heaven far exceeds any place that we can imagine:

- 2 Corinthians 2:9 says, “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things that God has prepared for those who love Him.”
- Revelation 2:7 says, “To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.”

The word *paradise* [Greek: *paradeisos*] means “a park, an Eden (place of future happiness).”

The word “paradise” literally means “garden of pleasure” or “garden of delight.”¹⁹

- The apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:4 says he, “was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.”
- This glorious abode is also called the “holy city” (Revelation 21:2), a place where “righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13), and the “kingdom of light” (Colossians 1:12).

Meditation

There are many different forms of Buddhist meditation with the purpose of basically “shutting down” the mind. This can be achieved several ways by using techniques such as fasting, posture positions, breathing exercises and repetitive mantras as seen in the following quote:

“Meditation is an elemental part of Buddhism. The various schools of Buddhism approach meditation differently. Zen meditation, vipashyana

meditation, walking meditation, mantra meditation...there are many different techniques to meditation. The goal is to still our minds."²⁰

When setting up a meditation room in your house, one book on Buddhism suggested:

"If possible, it is a good idea to have an alter in a room...The Buddha statue and its place holder can be placed in the center of the alter. The Buddha is placed on the alter so your attention can be focused on the Buddha and his teachings...Prayer beads and devotional objects can be placed on the alter and prayer beads should be held in meditation... The person who is mediating could run her hands over the beads as she repeated *Oh mani padme hum*, using the beads to keep track of the number of repetitions."²¹

From what I could find out, the chant *Oh mani padme hum* is associated with the four armed pagan deity whose name means "Lord who looks down."

In Matthew 6:7 Jesus says, "And when you pray, do not use vain *repetitions* as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words." (emphasis added)

Buddhist prayers or chants are self-centered, a way to enter a state of meditation but the Bible teaches that Christian prayer is "effective" and that the "fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." (James 5:16)

With the goal of Buddhist meditation to "shut down the mind," often times meditation and chanting mantras can lead to altered states of consciousness.

An altered state of consciousness can be defined as, "that state in which the mind is highly susceptible to outside suggestion."

However, we should be very leery of anything that makes us *susceptible to outside suggestion*. 1 Peter 5:8 says to be "self-controlled, be watchful; because your adversary the devil walks about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour."

Ron Rhodes, quoting other authors, talks about altered states of consciousness:

“some people have found Transcendental Meditation to be harmful. Altered states of consciousness led to contact with spirits. Moreover, some deep meditators have developed increased anxiety, confusion, and depression. Too much deep meditation can hinder logical thought processes. One researcher found that “as a person enters or is in an ASC [altered state of consciousness], he often experiences fear of losing his grip on reality, and losing his self control.””²²

Biblical meditation needs to be understood since the words “meditate” or “meditation” is used twenty times in the Bible.

Let’s examine verses that teach us why and how to meditate on Gods word.

- Psalm 1:2 says, “But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night.”

The word *meditate* [Hebrew: *hagah*] means to “ponder by talking to oneself, speak, study or talk.”

It does not mean to “empty oneself” or for your mind to become a “void” and “shut down.”

- Joshua 1:8 says, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it.”
- Psalm 19:14 says, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer.”
- Psalm 63:6 says that “when I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches.”
- See also Psalm 48:9; 77:12; 104:34; 143:5 and Psalm 119

So, we notice that we are to “meditate” or “ponder by talking to ourselves,” inwardly and outwardly about the word of God, about God Himself and His

works and it should be from the heart. This is a far cry from what meditation to the Buddhist means.

Another reason to avoid meditation, as defined by Buddhism, is because the goal of mediation is to provide the participant with a way to the ultimate truth by sheer human effort, "thus advocating a form of self-salvation by works instead of what the Bible explicitly teaches."

- Ephesians 2:8, 9 says, "For by faith you have been saved through faith, and not of yourselves; it is a gift of God, *not of works*, lest anyone should boast." (emphasis added)
- Titus 3:5 says, "*not by works* of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit." (emphasis added)
- Romans 11:6 says, "And if by grace, then it is *no longer of works*; otherwise grace is no longer grace." (emphasis added)
- Galatians 2:16 tells us that "We...knowing that a man is not justified [declared righteous before God] by the works of the law *but by faith in Jesus Christ*" (emphasis added)

Biblical salvation is *entirely* by God's grace through *faith and belief* in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

- Romans 10:9-10 says that, "if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."

Jesus Christ or Buddha?

It can and must be demonstrated that the person who is putting their faith or their "full weight" on the teachings of the Buddha for salvation will eventually fall short. Jesus is far superior and the only way to salvation.

Who is the Way?

As noted earlier, it is reported that Buddha's last words were:

- "Buddhas do but point the way; work out your salvation with diligence."²³

In the *Dhammapada*, considered part of the Buddhist canon, we read:

The *best of ways* is the eightfold path; the best of truths the four words; the best of virtues passionlessness; the best of men he who has no eyes. (emphasis added)

This is the way, there is no other that leads to the purifying of intelligence. Go on this way! Everything else is the deceit of Mara (the tempter). (emphasis added)

If you go on this way, you will make an end of pain! *The way* was preached by me, when I had understood the removal of the thorns (in the flesh). (emphasis added)

We often hear that there are many ways to God and that the way of the Christian is just one of many since all roads lead to God.

The writer of Proverbs tells us, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end is the way to death." (Proverbs 14:13)

And Isaiah tells us in 26:7-8 that "The way of the just is uprightness; O Most Upright, You weigh the path of the just. Yes, in the way of your judgments, O LORD, we have waited on you."

And finally, Buddha might have thought that he pointed the way, but he didn't. Jesus is the only way. He even said so Himself and we need to take the truth claims of Jesus very seriously for in Him and only in Him do we find our salvation.

- In John 14:6, Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

- In John 1:29 we read, "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!'"
- In Acts 4:12 we read of Peter who being "filled with the Holy Spirit" says, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." No amount of meditation or enlightenment will earn you or merit you salvation. Clearly, Jesus is the only way that leads to eternal life.

Who offers more Hope?

Buddha taught that all life was suffering and that it was something to be eradicated through works and denying all personal pleasures.

If you could avoid wanting for anything, if you could avoid material possessions and desires, you could reach that point where it was possible to be "enlightened."

In fact, one of Buddhism's great contradictions is "desiring or wanting" to "not desire or want anything."

Buddhists "hope" they can do enough and they "hope" that they will eventually reach nirvana knowing very well that there's a very good chance that they have thousands of more lives one after another after another after another, etc... ahead of them.

Granted, there are many verses in the *Dhammapada* that are essentially nice and sound very much like Biblical proverbs. But nice words and quips provide little hope for a person's eternal destiny.

Here are some of Buddhism's teachings that are essentially hopeless: ²⁴

- *Dhammapada* 211 "Let, therefore, no man love anything; loss of the beloved is evil. Those who love nothing and hate nothing, have no fetters."
- *Dhammapada* 215 "From love comes grief, from love comes fear; he who is free from greed knows neither grief nor fear."

On the other hand we have the teachings of Jesus who is the very embodiment of peace and love and our hope lays and rests firmly in Him:

- In John 14:26, Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."
- Galatians 5:22, 23 says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."
- The apostle John tells us in 1 John 4:18 that, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment."

Jesus came to give us hope and an abundant life:

- John 10:10 says, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."
- Revelation 21:4 reassures us that "God will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

The Buddhist does not have this hope.

Who extends Salvation?

Buddhism teaches that reincarnation and karma is a means to reach the ultimate goal of *nirvana* or *salvation*. The *Eightfold Path* is the way for you to better yourselves so that salvation will be attainable.

It teaches that the succession of lives brings about moral refinements in ones life.

"This path [the Eightfold Path], which is called the Noble Eightfold Path, is the path to achieving *salvation* and to the end of one's suffering." (emphasis mine) ²⁵

However Biblically, only God can offer us salvation. It is His and only His prerogative to offer salvation and it can be found in no other.

- Isaiah 43:11 - "I, even I, am the LORD, and besides Me there is no savior."
- Isaiah 45:21, 22 - "And there is no other God besides Me, a just God and a Savior; there is none besides Me. Look to Me and be saved."

With that said, Jesus, the Son of God is the Savior of the world.

- John 4:42 says, "Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world."
- Acts 4:12 says, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name [Jesus] under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Who is the better Christ?

Siddhartha Gautama, the *Buddha*, was a mere man who died, was cremated, buried and never rose again.

Siddhartha never claimed to be God or even a god and in fact, the Buddha is not even essential to the teachings of Buddhism.

The Buddha's goal was to simply bring his form of "enlightenment" to others so that they, on their own, could reach nirvana where all desires, pain and individual existence would be "put out" or "extinguished."

Jesus Christ, on the other hand is the Messiah, the one that the entire Bible is written about. He is the theme of the Old and New Testament and without Him, there is no Christianity.

- Jesus Christ testified that He is the theme of the Bible in John 5:39, 46-47 - "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me...For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?"

- In Luke 24:27, Jesus says, "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself."
- And in Luke 24:44, Jesus "said to them, 'These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.'"
- Jesus claimed to be God Incarnate; Incarnate simply means "God in the flesh" and proved it by raising Himself from the dead.
- Acts 2:15 says that "God raised [Jesus] from the dead" as well as Acts 2:24, 32; 3:26; 4:10; 5:30; Romans 6:4
- John 2:19-21 says that "Jesus answered and said to them, 'Destroy this body and in three days I will raise it up.'...But He was speaking of the temple of His body."
- In John 10:17, 18 Jesus says, "Therefore My Father loved Me because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I received from My Father."

This is extremely important theologically since the Bible teaches that God raised Jesus from the dead and that Jesus raised Himself from the dead. This is of course teaching that Jesus is God!

So, who is the better Christ? Buddha who is still in the grave or Jesus Christ who sits at the right hand of God in heaven (Psalm 110:1; Heb. 1:13), interceding on behalf of believers (1 Timothy 2:5)?

Conclusion

Just like all other attempts of man to reach up to God by our own works, we will fail. The Bible makes it clear that nothing we can do in the way of works, no good act can merit us salvation based on what we've done.

We will all fall short of the righteousness required from God and the Bible tells us that over and over again:

- Romans 3:23 says, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."
- Isaiah 64:6 says, "And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags."

Our only hope in this lifetime, not many lifetimes like Buddhism teaches, but this one lifetime, lies in the perfect sacrifice that Jesus paid on the cross.

That one act of sacrifice paid for my sins and I'm convinced that Jesus saw my face while He was dying on the cross for me.

The bottom line is this, there is no nirvana and since there is no nirvana, meditation will not reach that end. The *Eightfold Path* may focus on such elements as right living, right conduct, wisdom and conduct in a social order, but it will not lead to salvation as we saw earlier.

Not only is Jesus the *only way to the Father* (John 14:6), but He offers more hope than Buddha. Jesus extends salvation to the entire world (John 3:16) and He is the Christ, the Messiah, the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." (John 1:29)

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Notes

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