

Chapter 3  
Why I am not a Buddhist Part 1  
By Melvin Tinker

Introduction

It was a tender moment and one of the most significant moments in Asian history, a turning point which began with a look. It had been a long and tortuous road he had travelled fraught with indecision and doubt, but finally his mind was made up. To be sure, there was still the cost to consider. It was not the renunciation of his riches and status which concerned him. Being a Kshatriya Prince with all the riches and honour such a position entailed meant nothing to him. It was the thought of his wife and son which tormented him the most. They were his passion and delight and it was here that the choice he had made cut deep. So much so that he promised himself that he would steal one last look before he left them forever.

That was when he slipped into the bedroom where his dear wife and the child of their love lay. He longed to take the slumbering infant into his arms for one last time, sealing his love with a parting kiss. He yearned to take his wife in one last sweet embrace. But this was not to be. He stood in the shadows gazing at them and his heart was grieved. The pain of parting surged to the point of unbearable agony. Although his mind was resolute, nothing could prevent him from his quest, the tears flowed freely from his eyes.

Finally, he suppressed his feeling, tore himself from the scene of sublime domesticity and walked swiftly to where his horse and servant stood waiting at the gate.

“Do not leave me now, my lord,” cried a woman’s voice in the darkness. “In seven days’ time you will be rule over four continents and two thousand islands. This is no time to leave.”

“Well do I know it,” the young prince replies without stopping. “But it is not sovereignty I desire. I will become a Buddha and make all the world shout for joy.”

And so it was that Siddhartha Gautama, later to be known as the Buddha or ‘Awakened one’, rode off into the night and into history 500 years or so before the birth of Christ.

The story of Gautama is crucial for providing us with insight as to how the East as a whole (Hinduism) and Buddhism in particular perceives the human predicament and proffers a solution.

Gautama was brought up the son of a rajah of the Sakya tribe in Nepal and led a life which was both privileged and pampered. His father ensured that he was surrounded with every conceivable pleasure and shielded from every kind of sorrow, such that as

one account puts it, “that no trouble should come nigh him; he should not know that there was evil in the world.”

However, three things happened which were to shatter the cocoon of naiveté his father had carefully weaved around his son.

The first was the deep experience which began to grow upon discovering that his own mother had died while giving him birth.

The second experience occurred when he was about nine years old. Young Siddhartha was taken out to watch the annual Sakya ploughing festival, where his father made the first ceremonial cut into the ground. Instead of basking in his father’s regal splendor he was horrified to see that as the ground was gashed open, insects were thrown from their habitats, worms were cut into pieces and birds descended to eat the squirming creatures on the broken soil.

The third experience came some years later when the Kshatriya Prince, now fully grown, set out to see the world in his jewel bedecked chariot along a route carefully chosen and decorated by his father which would only show the beauty of life. However, along the way he encountered first an old man, then a sick man and finally a dead man. On seeing the corpse, Siddhartha is said to have asked, ‘Is this the only dead man, or does the world contain other instances?’ “All over the world it is the same”, replied his charioteer, “He who begins life must end it. There is no escape from death.” “Oh, worldly men!” exclaimed Siddhartha, as if speaking to his father and everyone else caught up in life’s distractions, “How fatal is your delusion! Inevitably your body will crumble to dust, yet carelessly, unheedingly you live on.” From then on, according to tradition, the son he left behind became ‘*Rahula*’ (the ‘fetter’) and Siddhartha became ‘the stream enterer’ whose goal was to become the *Tathagata* (the one who is simply “gone”.)

It was those life experiences which were to be formative in shaping Siddhartha’s understanding of the heart of the human predicament, which is suffering. His response in leaving his family is suggestive of what he came to see as the solution- viz. detachment. But as we shall see in a moment, while there were many other ascetics at the time that pursued the way of detachment as, if you will, the means of salvation for human beings, Siddhartha gave his understanding a particular form.

### *The dharmma or ‘teaching’*

It was something like six years after leaving his family that Siddhartha Gautama experienced his breakthrough. He came to realize that in his present weakened physical and mental state he was in no condition to receive any revelation. And so he modified his rule and regained a measure of physical strength and mental lucidity. As he was meditating under the *bo* tree in Buddh Gaya, Bihar, for 40 days and 40 nights it happened: the *seeker* became the *Buddha*, the *Awakened One*. Sometimes the term is referred to as the ‘Enlightened One’, but this would seem to be a less accurate rendering of the word, because the contrast is between all other men who are asleep and he alone who is awakened to reality.

What was the reality to which he was awakened? It was that suffering was the dominant element of human life. This leads on to the next obvious question: what was the cause of suffering? The Buddha saw that the origin lay in *desire*, that grasping which held the self to the wheel of insubstantial things. It followed that if desire itself could be eliminated then release from suffering would be possible and the human quest achieved. At the heart of the doctrine of the lotus is *the elimination of desire*.

Having had the awaking, the Buddha found five other ascetics to whom he delivered his first sermon, 'Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dharma' which contained the 4 Noble (Aryan) Truths.

The sermon begins with highlighting two ways of life which *do not work*. There is the way of *self-indulgence*- food, alcohol, sex and so on. These cause as many problems as they solve. Then there is the way of *self-denial* through practices such as fasting, solitude, and sleep deprivation. In contrast to these two false ways, Gautama claimed to have realized the '*middle path*'.

Underlying this middle path are the Four Noble (Aryan) truths.

1. *Dukkha*- anguish. Birth, age and death are all anguish as is the mental states men may experience. This is the underlying truth which defines human experience.
2. *Samudaya*- cravings or desire. This is the cause of *dukkha*, the craving of the experience of the senses. It is said that this desire belongs to the 'unreal self' which generates suffering since it is impermanent and changeable, seeking objects which belong to the world of illusion and so are bound to end in disappointment and disillusionment. It is this affirming of the lower self and clinging to it which is deemed evil.
3. *Nirodha*- containment. This is the complete abandonment and rejection of desire, even the desire to reject desire!
4. *Marga*- the right track. This is the eightfold path or eight elements which make up the right track consisting of 'the right'- right *understanding* (apprehending the four noble truths); right *aspiration* (renouncing desire); right *speech* (abstaining from slander, lies and foolish talk); right *living* (forbidding living by a trade which causes harm to others); right *effort* (the suppressing of evil mental states and the bringing about of good mental states); right *mindfulness* (to be aware of the body as the body, the mind as the mind, feelings as feelings and so on); right *concentration* (*samadhi*-entry onto the fourfold way of meditation which becomes open to the practitioner when he has overcome the five hindrances of sense desires- ill will, sloth, restlessness and doubt).

In her book, *Three Ways of Asian Wisdom*, Nancy Wilson Ross describes the process in this way: First, you must see clearly what is wrong. Then you must decide to be cured. Then you must act and speak so as to aim at being cured. Your livelihood must not interfere with your therapy. Your therapy must go forward steadily, as fast as possible,

but not too fast. You must think about it constantly, and learn to contemplate with a deep mind.

In summary, the First Noble Truth establishes the *problem*-affliction. The Second Noble Truth points to its *cause* which is craving or attachment. The Third Noble Truth highlights the way to *overcome* suffering via containment or extinguishing desire. The Fourth Noble Truth describes the eightfold path leading to the *end* of desire and so suffering. This final state (or perhaps it should be described as 'none-state') is *nirvana*. This is extinction, the 'deathless lake'. What is extinguished is not only suffering, desire and attachment, but the *individual* who desires. Some Buddhists claim that it is significant that at the moment the Buddha achieved his awakening under the bo tree, he did not cry 'I am liberated' but 'It is liberated'. He had transcended self to become the 'not-self'. As the British philosopher of comparative religion, Ninian Smart bluntly puts it, 'There is Nirvana, but no person who enters it.'

It is this complete liberation into nirvana that has occupied the attention of many Western adherents. But there is also what early Buddhism calls the *nibbuta*. This is the man who has attained the state of 'coolness' (not as 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans would understand being 'cool' - like Jonny Depp!). This is someone who is in a state of calm, unperturbed by the concerns of the world and free from the lower bases of desire. It is the *nibbuta* man who continues to remain in this world to teach the middle way, as did the Buddha from his awakening until the age of eighty.

*What is man- what is 'reality'?*

To try and understand how anyone can attain nirvana, it is vital to appreciate the Buddhist understanding of the ultimate nature of reality and the nature of man in relation to that reality.

In accord with mainline Hinduism, Buddhism in its ancient form is *monistic*. This is the view that all reality is ultimately One, a unity. What we experience as diversity and difference belong to the realm of illusion or *maya*- the root meaning in Sanskrit being 'to measure' or 'classify.' This is the world of scientific phenomena which is an illusion, a shadow world where individuality and diversity are *thought* to be real but are not. Being caught in *maya* is like being stuck in a bad dream. The dream is painful, frightening and uncomfortable, but it's not real. What is the solution to a bad dream? You wake up. Awakening is the true realization of reality. This, it is claimed, is what happened to Gautama under the bo tree. It is the awaking from the nightmare of diversity into the reality of the One.

If 'Reality' is one, where does this leave our understanding of human beings? It was at this point that Gautama departed radically from contemporary Hinduism. Hinduism regarded as essential the existence of *atman*, the real self. Whilst holding to traditional monism and the vale of illusion in which we find ourselves, Gautama said that all apparent existence belongs to the *anicca*- that which is impermanent and changing, but such a realm was *anatta* - 'without soul', there is no place for a permanent center of human consciousness.

And so while a human being might appear to be a unity, that is all it is- *appearance*. The Buddhist teaching is that this apparent existence is due to the coalescence of five *khandas* sometimes translated as ‘aggregates’. It is not all that easy to grasp how these *khandas* might be conceived; one suggestion is that they might be thought of as resembling centers of tension in a diffused field of magnetic energy.

The five *khandas* are as follows:

1. *Rupa*- a Sanskrit term meaning shape or form and refers to all that presents itself to us as the visible properties of apparent existence.
2. *Vedana*- feeling or sensation which arises out of contact with the apparent world.
3. *Sanna*- perception of the differences between the apparent phenomena.
4. *Sankhara*- a term which even the experts in Buddhism find it difficult to define. Maybe the best word which approximates this is ‘synthesis’- the ability to bring together the different aspects of experience into a whole (cf conceptual thinking).
5. *Vinnana*- ‘consciousness’ or better still, ‘self-awareness’, the ability to engage in inner reflection and to think about oneself.

Now we can perhaps begin to grasp what is claimed to happen at nirvana. There is an awakening to this state of affairs such that the ‘illusion of existence comes to an end.’ This is how bondage to the wheel of existence (*samsara*) is broken.

But is it possible for the different *khandas* to reform again? It is here that Buddhism maintains the ancient Hindu doctrine of *karma*- cause and effect, the relation of deed and retribution. However, this is *not* the idea that there is an ‘I’ who dies and is reborn or reincarnated because such an ‘I’ is denied. Rather, the *khandas* give up their temporary cohesion at death and, to use Eastern language, ‘wander in separateness through the vast abyss of nothingness, the endless universe. If in the infinite expanse of time they do come together again, the same experience of apparent existence will be born. The main thrust of this doctrine is that it is so hard to escape from illusion (*maya*) and will hardly occur within the span of one single period of time; awakening is ‘more likely to come only as a result of seeking through innumerable series of existences- a striving without ceasing.’<sup>1</sup>

*Is there room for God?*

From what we have seen so far in the teaching of the Buddha there is no room for self. But is there room for God? There does seem to be an allowance for something which has a state of permanence amidst the flux of what we perceive to be existence. This is

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Neill, ‘The Doctrine of the Lotus’ in *Crises of Belief* (Hodder, 1984), pp 137-8

illustrated by this passage taken from one of the sermons attributed to the Buddha: 'There is, monks, an unborn, not become, not made, uncompounded, and were it not, monks, for this unborn, not become, not made, uncompounded, no escape could be shown here for what is born, has become, not become, not made, uncompounded, therefore an escape can be shown for what is born, has become, is made, is compounded.'<sup>2</sup>

Hinduism, out of which Buddhism came, does allow for a supreme being- Brahman. But even this is not how Christians would conceive God, as Brahman is essentially *impersonal*. It is some kind of impersonal, stable 'something' which Buddha considers to be possible. But the classical form of Buddhism, known as Theravada Buddhism (southern school) is essentially atheistic (this is the minority tradition with something like 35% of the world Buddhists adherents). The other form of Buddhism which is more widespread is Mahayana Buddhism (Northern school of Nepal and Tibet- also Japan). The term 'Mahayana' means 'Great Vehicle' as distinct from Hinayana 'Small Vehicle', a reference to Theravadic Buddhism or the 'doctrine of the elders'. Here there is the reappearance of the Hindu concept of *avartars* or 'descents' of Ultimate Reality or Brahman. By and large these are mythical characters, but many of the Mahayana tradition would consider Buddha to be an avatar. There is also the *Bodhisattva*, who, following the example of Gautama, having attained perfect awakening refrain from entering into the state of nirvana in order to help people by teaching the 'Middle way.'

#### *East meets West in the art of Zen*

The type of Buddhism which many folk in the West have heard of is *Zen* Buddhism. This made its way into the counter culture in San Francisco through the Beats. Jack Kerouac's 'The Dharma Bums' appears to be a disguised history of this entry through Gary Snyder who had spent two years under a Zen master in Japan. But it was through the ex-Anglican counsellor, Alan Watts that it really began to spread in the States in the early 1950's. Watts was once referred to as the 'Norman Vincent Peale of Buddhism'. Zen had a natural appeal to the easy going, laid back cultural climate of the time which is well captured by Lin-Chi, 'In Buddhism there is no place for using effort. Just be ordinary and nothing special. Eat your food, move your bowels, pass water and when you are tired go and lie down.'<sup>3</sup>

#### *What are the features of Zen?*

The purpose is *to penetrate reality*. The method by which this penetration occurs is *meditation*, in which all earthly holds, including the dharma and nirvana itself are let go so there is nothing left but the 'I' and the 'it', until eventually they become identical. As Buddhagosa said of his state of enlightenment or awakening, 'I am nowhere a somewhatness for anyone.'

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<sup>2</sup> *Udana-Suttta* III. 3 quoted in Neill, p138

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Alan watts, '*Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen* (San Francisco , City Lights, 1959) p 10

At its most intriguing Zen is a world of paradox, the absurd and the irrational. This is deliberate so as to draw the mind away from that rationality which gets in the way between the world and the mind. And so in our experience we know what two hands clapping sounds like. In Zen we are invited to ponder the sound of one hand clapping.

Here is an example of Zen dialogue:

‘Am I right when I have no idea?’ asked the enquirer.

‘Throw away that idea of yours’ replied the Master.

‘What idea?’ asked the pupil in perplexity.

‘You are free, of course, to carry about that useless idea of no idea.’

According to Zen, it is the intellect which divides and orders, categorizes and measures, defines and describes. But what might it be if we could apprehend all things *at once* and *simultaneously*? This is illumination when thought ceases and something else takes its place. This experience is called *satori*- ‘the condition of consciousness wherein the pendulum of opposites has come to rest, where both sides of the coin are equally valued and immediately seen.’<sup>4</sup>

*Satori* can only come about when thought ceases.

How is this attained? The answer: through meditation.

We tend to view meditation as being concentrated thought- thinking about something, maybe a passage of Scripture or a hymn. But that is the Western mind set. In the East it is the exact opposite, meditation is the means of *stopping* thought. Thinking as we have seen is, according to Zen, a hindrance with its propensity to classify and analyze, thus keeping us trapped in the world of *maya*-illusion. Meditation helps us not to have a goal (going deeper into this or that) but meditation itself is to *be* the goal.

If we are bound to the wheel of samsara, meditation enables us not to fly off the periphery of the wheel but to get closer to the center. *Centering* is important to meditation. One Christian writer and former Zen Buddhist, puts it like this: ‘Think about the center of a wheel or a car or bike. What is it? It is the axle. What is the center of the axle? It is a point. And what is a point? It is nothing. Even in physical reality, in the center of the center of the center, in between the molecules and atoms and gluons and electrons and protons, is nothing. This nothing does not turn with the wheel. The nothing is free from the turning. When you reach this absolute nothing through your meditation you also realize the absolute everything. You have achieved absolute freedom. You are fully enlightened. You become everything when you become nothing.’<sup>5</sup>

One of the commonest methods of meditation is *mantra*. Mantra involves the repetition of words that have a meaning, first repeating them aloud and then internally. With

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<sup>4</sup> C Humphries ‘Buddhism’ quoted in Neill, p 143

<sup>5</sup> Ellis Potter, *3 Theories of Everything* (Destinée Media, 2012).

enough repetition, they become a vibration and transcend their meaning. They become finer and finer until you are vibrating along with every atom in the universe. All physical matter vibrates as electrons change orbits. When you realize that vibration, you unite yourself with all physical matter in the cosmos, and you become one with the all.

There are a variety of mantras. When the Beatles went off to India to study under the Maharishi Yogi (a Hindu, not a Buddhist), he gave each one their own secret mantra. If you listen to the 'Let it be' album, there you will find how John Lennon used it in his song, 'Across the Universe'. Listen to the lyrics and you can see how he was experiencing what he felt was some kind of transcendent state. The most common mantra, which is on that track is the repetition of the word AUM. Let's look at this video clip which plays the original version of Lennon's song and see what I mean: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjyQqK5Oge0> (play to 2.08)

The whole text is '*aum mane padme hum*', which means 'hail to the jewel in the lotus'. Lotus blossoms grow in the mud under the water, and propagate by shoots. Certain species have no seeds with a long stem and emerge through the surface of the water. If you see a statue of Buddha, look at the base and you will see little lotus blossom petals. It's the lotus throne, and he has lotus feet. This is a very important image for Buddhism. The lotus blossom has hundreds of petals. If you separate the petals and come into the center of the lotus blossom, what is there? Nothing! That is the jewel in the lotus.

### Summary

1. Buddhism belongs to the Eastern world of *monism*. All is One.
2. The heart of the human predicament is *suffering*.
3. The way of 'salvation' is by *detachment*.
4. The Four Noble Truths set out the way to the Eightfold path. Using medical terminology we may think of them as 'disease' (suffering); 'diagnosis' (desire); 'prescription' (containment) and 'treatment' (the middle way).
5. Theravada Buddhism is agnostic at best if not outright atheistic.
6. The end of the eightfold path is *nirvana* 'the great deathless lake' and the extinction of the individual.
7. The main technique employed to achieve this state (non-state) is meditation.

### POINTS FOR HOME

1. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.' John 1:1-3. The Biblical view of God and creation is very different from that of Buddhism. God is personal and relational. The world is real, not a dream. God can be spoken to in prayer and speaks to us through His Word. Take this week to delight in the God who is more like a divine family and his creation which we are to care for.
2. Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful from the time my mother conceived me.' Psalm 51: 4-5. The Bible views suffering and affliction as a

result of the Fall (Genesis 3), not the fundamental problem of human existence which is sin- both original and actual. How seriously do we take sin as primarily being something which offends God? What part does repentance (rather than remorse) have in our walk with the Lord?

3. 'Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.' Ephesians 2:3-5. Salvation is not by self-effort leading to the extinguishing of self in the 'deathless lake', it is a free gift of God, solely by grace whereby we are made alive, united to Christ. 'Nothing ages more quickly than gratitude' wrote Martin Luther, take time to ponder the wonder and the cost of our salvation.