

## ***Buddhism***

Psalm 46: 8-11; Romans 8: 18-25

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Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

### **I. Introduction**

A young queen of a small state that is in modern Nepal had a dream one night in which a beautiful white elephant offered her a perfect lotus flower and then leapt inside of her body through her side. She woke up sort of startled and trying to figure out what that meant and when she asked the sages, they told her that she was going to give birth to a son who would be either one of the great rulers of history or one of the great sages of history. The year was about 563 BCE, this is during the period that the Hebrew community was in captivity in Babylon, and Queen Maya gave birth to a son whom she named Siddhartha Gautama.

We're in the middle of a sermon series of world religions, and in that process we have talked about the fact that it is utterly ludicrous to think you can say anything particularly meaningful about an entire religious tradition in 20 minutes and yet also affirming the importance of being able to start to understand some of the places where we have commonalities and differences with people of other traditions as we seek to be in dialogue with them.

This morning we're going to be looking at Buddhism, which is the fourth largest religion in the world, practiced by roughly 350-ish million people and a tradition that has been an important part of my spiritual journey and the spiritual journeys of many in our community here at Metropolitan.

### **II. The Life of Buddha**

Siddhartha's mother died when he was quite young, leaving him to be raised by his aunt and his father. His father, the king, wasn't particularly interested in having a son who was going to be a great spiritual leader. He wanted to have a son who was going to expand his kingdom. And so, he trained up Siddhartha to rule and he worked very hard to insulate his son from the vagaries of life and things that might cause him to ponder and become a wise man.

So, Siddhartha spent all of his early years in his royal compound essentially, pampered in every way and indulged in every way, and it wasn't until he was 29 years old that he actually left the family compound and started to engage the broader world around him. And as soon as he left the royal palace, he started encountering things he had never seen before. On one trip, he encountered a sick person; in another trip, an old person; in another trip, a dead person; and finally, an ascetic monk. And it caused him to start to ponder the nature of human existence, the transitory nature of human existence, and the inevitability of suffering. And this caused sort of an existential crisis in the young Siddhartha's life.

He wanted to learn more but his father wouldn't let him leave the palace again, and so, he eventually escaped the palace, cut off his hair, and became an ascetic. He found two different gurus, meditation teachers, who taught him the art of meditation, and he lived an extraordinarily ascetic life, depriving himself of all of the comforts that he had been so accustomed to, fasting for prolonged periods. And after six years of incredibly ascetic living, during which time he almost starved himself to death, he came to realize that he wasn't any closer to understanding the mystery of suffering in life. And so, he gave up his ascetic lifestyle. He washed himself, clothed himself, and had a little food to eat, and then he settled himself under a Bodhi Tree and made the vow that he was not going to stop meditating until he had achieved the insight that he craved.

And in stories that very much echo some of the stories about Jesus' time in the desert, he sat and meditated. He was tempted and assaulted by these various spiritual forces around him and he kept his focus until at the age of 35, he had a moment of complete enlightenment when everything fell into place for him and he understood the nature of humanity, the nature of the universe, and it was such a momentous moment that the story says that the entire earth shook with the power of his revelation.

And then, he left the Bodhi Tree and started to teach. By all accounts, he had this incredibly powerful spiritual presence that you heard Dottie Yunker talk about a few weeks ago when she had encountered the Dalai Lama and people were drawn to him and to the teaching that he shared.

Eventually he founded a monastic community that interestingly included both men and women, which was a brand new idea, and included people from every caste of Indian society. People who never interacted with one another were all called together into this monastic community and all took common vows of poverty and chastity in much the same way that early Christian monastic communities formed. And Buddha spent the next 45 years of his life until he was 80 years old wandering the countryside of India and Nepal and teaching people about his great insight until he died at the age of 80.

### **III. Primary teachings**

Buddha's teaching captured what Buddhist tradition calls the Middle Way which is a way that exists between the extremes of self-indulgence and consumerism and the extreme of asceticism and self-deprivation and encourages us to find that middle place. He talks about it in the same way as a cello string or a sitar string that if it's too tight, it breaks, and if it's too loose, it doesn't make a sound. It's got to be in that perfect middle spot for the vibrations to work. And he developed what he called the Four Noble Truths which are the sort of hallmarks of Buddhist thought.

The first of those Noble Truths is that we live in a world of pain and suffering in which everything ultimately passes away. Buddha, as opposed to much of Jewish and Christian thought, doesn't spend any time wondering why that is. So, for those of you who just finished up our Job Bible study, there's no great debates in Buddhism about why they're suffering or why the world is created in this way that death and suffering exist. It just is. And Buddha says that the first piece that we need to come to terms with is that it exists and there's no escaping it. It's not even possible to escape through our own death because in Buddhist tradition, as in Hindu, the soul is reincarnated, so we can die but we're right back in the world again experiencing the same suffering and loss. So, there's no way to get out of that situation.

But then the second Noble Truth is that most of our suffering is actually caused not by the external world around us but by our attachment to it. So, our desire to hold on to and cling on to the things of this world and not let them go is the source of most of our suffering, that our attachment to the things of our lives to the people of our lives to what we want, our desires for the things around us are what ultimately cause us suffering. The third Noble Truth is the way to move away from suffering is to let go of some of those attachments. It's to get a little distance between ourselves and who we are and the stuff that clutters our lives. Does that sound familiar at all? Because it should. These are very, very similar ideas to our Christian faith.

The fourth Noble Truth is what's called the Eightfold Path which is all of the ways in which we learn some detachment. They have to do with behaving morally. They have to do with cultivating a deep sense of mindfulness. They have to do with learning wisdom. And so, this Eightfold Path is the means by which we focus inward and learn some detachment from the world around us.

We are supported in that journey in Buddhist tradition by the three treasures which are Buddha himself and his example in life, Buddhist teachings, the Dharma, and Sangha, the community of faith that supports us and nurtures us in that journey. Does that sound familiar at all? Because again, it should very much parallel how we understand and appreciate the example of Jesus Christ as a model for the way we live, that we dig deeply into the scriptures of our faith as we seek to learn what healthy and holy living is about, and the centrality of the community of faith that nurtures us in this journey together.

So, after Buddha's death, his large number of students gathered themselves together because they had all been with him at different places during his life and teaching and started to assemble all of his teachings together in one place. All of this Dharma. And interestingly they didn't write it down initially. They transmitted it orally through memory. And it wasn't until close to 500 years later that it finally gets written down in what we call the Polycanon which are the stories about Buddha's life and the teachings of Buddha, the Sutra, and the commentaries on the Sutra that the various sages have added over the years.

#### **IV. Buddhism and Christianity**

So, there are many, many powerful connecting points between our own tradition and Buddhism and some very important places of difference. When I first started reading some of the teachings of the Buddha, I was on a plane actually on my way back from Japan and I found myself scrawling in the margins of the book all of these scripture passages that various teachings I was reading echoed. Some very powerful and sometimes rather eerie parallels. I'm going to read to you a few words here and see if this sounds in any way familiar.

The Buddhist said, "I will tell you another parable. Once upon a time there was a son of a wealthy man who left his home and fell into extreme poverty. When the father traveled far from home in search of his son, he lost all track of him. He did everything he could to find his son but it was in vain. Decades later, his son now reduced to wretchedness wandered near to where his father was living. His father quickly recognized his son and sent servants to bring the wanderer home." And the story goes on. This probably sounds familiar to you all, right? Very, very similar stories that get told in both of our traditions.

Interestingly, the thing that separates us most from Buddhism is the same thing that makes Buddhism such an easy religion to be in dialogue with, there is very little role for God in Buddhist teaching. The Buddha was not an atheist, he didn't say there was no God, but he was rather uninterested in who God was or what God was about. It wasn't pertinent for him to the question of suffering and the meaning of life and right living in the world. So, Buddhism never came into conflict with the Hindu religion that it sprung up in.

And in fact, in many areas of the world, as you know from many of you who have traveled there, Hindu and Buddhist temples are the same temples. They worship in the same place and have the same clergy even sometimes. Because the Hindu faith, in terms of its understanding of God, doesn't stand in contrast with the practice that the Buddha taught.

Likewise, when I was visiting Japan, many Shinto and Buddhist temples co-exist with the same clergy serving their needs because again the theological content of Shintoism doesn't contrast with the practice of Buddhism. This is, of course, the reason why so many Jewish and Christian people have found Buddhism to be a powerful dialogue partner, because we don't believe different things about God. Buddhism doesn't have a stake in what God is like, whereas for Christianity, who God is and how God has revealed God's self in the person of Jesus Christ is of ultimate concern. So, these two traditions can be very comfortably in conversation with each other and have been in very powerful ways over the years.

One of those places is that Christianity and Buddhism both have a very deep and rich history of contemplation and meditation. You heard those wonderful words of the Psalm that invite us in the midst of all of the chaos and craziness of life to "be still and know that I am God." That there is an opportunity to center ourselves in a place

that is utterly secure and silent in the midst of all of the turmoil of life and it is in that place as we enter that silence that we come to hear the voice of the divine in our lives. That's an invitation that Christian mystics have engaged for centuries as well as great Buddhist teachers.

One of the great spiritual writers of the last generation, the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, was deeply impacted by his encounter with Zen Buddhism and kept him a multi-year correspondence with the great Zen teacher, Daisetz Suzuki, and wrote a wonderful book on Christian mystics and Zen masters and the common places that they touched.

My first teacher in contemplative prayer, Father Tilden Edwards, who's an Episcopalian priest in this area and author founded a group called the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation and also found his own spiritual journey deeply nurtured by his encounter with Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhist teaching offers us as Christians a wealth of helpful guidance about the discipline of quieting our minds so that we can start to listen for the divine voice within us.

That's a gift that we spend a lot of time working on here in Metropolitan. I want to offer you an invitation to be part of that journey because we've got some wonderful places to plug in on that, whether it's our Wednesday morning meditation group that meets here in the sanctuary or our Thursday morning men's *lectio divina* group or our contemplative Communion services in evenings during Lent and Advent or many of the events that we have, there's a lot of places to take advantage of the great wisdom of Buddhist tradition and incorporating it into our own call to engage in contemplative prayer.

## **V. Conclusion**

My first morning on my first trip to Japan, I flew into Kyoto and because your body clock gets all out of whack, I woke up bright and bushytailed at four o'clock in the morning with absolutely no idea what to do. So, I was brand new, I didn't know anybody there, so I just started to walk around the city. And a little bit before six o'clock, I found these huge beautiful wooden doors to this massive temple complex opened and I wandered in and saw some monks and laypeople getting ready for morning prayer. And so, I kicked off my shoes and I joined them and prayed as they chanted. And that temple became my temple and I started to go there every morning and I had my place on the mat. Don't sit in my place, don't kneel in my place, that's my spot! Every morning I spent some time in prayer while my Buddhist colleagues chanted beside me. And then, as all the chanting stopped, we had a moment to share in the beauty of silence as we worshiped together.

Amen.