



## Why dialogue about other gods and Jesus?

Everyone desires to have a voice. And everyone wants to be respected enough to have that voice heard. People know whether or not respect is being shown by whether or not what they have to say is being listened to or ignored. We all share this reality.

Think for a moment: can you remember a time when you had something important to say and it was obvious that the person you were talking to was not paying attention? Or have you ever been in a conversation where you knew that the person you were talking to was thinking about he or she was going to say next rather than what you were saying?

When Jesus taught his followers to love their neighbor as much as they loved themselves, and to do unto others and they would want others to do unto them he taught the basic reality that we are all made in the image of God—and therefore are worth something.

When we spread the message of the love of God shown through Christ we want to be given a hearing. There are few feelings worse than having someone discount what you have to say a priori simply because you are a Christian. Yet too often we Christians are guilty of the same thing.

With that in mind we must be prepared to hear the thoughts and ideas of people from other religious traditions. This does not mean that we must accept all truth claims as equal—for it is also true that to love our neighbor means that we must persist that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life—but that all people are equal. And because all people are equal all people should be treated with the same respect we would want to be given to us.

Only when we listen, respect and love people can we identify with them. Perhaps the reason Paul single-handedly effected change and scripted history is rooted in his methodology, “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9). Jeyachandran comments on this verse to the Hindu culture, “Paul would have said, ‘to the Brahmin, I became like a Brahmin, to win the Brahmins; to the Shudras, I became like a Shudra, to win the Shudras.’ Paul would have been the first politically correct kingdom activist. What would this look like today? Consider Swami Dayanand Bharati, Living Water and Indian Bowl, prefers to be called a bhakta (devotee) of Christ rather than a Christian. Since the later has a negative connotation in many places in India.

This sermon series is partially designed to help you, as a Christian, practice the art of listening to your neighbor, showing respect to your neighbor, and therefore loving your neighbor as you, as a Christian, want to be listened to, respected, and loved.

*“The Buddha taught his followers to escape suffering, while Jesus showed a way to conquer it by embracing it.”*

- Gerald R. McDermott, Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? (p. 134)

*“When people carried their puzzlement to Buddha himself, the answer he gave provided an identity for his entire message.*

*“ ‘Are you a god?’ they asked? ‘No.’ ‘An angel?’ ‘No.’ ‘A saint?’ ‘No.’ ‘Then what are you?’ ‘Buddha answered, ‘I am awake.’ ”*

- Huston Smith, The World’s Religions (p. 82)

## Introduction to Buddhism in Two Minutes

Buddhism is the story of how a prince became a sage and in doing so made it his mission to invite all people to participate in the enlightened state of reality that he believed he had obtained. The beauty of this religion is that it offers all people from all backgrounds a path out of the mundane day-to-day cycle of life that inevitably results in what the Buddha called dukkha, what some have translated as suffering, but which is best described as “the pain that colors all finite existence (The World’s Religions, 101)”. The only way to find relief is to realize that tanha, or what we know as “desire”, is the root of this pain and therefore must be transcended.

One major clarification needs to be made here: it is acknowledged that there are major differences of thought found in branches of Buddhism such as Mahayana, Hinayana, and Theravada and that this discussion cannot fairly represent all of these viewpoints. Therefore please feel free to talk to the speakers afterward or participate in the discussion post mentioned below (at [brianleport.com](http://brianleport.com)) if you would like to challenge or discuss anything taught here.

### 1. “What did Buddha teach was the greatest obstacle for humanity?”

As we explore the claims of the Buddha we will find that he has a lot in common with Jesus. But we will also see that where Buddha and Jesus do differ a great chasm is formed.

To understand Buddha’s teaching we must summarize his legend. It is taught that Buddha was a born great prince. When he was born it was prophesied that he would either be either a great king or a great renunciate. Since his father preferred that his son become a great king rather than live the ascetic life he made sure to give Buddha (known as Siddhartha from the clan Gautama) a life of pleasure. He gave his son three different palaces, many women, and enough pleasures to keep him from wondering about the outside world.

But one day Gautama requested of his father to see the city. His father eventually agreed but instructed the servant to make sure that his son did not see any elderly, sick, or ugly people along the way. It so happens that on his ride through the city he saw an old man lacking teeth. When he inquired into why this man looked like he did a servant informed him that this man was elderly. This troubled Gautama greatly. On the next three trips he encountered a diseased man, a dead corpse, and a monk who had forsaken the surrounding world. These depictions of human existence destroyed the view of reality his father had installed in him.

At this point Gautama began a journey toward enlightenment. He learned from Hindu gurus but was not satisfied. He tried extreme asceticism and almost died, but found this to be of no avail. Eventually he engaged himself in a “combination of rigorous thought and mystical concentration”. As the Gautama neared enlightenment “the Evil One” who came in the form of Kama, the God of Desire, and Mara, the Lord of Death challenged him. When he overcame their attempts to distract him he had a break through and reached his “enlightenment” that resulted in him becoming the Buddha, “the enlightened one” or “the one who has woken up”.

## 2. “What did this ‘enlightenment’ consist of?”

It is known as the Four Noble Truths. (1) Life is Dukkha. This can be understood as suffering. But it means more than what we think of suffering and rather includes everything from the pain of being born, “aging, sickness, death, losing friends, gaining enemies, not finding what one wishes for, encountering what one does not wish for” and so forth. “[T]he Buddha saw clearly that life as typically lived is unfulfilling and filled with insecurity.”

(2) The cause of Dukkha is tanha, or desire. But this is not just mere desire, but rather “the desire for self fulfillment”. Here we learn that our suffering comes from karma. Karma is that energy that transfers from one life to the next. We are not “reincarnated” like in Hindu thought. Rather, Buddhist thought suggests that our Karmic energies are reborn in another. We are not to be understood as being the same individual as in a past life (for the idea that we are an individual is an illusion), but rather that we are the rebirth of some “karmic seeds” from a past life.

The great problem here is ignorance. But by ignorance Buddhism does not mean simply being misinformed, but rather not understanding the true nature of reality. In this case the truth is that we are not really self but instead “no self”. We are not distinct individuals, but rather “various constitutes of mind and body”. Once we realize that we are not self, and that we should not have desire, we can move onto the third Truth.

(3) The Third Truth is the goal of cessation, or Nirvana. There are two Nirvanas: “Nirvana with remainder” which is what Buddha first accomplished when he reached enlightenment and therefore destroyed the seeds of future Karma yet continued to live out this current Karma and “Nirvana without remainder” which is what occurred when Buddha died and reached the cessation of existence escaping Samsara—the cycle of life and death.

(4) The Fourth Truth is the path to Nirvana, or “the means of putting an end to suffering” which we explore below.

### 3. “How did Jesus understand suffering?”

Jesus told his followers to not worry about themselves—much like Buddha told his followers. The difference is Jesus pointed toward serving the Kingdom of God. Whereas some Buddhist schools of thought allow for people to reach certain stages of enlightenment and then choose to remain to help others, the difference is that the Kingdom of God does not seek to help people find cessation, but rather to be part of God’s restorative program for this reality (Colossians 1; Romans 8; Revelation 21).

When people seek first God’s Kingdom, God takes care of us and our desires and our dreams (Matthew 6). Jesus understood this and told people that the gaining life was OK. Cessation was not the goal. Rather, we are to lose our lives for Christ that we might find our lives. We pick up our cross and die with Christ so that we may resurrect unto new life with Christ (both metaphorically spiritually and literally in the future resurrection). Jesus said to take up our cross and follow him.

And we know from the Gospels that the cross was a sign of death. It was the final word of the powers that be, the evil that is, the Caesars that rule the world. What Christ does is absorb that suffering and pain, he embraces it, and in doing so he trusts that God would vindicate him by raising him from the dead. The resurrection says that the power of evil, suffering, and pain—its greatest expression being death—is powerless when confronted by Christ.

### 4. “How would Jesus and Buddha answer this question: How do we escape suffering and pain?”

**Buddha:** Buddha would remind us that we are no self. We are part of the greater reality. We are where we are, what we are, and suffering what we suffer because of Karmic debt. The beginning of the end is to realize this through the several methods practiced within Buddhist thought. Once a person has begun to enter Nirvana (which may be defined in various ways like the Hindu moksha) they become an arhat (one who is worthy) and make preparations over several lives to leave Samsara. When we realize we are causations of thought, mind, body—but not an individual—we are on the way toward rising above Dukkha.

**Jesus:** Jesus would remind us that this sin filled world guarantees suffering. We cannot escape it. Rather, we must dive head first into this mess of reality. We must be willing to still suffer pain—our own and with others—to bring the message of the resurrected Christ to a hurting world. Christ promising not that we will overcome suffering by cessation, but that we will overcome it by resurrection. The victory that God began when he raised Jesus from the dead will finalize one day and all those in Christ will be raised up (or changed) into new life in the new heavens and new earth.

### Key Phrases and Terms

**arhat:** “literally, ‘one who is worthy,’ one who has followed the path and destroyed all causes for future rebirth and will enter nirvana upon death.” (Lopez, 257)

**dharma-** (1) The teachings of Buddha and (2) the basic “phenomena” that constitutes mind and matter. (Lopez, 258)

**karma-** “literally, ‘action’, the law of cause and effect of actions according to which virtuous deeds result in happiness in the future and nonvirtuous deeds result in suffering. Karma is accumulated over many life times and fructifies to create present experience.” (Lopez, 259)

**Nirvana-** “the cessation of suffering and hence the goal of Buddhist practice. The nature of Nirvana is widely interpreted in Buddhist literature, with distinctions made between visions of nirvana, which destroys the seeds of future rebirth, and final nirvana entered upon death.” (Lopez, 261)

**Samsara-** “the beginningless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth” (Lopez, 262)

## Sources Used and Recommended Reading

- 1 Hinnells, John †R. ed. *Dictionary of Religions*
- 2 Lopez, Donald S. *The Story of Buddhism: A Concise Guide to Its History and Teachings*
- 3 McDermott, Gerald R. *God’s Rivals: Why has God Allowed Different Religions?*
- 4 McDermott, Gerald R. *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation, and Religious Traditions*
- 5 Novak, Philip. *The World’s Wisdom: Sacred Text of the World’s Religions*
- 6 Prothero, Stephen. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know--and Doesn’t*
- 7 Smart, Ninian. *The World’s Religions*
- 8 Smith, Huston. *The World’s Religions*
- 9 Smith, Huston and Philip Novak. *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*
- 10 Zacharias, Ravi. *Jesus Among Other Gods*
- 11 Zacharias, Ravi. *The Lotus and the Cross: Jesus Talks with Buddha*

E-mail Brian LePort at [brianleport@gmail.com](mailto:brianleport@gmail.com) or visit [brianleport.com](http://brianleport.com) and participate in the discussion under the title Jesus among the gods: sermon series notes: Buddhism. Pastor Jeff has a blog as well that you can reference. [Beloveddiscipleship.com](http://Beloveddiscipleship.com)

## The kerygma.

Ravi Zacharias in his little book, “The Cross and the Lotus” describes an imagined conversation between Jesus, Buddha and Priya. Priya, a Thai prostitute dying with AIDS is given philosophical answers for her condition from Buddha who promises that her pain will be over soon enough. He offers death as the solution to her pain, but is unable to promise anything more. He can offer no forgiveness, no resurrection, no conquering of the pain. Jesus looks at Priya and promises forgiveness, conquering of pain through resurrection, and life.

**Matthew 16 13** *When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples. . . “Who do you say I am?” 16* *Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”*

**20**Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. **21**From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. **22**Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" **23**Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." **24**Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. **25**For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. **26**What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? **27**For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. **28**I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

## After Sermon discussion Guide

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Read Matthew 6:25-34. Here we have human fears at their worst. Fear of suffering for lack of having our basic needs met. But Jesus tells us that the Father will take care of those who put the Kingdom first.

1. How do we do this? What does it mean to seek first the Kingdom? What does this look like in your world?
2. How can you love your neighbor that is of a different faith? What does that look like?
3. Where would you begin a discussion with a Buddhist? Where do you think the Gospel can speak to the need of a Buddhist?

### THINK ABOUT IT

Read Romans 8:18-27. What do we learn about God's plan for the creative order? The Apostle Paul says that not only humans suffer, but also all of creation is suffering, waiting for us to be redeemed. In doing so he uses the imagery of birth pains. Why do you think creation must wait to be redeemed until the children of God are redeemed?

### WHAT WILL YOU DO?

Read James 1:2-5 What does James say the purpose of suffering is? How does suffering help us?

Read 1 Peter 4:12-14. What does it look like to suffer as a Christian?

### CHANGING YOUR MIND

Matthew 10:37-39