

TRANSCRIPT

John:

Well last week when we explored Hinduism, I made a promise, and I asked you a question. My promise was to be fair toward the other world religions. While it might seem that someone who's committed to one religion couldn't possibly be fair to another, I made the point that actually, confidence in your own perspective is precisely what should allow you to be fair toward others. If you have to dim the lights on your competitors and shine the spotlight on yourself, that's clearly a sign you're not confident in the inherent beauty of your own perspective.

But a truly assured person is going to turn all the gallery lights on full, as it were, and let everyone come and inspect it for themselves; and it's precisely my confidence in the reality of Jesus Christ that allows me to be committed to fairness in the study of the world religions. But then I asked you for something, and that was to be open to the idea that the religions are not all teaching the same thing; that in fact the religions contradict each other at such a fundamental level that they can't possibly all be true. In our Western context, we're so committed to all the religions teaching the same thing because we don't want anyone to fight. We want everyone to play nice, so that we have this motivation to say all the religions teach the same thing. And I'm asking all of us to be open to the idea of taking each religion on its own terms, and not imposing a kind of sameness across them.

And this will be particularly important as we turn to Buddhism, because Buddhism makes some striking departures from the normal expectations of religious outlook. And Buddhism seems to me the most misunderstood of all the world faiths, and probably the hardest to get your mind around, and maybe you'll see this today. Perhaps because of the charming, happy Dalai Lama, people assume that Buddhism is the kind of laid back religion. It's the chilled religion, it's the religion that doesn't have all the rules and regulations, it's the one that you get spiritual peace for a low cost. I told you a couple of weeks ago about the conversation I overheard at a party where this man was knocking back his chardonnay, and he said, "I prefer Buddhism to Western religion, because Buddhism gives me all the spiritual peace that I can without all the rules and regulations." Unaware, of course, that one of the five commandments of Buddhism, the pancasilas, is that he shouldn't have been drinking alcohol.

I almost laughed, but I didn't engage in the conversation. And in fact, these pancasilas, the five commandments of Buddhism just fall into one category of the eightfold path, so-called right action. And the eightfold path itself is just one aspect of the so-called four noble truths. So it gets detailed. In fact, I would go so far as to say that Buddhism is the most intellectually complex and existentially rigorous of all the world faiths. Behind that cheering smile of the Dalai Lama is a profundity and a discipline unmatched in the history of ideas.

So let me talk briefly about the origins of Buddhism before getting into more of the details. The Buddha was given the name Siddhartha Gautama. His family name, Gautama, raised as a Hindu prince in the northeast of India in the Sakya's kingdom where Nepal is today, in the 5th century BC or the 4th century BC. We can't actually locate which of those two centuries, but we're sure it's one of those.

He was raised a Hindu prince in the lap of luxury. And the Buddhist texts themselves tell us that he had all the joys you could possibly imagine and describes them as lily ponds all around his gardens, yeah, which are beautiful. He had full time female musicians at his beck and call, like the cause 24/7. You know? And three different palaces, depending on the weather, they would go. So he lived the life of luxury until age 29, when he ventured outside the palace walls and was confronted by what Buddhists call the four signs.

These are the four turning points in the Buddhist life. One day in his chariot, he spotted a very old, frail man. And he pondered the suffering of that. And he saw a very sick man near to the point of death, and he pondered the pain of that. And then as he kept riding along, he saw a corpse on the side of the road, and he was confronted by the reality of death. And these first three signs troubled him so deeply until he saw the fourth sign, which was a Hindu ascetic in perfect contemplation and perfect peace amidst the suffering of the world.

And the Buddha thought to himself, "How can one find peace amidst this world of suffering?" He returned to his palace and announced that he was going to leave the palace, leave his wife and his newborn, and discover the truth behind the problem of pain. The central idea in Buddhism is how to live with peace amidst this world of profound suffering.

He spent the next six years learning from the Hindu masters. Every single technique, every meditative application, all the deep mysteries of Hinduism. And at the end of six years, being himself a master of Hinduism, so the texts tell us, he decided that the answer can't be found in Hinduism. That no peace amidst suffering is there to be had. So he decided to sit under a Bodhi tree one night in May and not come out of his trance until he understood the solution.

How does one find tranquillity amidst anguish? And after many days of the deepest trance imaginable, so the texts tell us, he became enlightened. He saw the truth in an instant. And the account of it puts it this way. Then as the third watch of that night drew on, the supreme master of trance turned his meditation to the real and essential nature of this world. He comprehended that where there is no ignorance whatever, there also the karma formations are stopped. Then he had achieved a correct knowledge of all that there is to be known. And he stood out in the world as Buddha, the enlightened one, is what that word means.

And henceforth, Siddhartha Guatama was known as the Buddha. This enlightenment, this knowledge of all that there is to be known, was partly a rejection of Hinduism and partly the elaboration of some innovations that he found during his enlightenment. And to put it in context, I want to speak briefly about what the Buddha rejected from his native Hinduism before pivoting to the doctrines that he laid out that are still the very core of Buddhism today.

What did the Buddha reject? Well firstly, he rejected the notion of gods and brahmin that was central to his upbringing, to Hinduism. Hinduism places the gods at the very centre, and brahmin at the centre of that. You're meant to go back to brahmin ultimately. That's the goal. But Buddha thought all talk of gods and even brahmin was a distraction from the reality. And there are these very humorous passages in the Tripitaka, the Buddhist texts, where his disciples ask him the metaphysical questions. What about God? What about the origins of the universe? And the Buddha would constantly say, "Did I teach you about that?" And then the disciple would say, "No, but that's why we're asking you. What about-" And he would say, "Did I teach you about that?" And the texts just run like this. Infuriating in some ways to the disciples, but his point was if I didn't teach you that, it's a distraction to the path of wisdom.

It's not quite true to say he was an atheist in the strict sense, but he was a practical atheist, thinking that all talk of gods and even brahmin distracted you from the truth. The second thing he rejected from his Hinduism was the notion of the soul or the Atman, the true you which is brahmin, which at the end of your life if you've had enough reincarnations and enough discipline in Hinduism, your soul will merge back with the soul of the universe. Brahmin, as we saw last week.

But Buddha rejected the very notion that there is such a thing as a human soul. In fact, this gets complicated. He even rejected that there was a you at all. Not a false you, not a true you. There is no you. It's completely imaginary. And this is one of the hardest things for Westerners to get their heads around, because Westerners have grown up with, frankly, a Judaeo-Christian understanding of the human person as an independent, wilful creature that has existence. But in the Buddhist philosophy, this is the very problem with life.

And the way he put it was, there is no you. There is just an illusion that takes place because of a chain of cause and effect. Mental and physical sensations happening right now kick on and cause other mental and physical sensations right now, and they kick on more physical and mental sensations right now, so that in the end, there is no enduring you, there is just the chain of cause and effect creating an illusion.

So he would go so far as to say that in the 10 minutes I've been speaking to you today, there is no enduring you. The you of 10 minutes ago had one set of mental and physical sensations, which have

caused other mental and physical sensations, but in the nature of causation, there is no enduring reality. There is just cause and effect.

This is perhaps the hardest thing to get your head around, but you have to get your head around in order to understand Buddhism, because it's the very core of Buddhism. It's a doctrine called anatman, no self. Because the self or the illusion of the self is the very reason you suffer. If you can get rid of the notion of yourself, then suffering evaporates. And we'll spend some time unpacking that.

The third thing he rejected from his Hinduism was reincarnation, or transmigration of the soul. Obviously if there's no soul, there's no reincarnation. That just follows. At least not in the Hindu sense of a soul departing this life and being reborn in a body. Another body. In fact, there's a Buddhist scripture that is titled Rebirth is Not Reincarnation. That's pretty clear. The Buddha rejected Hindu reincarnation. What he said happened at death was the mental and physical sensations going on now kick on into a new life which is the effect of the previous causes, so that there is no enduring self crossing over from life, death, to a new life, but the very same causation continues along with its attachments and the suffering so that what you're experiencing now in terms of anguish is in fact the result of a previous life. Not a you, but the same chain of cause and effect, unbroken. That may sound complicated, but Buddha is just saying all that there is are the effects of suffering that continue on in a new collection of mental and physical states.

Well, that's what the Buddha rejected at his enlightenment. Let me pivot to the things that he committed to, the innovations of the Buddha. And you can summarize these in four truths, which are called the four noble truths. This is the core of Buddhism, so if we can get our head around these four truths, then we'll be well on our way to understanding Buddhism. All four truths are about suffering and how you can escape anguish in this life.

The first noble truth is that suffering exists, but he called suffering by a word, dukkha, which means more than what we think of as suffering. But here is the Buddha himself from his famous sermon, setting in motion the wheel of truth, describing the first noble truth. The noble truth of dukkha, suffering monks, is this. Birth is suffering. Aging is suffering. Sickness is suffering. Death is suffering. Association with the unpleasant is suffering. Disassociation from the pleasant is suffering. Not to receive what one desires is suffering.

It's important to spot the three dimensions of the suffering, and I'll talk about this in a moment, but for now it's really crucial to understand that for the Buddha, existence itself is by its very fleeting nature suffering. Buddha even thought happy sensations that you relish, that you cling to, are suffering. Why?

Because they'll soon go. The impermanence of all things is the problem in the world, which leads us to the second noble truth.

What is the origin of suffering? The origin of suffering is desire or craving. Again, to quote the Buddha himself. The noble truth of the origin of suffering is this. It is this craving first, which produces re-becoming. That's rebirth. Accompanied by passionate greed and finding fresh delight now here and now there, namely craving for sense pleasure, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence. Now there are the three aspects of craving that the Buddha thought caused suffering. Sense pleasure, the degree to which you desire material pleasure. Your glass of wine, your beautiful food, sex with your beloved, the beach, a sunset, the degree to which you are committed to those things causes your suffering. Because of course, when they disappear, you're left without that pleasure.

But he also said another aspect of craving is craving for existence, by which he means craving this notion of the self. The more you're attached to you having a self independent of other beings, the more you are destined for pain. And you can kind of see the logic.

But then he said if you crave non-existence, which seems like the opposite of craving existence, you're also going to have pain, because it's a craving. And his point is, it isn't the thing craved for that causes you pain, it's the craving or desire itself, whether a craving for positive or craving for negative, it's the craving. One way of thinking about this, and personally I think the logic is unbreakable unless certain other factors about the universe are true, but in the Buddhist framework, this logic is unbreakable. What causes the anguish of the beggar? Buddha would say it's not the circumstances of beggary, it's the beggar's longing for comfort. For a full belly. It's the longing for something better that causes the anguish. Do you see this? What is it that causes your anguish at the loss of a family member? The Buddha would say it isn't the loss of the family member, it's your attachment. Your craving for that person's presence. Your craving for their love. Ponder this for a while, and you think the Buddha was very insightful.

Before I look at the third noble truth, I should explain the doctrine of karma as it's known in Buddhism. It's quite similar to the doctrine of karma in Hinduism, but karma, you'll notice, the Buddha says that your craving produces re-becoming, right? And the way it produces re-becoming is because of karma. Karma is your attached deeds. It's wilful action. The Buddha said it isn't action in the world that is the problem, it's your commitment to action in the world that is the problem. And the more attached to the things of this world you are, the more you will stick to this world and therefore the karma formations will kick you on into another rebirth. And the same karma formations cross death into a new birth where the same karma attachments will kick on.

So of course, the goal is to detach. But your attachment to things is what causes rebirth. So if craving causes suffering, and karma is what brings you back for more suffering, the solution is obvious, right? Sure it's obvious. It's the third noble truth. The end of suffering through detachment from craving, to quote the Buddha. The noble truth of the end of suffering is this. It is the complete cessation of that very craving, giving it up, relinquishing it, liberating one's self from it, and detaching one's self from it.

Again, the logic is beautiful. If a beggar can give up attachments to a better life, to a full belly, to the comforts of sense pleasure, the anguish will disappear and you can be a perfectly tranquil beggar. If a child can give up his attachments to his father that he's lost, the child won't feel any anguish over the loss of the father, because it's not the father's loss that is the problem, it's the attachment one has that is the problem. I think the third noble truth is incredibly powerful, but detachment not only frees you from suffering now, frees you from the anguish you experience now, it frees you from a new birth. If you can completely detach, all karma formations will evaporate and there'll be no kick on in the cause and effect chain into another life. Extinguishment of rebirth is what the Buddha says in one of the scriptures about karma and rebirth.

When a man's deeds are performed without craving, arise without craving, are occasioned without craving, originate without craving, then inasmuch as craving is gone, those deeds are abandoned. Uprooted. Pulled out of the ground like a palmyra tree and become non-existent and not liable to spring up again in the future. In other words, detachment empties karma of its power of the chain of cause and effect. If you can work out how not to be attached to the activities of this world, you will leave this world behind, which brings us to the important doctrine of nirvana.

Not a band from the 90's. Not heavenly bliss, which is how people often use nirvana. You often hear surfers talk about that wave was just nirvana. In fact, it's kind of the opposite of nirvana. Nirvana actually translates as extinguishing or unbinding. The absolute removal of all mental and physical sensations. And nirvana, by definition, is neither happy nor sad, because both of those are unpleasant conditions because they are fleeting. And so the Buddha speaks of nirvana in this way. A learned and noble disciple becomes dispassionate with regard to the body, with regard to tangible things, becomes dispassionate with regard to the mind. And being dispassionate, he becomes detached. Through detachment, he is liberated. When liberated, there is knowledge that he is liberated and he knows birth and rebirth are extinguished or exhausted. Nirvana.

So the obvious question is, how do you get that? How do you escape this world of suffering, either now in the present or escape a rebirth into this painful world? That is what the fourth noble truth is all about. The eightfold path to the end of desire and suffering. The fourth noble truth is actually not a truth. It's a method. And the Buddha describes the method nice and briefly for us in this first sermon. The noble

truth of the path leading to the end of suffering is this. It is the noble eightfold path. And nothing else. Namely, right understanding, right aim, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Now just when you thought that you were going to understand Buddhism with the fourth noble truth, the fourth noble truth is that there are just eight more things you've got to know.

The eightfold path is the method for arriving at the solution that the third noble truth gives you. Yeah? So the third noble truth is if you can end your craving, you will end all anguish. The fourth noble truth gives you the path to do this. Now, each of the eightfold path, each item, could require a lecture. But there's a very simple way Buddhists like to teach the eightfold path as simply three categories. They are the category of wisdom or doctrine, there's the category of ethical behavior, and there's the category of mental discipline. So right understanding and right aim are two paths of wisdom or doctrine. And these just mean right understanding is a proper understanding of the doctrines taught by the Buddha. So it just involves lots of theological study. Okay?

Right aim is the decision in every moment of your life to apply yourself to Buddhist doctrine. Okay? And then we move into ethical behavior. So there's an ethical system in Buddhism that is quite complex and in many ways beautiful. Right speech just means speaking in the world with detachment. Speaking in a way that practices non-self. Practices not being attached to the things of the world. So of course, that gets rid of all angry speech or all jealous speech and so on. Right action is, of course, acting in the world in a way that doesn't create karma formations that is detached from the world, and under right action is where the pancasilas, the five commandments of Buddhism, come.

Right livelihood is simply there are certain jobs a Buddhist can have, and certain jobs a Buddhist can't have. Only jobs that are conducive to detachment are permissible to a Buddhist, and there are other jobs that are not. And then we move into the category of mental discipline, which is a key part of Buddhism. And there are just three aspects of this.

Right effort. Don't think that that's a new craving. Don't think you can get Buddha on this. Aha, you're saying effort! That's craving! No. He said you shouldn't even crave him or his teaching. But right effort is a mental decision that is absolute. It is the total decision to commit yourself to the path. Yeah?

Right mindfulness is just living your daily life, whatever you're doing, and you can do this while washing up. Buddha even said you can do it while you're going to the toilet. You can do it in every act of your life. Mindfulness, according to the Buddha, was focusing on how every action, even my action of speaking to you today, is merely the arising of certain sensations and disappearing of certain sensations. The arising

of mental formations, the disappearing of mental formations. The arising of physical feelings, the disappearing of physical feelings. That's what mindfulness is in Buddhism.

Right concentration is just meditation. Buddha was very committed to not transcendental meditation of the Hindu kind, but a kind of... I'm maybe making a mockery of it by saying it, spiritual pushups. But it's kind of you need to do this to build the kind of mental muscles, and the in out breathing of Buddhism is an exercise designed to give you pristine powers of concentration, because you need pristine powers of concentration to be a Buddhist. Because in every act of life, you need to be able to concentrate while doing the thing you're doing. Concentrate on being detached, on noticing sensations arising and disappearing, and meditation is how you're getting that power to do that.

That may sound complicated, but actually it all leads to a very simple point. The eightfold path leads to the conclusion of the cessation of desire, and here is the Buddha's own words of the climax of the eightfold path. By giving up of bliss and suffering, by the disappearance already of joy and sorrow, he the monk attains to and abides in the fourth jhana. State. State of mind. Which is neither suffering nor bliss. And which is the purity of equanimity mindfulness. This is called right concentration. This is called the noble truth of the path leading to the end of suffering.

Let me illustrate, before I conclude with some reflections on the difference between Christianity and Buddhism. Let me illustrate how seriously Buddhists take this, because in my experience of teaching this, lots of Westerners sort of think, "Oh, you can never really take this seriously." But Buddhists really take this seriously. And the Buddhists texts themselves illustrate how seriously Buddhists were meant to take this. In the narrative of the death of the Buddha, one of the crucial texts of Buddhism is called the Parinirvana, the total unbinding of the Buddha. It's the passion narrative, right? Jesus passion narrative. It's the passion narrative of Buddhism. But there ain't no passion in it. Sort of. Let me explain.

So the Buddha is dying. He's now a very elderly gentleman. He's taught for the best part of 40 years, spread his message far and wide, has many, many disciples, but now he's ill. He knows he's dying, and he's laid on a beautiful bed outside, and all the monks are in attendance, as you can imagine. And he spends those final moments teaching them further truths, and they're all listening on every word, and then he explains that he's now going to pass away. And the monks brace themselves, and the Buddha closes his eyes and serenely dies.

What do you think happens then? The junior monks weep and wail. Our saviour is gone! Our teacher is gone! Before the older monks say, "Hang on. Didn't the Buddha teach us to be detached?" You can hear the text for yourself. The Parinirvana of the Buddha. When the blessed one was totally unbound, extinguished, some of the monks present who were not without passion wept, uplifting their arms. They

fell down and rolled back and forth, crying, "All too soon is the blessed one totally unbound! All too soon is the one with eyes or insight disappeared from the world!" But the venerable Anuruddha addressed the monks. "Enough, friends. Don't grieve. Don't lament. Hasn't the blessed one already taught the state of growing different with regard to all things dear and appealing? The state of becoming separate? The state of becoming otherwise? What else is there to expect? It is impossible that one could forbid anything born, existent, fabricated and subject as it to disintegration from disintegrating." And the venerable Anuruddha and the venerable Ananda spent the remainder of the night in philosophical talk. Dharma talk.

Buddhists take this, that, seriously. How different. It's always struck me. How different is the Buddha's death from the death of Jesus narrated in the Gospels? With the lamentations of the crowds, unforbidden. With the cry of Jesus from the cross, "My God! My God!" The desperation of the disciples. There's a reason the narrative of Jesus' death is called the passion. And a reason the death of the Buddha is called the unbinding. And here we catch a glimpse into some of the profound differences between these two perspectives, and I want to spend my final moments with you outlining some of the major differences between Buddhism and Christianity.

Firstly, practical atheism or the worship of God. The Buddha thought talk of God was speculative, and a distraction from the true path. Now if we had time, and I know you're thanking the Lord that we don't, we would discuss a form of Buddhism that grew up 400 years after the Buddha called Mahayana Buddhism, which added to the Buddhist teaching gods. And holy ones in the spiritual realm who could assist you on the path. But these were clearly additions. And they're still part of many Buddhist cultures today, but even they would regard them as additions to the Buddhist teaching. The Buddha thought belief in God was a distraction. It's kind of obvious, isn't it, that Christianity says nah, not so much. Christianity says God actually is rather important to the whole thing. For a Christian, the logic of God is overwhelming. This rationally coherent universe that has somehow produced rationally coherent minds that now understand the rationally coherent universe can't have been an accident. Must have been produced by a grand immaterial eternal mind who is therefore worthy of worship. If a god exists, God is not a distraction. It's obviously the centre. On this topic, Buddhism and Christianity couldn't be further apart.

Secondly, ignorance or sin. The Buddha belief that the central problem with the human being is ignorance, and therefore the primary solution is knowledge, particularly knowledge of the four noble truths. That's what his enlightenment was all about. I mean, it's called enlightenment for a reason. And at the core of his enlightenment, at the text I already read to you, it says he comprehended that where there is no ignorance whatsoever, there also the karma formations are stopped, and then he had achieved correct knowledge of all that there is to be known. Ignorance and knowledge are at the very heart of Buddhism. If we had time, and we don't, I would talk about what's called the 12 stages of

conditioned arising, which is another important doctrine in Buddhism. And in the 12 stages, number one is ignorance. Ignorance is the crucial thing.

Now, the thing is, Christianity doesn't say that. Christianity says there's another problem. It's not ignorance. In fact, you can be ignorant and not have this problem, and you can be completely knowledgeable and have this problem. It's sin. And Jesus himself, we don't have to speculate, Jesus himself said that forgiveness of sins was the single message that the church was to proclaim throughout the world. And now, I don't have to make this up, because here are Jesus' words post-resurrection giving his disciples the marching orders. He told them, "This is what is written. The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the 3rd day." And here it is. "And repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations."

So you don't have to just listen to an Anglican priest about what is the core of Christianity. You just have Jesus. He said forgiveness of sins. And of course, the Apostle's Creed, which Christians of all denominations believe. Says I believe in the forgiveness of sins. The Buddha would regard this as compounding ignorance. This is a deep problem with Christianity itself.

A third difference between Buddhism and Christianity is the doctrine of nirvana or new creation. Buddhism shares with Hinduism a suspicion of all physical and mental states. And therefore, the goal of Buddhism is to remove all mental and physical states. This is the same with Hinduism via a different path. By definition, nirvana is unbinding or extinguishing, and that's an important idea to hold in mind. But Christianity promises not unbinding, not extinguishing, but renewing. New creation. I mean, there are so many texts we could look at, but the climactic passage in the Bible, Revelation 21, speaks of a vision of the future and it says, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.'" The idea is on a new earth. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying for the old order of things has passed away. He who is seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new."

Christianity promises not the extinguishment of creation, but the renewal of creation. And again, the Apostle's Creed believed by all Christians everywhere throughout the centuries says I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. And this difference in future hope actually impacts a pretty profound difference in every day life. My fourth point.

Is life to be guided by detachment, or engagement? Here I don't think Buddhism and Christianity could be further apart. The goal of Buddhism, as I hope I've explained, is detachment in all things. Christianity, foolishly, from the Buddhist perspective, foolishly encourages passionate engagement with the world.

Passionate engagement with the world. And you only have to look at Jesus to know this. One of the consistent words used of Jesus' love for the crowds throughout the gospels is [inaudible 00:37:17], the Greek term [inaudible 00:37:19] is the verb form of the word spleen. We get spleen from it, right? It means he was gutted. He saw the crowds and there were sheep without a shepherd, and it says, "He was [inaudible 00:37:29]." He sees poor people, he was [inaudible 00:37:32]. You couldn't get a more intense, passionate, attached word.

You think of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem because of their departure from the ways of God. In this climactic passage of the gospels, Jesus himself weeps. Think of his anguish on the cross. [inaudible 00:37:54]. My god, my god, why have you forsaken me? Whoa! That's engagement. My point is, Jesus was a terrible Buddhist. Really. And Christians make terrible Buddhists.

Again and again, the New Testament urges us to feel what others feel. Here's just one text. "Rejoice with those who rejoice. Mourn with those who mourn," Paul tells us in Romans 12. Christian life is characterized by feeling and engagement and passion. And these two ideas, detachment and engagement, lead to two very different approaches to suffering, by the way. Buddha's answer to suffering was detachment from the things that caused suffering. Christianity's answer to suffering is a suffering God. Is a God who himself entered into the world and experienced injustice and torture and a final breath. And Christianity says you can know that God sympathizes with your pain not just because he is all-knowing, but because he has experienced the depths of your pain.

But from the Buddhist perspective, this is ignorance. This is karma forming. This will bring you back. Finally, the difference of effort and grace. Buddha taught that your own mental and practical effort was the key to attaining enlightenment. Right aim, right speech, right mindfulness, right concentration and so on. You determine your liberation. At least substantially. One of the most beloved Buddhist texts is called the Dhammapada. And you can buy it as an independent text about 100 pages long. And he said this. "By one's self is wrong done. By one's self is one defiled. By one's self wrong is not done. By one's self, surely, one is cleansed. One cannot purify another. Purity and impurity are in one's self alone." Effort.

The same point is clear in the very important Buddhist doctrine that only a monk can be liberated. The Buddha was adamant about this. Only a monk can expect in this life the possibility of being liberated from rebirth. A lay person cannot. Unless a lay person builds up enough merit, and it's a formal doctrine called the doctrine of merit, enough merit to be reborn in an existence where you become a monk, and then you can have the chance of liberation. I'm not making this up, by the way. One of the best little entrees to Buddhism is published by Oxford University Press, and Professor Carrithers of Durham University puts it this way. "What the Buddhist teaching had to offer the laity, non-monks, was certain

spiritual goods. One was merit. And immaterial reward garnered by a layman simply by feeding a monk and listening to his sermon."

So you can see that whole tradition of laypeople collecting food for the monks. Merit could be laid up to secure a better rebirth. The more merit in the spiritual account, the better the rebirth. Hence, as there was a high spiritual purpose appropriate to the monk, namely liberation, so there was a lower one appropriate to the layman, better rebirth. And the hope that one would eventually be reborn in circumstances allowing one to become a monk and achieve liberation.

I wasn't exaggerating when I said that Buddhism is the most intellectually complex and existentially rigorous of all the faiths. But the thing I want to say is Christianity fails massively on the effort front. Christianity says that anyone at any time no matter what stage of knowledge or ignorance, no matter how immoral or moral, can be instantly acceptable to God. By grace. Because Jesus died on the cross for our sins, he freely forgives. And I mean, we could be here all day looking at texts about this, but his one, the one that Karen read us earlier... When the kindness and love of God our saviour appeared, he saved us not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. You can underline that in your mind. Not because of righteous things we had done.

Last week I said that while Christians see this doctrine of grace positively, I really want you, if you're a Christian here today, to think of it negatively as well. To try and, just as a thought experiment, see it from the Buddhist perspective. It's a cop out. Surely if you are partly to blame for the problem, you are partly responsible for the solution. No one can make another pure, the Buddhists said in the Dhammapada. And Christianity says precisely only Jesus can make you pure.

What is beautiful to the Christian is actually irresponsible, not just to Buddhism, but to all of the major faiths. Let me conclude. Some years ago, one of my world religions students at McQuarry in lecture one put up a hand like 10 minutes into the lecture. There's always one student like this. And said, "I've heard about the famous parable of the elephant. And the six blind men are called to inspect an elephant, and they hold different parts of the elephant. The one around the leg thinks it's a tree trunk. The one at the tail thinks it's a brush. The one at the ears thinks it's a winnowing basket. The one tapping the head thinks it's a pot of some kind. Right? Is that what we're going to learn, that basically all the religions have their own perspective on the one true reality?"

I had to be incredibly diplomatic. And I was. But I had to point out that actually, the original form of the parable comes from the Buddhist scriptures, from what's called the Verses of Uplift, Udana. 6768. And you can read it for yourself. "And Buddha made the opposite point." I mean, it's entered into the Western world with this everyone has a part of a truth idea, and we know exactly how that happened in

the 18th century, because a British poet took this parable and turned it into a pluralism. But the original form of it was the Buddhist saying all of the Hindu gurus are blind men who don't know the truth. Because it's not a pot, it's the head of an elephant. It's not a tree trunk, it's the leg of an elephant. It's not a brush, it's the tail of an elephant. It's not a winnowing basket, it's the ear of an elephant. The Buddha was adamant that all of the Hindu gurus that he had met were blind.

And here's the kicker. He said he came to reveal the truth. It's an elephant! And so, Buddha said in no sense do these blind men have view points. I mean, they're blind, right? He came to teach the truth. So I feel very confident that Siddhartha Guatama, if he were here today, would endorse my final statement. Christianity, with its emphasis on God, sin, new creation, passionate engagement, and grace, cannot be true if Buddhism is true. Just as Buddhism cannot be true if Christianity is true.

And with that provocative statement, very happy to take questions. Raise your hand. Meredith will bring you the microphone. As clearly as you can, ask the question and I'll try and answer it.

Speaker 2:

Hi, John. One of the things you mentioned before about effort. So the lay person's desire to have a greater rebirth, isn't that then attachment to something and how do you explain that?

John:

Yes. So the Buddha said that in the early stages of Buddhism, you need a little bit of that diluted attachment because you need that almost emotional effort to get into the Buddhist teachings. But he wanted you to pass that really quickly, to the point where you weren't attached to it at all. And he actually told a beautiful parable called the Raft Parable where he said, "When you come to a river you can't cross, you build a raft. So you desire the raft, right? But once you've made the raft and you cross carefully over, you get to the other side." He said, "It's a fool who then picks up the raft and walks on the ground with it." And what was he saying? He's saying don't attach yourself to me or even my teaching once you near the shore, because at that point there's this pivot point where desire even for extinguishment becomes simply a mental discipline in the direction of extinguishment.

The thing I've found about Buddhism over the years is that he thought of everything. Yeah.

Speaker 3:

The model of detachment and not being attached to anything, just first thought, doesn't it fall down if you care for the newborn or the elderly or you're putting food in your body and you're sustaining yourself for a reason.

John:

Mm-hmm.

Speaker 3:

How do you answer that?

John:

Because you're committed intellectually to sustaining your body for the purpose of enlightenment, because that's the truth. And all beings ought to be oriented as a mental discipline toward the truth. And so eating food-

Speaker 3:

But why bother about a baby? Because they're just a baby. They don't know anything, do they? Why would you-

John:

But they're a baby born in a world of suffering. And so it is just true that the goal for this child ought to be extinguishment. But they're not going to be extinguished if you don't care for them. They'll just die and be born in a new situation. So the Buddha said you of course look after yourself. See, the thing... He called his way the middle path, because he totally rejected Hindu asceticism, the punishing of the body, right? Not eating and all that sort of stuff. And he rejected the lap of luxury, the craving after material things. He said equilibrium is going to be found in being attached to neither asceticism nor hedonism, but a perfect middle path that keeps a perfect balance.

And so, that will involve eating, because to refuse to eat is actually to punish your body. That's to fall on the wrong side of the equation.

Tory:

John, what is the Buddhist view of the material world in terms of their narrative to do with creation or the beginning of the world, and what is their view of our physical world? Is it an illusion?

John:

Did I teach you that? And a disciple asked the Buddha exactly that, and he said, "Did I teach you that?" He says, "No no, you didn't. But that's why I'm asking." He said, "Did I teach you that?" Now in later Buddhism, there are all sorts of amazing accounts of the origins of the world, but they're totally contradictory of one another. And they don't come from the Buddha. They're kind of later Buddhist reflections on the creation. And they've sort of picked up Hindu myths along the way and sort of made them more Buddhist. But the Buddhist teaching itself offers absolutely no answer to the question, and the fact that you're asking that question is a sign of your lack of enlightenment. Sorry, Tory.

Speaker 5:

People often criticize Christianity for being evangelistic and trying to convert people. And they refer to Buddhism as great because they stay to themselves. Is there any Buddhist evangelism, and if so, is that a contradiction?

John:

It was missionary from the very beginning. The Buddha encouraged his monks to pass on the teaching. But without a passion. It isn't like the Christian longing for the salvation of the 150,000 in our region. We pray with passion for that. The Buddhist doesn't. But the Buddhist sees it as an obligation that arises logically from the teaching that one should act to see the good of another, so that they might attain enlightenment. And if you say, "But that's attachment." He would say, "No. Not doing that is attachment, because not doing that is selfish. And that is to nurse a self." So if you say, "Oh, I'm not going to bother about anyone else, I'm just going to worry about my own enlightenment," you're actually attached to self.

So the way to counter that idea is to be dispassionately committed as an intellectual exercise to passing on the Buddhist teaching.

Speaker 5:

[inaudible 00:52:16].

John:

Yeah, absolutely. And like I say, he's thought of everything.

Speaker 6:

I think we'll do maybe just these three that I see and that will be the end.

John:

Just these three! I'm getting the wind up here from Santino. So this is the last one? Last question.

Speaker 7:

Sure.

John:

Oh, sorry? Two! Excellent.

Speaker 7:

How does the Buddhist approach relationships? Like how do they do friendships? Kind of in the same way that they take care of themselves because they need to. If they don't, then like they're going against their own faith. But how do they do relationships, then? Because if they just, for example, if they love someone else just out of duty so that that person... I don't know. But if they're just doing that because they have to, otherwise they're disobeying their own faith, doesn't that still mean that they have some sort of underlying care for that person?

John:

Yes. It's a great question. And the Buddha thought of it. In English, there is the Buddhist ethic of compassion. But a Buddhist will tell you, like a real Buddhist will tell you compassion is not Christian compassion. So that compassion... I've read a Buddhist document that is titled Compassion Is Not Christian Love. And it starts off by saying, "Christian love is a personal commitment to the good of the other, where you feel their pain, you feel their joys, and that is ignorance." This is what this Buddhist text says.

Where Buddhist compassion is a decision of the mind to practice non-self to the degree that you will look after the practical needs of another person because not to do so is to nurse a self, because it is to be a selfish person. Yeah? And so, Buddhists will do compassionate deeds but the Buddha was adamant you are not to be emotionally committed to those deeds. You do them because they are logical. They are the logical extension of the practice of anatman, non-self. They are not driven by a feeling for another person's plight, because that is indeed to be attached, and that will create further karma formations and rebirth.

So it's very important to understand Buddhists are compassionate in the purely intellectual sense. Does that make sense?

Speaker 7:

Yes, but how do they have friendships?

John:

Oh. Friendships, relationships? They do, but they're intellectual in nature. They're not... I mean, the Parinirvana of the Buddha, the text about the death of the Buddha shows you how they have friendships. Their friendship's devoid of emotional craving for the other.

Speaker 8:

[inaudible 00:55:04].

John:

Marriage and sex? Again, for non-monks, marriage and sex is an important thing because there needs to be new children that need to be taught the dharma in order to experience nirvana. So you can't be saved as a married person. You can't experience liberation, but if you are a married person, your duty, your good karma is to be a good, loving husband or whatever and indeed to produce children. But the Buddha would say you even practice mindfulness in sex. So that you are not attached to sex, but you observe the arising and the disappearing of arousal. And so, actually sex is an opportunity for practicing Buddhist doctrine. You experience those things, but you are detached from them. Yep. It's all incredibly logical. He was a massively disciplined thinker, and by all accounts, a liver of his own doctrine.

Speaker 6:

Thank you so much.

John:

But I would make a terrible Buddhist! I confess.

Speaker 6:

Maybe we're thinking we all would. Thank you so much, John. I'm going to be the tough one, but John will be over at morning tea and I think he would love to follow up any of those questions that have remained unanswered.