

What's the deal with Buddha?

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The title of this evening's presentation, reflection, exploration—
 whatever you would like to call it:

What's the deal with Buddha.

Our purpose is to situate some of the basics of Buddhist thought,
 and then to rub these thoughts, the best we can,
 against our everyday experience, against the reality of human life,
 to see what really corresponds, makes sense, applies.

There is truth to be found everywhere.
 Christians can sometimes forget this.
 Christians relish what they believe to be revealed truth
 about the mystery of God, but such truth does not replace
 everyday experience, does not replace the reality of human life.
 Such revealed truth, we believe, indeed sheds light
 on all areas of human life, yet we must still probe and discern and decide.

My reflections—*all* of my reflections, no matter what the topic—
 are based on the premise that reality is *knowable*.
 This is important to state because not all people would agree with this.
 Some people believe that reality is *unknowable*
 and thus that we only swim in a vast sea of opinions.
 I humbly stand with those who believe that reality is knowable,
 who include in their ranks Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.
 One's knowledge of reality is never exhaustive, but such is fine.
 We can come to some grasp of what a human person is
 and what trees are and what love is.
 We can always go further in our grasp, and we must, but we *can* know.

Our knowledge is based on, is derived from, emerges from our experience.
 Experience is the amazing alliance between our senses and our mind,
 together, in interaction with the world around us and the world with in us
 —starting however with the world around us.
 Please keep this in mind as we explore the basics of Buddhism.

Our experience—if we are awake in it—leads to questioning. If we are awake in our senses and in our mind, we should be in awe of things, of the world around us, of life: so much that is not us, and thus known and unknown. Such awe normally leads to fundamental questions, with a view to knowing more:

- What is it?
- What is it made of?
- From where does it come?
- What is it patterned after?
- Why is it? *or* What is its purpose?

These are the 5 basic questions in human experience, posed by inquiring minds:

- “whatness”
- matter/material composition
- origin
- exemplar/model
- end or purpose

Now, interestingly, you will notice that the five senses—each uniquely—leads to the posing of one of the 5 basic questions:

- sight – what is it?
- touch – what is it made of?
- hearing – from where does it come?
- taste – what is it patterned after?
- smell – what is its purpose?

Think about it...

And in the very practical realm of doing, of accomplishing, another question emerges: that of *how*.

“How does this work?” and “how can we accomplish more?”

The imagination, the seat of creativity – which synthesizes the 5 senses – contributes greatly to the question of how.

But you will notice – if you think about it – that the question of how, although important, is, in a sense, less fundamental, less foundational.

The question of how follows the other 5 basic questions.

Sorry for the detour,
but please keep this in mind as we explore the basics of Buddhist thought.

What's the deal with Buddha?

I've always been fascinated with Buddhism—at least from afar.
It seems intriguing, different, and we are fascinated with things different.
It seems exotic—at least in comparison with what has become
commonplace in our society: Christianity.

We have to admit that there are a few strands of Christianity
that do not seem very exotic.

The simple fascination with this different experience called Buddhism
may explain the migration of some to it in Western societies.

(what is also interesting is how many younger people
born into predominantly Buddhist societies find Buddhism boring...)

I realized I needed to probe Buddhist thought when I started practicing yoga.

I love yoga. I love the simple awareness of the body.

I love the symbolic grasp of the body.

I love the marriage of breath and movement—a wonderful intuition.

I love the fluidity and “groundedness” and the holistic strengthening.

But if you take yoga, you will notice that some teachers
sometimes articulate a philosophy, a world-view.

When I was living in Annapolis, my yoga teacher would say certain things
that struck me—some as insightful, some as “funny”.

And I found myself rubbing her thoughts against the reality of human life.

And, at times, I found myself saying (in my head!)

“No, sweetheart, that does not cut it.”

I wondered from where her world view had come.

I was fairly certain that she had inherited it, embraced it from someone else.

The two statues of Buddha in the room were the dead giveaway: duh!

I can be a little slow...

One thing, for example that struck me funny was the insistence on quieting
thoughts, on indifferent observation of thoughts, on quasi *not* thinking.

I *thought* “no can do”—not because I am a mental train wreck
waiting to happen and I cannot possibly stop the train,

but because to stop thinking would be to stop being human.

And, for example, even to receive her instruction one had to think.

I realized that she had overlooked a very important distinction in human beings, the distinction between:

- imagination and intellect (or mind).
- capacity to imagine and capacity to know.
- the realm of images and the realm of thoughts.

And when it comes to the mind itself, there is a very important distinction to be made, the distinction between thinking about/pondering and direct discernment of reality, whereby we are present.

I felt like I had figured out the “funny” in what she was saying.

We *do* get stuck in our heads, we do get stuck in the realm of images or entangled indefinitely in thinking about things (which is often in conjunction with images.)

Our psychological issues are often confusion between the world of images and reality—which is why I tell people who are losing touch, who precisely need a reality check, if anything, to go for a walk in nature. We do get stuck in our heads and trying to quiet the parade of images is a good thing.

But it seems that my yoga teacher was, with all due respect, shooting herself in the foot in advocating a certain ‘turning off’ of the mind (which she called ego), when the mind *well-used*, i.e. in its act of discerning reality, is precisely how we are present to reality, how we are present to one another.

It really does not take much to realize that there always needs be, there always *is* a focus, a focal point.

Such is the case even in yoga.

There is a focus on one’s breathing—this fundamental, mysterious, vital activity within us.

Please keep *this* in mind as we explore the basics of Buddhist thought.

Let us ask the fundamental question: **who is Buddha?**

Who is this personage who has influenced so many generations of people, and so many persons today,

and seems to be gaining traction in Western circles?

Today there are over 350 million Buddhists in the world, making it the world’s 4th largest religion—although, strictly speaking,

I do not think we can qualify Buddhism as a religion.

Religion, in my book, speaks of connection with the Divine.

The Buddha makes *no mention* of a Supreme Being...

The person who has been named Buddha or *the* Buddha
—a title which means “awakened one”,
according to the sources that exist, lived some 2500 years ago,
in northern India, in what is now Nepal.

He is claimed to have died in 483 BC.

The question of historical sources—and thus the question of historicity,
is a challenging one.

There is no written testimony of the Buddha dating to his lifetime.

[Please note that I will, to an extent, compare and contrast
the Buddha with Jesus who is, of course, much more familiar for most of us.
Doing so I think will grant greater insight.]

As I said, the question of historicity is a challenging one.

Like Jesus, Buddha wrote nothing.

Like Jesus,

there are no written records considered official by the society at the time.

Both Buddha and Jesus were considered politically insignificant.

They were considered odd characters by the establishment.

Unlike with Jesus,

we have *nothing* written by persons who claim to have been eye-witnesses.

We have nothing written about the Buddha

until two an a half centuries after his death.

And yet, interestingly,

although it is difficult for us who so cling to written testimony,

we could say that

- the survival of what is considered his thought
- the fervor of disciples generations later

suggests that the proof of *non*-existence would be the greater pursuit.

If Buddha were a myth,

how do we explain so many disciples so marked by a personality?

In the end, disciples only give their lives for a *person*, a person who existed.

The question is that of oral tradition—unfortunately rather foreign to us.

Oral tradition is real and valid.

The *accuracy* of such tradition is an issue.

But we must not forget that those engaged in oral tradition

were more concerned with oral accuracy than we are,.

They used versification, formulas, chant and other means to favor accuracy. The Buddhist monks rather quickly established rules for their oral transmission.

We are less comfortable with oral tradition, but that is *us*.

We are more concerned with quickly writing so to legitimize.

Today still in India—from what I understand, oral tradition continues alongside written tradition.

For the cultures at the time of Buddha and Jesus, oral tradition was legitimate.

That is why Jesus himself wrote nothing....

The first *written* references to Buddha and to his thought date to approximately 250 BC.

A certain King Ashoka—who reigned from the region from which Buddha supposedly came, and whose kingdom extended to modern-day Afghanistan, converted to Buddhist thought.

After his conversion, King Ashoka had engraved in various places Buddhist thought, that is, sayings of the Buddha.

His edicts articulated such thought:

“The gift of dharma (Buddhist thought or law) consists in treating fairly slaves and servants, obeying one’s mother and father, being generous with friend, parents, priests, ascetics, and in not killing animals.”

In fact, his edicts called for the adoption of such thought.

“This edict of dharma has been written on stone so that it last a long time, and my descendants labor in conformity with it.”

King Ashoka did for Buddhism

what the Emperor Constantine did for Christianity:

societal acceptance and promotion.

The Buddha was the son of King Shuddhadona and Queen Maya (not to be confused with the American hip-hop singer *Mya!*), whose kingdom was that of Kapilavastu, which covered northern India and modern-day Nepal.

The Buddha’s birth name is Siddhartha.

Siddhartha means

“the one who can fulfill the wishes of the divinities and of men.”

Siddhartha grew up and lived in his father’s Kingdom until the age of 29.

Being of the noble class, he spent his early life as a prince, mostly oblivious to worldly miseries.

Indeed, his father, so to prepare him for the throne,
 did not want him to witness the four omens of human life,
 that is, the four types of persons who disturb and disrupt
 (but who, in fact, later moved Siddhartha to renounce everything
 and begin his journey of enlightenment):
 a sick person, an elderly person, an ascetic person, a dead person.
 Despite his protected upbringing and life,
 Siddhartha did encounter such persons.
 And his encounter prompted reflection
 on the ephemeral character of pleasure.

At the time he was married to Yashodhara and had a son named Rahul,
 whom he left, along with a luxurious life, for his journey.
 He was thirty years old when he left.
 Once on the road, he cut his long beautiful hair.
 It is claimed that he returned only twice to his father's palace.
 But the force of his life led to the eventual conversion of his father
 (and even his son) into one of his disciples.

Once he left home, Siddhartha never again partnered with anyone.
 Indeed, it is his claim, as we will try to see,
 that desire—in particular sexual (viewed by him as attachment)
 is an obstacle on the path of enlightenment.
 Thus, sexual relations, along with stealing, killing and lying
 are forbidden for Buddhist monks.
 The laity are allowed sexual relations,
 but in great moderation, with a certain sense of detachment,
 and not during certain holy periods of the year..

Siddhartha embarks on a five-year journey of renunciation,
 of deliberate poverty and detachment.
 His time spent with extreme ascetics does not lead to the liberation he seeks.
 Dissatisfied and still searching, he continues his journey,
 abandoning the excessive asceticism, and arrives at the village of Uruvilva,
 where he plants himself at the foot of a tree, called *ficus religiosa*,
 where he vows not to move until he is enlightened, until he understands
 the mystery of life and how to rise above the wheel of lives, of rebirth
 in which humanity is trapped.
 In one night, enlightenment comes.

After spending seven days in awe of the enlightenment, and with hesitation, Siddhartha, the Buddha,
embarks on a forty-five year journey of itinerant preaching.

Siddhartha, the Buddha, thus opts for a life on the road.

He has no fixed domicile, no place to call home.

In this his *life-style* is similar to that of Jesus.

As stated, the Buddha's journey as an itinerant preacher lasted 45 years—much longer than that of Jesus.

Only the first five years of the Buddha's journey is really described in subsequent writings.

In fact, supposedly nothing is known about the last 20 years of his life.

Like Jesus, the Buddha travels with disciples.

Unlike Jesus, a daily ritual eventually emerges.

While the Christian Scriptures describe very different days,

and not set daily routine for Jesus and his disciples,

the Buddha and his disciples generally had a structure to their day:

- rising before dawn
- meditation
- teachings
- begging in the neighboring villages
(in silence with eyes turned towards the ground)
- the only meal of the day
(eaten seated on the ground, under a tree or along the path
—as did the Indian ascetics of the time)
- the journey continues, with disciples posing questions along the way, the Buddha using concrete examples from their journey to illustrate, and apply to daily life—all of which would much later be inscribed

Their peregrinations are interrupted by monsoon season

for approximately 3 months each year,

which eventually leads to the establishment of something of a monastic life and rule.

The Buddha is therefore primarily a *teacher*.

The first teaching that he is recorded as giving was to the five ascetics with whom he tried in vain to find enlightenment.

After his moment of enlightenment, he comes across these five ascetics who are moved by his peacefulness, and ask what he has discovered.

In the form of a grand discourse, he exposes what he has discovered,
his doctrine.

Almost always, the Buddha's teaching began "O monks".

To those who sacrificed everything for the sake of enlightenment,
and thus were more likely to find it, he particularly addressed himself.
Monks are at the heart of the Buddhist community.

Interestingly, the Buddha is described as teaching
without emotion, without passion.

He had renounced himself.

He had renounced desire, of which emotion is a type,
which impedes enlightenment.

He sought to deliver pure teaching
unmarked by his personality.

What would be interesting to know is

- to what extent his disciples followed him for pure teaching, *or*
- to what extent they were drawn to the Buddha's personality
despite him.

The Buddha did not really share his personal story.

There were no testimonies.

His stories were general illustrations meant ultimately
to communicate the monastic rules that foster detachment.

According to the Buddhist tradition, with his awakening,
the Buddha became aware of his 547 previous lives,
and was liberated from desire which keeps us trapped in this wheel of lives.
With his awakening, the Buddha also acquired the six types of knowledge
that a Buddha has: the capacity

1. to see all things
2. to hear all things
3. to read minds
4. to create and to transform all things
5. to know the previous lives of others
6. to extinguish the ego

We do not know exactly how the Buddha died.

He was approximately 84 years of age.

There is one story of him being poisoned.

Whatever the case may be,
 while he lay in a grove of *sala* tree,
 he addressed his last words to the monks gathered around him:
**"Brethren, all things decay. Be lamps unto yourselves.
 Transient are all compounded things.
 Therefore strive earnestly to attain perfection".**
 In other words, as is often summarized,
**"All things are subject to destruction; be attached to nothing;
 thus will you eliminate suffering."**
 More than a 90s band that ended tragically,
 Nirvana is that "place" beyond suffering
 which one can attain by enlightenment, *so not to end tragically*.

What exactly did the Buddha teach?
 What is the essence of Buddhist teaching?
 In his quest, Buddha sought to go beyond the never-ending cycle of rebirth
 and thus he sought lasting peace.
 His quest was a personal one, with no intention of having disciples
 or of establishing a school of thought.
 Buddhist thought I personally find *very* complex.
 So, fasten your brain belts!

It seems that the Buddha developed his thought to some extent
 based on what he inherited from Hinduism,
 incorporating three important aspects of life derived from the latter:
karma, samsara, and nirvana, which we must navigate.
 Hinduism speaks of the EGO (to be distinguished from Freudian EGO),
 otherwise called the Self, which, according to Hindu tradition,
 is that which remains with each reincarnation, that which reincarnates.
 We might call it the soul.
 The Buddha, however, diverges from this Hindu perspective
 by specifying that the EGO is not that which remains,
 but is temporary, changing, in movement—like fire or water.
 In other words, he seems to suggest that, in a sense, nothing remains.

He says that the EGO is the individual that we experience in ourselves or others, composed of five changing aspects, five changing aggregates, making us a complex whole:

1. matter
2. sensation or feeling
3. perception
4. mental formations
5. consciousness

Upon death these five aspects of the self separate and regroup to form a new self, resulting in something of the old self, yet a new self. Thus, something does remain.

I am confused....

To clarify the “remain/unremain” dilemma, Buddhism uses the example of a candle.

When an extinguished candle is relit, we have the same wax and wick, but do we have the same fire?

I am *still* confused...

Samsara is the wheel of lives (with many complex levels) of this endless rebirth, that we escape only by means of enlightenment. **Karma**, according to the Buddha, is the negative energy that returns to us (“What goes around comes around.”) during our lives, because of attachment, weighing us down and keeping us in samsara. If we free ourselves of desire, there will be no issues with karma. If we successfully reach non-desire, then we reach **nirvana**. The Buddha does not say much about nirvana. The Buddha seems only to say what nirvana is *not*. **“O monks, there exists a domain where there is neither water nor fire nor wind, neither infinity of consciousness nor nothingness, neither full perception nor absence of perception, neither this world nor that world, neither sun nor moon.”** “Wow, thank you very much.”

The Christian equivalent of nirvana would seem to be heaven.

The two are actually rather different.

Heaven is all about the Divine Being, God.

Recall what we said about the mind and knowing reality outside of self: focus, contemplation, and, in heaven: loving contemplation of God.

Nirvana seems to be a place and state of being with no focus outside of self. To speak of heaven, Christians also largely say what it is *not*. But there is not a *total* negation of everything as the Buddha does in trying to speak of nirvana. Heaven implies a *certain* continuity for the human mind and heart, even though what will be experienced will be infinitely greater. And Christians would say, for example, that there *is* infinity of consciousness and full perception.

A life free of desire, a gratuitous life in a sense, whereby we attain nirvana, is lived according to the Four Noble Truths articulated by the Buddha. These Four Noble Truths shed light on the path called the Middle Way. Indeed, after his enlightenment —which follows his period of extreme asceticism, the Buddha declares, **“Monks, a recluse should avoid the two extremes, namely, indulgence in sensuous pleasure and indulgence in self-mortification. The Middle Way, as I understand and practice it, gives vision and knowledge and leads to Enlightenment.”**

The Four Noble Truths are the underlying perspective in Buddhist thought. The Four Noble Truths shed light for the journey, accompany the journey of detachment found in living the Middle Way. The expression is supposedly better translated “the truths of nobles”.

What are these Four Noble Truths?

Allow me, at this point, to read to you what is posted on the website for The Cambodian Buddhist Society, whose temple is nearby.

On the website, the Venerable Candavanno summarizes Buddhist thought:

1. There is suffering everywhere in the world: birth is suffering, old age is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow is suffering, lamentation is suffering, bodily pain is suffering, grief is suffering, despair is suffering, association with those you do not like is suffering, separation is suffering.
2. The cause of suffering is desire or craving. There are three types of desire: the desire for sensuous pleasure, the desire for rebirth, and the desire for no rebirth.
3. The cessation of suffering is the complete termination of desire of all kinds. Just as a fire dies when no fuel is added, so suffering will end when the fuel of craving is completely destroyed.

4. The way to end suffering is to follow the Middle Path or the Noble Eightfold Path, namely, Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

The Four Noble Truths are again the underlying perspective.
 Daily life is couched in this perspective.
 The Eightfold Path is the practical guide for daily life,
 the way to end suffering.

Recall what we said about intriguing minds.
 Considering the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path,
 it seems to me that Buddhism does not really answer the question “why?”
 The premise in Buddhist thought is that the world is full of suffering,
 a world in decay, which is thus *unknowable*.
 Hence, no gratuitous inquiry into “what?” or “why?”
 There is simply a practical guide for *how* to navigate this world of suffering.
 I would venture to say that, consequently,
 Buddhism cannot be fully satisfying for inquiring minds.
 The practical guide has very interesting precepts,
 which really resonate with people of good-will.
 They resonate because they often correspond with the reality of human life.
 But there is thought that necessarily precedes the practical guide
 which is, unfortunately, not articulated.
 The practical guide seems to fall into our laps as a given.
 I, for example, want to know *why* lying is bad...!

Buddhist thought thus seems largely to be a noble handbook
 to liberation from suffering, suffering which we bring upon ourselves
 because we are riddled with desire
 —which is a problem because we inevitably desire things of this world,
 which is a world of impermanence, of pure change.
 Talk about being trapped!
 The Buddhist practice is, therefore, largely one of detachment.
 I would say that the issue is not that of eliminating desire, of detachment,
 but of learning to desire that which enriches and expands us...

What is the Eightfold Path?

Allow me to quote the same website from The Cambodian Buddhist Society.

-What is right understanding? Right understanding is to have clear knowledge about suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the right path leading to the cessation of suffering.

-What is the right thought? Right thought is to have thoughts of renunciation, of hatelessness and of harmlessness.

-What is the right speech? Right speech is not to tell lies, not to speak maliciously, not to speak harshly of others and not to gossip.

-What is right conduct? Right conduct is not to kill, not to steal and not to commit adultery.

-What is right livelihood? Right livelihood is to earn one's living through right means, i.e., not to harm other people for one's living. Or right livelihood refers to abstaining from five occupations: trade in arms, trade in living being, trade in meat, trade in intoxicants and trade in poisons.

-What is right effort? Right effort is to make an effort to prevent unwholesome states from arising, to abandon the unwholesome states that have already arisen, to develop wholesome states that have not yet arisen and to maintain the wholesome states that have already arisen.

-What is the right mindfulness? Right mindfulness is to be aware and mindful, i.e., to live now this moment.

-What is right concentration? Right concentration is to restrain the mind from the five hindrances, i.e., not to allow oneself to be overcome by excessive sensual pleasures, by ill-will, by sloth and torpor, by restlessness and worry, by skeptical doubt. These five hindrances, according to Buddhism, are a cancer consuming the mind of man.

Now, there are even more detailed prescriptions, given with the *gradual* nature of the path in mind: beginning with the moral code that most people would accept (mentioned), and later articulating various proscriptions against entertainment and self-beautification.

The more demanding and greater prescriptions are for monks and nuns.

.

Again, these truths do not seem to result from asking the question “why?” They are simply facts that the wise come to realize.

And they are concrete steps on the gradual path to liberation,

The gradual path is more precisely

- 1st : moral conduct (disciplinary rules for words and behavior)
- 2nd : concentration
- 3rd : wisdom.

The big question for me is:

what exactly is the wisdom of which Buddha speaks?

What therefore is enlightenment?

What therefore is nirvana?

The Buddha gives a description of what it is *not*.

But, given the nature of the mind, there must be a focus to it, an object.

Wisdom in the Buddhist tradition

is the understanding of the Four Noble Truths,
achieved after living morally, and after learned concentration.

Wisdom in the Buddhist tradition

is seeing things as they are (according to Buddhist tradition).

Wisdom is insight into the three characteristic of existence:

- impermanence
- suffering
- non-self

Again, such insight comes after morality and concentration or meditation.

But what is this concentration or meditation?

It seems that is largely the observation of self,

becoming spectator to all the desires (and thoughts) that inhabit us.

We cannot eliminate our desires, but we can be in a place of observation,
and thus of freedom with respect to them.

This meditation is *not*

1. simple relaxation
2. a complete emptying of the mind
3. probing a particular reality

It is a state of calm observation of all things within,
which grants insight into the impermanence of all things,
and thus freedom with respect to them.

There are four things that are observed are essentially the aspects of self:

the body, sensation/feeling, the spirit, mental formations.

This, of course, as suggested before, is rather different from prayer.

Prayer is gazing in love upon an-Other, upon the Supreme Being.

One final issue:

there is much talk nowadays about compassion in Buddhism,
which I find difficult to understand from afar,
given its promotion of detachment.

Compassion, in my book, if it is genuine, implies some *attachment*
—to the person to whom it is expressed.

Otherwise, it is generic compassion which is not genuine compassion.

Supposedly, compassion as a great virtue emerged later

in the Buddhist tradition—interestingly, around the time of Jesus.

In fact, a great Buddha figure came to the fore around the time of Jesus,
who promoted this school of thought: compassion as the great virtue.

His name Avalokitesavara, whose 14th successor is today's Dalai Lama.

What is this compassion which today

has become the more frequently considered feature of Buddhism?

As grand and as moving as it is, there seems to be an inevitable limit to it.

The limit to it would be the following:

if each of us is impermanence and should never be object of attachment,

then the compassion exercised in the Buddhist tradition

cannot be towards the person *per se*, but simply towards his/her suffering.

Can we not say that such compassion is more a question of moral duty,

which contributes to laying the foundation without which life would be
chaotic and concentration impossible, and wisdom thus unattainable?

From a human perspective, this seems to be insufficient.

Moral duty can only be really understood

in the light of love, in the light of loving relationships.

We care for the needs of those we *love*.

Loving persons care for the needs of others.

From a Christian perspective,

compassion most definitely is an expression of love.

Divine love (normally!) moves a Christian to carry others' burdens,
with the belief that God is experienced in so doing.

Similarly, both Buddha and Jesus say, "Peace be with you."

Buddha seems to say it as a moral dictate, which prepares the way
to wisdom, to the state beyond suffering called nirvana.

Jesus says it as a gift that results from being in communion with the Divine.
Peace follows right order.
For a Christian, right order means being in God's embrace.
In saying "Peace be with you" Jesus draws into this embrace.
For a Christian, there can even be peace in suffering,
for, in suffering, there can be a mysterious encounter with God.

We could go on and on.
Let us stop here, and hope that at some point in the future we can resume....

