

Chapter 4  
Why I am not a Buddhist Part 2  
By Melvin Tinker

The world has become much smaller. Talk of living in a ‘global village’ is not just fanciful rhetoric. There are a number of factors which have led to this ‘globalization’. One is easy access to travel. When I was a child I would never have dreamt of being able to travel to the United States. The only access I had to things American was through the cinema and TV. Of course the latter has also made the world smaller by giving us ‘windows’ into lands and cultures we may never have even heard of. And now there is the internet, within seconds of something happening large sections of the globe will become instantly aware of it. And with all of this has come a greater awareness of other people’s beliefs. And this heightened awareness has had a profound effect- what I call the ‘supermarket effect’. I thought we had large supermarkets until I came to the States- ours are corner stores compared to yours. But think of what happens when you go into such a mega store to buy, say, a tube of toothpaste. I guess, for guys toothpaste is toothpaste-what the heck. But that just adds to the bewilderment when the poor fellow is standing there with rows and rows of the stuff- how do you choose between them? You have minty flavour, strawberry flavour, toothpaste with whitener, toothpaste with extra fluoride and so on. One response is to say: ‘It’s just a matter of personal preference- whatever works for you.’ The temptation is then to think: it is all relative, sure, there may be one or two differences, but they are more or less all the same- after all, toothpaste is toothpaste.’ And so in an act of desperation our bewildered male shopper closes his eyes, reaches out his hand, and places gum gel for teething babies into his shopping trolley by mistake!

The point is that the same supermarket effect can spill over to the way we approach other faiths or world views. Is it really the case that one religion is just as good as another- beneath they are all the same but just packaged differently? Is it simply a question of personal preference? Going back to our toothpaste illustration for a moment: imagine that a product came onto the market, claiming to be toothpaste, with all the right packaging and marketing, but after a few weeks people who have tried this new product discover that their teeth become more brittle. Far from whitening the teeth, they become discoloured. In fact, on closer inspection what is found to be in the tube is nothing but gelatine with a few additives. No one is then going to say, ‘All toothpaste is the same- whatever works for you’. Some things don’t work because they don’t pass the test of what the product is meant to be. Furthermore, even those products which are genuine toothpaste don’t all fare the same, some are better or worse than others.

Here’s the question: of all the different religions and beliefs which exist, including Buddhism and Christianity, how do you go about deciding between them? Are there criteria which might help us make such informed decisions, or do we fall back on the prevailing view of ‘Whatever works for you’?

Well, yes there are. You have to begin by asking what is the *purpose* of religions or belief systems? At root they are attempts to make sense out of life- to give us access into reality

and to help us make our way through life in a meaningful way. If you like they act as *mental maps* which we use to orientate ourselves in the world.

The four big questions world view seek to come to terms with are:

1. *Where do I come from?* The question of origins
2. *Who am I?* The question of significance
3. *Why is the world in such a mess?* The question of evil
4. *Is there a future?* The question of purpose

As Professor David Wolfe puts it, belief systems are projects which are concerned *with 'making sense out of total experience.'*<sup>1</sup>

Given this, there are criteria interwoven into all beliefs by which we can determine their strengths and credibility, whether they demand our assent and so are worth believing. These are the 6 'C's'.

1. Consistency - that the assertions don't contradict each other. This is a negative criterion.
2. Coherence - the belief hangs together in such a way that the different elements support one another providing a coherent whole.
3. Comprehensiveness - the belief must, in the words of one Gestalt therapist, 'gobble up experience' that is, cover reality and not leave out the rough edges of human experience –e.g. the problem of suffering.
4. Congruence - that is it must have a good 'fit' with reality and so providing a mental map which accounts for and explains what we experience. In other words, it has explanatory power. For example, why we feel significant and yet still long for more?
5. Competitive - a world view must effectively compete with and be capable of refuting other world views. The law of non-contradiction –that something cannot be A and non- A at the same time applies *between* world views and not just within them. This is vital when approaching the question of religious pluralism.
6. Commitment - people need to follow the world view. Any air brained belief can be argued, but not every belief can be lived.

Given that 'contrast is the mother of clarity', what I want to do is to use these four big questions and criteria to demonstrates some of the differences between Buddhism and Christianity and so show why I am not a Buddhist but a Christian.

So let us take a look at the 'conceptual maps' provided by Buddhism and Christianity and see how they fare in helping us 'make sense out of total experience.' In doing this I

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<sup>1</sup> David L. Wolfe, *Epistemology*, (Inter Varsity Press, Grove, 1982).

want us to come in at the level of underlying *presuppositions*, the basic core beliefs about things that matter. Here we will see that no matter what superficial similarities there may be between Christianity and Buddhism- for example, both had historical founders, both founders gathered around them disciples to propagate their teachings, and both had their teachings eventually gathered into a holy book- the *Sutras* (Pali Canon) and the Gospels- nonetheless there are fundamental and irreconcilable differences such that they *both* can't be right.

*Dealing with reality- where do I come from?*

As we saw in the last class, Buddhism in its varying forms is at one with traditional Hinduism in being *monistic*. Unity alone is real. What then are we to make of the diversity we experience, that the chair is different to the table, the dog is different to the cat and so on? Monism's answer is that such distinctions are *maya*- illusion. Shankara -a Hindu, not a Buddhist, speaks for all monists- when he says that the world is *maya* but is taken as 'real' in the same way a man mistakes a rope for a snake or mother of pearl for silver.'<sup>2</sup>

I would suggest to you that the Buddhist understanding of reality falls at the hurdle of 'congruence'- accounting for what we experience. This shows itself in two practical outworkings.

*First, the operation of modern science*

Not only is there no motivation for science- 'studying what is out there' and seeing how things function in terms of cause and effect, for according to this world view, there is at bottom 'nothing out there to study' it is *maya*. Whereas, as we have seen, the key to meaning is *detachment*, as exemplified by the Buddha, Christianity would come at it differently in terms of *involvement*. In 1925 in his Lowell lectures, the non-Christian and co-author with atheist Bertrand Russell of *Principia Mathematica* (1910-1913), A.N. Whitehead, argued that you had to have a sufficient basis for *believing* that the scientific enterprise would be worthwhile and it was Christianity which supplied it. He pointed out that the images of gods found in other religions, especially Asia, are too impersonal or too irrational to have sustained science. Obviously, if you believed that there were gods who are fickle and keep changing their minds, you could never engage in science, because that is dependent upon things being stable and not being changed on a whim. What is more, if what is perceived as the world is in a state of constant flux because it is *maya*, stability is denied which is fundamental to science's *predictive* element. The God of the Bible provides such stability. Here is Professor Rodney Stark making the same point:

'The rise of science was not an extension of classical learning. It was the natural outgrowth of Christian doctrine. Nature exists because it was created by God. To love and honour God, one must fully appreciate the wonders of his handiwork. Moreover, because God is perfect, his handiwork functions in accord with immutable principles. By the full use of our God-given

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<sup>2</sup> From An Encyclopaedia of Religion, ed. Vergius Ferm (New York: the Philosophical Library, 1945), p 707

powers of reason and observation, we ought to be able to discover these principles.’<sup>3</sup>

This brings us to the next problem with Buddhistic monism- *distinguishing reality from fantasy*.

If the world as we experience it is illusory, then how do we distinguish between our experiences, those considered to be objective and so ‘real’- and those subjective and maybe due to psychosis? As Lao-tse put it: ‘If when I was asleep I was a man dreaming I was a butterfly, how do I know when I am awake I am not a butterfly dreaming I am a man?’ The answer of course is that it is not possible to know. But from the standpoint of monism, ultimately what does it matter since ‘all is One’? Except of course on a practical level it matters a lot if you are dealing with someone who has psychosis.

By way of contrast the Biblical account of reality is radically different and does fit with what we experience and is intuitive. In Genesis 1 God presents himself as the unique, personal, absolute, sovereign God who, by his royal decreeing Word, brings a world into being, ordering things ‘just so’ with the result that they are good, or ‘fit for purpose’ as we might say. As such, God is *transcendent*, and ‘Wholly Other’ to his creation, but he also *immanent* and intimately involved with, in and through what he has made.

The Biblical account also explains the relationship between the one and the many, the universal and particulars- why we not only have a universal- say, the concept of ‘doginness’ and the particular dogs which exist-this one is a poodle, that one is an Alsatian and so on. This is because God within the oneness of his own being is in a relationship of three persons. There is unity- the Godhead- and diversity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and our creation reflects that. What is more, it is a *creation*, an objective reality, not a dream. Hence it is possible to do science and classify things, and help people who are deluded for there is a standard by which we can judge the real from the fantastic.

*Who am I? The question of significance*

According to Buddhism the ‘who’ (not the 1960’s British band!) is an illusion, we are more of a ‘what’ or an ‘it’. This was reflected in the Buddha’s ‘Eureka’ moment when he said, ‘*It is liberated*’ rather than ‘*I am liberated*’. So in answering the questions, ‘where do I come from and who am I?’ the two have the same root answer- we are an illusory manifestation of the One greater reality. In Mahayana Buddhism we are an extension of the divine essence into the world of diversity like a dance or dream.

The promoter of Western Zen Buddhism, Alan Watts, wrote

‘God entranced himself and forgot the way back, so that now he feels himself to be man, playing-guiltily- at being God.’<sup>4</sup> Using Watt’s Zen language, the

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<sup>3</sup> Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God*, (Princeton University Press, 2003), p 157.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Watts, *Beyond Theology: the Art of Godmanship* (New York: Meridian Books, 1967) p 32

true 'self' is God (Brahman) and the 'I' is the 'not self' in bondage to the wheel of samsara, existence. That 'I' needs to escape from the wheel by meditation in order to merge with the Absolute.'

Within this framework freedom is not freedom *to be* oneself, but freedom *from* oneself. In the words of D.T. Suzuki, the Zen teacher, the goal of Zen is not 'incarnation' but 'excarnation.'<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly enough, it was an English clergyman, Charles Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll who captured this thought well- and its logical consequences- in his 'Through the Looking Glass'.

Speaking of the dreaming King, Tweedledee says,

'And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you' be?'  
'Where I am now, of course,' says Alice. 'Not you!' Tweedledee retorts contemptuously. 'You'd be nowhere. Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream.' And Tweedledum added, 'If that there King was to awake, you'd go out – bang! Just like a candle.'<sup>6</sup>

The British historian, Arnold Toynbee captures the essentially nihilistic quality of Buddhism and much Eastern mysticism when he writes,

'We might think of a human person...as being a wave that rises or falls, or a bubble that forms and bursts, on the 'immortal sea's surface... But, if that is what we are, we have to live and die without ever knowing in what relation we stand to the Ultimate Reality that is the source and destination of our being in our ephemeral human life on earth.'<sup>7</sup>

Here Buddhism falls foul of the comprehensiveness criterion, for rather than explaining human personality it explains it *away*. This in turn runs into the criterion of coherence, for if there is no self which needs to escape from the wheel of samsara then who is it doing the meditating in an attempt to escape?

But it is at this point that the criterion of commitment is strained to breaking point as is illustrated by the Japanese poet, Kabayashi Issa (1762-1826), normally known simply by his pen name, Issa (meaning cup of tea.) All five of his children died before he was thirty, and then his young wife died. After one of those deaths he went to a Zen master and asked him for an explanation for such suffering. The master reminded him that the world was dew. Just as the sun rises and the dew evaporated, so on the wheel of suffering sorrow

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<sup>5</sup> Cited by Os Guinness in *The Dust of Death*. (Inter Varsity Pres, London, 1973), p 216

<sup>6</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (Glasgow: Collins Classics, 1954) p 186

<sup>7</sup> Arnold Toynbee et al, *Man's Concern with Death*, (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1968), p 184

is transient, life is transient, man is transient. Involvement in the passion of grief and mourning tells of a failure to transcend the momentum of selfish egotism.

This was the Zen philosophical answer. But on returning home Issa wrote a poem which literally runs:

‘This dewdrop World- a dewdrop world it is, and still, although it is....’ Or putting it more simply, ‘The world is dew, the world is dew and yet, and yet’.<sup>8</sup>

The Biblical view of human beings is much more affirming and at one with our deepest experiences like that of Issa. We are made in God’s image with purpose and dignity. Genesis 1 and 2 presents humans as being God’s vice regents, with capacities which enable us exercise a loving stewardship in the world under God and for God. We are individuals but made for relationship, male and female, and primarily with God. It is supremely in the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ that we see this most clearly. All that we were meant to be, like a son in loving obedience to a father, as Adam, Israel and David were meant to be but failed, Jesus is. In this one person, the Absolute (God) and the relative (man) became united forever. And so those who put their trust in him become united to him too by the Holy Spirit and this gives his followers quite a different perspective to suffering and death than the followers of the Buddha.

Let me give you a Christian experience of suffering and loss compared to that of Issa.

Norman Anderson went to Cambridge University in the 1930’s where he met his future wife. He became very active in the student evangelical movement of the day, the CICCUC which is equivalent to your Varsity. Then he went to Egypt as a missionary where he learnt Arabic. Then during the Second World War he was recruited by British Intelligence. After the war he came back to Britain and eventually rose to become Professor of Oriental Laws and Director of the Institute for Advanced legal Studies in the University of London. He wrote many fine Christian books, including a best seller booklet- ‘The Evidence for the Resurrection- a lawyer examines the evidence.’ which God has used to bring a countless number of people to Christ. He was eventually given a knighthood by the Queen. Sir Norman and his wife had three children, all fine Christians. His first daughter became a medical missionary in what was then the Belgian Congo (present day Zaire). During the violence that erupted there during the Simba uprising, she was gang raped. She came home and eventually went to California to do some advance study in medicine with the intention of returning to the Congo. But while there, she tripped, fell down some stairs and drowned in her own spittle. The second daughter died in circumstances scarcely less bazar.

Their only son, Hugh was a brilliant student at Cambridge University gaining a distinguished First (the highest possible grade) and even then was being tipped as a future Prime Minister. At the age of 21 he died of brain cancer.

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<sup>8</sup> Cited in *The Dust of Death* p 223

How do you deal with that? How would a Buddhist deal with that? We know how from the example of Issa. Let me tell you what Sir Norman said on a broadcast on the BBC a few days after his son had died. After explaining why he himself was convinced that God raised Jesus from the dead, he said, ‘On this I am prepared to stake my life. In this faith my son died, after saying, “I’m drawing near my Lord.” I am convinced that he was not mistaken.’ No disappearing into the deathless lake of nirvana, but because God has made an objectively real world into which God entered as a real person and died a real death and was raised bodily from a real grave, Sir Norman and his son had something which the Buddhist can never have- hope. As Dr Os Guinness wryly entitles one of his chapters in his book on suffering, ‘Nirvana is not for Egos’.<sup>9</sup>

*[This brings us to our last question] Suffering-why is the world in such a mess?*

As we saw last week, the Buddha saw *dukkha*-anguish- as lying at the heart of the human predicament. This in turn is caused by *samudaya*- cravings or desire. And so, using philosophical language, our fundamental problem is metaphysical, it is to do with our ‘being’. It is from this we need releasing and the illusion of maya of which anguish is a part. What is more, salvation is something *we* in some form are capable of achieving-escaping fthe wheel of samsara by meditation and the like.

If this is correct, then suffering or even the inflicting of pain by someone can’t be considered to be evil for at rock bottom it is illusory and illusions, like bad dreams, may not be pleasant but they can hardly be considered to be immoral. As with the concept of the self, suffering is not so much explained by Buddhism, but explained away- it is ‘dew’. But as Issa found, this is hardly satisfying and kicks hard against what we actually experience.

In the face of the Holocaust, 911, the appalling abuse of children in our world, can we simply view these things as ‘dew’? Is not suffering genuinely *real* and in some case rightly deemed ‘evil’? And so while Buddhism arose out of a confrontation of suffering and death in the experience of Gautama, it is hardly a satisfactory solution.

Contrast this with the Biblical view. Here the heart of the human predicament is not suffering but sin, which in some way occasions it. This doesn’t mean that every individual items of suffering is caused by specific acts of sin, Jesus saw that error off when he healed the man born blind in John 9. When he was asked by his disciples ‘who sinned, this man or his parents?’ (viewing suffering and sin in a cause and effect relation-like karma), Jesus replied, ‘Neither’ and pointed to a higher purpose in suffering when he heals the man and so demonstrating God’s power and compassion.

Neither is death considered to be part of an illusion for the Christian. It is an enemy which Jesus came to defeat as well as being a reminder that we live in a broken world, more than, that a cursed world. In short, our problem isn’t metaphysical as in Buddhism, but

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<sup>9</sup> Os Guinness, *Unspeakable: facing up to Evil in an Age of Genocide and Terror* (Harper SanFrancisco, 2005)

moral. And so if there is to be any salvation, then this must address the moral problem and must come from outside of us, not from within. What is more, if suffering is a result of such rebellion, then it is in reconciliation that true healing will be found and this includes the Christian hope not of the *disappearance* of the self into an impersonal nothingness, but the *redemption* of the self which will occupy a new heaven and a new earth. It is at the cross, the place of great anguish and suffering that death is defeated and the sting of death is drawn as the moral demands of the law are met. God's justice has been satisfied by Jesus' substitutionary, atoning death. His resurrection is the guarantee that the curse has been reversed and so enabling all those who put their trust in Christ to experience for ever what lies at the heart of the universe- Trinitarian love.

### Conclusion

As we have seen, the problem of suffering was the instigator of Buddhism, spurring Gautama on in his quest for enlightenment. His solution was detachment. In Christianity sin is the root cause of man's dilemma bringing suffering and alienation in its wake. God's solution is involvement- the incarnation of God not the excarnation of man. And it is the cross which above all things creates the great gulf between Buddhism and Christianity.

The difference has been well highlighted by Christian writer, Dr John Stott. He says, 'I could never believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the one Nietzsche ridiculed as 'God on the cross'. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune from it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have turned away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering.'<sup>10</sup>

This is literally the 'crucial' difference between Buddhism and Christianity and explains why I am not a Buddhist but a Christian.

### POINTS FOR HOME

1. 'All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means "God is with us"). Matthew 1:22-23.

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<sup>10</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Inter Varsity Press, Nottingham, 1986) pp 335-336

What difference will it make to your approach to suffering and difficulty knowing that God has been there too- that, in the words of John Stott, he 'entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death'?

2. 'Brothers and sisters we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.' 1 Thess 4:13-14.

The writer of Ecclesiastes writes that 'the day of the death of a godly man is better than the day of his birth'- how ill the reality of the resurrection of Jesus prepare you for death and those whom you love? Contrast this with nirvana!

3. The symbol of the Christian faith is a cross not a lotus which has 'nothing' in the centre. This week seek continually to go back to the old rugged cross for forgiveness, peace and hope.