

Don't Turn Out the Lights

February 2020

Recently I spent an afternoon hanging out with Buddhist monks talking about religion. Believe me, that was a first! In late January, I was part of a delegation of church leaders and mission workers that visited numerous ministries in Thailand and Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. Our aim was to learn more about Buddhism, the different cultures of southeast Asia, and what Christ is doing today in this part of the world. One day, our tour guide arranged for us to have a dialogue with Buddhist monks; we were given permission to ask them anything we wanted. Sitting at the steps of an ancient temple under the shade of a lush canopy, I met several monks who were eager to talk about their belief. We jumped into discussing what we believed to be true about the universe. I was shocked to learn Buddhists do not believe in God. I had always assumed Buddhist monks were very spiritual and spent much time praying to God. As I quickly discovered, they do not pray to God at all. Why would they? They don't believe God exists. Instead, as they explained, they meditate as often as they can, striving for their own enlightenment, hoping to achieve detachment from the desires and struggles of this world. In fact, the ultimate goal of their daily meditations is to entirely extinguish their lives in the end, blowing it out like a candle in the dark. By achieving their goal of enlightenment, they will no longer be plagued and bothered by the desires and struggles of this world. Therefore, they believe they will escape any thought of an afterlife. There is no God. There is no heaven as we know it.



As the afternoon progressed and my new friendship with the monks grew, my questions for them multiplied. I pressed the monks further with curiosity and inquiry. I asked, "Do you mean to say that you receive no outside assistance from a force greater than yourself in your quest to become more like Buddha, the perfectly enlightened One?" They said, "No, we don't; it is entirely up to ourselves and our wills to achieve whatever we can in this life. We are striving within the cycle of life to reach Nirvana, or enlightenment, which extinguishes our lives entirely; however, only a few people in history have ever achieved it. Short of Nirvana is our hope to be reincarnated in the next life as a god or better person, hoping not to come back as an animal or member of hell." I had never before talked with someone who believed in reincarnation. Therefore, I had a lot to think about. I made sure not to dwell on just the differences in our two faith systems, but to celebrate our common ground as well. We identified the many wonderful ways our beliefs were similar, especially in regard to non-violence, overcoming ego, and caring for the environment. However, the entire conversation made me appreciate as never before how unique our Christian faith is in terms of believing in a totally other, separate being in the universe, more powerful than ourselves; someone who is wanting to love and care for us on a daily basis. Buddhism is more individualistic than I had ever imagined.

Not wanting to waste a minute of the unique opportunity to learn more about Buddhism from these gentle monks, I pressed on with my questions. None of us was in a hurry. The sun was shining brightly. The conversation was relaxed and inviting. I asked, "Are monks members of a monastery for life, similar to the Christian tradition?" They answered, "No, a person can be a monk for a little while, leave the monastery whenever he would like, and return again if he feels led. It is totally up to the individual. Men can come and go as they please. There are nunneries for women, too. Some monks marry, others don't. Some stay in the monastery for life, but most individuals come and go throughout their lives as time permits." Then I inquired, "When you are not in the monastery, do you join a local temple, become a member of a congregation and meditate on a regular basis?" They replied, "No, Buddhists do not have congregations outside of the monastery. For the layperson, there is no joining a local temple. We meditate in our own houses, parks, some temples, or places of work on our own, whenever we can." The picture was beginning to get clearer for me. Buddhists do not receive any help from a being greater than themselves, they do not meet regularly with other Buddhists unless they are members of a monastery, and they get together religiously only when there are festivals and holiday celebrations. I began to appreciate as never before how much Christianity relies on regular fellowship, worship and group prayer and other means of gaining strength through organized community. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable with how much pressure was put on an individual Buddhist to achieve good karma or enlightenment all on their own strength.



Buddhist Monks

Throughout our two-week trip, we heard testimonies from Thai people who had found faith in Christ. Only one percent of Thailand is Christian. One young woman from the Wa tribal group in northern Thailand told our group her riveting testimony: At a young age, she was forced into a life of prostitution in order to help with her family's income. Worse still, she was raped by her father and neglected by her mother. She was virtually homeless. In recent years especially, thousands and even millions of Thai and Burmese young girls have been lured into this dark path of prostitution and sex slavery and endured similar fates. For many families, it is a matter of survival. Mixed in with the ills of prostitution and sex slavery are active and lucrative drug trading and constant war, violence and conflict, especially in Myanmar. This brave young woman stood in front of our group and told about her new-found faith in Jesus. She was incredibly articulate and confident given her young age and life circumstances. She extolled on how God and her new Christian community had brought healing into her life. She had never felt more loved in her life than when she gave her soul to Jesus. She was no longer alone, according to her testimony. Growing up, she had never known there was a loving God who wanted to guide and protect her from all the evil spirits that surrounded her. She ended her testimony by telling us that she now wanted to dedicate her life to becoming a Bible teacher and forming Christian community wherever she could to rescue other people from the darkness of evil spirits, fears associated with reincarnation and so-called good karma, and the life of individualism, which Buddhism teaches.

Throughout Thailand, thanks to the participation of the global Church, there are now safe houses of refuge for girls caught in sex slavery. Often, these girls are rescued at an early age and brought to these places of safety by concerned friends or family members, often against the will of the parents. The power of Christian community and prayers bring healing and hope to many of these ravaged lives. In Myanmar, brave Christians, crying for justice, are beginning to stand up to the ills and brutality of the Burmese army. They are trying to break the cycles of

hatred and retaliation that have been raging for 60 years going back to 1947 when the civil wars began in Burma. They believe that only the divine intervention of God can cause people to choose peace instead of further war. We met brave Christian people who are standing in solidarity with the persecuted minority groups in Myanmar, risking their own lives in doing so.

Life is not meant to be lived alone. The forces of evil and sin are too powerful for individuals to resist by themselves. Though there are many wonderful traits of Buddhism, a lack of belief in our one true God is an unfortunate if not tragic flaw in its worldview. From our Christian perspective, our God loves us so much that he sent his one and only son to live amongst us. He does not want us to be alone or frightened in life. He wants to put his arms around us and give us comfort with his loving presence. And, he wants us to do the same with each other. That is why we join churches and other Christian groups so we can dedicate our lives to helping and loving one another no matter what trials we might be facing. Best of all, our lives are not over when we die; and we are not reincarnated either. Our light does not go out with our last breath. In fact, our lives shine even brighter in heaven. As our bodies are resurrected, we walk even more closely with our God.



May we always remember these wise and instructive words from the book of Hebrews: "Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise. Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near." (Hebrews 10:23-25)