



In the Beginning, There Was No Buddha

By Forrest McPhail

There are no hidden keys of knowledge about Buddhists that will ensure success in reaching them with the Gospel. Only the Spirit of God can enlighten the minds of unbelievers (1 Cor. 2:6–16). And yet the Apostle Paul was most serious about his need to adapt himself to the cultures he ministered in without compromise (1 Cor. 9). This would definitely include understanding the mind and heart of those with whom he labored. He also asked prayer for the ability to preach the Gospel clearly (Col. 4:2–4). This requires knowledge of the audience’s worldview. If we want to reach Buddhists, we must strive to understand their worldview—one which is radically different from our own.

What the average Buddhist on the street (or dirt path!) believes is much different from the Buddhist doctrine taught in books. “Folk Buddhism” is the real religion held by the vast majority of Buddhists in Asia. Folk Buddhism is syncretistic, mixing animism (the worship of demons, angels, spirits of the dead) with Buddhist teachings. Animistic ideas clash with Buddhist doctrine. When they do, animism wins because animism addresses the everyday matters of life in ways that Buddhism cannot.

Folk Buddhists are still heavily influenced by Buddhist thought, even if their adherence to it is minimal. Consider how many Americans are “Folk Christians” who mix Christian ideas with popular culture and ideas. Buddhist doctrines that most impact the minds of Asian Folk Buddhists include:

■ **Reincarnation.** This doctrine teaches that all are stuck in an endless cycle of birth and rebirth that can be broken only by achieving nirvana (non-existence). Buddha gave us the path to achieve this and is why Buddhism was created. Very few Buddhists are trying to achieve this goal.



Forrest witnesses to Kone.

- **Suffering.** The meaning of life is this: life is suffering. To be alive is to suffer, and the goal of life is to end pain. All human desires are evil and keep us trapped in this endless cycle. Suffering must be avoided at all costs. This is why we so desperately need good karma.
- **Karmic law.** Karma is an undefinable law of justice in the universe. Do good, get good. Do bad, get bad. No one escapes karmic law, which manifests itself in this life and the next reincarnation. Bad karma leads to physical, social, or emotional suffering. Good karma leads to peace and prosperity, which is defined by wealth, health, success, etc. This law greatly impacts how people perceive themselves and those around them in their suffering or relative success.
- **Salvation.** The central tenant of Buddhism is: “You must depend upon yourself.” Achieving better karma and eventually non-existence requires that the individual gain mastery over his/her desires. No one can help another achieve salvation from life and suffering. Buddha is only a guide, not a god.

Just from this brief review of Buddhist doctrine, one might readily see how Buddhism conflicts with all human longings and spiritual needs. The religion makes fate, based on karma, the determiner of all facts of life. Most Asian Buddhists find this unacceptable.

They must have help in their time of need. They must find ways to manipulate their circumstances. This is where animism comes in: spirits of dead ancestors, former national heroes, or saints are appealed to for aid; demons are placated to deal with illnesses; traditional healers and mediums assist in interaction with the unseen world; astrology, card reading, witch doctors, and even gods from other religions

are called upon for help. Buddhist doctrine gets overhauled in practice in order to accommodate animism. Folk Buddhists are even allowed to earn merit for one another, both the living and the dead. This Folk Buddhism is clearly the real religion of most Asian Buddhists. The Buddha’s Buddhism in daily life is mostly relegated to ceremonial rituals. Very few monks even pursue nirvana as Buddha commanded.

How does one go about evangelizing people in such a context? We must start where people are when we witness, not with a formula, especially on the pioneer mission fields of the world. For the Folk Buddhist, Genesis 1–3 is vital. There is no cross without the creation. There is no real sin without a Creator. The life and death of Jesus has no meaning apart from Genesis 1–3.



Forrest and Jennifer McPhail minister in Cambodia, a predominantly Buddhist country.



Teaching young children the creation account lays the groundwork for the Gospel.

Folk Buddhists must be made to consider who God is and why it is important that they know Him. Most think that Jesus was merely a good religious teacher or, at best, another Buddha. They must be confronted with His eternity, His power, His authority and His ownership over all of His creation. They must know that God created all things, even all of the other spiritual powers of this world. They need to be made aware of God's loving relationship with man since the beginning of time and how God has revealed Himself in creation and through His prophets. They must see that Christianity, the worship of the Creator God, is the first and oldest religion of mankind and that all rivals, including Buddhism, are "Johnny-come-lately" creations of the human mind. The origin of suffering and man's guilt from the beginning until now must be brought to bear on their conscience. They must be led to acknowledge the just law of the Holy Creator God written on their conscience and how it is that they have failed to keep God's law and have refused to seek Him. They must be pressed to see that they cannot keep their own religion's laws, much less the law of the Creator! The promise of a Savior who would come to reverse the curse of sin and suffering must be held before them to emphasize the compas-

sion of God. All of this can be discussed from Genesis 1-3.

The great humility of God the Son, the Creator, through His incarnation, the evil of sin and the incredible suffering of the Savior cannot be realized without Genesis 1-3. His glorious resurrection, His return to glory, and the promises of eternal blessing have no meaning apart from a grounding in who God is. The Jesus Film, Chick tracts, God's Plan, the Four Spiritual Laws, and the Roman's road are meaningless to a Folk Buddhist apart from a clear understanding of creation



Forrest engages Buddhists in the market in discussion.

and the Creator. Paul's recorded sermons to the Gentiles began at Creation for a reason. There are also many in America in this generation that need to be evangelized beginning with Genesis 1-3.

In the beginning there was no Buddhism. Many Buddhists hide behind the apparent ancient age of their religion, thinking that Christianity came 500 or so years later. What they need to hear is God's call to return to the ancient path, the way of the Creator (Jer. 6:16). They need to hear of God's gracious call of repentance throughout the earth before His judgment comes (Acts 17:30-31). In the end there will be no Buddhism.

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