



25. What Is Buddhism?

The religion now called Buddhism was founded by an Indian Prince, Siddhartha Gautama, who was born some time between 624 and 448 BC. He was brought up in seclusion and luxury, ignorant of life outside the walls of the royal palace. When at length he ventured into the outside world, he encountered for the first time old age, pain and death.

He became a wandering ascetic and, seeking enlightenment, embarked with five disciples on a course of extreme mortification. Eventually he became convinced that this way was futile, and broke his fast with five grains of rice. Taking this to be due to weakness, his disciples withdrew from him, but Sakyamuni (as he was now known) continued to meditate until he perceived the Four Noble Truths, by which he became the Buddha (the Enlightened, or Awakened, One). He preached these Four Truths to the five disciples:

1. Everything is suffering.
2. Suffering comes from Desire.
3. Suppression of Desire suppresses Suffering.
4. The Eightfold Path, or the Middle Way, leading to the end of suffering:

(i) Right seeing, (ii) Right resolve, (iii) Right word, (iv) Right action, (v) Right means of existence, (vi) Right effort, (vii) Right attention, and (viii) Right contemplation.

Classical Buddhism holds that there is nothing, not even a transcendental Creator God, that permanently exists. All, including the gods, are subject to the Wheel of Karma, the ethical law that determines the form in which one is to be reborn. One can escape the wheel to reach the total detachment of Nirvana, only by achieving Enlightenment through the Eightfold Path.

After the Buddha's death, his religion became widespread in India, particularly under the great Emperor Asoka (about 250 BC). He sent Buddhist missionaries to Ceylon, Afghanistan and Iran. Buddhism eventually spread to Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia, China, Korea Japan, Tibet and Mongolia. Before the time of Asoka, however, it had split into two main branches. The Hinayana ('Lesser Vehicle') held to classical Buddhism. Mahayana

('Greater Vehicle') focussed rather on devotion to the 'Boddhisattvas', that is, beings who were believed to have postponed the attainment of Nirvana for themselves in order to assist suffering humanity.

After the conquest of India by Islamic invaders in the 12th Century AD, Buddhism virtually disappeared from the subcontinent except in Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka, where Hinayana Buddhism remains strong.

In southeast Asia, a variant of Hinayana is practised, in which the object is less to escape from the Wheel of Karma than to become a Mover of the Wheel. Mahayana Buddhism, practised mainly to the north of the Himalayas, became influenced in varying degrees by Tantrism, a form of Hindu and Taoist devotion involving the use physical techniques.

The forms taken by Buddhism vary widely from nation to nation, assimilating elements of the local religion, as in Lamaistic Buddhism, followed in Tibet and Mongolia, and Zen, which originated in Japan, with its well-known techniques for focussing the mind.

It will be seen that classical Buddhism is in essence atheistic; though this does not seem to be the case in some forms of Mahayana Buddhism. The followers of the Christian 'Death of God' school of thought, such as Don Cupitt, have been called 'Christian Buddhists'; but the Buddhist objective of total detachment is very different from the Christian ethic of engagement and love. How far the currents of thought generated by Buddhism, which may have come into contact with the world of Greek philosophy in north-west India and Afghanistan, influenced the development of Christianity is a matter of speculation.