

INSIGHTS FOR FRONTIER MISSIONS TO THERAVADA BUDDHISTS

Successfully communicating the gospel to the Buddhist world is no easy task. The author begins with a brief overview of the historical spread of Buddhism and its encounter with Christianity. He concludes with suggestions for evangelism from personal observation and experience in East Asia.

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Reaching classical Buddhists is a tough task. They do not have common points of contact from biblical revelation like Muslims or Jews, nor do redemptive analogies abound as found in many animistic tribal peoples. Theravada Buddhism proposes a highly integrated philosophical system that is primarily atheistic and totally dependent on self effort.

The Buddhist world

The vast Buddhist world is concentrated in East Asia. However, it encircles the globe, primarily through the Diaspora of Chinese and Southeast Asian peoples plus the overseas Japanese. By the opening of the twenty-first century, the population of Buddhists will exceed 700 million. Many more Chinese could be added to this total since 45 years of iron-fisted Chinese communist control has not wiped out two millennia of Buddhist philosophy and thinking.

Buddhism has many faces among the variegated groups who adopted it. It spread often among peoples where the prevailing religion was animism.¹ Although it formulated a religious system which dominated the traditional belief systems, it did not dislodge these beliefs entirely. Today, some 2,000 unreached people groups are identified with Buddhism.

Two broad schools of Buddhism exist. Mahayana, the large vehicle, accounts for four-fifths of Buddhists, primarily Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. About 14 million of this school adhere to

a Tantric form in Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, Bhutan, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (formerly the Soviet Union). Theravada, the small vehicle, is the second school, with about 120 million adherents, primarily in Myanmar (formerly Burma), Thailand, Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), Cambodia, and Laos. Buddhism also received some popularity in the West, mostly through American soldiers taking home Asian war brides as well as through the influx of Southeast Asian refugees.

Historical spread of Buddhism

The roots of Theravada Buddhism arose five hundred years before Christ through the teachings of Gautama Siddharta, who claimed to be enlightened as the Buddha. In the first three centuries, little Buddhist expansion occurred. It was confined largely to northern India and Nepal.

Then, under King Asoka of Magadha, India, a major expansion of Buddhism burst forth. Through his patronage, Asoka built 84,000 stupas, pronounced edicts exhorting the people to follow Buddhist precepts, and sent missionaries far and wide across his vast kingdom. They helped consolidate his conquests with a peaceable religious doctrine. Missionary monks also traveled the Silk Road into China and followed the trade routes to other lands in spreading the teaching of the Buddha. Then, under the Muslim conquests of the 12th century, Buddhism began to decline. Expansion seemed to have run its course.

Judeo-Christian encounter

During the intertestamental period four hundred years before Christ, a missionary movement of the Diaspora Pharisees reached as far as China.² During this time, Pharisees must have had contact with Buddhists travelling the same roads of that day. Certainly, the Nestorian Christians from the late fifth century A.D. had considerable interaction with Buddhists in China, primarily of the Mahayana school, but the Nestorian church did not survive because of syncretism and severe persecution.

In spite of centuries of significant Christian missions, both Catholic and Protestant, to the Buddhist world, little church planting and growth has resulted, with the possible exception of South Korea where the church now claims about one-third of the population. Koreans had the advantage of having an indigenous concept of God, "Hanim," which provided a vital point of contact for the gospel.

Today Christian populations among most Buddhist peoples are generally less than one percent. Wherever significant growth has occurred it has usually been among tribal animist peoples.

Short-comings

The failure of missions to make a significant impact, especially on Theravada Buddhists, involves both Buddhist barriers and missiological weaknesses. Three major Buddhist barriers need to be mentioned:

1. *Its eclectic nature.* Buddhism adeptly adjusted to the religio-cultural milieu of the peoples adopting it. For survival, it selected and incorporated essential cultural elements into Buddhism the same way that Hinduism did in reclaiming Buddhist India back into the Hindu fold. Like Hinduism, Buddhism comes in many shapes and forms: in China, it is mixed with Taoism and Confucianism; in Japan, with Shintoism, Confucianism, and ancestral worship; in Korea, with shamanism and Confucianism. The Theravada world accepted animistic spirits of the folk religion of the people, such as the “Bon” in Sri Lanka, the “Nats” in Myanmar, and the “Phii” in Thailand and Laos. Lacking rituals and life cycles of their own, Buddhists also integrated Brahman (Hindu) rituals into its syncretistic mix.

Buddhists would go even further to accept elements of Christianity as well, but there would be no room for a unique Christ. They even adapt Christian institutions. In 1880, the Young Men’s Buddhist Society was formed in Sri Lanka. In Thailand and Laos, school children parade weekly in the uniforms of Boy Scouts and Girl Guides under Buddhist guise.

2. *Buddhist solidarity.* Buddhist philosophy is all pervasive permeating the concepts and world views of a people and saturating their culture, language, education, and attitudes with Buddhistic viewpoints. In fact, the social solidarity of Buddhism is so strong that the national identity of the people comes from Buddhism. To be Thai or Burmese means to be Buddhist

3. *Theological barriers.* Paul A. Eakin summarized many historical and doctrinal similarities between Buddhism and Christianity.³ But significant contrasts of theological content, meaning and concepts are crucial to observe, especially in the doctrines of God, man, sin, salvation, and the future. As D.T. Niles points out, the final category in Buddhism is death, in Christianity it is life.⁴

A leading Buddhist scholar, Bhikkhu Buddhadasa Indapanno, comparing Christianity and Buddhism, equates God

with Karma, rejecting God’s personality in favor of impersonal “nature” as cause. He also identifies God the Creator with Buddhist’s *avijja*, meaning “lack of knowledge” or “ignorance,” a term which Buddhists identify as the cause of all evil and suffering.⁵ These theological barriers are so diametrically opposed to biblical truth that great discernment is needed, even though superficial similarities appear to exist.

The first of these three major Buddhist barriers puts pressure on the integrity of the church to remain faithful in a syncretistic society. The second threatens the identity and survival of the church and the isolation of those who would dare to stand out as Christians. The Japanese have a saying: “The nail that sticks up will be pounded down.” The third puts the Christians in a constant defensive mode under subtle, persistent pressure to compromise their beliefs and reintegrate with society.

Missiological weaknesses

1. *Mission Strategy.* Often under the colonial period, the “mission station approach” was common. In its time, it may have been the only viable way to help Christians survive and to get the Church started. But the “gathered, conglomerate,” often separates converts from their people and society and seldom has had a major impact on the core of Buddhist people groups. Christian missions and their churches were seen as outside intrusions and foreign imports to be avoided like the plague. Frequently, converts were considered traitors.

Another weakness common to the late 19th and early 20th century was in philosophy of ministry. To “civilize” and to “Christianize” were thought to be synonymous, so mission was deeply involved in both. In the process, a major tension arose between evangelism and education. Which should come first? Which should have priority? In my book, *Siamese Gold*, I give a case study of what happened in Northern Thailand 1914-1940.⁶

A change of priority in policy and strategy emphasized schools, education and institutions to the detriment of a

growing movement of the churches among the Buddhist population. The strong movement was arrested, or rather, a ripe harvest was largely neglected and died on the vine for lack of pastoral care. The new policy, to educate the Buddhists first so they may be better evangelized later, curtailed reaping the already-receptive harvest in progress. As funds, personnel, and even national evangelists and pastors were transferred into the institutional work, the churches struggled on, but the harvest of over 16,000 newly-baptized people was lost. While the Church could have tripled its 1914 membership in the North by 1940, its growth rate dropped and plateaued.

2. *Ineffective communication.* Too often evangelism revolves around the problem of meaning, especially in cultures saturated with Buddhism. A gospel proclaimer cannot transfer meaning across cultures, only bits of information will be deciphered in the minds of the Buddhist hearers. Often the Buddhist’s response regarding Christianity and Buddhism is, “They are just the same.” This indicates that inadequate communication has taken place. One should not destroy faith as a quality. But in the process of transferring faith from non-gods to the true and living God, priority should be given to communicating biblical concepts accurately. Premature decisions may inoculate Buddhists against the gospel.

3. *Lack of Indigeneity.* The Church among Buddhist societies is usually seen as an alien form and a foreign institution of the West. Frequently, the Church looks more like an imported monstrosity. Its buildings, forms, music, and methods are often so different from those of the Buddhist society. While of necessity there will be differences, too often the Church sticks out like a sore thumb or “a nail that must be pounded down.”

Strengths of Buddhists Missions

Overall, evangelizing Buddhists has been like squeezing a rubber ball—once the pressure of the thumb and finger is released, the ball immediately springs back into its original form unscathed! But four significant positive results arose

from the valiant efforts and years of sacrifice of godly missionaries and national believers who tried to penetrate Buddhist society, albeit with little success.

1. *Gospel seeds planted.* Much pioneering, sweat, and tears in witness and seed sowing among Buddhists over the years laid the foundations for an expected harvest. "You shall reap if you faint not."⁷

2. *The Church survived.* During the last century and a half, small churches have been planted and, against all odds, have survived. Signs today indicate that they are beginning to stir and grow afresh. Some small people movements have occurred. For instance, Dr. Daniel McGilvary, Presbyterian missionary to the Lao of North Thailand, saw a movement from 150 to 7,000 baptized in thirty years between 1884 and 1914. Today, churches in the North still form the strength and backbone of Christianity in that Buddhist land.

3. *Christian leaders trained.* With pressure on the Church to survive, missions took a serious role in developing leaders locally, through theological training and lay programs. Today's church leadership in Thailand and Sri Lanka is no longer the uneducated farmers of yesterday. Many national leaders of stature with degrees, training, and experience are leading the churches forward in Buddhist countries. This provides hope for the future.

4. *Goodwill established.* One benefit of Christian hospitals and educational institutions with their high standards, has been the generating of a large amount of goodwill. However, the nationalization of many of these institutions under Buddhist governments reduced the evangelistic potential. These Christian institutions did not produce a major breakthrough in church growth, but the goodwill built up has helped break down some prejudice against Christianity.

Some holistic, integrated farming experiments, such as those conducted by

Jim Gustafson among Northeast Thai Buddhists, appear to encourage church growth. In fact, where in the past a patron role has been utilized, small and lasting church movements have occurred. The difficulty is to extract oneself from that patron role without being seen as insincere in terms of the people's expectations. Another problem to avoid is the people's dependence on the patron in the process of development.

These four strengths can now be

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built on and integrated into a wider strategy for reaching Theravada Buddhists.

Keys for Strategy

The following twelve suggestions come from years of observation and experience in working with Buddhists. Each is like a pearl which has grown around some irritation and pain. Strung together, these pearls may provide helpful keys for strategizing ministries among Buddhist peoples. Each key is important.

1. *The indispensable means—spiritual warfare.* Jesus said, "I will build my church."⁸ So, essentially mission is the activity of God, the Holy Spirit. Since Christ has chosen to use human vessels to accomplish evangelization, we must take part in His spiritual warfare while depending totally on Him.⁹ So, prayer is a crucial ingredient as we pull down spiritual strongholds.¹⁰

Power and truth encounters will be most effective, not in apologetic frontal attacks on Buddhism, but as power plays at the animistic underpinnings. The folk Buddhists' capacity for the gospel should

be studied, especially their fear of demons and ancestral spirits. Spiritual warfare and confrontation need to be made at these animistic cracks in the Buddhist walls.

2. *The efficient concentration—focus on one people group at a time.* Too often, working with Buddhist groups has been like a shotgun approach to everybody at large. Identifying and understanding the target people group helps concentrate the energy and time needed for acceptance, communication, and repeated contact. It also allows opportunity for diffusion of the message throughout the group.

3. *The connecting point—felt needs.* More study needs to be made on points of contact related to the felt needs of the particular people. Some of the felt needs among Theravada Buddhists in Asia are sickness (often related to the demonic world), bondage and fear of demons, concern for black magic and witchcraft, uncertainty of the future, and Karmic fatalism. Therefore, the application of the gospel concerning spiritual and physical healing, freedom from demonic oppression, protection from sorcery, and hope and certainty for the future are possible clues for approaching Buddhists.

4. *The specific goal—church planting movements.* Planting an individual church among the people is insufficient. Dr. McGavran often talked about developing "clusters of churches." A church movement that proliferates churches must be the aim. Each will be a functioning church in true worship of God, in welcoming others into the fellowship, and in reaching out in witness and service to the surrounding community. Evangelism is necessary, but must go on to produce responsible participation in local churches.

5. *The effectual communication—receptor feedback.* While the communicator must clearly understand his biblical message, it is essential that he listens to the receptor for feedback that will clarify what is actually being understood. This cyclical feedback process will help clarify the concep-

tualization of the gospel and what the actual response over time is. Reaching people at their level of understanding, listening to how God is working in their lives step by step, always makes for good evangelism no matter how long it takes.

Effective communication also needs to be couched in indigenous forms, symbol, analogy, stories and word pictures relevant to the target audience. The use of local flavored media¹¹ such as ethnic song and music, indigenous dance-drama, and other arts, should be investigated and adapted for witness and teaching.

6. *The crucial process—parallel witness and nurture.* Too often delaying evangelism in order to consolidate through Christian education interrupts the flow of continuing outreach, making it difficult to stimulate strong outreach again. Like the two rails of a train track, both evangelism and discipling should be kept running simultaneously. Also, it is very important to keep converts among their own people and culture so that they model their new faith among their relatives and friends and thus maintain contact with them—the potential for further expansion.

7. *The logistical dynamic—family-oriented approach.* Focusing on the whole family or group is a wise and biblical approach. Using the natural bridges of relationships, we should permeate the whole extended family or group with the gospel. Asian Buddhist peoples primarily are linked together by nuclear or extended families or even village web relationships. A network approach aimed at web movements is absolutely essential.

8. *The holistic strategy—comprehensive planning.* Practical steps and processes should be laid out from start to finish with a view to reaching the set goal. Detailed strategies and plans with a clear means of evaluation through each phase of the church planting movement should be drawn up. These plans should cover everything from initial reconnaissance to extension of the church and mission.

9. *The essential division of labor—two groups of leaders.* Leaders for maintenance, working in the church in disciple-

ship, are the pastors and shepherds. Another set of leaders, reaching out to the unchurched community, may be classified as fishermen. The church needs both types of leaders. The shepherds help the church grow where it is. The fishermen help the church go where it isn't. We earnestly need to pray for and develop shepherds with a fisherman's passion, and fishermen with a shepherd's heart.

10. *The continuing momentum—lay movements.* Each Christian is a most valuable agent of the gospel for church planting and extension. Daily he/she is in contact with the society where he works and lives. Church leaders must stimulate lay movements and encourage lay teams to serve both in evangelizing the community and in nurturing new believers. Lay persons provide a rich pool of gifts, abilities, resources, personnel and energy needed to keep the momentum of the Christ-ward movement going. Home disciple groups, evangelistic Bible studies, community friendship groups, and voluntary association projects are essential for ongoing evangelization and church planting.

11. *The vital flexibility—missionary roles.* During the process of evangelization, the missionary as well as the national church planter needs to adjust roles according to the stage of church development. The function in a pioneer stage would be quite different from that of a partnership stage. Working with various growing situations may demand having a different role for each situation. Basic roles such as learner, model, servant leader, are also required. Pioneer and paternal roles should move on to the next stage as soon as practical. Although it is difficult to change roles from time to time, this flexibility is vital for the growth and advancement of the churches.

12. *The final product—indigenous churches and missions.* Evaluating the whole process helps determine how truly indigenous the church is. Note especially its identity with the people group and its level of the full expression of Christ and the gospel to its own society. Are adequate "functional substitutes" being

employed for those crucial areas of culture that would leave voids apart from relevant application from the Bible? Does the church movement have indigenous missions reaching out to other people groups?

The bottom line should be judged on the basis of three R's: Does it have the *respect* of the Buddhist community? Is it taking *responsibility* under the Lord for ministry to the society around? Is it exhibiting *resourcefulness* in evangelizing its Buddhist neighbors and in coping with opposition from without?

Stimulating strong church movements among all the unreached Buddhist peoples demands much wisdom, training, sensitivity and perseverance. Reaching classical Buddhists may be a tough task, but by no means is it an impossible one.

Endnotes:

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7. Galatians 6:9
8. Matthew 16:18
9. John 15:5
10. II Corinthians 10:3-5.
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