

TAKING THE HIGH PLACES FOR GOD

The spiritual need of Buddhists presents a tremendous challenge to Christian workers. The author suggests a spiritual strategy for God's plan to be fully realized among Buddhist people groups.

BY PAUL WAGNER

All over the world Buddhist thought and practice, with its special appeal to the human mind, is highly respected. Even in many Christian circles we find fascination for this intriguing philosophy. Curiosity combined with a search for inner peace drives countless people to the remotest places. There they hope to get a glimpse of tranquillity which is believed to emanate from sages and devotees. Buddhist monks and laymen alike claim to have access to experiences of supernatural depths and heights which are unknown to the average individual.

In trying to reach the Buddhist world with the gospel there are tremendous odds which have to be faced and overcome and I think we would do well to make this an urgent priority.

Buddhism is not simply a religion of majority groups of people in the so called Buddhist countries. It is interesting to note that Buddhist sanctuaries exist in remote quiet places off the beaten tracks of modern society in many countries. As the very nature of Buddhism encourages isolation from the world it is not surprising to find pockets of Buddhist societies in very secluded places. Most of them are little-known tribal groups which have embraced Buddhism and since then have strongly resisted any outside influences towards change. To this day many are therefore still unreached by the gospel. The barriers surrounding such a people are not only geographic and religious; there are linguistic, cultural, ethnic, sociological, and worldview differences as well. However, these hindrances to the gospel can only be overcome once they are thoroughly understood by those who are venturing to reach these unreached groups.

Concerning Buddhist societies, it must be taken into account that these people have been exposed to Buddhist customs and rituals for centuries. Their way of thinking is shaped by the teachings of Buddha which have been translated and then taught, memorized, and chanted day and night. Life as a whole is conditioned by these tenants. Distinctive cognitive styles have been developed which cause each upcoming generation to be saturated with the same principles and values. Significantly, and this must be understood, these principles/values are diametrically opposed to the gospel and differ greatly from other religious and philosophical systems. As a result of the way religion is handled in such a society, Buddhist thought is firmly rooted in the lives of its adherents and it becomes extremely difficult to reach them with the good news of Jesus Christ.

Theravada Buddhism is prevalent throughout Southeast Asia. The core of this religious endeavor is self-perfection through good works and meditation. To a Buddhist believer, the Christian teaching of receiving salvation by grace through faith appears simplistic and degrading. The goal of Buddhism is to reach nirvana, a word for ultimate annihilation and non-existence. This is sometimes wrongly compared with the biblical concept of heaven which means eternal life and ultimate fulfillment without the extinction of personality. Yet the Buddhist, whose worldview includes rebirth as a natural phenomenon and whose goal is to escape this life cycle, thinks of eternal life as a curse. Buddhism also teaches detachment from any human feelings, including love. Attachment is seen as the main reason for keeping mankind in this troubled

world.

The gospel in turn teaches self-denial as an expression of love which found its greatest example in the substitutional death of Christ. Consequently, the imitation of Christ's love is seen as the solution to human problems. Buddhism offers salvation through self-perfection and the way to reach this goal is withdrawal. Christianity propagates salvation through Jesus Christ and teaches restoration of broken relationships: first with God and then also with our fellowmen. In Buddhism, spirits and demonic powers are appeased; in Scripture they are resisted and cast out.

Despite these differences, Christian influence has already penetrated into the Buddhist world during the first centuries of the Common Era. Characteristically, the result was not a clear breaking away from Buddhism and turning to Christ, but a process of absorbing some biblical ideas into the concepts of Buddhism so that in some points Buddhist teaching has taken on a more Christian interpretation. Especially in areas where Buddhism seemed to have little to offer, Christian elements have been incorporated. Thus, Buddha also sacrificed himself by continuing to live on this earth in order to teach others the way to enlightenment. Although Buddha never claimed to be God, the human need for an object of worship is so strong that for many simple believers Buddha takes the place of a supreme being and nirvana is viewed as similar to the biblical heaven. To top it off, many aspects of ethical teaching in Buddhism seem to coincide with biblical teaching; this prompts even

serious people, from both the Buddhist and the Christian side, to assume that these religions are in essence the same

Preparation and Training

Due to the fact that in Buddhism there are some surface similarities with Christianity, comparative religion experts have done little to point out the crucial differences. Some of the hurdles in trying to reach Buddhists with the gospel have correctly been recognized by evangelical scholars and leaders of mission endeavours. However, there are many factors which have been overlooked or ignored. The orientation and preparation programs for missionaries to Buddhist countries have been lacking in this respect. Even today when much knowledge on how to get to know a different culture is available, the missionaries seldom have the time or resources to be able to thoroughly get acquainted with the situation and people they want to reach.

Mission programs are mostly measured by and evaluated in terms of activity. It is still taken for granted that the same activities which proved successful in one culture will bring forth similar results in another. And the pressure on missionaries to show results to their home churches and mission boards is as great today as it has ever been. There are mission boards who withdraw workers from Buddhist people groups because of lack of desired results. The missionaries are then relocated in animistic tribes because those people are easier to reach.

In order to work among Buddhists it is not enough to be instructed in how to live a simple lifestyle (which is more often than not interpreted as being backward or primitive). In most cases the typical boot camp training for learning survival techniques in jungle areas does not equip a person to reach Buddhist societies as the lifestyle of such a group does not coincide with what was taught. It would be better to follow those secular ethnologists who have gone to some Buddhist places before missionaries ever did, and who have laid open the background of the people and described their rituals and practices in detail. Secular ethnologists, however, are not aware of

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the spiritual implications of the strange mixture of natural and supernatural phenomena. They themselves get easily entangled and become victims of the world of the occult.

The missionary on the other hand may be aware of the fact that there are spiritual powers at work, but he/she is too often ill equipped to battle them. With his background of good Western logic, which he may have acquired at distinguished Christian schools, much of what he experiences in Buddhist societies leaves him puzzled because it defies logical explanations. On the other hand, the very fact that he is battling spiritual forces may instill in him an undue fear of getting involved in such practices himself. It therefore causes him to turn a blind eye to everything which suggests the involvement of supernatural powers. That of course means that he never will be able to really understand the people he is supposed to reach. Others recognize this pitfall and make bold attempts to study the sources of Buddhist thought and their origins without the necessary precautions. It has happened quite frequently that such eagerness gave way to fascination which then backfired and threw the student into utter emotional and psychological distress. But only few realize that they will not succeed in breaking into the vestiges of Buddhist thought as long as their own lives have not been cleansed from sins of similar occult origin.

A common mistake among Christians is that they think that certain occult practices they had done for fun need not be repented of. This assumption leaves every missionary vulnerable. His or her state can be compared to wearing a protective armor which has many holes. As missionaries, we grossly underestimate our enemy if we think he will leave us alone and unchallenged once we venture out into the spiritual battle unprepared.

Last Frontiers in Buddhist Mission

As has been mentioned before, the Buddhist tribal groups are the hardest to penetrate and attempts to reach them with the gospel have yielded little results so far. For instance, all Palaungic peoples groups which live in Burma, China, and Thailand, are still unreached. Their total

population is estimated at close to one million people. Others are members of the Mon Khmer peoples groups like the Mon, So, and Kui people. The gospel has been made known to them but the results are minimal. The Shan and Pao of Burma and Thailand also represent people groups who have hardly responded to the gospel.

There are also ethnic groups who are partly animistic and partly Buddhist. The names of these peoples may appear in statistics as "reached," but in fact, only the animistic societies have been contacted, whereas the Buddhist majorities of the same people groups are still unreached and resist the gospel. This is true for the Lawa in Northern Thailand, for example, and also for the Pwo Karen of Thailand and Burma. Even among the Sgaw Karen of Thailand, who are known to have a Christian majority, it has been observed that the number of Buddhists is increasing much faster than the number of Christians. And though there are growing churches in the animist areas, the Christians there are not equipped to reach out to their Buddhist neighbors. Recent growth among Christians in such areas may more often than not be attributed to the physical growth of Christian families rather than to be the fruit of outreach and evangelism.

Besides these tribal groups there are the neglected majorities of Theravada Buddhism in countries like Myanmar (formerly Burma), Laos, and Thailand. They can look back on a long history in missions, yet their churches are too weak or culturally alienated from the rest of their society. The impact they have in their natural surroundings is very minimal indeed. And all of this happens despite the fact that much of today's mission endeavor is geared towards these peoples as well as to the fast-growing urban societies, whose members are outwardly caught up in a modern world, but inwardly still bound to their old values of a rural past which they forsook only very recently.

A Spiritual Strategy

Looking at statistics and facing the great spiritual needs of Buddhist societies and people groups, the task of reaching them is a tremendous challenge to Chris-

tians in any country. In spite of what has been said before about cultural adjustment and getting to know the peoples to be reached, I am convinced that the answer to the problems involved in reaching the Buddhists in our generation is of a spiritual nature. In order to cope with this formidable task we need vision, perspective, preparation in prayer, dedication to people, perseverance, coordination, and cooperation.

Vision: In Revelation 1 and 7:9 we can see Christ, the supreme Lord, being praised by a great multitude of people from every tribe and nation. This gives us the assurance that all the unreached Buddhist peoples groups will be reached with the gospel before Christ returns. We who are now fighting the many odds to make the gospel heard and understood by Buddhists will at that time have overcome all hindrances and difficulties.

We will be joined by those many people who have not yet heard the good news, but who are still to hear it and receive Christ's salvation. Together we will raise our voices in praising our Savior. It is necessary to picture all the Buddhist peoples before the Throne of God until we are filled with the firm conviction that God will move step by step until this vision becomes reality. Being absorbed by these spiritual realities which are set before us in Scripture will prevent us from becoming casualties of the daily struggles we are facing.

Perspective:

There have been faithful missionaries who have made a lasting impact on some Buddhist peoples groups. Adoniram Judson was a pioneer among them. As a diligent student of the language and culture of the Myanmar Buddhists he spent much time with individuals. The thorough knowledge of his target culture made him an authority in the field. He is still highly respected today. But the true key to his accomplishments was prayer. He was a prayer warrior in the real sense. Taking his cue from Psalm 119:164 he prayed seven times during the course of one day. Even though it was a very slow process in the beginning to win Myanmar Buddhists to Christ there has been a steady increase of believers.

The physical descendants of those first Christians refused to embrace liberalism and later on overcame dead orthodoxy. Today they are among the pioneers who reach out to spread the gospel in the whole country by every means possible. Judson endured imprisonment and suffered the loss of family members without giving up on the great task ahead of him. He compiled a dictionary, translated the Bible, and wrote many tracts which explained the gospel to the Buddhist mindset. By faith he saw that the strongholds of idolatry and witch-

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craft would fall and he triumphed in the final victory of the gospel, although he saw only part of that victory during his lifetime. Because of his perspective he could begin what he hoped for: A lasting movement and ongoing outreach to the Buddhist peoples of Myanmar.

Although Myanmar is a much-troubled nation today, on the spiritual front Christians are advancing into every corner of their country. There is an increasing number of national missionaries reaching out cross culturally to the last frontiers of hidden people groups. Almost two hundred years have passed since Judson's perspective on that nation, yet it is steadily becoming more and more true.

Revivals and movements of the Holy Spirit among Buddhist peoples have been few and far between. Some spectacular reports about enormous church growth in recent years in Thailand, for instance, have been discovered to be largely due to believers from already existing churches changing to another group which happened to have more publicity at that time. Nevertheless, there have been genuine movements of God's Spirit among Christians and non Christians from Buddhist back-

grounds in China, Cambodia, Northern Thailand, and Myanmar. These breakthroughs did not have a large impact on the Buddhist societies as a whole, but the church grew through prayer and repentance, and Buddhists turned to Christ. Political persecution and deprivation of all comforts seems to be the tool God used in Cambodia to bring many thousands of believers into His kingdom in a short time. Missionaries have not always been the initiators of such movements. But in answer to many prayers, God chose different people and circumstances to bring about such awakenings.

Preparation in Prayer:

Mentioning prayer as the main reason for Buddhists turning to Christ, I do not think of prayer as a mechanical tool which will yield quick success as it is applied. An integral part of the lives of people who were totally dedicated to their God, was

prayer, which resulted in dramatic breakthroughs. These believers were ready for anything which God would ask them to do. If those who seek to reach Buddhists with the gospel in our generation pray like the veterans of spiritual warfare, they will find themselves involved in extreme spiritual conflicts. They will be deeply troubled by spiritual burdens which the Lord entrusts to them and which only the Holy Spirit can lift. Once He pleases to do so they will rest in the inner assurance that their prayer is answered and that a breakthrough is to come to the people for whom the burden was given.

It may happen that many persons simultaneously are compelled to pray and find themselves interceding at a time when the Lord wants to move among certain people group. This was the experience of believers in Myanmar some years ago. After several months of prayer the burden was lifted and a new breakthrough took place: Many Buddhists opened up to the gospel and received Christ in similar ways as described in the book of Acts. Unless Christians demonstrate a devotion to Christ and a dependence on the Holy Spirit which is greater than the Buddhists' devotion to their teaching, the followers of Buddha will not be impressed with our message.

Taking the High Places for God

In spiritual warfare it is essential to pray against the spiritual powers and principalities which dominate the people in different areas. Such authorities are normally revered by all the people of their territory and it is relatively easy to find out who they are. These powers have been overcome by Christ's victory on the cross. But only through prayer and the claiming of the victory of Jesus over their territories will they loosen their grip. As a result people will be free to hear the gospel and turn to Christ.

Such prayer is not only restricted to those missionaries or Christian workers who are laboring on the frontlines of gospel outreach. God uses His people all over the world to fight His battles through prayer. On the one hand we need to realize that the Holy Spirit works like the wind which blows wherever it pleases. That implies that we are to wait for the Holy Spirit to work among a people before there are genuine conversions and changed lives. But on the other hand we know we have a God who delights in answering our prayers. In fact He waits for us to pray!

The time of waiting for God's Spirit to move is a time of spiritual cleansing, expectancy, and a deepening assurance of our faith. It is a time of preparation for the task which lies ahead. Once the Holy Spirit starts His work He will use us as His co-workers to help people be born again and become established in their spiritual lives. Only when we as missionaries are prepared to receive such blessings and to cope with the load of personal counselling and nurturing which accompanies spiritual breakthroughs, will there be lasting fruit. Such times of waiting for God's Spirit to move is also a time of outward preparation and acquainting oneself thoroughly with the ways and thought patterns of the people. The above-mentioned awakening in Myanmar, for instance, took place at a time when a few Christian workers had taken the pains to develop a new approach in presenting the gospel to Buddhists. Work among people whom God has prepared for the gospel will then no longer need mere human effort to get things going. It will rather be a daily challenge to keep in step with what God is doing.

Dedication to Prayer: Having said all this about prayer and preparation through prayer it is obvious that we need to commit and ready ourselves to serve the spiritual needs of people. We need to be people oriented rather than task oriented. That means all we do will be measured against the needs of the people and not according to the programs we wish to see established in our target areas. We may have to discard activities or special emphases of a particular organization. Even if that strategy has been very successful elsewhere in the world it may not fit the situation or fill the need of a people at a particular point in time. We may have to part with forms of worship which are dear to us but meaningless to the people we want to reach. We may even have to deny our desire to build organizational structures—which would support us but which are inappropriate for the group we want to reach. Instead we will have to be diligent Bible students as well as alert observers of God's plans. Further we are challenged to demonstrate the same love to the people we want to serve as Jesus served mankind when He forsook heaven and took the form of a servant. In the same way as God's love transforms our hearts into loving the people He sent us to, He will give us enough sensitivity to know their real needs. This will enable us to adjust to their ways and thought patterns in order to initiate changes which are in line with God's Word but do not unduly interfere with their cultural backgrounds.

Perseverance: Many missionaries and mission agencies have stopped short somewhere in the process of penetrating a people group with the gospel. They may have been discouraged by initial minimal response; or their enthusiasm over some first results made them think that their job was done before the seed of the Word of God had a chance to take deep roots in the young believers lives. It may take many years of labor until God moves in a specific group of people and the first believers emerge. But that is only the beginning of penetrating such a group. Recent converts from a Buddhist background have to overcome many problems before they are established in their new faith. The process of changing their minds according to the truth set forth in the Scriptures will be slow and

needs much input and encouragement from more mature Christians. The daily struggle as the odd men out in a close knit family in a highly structured society is sometimes too hard for them to bear. They may experience serious setbacks. And once they realize that the claims of Christ mean a full surrender to Him as Lord over all areas of their lives they may shrink back or settle for a nominal Christian life which lacks total surrender. During all these struggles they need personal help on a day-to-day basis usually for a period of several years.

Also it presupposes that they are able to read and understand Scriptures written in their own languages. Yet in many unreached Buddhist tribes the battle to place the Bible, or even only parts of the Bible, into the hands of new believers in a form which they can readily understand may take years of additional effort. For young Christians to form structures of churches which fit their special cultural patterns and are able to reach out to others may be a task of more than one generation. Only with vision, perspective, and dedication will we be able to persevere individually and corporately until the task of penetrating each language and nation in the Buddhist world is completed. Without this we cannot be regarded as faithful servants when we have to give account of our work on Christ's return.

Coordination and Cooperation

It is obvious that the Great Commission is not the task of one person or one group. It is not sufficient an effort if one organization or Christian denomination pools all its resources to bring the gospel to the Buddhists. Only in the Body of Christ seen in its totality of all believers all over the world do we find the diversity of gifts which is needed to finish the task which was started by the great pioneers of past missions. In these last days God needs workers who can look beyond their organizational boundaries. They need to be firmly rooted in, as well as supplied and backed up by, their home churches and sending agencies. But they will also have to be able to look beyond organizational and doctrinal differences. It is a bad testimony to the unity which is meant to be in the Body of Christ when

certain groups carve out parts of the globe and claim it to be their own territory to the exclusion of others.

It is furthermore especially damaging when different groups with minor differences of creed try to establish their own brand of Christianity in places where there already is an ongoing Christian witness. One organization may be called to do a special task, but it cannot be done in seclusion or separation from the rest of the Body. In order to reach one people group with the gospel it will need the cooperation and networking of several Christian outreach groups working together, not to build their own organization, but the Body of Christ. Thus organizational structures have to be flexible and Christian workers unselfish, humble and free from the hidden ambition to seek approval or recognition for themselves. This may sound quite simple but it is a very difficult to put better knowledge into practice. Where the Holy Spirit is at work He unites those who respond

to His leading. Barriers against true cooperation will be removed and interdenominational and intercultural teams will form with all the gifts and resources available which are necessary to penetrate the Buddhist high places.

Conclusion

When those who want to work among Buddhists take the steps shown in this article there is indeed reason for rejoicing and hope that Buddhists will hear and understand the gospel soon. They will have a chance to experience true enlightenment as the Apostle Paul defined it in Ephesians 1:18. Paul understood the Asian mindset as we find it also among Buddhists today. He prayed for them that they might see with open eyes. He showed them the depth of their needs as people lost and enslaved to the prince of this world (Eph 2:1-5) and he introduced them to the fact that anyone who believes in Christ is united and

raised with Him into heavenly realms which are above all other principalities and powers (Eph 2:6). These are the same powers which until now rule the Buddhist world. Paul also prayed that these believers would be aware of and immersed in the vastness and depth of God's love which in turn enables them to fight the spiritual battles and overcome victoriously against all powers of the evil one.

By assigning ourselves to God in this way we pave the way for the consummation and fulfillment of all that God has designed for our Buddhist friends. They will be able to escape from ignorance and experience true enlightenment which only God can give. In this way the remaining heights which still stand against the Gospel will be taken, and God's plan of redemption will also be realized in the Buddhist world.

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