

# KARMA AND CHRIST:

## OPENING OUR EYES TO THE BUDDHIST WORLD

*With an alarming number of Buddhists waiting to hear the message of the Gospel for the first time, the author draws upon his own ministry and field experience in Sri Lanka and examines challenges and keys to Buddhist evangelization.*

BY TISSA WEERASINGHA

Nearly 600 million Buddhists the world over are waiting for the gospel to be communicated to them in terms they understand. If a Buddhist were to be asked, "Do you want to be born again?" he might likely reply, "Please, no! I do NOT want to be born-again. I want to reach nirvana." The Buddhist quest is for deliverance from the cycle of rebirths. If a Buddhist confuses "new birth" with "rebirth," the Christian message will be completely distorted. This is just one example. New categories must be developed for the transmission of the gospel to Buddhists in order for us to see the large-scale harvest we expect.

Our mission to the Buddhist peoples has been hampered by the fact that the Buddhist bloc has been largely neglected in contemporary missiological literature. Unfortunately, most people do not seem to realize that if we were to include mainland Chinese (most of whom may profess Buddhism in addition to Confucianism and Taoism) the Buddhist segment would be the largest unreached people bloc in the world.

The good news is that in many Buddhist lands there are reports of unprecedented response to the gospel. While Buddhist missions to the West seem to have gained fresh impetus in recent times, countries that have been traditionally Buddhist provide unprecedented opportunities as well. In countries such as Burma, Kampuchea and Thailand where gospel penetration has been slow in the past, there are signs of great openness and response to the message. In

Sri Lanka, for instance, more new churches have been planted among Buddhists than ever before.

### Challenges to Evangelism

Why is it that for so long Buddhists have shown little interest in Christianity? In addition to the misconception that Christianity is just another Western religion, most Buddhists have never really been fortunate enough to have a clear, relevant explanation of the gospel. The colonial history of Christianity in some Buddhist countries has complicated the issue further and discouraged Buddhists from getting too close to anything Christian. Furthermore, Buddhism is essentially a self-salvific philosophy, and even though at the popular level, there is a belief in gods, spirits, and other supernatural beings, the concept of a Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer God is totally foreign to the Buddhist mind. This major philosophical problem has to be dealt with at every stage of the interaction with and evangelization of Buddhist peoples.

Wherever Buddhism is found, it is intimately intertwined with the local culture. This makes the lines of separation between the cultural and the religious difficult for the untrained eye to distinguish. The creation of functional substitutes becomes a complex one in this case. Without such measures conversion becomes a mere cultural and social dislocation for the Buddhist. This process is only at an elementary stage in

many Buddhist contexts. Evangelism simply limps along in such environments.

### Keys to evangelism

#### 1. *Karma Concept as a Bridge*

Karma (law of moral causation) is the point of orientation of all things in Buddhism. This central concept is related to the Buddhist scheme of liberation. The belief is that merits or demerits are accumulated in one's life according to the good or evil deeds that one does. No deity oversees this operation. It rather is the net effect of this phenomenon that determines one's karmic destiny and afterlife. In practice, merit accumulation is not something that can only be done for oneself, but can be extended to others, too, and even to the departed dead through charitable acts. This transference of merit from the living to the dead catalyzes the attainment of liberation (nirvana).

We can use this merit transference concept as a bridge to the explanation of the cross. The Lord Jesus Christ is presented as the one who accumulated infinite merits by virtue of His sinless life and meritorious death. Since He was perfect in His nature, He generated an infinite quantum of merits during His earthly life and ministry through His innumerable good deeds (John 21:25). Even though the death of Jesus on the cross generated an infinite amount of merit, what effect could it have on humanity? According to the Buddhist merit transference (pattidana) concept,

## Karma and Christ

living beings are believed to have the ability to transfer merit to deceased persons on the basis of charitable deeds. If human beings who are laden with evil and are also unenlightened are believed to be capable of transferring merit, it is not incomprehensible at all that the Lord Jesus Christ would be able to transfer His merit to others. In fact the argument holds that when it comes to the transference of merit, it may only be possible for a perfect being who has no sin within himself to really do so. What happened on the cross was a unique merit transference.\* The use of this bridge has resulted in many Buddhists coming to Christianity in our church planting ministry in Sri Lanka.

### 2. Steps in the Conversion Process

We have observed that conversion takes place in stages among most Buddhists. An analysis of these stages may help us in our personal ministry to them. I present these stages merely as a guide which may or may not fit into other contexts.

*A. Turning From Idols:* The initial step in the conversion of Buddhists is a cessation of idol worship and spirit veneration. Interestingly, in Paul's letters to the churches in Corinth and Thessalonica, he mentions idol worship as the primary issue in their turning to God (See I Thes. 2:9, I Cor. 10:21 RSV). The cessation of idol worship is a sign that there is a realization of the powerlessness of "gods" against the supremacy of Christ. But, this is only the initial stage of conversion.

*B. Moral Regeneration:* In Buddhism, there is no concept of forgiveness. This recognition and the receiving of the forgiving grace of Christ is the next stage in the conversion process. Fate and fear

have pushed into the background any feeling of guilt and moral responsibility. But when the Buddhist sits under the teaching of the Word of God and realizes that God is a Personal Being to whom all are morally accountable, there comes a realization of the need for forgiveness. Under ongoing exposure to the Christian scriptures and the wooing of the Holy Spirit, the Buddhist becomes apprehended by the love of God, and seeks the forgiveness of sins. In ministry to Buddhists, we have observed that it is not possible to get them to make instant "decisions." Such "decisions" often mean nothing to them because at the initial stages they have no comprehension of the real implications of the gospel.

### What we need to do

In order to enhance current efforts of evangelism among Buddhist peoples the following main steps should be taken.

#### 1. An International Conference on Buddhist Evangelism

It is time for an international conference on Buddhist evangelism to be summoned so that those engaged in missions to Buddhists can sharpen their focus and exchange information, methods, and models. (Inasmuch as a conference on Islamic evangelism served to heighten awareness and concern for Muslim evangelism, conferences on Buddhist evangelism will surface this hitherto concealed segment in the eyes of the larger Christian community.)

#### 2. Literature for the Buddhist World

At the present time there is a great scarcity of literature on the evangelism and nurture of Buddhists. Major Christian publishers who up to now have

shown no interest whatever in the Buddhist world should be wooed to enter this field. Publications at all levels—evangelistic, theological, apologetic, and missiological—are needed.

#### 3. Concentrated Prayer Focus

One can never over-emphasize the need for a massive prayer focus on the Buddhist world. Even in this area I must mention that the AD 2000 Movement's 10/40 Window minimizes the focus on the Buddhist world. This could nicely be corrected by expanding it to the E/40 Window (E for Equator). The occultic, animist, and spiritist forces prevalent in Popular Buddhism make the prayer focus even more critical. We cannot afford to any longer ignore the cry of the Buddhist peoples of the world. Missionary Buddhism and militant Buddhism, a contemporary growing trend, calls for the harnessing of the worldwide resources available in the body of Christ for this great enterprise. Let us not fail to fulfill the Great Commission to the Buddhist world at this hour.

#### Endnote:

\* I have explained this in greater detail in my book *The Cross and the Bo-Tree*, (Communicating the Gospel to Buddhists), published in 1989 by Asia Theological Association, P.O. Box 1477, Taichung, Taiwan, R.O.C. 40099.

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