

## **Buddhist Nirvana and a Christian Alternative**

FERDINAND O. REGALADO

### **Introduction**

In the last issue of the *Asia Adventist Seminary Studies*, Jon L. Dybdahl, Professor of World Mission and President of Walla Walla College in Washington, U.S.A, underscores “the theological challenge” of Buddhism as one of the challenges Christians are experiencing vis-à-vis Buddhism’s emerging influence. He notes, “Adventism (and most of Christianity at large) has not taken seriously the theological challenge of Buddhism.”<sup>1</sup> Some of Buddhism’s teachings that “present a major challenge to the heart of Christianity and its theology,” according to him, are “the concept of God as an all-pervasive impersonal force, of reincarnation as a fact, of meditation as self-culture and a way to discover God inside, and of Buddhist enlightenment.”<sup>2</sup> Although Dybdahl does not include the Buddhist theology of Nirvana in particular as one of the theological challenges, the end of all these theologies, nevertheless, is Nirvana—the ultimate goal of the Buddhist’s life. Thus, I write this paper in response to such a challenge.

In this paper, I will attempt to analyze and evaluate the Buddhist theology of Nirvana, both in the Mahayana and Hinayana traditions, as to whether it is philosophically and practically valid. Then I will offer a Christian answer to such teaching by discussing eternal life as a better alternative than the Buddhist Nirvana. Thus, it is the purpose of this paper to show that the Christian teaching of eternal life is better than the Buddhist concept of Nirvana.

<sup>1</sup>Jon L. Dybdahl, “Meeting the Challenge of Buddhism in a Changing World,” *Asia Adventist Seminary Studies* 3 (2000): 81.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 82.

**Critique of the Buddhist Nirvana**

Nirvana is the ultimate goal of every Buddhist.<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps roughly equivalent to the idea of salvation in Christianity. Nirvana is also defined as the end of all suffering. Because of this definition, Buddhism is quite attractive. Although we may acknowledge its attractiveness, the concept of Nirvana has some weaknesses. In the following discussion we will see if Nirvana is theoretically conceivable as well as if it is practically meaningful.

**Nirvana Is Theoretically Inconceivable**

Nirvana has been misunderstood as “absolute annihilation,” so the idea follows that Buddhism is “essentially nihilistic.” Because of such a misconception, it has been argued that Nirvana is not annihilation. Rather, it is defined as “a state that can only be experienced, that defies our categories of thought and description.”<sup>4</sup> This is why Siddharta Gautama himself refused to define Nirvana when asked by one of his disciples. He said that he would not do so because he was “primarily concerned with the attainment or realization of *Nirvāna*, not its definition.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, Buddhism cautions that “it is dangerous to speculate on what Nibbana [the Pali spelling of Nirvana] is; it is better to know how to prepare the conditions necessary for Nibbana, how to attain the inner peace and clarity of vision that leads to Nibbana.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Buddhism teaches that one should experience it rather than theoretically pursue it.

<sup>3</sup>Richard [Henry] Drummond, “The Buddha’s Teaching,” in *The World’s Religions*, ed. Pat Alexander, Lion Handbook, rev. ed (Oxford: Lion, 1994), 231.

<sup>4</sup>Hans Küng, Josef van Ess, Heinrich von Stietencron, and Heinz Bechert, *Christianity and World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism*, trans. Peter Heinegg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 301.

<sup>5</sup>Richard [Henry] Drummond, *An Essay in Religious Understanding: Gautama the Buddha* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 115. Sulak Sivaraksa, “Christianity in the Reflection of Buddhism,” in *Christianity Among World Religions*, ed. Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 57, notes, “In Buddhism, we could not explain or define *Nirvāna* either. We can give some negative indications that *Nirvāna* is not this, is not that, and we can give some positive indications that *Nirvāna* is the perfect state of peace and happiness. Yet it is also a state beyond happiness.”

<sup>6</sup>K. Sri Dhammananda, “Nibbana,” in Chap. 5: “Basic Doctrines,” in *What Buddhists Believe*; available from <http://www.sinc.sunysb.edu/Clubs/buddhism/dhammnanda/102.htm>; accessed 4 December 2001.

However, this advice of eschewing to pursue it theoretically is in contradiction to the teaching of the Buddha who encouraged Buddhists to use their reason in considering any teaching that came to their notice.<sup>7</sup>

The Buddha taught that we should believe only that which is true in the light of our own experience, that which conforms to reason and is conducive to the highest good and welfare of all beings.<sup>8</sup>

Another disparity we can point out in the idea of Nirvana is its definition as “the blowing out of the flame of personal desire.”<sup>9</sup> This definition is based on two Sanskrit root words, *nir* and *va*, which mean “off or out” and “to blow” respectively.<sup>10</sup> However, Nirvana is also described as “supreme happiness (*parama sukha*).”<sup>11</sup> If Nirvana is described as supreme happiness, then, theoretically speaking, there must be some kind of good feeling or emotion. So one may ask the question, How come it is bliss, yet there is no feeling or emotion at all? This question is answered by “Sāriputta, one of the Buddha’s two main disciples.”<sup>12</sup> He says, “That is just where the bliss of nirvāna lies, in there being no sensation there.”<sup>13</sup> A careful analysis of Sāriputta’s answer appears to be untenable.

From the concept of Nirvana as “detachment from phenomenal existence and liberation from passions and uncontrolled desires,”<sup>14</sup> one can see another tension when Buddhism declares that Nirvana “is attainable in this present life,” not only “in life beyond ” with the physical “body remaining.” This is called *Sopadhiśesa Nibbana*.<sup>15</sup> Buddhists are aware that as long as a human being exists with a physical body, he or she is still subject to the chain of causation called *karma*, and therefore cannot be considered to be in the state of Nirvana in its strict sense.

Interestingly, Buddhism teaches two spheres of Nirvana. The first is known as the *sopadhiśesa*,<sup>16</sup> which simply means incomplete Nirvana; the second is

<sup>7</sup>U. Thittila, “The Fundamental Principles of Theravada Buddhism,” in *The Path of the Buddha: Buddhism Interpreted by Buddhists*, ed. Kenneth W. Morgan (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), 72.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 112.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Etienne Lamotte, “The Buddha, His Teachings and His Sangha,” in *The World of Buddhism: Buddhist Monks and Nuns in Society and Culture*, ed. Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984), 52.

<sup>12</sup>Küing et al., 301.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., citing *Anguttara Nikāya* V, 414-15.

<sup>14</sup>Drummond, *Essay in Religious Understanding*, 116.

<sup>15</sup>Dhammananda, “Nibanna.”

<sup>16</sup>According to Lamotte, 51, this word means “Nirvana with a remainder of conditioning.”

called *nirupadhiśesa*<sup>17</sup> and means complete Nirvana.<sup>18</sup> If Nirvana has two spheres, it can never be considered as Nirvana in the way Siddharta Gautama understood the concept. Gautama Buddha believed that Nirvana lies outside of this karmic-cyclic cosmos. In other words, he considered Nirvana as something beyond phenomenal existence—beyond our present existence.<sup>19</sup> Apparently, the Buddhist concept of Nirvana has some tensions.

Moreover, it has been said that complete Nirvana is fully realized by the Buddha *at death* after indefinite rebirths in the past, as seen in the life of Siddharta Gautama. At death there is no more becoming, no more rebirth, no desires, no suffering—the complete cessation of sorrow. Now the question is, After death, what then?<sup>20</sup>

Another problem with the idea of Nirvana is that it cannot be objectively verified, since it is a very subjective experience. This can be seen through its definition as a

subjective state of purity produced by the complete cessation of mental defilements. In it there is no place for either attachment or nonattachment, either to self or to the not-self. It is not an objective reality into which men enter and rest, nor is it a particular mental state. It is pure, eternal, unchanging, unextended, nonsubstantial, quiescent, attributeless, unacquired, and devoid of unsupported cause and condition. It is emptiness but not nothingness, calm but not compassion, self-less but not the Supreme Reality. It is not consciousness (for it is devoid of the five skandhas), nor unconsciousness, nor both, nor either. It cannot be spoken of as existent, for it noncompounded, nor nonexistent, for within the sphere of subjective experience it is a reality.<sup>21</sup>

To put it simply, Nirvana is purely subjective and an empty reality—there is nothing we can hold on to.

<sup>17</sup>Or “Nirvana without remainder of conditioning” (Ibid.).

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 51.

<sup>19</sup>Drummond, *Essay in Religious Understanding*, 119-20.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1984), 91-92.

<sup>21</sup>Lobsang Phuntsok Lhalungpa, “Buddhism in Tibet,” in *The Path of the Buddha: Buddhism Interpreted by Buddhists*, ed. Kenneth W. Morgan (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), 305.

### Nirvana Is Practically Meaningless

Nirvana's pragmatic definition is well illustrated by Malcolm David Eckel. He describes Nirvana in this manner:

Nirvana is the definitive end of the cycle of reincarnation. It is difficult for people who pride themselves on being active and busy to sympathize with the traditional Buddhist concept of nirvana. Instead of busyness, it speaks of quiet and cessation. Instead of a constant drive to create and succeed, it speaks of an impulse to take a bit of what we think of as existence and let it slip away. The word refers literally to a "blowing out," as if the fire of the personality could be allowed to flicker out like the dying flame of a candle.<sup>22</sup>

Eckel's substantive description of Nirvana is indeed noteworthy. It "conveys a sense of peace and serenity that cuts through the constant frustration of life."<sup>23</sup> In spite of its positive delineation, the concept of Nirvana has some shortcomings when closely examined.

Not only is Nirvana itself as a goal theoretically inconceivable, but also the path of going to that goal is practically impossible. Buddhism teaches that the Eightfold Path is the way to attain Nirvana. That path is described as "the way of high ethical conduct and stringent mental discipline."<sup>24</sup> That path has also been called "a rigorous system of self-salvation."<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, a Cuban Buddhist from the Indo-Tibetan Mahayana tradition indicates that "the path leading to that state [total transformation of the personality — another way to describe Nirvana] requires a level of commitment and expertise," and this path "is a path for the religious virtuoso."<sup>26</sup> He further declares that "even the most committed Buddhists will fail to reach the goal in this life."<sup>27</sup> Such a difficult path offers an empty hope for anyone in this present life. It suggests that only Buddhist nuns and monks are able to strictly follow this path. For example, in traditional Buddhism, "the monks and nuns spent sixteen hours a day on study and cultivation" so "there was little time for discriminating or wandering thoughts,

<sup>22</sup>Malcolm David Eckel, "Buddhism in the World and in America," in *World Religions in America: An Introduction*, rev. and expanded ed., ed. Jacob Neusner (Louisville, KY: Westminster, John Knox, 2000), 147.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>James R. Moore, "Some Weaknesses in Fundamental Buddhism," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 7 (Fall 1970): 31.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>26</sup>José Ignacio Cabezón, "Liberation: An Indo-Tibetan Perspective," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 12 (1992):197.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

and so achievement could be attained relatively quickly.”<sup>28</sup> Ordinary persons, therefore, have no hope of attaining such an ultimate state, for he or she could not spend enough time for meditation as one of the means of attaining enlightenment.

This empty hope of Nirvana is compounded by the Buddhist idea of cyclically endless life in relation to one’s salvation. A Buddhist may not be able to reach Nirvana in this present life but “there is always time for [him or her] to find the one true path. There is no hurry to be saved.”<sup>29</sup> According to the Cuban Buddhist mentioned above, this “is the most comforting aspect of Buddhism.”<sup>30</sup> It may appear consoling, but in reality, it gives false hope. One can never know when this eternal cyclic purification process towards Nirvana will end. There is no clear evidence to verify this indefinite cycle of karmic life. This is hoping for nothing.

The desire and effort exerted in attaining the goal of Nirvana is paradoxical. It has been observed that “Buddhists regard nirvana, the state of desirelessness, as the most desirable state.”<sup>31</sup> This appears self-contradictory.

The final destination of Nirvana is also vague. It can only be fully realized after death. The Buddha is said to have reached complete Nirvana only when he died. There is, however, no evidence to verify that Buddha truly reached that state. No one who has achieved Nirvana has ever returned to testify about achieving such a state.

One of the factors that makes Nirvana less than ideal, even unrealistic, is its failure to recognize that humans are subject to desire and ignorance. In the history of Buddhism, we can see this reality even in the monastery and among the Buddhist nuns and monks. One author writes,

Of course the monastery is a human institution; monks and nuns are not abstract embodiments of Buddhist principles but living people who are Buddhists. Very few are exempt from secular concerns; some have made great contributions to secular culture. The need to preserve and spread the Doctrine has brought literacy to millions and was responsible for the invention of printing. Monks and nuns, some of them among the most educated and cultivated members of their societies, have been active in every field of artistic and intellectual endeavour. Not all members of the Order have lived up to its ideals, for men and women are subject to desire and ignorance. Some have become involved in the worlds of politics and commerce. In Tibet monks have been rulers; in China monasteries have been markets; in Japan there have even been soldier-monks . . . . But

<sup>28</sup>[Venerable Master] Chin Kung, *Buddhism: The Wisdom of the Compassion and Awakening* (Singapore: Amitabha Buddhist Society, 1999), 11.

<sup>29</sup>Cabezón, 197.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>“Heaven,” reprinted from *This Rock* magazine, February 1994; available from <http://www.newadvent.org/faq/faq014.htm>; Internet; accessed 4 December 2001.



however varied their actual behaviour, the sons and daughters of the Buddha represent an ideal. Their goal is invisible, its attainment a private experience.<sup>32</sup>

So, in actuality, human beings, including sincere Buddhists, are still subject to desire and ignorance. Unless they recognize this, any Buddhist will feel the frustration that, although he or she knows what is good, he or she cannot do it. Hence, we may say that Nirvana as the ideal is practically impossible. It ignores the physical dimension of existence as well as the personal identity of the person. The problem with Buddhists is their belief that they could totally eliminate the desire by eliminating the personality or the self of the person.

Furthermore, Buddhism is also problematic as reflected below.

Although scientists, philosophers and religious scholars may have reached a good understanding about life and the universe, this realization is neither complete nor proper. Why? Although they have obtained some understanding, they are far from having freedom from anxiety, from ending their afflictions. They indulge themselves in Five Poisons of greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance and doubt. They remain mired in all the troubles of human relationships and are swayed by personal feelings. In other words, they are human.<sup>33</sup>

From this observation it implies that as long as an individual is still human, he or she is far from reaching complete realization or Nirvana. Yet, Buddhists teach that Nirvana is attainable in this life. This is a glaring contradiction. Perhaps aware of this tension, Mahayana tradition developed the concept of Bodhisattvas, who delayed their journey to Nirvana just to help sentient beings in their struggle toward complete liberation. Yet they teach that one's salvation is still an individual effort. So one may question the role of Bodhisattvas, if indeed, salvation is an individual work after all.

Thus we can see that the concept of Nirvana is both theoretically inconceivable and practically meaningless. If that is so, is there a better alternative? I think Christianity has a better alternative to the problematic concept of Nirvana. The Christian concept of eternal life offers a better future than the Buddhist concept of Nirvana.

<sup>32</sup>Richard Gombrich, "Introduction: The Buddhist Way," in *The World of Buddhism: Buddhist Monks and Nuns in Society and Culture*, ed. Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984), 10-11.

<sup>33</sup>[Venerable Master] Chin Kung, 15.

### A Christian Alternative to Nirvana

Hans Küng acknowledges the similarity between eternal life and Nirvana. He argues that “there *need not be any contradiction between the Christian notion of positive final state (‘eternal life’) and the notion, supported by most Buddhist schools, of a positive final state (nirvana).*”<sup>34</sup> He supports his argument by identifying some of these correspondences. He states that

“eternal life” is also a condition that cannot be grasped by our intellectual and descriptive categories, a condition that can only be experienced: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived” (1 Cor 2:9). “Eternal life” also is where the drives of the will, desire, and sensation are extinguished, insofar as all this implies inconstancy, imperfection and sorrow. “Eternal life” also can be experienced now, as the Jesus discourses in the Gospel of John repeatedly stress.<sup>35</sup>

In spite of the similarities between eternal life and Nirvana, there are still significant differences between these two ultimate goals.

Unlike Nirvana, which can only be fully realized at death, eternal life is a renewed human existence beyond death. Eternal life is talking about *real life* in its fullest sense, not the ambiguous cessation of human existence.

Richard Rice, Professor of Theology at Loma Linda University in California, U.S.A., has made an attractive exposition of the elements of the Christian concept of eternal life. I will summarize as much as possible his explanation and contrast them with the idea of Nirvana.<sup>36</sup>

**1. Eternal life is a gift of God.** Unlike Nirvana, eternal life is “due entirely to the creative and re-creative power of God;” it is not because of our own making. “We find a close association of these two functions in Rom 4:17, which describes God as the one ‘who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.’”

**2. Eternal life is the prospect of personal fellowship with God.** This is different from Buddhism’s idea of Nirvana. Note that the Christian’s ultimate destiny of life “is not self-gratification; it is the prospect of personal fellowship with God.” The idea of God and of fellowship with a divine Being that is far

<sup>34</sup>Küng et al., 327. Italics his.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>The following discussion is based on Richard Rice, *Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective*, 2d ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1997), 351-55. Sentences and words in quotations in this section are directly quoted from the cited pages in Rice’s book, though not individually footnoted.



greater than human beings, is absent in Buddhism. However, "for the committed Christian, fellowship with God is the major thing that makes eternal life attractive."

**3. Eternal life is the prospect of future service.** Eternal life "gives us a clearly God-centered, rather than self-centered, view of human destiny. It directs us away from the gratification of personal desires and provides us with a truly religious view of the future." Again, it is opposed to the idea of Nirvana, which is primarily self-centered. The prospect of future service in the future life corrects the notion of "self-indulgence." Our ultimate destiny

is other-oriented, not self-oriented. It seeks the glory of God and the welfare of one's fellows. Even when hope reaches its fulfillment, there is a place for love, as Paul's great hymn reminds us (1 Cor 13:13).

**4. Eternal life includes physical and spiritual restoration.** This is another dimension that Buddhism overlooks. For Buddhists, the self with its desire should be totally extinguished. They are not able to see the totality of the human being, which comprises a physical body as well as a consciousness. In Christianity, however, this physical body will be restored in such a way that

there will be changes in our constitution, as Paul's description of the resurrected body indicates (1 Cor 15: 42-50), but our existence will have a corporeal basis. The biblical concept of resurrection is that of the re-creation of the entire person, including a physical form.

Again, "for Christians, the central attraction of the future is the prospect of intimate fellowship with God"—this is the spiritual restoration. In other words, "eternal life restores human beings to the presence of God."

**5. Eternal life includes social restoration.** In the concept of Nirvana we have no hope of spending our eternal destiny with our loved ones or with our fellow human beings. It is not surprising, then, that a Buddhist's life is too individualistic in some respects. I have observed that, in their worship in the temple, Buddhists do not experience corporate worship. They do not socialize in their worship, perhaps because it does not form an important aspect of their spiritual goals. However, in Christianity, "the biblical portrayals of human destiny are emphatically social; they consistently describe the redeemed as a group, a community, rather than as separate individuals." For Christians, the idea of community will be carried over even in the life beyond.

**6. Eternal life includes environmental restoration.** Buddhism claims to be a very practical religion. However, in its teaching of an empty human destiny, it offers a future that is an abstraction, void of any reality. In contrast, Christianity teaches that

human beings are terrestrial creatures. This earth was our original home, and it will be our final home. Our ultimate destiny is inseparably linked to that of this planet, so the complete fulfillment of human existence has ecological dimensions. This is why the last book of the Bible speaks of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1).

One final note: the Christian's ultimate destiny is the cessation of all suffering and pain here on earth. It is the hope of an eternal good life in a "new heaven and new earth" in which God "will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev 21:4 NIV).

### **Conclusion**

The theological challenge of Buddhism has been addressed in this paper with regard especially to their teaching of human destiny. In our evaluation and analysis of the concept of Nirvana, it has been shown that such a concept is theoretically inconceivable as well as practically impossible. When the teaching of Nirvana is examined closely, we realize that it raises more questions rather than solutions—it offers an empty hope. Whatever one may find appealing in the concept of Nirvana is neutralized in the presence of a more concrete and hopeful doctrine of eternal life and ultimate destiny in Christianity.