

LOST AND FOUND

One of my friends was born in a cave in the mountains of India shortly after her parents fled the hostile Communist takeover of their native Tibet, about fifty years ago. As Gelak (not her real name) unpacked my dishwasher during a visit to Canada, I saw no glint in her shining Asian eyes of the insecurity I would expect upon hearing her story.

Gelak's people had been simple nomads, herding their yaks and sheep over the Northern Plateau of Tibet—the roof of the world. The isolation of the tiny country, populated by eight million Buddhists, was shattered by the political and religious persecution of the invading Chinese military. When they heard the army approaching, Gelak's parents had time only to grab and flee with two of their children not yet old enough to be tending stock with their siblings on the grazing lands. This began a year-long trek through the Himalayas to India with many other Tibetan exiles. The homeless people took their Buddhist faith with them.

“When I was a little girl, living in the cave,” Gelak told me, “every morning the monk living with us prayed. He chanted, he pounded his drum, he blew a trumpet made of a human thigh bone! My mother said, ‘No need to fear. The lama is just worshipping.’”

But fear was a reality for Gelak. At age four, due to pitiful living conditions, she was enrolled in a home for destitute children whose impoverished parents worked on road crews established by the Indian government. Within a year the institution was forced to shut its doors and, unable to contact the migrant parents, sent the children to various orphanages throughout India. Without documentation (because Tibetans use only given and not last names), little Gelak was truly lost.

“I always wondered why my parents didn't come to visit me,” she said. “When other parents came seeking their children, I would peek through the curtains to look at them. It was very hard.”

For six years, Gelak watched as one after another Tibetan playmate was claimed. At age eleven, she was finally returned to her mother, a widow since Gelak's father had been trampled to death by an elephant in the Indian work camps while she had been gone. Even so, she was finally home!

“Before I was in my mother's womb, God knew my future,” she said. “He knew where I was going. He brought me back to my family and we were united again.”

Gelak's spiritual wandering soon ended, as well. She did not follow Buddhist tradition, though her own brother was studying at a monastery to become a lama. With no male provider in the home, a poor immigrant girl in India had little hope without an education. The influence of Christian missions helped her find her way into nurses' training, Bible school, and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Gelak is one of fewer than five hundred known Tibetan evangelical believers worldwide. She still lives in Northern India with her husband and children, where she offers spiritual refuge in Christ to displaced Tibetan Buddhists struggling along their "path to enlightenment."

Tibet in America

Gelak's exile and homecoming illustrate the story of the larger Tibetan society—a story increasingly heard in North America, where some ten thousand Tibetans currently reside. More than one million people in Tibet have lost their lives in the Communist occupation, resulting in a massive exodus of refugees. This outcast population looks to its supreme leader, the Dalai Lama, for hope of return.

Their cause has captured American political attention through high-profile celebrities calling for human rights. For example, Richard Gere is an outspoken advocate for a free Tibet, and in January 2010 received blessings from His Holiness, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama himself. Gere's humanitarian interest is fueled by philosophical yearnings shared by many for some sort of Shangri-La.

"The West is very young; it's very corrupt," Gere says. "We're not very wise. And I think we're hopeful that there's a place that is ancient and wise and open and filled with light."¹

Pop culture is further influenced by movies such as *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun*—films saturated with the images and sounds of the Tibetan Buddhism that Gelak knows: the incessant chanting of mantras by shaved-headed monks, their prayers before images of Buddha, and tedious pilgrimages circumambulating sacred sites. Our weekend newspapers advertise getting-in-touch workshops at the local Buddhist temple: "Opening the Heart: Arousing the Mind of Universal Kindness." The travel section promotes a monastic retreat featuring vegetarian meals and Tai Chi classes. Iconic Himalayan art fills our chic galleries. We find that the social situation of Tibet cannot be separated from

¹ Quoted by James A. Beverley in "Buddhism's Guru," *Christianity Today*, 11 June 2001, p. 64. Accessed online 16 May 2011 at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/june11/15.64.html?start=2>.

its religion, which is the basis of its cultural identity. This religion is permeating the Western world.

The Dalai Lama, Buddhist Spokesman

Eastern beliefs were formally introduced to our continent in 1893, when Chicago hosted the World's Parliament of Religions. Japanese Zen became trendy in the West during the 1960s, and Chinese and Southeast Asian immigrants of numerous Buddhist denominations flooded our shores in the following decades. Tibetan Buddhism is distinct from other forms by the demonic and animistic nature of its own culture, yet the Dalai Lama has become the accepted mouthpiece for the world's more than three hundred and fifty million Buddhists.

“Dalai Lama” is the title for Tibet's head of state, and means “ocean of wisdom.” Tenzin Gyatso, the current Dalai Lama, is a vigorous septuagenarian believed to be the reincarnation of Buddha himself, and of each of the thirteen monks who in turn have held power since the seventeenth century. The discovery of Tenzin Gyatso was dramatic.

In 1933, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama died. Four years later holy men in disguise, on a quest for a successor as the god-king of Tibet, came upon the two-year-old son of a farmer in a remote corner of the Himalayas. This child correctly passed the test of spontaneously recognizing possessions owned by the former Dalai Lama, convincing his seekers that he was the reborn Buddha they sought. At age six, Tenzin Gyatso was taken to Tibet's capital city, Lhasa, for his extensive monastic education in Buddhist philosophy, and was there venerated as “the truth” and “the enlightened one.” In 1950, at age fifteen, he assumed full political and spiritual leadership of the country. Despite peace talks with China in 1954, Mao Tse-Tung's aggression forced the Dalai Lama to flee in 1959. Since then he has been ruling his fractured nation from Dharamsala, Northern India—not far from where my friend Gelak currently lives.

Tenzin Gyatso is highly respected. In 1989 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his nonviolent struggle towards the liberation of Tibet. He travels widely, converses with many of the world's religious and political leaders, and has written over fifty books. Crowds of up to three hundred thousand flock to hear his messages of love, compassion, and forgiveness.

Gelak and her husband have met with the Dalai Lama and admit, “Regardless of what people say and despite the religion that he represents, he is a charming and personable man with a lot of charisma.”

It is no wonder that the Dalai Lama's voice is heard on the global stage. He calls for world peace:

*The proper way of resolving differences is through dialogue, compromise and negotiations, through human understanding and humility. We need to appreciate that genuine peace comes about through mutual understanding, respect and trust. As I have already said, human problems should be solved in a humanitarian way, and nonviolence is the humane approach.*²

He calls for ecumenical unity:

*I always believe that it is much better to have a variety of religions, a variety of philosophies, rather than one single religion or philosophy. . . . Each religion has certain unique ideas or techniques, and learning about them can only enrich one's own faith.*³

He calls for ethical living:

*Every human being, whether Eastern or Western, Northern or Southern, rich or poor, believer or non-believer, all want happiness and to avoid suffering. . . . The main motivation should come from a sense of caring for others, a sense of sharing others' suffering and also a clear realization that we are part of humanity.*⁴

His own mission as the repeatedly reborn manifestation of the Buddha of Compassion is to help others, and he prays:

*For as long as space endures, and for as long as living beings remain, until then may I, too, abide to dispel the misery of the world.*⁵

The Dalai Lama makes his message palatable for Western audiences by downplaying the more sensational aspects of Tibetan Buddhism—superstitious fear of spirits, consultations with a possessed oracle, and slavish vows of celibacy, diet, and ritualistic chanting. Instead, he says:

*My religion is simple, my religion is kindness.*⁶

But distilling Buddhist beliefs is not so simple a matter. Despite its message of unity, there is much division within Buddhism's two main branches, Theravada and Mahayana. Tibetan Buddhism is only one religious order; some sects are atheistic and others

² Accessed online 16 May 2011 at <http://www.dalailama.com/messages/world-peace/9-11>.

³ Accessed online 16 May 2011 at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/movingwords/celebritychoice/dalailama.shtml>.

⁴ Taken from "An Address by His Highness the XVI Dalai Lama" presented at the American Buddhist Congress, 12 October 1999. Accessed online 16 May 2011 at <http://www.americanbuddhistcongress.org/dalailama.htm>.

⁵ Accessed online 16 May 2011 at <http://www.law.harvard.edu/students/orgs/hrj/iss14/ziemer.shtml>.

⁶ Accessed online 16 May 2011 at <http://www.tibet.net/en/index.php?id=37&rmenuid=1>.

idolatrous, some preach contemplative detachment and others a mystical materialism. Although distinctions between the myriad splinter groups are confusing, all followers share a common faith in their founding figure, the Buddha.

The Buddha

Twenty-five centuries ago, Siddhartha Gautama was born into a noble Indian family surrounded by luxury. The reality of suffering and pain shocked him when (legend says) he saw four sights: an aged man, a leper, a corpse, and a monk. He sought answers to human misery by studying prevalent religions and experimented with extreme asceticism. Meditating in the shade of a fig tree, he received a vision of wisdom. His resultant teaching on the “middle way” was more merciful than the tyrannical caste system, and Gautama soon collected a gathering of disciples who hailed him as Buddha, the first enlightened one. He taught that life was full of sorrows and that happiness was illusory, but that there was a way to break out of “samsara” (the endless cycle of reincarnation) earned through “karma” (the sum of a person’s actions, good and bad). One could attain “nirvana” (the state of emptiness and nonexistence where all passions and self-consciousness are extinguished as the individual’s life force merges with the void).

Within three hundred years Buddhism had spread throughout Asia, though it fought for popularity with Hinduism. It has made steady progress throughout the world, and, while estimates vary, some claim that up to four million North Americans practice some form of Buddhism today. One of your neighbors is likely to be flirting with its ideas. The basic doctrines of Buddhism stand in stark contrast to the tenets of Christianity.

Basic Buddhist Teaching

God and Creation

Buddhism is more an ethical philosophy than a religion. No Buddhist believes in a personal God, for all living things collectively make up the impersonal force which powers the universe. They see no intelligent design behind nature, speaking of creation as being “self-arisen.” Theologian Erwin Lutzer puts it this way: “God is not thought of as having an existence independent of the universe.”⁷ The transcendent Lord of the Bible is unknown to the Buddhist. Listen to what God has said:

Be still and know that I am God (Psalm 46:10).⁸

⁷ Erwin W. Lutzer and John F. DeVries, *Satan’s “Evangelistic” Strategy for this New Age* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1989), 62.

⁸ All Bible quotations in this article are taken from the New International Version.

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse (Romans 1:20).

The God who made the world and everything in it is Lord of heaven and earth . . . he himself gives men life and breath and everything else . . . God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:24-27).

Humanity and Sin

Since humanity is simply an outgrowth of nature, Buddhists do not recognize people as unique creatures made in God's image. There are no personal souls, for individuals are merely temporary materializations of the universal energy. Buddhists have no concept of sin as an offense to God's holy character and standards of righteousness, nor of forgiveness as a release from sin's eternal consequences. Wrongdoing is simply an act of relative evil that brings demerit, is punished by fate, and is able to be balanced out by virtuous works in this or a future life. Thus, most Buddhists have high morals. Their passive, intellectual answer to wrong desires is desirelessness, unlike the Christian's dynamic and experiential concept of victory over sin. The Dalai Lama believes:

The buddhas neither wash ill deeds away with water, nor remove beings' sufferings with their hands, nor transfer their realizations to others . . . Beings are released through the teachings of truth—the final reality.⁹

But God's Word says:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord (Acts 3:19).

*Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4).
There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:1).*

Authority

⁹ From Martin Scorsese's 1997 movie *Kundun*, a biographical presentation of the life of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, who himself corrected the script for accuracy.

To the Buddhist, truth is relative and is delivered through the ages by enlightened beings. Followers treasure the “three jewels”: the Buddha (born again into each age), the “dharma” (doctrinal teachings), and the “sangha” (community of Buddhist believers). Their sacred writings center upon the “four noble truths”: suffering troubles all of life; suffering is caused by desire; it will end when desire is obliterated; and desire can be conquered by progressing in stages along the “eightfold path.” The rules of the path concern right views, intentions, speech, behavior, occupation, effort, contemplation, and meditation.¹⁰ What a contrast with the Christian stance that objective spiritual truth is known only through the revelation of the Bible, understood by mind, and trusted by heart:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18).

The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word (Hebrews 1:3).

Salvation

Scholar Alister McGrath has written that the religions of the world “do not merely offer different ways of achieving salvation—they offer different understandings of salvation altogether.”¹¹ For the Buddhist, salvation is the escape from conscious suffering and desire, as opposed to the Christian perspective of abundant life now and eternity with God. The Buddhist’s works of merit, not Christ’s gift of atoning sacrifice, earn advancement towards nirvana. The Dalai Lama believes:

My own happiness is mainly due to my own good karma. It is a fundamental Buddhist belief that my own suffering is due to my mistakes. If some good things happen, that is mainly due to my own good actions.¹²

But God’s view is different:

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9).

¹⁰ See “Basic Buddhism” in *Christianity Today*, 11 June 2001. See also “Buddhism” in J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 164.

¹¹ Alister McGrath, *Intellectuals Don’t Need God, and Other Modern Myths* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 115.

¹² See *Christianity Today*, 11 June 2001, p. 64. Accessed online 16 May 2011 at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/june11/15.64.html?start=6>.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest . . . rest for your souls (Matthew 11: 28-29).

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain . . . let us draw near to God (Hebrews 10:19-22).

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full (John 10:10).
Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).*

Death and Reincarnation

Death is not an enemy of the Buddhist, but rather the portal to the next cycle of life and another chance at enlightenment and annihilation. The Dalai Lama serenely says:

*My foes will become nothing. My friends will become nothing. I, too, will become nothing. Likewise, all will become nothing.*¹³

But “Christian faith does not offer us a peaceful way to come to terms with death,” Philip Yancey counters. “It offers instead a way to overcome death. Christ stands for Life, and his resurrection should give convincing proof that God is not satisfied with any ‘cycle of life’ that ends in death. He will go to any extent—he *did* go to any extent—to break that cycle.”¹⁴

Without Christ, Buddhists are unable to escape the slavery of reincarnation, for all the good deeds completed in many lifetimes cannot accumulate for the evils done. E. Stanley Jones, a Christian missionary for fifty years to India’s Buddhists and Hindus, found not one person who claimed to have attained release from samsara.¹⁵ As God has said:

Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him (Hebrews 9:27-28).

¹³ Spoken by the movie character portraying the Dalai Lama in “Kundun.”

¹⁴ Philip Yancey, *Where is God When it Hurts?* quoted in Hank Hanegraaff, *The Covering* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 80.

¹⁵ See Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 218.

Jesus

Jesus Christ is a problem for Buddhists, despite their declaration that all faiths can coexist. The Dalai Lama explains Jesus as a fully enlightened being who lived previous lives and who taught the common religious principles of patience, tolerance, and compassion. But Jesus Himself demanded exclusive loyalty as the once-born Savior, whose death and resurrection alone redeems people. Jesus was not just a moral teacher who showed the way; He *is* The Way:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).

Conclusion

G. K. Chesterton wrote: “All Christianity concentrates on the man at the cross-roads. The vast and shallow philosophies, the huge syntheses of humbug, all talk about ages and evolution and ultimate developments. The true philosopher is concerned with the instant. Will a man take this road or that?”¹⁶

Gelak was a lost and wandering Tibetan who stood at the crossroads of the ancient philosophies and cried out for direction. “I prayed to God that whatever path I chose would be His way,” she says. “I am so happy that I found my family, but more important is that I found that there is a God who created this world and the circumstances through which I found Him.”

This Creator is not known in the fatalistic doctrines of Buddhism being promoted by our media, inviting the curious to lose themselves in the void of nirvana, binding them through the joyless legalism of karma to a laborious attempt to escape suffering. Rather, Christianity offers a personal God of life who finds us out and in whom we are found:

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost (Luke 19:10).

¹⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, ed. David Dooley, vol.1, *Orthodoxy, Heretics, Blatchford Controversy* (San Francisco; Ignatius Press, 1986), 314.

When Sharing your Faith with a Buddhist Friend:

- Clearly understand the differences between Buddhism and Christianity. Pray for discernment and browse the Internet selectively, as many Web sites strive to inclusively blend the two worldviews.
- Listen. Don't presume that you understand completely the Buddhist worldview. As Gelak and her husband say, even many years of studying Buddhism cannot compete with the generations of indoctrination, culture, and practice that a Buddhist has accumulated.
- Distinguish between the humanitarian issues of your friend's country and the spiritual issues of Buddhist faith. Don't get caught up in political or cultural debate.
- Show respect for your friend's culture, especially since Asians value this trait. Perhaps invite her to watch *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun* with you as discussion starters.
- Ask, don't tell. Courteous questioning is more loving than argument, will help you to see your friend the way God sees him, and may encourage him to consider the hope and joy he sees in your life.
- Be aware of differences in language and culture. A Buddhist may misunderstand some Christian terminology: spiritual rebirth is not reincarnation, and heaven is not nirvana.
- Avoid complicated theological discussions. Focus on the basic truths of God's love, our sin, and Christ's forgiveness.
- Express the high cost of salvation to God—the death of His Son on the cross. Since Buddhists work hard to earn salvation through good karma, Jesus' message of grace can be misunderstood as a hand-out.
- Gently challenge your friend's understanding of Christian teaching, especially if she is a North American convert to Buddhism. Often Westerners reject Christianity based on a faulty understanding of what we believe.

- Don't hit your friend over the head with your Bible, but do remember that truth must not be sacrificed for peace. Be prepared—Buddhists value tolerance and many find the exclusivity of Christ's gospel offensive.
- On the other hand, don't assume that your friend is aggressively seeking to disprove Jesus. Buddhists often view Jesus as peaceful but not Peace itself, as *a* way but not *the* Way.
- Model the compassionate love of Christ and practice the fruit of the Spirit!