

Sharing Light with Buddhists

To share effectively the truth of salvation with a Buddhist, it is first necessary to understand the worldview which determines their hopes, their failures and their goals.

Why so little transformation?

For many years I lived in Buddhist societies, thinking it was not necessary to delve much into their beliefs, believing that if one just spoke truth, then everything else would follow naturally. But success did not follow. I also observed the lives of many Buddhist background believers who were trained in church environments, and was sad to see some return to their old ways, seemingly unable to relate the truth of the gospel to life's sufferings, or allow it to permeate to the very heart of their worldview and conduct. Even among those who did remain faithful, I observed how many of them soon lost their ability to share the gospel effectively with their own people. Their language and behaviour gradually became more and more foreign to their own people, even if their lives were genuinely changed by the gospel. They forsook perfectly valid traditions because Christians from other backgrounds perceived these as alien to the Christian life, and they often lacked the understanding of how to share the Good News in culturally appropriate ways.

Learning from New Believers

Only in the last few years, as I have discipled new believers from Buddhist backgrounds and made a much-belated effort to learn their worldview, has it become evident that I can neither blame the devil, nor 'hard hearts' nor 'wrong timing', but my own failure to be a humble learner of their culture. To remedy my neglect, I am now attempting to share a few areas which I have found to be key, in the hope that other people will learn from my mistakes. I do not claim to be an expert in this field. But watching new believers share the gospel, I see understanding dawn on the listeners, so I am trying to follow their example.

Myanmar Theravada Beliefs

There are many kinds of Buddhism in the world, and multitudes of books have been written about them, ancient and modern. In this article I am focusing only on the Myanmar form of Theravada Buddhism. I do not intend to go into syncretistic beliefs and traditions that are prevalent among many but not all Buddhist practitioners, such as astrology and belief in spirits or '*nats*'. That is a subject most worthy of study, but is outside the scope of this article.

The 31 Abodes

Many visual learners find it a lot easier to understand Buddhism when looking at diagrams that represent worldviews. In any Buddhist monastery or meditation centre it

should be easy to find a picture of the '31 Abodes of Existence' (*tone sae di bone ခုဘုံ*), which show the many types of reincarnation one may pass through before attaining to 'nirvana' or *neibban* (နိဗ္ဗာန်), the place of no more suffering. Believers have simplified this diagram*, to help the average layman recognise the general categories into which the abodes can be grouped. The diagram shows a huge gap between the top of the triangle where the *brahma* abodes are located and *neibban*, as a way to emphasise the enormous difficulty in reaching it, according to Gautama Buddha.**

The earthly or human plane (*loo pone လူ့ဘုံ*) is closer to the lower planes of the 31 Abodes diagram. Beneath that are the four lowest planes, including the animal plane, which are all forms of hell (*ngayae ငရဲ*). Above the human plane are 6 levels of 'nat' abodes (*nat bone နတ်ဘုံ*) and beyond that, 20 levels of Brahma abodes (*byama bone ဗြဟ္မာဘုံ*).

At every level, beings accumulate merits or *kutho* (ကုသိုလ်) and demerits or *akutho* (အကုသိုလ်) for their good and bad deeds. Everyone hopes that at the end of an existence in a particular plane, he would have accumulated enough merit to enable him to be reborn in a higher plane. Conversely, he also hopes that the bad deeds he has done will somehow be cancelled out by his good deeds. If his merits outweigh his demerits, he is reborn higher, but too many demerits will send him to a lower plane, to the animal plane or to one of the fearful levels of hell. Buddhist literature describes the horrors of torture in hell deserved by those who have done particular evil deeds. Buddhists are naturally very frightened of going there. Fear of punishment due to the having insufficient merits is often a strong motivation for doing good deeds.

The whole of the 31 Abodes is enclosed by the *samsara* or *thandaya* (သံသရာ), the endless cycle of suffering to which life at every level is condemned. Gautama Buddha used various metaphors to emphasise the near impossibility of getting to *neibban*. e.g. Drop a needle from the Brahma plane (*byama bone ဗြဟ္မာဘုံ*) and on the human plane stand another needle on its head. It will be easier for those two needles to touch each other than for a being to be reborn as a human.

If it is so hard to be reborn as a human, how much harder is it to reach *neibban*?

Footnotes:

*See 31 Abodes diagram included in this article.

**In Buddhism, reaching the Brahma abode at the top of this triangle in no way indicates nearness to *neibban*.

Although *vibathana* (*vibathana ah doh cheng* ဝိပဿနာ အားထုတ်ခြင်း) meditation is a highly regarded Buddhist practice, according to Buddha himself the chances of attaining nirvana by such means are narrow indeed. At any level of existence, the slightest little misdeed will send one backwards to a lower plane, keeping the being in a perpetual cycle of hopelessness.

The Ten Fires of Desire

In addition, the Ten Mind-defiling Passions or The Ten Fires of Desire (*kiletha mee sae pa* ကိလေသာမီး ၁၀ပါး) corrupt the human mind, so following the Four Noble Truths (*thissa lay pa သစ္စာ ၄ ပါး*) is essential. One of these is the Eight-fold Path (*mega thissa မဂ္ဂ သစ္စာ*) with its right thinking, right conduct, etc, which Buddhists try by their own effort to follow. There is no god or saviour in true Buddhism, although many forms of Buddhism show reverence to Gautama Buddha as if he were such. The only escape from the '*thandaya*' possible is through following *vibathana* meditation.

One could ask Buddhists is it possible for them to spend 24 hours a day doing meditation?

Common Mistakes in Sharing the Gospel

1. When sharing the gospel, we should explain that the Creator is without sin. Buddhists often deny the existence of a creator because they conclude that a creator must also have created evil. Such a creator is indeed inferior if he is locked inside the vicious cycle of *thandaya* like the beings in all the other planes lower than *neibban*. The superiority of the biblical Creator God becomes clear to Buddhists when they see the contrast between the pre-Fall state of perfection and post-Fall depravity in Genesis 1-3. Only then can they see that God is outside the '*thandaya*' and therefore free of evil.

However, due to Buddhist resistance to the creation idea, most of my Buddhist background friends do not initially emphasise the creation story, unlike the approach in many tribal societies. After explaining true Buddhism, they share about the person and work of Christ, since their people can relate easily to the idea of a good and wise teacher who does miracles, because Buddha in his various incarnations was reputed to do the same.

2. Another area of resistance is to the idea of heaven when it's called *kaung kin bone* (ကောင်းကင်ဘုံ) as in the Judson translation of the Bible. When Myanmar Christians traditionally explain the gospel, they tell Buddhists that if they accept Jesus they can go to *kaung kin*, which simply means 'sky', a term which is meaningless because Buddhists do not know where in the pantheon this place exists. Most of them presume it is somewhere around the *nat* plane of existence, which is far lower than *neibban*, and therefore not the most desirable place to go.

As the *nat* plane is still enveloped within the *thandaya* or cycle of existence, how attractive is the gospel when Buddhists think they are being asked, 'Do you want to go to the *nat* plane when you die?'

In traditional evangelism, heaven has often not been explained meaningfully to Buddhists. So believers have changed the terminology. Instead of calling heaven *kaung kin*, they are calling it *neibban shwe byee dor* (နိဗ္ဗာန် ရွှေပြည်တော်), a term that comes from Mahayana Buddhism. It takes the essential meaning of *neibban* as the place where suffering ceases and marries it to a cultural idea of a golden city or utopia. So when believers explain heaven to Buddhists, they make clear that it is a place outside the *thandaya*, and therefore free of suffering, which is entirely consistent with the biblical picture in Rev 7:16,17. Only then does heaven begin to sound attractive to Buddhists, since they long to be free of the cycle of suffering and to live forever where there is no more pain or rebirth.

Some Christians object to the term *neibban* for heaven, on the grounds that the Buddhist meaning is cessation of all existence and desire, good or evil. However, there is no other term which carries as strong an idea of the end of suffering. In my opinion, it is far better to use this term and reload it with fuller meaning than to equate heaven with the considerably lower *nat* plane.

3. Another mistake Christians make is to offer eternal life (*htawara athat ထာဝရ အသက်*) to Buddhists as if it were a sought-after gift. Because there is only impermanence (*aneissa အနိစ္စ*) inside the *thandaya*, the meaning they understand is they are being offered an eternal cycle of reincarnation, the very thing they are trying to escape!

Myanmar people are familiar with Zawgyi, a magician in traditional tales, who got eternal life through some kind of potent medicine and by his powers was able to turn iron into gold, never needed to eat and was able to fly everywhere, even underground. By using the term 'eternal life' (*htawara athat ထာဝရ အသက်*) they may mistakenly associate that with Zawgyi's magic powers. Instead of promising them 'eternal life', we should say that they will be free from suffering in the endless cycle (*thandaya wo seng yae hma hlut myauk mee သံသရာ ဝဋ်ဆင်းရဲ မှ လွတ်မြောက်မည်။*). That will truly be good news to them.

4. When we call unbelievers sinners (*abyitha အပြစ်သား*), it is similar to calling a westerner a criminal! A much more appropriate term is being used to indicate the biblical notion of sin, that is *akutho* (အကုသိုလ် or *akutho dusayait* အကုသိုလ်ဒုစရိုက်), a combination of the word for 'demerits' and 'evil deeds'. If

you ask a Buddhist if he is a sinner (*abyitha* အပြစ်သား), he will of course deny it, since that connotes a murderer or a violent person. But try asking him if he has *akutho* အကုသိုလ် or *akutho dusayait* အကုသိုလ်ဒုစရိုက်) and he will admit everyone has it.

5. The concept of blood sacrifice (*yit bu zaw thee* ယဇ်ပူဇော်သည်) is anathema to a Buddhist, except for those who practice *nat* appeasement. So when Christians try to explain Christ's death with a lot of references to Old Testament animal sacrifices, killing and blood, there is much resistance. Believers initially explain the crucifixion in terms of Christ giving a **gift** of His life. Only later do new disciples come to understand that Christ's death was a fulfilment of the Jewish animal offering system.
6. God himself should be called by a high term such as *ananda dago dor phaya* အနန္တ တန်းရိုးတော်ဘုရား which means Infinite Powerful God, not *phaya thakin* as in the Judson version, since this is a term for lord and master which has negative connotations dating from the British colonial era.

If we Christians also familiarise ourselves with the Ten Fires of Desire (*kiletha mee sae pa* ကိလေသာမီး ၁၀ပါး) especially the first three; greed (*loba* လောဘ), anger (*dotha* ဒေါသ) and illusion (*moha* မောဟ) and quote them as examples when asking the person if he has succeeded in conquering sin in his life, we may find a more positive response. James uses the word 'fire' in James 3:6 to describe the evils of the tongue, which corrupt the whole person.

Why should we not use terms that are already familiar to Buddhists? Even if their use of the term is not the exact biblical equivalent, we can start with what they already know, then explain the biblical meaning. By using unfamiliar metaphors we only solidify their resistance.

Another Way to Explain the Gospel

After ascertaining a person's level of openness, believers show them the diagram of the 31 Abodes and first explain true Buddhism to them. That is, to explain how extremely difficult it is to reach *neibban* from any level of existence, sometimes quoting from Buddha to back up their claims. By the time they have finished explaining how a person cannot get to *neibban*, the person himself begins to wonder 'so what hope is there for me?' Then the believers will explain that the Infinite Mighty God (*ananda dago dor sheng phaya* အနန္တ တန်းရိုးတော်ရှင်ဘုရား), has always lived in *neibban* in perfection (*neibban dweng san myan hlyet shi thor moo dor phaya*) (နိဗ္ဗာန်တွင်စံမြန်းလျက်ရှိတော်မူသော ဘုရား) with no suffering or pain. He created the world of humans in order to share his perfection (*thissa daya ko loo tha htan thoh poh saung*

hpoh သစ္စာတရား ကို လူသားတို့ထံ ပို့ဆောင်ဖို့—)။ The first humans were tempted by Satan (*Mana* မာန်နှတ်). They misused the free choice God gave them by disobeying his commands. (*phaya bay thor lu la yay ko thoodoh a lwae thone sa loh ke thee* ဘုရားပေးသော လွတ်လပ်ရေး ကို သူတို့အလွဲသုံးစားလုပ်ခဲ့သည်။)။ At that point sin (*akutho dusayait* အကုသိုလ်ဒုစရိုက်) entered into the world, along with pain and suffering (*dukka seng yae ဒုက္ခ ဆင်းရဲ*)Ever since then, humans have been caught up in this vicious cycle (*thandaya* သံသရာ) with no hope of escape.

Breaking the Vicious Cycle

In order to rescue the human race from its accumulated demerits (*akutho dusayait* အကုသိုလ်ဒုစရိုက်), the Infinite powerful God, (*ananda dago dor sheng phaya* အနန္တ တန်းခိုးတော်ရှင်ဘုရား) became incarnated as a man in the human plane (*loo tha apyit loo pone thoh jwa la dor moo ke thee* လူသား အဖြစ် လူဘုံ သို့ ကြွလာတော်မူခဲ့သည်။), being born as a human baby through a human mother, a virgin (*tha dor thee Mayee soe thor abyong seng di yau ei bai dweng weng sa dor moo thee* သားတော်သည် မာရီ ဆိုသော အပျိုဝင် တစ်ယောက်၏ ဗိုက်တွင် ဝင်စားတော် မူခဲ့သည်။)။ This was the Lord Jesus Christ (*Yeshu Krit dor phaya* ယေရှု ခရစ်တော်ဘုရား), who lived a pure and holy life, similar to a *yahanda* (ရဟန္တာ) or holy man *, yet maintained daily human contact, teaching and performing miracles (*aunt oh bwe ya* အံ့ဩဖွယ်ရာ). Because of jealousy, the corrupt religious leaders of his day plotted to kill him (*thoo ko tha hpoh jansee ke thee* သူ့ကို သတ်ဖို့ ကြံစည်ခဲ့သည်)။ One of Jesus’ own followers betrayed him, and he was unjustly sentenced to death by crucifixion, a punishment given only to criminals. However, it was clear to all who had heard and seen him, that he was not guilty of a single crime or demerit (*akutho dusayait* အကုသိုလ်ဒုစရိုက်). In order to save mankind, he willingly gave up his own life (*thu athet net kandako ko ziwida dana byu thee* သူ့အသက်နှင့် ခန္ဓာကိုယ် ကိုဖီဝိတ ဒါန ပြုသည်။)။ After three days he rose again (*athet byang shin thee* အသက်ပြန် ရှင်သည်။) and lived for 40 more days on the earth appearing to his followers. Then he returned to *neibban* from which he had originally come, without having to go through the 31 Abodes, because he was already perfect. Now, those who trust (*yone kyi ah ko thee* ယုံကြည် အားကိုးသည်။) in him can be freed from the cycle of suffering (*thandaya hma hlut myauk thee* သံသရာ မှ လွတ်မြောက်သည်။), because when he came back to life he broke through the vicious cycle that had been like a barrier or wall keeping us from reaching *neibban*.

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If in our zeal we too quickly emphasise the superiority of Christ over *yahanda* or Buddha himself, Buddhists may reject our message without further consideration. Some come to initially believe Christ is a *yahanda* in the same way some Muslims initially call Christ a prophet. In time, they will realise he is indeed far more than a *yahanda*.

Overcoming the Ten Fires of Desire

Through his life in us, we can overcome the Ten Fires of Desire. For example, two new believers had an argument in which they shouted at each other. A Buddhist neighbour heard the commotion. Later, this neighbour was amazed to see the same two women sitting talking calmly to each other after they had sorted out their differences. One of them commented, 'Before I knew Jesus I had a bad temper and would never talk to the person again if I was offended. Now I feel calmer and am able to forgive and not hold grudges.'

Indeed, everyone struggles with the Ten Fires of Desire within, but Jesus helps us to conquer them.

Conclusion

This kind of example of changed lives will go far to confirm verbal explanation of the Gospel, and may convince more Buddhists to take a second look at a faith which they have always considered inferior to their own. In addition, evangelists and church planters should learn from others' mistakes and try to use terminology which resonates positively with those they are attempting to reach.

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