

Reaching Buddhists through the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament

Keith Carey

Can Christians and Buddhists find a common ground from which to dialogue? Keith Carey proposes one area: the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. While purposely avoiding the complexities of the many different sects within Buddhism, Carey analyzes the basic concept common to all branches of Buddhism: the Eightfold Path. Such an analysis is but the tip of the iceberg, but it is indeed an encouraging beginning. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament has been neglected for too long as a possible bridge to the evangelization of many groups of unreached peoples.

At first glance, the Old Testament might seem to be more a hindrance than a help in efforts to bring Buddhists to a true knowledge of God through Jesus Christ. The Judeo-Christian tradition is based on the belief in one God, while Buddhism is polytheistic. Christians place saving faith in God Himself, while Buddhists trust in their own ability to work out the teachings of Gautama Buddha (Champion 1945:11). Furthermore, none of the Buddhist gods are supremely good. Buddhists reject the idea of creation (Masao 1986:139,145), but they do believe in reincarnation, a concept that Christians cannot accept. While the Old Testament is full of references to war, Buddhists are pacifists. God frequently required blood sacrifices from the Jews, a tradition Buddhists find abhorrent (Buri 1986:32).

While these problems must be acknowledged, it must also be recognized that the Old Testament does contain a genre of literature which may profoundly speak to the felt needs of a Buddhist. The wisdom literature, particularly the wisdom



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sayings found in the book of Proverbs, is a powerful bridge of testimony. By beginning with some of the wisdom sayings, the Christian may enter into dialogue with Buddhists and perhaps from there lead to the truth of Christ's person and work.

Central to Buddhism are the Four Noble Truths. All Buddhists believe that: 1) life is full of suffering; 2) suffering is caused by a desire for pleasure; 3) suffering can be ended by eliminating these desires; and 4) the elimination of earthly desires is accomplished by practicing the precepts of the Noble Eightfold Path. These precepts are the practice of right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. It is particularly in the Noble Eightfold Path where Old Testament wisdom literature finds its parallels. Although each Buddhist sect has its distinctives, the Noble Eightfold Path is basic to all Buddhist beliefs, and what follows will be limited to the Noble Eightfold Path.

RIGHT UNDERSTANDING

The first element of the Noble Eightfold Path is *right understanding*. To understand life correctly is to understand it "as transient, painful, and 'selfless'" (Fernando 1985:56). Gautama Buddha's purpose behind this first path was "to help others perceive more clearly the right type of life they should lead" by examining "the type of life that is conventionally upheld as ideal" and thus exposing that life to the three basic elements of right understanding (Fernando 1985:57). While the purposes of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament do not have exact parallels to this particular Buddhist understanding, certainly the book of Job does show the example of one who had the "right type of life," a life that was subsequently examined. Furthermore, the first chapter of Proverbs seems to allude to some of the ways that right understanding may be achieved: "... for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair" (1:2-3).

RIGHT THOUGHT

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The second dimension of the Noble Eightfold Path is *right thought*. First, this includes thoughts of good will. *Dhammapada* 1:5 tells Buddhists that hatred is never "appeased in this world; by love alone it is appeased." Other Buddhist writings elaborate on this thought: "Conquer your foe by force, you increase his enmity; conquer by love, and you will reap no after-sorrow" (as quoted in Champion 1945:14). The book of Proverbs expresses the same idea in a variety of ways. For example, Proverbs 25:21-22 declares, "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you."

The concept of putting right thought before works is also beautifully stated in *Dhammapada* 7:2: "If a man lives a hundred years and engages the whole of his time and attention in religious offerings to the gods, sacrificing elephants and horses and other things, all this is not equal to one act of pure love in saving life." Proverbs 10:12 echoes this principle: "Hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers all wrongs." Buddhist writings claim that compassionate thoughts are central to this faith (Fernando 1985:72). Thoughts of compassion are central to the Christian tradition as well. Proverbs 17:5 reads: "He who mocks the poor shows contempt for their maker; whoever gloats over disaster will not go unpunished." Similar ideas are voiced in Proverbs 19:17, 22:9, and 22:22.

The second aspect of right thought is the renunciation of self-will. A common element of Buddhist literature is the idea that "people are in bondage because they have not yet removed the idea of 'I'" (Champion and Short 1951:163). Self-denial is central because elimination of earthly desires is the only way to eliminate suffering. In Christianity, however, selflessness has a much different purpose than it does in Buddhism. Whereas the Buddhist denies his flesh to eliminate his own suffering, the Christian denies his own desires in order to serve and exalt the God who created the universe. Proverbs 3:5,6 expresses this idea clearly: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight."

RIGHT SPEECH

The third precept of the Noble Eightfold Path is *right speech*. Gautama Buddha pointed out four types of wrong speech: falsehood, slander, gossip, and harsh words (Fernando 1985:72). All four are liberally described in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 6:16-17 reveals that the Lord hates a lying tongue. Proverbs 11 shows how gossip and slander come from those who "lack judgment." In Proverbs 15:1 is found the classic statement that Gautama himself might have quoted had he known it: "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

RIGHT ACTION

The fourth component of the Noble Eightfold Path is *right action*. For Buddhists, "the term 'action' here is broadly used and includes three different aspects of human conduct: 1) refraining from killing; 2) refraining from stealing; and 3) refraining from wrong sexual behavior" (Fernando 1985:73-74). Obviously the Old Testament also speaks of these aspects, especially in the Ten Commandments. It is in the third aspect of sexual behavior where the Proverbs come closest to the intent of the Buddha. He recognized that sex "is the strongest impulse in humans, and that its right use calls for an equally strong self-control" (Fernando 1985:75). This is what the writer of Proverbs also advocates: "[Wisdom] will save you also from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words...." (2:16; cf. 2:16-20; see also 5:1-20 and 6:23-29).

RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

Right livelihood is the fifth dimension of the Noble Eightfold Path. Buddhists believe that a person should earn a living by work that helps rather than hurts mankind as a whole: "humans can legitimately earn money only by a service performed for another, not by an exploitation of the other" (Fernando 1985:80). Proverbs 11:18 says that "the wicked man earns deceptive wages, but he who sows righteousness reaps a sure reward" (cf. the prophets' concern for this matter; for example, Amos 8:6; Mic. 6:10-11). In like manner, Proverbs 11:1 emphasizes the necessity of earning one's

livelihood in a right way: "The LORD abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight" (cf. Prov. 16:11; 20:10,23). Proverbs 10:1 reads: "Ill-gotten treasures are of no value, but righteousness delivers from death" (cf. Prov. 11:4).

A related point of agreement is that one's motive for working should not be simply to get rich. Spiritual enlightenment should be valued much more highly than wealth. *Dhammapada* 7:5 declares, "One is the road that leads to wealth, another the road that leads to nirvana." Though Christians do not believe in nirvana, the idea that riches can stifle spirituality is prevalent in the Bible's wisdom literature and is actually one of the main themes of the book of Ecclesiastes. Throughout most of this book, the preacher tells of the futility of worldly pursuits and human effort. He reserves some of his sharpest comments for the "vanity" of hoarding wealth: "Whoever loves money never has money enough.... As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them?" (Eccl. 5:10-11). The preacher says that the rich man cannot even sleep because of his concern for wealth, and he observes that the hoarding of wealth is harmful to the soul. This is in keeping with his point in 3:15: "Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand." Finally, at the very end of Ecclesiastes, the preacher speaks of what is *really* important in life: "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (12:13).

RIGHT EFFORT

Right effort is the sixth precept of the Noble Eightfold Path. Strenuous labor and wholesome thoughts (i.e., of benevolence and selflessness) are essential to produce right effort (Fernando 1985:81). The Buddha comments on the tremendous energy which is required in such right effort: "yet shall there be no decrease of energy till that which is to be won by vigorous strength, energy and effort be attained (*Majjhima Nikaya* 1:482, Sutta 70). The writer of Proverbs concurs with the need to work hard: "Lazy hands make a man

poor, but diligent hands bring wealth" (cf. Prov. 6:6-8; 19:5; 24:30-34). Such work should also be done with "wholesome" thoughts, for "the wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to its ways" (Prov. 14:8), and "the heart of the righteous weighs its answers" (Prov. 15:28).

RIGHT MINDFULNESS

The seventh dimension of the Noble Eightfold Path is *right mindfulness* or *attentiveness*. A Buddhist should be attentive to three things: to what is going on at the moment; to his inner impulses and emotions; and to an awareness of the realities of life, that it is transient and painful (Fernando 1985:84). *Dhammapada* 1:2 says, "All that we are is the result of what we have thought." Proverbs 21:29 echoes, "A wicked man puts up a bold front, but an upright man gives thought to his ways." In addition, various aspects of right mindfulness are addressed throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. Much of Ecclesiastes deals with the futility of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain through worldly pursuits, and the third chapter of Ecclesiastes speaks of the changes in life. The preacher explains that "there is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven" (3:1).

RIGHT CONCENTRATION

The last dimension of the Noble Eightfold Path is often the most threatening to Christians. *Right concentration* or *meditation* is intended to calm the mind and then, through that calming, contribute to "widening the mind's vision of the reality of life" (Fernando 1985:89). Most Christians have a difficult time with the Buddhist practice of staring at an object in order to clear the mind of all thoughts. However, any witness to Buddhists must address the concept of meditation. The intent to *clear* the mind (which is characteristic of Buddhism) may be contrasted with the intent to *concentrate* the mind (which is characteristic of the Biblical view of meditation). Evidences for the practice of meditation in the Old Testament may prove helpful in Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Although the Old Testament wisdom literature contains few direct references to meditation, illustrations can still be found,

especially in the Psalms (for example, Gen. 24:63; Job 2:13; Ps. 1:2; Ps. 63:6; and Ps. 119:78,148).

CONCLUSION

This study has examined a limited section of the Old Testament—wisdom literature—and observed some parallels to Buddhist thought. Certainly there is a need for many other studies of the literary genres of both the Old and New Testaments and their applicability in ministry to Buddhists. What has been presented here is only a possible beginning in a Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Even with all the similarities which have been detailed above, it must be seen that there are also basic differences. For the Buddhist, the Noble Eightfold Path is the road *to* salvation, while the wisdom literature of the Old Testament represents the fruit *of* salvation, not the efficacious means of reconciliation with God. Nevertheless, the similarities may prove to be enough to prompt some Buddhists to learn more of the Biblical revelation.

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