In religion, salvation is the concept that God or another Higher Power “saves” humanity from spiritual death or eternal damnation by providing for them an eternal life (or some form of afterlife). Salvation has been termed the major theme of the Bible (Selman and Manser 2002: s.v. “Salvation”). Salvation may also refer to “deliverance” or “redemption” from actual trouble or threatening danger, such as sin and its effects (Morris 1993:784; Grudem 1994:580). By its very nature, salvation must answer to the plight of humanity as it actually is, offering individuals forgiveness, redemption from slavery of sin, reconciliation from alienation, and “renewal for a marred image of God” (Stagg 1962:80).

World religions share the notion that humanity needs salvation from its present condition since humanity has “lost” its purpose of existence. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—the three monotheistic religions of the world—regard salvation as liberation from the bondage of sin and re-establishing a personal communion with God (Valea 2009; Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson 2001). Judaism suggests collective salvation for the people of Israel (Brodbeck 2007:1672). In Christianity Jesus is the source of salvation and faith in His saving power is stressed (John 3:14-22) (Frankiel 1985), whereas Islam emphasizes submission to Allah.

Eastern religions claim that salvation can be attained by using only inner human resources such as meditation, accumulation of wisdom, asceticism, rituals, or good deeds. They tend to stress self-help through individual discipline and practice, sometimes over the course of many lifetimes—though Mahāyāna Buddhism and some forms of Hinduism suggest that humans can be saved only through the grace and intervention of divine external personal agents (certain buddhas, a bodhisattvas, an avatar or avatāra, etc.).
This article will explore how Theravāda Buddhism understands the concept of salvation, although in the conclusion I will discuss briefly how Mahāyāna Buddhism relates to the issue of salvation as well. Such an exploration is significant not only for those who work with Buddhists as missionaries, but also for those who live in western countries where Buddhism has influenced many New Age beliefs (Lewis and Petersen 2005:101-349; Eck 2001:142-221).

**Origins of Buddhism**

Buddhism originated in northern India and evolved from the teachings of Siddhārtha Gautama (or Siddhāttha Gotama), who was born in the 5th century BCE in the city of Lumbini in the Indian state of Kapilavastu, now part of Nepal. His father wanted him to become a great king, so he took precautions to ensure that his son would not be influenced in the direction of religion (Herold 1922:8-11; Narada 1992:9-12).

In spite of his father’s efforts, after Siddhārta was married to his cousin and had a son, he was exposed to “four great sights” that altered the course of his life. After encountering an old man, an ill man, a corpse, and an ascetic, Gautama was convinced that suffering lay at the end of all existence. Shortly after that experience, according to Buddhist texts, at the age of 29, he renounced his princely titles, abandoned his life of comfort and ease, said good bye to his wife Yaśodharā and child Rahula, and became a spiritual seeker in the hope of comprehending the truth of the world around him.

At the age of 35 while meditating for many days beneath a sacred fig tree, he finally attained full enlightenment by understanding how to be free from suffering. He became an arahat (or arīya-puggala, a “Noble One”), which marked the end of his attachments (Nārada 1980:1-45; Nyānatiloka 1980:23-26). After his spiritual awakening, the Buddha began a teaching career motivated by his great compassion for living beings. He attracted a band of five followers, who formed with him the sangha or first Buddhist order.

In a deer park in the small town of Sarnath, outside modern Banaras, the Buddha delivered his first sermon, “Setting in Motion the Wheel of Truth in which he outlined four interrelated spiritual truths, often called the Four Noble Truths (Gyatso 2007), which summarize the causes of suffering and how to end suffering by following the Eightfold Path (Nārada 1980:74-99; Amore and Ching 2002:210-218).

He spent the rest of his life teaching and travelling throughout the northeastern part of the Indian subcontinent. He died from food poisoning at the age of 80 in Kushinagar, India. It was at this stage that he

According to the Pali Buddhist scriptures, the Four Noble Truths (or *The Four Truths of the Noble One*) were the first teachings of Gautama Buddha after attaining enlightenment. Escape from suffering is possible for those who accept and follow these Four Noble Truths which are traditionally summed up as follows: (1) life is basically suffering, or dissatisfaction (*dukkha*); (2) the origin or arising of that suffering (*samudaya*) lies in craving or grasping; (3) the cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering is possible through the cessation of craving; and (4) the way (*magga*) to cease craving and so attain escape from continual rebirth is by following Buddhist practice, known as the Noble Eightfold Path (Nanayakkara 2000:262-264).

Theravāda Buddhism was one of the many schools that started shortly after the death of the Buddha. It did not become popular until the third century BCE, when the Indian emperor King Aśoka (or Ashoka) made Theravāda Buddhism the official religion of his empire. In the same era, King Aśoka sent missionaries, including his own son, Arahat Mahinda, to Sri Lanka and other Southeast Asian countries. During the Muslim invasion of northern India around AD 1000, Buddhism began to die out in India but started to flourish in other Southeast Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, and Laos (Lynn De Silva [1974] 1980:16, 17).

While Buddhism remains most popular within Asia, its various branches are now found throughout the world. As Buddhism has spread from its roots in India to virtually every corner of the world, it has adopted and adapted local practices and beliefs. Various sources put the number of Buddhists in the world at between 230 million and 500 million (Adherents .com 2005; US Department of State 2004; Garfinkel 2005:88-109; Maps of World 2009).

The Buddhist canon consists of a vast corpus of texts that cover philosophical, devotional, and monastic matters. Each of the major divisions of Buddhism has its own distinct version of what it considers to be canonical scriptures (McDermott 1984:22-39). The Buddha did not write down his teachings and rules of discipline. At the first council (543/2 BCE), two of Buddha’s travelling companions, Ananda and Upali, recited the suttas (discourses on the doctrines) and vinaya (the monastic rules). Later another disciple recited the systematic treaties. In the first century CE, Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka wrote down the texts on palm leaves (Nigosian 2008:179; Amore and Ching 2002:220; Lily de Silva 2007:26-39; Warder 2000).
Adherents of Hinduism (Warrier 2005:134), Buddhism, Jainism (Salter 2005:174; Narayanan 2002:164-166, 176-177), and Sikhism (Shackle and Mandair 2005:1-19; Oxtoby 2002:139-141) do not believe in salvation in the sense understood by most Westerners. They do not focus on Hell or Heaven as the end of a soteriological choice, but on knowledge (King 2005:149, 153). They believe in reincarnation (Buddhism rebirth) after death. According to this belief, one's actions or karma allow one to be reborn as a higher or lower being. If one is evil and has a multitude of bad actions, one is likely to be reborn as a lower being. If one has a multitude of good actions or karma, one is likely to be reborn as a higher being, perhaps a human with higher status or in a higher caste (Padmasiri De Silva 1998:41; King 1999:67, 123, 124, 172, 173). In fact, “birth and death are not the predestined fate of a living being but a ‘corollary of action’ (karma), as it has been called by some. One who acts must sooner or later reap the effect; while experiencing an effect, one is sowing seeds anew, thus causing the next wave of life to be high or low according to the nature of one’s preceding actions” (Takakusu 1978:37).

Eventually, however, one is able to escape from samsāra, the cycle of death and rebirth, through the attainment of the highest spiritual state. This state is called moksha (or mukti) in Hinduism, and often is called Nirvāṇa (Nibbāna) in Buddhism. This state is not one of individual happiness but often a merging of oneself with collective existence (Dharmasiri 1986:19, 20). Nirvāṇa in the sutras is never conceived of as a place (such as one might conceive heaven), but rather it is the antinomy of samsāra, which itself is synonymous with ignorance (avidyā, Pāli avijjā). This said, “the liberated mind (citta) that no longer clings’ means Nibbāna” (Majjhima Nikaya 2-Att. 4.68; Nanamoli and Bodhi 1995). Liberation therefore, in Buddhism is seen as an end to suffering, rebirth, and ignorance (Dhammavihari 2003:160-166) as well as the attainment of “Happiness, Moral Perfection, Realization and Freedom” (Lily De Silva 1987:29).

Buddhism is actually a protest or radical movement directed against the hallowed ritualism and sacrificial religion cultivated by the Brahmins in Hinduism (Amore and Ching 2002:201-203; Lynn De Silva 1980:11-13). As a substitute, it offers a system of moral training and mental discipline leading to ultimate nirvāṇa. Siddharta Gautama, who discovered the means by which deliverance from suffering can be achieved, is no longer accessible; the Buddha is neither a “Savior” in the Judeo-Christian sense or a “deva” (god) in the Hindu-Buddhist sense, nor is he alive. However,
he did show the way. In this sense, the Buddha is not the agent of salvation, but Buddhism as a salvation religion is concerned with his way, that is, his message of salvation (dhamma) (Rahula 1978). “As a message [the dhamma’s] basic intent does not seem to have been to present a doctrinal or philosophical system as such, but rather to convert the hearers to a radically new mode of life, to lead people, in other words, to enter into the Path through which salvation could actually be experienced” (Reynolds 1972:16).

The Buddha should not be seen as a god, because the Buddha cannot help anyone to attain nirvāna. He is not a liberator, but rather the pointer of the way to liberation. When it comes to the matter of salvation every person is on his or her own. Nonetheless, on a practical level, many laypeople consider and exalt the Buddha as a spiritual being, and they worship him, pray to him, and expect to receive blessings from him. What makes the historical Buddha so special is his life example. He left everything that he had—his life of ease and comfort, his family and loved ones—and completely renounced worldly life in the search for truth. He completely detached himself from what he believed to be the cause of suffering. It is in this sense that Buddhists take refuge in him and observe his dharma and follow his way of liberation from suffering.

Theravāda Buddhism is basically a religion without god. It does not believe in a supreme being, although it does recognize many gods as higher beings. However, when it comes to the issue of salvation, the gods cannot help because they are beings subjected to suffering and the karmic system of samsara, the endless cycle of rebirth (Kung 1993:303). These higher beings are in need of liberation themselves (Deming 2005:39). In Theravāda Buddhism, man must save himself. The last words of the Buddha before he died were a clear indication that his disciples could no longer depend on him: “Behold, O monks, this is my last advice to you. All component things in the world are changeable. They are not lasting. Work hard to gain your own salvation” (Walsh 1995:231).

For Buddhists, religion is purely a matter of understanding and practicing the message. In that sense, personal ethics are an important part of Buddhist doctrine (Dharmasiri 1986:15-30; Premasiri 1989:36-64).

**Buddhism’s Central Concern**

Unlike many other religions, Buddhism is not concerned with the problems of the immortality of the soul (Pyysiäinen 2003: Dhammapada 1992:1.1-3; Dhammika 2009). There is no consistent notion of the afterlife, such as heaven and hell. Buddhism does not hinge upon the concept of a Creator God but upon the personal practice of ethics, meditation, and
wisdom (Sayādaw 1983). A story is told in the *Culamalunkya Sutta* that one day Malunkyaputte, one of the disciples of the Buddha, complained to the master that he had no answers to many of the important questions of life. The Buddha, as so often happened, replied with a story:

A man is wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison. His friends and relatives brought a surgeon to him. The man said, “I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble, a brahman, a merchant or a worker. I will not let the surgeon pull out the arrow until I know the name and clan of the man who wounded me . . . until I know whether he was tall or short or of middle height . . . until I know whether the bow that wounded me was a longbow or crossbow . . . until I know whether the crossbowstring that wounded me was fibre or reed or sinew or bark . . . .”

All this would not be known to the man, and he would die. (cited in Harris 2005:198; *Malunkyaputta Sutta* 2005)

The point of the story is that those who insist on knowing the answers to speculative questions about the nature of reality will die before they know the answers (see also Nithiyandananda 2002a:vii for a similar story). The Buddha is far more concerned that people live a holy life that leads to the cessation to suffering. In fact, the Buddha avoided discussing any purely theoretical or metaphysical issues, as well as questions concerning himself. The Buddha was a practical philosopher who concerned himself completely with knowing the cause of suffering and achieving *Nirvāṇa* by extinguishing the flame of desire. For him, metaphysical questions offered few benefits and did not have anything to do with the fundamentals of religion. The Buddha’s teaching is predominately practical in nature. Its chief purpose is to enlighten people about the problem of suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation (Spiro 1982:36; Gunaratna 2008:3-5; Nithiyandananda 2003a). It is, thus, human suffering that has determined the soteriological goal of Buddhism, which is characterized as how to obtain release from human suffering itself. In that way, “Buddhism is less a set of beliefs than a path, leading from suffering to the cessation of suffering, from ignorance to compassion and wisdom” (Harris 2005:198). Therefore, deliverance from suffering (*dukkha*) is the ultimate goal of Buddhism and the *Leitmotiv* of Theravāda Buddhism.

Unlike some salvation religions (Christianity, for example), in which sin is the primary concern, the primary concern of Buddhism is not with sin, but with suffering. This is not . . . because sin does not exist in Buddhism. Lying, stealing, killing, and so on—all these and more are Buddhist sins. The difference is that although Buddhism recognized
the existence of sin, unlike Christianity it does not see it as inevitable. All human beings have the capacity to become saints (arahants), and thus sinless. For Buddhism, it is not sin but suffering that is inevitable. Just as Christianity teaches that any being, however pure, remains in the sight of God a miserable sinner, so Buddhism teaches that any being (even a god), however blissful, cannot escape suffering. (Spiro 1982:38, 39)

Since suffering is a fact of life, the aim has been to search for ways and means by which suffering may be overcome (Pandit 2004).

The Four Noble Truths and How to Overcome Suffering

Buddhism began as a way to address the suffering that exists in the world, and it was not overly-focused on ultimate salvation. That said, however, there was a clear doctrine of salvation in the Buddha’s teachings: Salvation in early Buddhism was Nirvāṇa, the extinguishing of the karma that constitutes the self. Nirvāṇa is not a place or a state, but the end of rebirth.

Significantly, the Buddha said little about Nirvāṇa, because he felt that the alleviation of suffering was far more important, and that focusing on the goal of ultimate salvation would only lead to more attachments, and therefore more suffering. Rather than focus on Nirvāṇa as a goal, lay Buddhists were encouraged to give donations of goods, services, or money to monks or monasteries; to chant or copy sutras; and to engage in other activities in order to gain merit that could lead to a more desirable rebirth. This would bring them closer to enlightenment. The Buddha developed his thesis in four parts, enunciating in each part a principle, which he called a Noble Truth (Nanayakkara 2000:262-264; Story 1968). The Four Noble Truths outline Buddhist soteriology: they describe suffering (dukkha) and its causes, the possibility of its cessation, and the way to its cessation, that is, the Noble Eightfold Path (Nithiyanandam 2002b:355-389).

All Life is Suffering (The First Noble Truth)

The first Noble Truth (Dukkha-ariya sacca) is generally translated as “Noble Truth of Suffering” and has been interpreted to state that suffering is a universal fact. Because of this emphasis, Westerners especially have regarded Buddhism as pessimistic. But dukkha is a highly philosophical term (Nanayakkara 1979:696; see also Rahula 1978:16, 17).

According to the Buddha, whatever life we lead, it has the nature of some aspect of suffering (dukkha). Even our present so-called happiness is only transitory in nature. That is, we can only find temporary happiness and pleasure in life (Mahāvagga I:9). At first glance this seems exceedingly
depressing and negative. However, even when you really feel fulfilled there will be that subtle, all-pervasive undercurrent of tension—the realization that no matter how great the moment of joy may be, it is going to end. No matter how much we have gained, we will lose some of it or will spend the rest of our days guarding what we have gotten or scheming how to get more. Ultimately we are going to die and lose everything. Because of that, life is transitory.

It is true that the Pali word for *dukkha* in the ordinary sense means “suffering,” “pain,” “sorrow,” and “misery” (Keown 2003:81), “but the term *dukkha* as the First Noble Truth, which represents the Buddha’s view of life and the world, has a deeper philosophical meaning and connotes enormously wider senses . . . such as ‘imperfection’, ‘impermanence’, ‘emptiness’, ‘insubstantiality’” (Rahula1978:17). When the Buddha declares that all life is *dukkha*, he does not mean that all life is suffering and nothing less, but “refers to the unsatisfactory nature and the insecurity of all conditional phenomena, which on account of their impermanence, are all liable to suffering” (Nyānatiloka 1980:65). Buddhism in this sense is seen as neither pessimistic nor optimistic but teaches that truth lies midway between both of them in real life. The Buddha does not deny that there is happiness in life.

The Arising of *Dukkha* (The Second Noble Truth)

The Second Noble Truth (*dukkha*-samudaya-ariyasacca) deals with the arising or origin of *dukkha* (called *sumudaya*). The best known definition of the Second Truth can be found in the *Mahāvagga* (of the *Vinaya* *Pittaka*, “The Book of the Discipline”): “It is this ‘thirst’ (craving, *tanhā*) which produces re-existence and re-becoming, and which is bound up with passionate greed, and which finds fresh delight now here and now there, namely, (1) thirst for sense-pleasure (*kāma-tanhā*), (2) thirst for existence and becoming (*bhava-tanhā*), and (3) thirst for non-existence (self-annihilation, *vibhava-tanhā*)” (cited in Rahula 1978:29; see also the *Samyutta-nikāya* V:421; *Digha Nikāya* 22; Bodhi 2000:1843-47; Nyānatiloka 1980:218.). “According to the Buddha’s analysis, all the troubles and strife in the world, from little personal quarrels in families to great wars between nations and countries, arise out of this selfish ‘thirst.’” (*Majjhima-nikāya* [PTS edition], cited in Rahula 1978:30). “Here the term ‘thirst’ includes not only desire for, and attachment to, sense pleasures, wealth and power, but also desire for, and attachment to, ideas and ideals, views, opinions, theories, conceptions and beliefs (*dhamma-tanhā*)” (Rahula 1978:30).
The End of Suffering (The Third Noble Truth)

Since the Buddhist concept of suffering arises from a person’s clinging desire (Pali tanhā, Sanskrit samudaya or trishna) to that which is inevitably impermanent, changing, and perishable, there is a need to end that craving (nirodha) and free oneself from all desire (Burton 2004:22). The Third Noble Truth deals with the elimination or cessation of the root of dukkha, which we have seen earlier is “thirst” (tanhā). This is achieved by eliminating all delusion, thereby reaching a liberated state of Enlightenment (bodhi) and Nirvāna (nirvāna is the more popular Sanskrit term of the Pali term of Nibbāna).

What is Nirvāna? Extensive descriptions and definitions have been proposed, but most of them have been more confusing than clarifying. The reason for that is simple, according to Buddhist scholars such as Rahula (1978:35): “Human language is too poor to express the real nature of the Absolute Truth or Ultimate Reality.”

Nibbāna is the ultimate goal of Buddhism. It amounts to perfect happiness, the liberation from the cyclic process of dukkha. In early Buddhism it was considered the highest goal, which every individual ought to attain sooner or later. This ultimate goal is without dispute (Vajiraāna 1971). However, others have perceived Nibbāna differently. One interpretation sees Nibbāna as a transcendental reality beyond any form of conceptualization or logical thinking. “It is a metaphysical reality, something absolute, eternal and uncompounded, a noumenal behind the phenomenal” (Premasiri n.d.:3). Others have interpreted Nibbāna to mean the “extinction of life, an escape from the cycle of suffering which in the ultimate analysis is equivalent to eternal death” (3). Because of this, many scholars have voiced the opinion that Buddhism is an “otherworldly,” a “life-denying,” and a “salvation religion” that has nothing to do with this world (Story 1971; Coomaraswarmy 1975:48).

To call the Buddhist ideal of Nibbāna a concept that is lacking in social and worldly concerns is only true if by “social and worldly concerns” one understands the involvement in acts of wickedness, greed, and folly. Buddhism concentrates on man’s character traits, according to which a morally good person is a person whose mind feels social concern and will do what is right as a matter of course (Aronson 1980, especially chapter 6).

The Buddha instructed the first 60 of his disciples who had attained Nibbāna with the following words: “Go ye forth and wander for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, for the gain and the welfare of gods and men. Let not two of you go the same way” (Vinaya 1:21).
A person whose noble mind is free from sensuous intoxication and negligent behavior, reflecting patience and gentle demeanor, and restraining himself from evil, plays a vital part in society by giving it moral direction and guidance (Dīghā-Nikāya 3.191).

The Buddha did not claim that he invented the Eightfold Path. He himself called it purānam aṇjasam ("the ancient path"), trodden by other wise people before him. In a very fitting figure of speech, the Buddha said: “Just as if Brethren, a man faring through the forest, through the great woods, should see an ancient path, an ancient road traversed by men of former days. And he were to go along it, and going along it, he should see an ancient city, an ancient prince’s domain, wherein dwelt men of former days, having gardens, groves, pools, foundations of walls, a goodly spot. . . . Even so have I, brethren, seen an ancient road traversed by the rightly Enlightened Ones of former times” (cited in Weeraratne 1991:46). In other words, Nirvāna and the Path that leads to its realization have always been there, but were covered by the veil of ignorance. The Buddha merely re-discovered Nirvāna as he ventured on the Path. He was the pioneer (the ādimapurisa). Having walked and discovered the goal and the path, the Buddha now used his experience to show how others may follow that same Path and reach the identical goal he had reached (Weeraratne 1991:46).

The Way (Magga) Leading to the Cessation of Suffering (The Fourth Noble Truth)

Reaching this liberated state (that is the cessation of dukkha) is achieved by following the Eightfold Path (Ariya-Atthangika-Magga) laid out by the Buddha in his Fourth Noble Truth (Nithiyanandam 2002b:391-466). This way is also known as the “Middle Path” (Majjhima Patipada), because it avoids two extremes. This is in clear contrast with the Buddha’s own experience and misconceptions which were current during his own quest for truth. In the first discourse after his Enlightenment (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta—“Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion”) he explained to the five disciples who had deserted him when he abandoned the path of self-mortification that there are two extreme courses to avoid. On the one hand is that of sensual indulgence, which is “base, low, vulgar, impure and unprofitable,” and on the other hand the practice of extreme physical asceticism, which is “painful, impure, vain and unprofitable” (Samyutta Nikāya 56:11). In contrast to these extremes stands the
middle way discovered by [the Buddha, that] avoids both these extremes; it gives vision, it gives knowledge, and it leads to peace, to direct acquaintance, to discovery, to Nibbāna. And what is that middle way? It is simply the noble eightfold path, that is to say, right view, right intention; right speech, right action, right livelihood; right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. That is the middle way discovered by a Perfect One, which gives vision, which gives knowledge, and which leads to peace, to direct acquaintance, to discovery, to Nibbāna. (Samyutta Nikaya 56:11)

This Middle Path is composed of eight categories or divisions (Ledi et al. 1998; Nyānatiloka 1968; Piyadassi 1979) and there are three themes into which the Path is divided: good moral conduct (Understanding, Thought, Speech); meditation and mental development (Action, Livelihood, Effort), and wisdom or insight (Mindfulness and Concentration) (see table 1). Each section starts with the word samyak (in Sanskrit) or sammā (in Pali) meaning “thoroughly, properly or rightly” (Rhys Davids and Stede 1989:695, 696; Nyanatiloka 1980:110), most often translated as “right” in English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headings</th>
<th>Duties or Principles of Conduct</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wisdom or Enlightenment</td>
<td>1. Right View (sammā ditthi): Right Understanding (the Four Noble Truths)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Paññā)</td>
<td>2. Right Thought (sammā sankappa): Freedom from all ill will, lust, cruelty, and untruthfulness</td>
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<td>Ethical and Virtuous</td>
<td>3. Right Speech (sammā vaca): Abstaining from untruthfulness, tale-bearing, harsh language and</td>
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<td>Conduct (Śīla)</td>
<td>vain talk.</td>
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<td>4. Right Action (sammā kamanta): Abstaining from killing, stealing and sexual misconduct</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Right Livelihood (sammā ajiva): Earning a living in a way not harmful to any living thing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concentration (Samādhi)</td>
<td>6. Right Effort (sammā vayama): Avoiding evil thoughts and overcoming them; arousing good</td>
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<td>thoughts and maintaining them</td>
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<td>7. Right Mindfulness (sammā sati): Paying vigilant attention to every state of the body, feelings,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and mind</td>
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<td></td>
<td>8. Right Concentration (sammā samadhi): Concentrating on a single object so as to induce certain</td>
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<td></td>
<td>states of consciousness in deep meditation</td>
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Source: Adapted from Lynn De Silva (1980:53); Saddhatissa (1971:71ff); Weeraratne (1991).
The practice of the Eightfold Path is understood in two ways: (1) as requiring either simultaneous development with all eight items practiced in parallel (Rahula 1978:46) or (2) as a progressive series of stages through which the practitioner moves, the culmination of one leading to the beginning of another (Bodhi 1994: chapter 2). The practice of these eight factors aims to promote and perfect the three essentials of Buddhist discipline: Wisdom (Paññā), made up of right view and right intention; Ethical Conduct (Śila), made up of right speech, right action, and right livelihood; and Concentration (Samādhi), made up of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. These three groups represent three stages of training: higher moral discipline, higher consciousness, and higher wisdom. In fact, the whole of the Buddha’s teaching is summarized in this Path.

Wisdom or Enlightenment (Paññā): wisdom should not be translated only as “wisdom,” but also as “understanding,” “discernment,” “cognitive acuity,” or “know-how” (Rhys Davids and Stede 1989:390; see Dhammapada 256-258, 268, 269). “Paññā as realization or pure thought is an understanding that goes beyond the range of ordinary empirical knowledge (ñāna). One of the limitations of commonsense, everyday knowledge, is that, although it contributes to salvation, it still does not free one from upadhika (‘showing attachment to rebirth’)” (Matthews 1983:107). In a sense Paññā provides a sense of direction to see things as they really are. Paññā is the wisdom that is able to extinguish afflictions and bring about enlightenment.

[It] sees the true nature of reality with an experience that is far more profound than seeing painfulness, ignorance, or craving through ordinary knowledge (ñāna), . . . although it is causally related to that kind of knowledge. Wisdom proceeds beyond the skin of things, penetrating the genesis of becoming, providing the individual with more than just general understanding of how ignorance and craving block insight into momentariness of the phenomenal world. It constitutes a whole ‘diagnosis of spiritual illness,’ to use the language of Caroline Rhys Davids. (C. Rhys Davids 1931:55, cited in Matthews 1983:107)

“It is by means of this cognition that one reaches the last stage of the Buddhist Path, the stage of paññā, Wisdom. ‘Wisdom’ for Buddhism refers to a very specific form of knowledge, viz. knowledge by means of which salvation can be achieved; and this knowledge is not intellectual—no amount of intellectual knowledge can lead to Deliverance—but intuitive” (Spiro 1982:52; Premasiri 2004:290-296). The two factors of Right Thought and Right Understanding contribute to such wisdom.

Since the Buddhist way of life begins with the mind and ends with the mind transcended, the first requirement is to uproot ignorance, to have
the right view. This training in wisdom is designed to awaken the human faculty to penetrative understanding that sees things “as they really are,” that is the nature of existence as presented in the Four Noble Truths (Story [1968] 1983). The Buddha explained it this way: “What is Right Understanding? Truly, it is to understand suffering, the cause of suffering, the existence of suffering and the way to its extinction” (Dīgha Nikāya 22). This understanding is more than knowledge (which is usually an accumulation of memory and an intellectual understanding of an issue based on available data), but it is deep understanding called “penetration” (paṭivedha) (Nyānatiloka 1980:173), which is “seeing a thing in its true nature, without name and label. Right view is the cognitive aspect of wisdom. This penetration is possible only when the mind is free from all impurities and is fully developed through meditation” (Rahula 1978:49; see also Nanamoli and Bodhi 1991). This shows that Buddhism relies more upon an attempt to understand the world than to simply have faith in scriptures or revelations (Anālayo 2006b:675-79).

Wisdom also includes right thought and can also be known as “right intention” that is free from greed and lust, free from ill-will, hatred, cruelty, and violence in this world (Nyānatiloka 1980:110). Right Thought is directed toward the renunciation of these worldly things and a greater commitment to the spiritual path leading to Nibbāna. While right view refers to the cognitive aspect of wisdom, right intention refers to the ability to make conscious choices or decisions. Right intention can be described best as commitment to ethical and mental self-improvement. It is significant that right intention is the second category in the path, “between right view and the triad of moral factors that begins with right speech, because the mind’s intentional function forms the crucial link connecting our cognitive perspective with our modes of active engagement in the world. On the one side actions always point back to the thoughts from which they spring. Thought is the forerunner of action, directing body and speech, stirring them into activity, using them as its instruments for expressing its aims and ideals” (Bodhi 1994).

Ethical and Virtuous Conduct (Śīla): though the principles laid down in this section restrain immoral actions and promote good conduct, their ultimate purpose is not so much ethical as spiritual. Ethical conduct is not prescribed merely as guides to action, but primarily as aids to moral discipline and mental purification (Premasiri 2007:122). As a necessary measure for human well-being, ethics has its own justification in the Buddha’s teaching, and its importance cannot be underrated. But in the special context of the Noble Eightfold Path, ethical principles are subordinate to the path’s governing goal: final deliverance from suffering.
The English word “morality” and its derivatives suggest a sense of obligation and constraint quite foreign to the Buddhist conception of sila; this connotation probably enters from the theistic background to Western ethics. Buddhism, with its non-theistic framework, grounds its ethics, not on the notion of obedience, but on that of harmony. In fact, the commentaries explain the word sila by another word, samadhanā, meaning “harmony” or “coordination.” (Bodhi 1994)

In order to achieve and reach this “harmony,” three important factors in the Noble Eightfold Path must be practiced: namely, right speech, right action, and right occupation or right livelihood.

These three path factors may be treated together, as collectively they make up the second of the three divisions of the path, the division of moral discipline (śila).

The Buddha divides right speech into four components: abstaining from false speech (Anguttara Nikaya 10:176), abstaining from slanderous speech (Majjhima Nikaya 61 [Ambalatthika-rahulovada Sutta]), abstaining from harsh speech (Anguttara Nikaya 10:176), and abstaining from idle chatter (Nyānatiloka 1968: 50, 51). “When one abstains from these forms of wrong and harmful speech one naturally has to speak the truth, has to use words that are friendly and benevolent, pleasant and gentle, meaningful and useful. One should not speak carelessly: speech should be at the right time and place. If one cannot say something useful, one should keep ‘noble silence’” (Rahula 1978:47).

Sometimes samma kammanta is also translated as “right conduct, right behaviour” (Rhys Davids and Stede 1989:695). This second ethical principle refers to deeds that involve bodily actions. The Buddha mentions three components of right action: abstaining from taking life (panatipata veramani), abstaining from taking what is not given (adinnadana veramani), and abstaining from unlawful sexual misconduct (kamesu miccha-cara veramani). The canon states: “And what is right action? Abstaining from taking life, from stealing, and from sexual misconduct: This is called right action” (Saccaviḥanga Sutta).

“Abstaining from taking life” has a wider application than simply refraining from killing other human beings. The precept forbids killing any sentient or conscious being. A “sentient being” (pani satta) is a living being endowed with mind or consciousness; for practical purposes, this means human beings, animals, and insects. Plants are not considered to be sentient beings.

The second ethical principle also forbids taking what is not given—which includes stealing, robbery, fraud, deceitfulness, and dishonesty—and sexual misconduct. Positively formulated, right action means to act...
kindly and compassionately, to be honest, to respect the belongings of others, and to keep sexual relationships harmless to others (McCleary 2007:55, 56).

For the lay followers of the Buddha, the explanation is more elaborate: And how is one made impure in three ways by bodily action? There is the case where a certain person takes life, is a hunter, bloody-handed, devoted to killing and slaying, showing no mercy to living beings. He takes what is not given. He takes, in the manner of a thief, things in a village or a wilderness that belong to others and have not been given by them. He engages in sensual misconduct. He gets sexually involved with those who are protected by their mothers, their fathers, their brothers, their sisters, their relatives, or their Dhamma; those with husbands, those who entail punishments, or even those crowned with flowers by another man. This is how one is made impure in three ways by bodily action. ([Cunda Kammaraputta Sutta] [AN 10.176])

In other words, unwholesome actions lead to unsound states of mind, while wholesome actions lead to sound states of mind. 

**Right Livelihood** (or right occupation) is about avoiding certain occupations that may not cause one to be directly involved in transgressions against some aspect of the Eightfold Path, but that would implicate someone indirectly in such transgression. Right livelihood means that one should earn one’s living in a righteous way and that wealth should be gained legally and peacefully (Weeraratne 2006:679-681). The Buddha mentions four specific activities that harm other beings and that should be avoided for this reason: (1) dealing in weapons, (2) dealing in living beings (including raising animals for slaughter as well as slave trade and prostitution), (3) working in meat production and butchery, and (4) selling intoxicants and poisons, such as alcohol and drugs. Furthermore, any other occupation that would violate the principles of right speech and right action should be avoided. “For a genuine Buddhist, then, one’s everyday activities, by way of thought, word, and deed, are more important than anything else in life” (Bogoda 1994).

These three factors (Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood) of the Eightfold Path constitute Ethical Conduct. It should be realized that the Buddhist ethical and moral conduct aims at promoting a happy and harmonious life both for the individual and for society. This moral conduct is considered as the dispensable foundation for all higher spiritual attainments. No spiritual development is possible without this moral basis. (Rahula 1978:47)
Concentration (Samādhi): Samādhi is usually translated as “concentration” and represents a mental quality or state of mind, covering not only the concept of tranquility but also the development of insight (Anālayo 2006a: 650-656). Since the Nirvanic goal is the release from the cycle of births and death or samsāra, this is achieved through the perfection of wisdom (pāññā or ñāna), which gives an insight into the real nature of life (which is generated through samādhi or perfect concentration) (Dhirasekera 1979:208, 209). It is at this stage of mental discipline, generally called trance or contemplation, that “passionate desires and unwholesome thoughts like sensuous lust, ill-will, languor, worry, restlessness, and skeptical doubt are discarded, and feelings of joy and happiness are maintained, along with certain mental activities” (Rahula 1978:48, 49). This training of the mind is done through right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation.

Right effort is a category that deals with avoiding or eliminating evil and unwholesome things from your life, and with developing and maintaining through your own effort wholesome things, such as good conduct and a clean mind (Nyanatiloka 1980:111). Right effort is all about attitude—trying to eliminate any evil that has already developed, trying to prevent evil that might develop, trying to maintain any good which has already developed, and trying to promote any good that might yet develop (Story 1968:62). The basic idea is to keep you pointed in the right direction by focusing upon the principles of fostering good and opposing evil, regardless of what form they might take. Right effort can be seen as a prerequisite for the other principles of the path. Without effort, which is in itself an act of will, nothing can be achieved, whereas misguided effort distracts the mind from its task, and confusion will be the consequence (McCleary 2007:55, 56).

Right Mindfulness is a principle of staying aware of what you are doing at all times. (Sati can also be translated as “awareness” in the sense of a mental quality.) Make yourself aware of your deeds, words, and thoughts so that you can be free of desire and sorrow. By staying mindful of body, feelings, and mind, it is easier to keep doing what is right and avoid doing what is wrong (Anālayo 2007a:7-12).

Right mindfulness is the mental ability to see things as they are, with clear consciousness. Right mindfulness is anchored in clear perception, and it penetrates impressions without getting carried away. Right mindfulness enables us to be aware of the process of conceptualization in a way that we actively observe and control the way our thoughts go. The Buddha has further described this as the “four foundations of mindfulness” (cattaro satipatthana): (1) contemplation of the body, (2) contemplation of feeling (repulsive, attractive, or neutral), (3) contemplation of the state of mind,
and (4) contemplation of the phenomena (Anālayo 2007a:11, 12; Bodhi 1994). The Buddha says that the four foundations of mindfulness form “the only way that leads to the attainment of purity, to the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, to the end of pain and grief, to the entering upon the right path and the realization of Nibbāna” (Maha-satipatthana Sutta [Digha Nikaya 22]). They are called “the only way” (ekayano maggo), not for the purpose of setting forth a narrow dogmatism, but to indicate that the attainment of liberation can only come from a deep level of contemplation, practiced through “right mindfulness” (Bodhi 1994).

Right Meditation (Sammā samādhi) can also be translated as “right concentration” (Rhys Davids and Stede 1989:685; Nyanatiloka 1980:191) that is, training your mind to focus on a single object without wavering. Concentration in this context can be described as one-pointedness of mind, meaning a state where all mental faculties are unified and directed onto one particular object. Right concentration for the purpose of the Eightfold Path means “wholesome concentration,” that is, concentration on wholesome thoughts and actions (Vajirañana 1975). The Buddhist method of choice to develop right concentration is through the practice of meditation. Right meditation is about training the mind to improve both mental and spiritual discipline. Only by attaining an ability to focus on a single object can a person also attain the sufficient calm and peace necessary for enlightenment (Sayādaw 2007; Coleman 2008:8, 9).

**Summary of Salvation in Buddhism**

These eight factors summarize the Buddha’s teaching and its practice. They are the very heart of the Buddha-Dhamma. It is not enough to know and admire the Dhamma; it must be practiced in daily life, for the difficulty of knowing what is right is nothing compared to the difficulty of putting it into practice. We really know something only when we do it repeatedly, when we make it part of our nature. The practical side of the Dhamma is the threefold training in morality, concentration, and wisdom, which collectively constitute the Noble Eightfold Path, the “middle way” discovered by the Blessed One for the realization of Nibbāna. (Bogoda 1994)

Following the Noble Eightfold Path requires that a person do this list of eight things. Salvation is through what a Buddhist does. It is achieved through human works. Following this Path is a way of life that must be followed and practiced by each individual. “It is self-discipline in body, word and mind, self-development and self-purification. It has nothing to do with belief, prayer, worship or ceremony. In that sense, it has nothing which popularly can be called ‘religious’” (Rahula 1978:49, 50).
Original and Theravāda teaching indicate that a Buddhist can, for the most part, help fellow seekers only by showing them an example of dedication to meditation and self-denial. Mahāyāna teaching emphasizes “compassion,” which involves aiding people in all areas of their lives, even though such aid does not lead directly toward *nirvāṇa*. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, salvation does not depend solely upon one’s own effort. Good merit can be transferred from one person to others. No one can exist by himself physically and spiritually. Mahāyānists regard the egoistic approach to salvation as unrealistic, impossible, and unethical (Cho 2000:81-84). They call themselves Mahāyāna because they see their path as “larger and superior,” and they refer to Theravādan Buddhists as Hinayana, that is the “narrow and inferior path.” Instead of seeking *Nirvāṇa* just for oneself in order to become an *arhat*, the disciple of Mahāyāna Buddhism aims to become a *bodhisattva*, a celestial being that postpones his own entrance into *parinirvāṇa* (final extinction) in order to help other humans attain it. Such a person swears not to enter *Nirvāṇa* until he fulfills this noble mission. Here is a part of a *bodhisattva*’s vow:

I would rather take all this suffering on myself than to allow sentient beings to fall into hell. I should be a hostage to those perilous places—hells, animal realms, the nether world—as a ransom to rescue all sentient beings in states of woe and enable them to gain liberation. I vow to protect all sentient beings and never abandon them. What I say is sincerely true, without falsehood. Why? Because I have set my mind on enlightenment in order to liberate all sentient beings; I do not seek the unexcelled Way for my own sake. (*Garland Sutra* 23)

The *bodhisattva* beings help humans work out their liberation. Therefore, a *bodhisattva* (“Buddha-to-be”) rather than an *arhat* becomes the ideal one seeks to achieve the religious discipline. The *bodhisattva* beings help humans work out their salvation. In the process of obtaining this goal, one realizes that all beings can benefit each other because they all depend upon each other. Salvation depends on the help of others. A good teacher can assist students on the path of salvation (Amore and Ching 2002:243-247; Cheng 1996:61).

Another savior concept that has been developed in all three stands of Buddhism is the concept of the future Buddha, who at this time is living in the *Tusita* (“joyful”) deva-world (*Mahavamsa* XXXII:72) and will return sometime from between 500 to many millions of years after the death of the Siddhartha Gautama or the historical Buddha. This future Buddha, or *Maitreya* (“loving and kindly one”) will put salvation more easily within the grasp of the people (Nanayakkara 2002:674, 675; Arthur 1997:43-57).
Christianity and Buddhism Contrasted

At the end of such a long discussion on salvation in Buddhism it is very tempting to try to determine which religion—Buddhism or Christianity—is a “better” option for salvation. The fact that I am writing and living as a Christian is an indication of which option I have chosen as my own solution to life. A far more important and significant question in the context of Christian mission should be how to build a bridge to make salvation attractive and understandable to Buddhists. Dean Halverson in his book *The Compact Guide to World Religions* (1996) has contrasted Buddhism and Christianity in order to show some of the large intellectual and spiritual differences and, therefore, barriers that exist between both systems—in regard to God, humanity, the problem (of sin); the solution and the means to solve this problem; and the final outcome (see Table 2). The most striking difference is that in Buddhism human beings are “on their own.” There is no power beyond themselves, and *Nirvāna* is the “end” for Buddhists. In contrast, heaven is the beginning of something more glorious for Christians.

Buddha and Jesus

The founder of Buddhism clearly had a beginning and an end. The Siddhharta Gautma was born as a prince into a wealthy Hindu family. Though he achieved his “Great Enlightenment” through meditation and became “The Enlightened One” (or the Buddha), he finally reached his end, he is no longer alive. Unlike the Buddha, Jesus is the “The Ancient of Days,” who has no beginning or ending, one who is the truth and does not need further enlightenment (Col 1:15-20; John 1:9-14, 17; 17:3; 20:31; Rom1:4; Jude 1:25; Heb 13:8; Rev 22:13). Because of his special relationship to God (John 3:16; 6:44; 14:6, 9), reconciliation between God and man can be achieved through him. Jesus can claim to “be the way” by which salvation and eternal life can be received (John 14:6; 5:35), whereas the Buddha merely claimed to point to the way by which we could escape suffering.
**Table. Buddhism and Christianity Contrasted**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM</th>
<th>MAHAYĀNA BUDDHISM</th>
<th>CHRISTIANITY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>GOD</strong></td>
<td>Nirvāṇa, an abstract Void.</td>
<td>Nirvāṇa, an abstract Void, but also an</td>
<td>A personal God who is self-existent and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>undifferentiated Buddha essence.</td>
<td>changeless.</td>
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<td><strong>HUMANITY</strong></td>
<td>An impermanent collection of aggregates</td>
<td>An impermanent collection of aggregates.</td>
<td>Made in God’s image. Personal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>For some, personal</td>
<td>existence has value.</td>
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<td>existence continues for a</td>
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<td>while in the Pure Land.</td>
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<td><strong>THE PROBLEM</strong></td>
<td>We suffer because we desire that which is</td>
<td>Same as Theravāda Buddhism.</td>
<td>We suffer because of the</td>
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<td>temporary, which causes us to continue in the</td>
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<td>consequences of our sin. But we also</td>
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<td>suffer because, being made in</td>
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<td>illusion of the existence of the individual</td>
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<td>self.</td>
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<td><strong>THE SOLUTION</strong></td>
<td>To cease all desire in</td>
<td>To become aware of the</td>
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<td>order to realize the</td>
<td>Buddha-nature within.</td>
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<td>nonexistence of the self,</td>
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<td>thus finding permanence.</td>
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<td><strong>THE MEANS</strong></td>
<td>Self-reliance. We must</td>
<td>Self-reliance. The means vary from that of</td>
<td>Reliance on God. We</td>
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<td>follow the Middle Path and accrue karmic</td>
<td>following the Eightfold Path, to emptying</td>
<td>must repent of our sins and</td>
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<td>merit.</td>
<td>the mind, to accruing merit by</td>
<td>trust in the saving work of Jesus</td>
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<td>performing rituals, to</td>
<td>Christ.</td>
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<td>realizing the Buddha-</td>
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<td>nature within, to</td>
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<td>depending on the merit</td>
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<td>of a bodhisattva.</td>
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<td><strong>THE OUTCOME</strong></td>
<td>To enter Nirvāṇa where the “ego” is</td>
<td>The outcome varies from</td>
<td>Our existence as individuals survives</td>
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<td>extinguished.</td>
<td>that of returning as a bodhisattva in order</td>
<td>death, and we are fulfilled as we are in</td>
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<td>to guide others, to entering</td>
<td>eternal fellowship with a loving and</td>
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<td>Nirvāṇa, to living in a Pure Land from which</td>
<td>personal God.</td>
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<td>one can enter nirvāṇa.</td>
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Salvation Contrasted

In Theravāda Buddhism “salvation” is only available to monks. A layperson needs to be reborn in a future life as a monk (bhikkhu) to be able to attain Nirvāna. But such a life is a constant struggle against evil and evil desires, a battle which has to be fought alone (because the Buddha merely showed the way).

In Christianity salvation is not reliance on one’s own strength but has been achieved through Christ’s own sacrifice when he died on the cross on our behalf. This salvation is free and it is a gift of God for all. Salvation does not result from anything that an individual does or can do; we simply receive it by trusting in what Christ has already done for us (John 3:16; Gal 3:28; 4:7; Eph 4:3; Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12).

There is no division in who is able to gain salvation in Christianity. Salvation is available to everyone. It does not exclude certain groups or sects. In fact, believing in Christ unifies us into a body that functions under the authority of Jesus Christ and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. As people surrender their lives to Jesus, there is no longer the need to fight the battle against darkness alone; we can trust in His power. It is this assurance that can bring hope and light into the lives of many Buddhists who are often in constant fear, not only of the future but especially of the present. It is often the fear of the devas or local gods that will lead people in Buddhist countries to turn to magic (hūniyamism), astrology, and demon worship.

Because of that, many Buddhists turn to what is commonly called “Folk Religion.” In such a setting people are less involved in discovering the ultimate truths and reaching Nirvāna; instead they are concerned with solving the problems of everyday life, such as sickness, business deals, or simply getting enough food for the family. For example, “to solve problems like these, the peoples of the Tibetan Buddhist world rely on the shamanistic and animistic beliefs of their remote ancestors. These beliefs, mixed with some of the simpler teachings of Buddhism, make up the everyday religion of most people in the Tibetan Buddhist world” (Tsering 1988:102, 103).

Conclusion

There is an interesting story being told in Buddhist literature that might help Christians to convey their understanding of salvation to Buddhists and to illustrate the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice for His people:

Prince Mahanama, of the Shakya clan and a cousin of the Buddha, had great faith in the teachings of the Buddha and was one of the most faithful followers.
At the time a violent king named Virudaka of Kosala conquered the Sakys clan. Prince Mahanama went to the King and sought the lives of his people, but the King would not listen to him. He then proposed that the King let as many prisoners escape as could run away while he himself remained underwater in the nearby pond.

To this the King assented, thinking that the time would be very short for him to be able to stay underwater.

The gate of the castle was opened as Mahanama dived into the water and the people rushed for safety. But Mahanama did not come up, sacrificing his life for the lives of his people by tying his hair to the underwater root of a willow tree. (The Teaching of Buddha 1966:254, 255, cited in Halverson 1996:66, 67)

This simple story conveys a number of images that can illustrate to Buddhists (from their own literature) the significance of Christ’s sacrificial death.

All of us are enslaved—perhaps not to a wicked king but we are in bondage to sin (John 8:34; Rom 6:6, 16). Through the death of Mahanama all the members of the Shakya clan were freed from bondage of the wicked king and correspondingly, Christ died to free all of humanity from the bondage of sin (Matt 20:28, Rom 5:18, 19). Mahanama voluntarily died because he was motivated by love for his people, so Christ also freely gave up His life out of love for all humanity (John 10:11-18; 13:1, 24). Salvation is not something we can earn, but it is free for the taking. Freedom from bondage for the Sakya clan was gained by simply running from the kingdom of the wicked king. People can receive the gift of salvation by placing their faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ (Rom 3:20-24; Eph 2:8, 9) (Halverson 1996:67). Salvation does not depend on our human efforts of doing good works (such as rituals and merit making in order to achieve “good karma” (Amore and Ching 2002:232, 233). In fact “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isa 64:6).

The reason that as Christians we can face the future with confidence is the fact that Jesus, our Savior, is alive. His remains are not housed in a grave or a temple (such as the “Temple of the Tooth” in Kandy, Sri Lanka, where people come to “worship” the tooth of the Buddha). Christ’s tomb is empty, whereas the Buddha and other religious founders are dead. Because Jesus is alive we have hope not only for the future but for our daily living as well.
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