Lesson 10

Buddhism

If some members of the class have completed the assignment of presenting the gospel and other Christian truth to a member of a religious group being studied in this course, they should briefly report their experience to the class.

The class leader should ask the review questions from the previous lesson, and let students answer. Then a few questions from other previous lessons should be asked.

To begin the lesson material for this session, someone in the class should read the paragraph below entitled “First Encounter.”

First Encounter

Yeo grew up in a Buddhist family in the Philippines. He remembers times when it was not safe to go to the marketplace because Muslims were killing Buddhists for their religion. Yeo sometimes went with his mother to the Buddhist temple to burn incense. One day his sister was sick and dying. A doctor was there but could not help. Yeo’s mother prayed frantically for Buddha to help her.

Read the assigned passage aloud together. Several students could take turns reading verses. Have a few minutes of silence for students to write, then let several students tell what they wrote.

Assigned Passage: Genesis 3.

Write a paragraph summarizing this scripture passage.

What does the passage tell us about God, man, sin, and the world? Make a list of statements.
Study the information provided about the religious group. The leader or another person in the group could read and explain the material to the group. Allow different students to read and explain the quotations in the boxes.

When you see the sign ? ask the question and let the students discuss the answer.

During this part of the study, it is not necessary to look up the Bible verses marked ☳. Stop before coming to the information in blocks toward the end of the lesson.

**Origin of Buddhism**

Buddhism was developed by Siddhartha Gautama. Nothing was written about the life of Siddhartha Gautama until 400 years after his death, so details about his life are not certain.

Gautama was born at around 563 BC. He was the son of a king of a small part of India. As a young man he escaped his keepers to get out and see the world. He saw people in poverty and disease, and concluded that life is essentially sorrow and suffering.

Gautama had an experience which he said enlightened him about the nature of reality. The word *Buddha* means “enlightened.” Gautama is often called “the Buddha.” ☳

**Reincarnation**

Gautama and most of the people of his culture already believed in reincarnation before he developed his new religion. Reincarnation means that a person is born again as another person or a creature such as an animal or insect. By reincarnation a person lives many lives.

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1 The Bible tells us not to trust a message from a spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus Christ. The enlightenment that Gautama received was false (1 John 4:3).
If a person does mostly good deeds in his life, he earns karma. By earning enough karma, he can be born into a better life the next time.  

Because life is so miserable, Gautama felt that living many lives is not a good thing. He believed that a person should have the goal of escaping the cycle of reincarnation.

A serious Buddhist follows the Buddhist way of life in order to rid himself of all desires. If he succeeds, he will not desire or enjoy anything or any human relationship. When he dies he will enter nirvana instead of being born as another living thing.

How is the Hindu concept of a perfect life different from the Christian concept?

Nirvana means nothingness, the end of self, like the blowing out of a candle.

Buddhists believe in endless cycles of time, with no beginning, no ending, and no events that change things permanently.

Buddhism does not believe in a supreme God who is a person. They believe in an ultimate reality that is the total of everything that exists. Therefore, Buddhists meditate, but they do not pray, because they do not believe that there is a God who speaks and listens. Buddhists have writings that are called prayers, but they do not address anyone. Gods of any kind are not important to Buddhism.

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2 The Bible says that our works do not earn acceptance with God or pay for our sins (Romans 3:20).
3 For the Christian, human relationships are very important and bring joy (1 Thessalonians 3:12).
4 The Bible says there are key events and that time will not always continue as it is now (Revelation 10:6).
5 It is a great privilege for the Christian to pray in confidence that God hears (1 Timothy 2:8).
Present Influence

Today there are many different sects of Buddhism. They are not united in a world-wide organization.

The number of professing Buddhists in the world who purposely follow Buddhist teachings is at least 350 million. The number of people who call themselves Buddhist because they have been taught it and are not loyal to a different religion would be more than a billion.

Many people call themselves Buddhists but select certain teachings that they like and ignore others. Many professed Buddhists do not participate in organized groups.

Writings considered holy scriptures by Buddhists would fill 1000’s of volumes. Therefore, each sect focuses on certain ones, rather than trying to study them all.

How does a Christian view the Bible differently from the way a Buddhist views his scriptures?

The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism

The beliefs that Gautama taught after his enlightenment are summarized in the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism.

(1) Life is full of sorrow and suffering with no real happiness.

(2) Suffering results from desires because nothing we desire is permanent.

(3) Detachment from all desires is the way to escape suffering.

(4) The eight principles of Buddhist ethics for life take a person toward detachment from all desires and nirvana.

“God is indeed there. He is there as He is here and everywhere, not confined to a tree or stone, but free in the universe, near to everything, next to everyone, and through Jesus Christ accessible to every loving heart” (A.W. Tozer, The Knowledge of the Holy, 82).
Difficult Doctrines of Buddhism

Many people call themselves Buddhists because they follow some of the advice of Buddhist writings. They may not understand the foundational doctrines of Buddhism.

Sometimes people like the concept of reincarnation because it means they will live many times. But in Buddhism, reincarnation is not considered a good thing because life is miserable. Also, according to Gautama, a person’s conscious self is not reborn. Only some of the material that he was made of is used to make a new creature. That means death is really the end of a personality.

In original Buddhism, a person did not have the possibility of reaching nirvana at the end of his present life unless he was a Buddhist monk. A woman did not have the possibility to reach nirvana until being born again as a man and becoming a monk.

Sometimes people assume that nirvana is like the Christian concept of heaven. But in Buddhism, nirvana is nothingness. If a person reaches nirvana, he no longer exists as a thinking being. Gautama said that to reach nirvana is to be like a candle when it is blown out. The main goal of a committed Buddhist is to reach nirvana.

According to Gautama, all suffering comes because of desires. If a person could desire nothing, he would not suffer. To be a committed Buddhist, one must not care about any human relationships and learn to take no pleasure in anything at all.

The story is told of a Buddhist monk named Sangamaji. He became a monk and left his family to spend all of his time wandering and meditating.

“I believe in ... one Lord Jesus Christ ... by whom all things were made, who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven ... and was made man and was crucified for us” (Nicene Creed).

Jesus gives eternal life to those who believe on him (John 10:28).
Once his wife found him, laid their child in front of him, and begged him to help support them. Sangamaji sat without answering until she left. Gautama said that this man had reached the goal of Buddhism because he felt no joy when the wife came or sorrow when she left.  

The Lifestyle of Buddhism

Many people who call themselves Buddhists have grown up in a culture of Buddhism and have never seriously considered anything else. The assumptions of the religion seem to them the only reality. The rituals are part of their daily lives.

A person who converts to Buddhism from another religion is usually attracted by the religion’s philosophy of life. People do not join because they want to seek nirvana. People join because Buddhism seems to offer a life that is free from anxiety and conflict. Many people feel that they find freedom from stress in Buddhism and that their life is more orderly than before.

Buddhism emphasizes a life of virtue. They believe that an action is virtuous if it benefits yourself and others, and does not harm anyone. The person’s intentions are more important that the actual results of his action.

The mental and spiritual exercises are designed to help a person move from self-centeredness. They believe that all anxiety comes from caring too much about self. They want to forget self and love all sentient creatures (creatures that have minds). The problem is that without relationship with God, there is not a basis for selflessness and love.

Why can a person not be truly selfless and loving without a relationship with God?

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7 Christians commit to marriage as a relationship that brings joy (Ephesians 5:28).
Now go back over the preceding material and look at the points marked ☐. Each one has a footnote with a biblical fact and reference. All students should look up the verses and take turns reading them to the group.

Next study the block with material entitled “Evangelism.” This block provides some practical things to remember when talking to members of the particular religious group.

**Evangelism**

Because Buddhists do not profess to be Christians and do not recognize the Bible as the final authority, it is not enough just to show them that their beliefs are not consistent with the Bible. They already know that the Bible supports a religion different from their own.

It is still important and effective to share the gospel. When you are in a conversation with a Buddhist, tell him you would like to explain the foundation of your beliefs. Share the gospel simply. Even though the Buddhist does not claim to believe the Bible, God’s truth has power because of the work of the Holy Spirit.

You should also share your testimony. Tell how the gospel brought you into relationship with God, brought you forgiveness and deliverance from sin, and gave meaning to your life.

Beyond the basics of the gospel presentation and personal testimony, you can speak to the special needs of the Buddhist with the truth of the gospel. Buddhism struggles to explain the suffering and sorrow of life. It fails to explain the reality of good things and the joy that exists. It denies the importance of everything that seems important in life, including human relationships. It is a religion without a personal God who has relationship with his worshippers. It provides no eternal life and significant individual destiny.

The Buddhist believes that suffering is meaningless and unreal. This is an unsatisfying explanation.

Christianity explains the condition of suffering in the world. The world was created perfect by God, but man sinned and brought a curse on the world. This explains why there is aging, sickness, and death. Sin is also demonstrated in the continued evil actions of people.
The Buddhist believes that there is no real happiness in life, and we should therefore desire nothing. This contradicts the experiences of joy and pleasure people have, especially in personal relationships.

The fact of creation by God explains why there is still much joy and pleasure in life, even though the world is not perfect like God originally designed it.

Like Buddhists, Christians realize that earthly things are not permanent. We should not live as if we will keep what we have here forever. However, a Christian can enjoy life because he knows he will live forever with God. Though things are not permanent, they are real, and our choices have eternal results. This gives purpose and significance to human life.

The Buddhist believes that he should forget all relationships because they are meaningless. But human nature has a deep need for committed relationships.

God has created us for relationships with other human beings. We desire to be valued by others. We desire to make commitments to others. Relationships are especially significant because we know that all people are specially created as eternal beings with eternal destinies.

Buddhism is a religion without a God. But each of us has a deep need to know God and worship him.

God designed us to live in relationship with him. A person is never fulfilled and satisfied until he is in a personal relationship with God. The relationship with our Creator will be eternal, and heaven is the place where we will live with God.

Someone should read the testimony in the next block to the group.

A Testimony

Yeo’s mother prayed desperately for Buddha to heal her dying daughter, but it seemed that there was no help. Then she remembered a Christian missionary named Wong who was preaching nearby. She sent Yeo to bring him. When Wong arrived, he said, “Don’t pray to Buddha; pray to Jesus.”
Wong began to pray, and the girl was healed. Yeo’s mother became a Christian that day, and Yeo became a Christian later.

Now read Genesis 3 again. Write a paragraph explaining the message this passage has for a Buddhist. Let several students tell what they wrote.

Remind students that they need to find opportunities to present the gospel to someone from this religious group. They should prepare to report their conversation to the class.

Recommended Books

The Case for a Creator: A Journalist Investigates Scientific Evidence that Points toward God, by Lee Strobel

The Lotus and the Cross: Jesus Talks with Buddha, by Ravi Zacharias

The books recommended for the lessons on Hinduism, Taoism, Islam, and Judaism are also relevant for this lesson.