

“God, Nirvana, or Whatever”

Buddhism has been an interest of mine since I went home from church one Sunday many years ago disillusioned with the traditional definition of eternal life. I just couldn't see the concept of eternal life being relegated to one's life after death. If the infinite includes all things, then the finite, our lives, must be a part of the infinite. We are a part of eternal life, even as we walk this earth. So began my searching for a deeper understanding of life.

Buddhism has offered me invaluable insights over the years in understanding my own relationship with God in Christianity. I must credit a recent book, [Without Buddha, I Could Not Be a Christian](#), by Paul F. Knitter, for helping bring some of my understandings of Buddhism and Christianity into a clearer light.

The person we refer to as “Buddha”, was named Siddhartha Gautama. He lived in Northern India about 400 years before the birth of Jesus. At the age of 35, Buddha attained enlightenment or awakening after years of searching. He discovered that the extremes of wealth or asceticism did not lend themselves to experiencing awakening. Rather, he saw that enlightenment was to be found in the midst of everyday life, in the present moment. Only when we could focus on living in the “now” of every situation could we realize the totality of life.

The first sermon that Buddha gave after his enlightenment has become known as “The Four Noble Truths.” Briefly stated the 4 Noble Truths, which make up the foundation of Buddhism, are: (1) life is suffering (2) suffering is caused by human craving and attachment (3) there is a way to overcome craving and attachment, and (4) that way follows what has become known as “The Eight Fold Path.”

Buddha realized that human nature has a natural desire to cling to things. We want something and as soon as we get it we become bored with it and focus on some other desire that we think will make us happy and complete. Even relationships can become a negative attachment if we expect some exterior happiness as the outcome for them. This intense craving and attachment creates anxiety and suffering because all physical and material things are impermanent, they are constantly changing and growing.

We move toward enlightenment when we realize the impermanence of life. It is then that we come to see the interrelatedness of all things. As Thich Nhat Hahn calls it, “interbeing” is the source of our identity. We have no identity on our own, it is only in our interactions with others and with the world around us that we find our own “being” or “becoming”, as Paul Knitter puts it.

Jesus teachings are often similar to Buddha's. In Luke 12:14-21, Jesus tells the parable of the farmer who made a bumper crop and had no place to store all his grain. His solution was to build bigger barns to store it all. Now, he tells himself, I am all set with wealth enough to last the rest of my life. Jesus calls this man a fool because “this very night your life will be demanded of you” and whose will all those riches be then? Jesus concludes that we must be rich toward God, rather than rich in earthly possessions.

What does it mean to be rich toward God? Probably something to very similar to what Buddha taught: putting material possessions in proper perspective with respect to our relations with others. Jesus told us that every time we feed the hungry or clothe the naked, we do the same for him. And as often as we do those selfless acts, we do them for all of humanity . . . including ourselves. That is what it means to be rich toward God, and that is what moves us closer to the enlightenment and awakening that Buddha talked about.