

# Engaging Buddhists with the Gospel

By Mike Morris

## Pre-Session Assignments

One week before the session, participants will take the following assignments.

### Assignment One

Read the comments related to **Overview of Christianity and Buddhism** in the section **It's In the Book**. Prepare to share your answer to the following question: How would you explain to a Buddhist that Jesus has never changed?

### Assignment Two

Read the comments related to Romans 5:1–8 in the section **It's In the Book**. Prepare to share your answer to the following question: What should be the disciple's attitude toward suffering?

### Assignment Three

Read Hebrews 12:6–11 and 1 Peter 2:20. Sometimes Christians suffer because of their own sin. Sometimes Christians suffer when they do the right thing in the face of opposition. Prepare to share your answer to the following question: Why does only this second type of suffering produce perseverance, proven character and hope?

## Scripture to Memorize

*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.* Hebrews 13:8

## Session Goal

Consistent with God's Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will understand the essential differences between Christianity and Buddhism.

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## It's in the Book

30 minutes

### Real-Life Scenario

Stan believes life has been unfair to him. He thinks he has suffered more than anyone else he knows. He believes he is not athletically, artistically or academically talented enough to get any recognition in those fields. Some celebrities he admires are Buddhists, and he likes the Buddhist belief that his consciousness will be reborn as a somewhat different consciousness in the future. He believes Buddhism is not very different from Christianity. What would you advise Stan about this?

### Overview of Christianity and Buddhism

Unlike Hindus who believe in the reincarnation of a person's unchanging and permanent soul into a different body, most Buddhists believe that at the time of physical death a person's consciousness is reborn as a somewhat different consciousness in a different body.

The Buddhist concept of rebirth is different from the Christian concept of rebirth. Thus, when witnessing to Buddhists, Christians must be careful to define exactly what they mean when they talk about being "born again" (John 3:3).

Buddhists believe tendencies from one life pass to the next life and karma (their law of cause and effect) is an important factor in determining whether life will be good or bad. Buddhists believe intentionally good actions will have good effects in this life and the next life, and they believe intentionally bad actions will have bad effects in this life and the next life. Karma is a law without a lawgiver.

An important goal is nirvana, which they view as a state in which they are free from suffering and the cycle of death and rebirth. According to Buddhists, there is no unchanging, all-powerful creator of the universe. They believe that everything, whether natural or supernatural, constantly changes. Some Buddhists believe Jesus was an enlightened teacher, but they do not believe He was God in human flesh.

Christians believe created things change but God does not change (Malachi 3:6). "The eternal triune God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being" (*The Baptist Faith and Message*, 2000). Circumstances change, but God does not.

Jesus is fully God (Colossians 2:9), and He is eternal (Hebrews 1:12). At the time of the universe's creation, Jesus existed, "and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" (John 1:1-3). In the Old Testament, Jesus was prophesied to be the Savior (Isaiah 53).

God's purpose is unchangeable (Hebrews 6:17). In contrast to the many rebirths of Buddhism, Christians believe that "it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). The new birth for Christians happens in the same body, but Buddhists believe rebirth happens in a different body.

### Assignment One Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment One** during the week may now share an answer to the

following question: How would you explain to a Buddhist that Jesus has never changed?

### **Discussion Question**

Why is believing in an unchanging God important?

**Read** Romans 5:1–8 out loud.

### **Studying the Passage**

**Verse 1. justified by faith.** Christians are saved through faith in Christ (Ephesians 2:8–9); they are not saved by their “works.” They have surrendered their lives to Him in repentance and faith. *Faith* means more than intellectual belief. The “demons also believe” in the intellectual sense (James 2:19), but they are not going to heaven.

Saving faith involves complete trust in Jesus for the rest of one’s life. Christians who repent and believe in Christ have been justified by faith alone.

**Verse 3. Suffering.** God can use suffering to produce perseverance, proven character and hope. Similarly, James says trials (hardships) produce endurance and completion (James 1:2–4).

Buddhists disagree with Christians about suffering and salvation. Buddhists believe in four noble truths:

1. Suffering is part of life.
2. Suffering is caused by selfish desire.
3. Suffering is removed by eliminating selfish desire.
4. Selfish desire is eliminated by following the noble eightfold path.

For the Buddhist, salvation involves enlightenment and escape from suffering through self-effort. Buddhists do not believe they need a perfect Savior (Jesus) to pay for their sins.

**Verse 6. Christ died for the ungodly.** Christians believe a perfect Savior was needed to pay for their sins because God’s standard is perfection (see Romans 3:23). Thus, imperfect people cannot earn eternal life. Rather, this is a gift received through faith (see Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:8–9).

**Verse 8. while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** Christians believe sinners cannot earn salvation through self-effort. Christians should share the gospel and be “ready to make a defense” of Christianity “with gentleness” to Buddhists (see 1 Peter 3:15).

### **Assignment Two Feedback**

The person who completed **Assignment Two** during the week may now share an answer to the following question: What should be the disciple’s attitude toward suffering?

### **Assignment Three Feedback**

The person who completed **Assignment Three** during the week may now share an answer to the following question: Why does suffering for the right thing (and not suffering because of one’s own sin) produce perseverance, proven character and hope?

### **On Your Own**

Spend a few moments in silent prayer. Tell Jesus you want to share His love with those who are Buddhists. Ask Him to supernaturally arrange for you to have a conversation with such a person. Invite the Holy Spirit to prepare you to share the gospel.

### **Heart and Hands**

8 minutes

Read again the **Real-Life Scenario** near the beginning of the lesson. Consider whether your answers have changed during the session.

Be silent for two or three minutes. Thank Jesus for His sacrifice and for the gospel. Adore Him for His glorious reign on the throne of heaven. Then ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you:

1. A way the Scriptures you studied today will change your heart for the glory of Christ.
2. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to stop doing something for the glory of Christ.
3. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to do something for the glory of Christ.

Write what the Spirit reveals to you below and then be ready to share what you have written with the group.

### **Since Last Week**

5 minutes

Give the group this update: "In our last session I made a commitment to . . . I want to let you know how that turned out. On that same issue I think the Holy Spirit now is leading me to . . ."

### **Grace-Filled Accountability**

5 minutes

Disciples can agree on a way to hold one another accountable. Confessing faults with other disciples allows them to offer grace, insights, and encouragement. Even more important is confession to Christ, the source of true forgiveness and cleansing.

### **Planning for Evangelism, Missions, and Service**

5 minutes

Groups of disciples always are making preparations for evangelism, missions, and service. Use these minutes to work on the next plan.

### **Prayer**

7 minutes

Every disciple will pray aloud, offering praise to Jesus, thanking Him specifically for His gracious acts, making heartfelt confession, committing to actions flowing from the Bible study, praying toward evangelism locally and globally, and interceding for others as prompted by the Holy Spirit.

## At Home: Nail It Down

Buddhists believe:

- a series of deaths and rebirths take place for individuals until the final state of nirvana is reached. This belief in rebirth is not the same as Hindu reincarnation.
- nirvana provides relief from suffering and an end to the series of deaths and rebirths.
- everything—both natural and supernatural—changes. Thus, they do not believe in an unchanging God or an unchanging soul.
- salvation (escape from suffering) comes through their own efforts and they do not need a perfect Savior to pay for their sins. Some Buddhists believe Jesus was an enlightened teacher, but they do not believe He was God in human flesh. Christians must be careful to define terms like *rebirth* and *born again* in discussions with Buddhists.

Christians believe:

- God does not change (Hebrews 13:8; Malachi 3:6).
- salvation cannot be earned by self-effort and people are saved by surrendering their lives to Christ in repentance and faith.
- in contrast to the many rebirths of Buddhism, “It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment” (Hebrews 9:27).
- God can use suffering to produce perseverance, proven character and hope (Romans 5:3–5).

Christ died so Buddhists (among all others) would be redeemed. Christ calls His disciples to take them the good news.

### Follow up Question

*What are some of the main differences between Christianity and Buddhism?*

The Making Disciples curriculum is a gift from Southwestern Seminary to those who, for the glory of the Father and in the power of the Spirit, will spend a lifetime embracing the full supremacy of the Son, responding to His kingly reign in all of life, inviting Christ to live His life through them, and joining Him in making disciples among all peoples.