



Sharing Christ with Buddhists

Insights into the challenges of reaching out to those with a very different worldview

BY GRACE JORDAN



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Understanding the impact the gospel message has had on our own lives and motivated by the goodness of God, we rush to take our doctrine and practices to those who have not had the benefit of our learning and experience.

We imagine it is like ‘boy meets girl’. If we can just get them together, the magic will happen. A good product meets a need and ‘bingo’, we have a connect. A hunger meets an appetite; a thirst finds an oasis. It makes sense—to a Western mind. And there it ends.

Buddhist cultures are not so easily persuaded or quick to follow the rational reasoning that is second nature to a Westerner. So after years of missionary endeavour with little to show for our labours*, we are still looking for the East meets West solution, the meeting ground where understanding can produce good fruit and satisfy a thirst.

Early missionaries to the Buddhists followed this approach too. In 1813, Adoniram Judson, the first missionary to Burma, boldly pronounced the power of the Church of Jesus to supplant the thousands of temples and places of idolatrous worship that he found on arriving in Burma.

On his death, he left a church of close to 8,000 members which by 1961, after almost 150 years of missionary work, recorded a dwindling membership of 5,300.¹ The prophetic pronouncement

was not fulfilled in Judson’s time and waits to be harvested.

More recently, Dale Jones² relates his belief that if the Scripture and its teachings were translated well and printed in the highest quality, that unbelievers would quickly understand and turn to Christ.

Imagine his shock when his Cambodian students were unable to answer the simplest questions in their carefully prepared workbooks. He adds, “In the course of time I have all but abandoned using any of the materials we had so meticulously produced.”³

Why is it that after so many years of ministry to Buddhists, fruitful harvesting shows little return for the great efforts and finances poured into this field?

Sadhu Sundar Singh gives us a window of understanding. As he sat with his friends on the platform of an Indian train station, a fainting Brahmin priest was hurriedly carried from an overheated, crowded third-class carriage. In horror, he waved away a cup of water that the Anglo-Indian stationmaster was trying to give him. He would not pollute his lips with a common cup even to save his life.

When his companion reappeared from the train with the Brahmin’s own brass bowl, he drank greedily, clutching it and gulping the life saving water. The weakened man revived and continued his train ride.

Sadhu concluded, “That’s what



I am always telling my Christian friends. We are offering Christianity in a Western cup and India rejects it. But when we offer the water of life in an Eastern bowl, then our people will recognize it and take it gladly.”⁴

If you have need of further proof that our current ways of reaching people from a Buddhist background are in need of an overhaul, consider that you are visiting with a friend with whom you have built up a good relationship. This friend, Bo, asks you who this man Jesus is. He has heard about him but wonders and wants to know more.

After some time of explanation and background you come to the pinnacle of joy—John 3:16 and share this Good News with Bo. Bo listens with Asian politeness and makes no reply, for here is what he has heard:

- *For God* (he does not exist)
- *so loved* (that’s a passion to be extinguished)
- *the world* (need to be detached from it)
- *that he gave his only begotten son* (no substitute is possible for Karma)

- *that whosoever believes in him* (self-effort alone delivers one’s soul, not faith)
- *should not perish but have everlasting life* (the goal is to reach *nirvana* [death and escape] not continue in the life and suffering forever).

Unless Christians can share the gospel message in terms that Buddhists can understand and appreciate, confusion and misunderstanding will result.⁵

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PRACTICAL TIPS

Here is some of what we have learned to more effectively witness to Buddhists:

1. Love your Buddhist neighbours and relate to them as friends
2. Learn about their culture and see as they see; think as they would think
3. Live out a holy life before them with purity, integrity and the joy of Jesus
4. Tell them ‘your story’ with Jesus and how he daily intervenes in your life
5. Open your home so they can draw near and watch Jesus in you as you relate to your elderly parents, children and everyday situations
6. Be patient. Go for the long haul and never give up. Their souls depend on you

BUDDHIST NUMBERS

- There are approximately 1.2 million Buddhists in Canada (2007 census) representing 3.6 percent of the population
- There are an estimated 500-750 million Buddhists in the world (the estimate spread exists because of the unknown number of Buddhists in China where government persecution has suppressed and driven them underground)
- The first Buddhists arrived in Canada in 1788—Chinese immigrants aboard a ship that landed in British Columbia

(* The Gospel, which has readily been accepted by animistic and tribal people living within Buddhist societies, has borne minimal results among pure Buddhist cultures.)

¹ Wagner, Elizabeth. *Tearing Down Strongholds* Prayer for Buddhists, 1988 Christian Literature Crusade

² Edited by Paul H. De Neui. *Communicating Christ Through Story and Song* Orality in Buddhist Contexts. Moving Towards Oral Communication of the Gospel Experiences from Cambodia by Dale Jones, p174, William Carey Library, 2008

³ Ibid. p 175

⁴ *The Evangelization of the TB Peoples in Central Asia*, Keith Miles p 74

⁵ *Sharing Christ in the Tibetan Buddhist World*, Marku Tsering p 8