

Let's Be Honest: Buddhism

SERIES	Let's Be Honest — Worldview Series (Overview)
MESSAGE	Week 3 — Buddhism
PASSAGE	John 6:35; Matthew 11:28
SPEAKER	Brett, Campus Pastor — Mountain View
KEY PRINCIPLE	One glass is empty. One is full. Buddhism says empty yourself; Jesus says come to me and be filled.

I. Introduction: A Series for Knowing Our Neighbors

A Good morning, Menlo Church, at all of our campuses in San Mateo, here in Menlo Park, Saratoga, my home in Mountain View, and joining us online.

B My name is Brett, and I'm the campus pastor at our Mountain View campus, and I'm so excited to be here with you today as we continue our series called "Let's Be Honest," during which we're looking at some of the world's largest or most influential religions and attempting to provide an honest, respectful, fair view of what they believe in order to try to better understand the world of our friends, coworkers, and neighbors.

C At Menlo, we talk about being For the Bay, and in order to be For the Bay, we have to know the Bay, and our hope is that this series helps us know our neighbors a little better so that we can love them better.

D As we talk about these religions, we also want to ask, what does Jesus offer that is different from these religions?

E Today, we are looking at Buddhism.

F I want to start with a moment of honesty. I grew up in a small town in East Tennessee, a state where less than 1% is Buddhist, and all I knew about Buddhism growing up came from stereotypes that I saw on TV or in the movies. In case you are wondering, TV and movies are terrible sources for theological education.

G Because of that, I often shied away from anything regarding Buddhism or other Eastern religious traditions because they felt so unfamiliar to me.

H I imagine that there are some of you here today who feel the same way as I did back then. You were okay talking about Judaism and Islam the past couple of weeks because they're at least monotheistic, Abrahamic religions, like Christianity, and you see some connection, but Buddhism feels a little too different or mysterious and you've tended to just stay away.

I Some of you, on the other hand, actually have a deep history in Buddhism. Maybe even you, your close friends, or family members practiced or continue to practice it today.

J There are still some others in here who I might call the dabblers. You're not Buddhist, but you do enjoy incorporating some of its practices into your life through things like mindfulness apps or spiritual wellness retreats. You've found that they have helped you center yourself, and so you figure, why not? It's not like they're asking you to pledge your allegiance to another god.

K If that's you, I want to give a little caution. This can be what's called syncretism, which is the practice of blending two different religions into one, and as we'll see in just a bit, while there might be some similarities, ultimately, where they're both asking you to go is in opposite directions.

L So wherever you find yourself, I hope today we're all able to learn and grow together, and here's how we're going to do it.

M We're going to start by going to school a bit as we look at some of the core foundational beliefs of Buddhism.

N Like many religions, Buddhism is very diverse and practiced by about 500 million people, so what we cover will absolutely not make you an expert of all things Buddhism. We'll focus more on Theravada Buddhism because it's most closely related to the early teachings of the Buddha. The other main types are Mahayana, which is very common in East Asia and includes Zen and Pure Land Buddhism, and Vajrayana, in Tibet and the Himalayas, associated with the Dalai Lama. They all have some core similarities, but they also vary in their sacred texts and practices.

O After that, we're going to take time to see how Christianity speaks to the core questions of Buddhism.

P Then finally, we'll close with how we can respond this week.

Q So before we dive in, let's pray. *[Congregational prayer.]*

R The key image I want you to keep in mind as we learn about Buddhism is these two glasses. *[Holds up two glasses — one empty, one full.]* One is empty. One is full.

S Both Buddhism and Christianity address a deep, universal question, and these glasses represent the core difference in how both traditions answer the question. Well, what is that question? To find out, let's go back to the beginning.

II. Who Was the Buddha? The Search That Led to Enlightenment

A One day, a 6th century prince near modern-day Nepal, named Siddhartha Gautama, left his palace walls and came face to face with the frailty of life when he saw a dead man, a sick man, and an old man.

B Seeing pain and suffering like this, he began to ask the questions most of us ask when seeing similar things, and that question is "Why?" "Why is life like this?" "Why do I experience pain?" "Why must people suffer?"

C Which then led him to the follow-up: "How can I fix it?"

D It was these very human questions that led Siddhartha to abandon his life in the palace to search for answers.

E After years of learning and practicing various religious beliefs and practices, he still felt unsatisfied. Then, one day, while meditating under a tree, he had an experience unlike any he had ever had, where the answers he was searching for finally became clear.

F This moment became known as the Enlightenment, and he became known as the Buddha. The Buddha came to reject both palace luxury and extreme self-denial, which was common in the religious practices of his day. Instead, he taught what became known as the Middle Way, a path of disciplined practice that avoided both indulgence and extreme self-denial.

G Before moving on to what the Buddha taught, I want to name something that sets Buddhism apart from the religions that we've learned about the first two weeks, and that is that Buddhism is nontheistic, meaning it does not believe in an all-powerful, creator God who oversees all of creation. There are spiritual beings in Buddhism, but they are mortal like all of us.

H The Buddha was a human being who attributed all of his realizations and achievements to his own work and intelligence.

I Buddhism is ultimately a faith tradition rooted in the belief that every person can reach enlightenment. The Buddha said that each person is to develop and work out their own freedom, and they can do that through personal effort and intelligence.

J You can already see why Buddhism can be so compelling. It takes suffering seriously, refuses shallow answers, and then it tells you that you have the power to overcome it.

K I was a swimmer through a lot of my early life, and one thing that I loved about swimming is that it was me against the water. If I wanted to get better, I had to put in the work. If I had a good race, it's because my work paid off. If I had a bad race, it was also because of me. I didn't have to worry about bad calls or teammates dropping the ball. It was ultimately on me.

L In a culture where many people feel anxious, distracted, and exhausted by their own desires, Buddhism says, you don't need to rely on anyone or anything else, you have the power to fix this.

M But how does one do this? What exactly did the Buddha discover that time under the tree? Buddha taught what's called the Four Noble Truths.

III. The Four Noble Truths: Suffering, Craving, Nirvana, and the Path

A The first noble truth is that life is marked by dukkha. *[Invites the room to say the word aloud: "dukkha."]*

B Dukkha is the word most often translated as suffering, but its meaning goes much deeper than that. Dukkha talks about the impermanence, the imperfections of life. It essentially says anything that is temporary, anything that changes — that thing isn't complete or whole, and therefore, it suffers.

C Imagine that this glass represents life. Right now, life is full. Dukkha says, it won't last. *[Pours some water from the glass into a pitcher.]* But you know what, that moment also won't last. *[Pours the pitcher back into the cup.]*

D These moment-to-moment changes aren't necessarily good or bad, they're just changes.

E All life is a series of moments that are constantly changing, and whatever is impermanent is dukkha, because it's unsettled and incomplete.

F This observation from the Buddha about the reality of life is one we see shared in the pages of the Bible. James, one of the New Testament writers and half-brother of Jesus, says, "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."

G Or the author of Psalm 39: "Everyone is but a breath, even those who seem secure."

H This is life. It's just a mist or a breath. It won't last.

I In Buddhism, this truth even applies to the concept of "you." There is an idea called anatta, or no-soul. It's the belief that there's no fixed, unchanging "you" underneath your thoughts and feelings and experiences. The concept of "you" doesn't exist. You don't have a permanent soul, you're just a collection of inputs from one moment to the next.

J The First Noble Truth tells us a reality about life. What's temporary suffers. Everything is temporary, therefore everything suffers — it's dukkha.

K The Second Noble Truth moves from the "what" to the "why." Why does suffering exist? Buddhism answers this by saying our cravings or attachments.

L Deep within us is a constant desire to feel whole or complete. To fill holes in our lives with something we don't have. The problem is that we try to fill these cravings with things that are temporary.

M You think that landing that next promotion or hitting a certain salary bracket will finally give you the sense of security and significance you've been searching for. But the moment you achieve it, the goalpost moves.

N You work to craft the perfect image, hoping that if people see you as successful, happy, and put-together, you will finally feel validated. But once you've achieved it, you have to keep it.

O My wife and I have a one-year-old, and we have loved watching him grow this past year, but I'll tell you, when he first learned to sit up, we were so excited, but do you know what happened? I saw my friend's baby start to crawl on Instagram. Then Finn started to crawl, but again, that baby started to walk. The parent pride in me just keeps wanting more.

P Let's go back to this glass. This noble truth says that this glass won't be content until it's full, like it is right now. But, as we saw earlier, this state won't last forever.

[Pours it out.] So now, what does it need? It needs more.

Q Every craving leads to an action. Buddhism calls this karma, which is simply the cause and effect of your choices. Those actions, either positive or negative, have an effect that shapes the conditions of your life today, but also the next life. It keeps going from one life to another.

R At the heart of this is the belief that we suffer because we hold onto things that will never fully satisfy, and because we are never satisfied, we are stuck in a constant cycle of life.

S Again, we see the same observation about reality and longing found in the Bible. The author of Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Scripture, or Old Testament, says: "All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing... I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

T He's saying, we all live our lives chasing after something, but no matter how hard we try, it's never enough. There's always more. It's like trying to catch the wind.

U The Second Noble Truth tells us the suffering is caused by craving.

V The Third Noble Truth begins to move towards the solution, the end of suffering, which is called Nirvana. Nirvana is the end goal of Buddhism. It's the removal of all cravings and attachments.

W Now I want to be careful here, because sometimes Nirvana gets misunderstood as nothingness, but that's not what Buddhism teaches. Instead, once craving and attachment are gone, there's total peace.

X Think about it this way. When was the last time you couldn't sleep because your mind was spinning? I'm willing to bet, your mind was spinning because of something in your life that was out of your control.

Y Buddhism would say, "You have a craving to control something that is not yours to control. In fact, you can't actually control anything at all because you can't stop the impermanence of life. Release the craving for control, and you'll find peace."

Z Again, let's go back to the glass. We've already seen that what's in here is constantly changing. Life is always shifting. Nothing stays full forever. But craving keeps telling us, "It has to be full. I have to keep this up."

AA Buddhism says, if you want to stop that cycle, you have to let go of the craving to make temporary things permanent. Release the attachment. Release the clinging. Even release the idea of "me" that keeps trying to control everything.

AB Buddhism says freedom comes as those attachments are poured out. Not because pain never exists or that life stops changing, but instead because you are no longer grasping at what cannot last. You have seen reality clearly, released craving, and found freedom from the cycle of suffering.

AC That is what the Third Noble Truth says. Nirvana is the emptying of craving and clinging, so suffering no longer rules you.

AD How does one do this? That is what the final noble truth is all about, and the solution is the Eightfold Path.

AE The Eightfold Path is like a full life training plan. It's a set of ideas and practices you do simultaneously that focus on three primary areas: Wisdom, Ethical Conduct, and Mental Discipline.

AF Wisdom focuses on learning to see reality clearly, which includes Right View and Right Intention.

AG Ethical Conduct focuses on learning to speak, act, and work in ways that do not cause harm, which includes Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood.

AH Mental Discipline focuses on learning through effort, mindfulness, and meditation to notice craving without being ruled by it, which includes Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

AI The Eightfold Path trains a person to notice desire without obeying it, observe suffering without being consumed by it, and eventually see through the attachments in order to fully let go and move towards Nirvana.

AJ In other words, the Fourth Noble Truth is that the Eightfold Path is a whole-life path of seeing differently, living differently, and training the mind differently.

AK When you put the Four Truths together, we see that Buddhism is ultimately naming the problem of suffering, identifying the cause, showing us the solution to the cause, and providing us a way to reach it ourselves.

IV. Christianity's Different Answer: Wholeness, Sin, and the Emptied God

A When I take a step back and look at Buddhism, you might see there's a lot of wisdom in there.

B If you've ever tried to cling onto something for security that was never meant to last, you see the wisdom in it.

C If you've ever experienced comfort one day only for it to come crashing down the next with one phone call, one doctor's appointment, one meeting with your boss, you see the wisdom in it.

D And if you were a fan of US soccer this week, you see the wisdom in it.

E And then as Christians we can also look at Buddhism and what it teaches and say, "Yes, our world is not as it should be. Yes, craving can lead to suffering. Yes, our desires can become disordered. Yes, we experience pain when we make temporary things ultimate things." The Bible points to a lot of the same ideas.

F However, Christianity answers the questions of why and how in a much different way.

G For Christianity, the story of humanity doesn't begin with suffering; it actually begins with wholeness or completion. We read in the opening pages of the Bible that God created the world, and when He completed His creation, He looked at everything, including humans, and said, it is very good.

H When God said it's very good, He's saying we were made with purpose on purpose.

I Those emotions we have, we're supposed to have them. The need to eat or drink, that's how we're created. The desire for relationships and belonging, God wired us that way. You simply being you — you aren't just a set of inputs, you are a person uniquely created in God's image.

J Our problem isn't that we have cravings or desires, our problem is that our desires have become disordered.

K Shortly after God says creation is very good, we read about the first humans, Adam and Eve, who craved something they couldn't have. They were told that God would take care of them and they could eat from any tree except for one, but then a snake says that if they eat from the tree they're not supposed to eat from, their eyes will be opened and they will be like God. And we read:

"When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it." — Genesis 3:6

L They saw and took. And as a result, sin entered into the world.

M Sin makes us believe that our cravings will satisfy us. That our success will make us feel worthy. That control will make us feel secure.

N The root of the problem we see in the world isn't suffering; it's sin. Suffering is a reality in a world infected by sin.

O That's the why. While Buddhism looks to our emptying as the solution for the how, Christianity provides a different solution.

P Centuries before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah wrote about one who would come, saying:

"Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed." — Isaiah 53:4-5

Q Isaiah foretold that someone would come, not to teach us how to rid ourselves from suffering, but instead who would take on our suffering so that we would be healed.

R About 500 years later, that person, Jesus, was born. But Jesus wasn't just a person, Jesus was God in human form, fully God and fully human.

S Paul, one of the early church fathers, wrote this about Jesus:

"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" — Philippians 2:6-8

T You see, Christianity has an emptying too. But instead of that emptying being a requirement by us to receive freedom, in Jesus, God emptied Himself to enter our suffering, take it upon Himself, and make us whole. To make you whole.

U *[Walks back to the table and picks up the pitcher and an empty glass.]* You see, Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." *[Pours water.]*

V "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."
[Pours water.]

W Buddhism looks at the glass and says, "The way to freedom is to empty yourself. Empty yourself from cravings, from attachments, from your idea of self, from all the things that cannot last."

X But Jesus looks at the glass and says, "You can't free yourself, but that's okay. I emptied myself for you. Come to me. I have come so that you may have life, and have it to the full." *[Pours water until it overflows.]*

Y This is the message of the Gospel. God emptied Himself for us, so that we could have life to the fullest.

Z Buddhism and Christianity look at the same core human question of suffering, but they come to very different solutions. *[Holds up both glasses.]*

AA One says to empty yourself, the other to become full. The choice is yours, but you can't have both.

V. Two Glasses, One Choice: How We Respond This Week

A In light of this, here are some invitations for us to consider this week. First, I hope when you interact with the people in your life who are Buddhist this week, you are able to approach those relationships with a sense of respect and care. And as you have a conversation with them, a question you could ask is, "In a world full of suffering, how do you find peace?" And just listen and be in relationship with them.

B Second, if you fell in the "dabbling" category earlier, I'm not telling you you have to go and delete any mindfulness app you have immediately, but instead, I want you to be a thoughtful consumer. Seriously take a look at what path it's leading you on — is that path towards emptying yourself, or being filled by Jesus? If it's the former, maybe find a new app that refocuses your mind on Jesus.

C Finally, if you are a Buddhist listening to this right now, I hope you feel like what you heard today gave a fair representation of what you believe, and I also hope you hear that I believe there is a God who made you on purpose — who gave you your desires, your personality, your gifts, your life, and invites you to experience the gift of a full life in Him.

D The passage we've come back to each week is a reminder for us. The full life God offers is a gift for all of us, not because of what you've done or what you can do, but because He loves you. The invitation of Jesus is not, "Empty yourself enough and maybe you'll be free." The invitation of Jesus is, "Come to me." Bring your suffering. Bring your striving.

E Let's pray. *[Closing prayer.]*