

Three ways Buddhism has shaped me as a Sri Lankan Christian

The church of my youth taught me that salvation means having arrived. My Buddhist neighbors showed me otherwise.

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Growing up Christian in predominantly Buddhist Sri Lanka, I learned early that there was much to be gained from the study of Buddhism. The teachings of the Buddha sometimes challenged my assumptions about Christianity, and at other times they illuminated and clarified the words and stories of Jesus.

Here are three teachings by the Buddha that have shaped and enriched my faith:

1. We never arrive. We are always on the journey.

Many preachers in the Baptist church of my youth, influenced by evangelical theology, asserted that once you “accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior,” you have arrived. Now that you are saved, they said, nothing more is needed.

Buddhism's emphasis on journey is hard to miss. The Noble Eightfold Path that helps Buddhists to reach the highest goal of Nirvana begins by “entering the stream.” It's a carefully constructed system that helps them step by step to reach to greater degrees of spiritual achievement.

Echoing the Apostle Paul's [letter to the Philippian church](#), the Buddha told his disciples on his deathbed, “Work out your salvation with diligence.” Meinhard Grum, who taught me New Testament Greek at the ecumenical seminary in Sri Lanka, reminded me that the pluperfect tense in Greek does not mean that you are saved, but that you are *being* saved. “You never fully arrive,” he said. “You are always in process.”

2. **Without discipline the journey will fall apart.**

Some Christian traditions, notably Catholic orders, require strict discipline of their followers. In my Christian formation, however, apart from an occasional emphasis on prayer, Bible reading, and weekly church attendance, there was very little discipline. An arrived theology does not need discipline. A journey theology does.

Growing up I sometimes envied my Buddhist friends, whose spiritual disciplines were obvious. They had memorized more Buddhist scripture in its original language (Pali) than I could ever hope to do in my mother tongue (Sinhala) or even in English. Many of them had daily rituals of prostrating before their parents, the statue of the Buddha in their home, and any Buddhist monk they met.

The threefold refuge every Buddhist chants at the beginning the day is a reminder of the journey:

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gaccāmi

Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gaccāmi

Sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gaccāmi

(I take refuge in the Buddha, the teaching, and the community.)

Every morning the faithful follower honors five precepts to abstain from killing any living being, taking what is not given, engaging in sexual misconduct, lying, and taking intoxicants. Those with a more intentional discipline hold ten precepts, and monks follow an entire code. For lay persons, the five precepts are sufficient. For the one who is intentional about the path, regular meditation is required. And those who achieve higher stages, usually those in a monastic path, are able to achieve wisdom.

By contrast, Christians in the Protestant traditions have often emphasized the important theological notion of grace. This can result in an unfortunate downplaying of discipline.

3. **The journey requires us to travel light.**

The Christian tradition uses the word *eternal* to describe a life to which all people should aspire. God is permanent, as is heaven, where hymns, prayers, and benedictions enjoin us to live in God's presence "forever and ever." The sense that something beyond this world is permanent gives me the sense that something in me is permanent as well.

Buddhism doesn't do this. The Buddha underscored throughout his teaching, *Sabbe saṃkharā aniccā*—all conditioned things are impermanent. When his disciples asked the Buddha about God, he was silent, believing that pondering the divine may distract from the focus necessary to transcend the unsatisfactory condition of our existence. He was very clear, however, that there is nothing within a human being, not even a soul, that lasts forever.

In fact, all things, including each of us, change from moment to moment. You are not the same person you were a moment ago. Our life's moments are like film footage: played onscreen they look like a single thing, but if you look at the reel frame by frame, each is slightly different. Therefore, the Buddha said, there is no need to cling to anything. Clinging or craving is what causes the dissatisfaction in the first place. Learning to get beyond that, following his precepts and path, is our spiritual quest.

Karl Sundermeier, a German missionary with whom I worked early in my ministry, used to say that Christians are called to live in tents—meaning that they must live lightly, ready to move when God calls.

Having gained insights such as these, I want to share them with others. That's why [I'm leading a trip to Sri Lanka from February 2 to 12](#). The trip will include visiting historic Buddhist temples and shrines, practicing meditation, and meeting with Christian and Buddhist leaders to learn about how the various groups—including Hindus and Muslims as well—navigate this unique religious mix.