THE MONKEY, THE ARROW, AND THE CROSS

Buddhism, Western Thought, and Christianity in Dialogue

An Inquiry into Mind, Self, God, Cosmos, Purpose, and the Grounds of Belief

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The Monkey, the Arrow, and the Cross: Buddhism, Western Thought, and Christianity in Dialogue

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Greek New Testament references follow the Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece, 28th edition (NA28) / UBS5. Hebrew Bible references follow the Masoretic Text as printed in Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia; Septuagint (LXX) references follow the Rahlfs-Hanhart edition.

Pāli canonical references follow the standard Pali Text Society abbreviations (DN, MN, SN, AN, Dhp, Sn, Mil). Links are provided to freely available translations at SuttaCentral and Access to Insight. Passages from Buddhist texts are paraphrased unless otherwise marked.

This book is a work of comparative education. It presents each tradition in the terms its own scholars would recognize and does not claim to settle the questions it examines.

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Preface: How This Inquiry Began

This book grew out of a sequence of questions. It began with a simple one: what do Buddhists mean when they speak of a "monkey mind"? From there the questions pressed outward, the way honest questions do. If the restless mind is a problem, what about the inquiring mind that seeks truth through critical thinking? What would Buddhism make of someone who loves history, science, and cosmology, and who believes that physics points toward a Creator? How would the Buddha regard Jesus and the Christian faith? What is the ultimate goal of Buddhism, and do Buddhists believe in a soul or in reincarnation? How does Buddhism account for the existence of the universe and its physical laws? What is the purpose of life, and is there such a thing as good and evil? And finally, the question underneath all the others: how do Buddhists know their philosophy is true, and why do they trust it?

The chapters follow that order of inquiry. Each begins with the question as it was first asked, sets out the Buddhist answer in its own vocabulary, and then places that answer beside the main lines of Western philosophy and Christian theology. Part Four stages a formal debate among three voices: a Buddhist monastic scholar, a Christian philosopher-theologian, and a secular Western naturalist. The Conclusion gathers the fundamentals of Buddhism into a form a Western reader can carry away and use.

Why Compare at All?

Comparison is not the same as competition. The aim here is understanding, and understanding requires that each tradition be heard at its strongest. A Christian reader who meets only a caricature of Buddhism learns nothing, and a Buddhist reader who meets only a caricature of Christianity learns less than nothing, because the caricature confirms a prejudice. The standard adopted throughout is the one the Buddhist scholar Masao Abe and the Christian theologian John Cobb set for their decades of dialogue: describe the other tradition in words its own best thinkers would accept as fair, and only then register disagreement.

That standard cuts in every direction. Popular Western writing often presents Buddhism as a purely rational, science-friendly "philosophy" with no faith, no ritual, and no metaphysics. That picture is incomplete. Buddhism has devotion, cosmology, heavens and hells, and a doctrine of rebirth that no laboratory has confirmed. Equally, popular comparisons sometimes present Christianity as a religion of blind belief that forbids questioning, or as teaching that the soul is a ghostly substance that simply floats away at death. Those pictures are also incomplete. Christianity has a long tradition of reasoned argument, historical investigation, and a biblical

anthropology centered on the resurrection of the whole person. Correcting such distortions is part of the work of this book.

A Note on Terms and Sources

Buddhist technical terms are given in Pāli (the language of the Theravāda canon) and, where it helps, in Sanskrit (the language of much Mahāyāna literature). Thus *anattā* (Pāli) and *anātman* (Sanskrit) both mean "not-self"; *nibbāna* and *nirvāṇa* both name the goal of the path. A glossary appears in Appendix A.

Canonical Buddhist texts are cited by their standard abbreviations: DN (Dīgha Nikāya, the Long Discourses), MN (Majjhima Nikāya, the Middle-Length Discourses), SN (Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Connected Discourses), AN (Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Numerical Discourses), Dhp (Dhammapada), and Mil (Milindapañha, the Questions of King Milinda). Free translations are linked at SuttaCentral and Access to Insight. Buddhist passages are generally paraphrased so the reader meets the thought rather than a single translator's wording.

Biblical passages are quoted from the New International Version (NIV). Where the wording bears on the argument, the underlying text is noted: the Greek critical text (NA28/UBS5) for the New Testament, and the Masoretic Text (MT) with the Septuagint (LXX) for the Hebrew Bible, with comments on where the English follows or departs from those sources.

Scholarly sources are named in the text and listed with links at the end of each chapter and in the Bibliography (Appendix C). Preference has been given to peer-reviewed scholarship, university presses, the major reference works (the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* among them), and the primary texts themselves.

The Shape of the Book

- **Part One, The Mind:** the monkey mind, the inquiring mind, and the Buddhist critique of clinging to views, including views about design and a Creator.
- **Part Two, The Buddha and the Christ:** how Buddhism has understood Jesus and Christianity, and how Christians have answered.
- **Part Three, Foundations of Buddhism:** the goal of the path; self, soul, and rebirth; the origin of the universe and natural law; purpose, good, and evil; and how Buddhists justify belief.
- **Part Four, The Great Debate:** a structured, three-voice debate on God, the soul, suffering, salvation, death, and knowledge.

- **Conclusion and Appendices:** the fundamentals of Buddhism set against Western and Christian thought, a glossary, a guide to primary texts, and a bibliography.

Part One: The Mind

"Just as a monkey roaming through a forest grabs one branch, lets it go, and grabs another, so what is called mind arises as one thing and ceases as another, by day and by night." (paraphrase of SN 12.61)

"You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." (Augustine, Confessions 1.1)

Chapter 1: The Monkey Mind

The Question

What do Buddhists mean when they speak of a "monkey mind"?

The Image and Its Sources

The phrase describes the restless, unsettled quality of the untrained mind as it jumps from thought to thought, worry to worry, plan to plan, like a monkey swinging from branch to branch. The image is ancient. Its earliest canonical form appears in the Pāli discourses, in the *Assutavā Sutta* (SN 12.61). There the Buddha compares the mind to a monkey in a forest that grabs one branch, releases it, and seizes another. His point is not merely that the mind is busy. It is that what we call "mind" or "consciousness" is not a stable thing at all but a stream of events, each arising and ceasing in turn. The monkey is an image of impermanence before it is an image of distraction.

The same sutta makes a striking and often-overlooked observation: an untaught person would do better to take the body as a self than the mind, because the body at least appears to last for years, whereas the mind changes from moment to moment. The monkey simile therefore sits at the root of the Buddhist teaching on not-self, which later chapters explore.

The image traveled with Buddhism into East Asia. In Chinese, the compound *xīnyuán* (心猿, "heart-monkey" or "mind-monkey"), often paired with *yìmǎ* (意馬, "will-horse"), describes a mind that is capricious, restless, and uncontrollable. The sixteenth-century Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, traditionally attributed to Wu Cheng'en, turned the image into a character: Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, a brilliant, mischievous, and ungovernable trickster who must be disciplined before he can serve the pilgrim monk on his journey to India to bring back the scriptures. Readers in the Chinese tradition have long understood the novel as an allegory of the mind being trained on the road to awakening.

What the Monkey Mind Does

In the monkey-mind state a person gets lost in stories and misperceptions: rehearsing the past, fretting over the future, arguing with people who are not present, and narrating experience rather than living it. Buddhist teachers do not treat this as a moral failure. The mind that scans for threats and opportunities served our ancestors well. The difficulty is that, left untrained, it runs without rest and generates a steady undertow of commentary, planning, and worry.

The Buddhist remedy is not suppression. A meditator does not try to force the monkey out of the tree. The practice is to notice the movement of thought without being carried off by it, and gradually to cultivate *samatha* ("calm abiding," Sanskrit *śamatha*), a state of stable attention in which thoughts may arise without seizing control. Over time this calm becomes the platform for *vipassanā* ("insight"), the direct seeing of how experience actually arises and passes away.

What Neuroscience Has Found, and Its Limits

Contemporary research offers some support for the Buddhist description. A 2011 study by Judson Brewer and colleagues at Yale, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, found that experienced meditators showed reduced activity in the brain's "default mode network," a set of regions associated with mind-wandering and self-referential thinking (Brewer et al. 2011). An earlier study by Sara Lazar and colleagues at Harvard reported greater cortical thickness in prefrontal regions and the insula among long-term meditators (Lazar et al. 2005).

These findings are suggestive rather than conclusive. Many early studies were small and cross-sectional, comparing meditators with non-meditators rather than following the same people over time. A widely cited review by Nicholas Van Dam and fifteen co-authors, "Mind the Hype" (*Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 2018), warned that popular accounts of meditation research have run well ahead of the evidence (Van Dam et al. 2018). The careful conclusion is that meditation measurably affects attention and self-referential processing, while the size and permanence of those effects are still being studied.

The Western and Christian Counterpart

The West did not need Buddhism to discover the restless mind. Augustine of Hippo opens his *Confessions* (c. 397) with the sentence quoted at the head of this part: the human heart is restless until it rests in God. Blaise Pascal, in his *Pensées* (1670), argued that human beings pursue "diversion" precisely because they cannot bear to sit quietly alone in a room with their own thoughts.

The Christian contemplative tradition developed its own disciplines for the wandering mind. The fourth-century monk Evagrius Ponticus analyzed the *logismoi*, the intrusive "thoughts" that assault the one who prays, with a psychological precision that modern readers often compare to Buddhist analysis. John Cassian, in his *Conferences* (Book 10), taught monks to steady the mind by repeating a single verse of Scripture. His chosen verse was Psalm 70:1, which the NIV renders:

> "*Hasten, O God, to save me; come quickly, LORD, to help me.*" *(Psalm 70:1, NIV)*

> **Text note.** English Bibles number this verse 70:1, but in the Masoretic Text it is 70:2, because the Hebrew counts the superscription as verse 1. In the Septuagint the psalm is 69:2 (*ho theos, eis tēn boētheian mou prosches*). Cassian knew it in Latin (*Deus in adiutorium meum intende*). The NIV's "Hasten ... come quickly" reflects the urgent Hebrew imperatives (*ḥûšāh*, "hurry"), which the LXX renders with the milder *prosches*, "attend." The English here follows the MT closely.

The apostle Paul likewise speaks of taking "every thought" captive (2 Corinthians 10:5, NIV) and urges believers to fix their thinking on whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable (Philippians 4:8). The Greek verb in Philippians 4:8, *logizesthe*, means "reckon" or "take into account," a deliberate, sustained act of attention rather than a passing thought.

Two Methods Compared

Both traditions recognize the untrained mind as a problem, and both prescribe training. The difference lies in method and direction.

Aspect	Buddhist approach	Christian contemplative approach
Diagnosis	The mind is an impermanent stream mistaken for a self; restlessness comes from craving and aversion	The heart is restless because it was made for God and seeks rest in lesser things
Method	Observe thoughts without identifying with them; calm, then insight	Redirect attention toward God through prayer, Scripture, and watchfulness (*nēpsis*)
Goal	Seeing through the stream; freedom from clinging	Communion with a personal God; rest in divine love
Role of the self	The sense of a fixed self is part of the problem	The self is healed and fulfilled, not dissolved

Sources for Chapter 1

- *Assutavā Sutta* (SN 12.61), trans. Bhikkhu Sujato: suttacentral.net/sn12.61
- Brewer, J. A., et al. (2011). "Meditation experience is associated with differences in default mode network activity and connectivity." *PNAS* 108(50): 20254–20259. doi:10.1073/pnas.1112029108
- Lazar, S. W., et al. (2005). "Meditation experience is associated with increased cortical thickness." *NeuroReport* 16(17): 1893–1897.
- Van Dam, N. T., et al. (2018). "Mind the Hype." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 13(1): 36–61. doi:10.1177/1745691617709589

- Augustine, *Confessions*; Pascal, *Pensées*; John Cassian, *Conferences*, Book 10.

Chapter 2: The Inquiring Mind

The Question

How does Buddhism classify an inquisitive, analytical mind, a personality that seeks truth through critical thinking?

Not All Thinking Is Monkey Mind

Buddhism draws a sharp line between restless mental agitation and disciplined investigation. They are not the same thing, and the second is actively cultivated.

Among the seven "factors of awakening" (*bojjhaṅga*), listed throughout the Saṃyutta Nikāya (SN 46), the second is *dhamma-vicaya*, "investigation of phenomena." The seven are mindfulness (*sati*), investigation (*dhamma-vicaya*), energy (*viriya*), joy (*pīti*), tranquility (*passaddhi*), concentration (*samādhi*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). Investigation is placed immediately after mindfulness, because once the mind can hold an object steadily, it can begin to examine it.

The Pāli word *vicaya* comes from a verb whose range includes both "investigating" and "discriminating" or "sorting." Investigation of phenomena therefore means more than curiosity. It is the trained ability to tell apart what is wholesome from what is unwholesome, what leads toward freedom from what leads toward further entanglement.

Paññā: Wisdom as Discernment

Investigation matures into *paññā* (Sanskrit *prajñā*), usually translated "wisdom" but closer in meaning to "discernment." In the Abhidharma literature, the systematic analysis of mind developed after the Buddha's death, *prajñā* is defined as the precise, analytical discrimination of phenomena. It dispels doubt by seeing clearly what is the case. It is not a mood or a feeling of profundity; it is knowledge that cuts.

The early texts also affirm the ordinary processes of reasoning. *Vitakka* ("applied thought," directing the mind to an object) and *vicāra* ("sustained thought," keeping it there) are present in the first stage of meditative absorption (*jhāna*). They are neither good nor bad in themselves. What makes them wholesome or unwholesome is the intention behind them and whether they are driven by greed, hatred, and delusion, or by generosity, goodwill, and understanding.

The Kalama Sutta: A Charter of Free Inquiry

The best-known Buddhist text on inquiry is the *Kālāma Sutta* (AN 3.65). The Kālāmas, villagers of Kesaputta, told the Buddha that many teachers passed through

their town, each praising his own doctrine and disparaging the others. Whom should they believe?

The Buddha named ten grounds that are not by themselves sufficient reasons for accepting a teaching:

1. oral tradition handed down by repetition;
2. lineage or succession of teachers;
3. report or hearsay;
4. a body of scripture;
5. logical reasoning alone;
6. inferential reasoning alone;
7. reflection on appearances;
8. agreement with a view one has already pondered and accepted;
9. the apparent competence of the speaker;
10. the thought, "This teacher is our master."

Instead, he told them, when you know for yourselves that certain things are unwholesome, blameworthy, censured by the wise, and lead to harm and suffering when adopted, abandon them; and when you know that certain things are wholesome, blameless, praised by the wise, and lead to welfare and happiness, take them up and live by them.

Soma Thera called this sutta "the Buddha's charter of free inquiry," and it is often cited as evidence that Buddhism is free of dogmatism and fanaticism. Chapter 9 will show that this reading, though real, needs qualification.

The Western and Christian Counterpart

Western philosophy also began with a charter of inquiry. In Plato's *Apology* (38a), Socrates declares that the unexamined life is not worth living. The medieval Christian tradition, far from forbidding inquiry, defined theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*, "faith seeking understanding" (Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, 1078), and Thomas Aquinas built the *Summa Theologiae* as an extended sequence of objections, counter-arguments, and replies.

The New Testament contains its own injunctions to test claims:

> "*Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good.*" *(1 Thessalonians 5:20–21, NIV)*

> **Text note.** The Greek of 1 Thessalonians 5:21 in NA28 reads *panta de dokimazete, to kalon katechete*, literally "but test all things; hold fast the good." *Dokimazō* is the word for assaying metal, testing whether it is genuine. The Buddha used the same

> metaphor, according to a verse preserved in the Tibetan tradition: the wise should test his words as a goldsmith tests gold, by burning, cutting, and rubbing. The NIV's "test them all" narrows "all things" (*panta*) to the prophecies of verse 20, which fits the context; the Greek is broader and can be read as a general principle.

Luke describes the people of Berea as "of more noble character" than those in Thessalonica because they "examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11, NIV). The Greek participle *anakrinontes* is a legal term for examination, as of a witness.

The parallel is real, and so is the difference. The Bereans tested a new claim against an existing authority, Scripture. The Kālāmas were told to test claims against their own experience of what leads to harm and what to well-being, together with the judgment of the wise. Both traditions value testing; they disagree about the final touchstone.

The Key Distinction

Monkey mind	Investigative mind
Reactive, scattered, driven by craving and aversion	Directed, sustained, rooted in mindfulness
Clings to whatever answer arises	Holds conclusions provisionally and keeps examining
Produces agitation and fatigue	Produces clarity and, eventually, calm
Asks questions to soothe anxiety or win arguments	Asks questions to see what is actually the case

On Buddhist terms, an inquisitive, analytical personality pursuing truth is not a defect to be cured. It is raw material for wisdom. The monkey mind is not the mind that asks too many questions; it is the mind that grasps at answers. Whether a given inquiry is wholesome depends on the question the next chapter takes up: what is the relationship between the inquirer and the views he or she arrives at?

Sources for Chapter 2

- *Kālāma Sutta* (AN 3.65): suttacentral.net/an3.65; Soma Thera's translation at Access to Insight
- *Bojjhaṅga Saṃyutta* (SN 46): suttacentral.net/sn46
- Gethin, Rupert (2001). *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oneworld. (Standard scholarly study of the factors of awakening.)
- Anselm, *Proslogion*; Plato, *Apology*; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*.

Chapter 3: Views, Speculation, and the Question of Design

The Question

Suppose a person loves to talk about history and science, subjects that demand critical thinking. One of his favorite topics is intelligent design: the conviction that physics and cosmology, including supersymmetry, point to the existence of a Creator. What kind of mind would Buddhism say this is?

First, a Buddhist Classification of Temperaments

The early discourses classify mental states rather than people, but the later commentarial tradition did develop a typology of temperaments. Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* ("The Path of Purification," fifth century CE), the great manual of Theravāda practice, describes six temperaments (*carita*) so that a teacher can assign each student a suitable meditation (*Visuddhimagga* III.74–102). The six are the greedy, the hating, the deluded, the faithful, the intelligent (*buddhi-carita*), and the speculative or discursive (*vitakka-carita*).

The person described in the question shows features of two of them. The **intelligent temperament** loves understanding, learns readily, and is drawn to analysis; Buddhaghosa recommends for it contemplations such as the recollection of death and the analysis of the body into its elements, because such a mind thrives on subjects with real depth. The **speculative temperament** is fond of talk and company, generates idea after idea, and can become restless and scattered; for this temperament Buddhaghosa prescribes mindfulness of breathing, the simplest anchor available, to give the busy mind a place to rest.

In other words, Buddhism would not call this person's mind bad. It would identify real strengths (keenness, breadth, analytical power) alongside a characteristic risk (proliferating thought and attachment to one's conclusions). The rest of this chapter explains that risk.

Diṭṭhi: The Problem of Views

The Pāli word *diṭṭhi* (Sanskrit *dṛṣṭi*) means "view" or "opinion." Buddhism distinguishes right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) from wrong view (*micchā-diṭṭhi*), and right view is the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. Yet the early texts, especially the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, one of the oldest strata of the canon (Sutta Nipāta, chapter 4), warn repeatedly that even correct views become dangerous when grasped. Grasping at views breeds conceit, quarrels, and division. The Buddha is said to have described the intellectual marketplace of his day as a "thicket" and a "wilderness" of views.

Among the four kinds of clinging (*upādāna*), the second is *diṭṭhupādāna*, "clinging to views." It is the mind's search for a position in which everything is settled: *this is right, I have the answer, now I am secure.* Buddhist teachers observe that such security is illusory, because any position can be challenged, and the one who has invested his identity in a view experiences each challenge as a threat to himself.

The scholar Paul Fuller, in *The Notion of Diṭṭhi in Theravāda Buddhism* (2005), argues that right view in the early texts is not simply a correct opinion replacing an incorrect one. It is a different *way of holding* anything at all: a detached order of seeing that does not cling. This matters for the question at hand. Buddhism's concern is less with *what* the design enthusiast believes than with *how* he holds it.

Papañca: Conceptual Proliferation

A second relevant term is *papañca*, which the Sri Lankan monk-scholar Katukurunde Ñāṇananda rendered "conceptual proliferation" in his classic study *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought* (1971). The key text is the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* (MN 18), which traces a sequence: contact gives rise to feeling, feeling to perception, perception to thinking, and thinking, once it turns in on itself, to *papañca*, a proliferation of concepts that then overwhelms the person who produced it.

The commentaries name three drivers of *papañca*: craving (*taṇhā*), views (*diṭṭhi*), and conceit (*māna*, the sense of "I am"). The American monk Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu has argued that *papañca* is not a matter of how much one thinks. It is thinking organized around the categories of self: *I am the thinker; this is mine; this is what I am.* A person could think vigorously about cosmology without *papañca*, and a person could produce *papañca* from a single idle thought about himself.

The Dhammapada (vv. 254–255) sums up the contrast: the world delights in proliferation, while the Awakened delight in its ending (*nippapañca*).

The Unanswered Questions

The debate about a Creator touches a set of questions the Buddha deliberately left unanswered (*avyākata*). In the *Cūḷamālukya Sutta* (MN 63), the monk Māluṅkyaputta threatens to leave the order unless the Buddha tells him whether the world is eternal or not, whether it is infinite or finite, whether the soul is the same as the body or different, and whether a fully awakened being exists after death. The Buddha replies with the parable of the poisoned arrow. A man struck by an arrow who refused treatment until he learned the archer's name, caste, height, complexion, and village, and the type of bow and feathers, would die before his questions were answered. The Buddha says he has left these questions undeclared because they do not lead to disenchantment, calm, direct knowledge, or liberation.

In the *Acinteyya Sutta* (AN 4.77) the Buddha names four "unthinkables" that bring madness and vexation to anyone who tries to think them through. The fourth is *lokacintā*, "speculation about the world," which the commentary glosses as questions such as who created the world and where it came from.

Scholars disagree about the reasons for this silence. Some, such as K. N. Jayatilleke, argue that the Buddha regarded these questions as meaningless in the form they were asked. Others, including the Indian philosopher Sadhana Ratna Chakma, stress that each unanswered question presupposes the existence of a permanent self (*ātman*) that the Buddha rejected, so any direct answer would have endorsed a false premise (Chakma). Still others stress the pragmatic reason the Buddha himself gives: the questions do not help.

Applying This to the Design Enthusiast

On Buddhist terms, then, the person in the question displays a mixture:

- **Wholesome capacities:** intellectual energy, investigation (*dhamma-vicaya*), love of truth, and applied and sustained thought.
- **Risks:** clinging to views (*diṭṭhupādāna*), conceptual proliferation (*papañca*), and a craving for final answers to exactly the questions the Buddha declined to answer.

A Buddhist teacher would likely say something like this: your intellect is a fine instrument, and the questions interest you for good reasons. But notice whether your investigation is quieting the mind or inflaming it, whether you can hold your conclusions lightly, and whether you can hear a contrary argument without feeling personally threatened. And notice that whatever the answer about the origin of the universe, the arrow is still in your side.

A Necessary Word About the Science

Because this book aims at accuracy, the scientific claims in the question deserve a clear statement of their current status.

Supersymmetry (SUSY) is a proposed extension of the Standard Model of particle physics in which every known particle has a heavier "superpartner." It is mathematically elegant and was long favored as a solution to the "hierarchy problem," the puzzle of why the Higgs boson's mass is so much smaller than the energies at which gravity becomes strong. However, the ATLAS and CMS experiments at CERN's Large Hadron Collider have so far found no superpartners in the energy ranges they have explored (CERN: Supersymmetry). Supersymmetry is therefore an unconfirmed hypothesis, not an established result. Even if it were confirmed, it would describe how nature behaves; it would not by itself prove or

disprove a Creator. Any inference from physics to God is a philosophical argument that uses physics as evidence.

Interestingly, some philosophers have argued that the *absence* of supersymmetry strengthens the case for cosmic fine-tuning, because the Higgs mass then appears delicately balanced without a known physical mechanism to explain it. That argument is live in the literature.

Cosmic fine-tuning should be distinguished from **intelligent design** in the narrower biological sense. The fine-tuning argument claims that several physical constants fall within narrow life-permitting ranges; it is discussed seriously in peer-reviewed philosophy of physics, for example in Geraint Lewis and Luke Barnes, *A Fortunate Universe* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), and in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on fine-tuning. Responses include the multiverse hypothesis, the anthropic principle, and doubts about whether probabilities can be meaningfully assigned to constants. Biological intelligent design, associated with Michael Behe and William Dembski, holds that certain biological systems could not have arisen by gradual evolution; it has not gained acceptance in mainstream biology.

The Christian and Western Reply

A Christian philosopher would respond to the Buddhist diagnosis with a sharp question: what if the "speculative" question is in fact the most important question of all? If a personal God exists who created the world and seeks relationship with human beings, then knowing him is not a distraction from the cure; it *is* the cure. The Bible treats creation as a window onto its Maker:

> "*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*" *(Psalm 19:1, NIV)*
>
> "*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*" *(Romans 1:20, NIV)*

> **Text note.** Psalm 19:1 in English is 19:2 in the MT and 18:2 in the LXX. The Hebrew *mesapperîm* ("recount, tell") is a participle of continuing action: the heavens keep on telling. The LXX renders it *diēgountai*, "narrate." In Romans 1:20 (NA28) Paul pairs two words: *nooumena kathoratai*, "being understood, they are clearly seen." The NIV's "being understood from what has been made" preserves this: Paul describes perception that involves reasoning, not a mystical intuition. This is the classic scriptural warrant for natural theology.

This tradition of natural theology runs from Aquinas's Five Ways (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3) through William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802) to contemporary

arguments from fine-tuning. It has also faced powerful Western critics: David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779) and, later, Darwinian biology undercut many older design arguments.

The disagreement between Buddhism and Christianity at this point is not about whether one should think carefully. Both traditions prize careful thought. The disagreement is about what careful thought is *for*. For the Buddhist, the proper object of investigation is the experience that generates suffering. For the Christian, the proper object of investigation includes the God who is the source of all things. The parable of the arrow assumes that the archer's identity is irrelevant to the wound. The Christian answers that in this case the one who can heal the wound and the one who made the world are the same person.

Sources for Chapter 3

- Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga* III, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification*: Access to Insight PDF
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Part Two: The Buddha and the Christ

"Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world; by non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is an eternal law." (Dhammapada 5, paraphrase)

"But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44, NIV)

Chapter 4: How Buddhism Sees Jesus and Christianity

The Question

How would Buddhism, and the Buddha himself, regard Jesus and Christianity?

A Caution About Anachronism

The Buddha lived in northeastern India roughly five centuries before Jesus; most historians now place his death around 400 BCE. He never encountered Judaism or Christianity. What can be said responsibly falls into three categories: what the early Buddhist texts say about creator gods and saviors in general; what later Buddhist philosophers argued against theism; and what modern Buddhist teachers and scholars have actually said about Jesus. Anything beyond that is reconstruction, and this chapter labels it as such.

The short answer, which the rest of the chapter unpacks, is this: most Buddhist thinkers have admired Jesus as a teacher of compassion and self-giving love, while rejecting the theological framework of a creator God, an immortal individual soul, and salvation through faith in a unique divine savior.

The Early Texts on Creator Gods

The Buddha's world was full of gods. The early texts do not deny that gods exist; they deny that any god is eternal, all-knowing, or the creator of the world. Four discourses are central.

The Brahmajāla Sutta (DN 1)

In the "Net of Views" discourse (DN 1), the Buddha offers a genealogy of the belief in a creator. When a world-system begins to re-form after a period of dissolution, the first being to be reborn in the newly formed realm of Brahmā lives there alone and longs for company. Other beings then arise there as a result of their own past actions. The first being concludes, "I am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Creator, the Maker; these beings were created by me, because I wished for them and they came." The later beings agree, because he was there first. One of them eventually dies, is reborn as a human, develops meditative powers, remembers that previous life, and teaches that the Great Brahmā is eternal and the creator of all. In the Buddha's account, belief in a creator arises from a misunderstanding of sequence as causation, amplified by incomplete memory. The same discourse classifies this belief as a form of partial eternalism, one of sixty-two speculative views.

The Kevaddha Sutta (DN 11)

In the *Kevaddha Sutta* (DN 11), a monk with psychic powers ascends through the heavens asking where the four great elements cease without remainder. No god can answer. At last he reaches the Great Brahmā, who responds three times with his titles ("I am Brahmā, the Creator, the All-Seeing …") and then takes the monk aside and privately admits that he does not know. He sends the monk back to the Buddha. The story is gently satirical: the highest god of the Brahmanical tradition is portrayed as a being with a reputation to protect.

The Tevijja Sutta (DN 13) and the Brahmanimantanika Sutta (MN 49)

In the *Tevijja Sutta* (DN 13), two young brahmins dispute the right path to union with Brahmā. Under questioning they admit that neither they, nor their teachers, nor their teachers' teachers back seven generations have ever seen Brahmā face to face. The Buddha compares them to a line of blind men, each holding on to the one in front, none of whom can see. In the *Brahmanimantanika Sutta* (MN 49), a god named Baka Brahmā believes his realm to be permanent and complete; the Buddha visits him and shows that there are realms of knowledge beyond his reach.

The Buddhologist Richard Hayes, in a much-cited article, argued that these texts portray the Buddha not as a dogmatic atheist claiming to disprove God but as a skeptic who challenges the grounds on which others claim knowledge of God (Hayes 1988). The Buddhist scholar Anālayo describes the early texts' treatment of Brahmā as "inclusivism": the god is kept within the Buddhist cosmos but placed in a subordinate position, sometimes mocked as a false creator and sometimes honored, as Brahmā Sahampati, for urging the newly awakened Buddha to teach (Anālayo 2011).

Later Buddhist Arguments Against a Creator

In the classical period, Buddhist philosophers moved from skepticism to argument. Vasubandhu (fourth to fifth century CE), in his *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, and Dharmakīrti (seventh century), in the *Pramāṇavārttika*, developed formal refutations of *Īśvara*, the Lord of Hindu theism. Their main lines of argument were these:

- **The argument from change.** A permanent, unchanging cause cannot produce effects at different times. If God is eternal and sufficient, all his effects should exist at once and forever. If he needs further conditions to act, then those conditions, not God, explain the variety of the world.
- **The argument from purpose.** If God creates for a purpose, he lacks something he seeks; if he creates for no purpose, he is like a child or a madman.
- **The argument from suffering.** A world containing so much suffering is hard to reconcile with a creator who is both powerful and good. A verse in

the *Bhūridatta Jātaka* (J 543) asks why, if Brahmā is lord of the whole world, he does not set it right and why he ordains misery and injustice.

Because of this literature, the scholar Matthew Kapstein has described later Indian Buddhism as not merely nontheistic but anti-theistic.

Would These Arguments Apply to the Christian God?

Christian philosophers have pointed out that the gods criticized in the early discourses are beings *within* the cosmos. Brahmā is born, lives for an immense span, and dies. He is subject to karma and rebirth, and he is mistaken about his own origin. The God of classical Christian theism, by contrast, is not a being within the universe but, in Thomas Aquinas's phrase, *ipsum esse subsistens*, "subsistent being itself," the source of the existence of everything else, including time. On this view the early Buddhist genealogy of the creator-belief does not touch the Christian doctrine at all, because it describes a different kind of god. Keith Yandell and Harold Netland develop this point in *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal* (2009).

The Buddhist can answer that the later arguments of Vasubandhu and Dharmakīrti were aimed precisely at an eternal, unconditioned cause, which is what the Christian God is claimed to be. The argument from change, in particular, poses a question Christian theologians have also had to answer: how does an eternal, unchanging God cause a world that changes? Augustine and Aquinas answered it with the doctrine that God is outside time and wills eternally the whole temporal order. Whether that answer succeeds is one of the points taken up in the Great Debate.

How Modern Buddhists Have Spoken of Jesus

In the twentieth century, Buddhist teachers began to speak directly about Jesus, and their tone was often warm.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022), the Vietnamese Zen master, wrote *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (1995) and *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (1999). He kept images of both on his altar and suggested that the Holy Spirit, as the energy of God's presence, resembles what Buddhists call mindfulness. He read the Christian practice of the Eucharist as a practice of deep presence.

The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, invited in 1994 to comment on passages from the Gospels at the John Main Seminar in London, published those reflections as *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus* (1996). He spoke of Jesus as a being of high spiritual attainment and found in the Sermon on the Mount a teaching of compassion he could recognize, while stating plainly that Buddhists and Christians differ on the creator and that it is better for each to deepen their own tradition than to blend them.

D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966), who introduced Zen to the West, wrote in *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (1957) of his discomfort at the image of the crucified Christ, which he contrasted with the image of the Buddha lying peacefully at his death. For Suzuki the crucifix symbolized a self that must be violently put to death, whereas the Buddhist sees no self there to crucify.

Masao Abe (1915–2006), of the Kyoto School, entered a long dialogue with Christian theologians. In "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," published in *The Emptying God* (1990), he took Paul's hymn in Philippians 2 as the meeting point between the traditions:

> "*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.*" *(Philippians 2:6–7, NIV)*

> **Text note.** The key Greek phrase in Philippians 2:7 (NA28) is *heauton ekenōsen*, "he emptied himself," from which theology takes the term *kenosis*. The NIV's "made himself nothing" is an interpretive rendering that expresses the sense of self-humbling well but loses the literal image of emptying, which is precisely the image Abe connected with Buddhist *śūnyatā*, "emptiness." Readers comparing the traditions should know that the Greek word and the Buddhist concept share a metaphor, though not a meaning: Paul's Christ empties himself of status while remaining the same person; Buddhist emptiness denies that any person has a fixed essence to begin with.

Abe pressed Christians to ask whether God himself, and not only the Son, should be understood as self-emptying love. Christian respondents such as John Cobb and Jürgen Moltmann engaged the question seriously while insisting on the personal reality of God.

Critical voices also exist. The Sri Lankan philosopher Gunapala Dharmasiri's *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God* (1974) examined contemporary Christian theology from the standpoint of early Buddhism and found its concept of God incoherent. Many Buddhist writers in colonial-era Sri Lanka and Burma wrote polemically in response to Christian missionaries, and scholars note that modern Buddhist anti-theistic writing often grew out of that encounter.

Where Jesus and the Buddha Converge

The ethical overlap between the teaching of Jesus and the teaching of the Buddha is real and has impressed readers on both sides.

Theme	Jesus	The Buddha
Love of enemies	"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44)	Hatred is not appeased by hatred but by non-hatred (Dhammapada 5)

Theme	Jesus	The Buddha
Reciprocity	"Do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12)	All tremble at violence; comparing oneself with others, one should neither harm nor kill (Dhammapada 129–130)
Wealth	"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matthew 6:19)	Craving for possessions binds beings to suffering; the monastic renounces property
Humility	Whoever wants to become great must be a servant (Mark 10:43)	Conceit (*māna*) is one of the last fetters to be broken
The lost child	The prodigal son welcomed home by his father (Luke 15)	The Lotus Sutra's parable of the rich man's lost son (chapter 4)

The last parallel is especially striking. In the Lotus Sutra, a son who has wandered for decades in poverty returns unrecognized to his wealthy father's estate; the father, knowing him, employs him in humble work for years before revealing that he is heir to everything. Scholars generally regard the two parables as independent, and they differ in emphasis: Luke's father runs to embrace the son immediately, while the Lotus Sutra's father trains his son gradually. The difference is itself instructive: immediate grace on the one hand, patient cultivation on the other.

Where They Diverge

- **The Creator.** Christianity confesses one God, "Maker of heaven and earth." Buddhism denies an eternal creator.
- **The person.** Christianity affirms that each person is a unique creature, loved by God, destined for bodily resurrection. Buddhism teaches that there is no permanent self and that the continuity of a life is a causal stream.
- **The problem.** For Christianity the root human problem is sin: a broken relationship with God expressed in wrongdoing. For Buddhism the root problem is ignorance (*avijjā*) and craving (*taṇhā*).
- **The solution.** For Christianity salvation comes through God's grace received by faith in Christ, whose death and resurrection reconcile humanity to God. For most Buddhist traditions liberation comes through one's own practice of ethics, meditation, and wisdom, guided by the Buddha's teaching.
- **History.** Christianity rests on claims about particular historical events, above all the resurrection. Buddhism rests on a teaching that, in its own terms, would be true whether or not the Buddha had lived.

On the last point, Paul is explicit:

> "*And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.*" *(1 Corinthians 15:17, NIV)*

The Buddhist texts say something almost opposite about the Dhamma: whether or not a Buddha arises, the law that all conditioned things are impermanent remains (AN 3.136). Christianity stakes itself on an event; Buddhism stakes itself on a law.

A Qualification: Grace in Buddhism

The contrast between Christian grace and Buddhist self-effort is real in Theravāda, but it is not the whole story. In Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, especially the Jōdo Shinshū school founded by Shinran (1173–1263), practitioners rely entirely on "other-power" (*tariki*), the saving vow of Amida Buddha, rather than on "self-power" (*jiriki*). Shinran taught that the sincere recitation of Amida's name is itself a gift and not an achievement. Karl Barth, in his *Church Dogmatics* (I/2, §17), called Jōdo Shinshū the closest parallel in world religion to Reformation Christianity's teaching of grace, and then argued that the decisive difference is the name of Jesus Christ: grace in Christianity is grounded in a historical act of God, not in a vow told in a sacred story.

Christianity, likewise, is not simply passive. The same Paul who teaches salvation by grace also writes, "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you" (Philippians 2:12–13, NIV). The line between "self-power" and "other-power" therefore runs through both traditions rather than neatly between them.

How the Buddha Might Respond: A Reconstruction

Drawing only on principles found in the early texts, a careful reconstruction of the Buddha's likely response would include the following:

- He would likely honor the ethical teaching of Jesus on compassion, forgiveness, and non-attachment to wealth as wholesome and praised by the wise.
- He would likely decline to affirm or deny the existence of an eternal creator, classing the question with those that do not lead to liberation, while challenging any claim to know God that rests on tradition or scripture alone.
- He would likely reject the idea of an eternal individual soul as a form of eternalism.
- He would likely redirect the discussion toward the arising and ending of suffering in present experience.

A Christian reconstruction of Jesus's response to the Buddha is equally possible, and later chapters present it: Jesus would honor the Buddha's compassion and honesty about suffering, and would say that the rest the Buddha sought is found in God. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28, NIV).

Christian Responses to Buddhism

Christian responses have varied widely.

- **Appreciative and inclusive.** The Second Vatican Council's declaration *Nostra Aetate* (1965, §2) acknowledged that Buddhism recognizes "the radical insufficiency of this changeable world" and teaches a path to liberation, and affirmed that the Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in other religions. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton engaged D. T. Suzuki and met the Dalai Lama in 1968.
- **Dialogical.** John Cobb's *Beyond Dialogue* (1982) argued that Christianity could be transformed by taking Buddhist insights seriously without ceasing to be Christian. Paul Knitter's *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (2009) went further, defending "double belonging."
- **Critical.** Keith Yandell and Harold Netland's *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal* (2009) respectfully argued that Buddhist metaphysics faces serious philosophical difficulties, especially concerning personal identity, moral responsibility without a self, and the explanation of why anything exists.
- **Converted.** Paul Williams, a leading British scholar of Mahāyāna Buddhism and for two decades a practicing Buddhist, became a Roman Catholic and explained why in *The Unexpected Way* (2002). His central argument was that Buddhism offers no answer to the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?", and that without an answer the Buddhist account of the world remains incomplete.
- **Sri Lankan Christian theology.** Lynn de Silva's *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (1979) argued that the biblical view of the human being, as a psychosomatic unity rather than an immortal soul lodged in a body, is closer to Buddhist *anattā* than Western Christians usually realize.

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Part Three: Foundations of Buddhism

"There is, monks, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned. If there were not, no escape from the born, become, made, and conditioned would be discerned." (Udāna 8.3, paraphrase)

"Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." (John 17:3, NIV)

Chapter 5: The Ultimate Goal

The Question

What is the ultimate goal in Buddhism?

The Four Noble Truths

Everything in Buddhism radiates from the Buddha's first discourse, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, "Setting the Wheel of the Dhamma in Motion" (SN 56.11). Delivered at the Deer Park near Benares to five former companions, it states four truths, structured like a physician's diagnosis:

1. **Dukkha** (the illness): Life as ordinarily lived is marked by *dukkha*, a word poorly served by "suffering." It includes pain and grief, but also the subtler unsatisfactoriness of anything that changes, and the deepest unease of existing as a conditioned being at all.
2. **Samudaya** (the cause): *Dukkha* arises from craving (*taṇhā*): craving for sense pleasure, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence.
3. **Nirodha** (the cure): *Dukkha* ceases when craving ceases completely.
4. **Magga** (the treatment): The way to that cessation is the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold Path

The path is traditionally grouped into three trainings:

Training	Path factors	Meaning
Wisdom (*paññā*)	1. Right view; 2. Right intention	Understanding the Four Truths; intentions of renunciation, goodwill, and harmlessness
Ethics (*sīla*)	3. Right speech; 4. Right action; 5. Right livelihood	Truthful, kind speech; not killing, stealing, or sexual misconduct; earning a living without harm
Meditation (*samādhi*)	6. Right effort; 7. Right mindfulness; 8. Right concentration	Cultivating wholesome states; clear awareness of body, feeling, mind, and phenomena; deep meditative absorption

The factors are not steps taken in sequence but strands developed together, like the strands of a rope.

Nirvana

The goal is *nibbāna* (Sanskrit *nirvāṇa*), literally "blowing out" or "extinguishing," as a flame goes out when its fuel is exhausted. What is extinguished is the threefold fire of greed, hatred, and delusion. With it ends the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*).

Nirvana is not a place and not a heaven. The Buddha consistently declined to describe it in positive metaphysical terms, and the texts usually speak of it by negation: the unconditioned, the deathless, the cessation of craving, the end of *dukkha*. The tradition distinguishes two aspects. Nirvana "with remainder" (*sa-upādisesa*) is attained in life: the awakened person still has a body and still feels pain, but greed, hatred, and delusion are gone. Nirvana "without remainder" (*anupādisesa*), sometimes called *parinibbāna*, follows the death of such a person, after which there is no further rebirth.

Is final nirvana annihilation? The Buddha rejected that description as firmly as he rejected eternal existence. In the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta* (MN 72), the wanderer Vacchagotta asks whether an awakened being is reborn, not reborn, both, or neither after death. The Buddha answers with a question: when a fire goes out, in which direction has it gone, east, west, north, or south? The question does not fit the case. The fire has not gone anywhere; it has ceased for lack of fuel. Likewise the categories of "existing" and "not existing" do not apply to the one who has been freed from the aggregates by which a being is identified. The Buddha adds that such a one is deep, immeasurable, and hard to fathom, like the ocean.

One famous passage speaks in almost positive terms. In the *Udāna* (8.3), the Buddha declares that there is an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, and that were it not so, no escape from the born and conditioned would be possible. Christian readers have sometimes compared this passage to language about God. Buddhist scholars caution that it describes a state or dimension to be realized, not a personal being to be worshipped, and that it neither creates nor governs the world.

The One Who Attains It

In early Buddhism and in today's Theravāda tradition, the ideal is the *arahant* (Sanskrit *arhat*), "the worthy one," who has attained nirvana by following the path the Buddha taught. The tradition describes four stages of awakening: the stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*), who has broken the first three fetters, including the view that there is a permanent self, and will attain full awakening within seven lives at most; the once-returner; the non-returner; and the arahant.

Mahāyāna Buddhism, which emerged in the centuries around the turn of the Common Era, placed at the center the *bodhisattva*, the being who vows to attain full Buddhahood for the sake of all beings and to keep working for their liberation. The eighth-century poet-monk Śāntideva expressed this in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra*: as long as space endures and as long as beings remain, may I too remain to dispel the misery of the world.

The Three Great Traditions

Western readers often speak of "Buddhism" as if it were one thing. It is at least three broad families, which together number roughly half a billion adherents.

Tradition	Main regions	Canon and emphasis
Theravāda ("Teaching of the Elders")	Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia	Pāli Canon; the arahant ideal; monastic discipline; insight meditation
Mahāyāna ("Great Vehicle")	China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam	Sanskrit sutras in Chinese translation; the bodhisattva ideal; emptiness; Buddha-nature; Zen and Pure Land schools
Vajrayāna ("Diamond Vehicle")	Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan, Himalayan regions	Mahāyāna philosophy plus tantric ritual and meditation; the guru relationship; the Dalai Lama belongs to this tradition

This book draws most often on the early Pāli texts because they are the common inheritance of all three, but it notes where the later traditions differ.

The Western and Christian Counterpart

The Christian goal is often summarized as "going to heaven," but the New Testament's own summary is relational. Jesus defines eternal life as knowing God (John 17:3, quoted at the head of this part). The final vision of Scripture is not the escape of souls from the world but the renewal of the world itself, with God dwelling among his people:

> "'*He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death*' *or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*" *(Revelation 21:4, NIV)*

> **Text note.** In John 17:3 (NA28), "eternal life" is *zōē aiōnios*, literally "the life of the age," the life of the age to come. In Johannine usage it describes a quality of life that begins now through knowing God, not merely endless duration. Revelation 21:4

> alludes to Isaiah 25:8, where the MT says God will "swallow up death forever" and the LXX, interestingly, reads "death, having prevailed, swallowed up." The NIV's quotation marks in Revelation 21:4 reflect this Old Testament allusion.

Both traditions, then, promise the end of suffering, grief, and death. Buddhism locates that end in the cessation of craving and rebirth. Christianity locates it in a new creation in which persons, raised from death, live in communion with God.

Question	Buddhism	Christianity
Name of the goal	Nirvana (*nibbāna*)	Eternal life; the Kingdom of God; the beatific vision
Nature of the goal	Cessation of craving and of rebirth; the unconditioned	Communion with a personal God in a renewed creation
Does the individual persist?	The categories "exists" and "does not exist" are said not to apply	Yes: the person is raised bodily and known by God
How is it reached?	The Eightfold Path (with Pure Land as a partial exception)	Grace received through faith in Christ, expressed in a transformed life
Can it begin now?	Yes: nirvana with remainder is attained in this life	Yes: eternal life begins in knowing God now

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Chapter 6: Self, Soul, and Rebirth

The Question

Do Buddhists believe in a soul? In reincarnation?

Anattā: The Teaching of Not-Self

Buddhism is distinctive among the world's religions in teaching *anattā* (Sanskrit *anātman*), "not-self." It is one of the three marks of all conditioned existence, together with impermanence (*anicca*) and unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*).

The teaching was aimed first at the Upaniṣadic doctrine of *ātman*, the eternal, unchanging Self at the core of each being, which the Brahmanical sages identified with *brahman*, the ultimate reality of the universe. The Buddha looked for such a Self in experience and did not find it.

The Five Aggregates

The Buddha analyzed a person into five "aggregates" or "heaps" (*khandha*, Sanskrit *skandha*):

Aggregate	Pāli	What it covers
Form	*rūpa*	The body and physical matter
Feeling	*vedanā*	The pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral tone of each experience
Perception	*saññā*	Recognition and labeling
Mental formations	*saṅkhārā*	Volitions, habits, and dispositions, including intention
Consciousness	*viññāṇa*	Awareness through the six senses (the mind counted as the sixth)

In the Buddha's second discourse, the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* (SN 22.59), he examines each aggregate with two tests. **The control test:** if the body were self, it would not lead to affliction, and one could say, "Let my body be thus; let it not be thus." But one cannot. The same holds for feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. **The permanence test:** is each aggregate permanent or impermanent? Impermanent. Is what is impermanent satisfying or unsatisfying? Unsatisfying. Is it fitting to regard what is impermanent and unsatisfying as "This is

mine, this I am, this is my self"? No. The discourse ends with the five listeners attaining awakening.

The Chariot and the Flame

The *Milindapañha* ("Questions of King Milinda," compiled over several centuries from about the first century BCE) records a dialogue between the monk Nāgasena and the Indo-Greek king Menander. When the king asks his name, Nāgasena replies that "Nāgasena" is only a designation; no person is found as such. The king objects: then who keeps the precepts, who meditates, who attains nirvana? Nāgasena asks how the king arrived. By chariot. What is the chariot? Is it the pole, the axle, the wheels, the frame? None of them singly. Something other than all of them? No. Then "chariot" is a name for the parts in their proper relation. So too "Nāgasena" is a name for the aggregates in their functioning relation.

The same text supplies the classic image for rebirth. If a man lights one lamp from another, has the flame passed over? No, and yet the second flame did not arise without the first. So in rebirth, the new being is "neither the same nor another" (*na ca so na ca añño*).

Not-Self Is Not Nihilism

Two misunderstandings must be avoided. First, *anattā* does not mean that persons do not exist. Buddhist philosophy distinguishes conventional truth (*sammuti-sacca*) from ultimate truth (*paramattha-sacca*). Conventionally, there are persons who act, choose, and bear responsibility. Ultimately, there is no permanent, independent, self-owned essence among the processes that make up a person.

Second, the Buddha himself refused to state flatly that "there is no self." In the *Ānanda Sutta* (SN 44.10), the wanderer Vacchagotta asks, "Is there a self?" The Buddha is silent. "Then is there no self?" Again silent. After Vacchagotta leaves, the Buddha explains to Ānanda that to say "there is a self" would side with the eternalists, and to say "there is no self" would side with the annihilationists and would further confuse Vacchagotta, who would think, "The self I had before no longer exists." *Anattā* is therefore best understood as a method of practice (regard nothing as "me, mine, my self") rather than a metaphysical denial.

Variations Within Buddhism

The teaching has not been uniform across the tradition.

- **The Pudgalavāda** ("Personalists"), an early Indian school, held that there is a "person" (*pudgala*) that is neither identical to nor different from the aggregates. Other schools regarded this as a dangerous concession, but it

shows that the problem of personal identity troubled Buddhists from the beginning.

- **Buddha-nature** (*tathāgatagarbha*) teachings in Mahāyāna texts such as the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* speak of an inherent potential for awakening in all beings, and some passages even speak of a "true self." Scholars debate whether this is a skillful accommodation to audiences who feared nihilism or a genuine shift in doctrine.
- **Tibetan Buddhism** speaks of a subtle, continuous "mindstream" (*citta-santāna*) that passes through death and an intermediate state (*bardo*) before rebirth. Theravāda denies an intermediate state and holds that rebirth-consciousness arises immediately upon death.

Rebirth, Not Reincarnation

Because there is no permanent soul, Buddhists prefer "rebirth" to "reincarnation." Reincarnation, in the Hindu sense, implies that a soul (*ātman*) passes from body to body as a person changes clothes (*Bhagavad Gītā* 2.22). In Buddhism nothing passes over. What continues is a causal stream: the momentum of intentional actions (*kamma*) conditions the arising of a new psycho-physical process, as one candle lights another.

Saṃsāra: The Round of Rebirth

Saṃsāra, "wandering on," is the beginningless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The *Anamatagga Saṃyutta* (SN 15) declares that a first beginning of beings wandering in saṃsāra is not evident, and that the tears each being has shed over the eons exceed the waters of the four great oceans (SN 15.3).

Rebirth takes place in six realms: three fortunate (gods, demigods, humans) and three unfortunate (animals, hungry ghosts, hell-beings). The Abhidhamma elaborates these into thirty-one planes. None is permanent. A god's life may last for eons, but it ends, and a hell-being's suffering, however long, also ends. This is a key difference from traditional Christian teaching on final judgment.

Karma, in this system, is not a sentence passed by a judge. The Buddha defines it as intention: "It is intention, monks, that I call kamma" (AN 6.63). Intentional actions of body, speech, and mind shape future experience as seeds shape plants.

Is There Evidence for Rebirth?

Buddhist tradition holds that advanced meditators can recollect past lives; the Buddha is said to have done so on the night of his awakening. In the modern West, the psychiatrist Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia collected thousands of case reports of children who claimed memories of previous lives, beginning with

Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation (1966). His work is carefully documented but remains contested; critics point to cultural contamination, investigator bias, and the absence of a known mechanism. Several respected Western teachers, including Stephen Batchelor (*Buddhism Without Beliefs*, 1997), practice Buddhism while remaining agnostic about rebirth. Others, including Bhikkhu Bodhi, argue that rebirth is integral to the Buddha's teaching and cannot be removed without changing it.

The Western Philosophical Counterpart

Western philosophy has its own long debate about the self, and parts of it come remarkably close to Buddhism.

- **Plato** (*Phaedo*) argued that the soul is immortal, simple, and distinct from the body, and even entertained reincarnation.
- **Aristotle** (*De Anima*) defined the soul as the "form" of a living body, its organizing principle, rather than a separate thing inside it.
- **René Descartes** (*Meditations*, 1641) identified the self with a thinking substance, the "I" that cannot doubt its own existence.
- **David Hume** (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739, 1.4.6) reported that whenever he looked within for his "self" he found only particular perceptions (heat, cold, love, hatred, pleasure, pain) and concluded that the mind is "a bundle or collection of different perceptions." No Western text comes closer to the five aggregates. Scholars have debated whether Hume could have encountered Buddhist ideas through Jesuit sources at La Flèche; the question remains open.
- **Derek Parfit** (*Reasons and Persons*, 1984) defended a "reductionist" view of personal identity, argued that "identity is not what matters," and explicitly noted that the Buddha had held a similar view.

The Christian Counterpart

The popular Western picture of the soul as a ghostly substance that exits the body at death owes as much to Plato as to the Bible. Biblical anthropology is more holistic.

> "*Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*" *(Genesis 2:7, NIV)*

> **Text note.** "Living being" in Genesis 2:7 translates the Hebrew *nepeš ḥayyāh* (MT); older English versions render it "living soul." The LXX has *psychēn zōsan*, from which Paul quotes in 1 Corinthians 15:45. The point matters for comparison with Buddhism: in the Hebrew text the man does not *receive* a soul; he *becomes* a living *nepeš*, a whole animated person. The same phrase *nepeš ḥayyāh* is used of animals in Genesis

> 1:20–24. The NIV's "living being" is closer to the Hebrew than the traditional "living soul."

The New Testament nevertheless distinguishes the soul from the body in some passages:

> "*Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*" *(Matthew 10:28, NIV)*

And the Christian hope is not the immortality of a disembodied soul but the resurrection of the body. Paul contrasts a "natural body" (*sōma psychikon*) with a "spiritual body" (*sōma pneumatikon*) in 1 Corinthians 15:44: the resurrected person is still embodied, but in a transformed way. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, taught that the soul is the form of the body and remarked in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 15 that "my soul is not I" (*anima mea non est ego*): a disembodied soul is not a complete human person.

Christian theology has also debated the "intermediate state" between death and resurrection (2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23), and some Christian thinkers hold "Christian physicalism" (for example, Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 2006). Lynn de Silva argued that such biblical holism brings Christianity closer to *anattā* than is usually recognized, while still differing on the decisive point: in Christianity, God preserves and raises the person.

On reincarnation, the Christian position is clear: "people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Hebrews 9:27, NIV).

The Christian Critique and the Buddhist Reply

Christian philosophers raise three main objections to *anattā*:

- **Responsibility.** If there is no enduring self, who is responsible for past actions, and who receives their results? The Buddhist reply, from the *Milindapañha*: milk becomes curds, curds become butter, butter becomes ghee. It would be wrong to say the ghee is the same as the milk, yet it came from the milk. Continuity of causes, not identity of substance, grounds responsibility.
- **Love.** Christian love is directed to persons as irreplaceable. If persons are bundles of processes, what is loved? The Buddhist reply: compassion is directed to *suffering*, which is real wherever it occurs, and does not require a metaphysical self to be sincere.
- **The experiencer.** Every experience seems to be experienced *by* someone. The Buddhist reply: the sense of an experiencer is itself one more

experience arising in the stream. The Christian counter-reply: that sentence presupposes someone to whom the sense of an experiencer appears.

Question	Buddhism	Christianity	Western philosophy
Is there a soul?	No permanent self; the person is five aggregates	Yes, but understood holistically; the person is body and soul	Contested: Plato and Descartes yes; Hume and Parfit no
What survives death?	A causal stream conditioned by kamma	The person, preserved by God and raised bodily	Naturalists: nothing; dualists: the mind
How many lives?	Countless, until nirvana	One life, then judgment and resurrection	Not a philosophical consensus
Is the self good?	The belief in a self is the root of suffering	The self is created good, fallen, and redeemable	Varied

Sources for Chapter 6

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Chapter 7: The Universe, Creation, and Natural Law

The Question

How does Buddhism explain the existence of the universe, creation, and physical laws?

No First Beginning

The early texts state that a first beginning of the round of existence cannot be discerned (SN 15.1). Later Buddhist cosmology pictures a universe without beginning or end, filled with countless world-systems, each of which forms, endures, dissolves, and remains empty over immense periods called *kappas* (Sanskrit *kalpa*). The texts describe world-systems destroyed by fire, water, or wind, and then re-forming. There is no first cause and no final end, only the ongoing process of arising and passing away.

Buddhism does not attribute the universe to a creator. The Dalai Lama, in *The Universe in a Single Atom* (2005), gives the classic Buddhist reason: if there were an absolute beginning, there would be only two options. Either the universe was caused by a transcendent intelligence outside the chain of cause and effect, or it came from nothing, without any cause. Buddhism rejects both. The first leaves unexplained the status of the transcendent intelligence itself; the second violates the principle that everything arises from causes.

Dependent Origination

In place of creation, Buddhism offers *paṭicca-samuppāda* (Sanskrit *pratītya-samutpāda*), "dependent origination." Its most compact formulation appears in many discourses:

> *When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases. (e.g., MN 79, paraphrase)*

The Buddha is also reported to have said that whoever sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma, and whoever sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination (MN 28). Everything, physical or mental, arises from causes and conditions and ceases when they cease. Nothing exists independently or of itself.

The doctrine has a specific application to the problem of suffering in the twelve links (*nidāna*) of dependent origination (SN 12):

Link	Pāli	Conditions the next
1. Ignorance	*avijjā*	Not seeing the Four Truths
2. Volitional formations	*saṅkhārā*	Intentional actions that shape future existence
3. Consciousness	*viññāṇa*	Consciousness that arises in a new life
4. Name-and-form	*nāma-rūpa*	The mental and physical organism
5. Six sense bases	*saḷāyatana*	Eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind
6. Contact	*phassa*	Meeting of sense, object, and consciousness
7. Feeling	*vedanā*	Pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral tone
8. Craving	*taṇhā*	Thirst for pleasure, existence, or non-existence
9. Clinging	*upādāna*	Grasping at pleasures, views, rites, and self
10. Becoming	*bhava*	The process that leads to a new existence
11. Birth	*jāti*	Arising in a new life
12. Aging and death	*jarā-maraṇa*	With sorrow, grief, and despair

The chain is traditionally drawn as the rim of the Wheel of Life (*bhavacakra*). It has no first link in time. Ignorance conditions formations, but ignorance itself has conditions in previous cycles. The chain can nonetheless be broken: the reverse sequence shows that with the cessation of ignorance, formations cease, and so on to the cessation of the whole mass of suffering. Several Western scholars regard the twelve-link list as a later synthesis of shorter lists, but the principle of conditionality runs throughout the earliest texts.

Emptiness

The Mahāyāna philosopher Nāgārjuna (c. second century CE) drew the radical conclusion. If everything arises dependently, nothing has *svabhāva*, "own-being" or intrinsic existence. Everything is empty (*śūnya*) of independent existence. His *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* opens by arguing that nothing arises from itself, from another, from both, or without a cause. Emptiness is not nothingness; it is the absence of independent, self-standing existence. For Nāgārjuna, emptiness and dependent origination are the same fact seen from two sides.

Natural Law Without a Lawgiver

Buddhism does recognize order in the universe. In the *Paccaya Sutta* (SN 12.20), the Buddha says that whether or not Tathāgatas arise, the principle of conditionality stands: it is the stability of the Dhamma, the fixed course of the Dhamma. The Buddha *discovers* the law; he does not make it.

The fifth-century commentator Buddhaghosa later spoke of five kinds of natural order (*niyāma*). In the twentieth century Caroline Rhys Davids popularized them as five "laws of nature": physical order (*utu-niyāma*, seasons and inorganic processes); biological order (*bīja-niyāma*, seeds and heredity); moral order (*kamma-niyāma*, action and result); mental order (*citta-niyāma*, the processes of mind); and the order of Dhamma itself (*dhamma-niyāma*). Scholars have noted that the fivefold list does not appear in the canon itself and that the modern reading of it as a scientific taxonomy goes beyond Buddhaghosa's own purposes. Still, the idea behind it is canonical: the moral order is part of the natural order. Rhys Davids described this as substituting a "cosmodicy" for a theodicy.

The Buddha also warned against explaining everything by karma. In the *Sīvaka Sutta* (SN 36.21), he lists eight causes of painful feeling: disorders of bile, phlegm, and wind, their combination, changes of climate, careless behavior, assault, and the results of past karma. Karma is one cause among many, not the explanation of everything.

Buddhist Origin Stories

The *Aggañña Sutta* (DN 27) tells how, when a world-system re-forms, beings made of light descend from the Radiant realm, taste a savory essence spreading on the waters, grow coarse, lose their luminosity, and gradually develop bodies, sexes, property, theft, government, and social classes. The sun and moon appear as their light fades.

Scholars such as Richard Gombrich and Steven Collins have argued that this text is largely satirical: a parody of Brahmanical creation myths designed to show that the caste system is a human social invention, not a divine ordinance. Buddhist cosmological descriptions are not meant to be read as literal geography or astronomy, and they do not agree with the astronomy already known in ancient India.

The Christian Counterpart: Creation

> "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*" *(Genesis 1:1, NIV)*

> **Text note.** The MT reads *bərēʾšît bārāʾ ʾĕlōhîm ʾēt haššāmayim wəʾēt hāʾāreṣ*. The verb *bārāʾ* is used in the Hebrew Bible only with God as subject. Grammatically, *bərēʾšît* can be read as an absolute ("In the beginning, God created") or as a construct ("When God began to create"), and some modern translations take the second option. The LXX, *En archē epoiēsen ho theos*, chose the absolute reading, as the NIV does. The explicit doctrine of creation "from nothing" (*creatio ex nihilo*) is stated clearly in Christian writers of the second century (Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus) and is supported by passages such as Hebrews 11:3, "what is seen was not made out of what was visible" (NIV), and 2 Maccabees 7:28 in the LXX.

The New Testament places Christ at the center of creation and of its continuing order:

> "*Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.*" *(John 1:3, NIV)*
>
> "*He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*" *(Colossians 1:17, NIV)*

> **Text note.** The punctuation of John 1:3–4 is a famous textual question. NA28 places the stop *after* "that has been made" (*ho gegonen*), so that it begins verse 4: "What has come into being in him was life." Many early Greek writers read it that way. The NIV follows the alternative punctuation, attaching "that has been made" to verse 3. Either way, the verse affirms that everything that exists came to be through the Word. In Colossians 1:17 the verb *synestēken* ("hold together," "cohere") describes God's ongoing sustaining of the world, the theological ground for the Christian view of natural law.

For Christianity, then, natural laws are not self-existing. They describe the faithful and consistent way God governs creation. Historians of science have long debated how much the belief in a rational Creator encouraged early modern scientists such as Kepler, Boyle, and Newton to expect lawful order in nature (see Peter Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*, 2007).

Did the Universe Have a Beginning? The Scientific Picture

Modern cosmology complicates both traditions' ancient pictures in interesting ways.

- **The Big Bang.** Georges Lemaître, a Belgian physicist and Catholic priest, proposed in 1927–1931 that the universe expanded from a "primeval atom." Edwin Hubble's observations of galactic recession (1929) and the discovery of the cosmic microwave background by Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson (1965) confirmed that the observable universe has expanded from a hot, dense state about 13.8 billion years ago.
- **Past-incompleteness.** In 2003 Arvind Borde, Alan Guth, and Alexander Vilenkin proved that any universe that has, on average, been expanding throughout its history cannot be extended infinitely into the past (Borde,

Guth & Vilenkin 2003). Vilenkin has interpreted this as evidence that the universe had a beginning. Others note that the theorem applies to classical spacetime and may not hold in a full theory of quantum gravity.

- **Alternatives.** The Hartle–Hawking "no-boundary" proposal (1983) describes a universe finite in the past but without a sharp initial boundary. Roger Penrose's Conformal Cyclic Cosmology proposes an endless succession of cosmic "aeons," a model Buddhist writers have noted resembles their cycles of world-systems. Multiverse models posit many universes, echoing the Buddhist image of countless world-systems.

Neither tradition can claim science as its ally without qualification. The Big Bang fits well with the Christian expectation of a beginning, and Lemaître was a priest, though he himself cautioned against treating his theory as a proof of creation. Cyclic and multiverse models fit the Buddhist picture of endless world-systems, but they remain speculative.

Thomas Aquinas, notably, held that a beginning of the world in time cannot be *demonstrated* by philosophy; it is known by revelation (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 46, a. 2). What Aquinas thought reason could establish is that the world, whether or not it had a beginning, *depends* for its existence on God at every moment. This means that the deepest Christian question for Buddhism is not "When did it start?" but "Why does anything exist at all?" Gottfried Leibniz posed it in 1714: why is there something rather than nothing? Dependent origination explains how each thing depends on other things. It does not obviously explain why there is a network of dependent things at all. Buddhist philosophers generally reply that the question assumes a standpoint outside all conditions from which "nothing" could have been the alternative, and that no such standpoint is available.

Question	Buddhism	Christianity	Scientific cosmology
Did the universe begin?	No first beginning; world-systems arise and dissolve endlessly	Yes, created by God (though Aquinas held this is known by revelation)	The observable universe expanded from a hot dense state 13.8 billion years ago; what, if anything, came before is open
What explains existence?	Dependent origination; no first cause	God, the necessary being, creates and sustains all	Physics describes; whether it can explain existence itself is disputed
Where do natural laws come from?	The Dhamma is a law that stands whether Buddhas arise or not	Laws express God's faithful governance	Laws are discovered regularities; their ultimate status is a philosophical

Question	Buddhism	Christianity	Scientific cosmology
			question
Is there a moral order in nature?	Yes: karma is a natural law	Yes: God is just, and moral law is written on the heart	Generally no; morality is treated as human or evolutionary

Sources for Chapter 7

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Chapter 8: Purpose, Humanity, Good and Evil

The Question

What is the purpose of life and of humanity? Is there such a thing as good and evil?

The Precious Human Birth

Buddhism teaches that human birth is rare and precious. In the *Bālapaṇḍita Sutta* (MN 129), the Buddha offers an image. Suppose a man threw a yoke with a single hole into the ocean, and a blind turtle surfaced once every hundred years. The chance that the turtle would put its neck through the hole would be greater than the chance that a being in the lower realms would regain a human birth.

Human life is precious not because humans are the crown of creation but because of its position. In the Buddhist cosmos humans sit in the middle. The gods are too comfortable to feel the urgency of liberation; animals and hell-beings are too afflicted or too dull to practice. Humans experience enough suffering to be motivated and enough freedom to act. And only in the human realm do Buddhas arise.

The Purpose of Life

In Buddhist terms the purpose of life is to use this rare opportunity to awaken: to see through ignorance, end craving, and attain liberation. In the Mahāyāna, this purpose widens to include all beings. The bodhisattva generates *bodhicitta*, the mind resolved on awakening for the sake of others, and vows to work for their liberation for as long as beings suffer.

This purpose is not assigned from outside by a creator. It arises from the recognition of suffering and of the possibility of its end. A Tibetan teacher might put it this way: you did not take this birth by accident; use it well.

The Four Immeasurables

Buddhist ethics is not only a list of prohibitions. At its heart are four "immeasurable" or "divine" states (*brahmavihāra*) to be cultivated without limit toward all beings:

- **Loving-kindness** (*mettā*): wishing that beings be happy.
- **Compassion** (*karuṇā*): wishing that beings be free from suffering.
- **Sympathetic joy** (*muditā*): rejoicing in the happiness and success of others.
- **Equanimity** (*upekkhā*): a balanced mind that does not favor or reject, grounded in understanding that each being is heir to its own actions.

The *Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta* (Sn 1.8) asks the practitioner to cherish all beings as a mother protects her only child with her life.

Good and Evil: Wholesome and Unwholesome

Buddhism has a clear moral vocabulary. Its central terms are *kusala*, "wholesome" or "skillful," and *akusala*, "unwholesome" or "unskillful." The choice of words is significant: an action is judged by what it does to the mind and to the world, much as a physician judges what heals and what harms.

The Dhammapada (v. 183) summarizes the teaching of all Buddhas: to avoid all evil, to cultivate the good, and to purify one's mind.

The Three Roots

Unwholesome action springs from three roots (*akusala-mūla*): **greed** (*lobha*), **hatred** (*dosa*), and **delusion** (*moha*). In Tibetan paintings of the Wheel of Life they appear at the hub as a rooster, a snake, and a pig, each biting the tail of the next. Wholesome action springs from their opposites: **non-greed** or generosity (*alobha*, *dāna*), **non-hatred** or loving-kindness (*adosa*, *mettā*), and **non-delusion** or wisdom (*amoha*, *paññā*).

Intention

Because karma is intention (AN 6.63), the moral quality of an act lies chiefly in the mind that performs it. Buddhist teachers commonly weigh three factors: the intention behind an act, its effect on oneself, and its effect on others. An act done with good intention that benefits both oneself and others is wholly good. An act done with bad intention that harms both is wholly bad. Many actions are mixed.

The Five Precepts and the Ten Courses of Action

The minimal ethical commitment of a lay Buddhist is the Five Precepts, each phrased as a training rule the practitioner voluntarily undertakes:

1. to abstain from taking life;
2. to abstain from taking what is not given;
3. to abstain from sexual misconduct;
4. to abstain from false speech;
5. to abstain from intoxicants that cloud the mind.

The *Sāleyyaka Sutta* (MN 41) expands these into ten wholesome courses of action: three of body (not killing, not stealing, not sexual misconduct), four of speech (not lying, not divisive speech, not harsh speech, not idle chatter), and three of mind (not covetousness, not ill will, and right view).

The precepts are not commandments issued by a god; the practitioner undertakes them because he or she sees that harmful actions produce suffering. The scholar Damien Keown has argued in *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (1992) that Buddhist ethics is best understood as a form of virtue ethics, closer to Aristotle than to either divine command theory or utilitarianism.

Is There Absolute Evil?

Buddhism personifies evil in the figure of Māra, the tempter who tried to prevent the Buddha's awakening. But Māra is not an eternal adversary of a good God; he is a being within saṃsāra, and in philosophical terms he stands for death, defilement, and the forces that bind beings to the round of rebirth. Evil in Buddhism is ultimately rooted in ignorance. No being is evil by nature; even the mass murderer Aṅgulimāla, in the *Aṅgulimāla Sutta* (MN 86), became an arahant.

The Christian Counterpart

The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) opens with a famous answer to the question of purpose: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." Christian purpose is relational and God-directed. Human beings have dignity because they are made in the image of God:

> "*So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*" *(Genesis 1:27, NIV)*

> **Text note.** The MT reads *bəṣalmô*, "in his image," using *ṣelem*, a word elsewhere used of a physical representation or statue; the LXX renders *kat' eikona theou*, "according to the image of God." The NIV's "mankind" translates the Hebrew *hāʾādām*, which here is collective ("humankind") rather than the proper name Adam, as the plural "them" confirms. This is the textual root of the Christian doctrine of universal human dignity, and it contrasts sharply with the Buddhist view that the human realm is one realm among six.

Jesus summarized the moral law in two commandments: to love God with all one's heart, soul, and mind, and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Matthew 22:37–39). Good, in Christianity, is ultimately grounded in God's own character; evil is a turning away from God. Augustine of Hippo argued (*Enchiridion* 11) that evil has no independent existence but is a "privation of good" (*privatio boni*), as blindness is the absence of sight. Structurally, this resembles the Buddhist view that the root of evil is ignorance, an absence of right seeing.

The New Testament's word for sin, *hamartia*, originally meant "missing the mark":

> "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" *(Romans 3:23, NIV)*

> **Text note.** Romans 3:23 (NA28): *pantes gar hēmarton kai hysterountai tēs doxēs tou theou*. The first verb is aorist (a completed act viewed as a whole, "sinned"); the second is present ("are falling short," a continuing condition). The NIV's "sinned and fall short" preserves this distinction accurately. The Buddhist concept of *akusala* describes unskillful acts; the Christian concept of sin adds the dimension of a breached relationship with a personal God, which is why forgiveness, and not only improvement, is central to Christianity.

Christians also affirm a natural moral knowledge available to all people; Paul speaks of Gentiles who show "that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts" (Romans 2:15, NIV). Aquinas developed this into his theory of natural law.

The Problem of Suffering

Each tradition faces a hard question about suffering.

Christianity must answer the problem of evil: if God is all-good and all-powerful, why does he permit so much suffering? Christian responses include the free-will defense (Alvin Plantinga), the "soul-making" theodicy (John Hick, following Irenaeus), the book of Job's refusal to explain, and, most distinctively, the claim that God has entered suffering himself in the crucified Christ.

Buddhism does not face the problem of evil in that form, because it posits no all-good creator. But it faces a different difficulty: if karma explains one's circumstances, does it imply that victims deserve their suffering? Buddhist teachers answer that karma is only one of many causes (SN 36.21), that no one can trace the workings of karma in detail (it is one of the four "unthinkables" of AN 4.77), and that the correct response to anyone's suffering is always compassion, never judgment.

Question	Buddhism	Christianity	Secular Western thought
Purpose of life	To awaken and to free all beings from suffering	To know, love, glorify, and enjoy God forever	Self-chosen: flourishing, happiness, meaning
Why are humans special?	Rare opportunity for awakening	Made in the image of God	Rationality, consciousness, moral agency
Source of morality	Natural law of karma; wisdom and compassion	God's character and will; natural law	Reason, social contract, evolution, consequences
Nature of evil	Unwholesome states rooted in greed, hatred, delusion	Sin: turning away from God; privation of good	Harm; wrongdoing defined by moral theory
Remedy	Purification of mind; the Eightfold Path	Repentance, forgiveness, and grace in Christ	Education, law, moral progress

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Chapter 9: How Do Buddhists Know? Faith, Reason, and Experience

The Question

How do Buddhists know their philosophy to be true, and why do they put faith in it?

Two Means of Knowledge

Classical Buddhist epistemology, developed by Dignāga (c. 480–540 CE) and Dharmakīrti (seventh century), recognized exactly two valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*): **perception** (*pratyakṣa*) and **inference** (*anumāna*). Testimony and scripture were not accepted as independent sources of knowledge; a scripture could be trusted only to the extent that its claims about observable matters proved reliable, and its claims about unobservable matters were then accepted by an inference from that reliability.

The Sri Lankan philosopher K. N. Jayatilleke, in *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (1963), argued that the earliest texts already show a sophisticated empiricism, in which knowledge is grounded in experience, including the "extrasensory" experience claimed for advanced meditators. Later scholars, such as Stephen Evans, have cautioned against reading modern scientific empiricism into the early texts; the Buddha's concern was with liberating knowledge, not with knowledge in general (Evans 2009).

Test the Teacher

A remarkable discourse shows the Buddha inviting scrutiny of himself. In the *Vīmaṃsaka Sutta* ("The Inquirer," MN 47), he tells monks to investigate the Tathāgata, the Buddha himself, to determine whether he is truly awakened: to observe over a long period whether defiled states are ever found in his conduct, whether he has held his good qualities for a long time or only recently, whether fame has corrupted him, and whether he is restrained out of fear or out of freedom from lust. Faith that rests on such investigation is called *ākāravatī saddhā*, "faith with reasons," and the text says it is firm and cannot be shaken by any ascetic, brahmin, god, Māra, or anyone else.

A later verse, cited in the Tibetan tradition from Śāntarakṣita's *Tattvasaṅgraha*, has the Buddha say that the wise should accept his words only after testing them as a goldsmith tests gold, by burning, cutting, and rubbing, and not merely out of respect.

The Path from Trust to Knowledge

The *Caṅkī Sutta* (MN 95) lays out the Buddhist theory of how belief becomes knowledge. The Buddha first explains how to "preserve the truth": a person who holds a belief may say, "This is my belief," but should not conclude, "Only this is true; anything else is wrong." He then describes a sequence: faith in a teacher leads one to approach him; one pays respect, listens, hears the Dhamma, remembers it, examines its meaning, gains a reflective acceptance of it, and then develops zeal, effort, and scrutiny, until finally one "sees with wisdom" the truth for oneself. Faith opens the door; direct realization completes the journey.

Rethinking the Kalama Sutta

Chapter 2 presented the *Kālāma Sutta* as a charter of free inquiry. The American monk and scholar Bhikkhu Bodhi has argued that this popular reading needs correction (Bodhi, "A Look at the Kalama Sutta"). The Kālāmas were not the Buddha's disciples; they came to him confused by competing teachers. The Buddha therefore gave them advice suited to people not yet ready to trust him, and he confined it to what anyone can verify: that greed, hatred, and delusion lead to harm, and their absence to well-being. The sutta does not ask them to accept rebirth, karma, or nirvana. It ends with the "four assurances": if there is another world and karmic results, one who lives well will be reborn well; if there is not, one still lives happily here and now.

Bodhi's conclusion is that Buddhism does include faith (*saddhā*), but a specific kind. Those parts of the teaching within ordinary experience can be personally confirmed, and that confirmation provides a reasonable basis for trusting those parts that lie beyond one's present capacity to verify. At stream-entry, the first stage of awakening, this trust becomes "confirmed confidence" (*aveccappasāda*) in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.

What Can Be Checked in Practice

Much of the Buddhist case rests on claims a practitioner can test in meditation:

- **Impermanence:** attention to breath, bodily sensation, and thought reveals constant change.
- **Unsatisfactoriness:** attention reveals that grasping at pleasant experiences and resisting unpleasant ones produces tension and disappointment.
- **Not-self:** attention reveals that thoughts arise unbidden, that feelings change without our command, and that no fixed controller can be located.
- **Ethics:** keeping the precepts produces a clearer conscience, fewer regrets, and a calmer mind, which in turn supports meditation.

The Limits of Verification

The picture is not as simple as "Buddhism is empirical and Christianity is faith." Three difficulties deserve honest statement.

- **Circularity.** Critics note that practice is undertaken within a framework that tells the meditator what to look for. A person trained to see impermanence and not-self may find them partly because the training shapes perception. Defenders respond that all expert observation, including scientific observation, requires trained perception.
- **Private evidence.** Meditative insights cannot be publicly inspected in the way a laboratory result can. Claims about past-life recollection or the nature of nirvana cannot be checked by a non-practitioner.
- **Unverified doctrines.** Most Buddhists, like most adherents of any religion, have not personally verified rebirth, the operation of karma across lives, or the existence of other realms. They accept these on the authority of the Buddha and the tradition, justified in their eyes by the reliability of what they have verified.

Scholars have also questioned the modern image of Buddhism as uniquely scientific. Donald Lopez, in *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2008), traced how the claim that Buddhism is "compatible with science" was developed in the nineteenth century, partly by Asian reformers responding to Christian missionaries. The philosopher Evan Thompson, himself deeply sympathetic to Buddhist practice, argued in *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* (2020) that "Buddhist exceptionalism," the belief that Buddhism is superior to other religions because it is really a science of mind, misrepresents both Buddhism and science.

The Christian Counterpart: Faith and Evidence

Christianity is sometimes described as a religion of pure faith that forbids verification. That description is also incomplete. Christian epistemology spans a range.

> "*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*" *(Hebrews 11:1, NIV)*

> **Text note.** Hebrews 11:1 (NA28) reads *estin de pistis elpizomenōn hypostasis, pragmatōn elenchos ou blepomenōn*. *Hypostasis* can mean "substance," "foundation," or "assurance," and in documentary papyri it can mean a title deed. *Elenchos* is a term of argument and proof: "conviction," "demonstration," "evidence." The NIV's "confidence … assurance" captures the subjective side; older renderings ("substance … evidence") capture the objective side. The Greek does not define faith as belief without evidence; it defines faith as the grounded conviction of things not yet seen.

> This is closer to the Buddhist *ākāravatī saddhā*, "faith with reasons," than popular accounts of either tradition suggest.

The New Testament repeatedly grounds faith in testimony and evidence. Luke introduces his Gospel as the product of careful investigation "so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:4, NIV). Paul lists named witnesses of the risen Christ, most of whom were still alive to be questioned (1 Corinthians 15:3–8), and makes the whole faith depend on the historical fact of the resurrection (15:17). Peter tells believers to be ready "to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15, NIV), where "answer" translates *apologia*, a reasoned defense.

Christian thinkers have developed several accounts of how belief in God can be justified:

- **Natural theology:** arguments from the existence, order, and fine-tuning of the world (Aquinas; Paley; contemporary philosophers such as Richard Swinburne).
- **Historical evidence:** the case for the resurrection of Jesus from the New Testament documents (N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 2003).
- **Religious experience:** William Alston argued in *Perceiving God* (1991) that the experience of God can justify belief much as sense perception justifies belief in the physical world. This is the closest Christian parallel to the Buddhist appeal to meditative experience.
- **Reformed epistemology:** Alvin Plantinga argued in *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000) that belief in God can be rational without being based on arguments, as belief in other minds is.
- **Fideism:** some Christians, such as Søren Kierkegaard, emphasized a leap of faith beyond reason.

The Secular Western Counterpart

The secular Western tradition generally holds that belief should be proportioned to public evidence. W. K. Clifford's essay "The Ethics of Belief" (1877) argued that it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. Karl Popper held that a claim is scientific only if it could in principle be falsified. By these standards, both traditions contain testable and untestable elements. Christianity's resurrection claim is a historical claim open in principle to historical investigation; its claims about God's nature are not testable in the scientific sense. Buddhism's claims about the mind are testable in practice, at least privately; its claims about rebirth and nirvana are not.

Question	Buddhism	Christianity	Secular Western thought
Valid sources of knowledge	Perception and inference (classical); meditative insight	Reason, Scripture, historical testimony, experience of God	Public evidence and reason; the scientific method
Role of faith	*Saddhā*: provisional trust leading to verification	*Pistis*: grounded trust in God and his acts	Belief proportioned to evidence
What can be verified?	Mental impermanence, the effects of ethics and meditation	The historical claims about Jesus (in principle); the effects of faith in a life	Whatever can be publicly observed or inferred
What must be trusted?	Rebirth, karma across lives, nirvana	God's nature, grace, life after death	Axioms of reason and the reliability of perception

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Part Four: The Great Debate

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." (1 Peter 3:15, NIV)

"One who holds a belief preserves the truth by saying, 'This is my belief,' without concluding, 'Only this is true; anything else is wrong.'" (MN 95, paraphrase)

Chapter 10: A Debate on Life, the Soul, and God

About This Debate

The debate that follows is a constructed dialogue. Its three participants are composites, not portraits of real people, but every argument they make is drawn from real scholars and texts cited earlier in this book. The aim is to let each position speak at full strength and to let the reader watch the arguments meet.

- **The Buddhist** is a monastic scholar trained in the Pāli Canon and in the Madhyamaka philosophy of Nāgārjuna, with long experience of meditation and of interreligious dialogue.
- **The Christian** is a philosopher-theologian in the classical tradition of Augustine and Aquinas, familiar with modern philosophy of religion and with the biblical languages.
- **The Naturalist** is a secular Western philosopher of science who holds that the natural world is all there is and that belief should follow public evidence.
- **The Moderator** frames the questions and holds the participants to them.

Round One: Opening Statements

MODERATOR: Each of you has five minutes. Tell us what you take to be the most important truth about human life.

BUDDHIST: The most important truth is the one the Buddha taught first: there is *dukkha*, there is a cause of *dukkha*, there is an end of *dukkha*, and there is a path to that end. I do not ask anyone to believe this on my authority. Look at your own experience. You want pleasant things to last, and they do not. You want to be someone solid and secure, and every day you discover that you are changing. The suffering does not come from the world alone; it comes from the way we grasp at it. When grasping ends, suffering ends. That is not a doctrine about the heavens. It is a report from the laboratory of the mind, and anyone may repeat the experiment.

CHRISTIAN: I agree that suffering is real and that grasping makes it worse; Augustine said much the same about disordered love. But I think the most important truth about human life is that it is a gift. We did not make ourselves, and we do not hold ourselves in being. The universe does not explain itself. Behind all that is, there is One who simply *is*, who made us for himself, and who, in Jesus of Nazareth, entered our suffering and defeated death. Christianity does not begin with a technique. It begins with an event: a tomb found empty and a man seen alive. If that event did not happen, Paul says, our

faith is futile. If it did, then everything else we think about the self, suffering, and death must be rethought in its light.

NATURALIST: My colleagues have both offered consolations. I want to offer a caution. The most important truth about human life, as far as the evidence shows, is that we are evolved primates on a small planet in an old and vast universe, and that our capacity to fool ourselves is enormous. Both religions make claims that go far beyond public evidence: one about a God who acts in history, the other about rebirth, karma across lifetimes, and a state called nirvana. I grant that each tradition contains practical wisdom. Meditation is a useful discipline and the ethics of compassion is admirable. But usefulness is not truth. My position is that we should believe what the evidence supports, build meaning ourselves, and treat one another decently because we know this life is the only one we are sure of.

Round Two: God and the Origin of the Universe

MODERATOR: Why is there a universe at all? Does it need a Creator?

CHRISTIAN: Let me put the argument in its classical form, the one Aquinas and Leibniz shared. Everything we observe exists contingently: it could have not existed, and it depends on other things. My colleague's own doctrine of dependent origination agrees. But then we must ask about the whole network. Why is there a network of dependent things rather than nothing at all? Adding more dependent things, even infinitely many, never explains why there is any dependence in the first place. An infinite chain of borrowed money does not explain where the money came from. There must be something that does not borrow its existence, something whose nature is to exist. That is what classical theism means by God. Notice that this argument does not depend on the universe having a beginning. Aquinas thought the beginning was known by revelation, not by argument. The argument concerns *dependence*, not *time*.

BUDDHIST: I respect that argument; it is the strongest form of the case for a Creator. But consider what it asks us to accept. It asks us to accept one thing that is not conditioned by anything, a cause that causes without itself being affected. Vasubandhu and Dharmakīrti asked a simple question: how can something utterly unchanging produce effects that change? If God is complete and eternal, and his will is eternal, then either his effects are eternal too, and the world never changes, or something besides God must explain why this effect arises now and not then. In that case, the other conditions are doing the explaining, and God is idle. Dependent origination does not need a first cause because it does not treat the world as a set of things needing a source. It treats the world as a process of conditioning. The question "Why is there something

rather than nothing?" assumes that "nothing" was a real alternative. From where would we survey that alternative?

CHRISTIAN: The answer to Dharmakīrti is that God is not in time. He does not wait and then act. In one eternal act of will he wills the whole temporal order, including its changes. The effects differ from one another because God wills them to differ, not because God changes. As for the question's legitimacy, it is you who taught me that everything conditioned depends on conditions. I only ask that you apply that principle to the totality. If each thing is empty of self-existence, the whole is empty too. What holds it in being?

BUDDHIST: Nāgārjuna would say that emptiness applies to the whole as it does to the part, and that is precisely why the whole needs no foundation. Emptiness is not a lack waiting to be filled by God. It is the way things are. You are asking for a pillar under the sky. The sky does not need one.

NATURALIST: May I interrupt this very elegant disagreement with some physics? The observable universe expanded from a hot, dense state about 13.8 billion years ago. The Borde–Guth–Vilenkin theorem suggests that an expanding universe cannot be infinitely old, which is good news for my Christian friend. But that theorem uses classical spacetime, and we do not yet have a theory of quantum gravity. Cyclic models and multiverse models remain possible, which is good news for my Buddhist friend. The honest answer is that we do not know. And I would add a warning to both of you. Our intuitions about "cause" and "nothing" were formed by medium-sized objects on Earth. Quantum physics has already shown that those intuitions fail at small scales. I see no reason to trust them at the scale of the universe as a whole.

CHRISTIAN: But you have just used a principle of reason to argue that we should distrust principles of reason. If our intuitions about causation are unreliable, so is science, which assumes causation at every step.

NATURALIST: Science assumes regularities we can test. Your argument assumes a principle, "everything contingent has an explanation," that cannot be tested and that some physicists doubt at the quantum level.

BUDDHIST: I find myself agreeing with our naturalist friend more than he might expect. The Buddha put these questions aside, not because he thought them stupid, but because answers to them do not remove the arrow. Whether the world is finite or infinite, eternal or not, the practitioner still faces birth, aging, sickness, and death.

CHRISTIAN: And there we disagree most deeply. The parable of the arrow assumes that the identity of the one who can heal is irrelevant to the healing. But if the physician is also the Creator, then knowing him is the cure. You say

the question does not remove the arrow. I say the answer came to us with nail wounds in his hands.

Round Three: The Soul and the Self

MODERATOR: Is there a soul? What are you?

BUDDHIST: Look for yourself and tell me where you are. Is the self the body? The body changes from moment to moment, and you cannot command it not to age. Is the self your feelings? They come and go. Your perceptions, your intentions, your consciousness? Each arises and ceases. Where is the owner? The Buddha did not say "there is no self" as a metaphysical dogma; when asked directly, he was silent, because both "there is a self" and "there is no self" can become views we cling to. He taught a practice: regard each thing as "not mine, not I, not my self," and see what happens. What happens is freedom.

NATURALIST: Modern neuroscience and philosophy have reached a conclusion surprisingly close to that. Hume looked inside and found only a bundle of perceptions. Parfit argued that personal identity is not what matters. Neuroscience finds no single place in the brain where "the self" sits; the sense of self appears to be constructed by many processes working together. On this point I think the Buddha was ahead of his time. Where I part company with him is rebirth. If the self is a pattern produced by a brain, the pattern ends when the brain dies. I see no evidence for a "stream" that continues.

BUDDHIST: The Buddha would ask you to be as careful with "the brain produces the mind" as with any other view. You have shown correlation between brain states and mental states, not that consciousness is nothing but the brain. The texts claim that meditators can recall former lives. You may reject those reports, but you cannot say the matter has been tested and settled.

CHRISTIAN: I want to begin with agreement, because Christians are often misunderstood on this point. The Hebrew Bible does not say that Adam *received* a soul. It says that he *became* a living *nepeš*, a living being, dust animated by the breath of God. Christian hope is not the escape of a ghost from a body; it is the resurrection of the whole person. Aquinas, following Aristotle, said the soul is the form of the body, and "my soul is not I." So I do not defend the Cartesian ghost either. But here is where I cannot follow my Buddhist friend. When you say, "Look for the self and you will not find it," who is looking? When you say, "Regard this as not mine," who is regarding? Every sentence of the instruction presupposes a subject who is instructed. The fact that I cannot find myself as an object among other objects does not show that I do not exist; it shows that I am the one who looks, not one of the things looked at. An eye cannot see itself either.

BUDDHIST: The eye cannot see itself, true. The Buddhist does not deny the process of seeing. What we deny is that there is a fixed, independent owner behind the seeing. The process of looking can be observed looking. And when it is observed carefully, the sense of a separate looker turns out to be one more thing that arises and passes.

CHRISTIAN: Then let me ask about responsibility and love. If no enduring person exists, who deserves praise or blame for yesterday's act? And whom do I love when I love my wife? A bundle? A process?

BUDDHIST: King Milinda asked Nāgasena the same question. Milk becomes curds, curds become butter, butter becomes ghee. The ghee is not the milk, yet it did not arise without it. The one who acted yesterday and the one who bears the result today are neither the same nor different; they are one causal stream, and that is enough for responsibility. As for love, compassion does not need a metaphysical self to be directed toward. It needs suffering, which is real wherever it arises. Perhaps your love for your wife is not diminished when you see her as a living process rather than a fixed thing; perhaps it becomes more attentive, because you know she is changing and will not always be as she is today.

CHRISTIAN: That is beautiful, and I will not pretend it is empty. But the Christian claim is that God knows each person by name, not as a stream but as a someone, and that this knowing is what finally makes each person irreplaceable. "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." A stream can be continued by another stream. A beloved person cannot be replaced by another person.

Round Four: Suffering and Evil

MODERATOR: Why is there so much suffering, and is there such a thing as evil?

NATURALIST: I will state the problem most sharply for my Christian colleague. If God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good, why do children die of cancer? Why were there hundreds of millions of years of animal predation and pain before any human being could sin? The Buddhist has an easier time here: there is no God to blame.

CHRISTIAN: The problem is real, and I will not answer it with a slogan. Christianity offers several partial answers: that a world with genuinely free creatures must allow the possibility of evil; that a world in which character can be formed must include real challenge; that we see a small part of a much larger story. But the deepest Christian answer is not an explanation. It is a person. The God Christians worship is not a spectator of suffering; he entered it, was tortured, and died. The cross does not explain evil, but it tells us that

God is not indifferent to it, and the resurrection tells us that evil will not have the last word. I would also say to my Buddhist friend that his system faces its own version of the problem.

BUDDHIST: Please explain.

CHRISTIAN: If karma is a natural moral law, then the child born into a war zone is experiencing the results of her own past actions. Does that not imply that she deserves it?

BUDDHIST: No, and this is a common misunderstanding. The Buddha himself said that painful feelings arise from many causes: disease, weather, carelessness, violence, and past karma among them. Karma is not the explanation of everything, and the detailed workings of karma are one of the four things the Buddha called unthinkable; anyone who tries to trace them will go mad. The only correct response to that child's suffering is compassion and help. Now let me say what I think suffering is. Suffering is not a punishment and not a test. It is the natural consequence of beings who crave in a world where nothing lasts. Evil is real in the sense that greed, hatred, and delusion are real and cause immense harm. But no being is evil by nature. Aṅgulimāla murdered many people and became an arahant. Evil is ignorance, and ignorance can end.

CHRISTIAN: Augustine would agree that evil has no substance of its own; he called it a privation of good. On that we are closer than people think. The difference is that you trace evil to ignorance, and I trace it to a will that turned away from its Creator. Ignorance can be cured by knowledge. A broken relationship requires forgiveness.

NATURALIST: And I would say that "evil" is our name for severe harm deliberately caused, and that the causes of suffering are understood best by biology, psychology, and history. Evolution explains why we feel pain. Psychology explains cruelty better than either karma or sin. None of that makes moral outrage meaningless; it just means we should fight suffering with medicine, education, and justice.

BUDDHIST: With medicine, education, and justice, yes. And also with the training of the mind, because medicine does not heal hatred.

Round Five: Salvation and Liberation

MODERATOR: How is a human being rescued? By grace or by effort?

BUDDHIST: The Buddha said: you yourselves must strive; the Tathāgatas only point the way. No one can purify another. That is the Theravāda teaching, and it is the heart of the matter for most Buddhists. I will admit, though, that in Japan the Pure Land tradition teaches reliance on Amida Buddha's vow rather

than on one's own power. Shinran taught that even the recitation of the Buddha's name is a gift. So Buddhism knows something of what you call grace.

CHRISTIAN: I am glad you mention Shinran. Karl Barth called Pure Land Buddhism the nearest thing to the Reformation's doctrine of grace in any religion, and then said the whole difference lies in one name: Jesus Christ. The Christian claim is not merely that grace exists but that God has acted in history to reconcile the world to himself. "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." And yet Christians do not sit passively either; the same Paul tells us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, because God is at work in us. Grace does not abolish effort; it makes effort possible.

BUDDHIST: From my side, the difficulty is this. If salvation depends on accepting a particular historical person, what of the billions who never heard of him, or who lived before him? The Dhamma is available wherever beings suffer and examine their minds.

CHRISTIAN: Christians have argued about that question for two thousand years. Some hold that those who never heard are judged by the light they had; Paul says the moral law is written on every heart. The Second Vatican Council taught that God's grace can work in ways known to him alone. But I will not dissolve the claim: Christians believe Jesus is not one path among many but the one through whom God saves, whether people know his name or not.

NATURALIST: I note that both of you have accounts in which something is wrong with us and needs fixing. I think the diagnosis is exaggerated. Human beings are not fallen and not deluded, just evolved: capable of great cruelty and great kindness. We do not need rescue. We need wisdom, institutions, and each other.

BUDDHIST: You say we do not need rescue. But you will age, you will fall sick, and you will die, and so will everyone you love. Has your wisdom removed that arrow?

NATURALIST: No. It has taught me to face it without illusions.

CHRISTIAN: And that, I think, is the most honest thing any of us has said so far.

Round Six: Death and What Follows

MODERATOR: What happens when we die?

NATURALIST: The evidence suggests that consciousness depends on the brain, and that when the brain dies, the person ends. Epicurus said that death is nothing to us, because where death is, we are not. I find that bracing rather than bleak.

BUDDHIST: For the unawakened, death is followed by rebirth according to karma: the stream continues, conditioned by the intentions that shaped it. For the awakened, death is *parinibbāna*, and the Buddha refused to say that such a one exists, does not exist, both, or neither. When a fire goes out, you do not ask in which direction it went.

CHRISTIAN: Christians believe that after death the person is held by God, and that at the end of the age God will raise the dead bodily, as he raised Jesus, and renew creation. We will be judged, and we will be known. Scripture says we die once, and after that comes judgment. That is sobering, but it also means this life matters infinitely: there is no second attempt, but there is mercy.

BUDDHIST: And the Buddhist would say that the long view of many lives also makes this life matter infinitely, because the human birth is rarer than a blind turtle finding a yoke in the ocean.

NATURALIST: And I would say that this life matters because it is the only one we can be sure of.

Round Seven: Purpose and Meaning

MODERATOR: What is life for?

CHRISTIAN: To know God and enjoy him forever, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Meaning is not something we invent; it is a relationship we are invited into.

BUDDHIST: To awaken, and to help all beings awaken. Meaning is not given from outside; it is found in the ending of suffering, for oneself and for others.

NATURALIST: Whatever we make it: love, work, knowledge, beauty, justice. Meaning is constructed, but a constructed meaning is not fake. A house is constructed too, and it keeps the rain off.

CHRISTIAN: A house built on sand also keeps the rain off, until the flood.

NATURALIST: And a house built on rock can be built on a rock that turns out to be imaginary.

Round Eight: Knowledge and Faith

MODERATOR: How do you know any of this is true?

BUDDHIST: By testing it. The Buddha invited his own monks to investigate him, to watch his conduct over time and see whether he was truly free. I test impermanence every time I sit. I test the effect of the precepts every day. What I cannot yet verify, rebirth for example, I hold with reasoned trust, because the

teacher who was right about what I can test is likely to be right about what I cannot yet test.

NATURALIST: Forgive me, but that is also the reasoning of every religious believer. And your tests are private. Your meditative experience is shaped by the framework you were taught. A Christian mystic finds God in contemplation; a Buddhist meditator finds emptiness. Each finds what the tradition told him to look for.

BUDDHIST: That is a serious objection, and some Buddhist scholars have made it themselves. My answer is that trained perception is not the same as imagination. An astronomer also needs years of training to see what is in the telescope. But I grant that meditation cannot be inspected by an outsider in the way an experiment can.

CHRISTIAN: I am grateful for that honesty, and I want to correct a common picture of Christian faith. The New Testament word for faith, *pistis*, means trust, and the letter to the Hebrews calls faith an *elenchos*, a conviction or proof, of things not seen. Luke wrote after careful investigation so that his reader might know the certainty of what he had been taught. Paul listed witnesses who could be questioned. The Christian claim is exposed to history: if the bones of Jesus were found, Christianity would be refuted. There are few religious claims that stake so much on a public event. And we also have our own tradition of experience. William Alston argued that the experience of God is a form of perception that can justify belief, as sense experience does.

NATURALIST: The resurrection is a historical claim, yes, and I respect that it is falsifiable in principle. But the evidence is two-thousand-year-old testimony from committed believers. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

CHRISTIAN: And the Buddhist claim of rebirth, and the naturalist claim that the universe explains itself, are also extraordinary. None of us stands on neutral ground. The question is which view best accounts for all the evidence, including the existence of the universe, the reliability of reason, the reality of moral obligation, and the historical data about Jesus.

BUDDHIST: The Buddha would say: hold your views, including that one, lightly enough that you can still learn.

Round Nine: Closing Statements

NATURALIST: I have enjoyed this more than I expected. Both traditions contain real wisdom about the mind and about how to live. Buddhism anticipated modern doubts about the self; Christianity gave the West its belief in universal human dignity. But I remain unconvinced that either has shown its

metaphysical claims to be true. I would ask the reader to take what can be tested, test it, and hold the rest as open questions.

BUDDHIST: I would ask the reader only to look. Look at how the mind grasps, and at what grasping does. Look at whether generosity, kindness, and understanding make life lighter. If they do, walk further along the path and see what you find. The Buddha said he taught only suffering and the end of suffering. Everything else, including this debate, is a finger pointing at the moon.

CHRISTIAN: I would ask the reader to take suffering as seriously as my Buddhist friend does, and the evidence as seriously as my naturalist friend does, and then to consider one more question: who was Jesus of Nazareth, and what happened on the third day? If he was who he said he was, then the rest the restless heart seeks is not the extinction of the self but the embrace of the One who made it. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

The Moderator's Summary

The three positions agree on more than one might expect:

- Suffering is real, and much of it is made worse by grasping, fear, and self-centeredness.
- The untrained mind is restless, and disciplined attention can transform it.
- Compassion, honesty, and generosity are better than cruelty, deceit, and greed.
- The popular Western picture of the self as a simple, ghostly substance is inadequate.
- Belief should be examined, not merely inherited.

They disagree, irreducibly, on the following:

- **God:** a personal Creator (Christianity), no creator and no need of one (Buddhism), no evidence for one (naturalism).
- **The person:** a created, embodied soul to be raised by God; a stream of conditioned processes to be released; a biological organism that ends at death.
- **The human problem:** sin, ignorance, or simply the limitations of an evolved animal.
- **The remedy:** grace received in faith; the Eightfold Path; reason, science, and ethics.
- **Death:** resurrection and judgment; rebirth or nirvana; the end of the person.

- **Knowledge:** revelation tested by history, reason, and experience; meditative verification plus reasoned trust; public evidence alone.

The debate does not end with a verdict, and it was not meant to. Its purpose is to let each reader see where the real questions lie.

Sources for Chapter 10

The arguments in this chapter are drawn from the sources cited in Chapters 1–9, especially: Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, qq. 2 and 46; Leibniz, *Principles of Nature and Grace*; Vasubandhu and Dharmakīrti as discussed by Hayes (1988); Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*; *Milindapañha*; SN 36.21; AN 4.77; MN 47; MN 63; MN 72; Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2 §17; Alston, *Perceiving God*; Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*; Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*; Borde, Guth & Vilenkin (2003); and Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*. Biblical quotations: Matthew 10:28; Matthew 11:28; 1 Corinthians 15:17; Ephesians 2:8; Philippians 2:12–13; Hebrews 9:27; Hebrews 11:1; Luke 1:1–4 (all NIV).

Conclusion: What the Western Reader Should Carry Away

Conclusion: The Fundamentals of Buddhism and Western Thought

This book began with a monkey in a tree and ended with three voices in a debate. Along the way it has tried to do one thing: to let Buddhism speak in its own terms, and then to let Western philosophy and Christianity answer in theirs. This conclusion gathers what has been learned into a form the reader can keep.

Twelve Fundamentals of Buddhism

1. **The Buddha was a human teacher, not a god.** Siddhattha Gotama claimed to have discovered, not invented, the truth about suffering and its end. Buddhists honor him as the Awakened One, not as a creator or a savior who acts on their behalf (Pure Land devotion being a partial exception).
2. **The starting point is suffering.** The Four Noble Truths diagnose *dukkha*, identify craving as its cause, affirm that it can end, and prescribe the Eightfold Path as the treatment.
3. **The path has three trainings.** Ethics (*sīla*), meditation (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) support one another; none is sufficient alone.
4. **Everything conditioned is impermanent.** Nothing that arises from causes lasts; this includes bodies, feelings, thoughts, relationships, nations, and world-systems.
5. **There is no permanent self.** A person is five aggregates in continuous process. This is not nihilism: persons exist conventionally, act, and bear responsibility.
6. **Everything arises dependently.** Dependent origination replaces creation. Nothing exists independently; there is no first cause.
7. **Karma is intention and its results.** It is a natural moral law, not a judge's sentence, and it is one cause among many, not an explanation of everything.
8. **Rebirth is not reincarnation.** No soul transmigrates; a causal stream continues, conditioned by karma, through many lives, until liberation.
9. **The goal is nirvana.** It is the extinguishing of greed, hatred, and delusion and the end of rebirth; it is not a heaven and, according to the Buddha, not annihilation.
10. **Ethics is wholesome and unwholesome action.** The three roots of evil are greed, hatred, and delusion; the five precepts and the four immeasurables (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity) express the moral life.

11. **Views are to be held without clinging.** Even right view becomes a trap when grasped; some metaphysical questions were deliberately left unanswered.
12. **Faith is provisional trust leading to verification.** The teaching invites testing, but it also asks for reasoned trust in what cannot yet be tested, such as rebirth and nirvana.

The Great Contrasts

Topic	Buddhism	Christianity	Secular Western thought
Ultimate reality	Dependent origination; emptiness; the unconditioned (nirvana)	The triune God, personal and self-existent	The physical universe and its laws
Origin of the universe	Beginningless cycles of world-systems	Created by God from nothing	Big Bang; ultimate origin an open question
The human person	Five aggregates; no permanent self	Embodied soul made in God's image	Evolved organism; the self as constructed
The human problem	Ignorance and craving	Sin: estrangement from God	Ignorance, harm, and injustice
The remedy	The Eightfold Path	Grace through faith in Christ	Reason, science, ethics, institutions
Moral foundation	Karma and the wholesome roots	God's character and law	Human reason, welfare, and agreement
Death	Rebirth or, for the awakened, parinibbāna	Resurrection and judgment	The end of the person
Final goal	Nirvana	Eternal life with God in a new creation	A good life, well lived
Role of the founder	Discoverer and guide	Savior and Lord, God incarnate	No founder; a tradition of inquiry
Basis of knowledge	Perception, inference, meditative insight, reasoned trust	Revelation, reason, historical testimony, experience	Public evidence and reason

Misconceptions Worth Correcting

Western readers commonly misunderstand Buddhism in several ways:

- **"Buddhism is atheism."** Not exactly. Buddhism denies an eternal creator but accepts many gods as beings within saṃsāra. Hayes calls the early Buddha a skeptic rather than an atheist; later Buddhist philosophy became explicitly anti-theistic.
- **"Buddhism is purely scientific and has no faith."** Buddhism prizes investigation, but it includes faith (*saddhā*), devotion, ritual, and cosmology, and some of its central doctrines are not publicly verifiable.
- **"Nirvana is heaven" or "Nirvana is annihilation."** The Buddha rejected both descriptions.
- **"Karma is fate" or "karma is cosmic punishment."** Karma is intention and its results; the future is shaped by present choices.
- **"Buddhists believe in reincarnation of the soul."** Buddhism teaches rebirth without a soul.

Buddhist and secular readers commonly misunderstand Christianity in several ways as well:

- **"Christian faith means belief without evidence."** The New Testament grounds faith in testimony and presents it as grounded conviction; Christian philosophy has a long tradition of argument.
- **"Christians believe in a ghostly soul that floats to heaven."** The biblical hope is the resurrection of the whole person; the Hebrew Bible describes the human being as a living *nepeš*, not a soul imprisoned in a body.
- **"The Christian God is a being like Brahmā."** Classical theism understands God not as the largest being within the universe but as the source of all being, outside time.
- **"Christianity rejects effort."** Grace is primary, but it calls forth and empowers a transformed life.

Where the Traditions Meet and Where They Part

Buddhism and Christianity meet in their seriousness about suffering, their suspicion of self-centeredness, their ethic of compassion toward enemies, and their conviction that the ordinary human condition needs radical transformation. Both have produced contemplatives who trained the restless mind with extraordinary discipline. Both have produced saints of self-giving love.

They part on the deepest questions: whether reality is ultimately personal; whether the individual person is to be preserved or released; whether the human problem is

fundamentally ignorance or estrangement; whether the remedy is discovered or given; and whether history, in the form of a particular life, death, and resurrection, is the place where ultimate reality has shown its face.

Western secular thought stands with Buddhism in rejecting a creator and a soul, and with Christianity in affirming the unique worth of the individual and the importance of public reasons. It asks both traditions to show their evidence, and it is asked in return by both to account for the existence of the universe, the reliability of reason, and the depth of the human longing for more than this world can give.

A Closing Reflection

The monkey mind grasps at branches. The inquiring mind examines them. The Buddha's arrow reminds us that some questions can wait while the wound is treated. The cross proclaims that the one who made the forest entered it and bore the wound himself. A reader who has followed this book need not choose between these images to have learned from them. But every thoughtful person eventually must decide which questions are the arrow and which are the archer, and whether the archer, in the end, is also the healer.

The Buddha asked his hearers to come and see (*ehipassiko*). Jesus asked his first disciples the same thing: "Come," he replied, "and you will see" (John 1:39, NIV). The invitation, in both traditions, is to look with honesty and to follow the truth wherever it leads.

Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

Term	Language	Meaning
Anattā / *anātman*	Pāli / Sanskrit	Not-self; the absence of a permanent, independent essence in any phenomenon
Anicca	Pāli	Impermanence; the first of the three marks of existence
Arahant / *arhat*	Pāli / Sanskrit	"Worthy one"; a person who has attained nirvana
Avijjā	Pāli	Ignorance; the first link of dependent origination
Avyākata	Pāli	The "undeclared" questions the Buddha declined to answer
Bodhicitta	Sanskrit	The mind set on awakening for the sake of all beings
Bodhisattva	Sanskrit	A being committed to attaining Buddhahood to free all beings
Brahmavihāra	Pāli	The four immeasurables: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity
Carita	Pāli	Temperament; Buddhaghosa lists six types
Dhamma / *Dharma*	Pāli / Sanskrit	The Buddha's teaching; also the truth or law it describes; also "phenomenon"
Dhamma-vicaya	Pāli	Investigation of phenomena; the second factor of awakening
Diṭṭhi	Pāli	View, opinion; *sammā-diṭṭhi* is right view, *micchā-diṭṭhi* wrong view
Dukkha	Pāli	Suffering, stress, unsatisfactoriness
Kamma / *karma*	Pāli / Sanskrit	Intentional action and its results
Khandha / *skandha*	Pāli / Sanskrit	The five aggregates that make up a person
Kusala / *akusala*	Pāli	Wholesome / unwholesome

Term	Language	Meaning
Mettā	Pāli	Loving-kindness
Nibbāna / *nirvāṇa*	Pāli / Sanskrit	The extinguishing of greed, hatred, and delusion; liberation
Papañca	Pāli	Conceptual proliferation
Paññā / *prajñā*	Pāli / Sanskrit	Wisdom, discernment
Paṭicca-samuppāda	Pāli	Dependent origination
Pramāṇa	Sanskrit	Valid means of knowledge
Saddhā	Pāli	Faith, confidence, trust
Samādhi	Pāli	Concentration, meditative absorption
Saṃsāra	Pāli / Sanskrit	The beginningless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth
Sīla	Pāli	Ethical conduct
Śūnyatā	Sanskrit	Emptiness; the absence of intrinsic existence
Taṇhā	Pāli	Craving, "thirst"
Tathāgata	Pāli / Sanskrit	"Thus-gone one"; the Buddha's title for himself
Upādāna	Pāli	Clinging; four kinds: to sense pleasure, views, rites, and self-doctrine
Kenōsis	Greek	Self-emptying (Philippians 2:7)
Nepeš	Hebrew	Living being, life, self; traditionally "soul"
Pistis	Greek	Faith, trust, faithfulness
Hamartia	Greek	Sin; literally "missing the mark"

Appendix B: A Guide to the Primary Texts

Text	Reference	Why it matters	Link
Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion	SN 56.11	The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path	suttacentral.net/sn56.11
The Characteristic of Not-Self	SN 22.59	The five aggregates and the teaching of not-self	suttacentral.net/sn22.59
The Net of Views	DN 1	The sixty-two views; the origin of belief in a creator	suttacentral.net/dn1
To the Kālāmas	AN 3.65	The charter of inquiry	suttacentral.net/an3.65
The Shorter Discourse to Māluṅkyaputta	MN 63	The parable of the poisoned arrow	suttacentral.net/mn63
To Vacchagotta on Fire	MN 72	Where does the extinguished fire go?	suttacentral.net/mn72
The Honeyball	MN 18	Conceptual proliferation	suttacentral.net/mn18
The Inquirer	MN 47	Investigating the Buddha himself	suttacentral.net/mn47
With Caṅkī	MN 95	How belief becomes knowledge	suttacentral.net/mn95
The Discourse on What Is Primary	DN 27	Buddhist origin story; critique of caste	suttacentral.net/dn27
The Dhammapada	Dhp	The classic anthology of the Buddha's verses	suttacentral.net/dhp
The Questions of King Milinda	Mil	The chariot, the flame, and the problem of identity	Rhys Davids trans. (1890–94)
The Path of Purification	Visuddhimagga	The Theravāda manual; the six temperaments	Ñāṇamoli trans. (PDF)
Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way	Nāgārjuna, MMK	Emptiness and dependent origination	Garfield trans. (1995)

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