

GREGORY P. WHITSETT

Making Disciples in Buddhist Asia

This article is adapted from two chapters the author published in *Winning Hearts: Leading Buddhists to Faith in God*, edited by Gregory Whitsett and Amy Whitsett. Global Mission Centers, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. © 2016.

A True-to-Life Parable

I would like to share a story—a parable, really.

Pastor Joe was a new, young pastor, pastoring in a predominately Buddhist town. His congregation was small, and only three of his members came from a Buddhist background.

When Pastor Joe suggested that they plan a week-long evangelistic campaign, the church members eyed each other uncomfortably. But no one opposed him because they all knew evangelism was important. However, they knew from experience how hard it was. While a number had been baptized in previous years, only two had remained in the church.

But Pastor Joe, knowing that evangelizing Buddhists would be difficult, had familiarized himself with the major differences between Christianity and Buddhism. He had also learned that it would be best to avoid ‘topical’ studies that skipped around in the Scriptures. So he decided to focus on stories that would teach the key points of salvation—creation and the fall; the promise of the Messiah; the birth, life, and death of Jesus; and finally, the resurrection and promise of the second coming. Pastor Joe selected John 3:16 as his key text and ordered a banner with a picture of Jesus smiling and the words “Jesus Loves You” emblazoned across it in bold letters.

Before long the first evening arrived, and while the turnout was small, the members were happy for the few visitors who came. Afterwards,

Pastor Joe introduced himself to each of them and learned that only two were Buddhist—a middle-aged couple named Tui and Nok.

After the obligatory hymn singing and prayer, Pastor Joe stood up and introduced the theme: “Many people wonder who Jesus is and why Christians worship Him. I look forward to teaching you about Him over the next few days. There is a verse in the Bible that is perhaps the most famous of all Bible texts. It’s found in John 3:16. It says, ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.’”

At home that night, Tui and Nok talked about what they had heard. “What is it that Christians find so appealing about Jesus?” Tui began, “It just makes no sense. It is sad that they put all their hope in someone that died and went to heaven. Don’t Christians know that they can only depend on themselves?”

“That may be true,” Nok responded. “But think of it this way, we Buddhists are known to pray for blessing from Ganesh and Indra and other gods. I suppose there are many gods we don’t know about and this Jesus must be one of them. I like Him because He is supposed to be quite a miracle worker and is willing to help everyone. Obviously we don’t have to become Christian to get his help in our lives.”

With this thought in mind, Tui and Nok continued to attend the meetings. As the meetings came to a close, the pastor invited those who wanted to confess their sin and receive Jesus’ forgiveness and gift of life, to raise their hand. Seeing everyone raising their hands, Tui and Nok raised theirs. After the service, Pastor Joe talked with them and shared how excited he was that they wanted to give their lives to Jesus. They smiled and accepted his prayer for them then quickly went home.

Pastor Joe was overjoyed. His meetings had been a success! The next day he visited Tui and Nok to make sure they understood everything they had heard.

“I am so happy that you have decided to give your lives to Jesus,” Pastor Joe began. “You will never regret your decision! But do you have any questions about what I have been presenting the last few evenings?”

After a few general comments Tui ventured, “Well, I am a bit confused by a couple things, especially the Bible verse you quoted every evening.”

“What seems confusing to you?” Pastor Joe asked warmly.

“Well, first you say the Christian God is in heaven. Everyone knows that the gods were once humans with great merit. The more we worship and do good things in their name, the longer they will be stuck there. It seems to me that it will take a long time before the Christian God will ever be reborn! And another thing is that this God loves the world. There are good things in this world, but anyone with wisdom knows that cravings

and desires are a sign of ignorance and the very source of suffering. So while you say your God did not create suffering, He seems to have been affected by the desires of this world and so must experience suffering like us. And the fact that he offered his Son as a blood sacrifice is disturbing. The only people I know who do this are the uneducated mountain tribes, making peace with the spirits. Was God trying to make peace with the spirit Satan?"

Tui finally paused, allowing the preacher the opportunity to respond. However, young Pastor Joe was now just as confused as Tui. He managed to give some kind of answer before praying and heading home, discouraged as he realized his new converts were still fully Buddhist.

The Statistical Picture

While Christian missions has sought to make disciples across the world, some areas have seen success—such as South America and Sub-Saharan Africa—while others like Asia have been much more difficult.

The question we need to now ask is, "How is Christian mission fairing amongst these people groups?" To answer this question, it is helpful to refer to Paul Hattaway's, *Peoples of the Buddhist World: A Christian Prayer Diary* (2004). In this work, Hattaway identifies 238 major Buddhist ethnolinguistic groups. Table 1 shows a summary of the Buddhist people groups by major school of Buddhism. Allow me to point out a few key points. There are 23 ethnolinguistic groups in the Mahayana Buddhist School found primarily in China and East Asia. There is an estimated 1.7 billion people in these 23 language groups of which 31% are Buddhist and 6.9% Christian. China and South Korea have the large Christian populations.

The Theravada Buddhist school of South and Southeast Asia and the Tibetan school of the Himalayas and Steppes of China, Mongolia, and Central Asia have a much greater diversity of languages. There are 86 language groups with a population of 153 million people in the Theravada branch and 129 language groups with a population of 23 million people in the Tibetan branch. In both these groups, less than one percent are Christian (Hattaway xxii).

Table 1. Christian progress by the three major Buddhist schools

SCHOOL	GROUPS	POPULATION (2010)	PROFESSING BUDDHISTS	PROFESSING B %	PROFESSING C % CHRISTIANS
Mahayana	23 groups	1,701,910,890	526,891,190	31.0%	6.9%
Theravada	86 groups	153,085,440	143,900,240	94.0%	0.8%
Tibetan	129 groups	23,277,280	16,642,865	71.5%	0.8%
Totals	238 groups	1,878,278,990	687,439,675	36.6%	6.4%

Regretfully, reliable and universal data regarding Seventh-day Adventist membership demographics by language group is not available. However, consider the following:

- There is one Seventh-day Adventist for every 393 people in the world.
- There is one Seventh-day Adventist for every 4,714 people in the countries where Buddhism is the major belief system of the society.

But these statistics do not adequately show the degree of the challenge. In many Buddhist majority countries, there are non-Buddhist people groups and foreign residents that inflate the ratio of SDAs to Buddhists in the country. For example, the Global Mission Center for East Asian Religions, an organization operating under the General Conference Office of Adventist Mission, conducted a membership religious history survey in Sri Lanka to identify how many of the Adventist members came from a Buddhist background. Sri Lanka is a primarily Buddhist country with 70% of the population self-identifying with the state religion. The survey was translated into two languages and distributed by the local leaders of each of the 40 churches and worship groups in the country. Of the 1,654 average worshippers on any given Sabbath, 963 participated (or 58%) participated in the survey. The results showed that 6% of the members of those in regular attendance (about 99 people) were Buddhist when the Adventist Church shared the Gospel with them. This is consistent with anecdotal evidence in many of the other Buddhist countries.

The Challenge to Disciple Making in Buddhist Asia

In the parable above, it is clear that Pastor Joe and Tui are on very different wavelengths. Even with all his prayers and good intentions, Pastor Joe is not going to be able to convince Tui that Christianity is better than Buddhism. Why? Let me share a couple of reasons.

Worldview Differences Prevent Buddhists from Appreciating Christianity

Much has been written by Christian missiologists regarding the differences between the beliefs, values, and worldviews of Buddhism and Christianity, and space does not allow me to give a thorough overview of this very serious challenge to Christian mission. Instead I will simply give an analogy as to how the Christian worldview clashes with Buddhism.

How many people enjoy wearing a t-shirt or ball cap with the name and logo of their favorite golf team emblazoned across it? Of course, none, because, unlike most popular sports, golf is not a team sport. In a similar

way, Buddhism is a religion of the individual. While many Asian cultures are social in nature, Buddhism teaches that it can only be the individual who is responsible for one's karma. Just as no one but the golfer can hit the ball, Buddhism teaches that only the individual can address *vipāka*, the results of one's own karma, and only the individual can determine the journey that will lead him or her ever closer to or further from nirvana.

Unlike most other popular sports, in golf the lowest score wins. The goal is to complete the eighteen-hole course with as few strokes as possible. Similarly, Buddhists believe that they will experience a repeated cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. When a golfer is playing his game, he will probably tell you that he is not focused on the last hole. Rather, he is focused on the current hole he is playing. His focus is on getting the ball into the hole with as few strokes as possible—and that takes all of his concentration. In Buddhism, while the ultimate goal is nirvana, very few Buddhists actually keep that goal in mind. While they know there is a "final hole" up ahead, they direct their energies to their current life, knowing that the end will eventually come in due time. But to get there requires focus and concentration on the present.

To keep his score low, the golfer is blessed to have an array of tools at his disposal, most of which come in the form of golf clubs that he carries in a golf bag. The golf clubs vary in weight and size—some thick and heavy, others thin and light, but each designed to serve a different purpose. And a good golfer knows how and when to use each one to his advantage. Buddhists also have an array of tools that come in the form of rituals, amulets, sacred sites, sutras, and so forth. Each have their purpose and can help a Buddhist improve their lot in life and to offset the ill results of karma. In addition, a golfer can hire a caddy to offer advice and a trainer to improve their skill. Likewise a Buddhist will revere Buddha and monks who have shown expertise in the game and can give them help through their power or advice.

Golf is not without its challenges, however. Every good golf course has obstacles and conditions that must be accounted for. Golfers face sand traps, water hazards, challenging slopes on the greens, stands of trees, and even varying weather conditions. More experienced golfers are able to skillfully compensate for each of these and manage to card a good score. The less skilled often find themselves blasting clouds of sand into the air as they attempt to get their ball from the sand trap back to the turf. Similarly, there are obstacles in the Buddhist life. Bad things happen to everyone and are *vipāka*—the result of one's karma—that create misfortune. Also, Buddhists see the spirits and wild beasts as simply fulfilling their lot in life and not in a sinister plot to cause them trouble. Buddhism teaches that one must simply accept what has happened as fact and move

on. Just as a golfer uses a specific club to drive his ball out of a sand trap, a Buddhist can use rituals and ceremonies to help him “get out of the sand trap” and get the ball back on the green. There is no value in getting angry or upset at these things, Buddhists believe. Suffering just is, so accept it, deal with it, and move on.

Christianity, on the other hand, is better compared to the game of soccer—or football as it is called in Asia. Football is a contest between two opposing teams each trying to outscore the other during the ninety-minute game. The members of the team work together, with each player filling a specific role. It is a fast-paced, intense 90 minutes of running, passing, striking, and ball-stealing as the battle for control of the ball moves back and forth across the field. There are two tactics used—offense and defense—and the players are skilled at both. On a good team, players know how to use each other’s skills to the team’s advantage.

The parallel with Christianity should already be apparent. In Christianity there are two teams: God’s team and Satan’s team, who are engaged in a great controversy where only one team can win. Like football, Christianity is set in a definite linear timeframe, as Christians believe that there will come a time when God will resolve the sin issue and restore creation to its pre-sin state, ending this present state of suffering and sorrow. With only one life to live, every person has important choices to make—which team one will play on, how skilled one will become, and how closely one will listen to and follow the team Captain. The similarities go on. But suffice it to say, Christianity and Buddhism are worlds apart in their cultural themes and worldview.

Evangelism Methodology of Workers Is Not Adequate for Buddhist Fields

When the gospel worker approaches a Buddhist with Bible studies, evangelistic preaching, or Christian literature, he prays that he will find success in impressing the Buddhist with the beauty of the gospel of grace and forgiveness through Jesus’ death and shed blood. He eloquently paints vivid pictures of the end of time and Christ’s return to reward the faithful; however, more often than not, his labor is in vain. Why? Because it would be like bringing a football training video to a country club with the hope that the golfers would find it relevant to their game. The golfers may show kindness and friendliness to the footballer and patiently sit through the training video—some may even take notes. But in reality, there is little in the football training video that can be applied to the game of golf. Alas, when Christians follow their good motives but fail to make the good news of Jesus Christ relevant by presenting it in the language

and lifestyle of the Buddhist worldview, they find that their efforts yield little fruit.

The leading edge of mission to Buddhists in Asia belongs to pastors, Bible workers, and Global Mission pioneers who set the pace and tone for building God's kingdom. Sadly, these workers are often ill-equipped due to either a lack of training, or the training and resources are designed for other non-Buddhist audiences. This lack of expertise further drives gospel workers away from evangelism and more toward the inward-facing aspects of ministry, such as preaching, directing board meetings, and caring for church members' needs.

Because "golfers" (Buddhists) so rarely decide to switch sports and become "footballers" (Christians), gospel workers find more success and fulfillment in recruiting footballers from other teams (Christians of other denominations) and adding them to their rosters. Of course, we rightfully desire and take joy when brothers and sisters from other Christian faith traditions see the beauty of the Three Angels' Messages trumpeting the soon return of Christ, but it seems that success along these lines only seems to pacify our concerns at not being successful in discipling Buddhists for Jesus.

Before turning to the solution for those problems, the next section discusses the challenge of worldview a little more. To understand the concept of worldview we must first understand culture.

The Culture Tree

When we think about culture, we usually think of dress, food, language, mannerisms, etc. We know that Lao people eat sticky rice and papaya salad, Burmese men traditionally wear *longyis* or sarongs, Cambodians speak Khmer, and they all are Buddhist. And if we take the time to closely examine culture, we will find that even the way information is processed can be different. Logic and common sense are not universally the same. We call all of this "culture," but there is more to culture than just these "visible" things. In fact, these are simply the behaviors and forms. I like to use the analogy of a tree—a culture tree. The behaviors and forms that we often refer to as culture are represented by the leaves and branches. They are the things we see first and what we use to identify a culture by, just as we do a tree. When we identify a tree we typically look at the top or crown of the tree and observe its shape, leaves, fruit, and flowers. Indeed, from a distance we can easily spot a banana tree, coconut palm, or a mango tree. Likewise we usually identify a culture by its characteristic forms and behaviors.

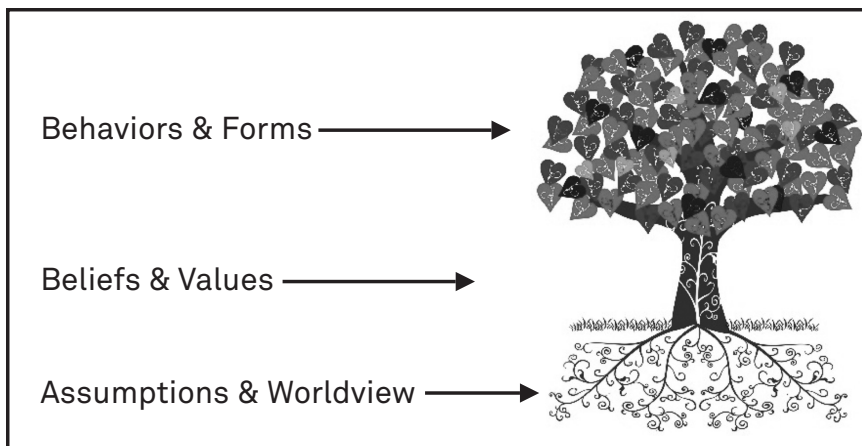


Figure 1. The culture tree

But what supports the leaves and branches of a tree? A trunk, of course! In the 'culture tree' analogy, the trunk is the network of beliefs and values. Beliefs and values provide support and structure for the behaviors and forms. Beliefs are what we believe to be right and wrong, true and false, things that we know to work and those that don't; while values reflect the priority we place on these beliefs. Although our beliefs may remain constant, the value we place on them may vary a little as we re-prioritize based on the context of various situations. It is important to note that sometimes we do not make decisions based on our desired or ideal values. Instead, we make decisions based on our actual beliefs and values. For example, in the Seventh-day Adventist Church we have a mission statement, a vision statement, and the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. But we find that while these are extremely important to us as individuals, how we actually experience them and live them out in our lives differs from person to person. Even more interesting, we may compromise our own beliefs because of other things that seem to conflict and hold all our values in tension. So while we may be able to make a neat little list of our values, it is not uncommon to find that some may just be desired or ideal values. However, if we watch our behaviors—or have someone else watch and tell us what they see—we will be better able to identify our actual values.

After the 'branches' (cultural behaviors & forms) and 'trunk' (cultural values & beliefs) we need to consider the roots of the tree. Just as tree roots are out of site below ground but provide the nutrients a tree needs to be healthy, cultures also have "roots" that are equally vital yet invisible.

In cultural terms, tree roots are analogous to a cultures worldview and assumptions. The worldview determines the 'system' in which life

is played out and why it should be lived in a certain way. It provides the theme or purpose for life from which all behaviors, forms, values, and beliefs take their meaning and are nourished. Assumptions are so called because their truthfulness is assumed. Whether defensible or not, each culture has assumptions about what is real, about the nature of life and death, about spirits, karma, and what is most important in life, what we do when we experience crisis, and so on.

I have found that as I study other worldviews and beliefs I begin to get a window into my own assumptions and worldview. There is no culture that does not need the transforming influence of the Holy Spirit to correct and refine its collective understanding and assumptions.

Analyzing Worldview

Let us consider a real-life example. There is a spirit house located at a three-way intersection a couple of blocks away from the Thailand Mission office in Bangkok. The corner is dangerous because the perpendicular road emerges between two high walls making it very difficult to see oncoming traffic. This particular spirit house is really quite attractive and well taken care of. It has a clean white paint job with bright orange trim work. The dozens of bottles of red Fanta soda set on the table in front of the spirit house are regularly replaced which indicates the degree of devotion its owner has. If you were to come at the right time, you would also notice that there are regular visits by the owner to offer his or her prayers and offerings. Some passersby honk their horn or *wai* (bow) to the spirit house.



Figure 2. Spirit house in Thailand

The design and the activity are all based on the belief that a spirit in that location—perhaps the spirit of one who died in a violent accident—has power to harm or to help passersby. By demonstrating respect to it, travelers believe that they prevent angering the spirit, which could in turn cause them to have a traffic accident. In fact, the local people believe the spirit house is a road safety device.

Behind these beliefs is the Thai assumption that spirits are sentient beings just like human beings but in a different life form. How do they “know” this? From the experience of collective generations that have learned that spirits are indeed real and can harass and harm a passerby. There are anecdotes of spirits that began to haunt a place along the road after a fatal accident.

But a European with a secular scientific worldview will see something totally different. She will observe the aesthetics of the shrine and the quaintness of the devotion. For her, it is all just a silly superstition and potentially a traffic hazard because it could distract a passing driver who may wish to *wai* and take his hands off the steering wheel.

What does a Seventh-day Adventist see? Because his worldview is influenced by the theme of the Great Controversy, he does not see a shrine to a spirit that could harm him, neither does he see it as a silly superstition. The Adventist sees this shrine as a place where one of Satan’s demons is harassing travelers and deceiving the residents about the true nature of death—causing them to believe in a soul that lives on after death. Also a fully-disciplined Seventh-day Adventist will see this spirit house as a tool of Satan to twist the understanding of people and make it hard for them to appreciate the gospel if and when they hear it preached.

If a Thai person wanted to convert a secular European or a Seventh-day Adventist to his opinion, he would have a real challenge. Why? Because both the secular European and Adventist beliefs and lifestyle are grounded in a worldview that is not easily changed. It stands to reason, then, that if we are going to be successful in discipling Buddhists for Christ then we are going to have to deal with these worldview issues. So how are worldviews informed? Can a few quotes from Scripture do this?

I recently met an elderly woman while visiting a new church plant in Thailand. She sat in the front row and was an attentive and active participant in the worship service. Curious about her story, I discovered that she came from a Buddhist background and had in fact been baptized a few years earlier—at the age of 72! This was a surprise! Typically, women her age become more devout in their Buddhism, even becoming nuns to earn more merit. My curiosity was fully aroused—What happened to cause her to change religion? So I talked with her after church. She told me that since the age of five she had experienced a life-long struggle with spirits.

She had spent thousands of dollars doing everything she could to get rid of them, but nothing worked. Then an Adventist pastor moved in next door to her. Each week she heard the singing and it appealed to her. Finally mustering her courage, she visited the pastor and a friendship began. Eventually she confided in him about the spirit problems she was experiencing. The pastor offered to pray for her and she gladly accepted, though she doubted that it would make any difference. But to her surprise, after the pastor prayed, the spirits stopped bothering her! She immediately began Bible studies and was baptized a short time later. As we concluded our conversation I asked her to summarize what Christianity meant to her. Her response was intriguing. She said, "Jesus means everything to me. He has saved me from so much and I owe Him everything. Because of this I have decided that when I die, I want to be a Christian in my next life!"

The story started wonderfully, but it became clear that her worldview had not changed. Why? The pastor had studied with her. I am certain of this. But telling someone and showing them Bible texts to support your teaching does not change a worldview.

Change: Can Worldviews Change?

Worldviews do not change because we want them to! Worldviews are shaped by life experiences and the explanations that accompany those experiences. Worldviews are learned from infancy. When attempts fail, parents, teachers, and older siblings scold and tell the young child why it failed. When success is achieved, members of the society offer their explanatory narratives. One of the richest seedbeds for worldview formation is times of crisis and what people do in times of crisis can help you understand their worldview. A Western Adventist may 'believe' in prayer but when he gets sick he likely turns to doctors and not God through prayer for help. Only when doctors can no longer help do some people turn to God in prayer.

Likewise, when things happen in life that challenge our old assumptions, worldviews are modified to accommodate the new information. Many gospel workers think that their words, shaped into well-crafted Bible narratives, will make the difference, or that a better set of proofs or arguments in behalf of Christ will convert them. But these attempts result in limited success. For worldviews to change, there needs to be a new experience that challenges old assumptions.

A Model for Discipling Buddhists for Jesus

The goal of this paper up to this point has been to clarify the challenge that is faced by the would-be discipler of Buddhists. Disciple making is not merely a process of conversion but it is a process of transformation and the formation of a new worldview and the person's incorporation into a sub-culture of local believers in Christ.

Measuring success in terms of baptism is a mistake not only because it draws the emphasis away from disciple making to making people loyal to behaviors and creeds, but also because it allows us to be easily deceived into thinking that this person has fully adopted the new pathway of liberation from suffering and shame in this world and preparation for the kingdom of God.

Another major weakness of making baptism the primary measure of success in disciple making is that it fails to focus on the real nature of discipleship which is the journey. While knowing our destination can help us mark our course in the proper direction, it is not the best way to measure our progress. Disciple making is a journey that requires way-stations to measure the progress. This is important not only for motivational purposes for the gospel worker but also for identifying what the disciple needs at each stage in the same way that a teacher will assess students to know what is needed to educate them.

My wife, Amy, and I have spent time thinking about making disciples in the Buddhist context and have developed a "Cycle for Discipling Buddhists."

Mission 1—Win Confidence

There are five stages in the discipleship cycle. The goal of the first stage is to earn the trust of a Buddhist contact in order for him or her to become a disciple. This is accomplished using Christ's method of ministry as Ellen G. White describes it in *The Ministry of Healing*. This passage is now an often-quoted and well-known passage of inspiration. Let's take a moment to meditate upon these words.

Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, "Follow Me." (White 1905:143)

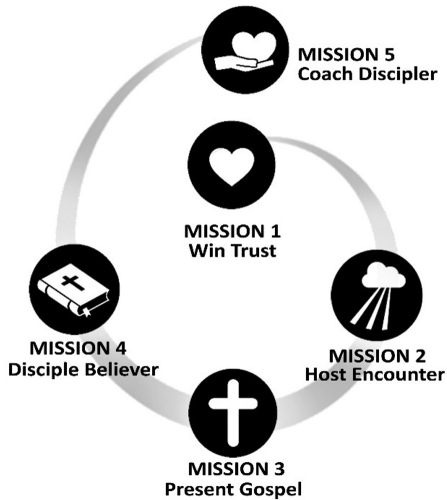


Figure 3. Cycle for discipling Buddhists for Jesus

Several things stand out in this passage.

Christ's Method Alone Gives Success

In other words, there are *many* methods available to the gospel worker from which she can choose, but all of these other options will only give a *false* success. More important is the point that they may appear successful and may result in baptisms, but their success is not genuine. Beware of using man's methods to achieve God's mission! The good news is that we have a description of the method Jesus used.

He Mingled with People as One Desiring Their Good

This isn't an activity of working the crowds to hand out tracts or manipulating conversations to insert God whenever possible. Rather, Christ's mingling was an investment of time spent with people. It required being born as a baby in the home of a Jewish father (Joseph) and a Levite mother (Mary). It meant growing up as a child, doing chores, learning a trade, and walking the dusty roads from village to village. As Jesus' fame spread, it meant less personal time, late nights, and early mornings. In essence, Jesus' form of mingling was genuine and included learning from those He had come to save.

As part of this learning, it is important to recognize that Christ-likeness

in cross-cultural mission assumes that the gospel worker will invest significant study into the needs and nature of the people to whom he has been called. Ellen White writes:

In order to lead souls to Jesus there must be a knowledge of human nature and a study of the human mind. Much careful thought and fervent prayer are required to know how to approach men and women upon the great subject of truth. (1948:4:67)

How is this done? As you befriend people, observe their routines and special events. Take note of the themes of their conversation. Identify how they use their money and time—especially for relaxation, toys, and fun. Who is important to them other than their family? Why? What are the necessities for life and why? How are important decisions made? Are they made by a group or individually? What types of decisions involve extended family members? The community? What is the apparent goal or purpose of their life? What is considered success in life? What about failure in life? What enemies or obstacles hinder success in their life? What is the “theme” of life, and how do they “play” the game of life? What are their perceptions of Christianity?

He Showed Sympathy for Them

What is this sympathy that Jesus expressed? Sympathy is of Greek origin, from *sympatheo*. *Sym-* is a prefix that can be translated “with,” “join,” or “together.” *Patheo* is the root word and means “to feel,” “have passion,” or literally, “to suffer.” We could literally say showing sympathy is to join together in other people’s suffering. Jesus participated with people in their joys and sorrows. Paul exhorted the Romans, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15 NKJV).

He Ministered to Their Needs

Today we have glamorized the word *minister*—we see it as someone who heads a department of the government or as a reference to ordained clergy. But the verb to *minister* in the New Testament is translated from the word *diakoneo*, from which we derive the word *deacon*. This is someone who serves others—in a word, a servant.

There are basically three types of servants—a slave, an indentured servant who is bonded to pay off a debt, and a caregiver. A caregiver is a voluntary servant motivated by generous compassion. Like a mother who serves the needs of her child—nursing him, changing his diapers, bathing

him, and raising him to adulthood—so Christian ministries to Buddhists will be motivated by God’s love for humanity and not out of coercion or a sense of obligation.

He Won Their Confidence

Here is the outcome of Christ’s labor. It was through the mingling, sympathizing, and serving that Jesus won the trust of those He associated with. This is not a fourth activity or item on Christ’s agenda but rather the fruit of His labor.

The indicator that we have accomplished the goal of this stage of discipleship is that the Buddhist will say, “You are my brother/sister.” Or “I can talk about things with you that I couldn’t with anyone else.” We must make sure, however, that our relationship with Christ is obvious. God’s presence in our lives must be so real and life-changing that our Buddhist friends are seeing how God is working in our lives and are attracted to learn more.

He Bade Them Follow Him

Jesus did not expect life-changing decisions with people dropping their nets and selling their property to follow Him without first demonstrating the good news in tangible ways. Once He saw that they trusted Him, Jesus called them to commitment. It is important to point out, however, that as gospel workers we cannot simply call Buddhists to follow us, because we are not calling them to a social club but rather to Christ. Therefore, we cannot go from winning Buddhists’ confidence in us to asking them to give their lives to Jesus. Something else must happen in order for Christ to win their confidence. That something else is the second stage of our mission to disciple Buddhists for Jesus.

Mission 2—Host Encounters with God

We have all read stories in the Bible where people, even Israel’s own kings, entreat a prophet of God, “Pray to your God for me.” At first glance it seems like a reasonable and proper request. But if you look at the pronouns you will find something very profound. Why do they ask the prophet to pray to “his” God? Why did not they say pray to “our” God, or even just “pray to God”? It was simply because they did not have the relationship with God that the prophets did. It was not that the kings were less important to God or that the prayers of the prophets were better received by God than the prayers of the kings. No! It was that the kings did

not have a relationship with God. So the prophets would step in to create a bridge between the king and God. They worked to connect them.

This is exactly what we are to do with our Buddhist friends—we are to stand in the gap and be a bridge between them and God. We need to use our relationships and daily interactions to host an encounter with God. Where are they hurting? Where do they need a God-sized answer for their problems? Use those opportunities to pray for and with them. Give God an invitation to work in their lives so they know he is real and that he knows them.

I have interviewed many Buddhists about how they first believed in Jesus and so far, all of them trace their experience back to God working in some tangible way in their lives. They had a personal encounter with God where He healed them physically, helped them get a job, cast out demons, gave them dreams or visions, filled them with a heavenly peace, or assured them of His presence and love. These experiences are not always observable by the Christian disciple-maker but it is none the less a very real experience.

We can measure success in this stage of mission when the Buddhist disciple proclaims faith that Jesus is real and has done something for them causing them to want to continue to pray to and learn about him.

Mission 3—Present the Gospel

After our Buddhist friends have encountered God, they will be open and ready to hear a gospel presentation. But this is not the gospel according to John 3:16 or a spiritual formula. What is needed is the “gospel according to me.” The testimony must focus on how God has transformed one through an understanding of their spiritual shame, guilt, and fear. Also this testimony can be bolstered with recent stories of how God is continuing to change the disciple to be more like Jesus. We have not yet been changed from glory into glory—we are *being* changed. It is an active, present, current process. And the gospel, or Good News, for them is that God wants to work the same miracle in their lives!

Sanctification is the process of a lifetime. Our job as Christians is to give a testimony that is consistently in the present. The goal is for our Buddhist friends to see the changes in our lives and want to know how to follow Jesus and experience change themselves. But notice the wording: they should not be asking “how to be *like* Jesus,” they should be asking “how to *follow* Jesus.”

As our testimony strengthens, the discipler will point to the great promise of the new heaven and new earth—the ultimate solution to suffering, sin, and death in this world and the need for purity to enter that

place. This is the Christian analog to the Buddhist solution they call nirvana—the snuffing out of the flames of ignorance, lust, and avarice.

The ultimate focus of this gospel presentation is that we experience moral change through the transforming gift and power of Jesus for us and in us. We must be open enough about our own personal growth process that our friends ask, “How can I also follow?” I want to live my life in such a way that my Buddhist friends can imitate me as I am continuing to learn to follow. That is what Paul was saying: “I am following. I have not arrived at the destination. So imitate me. Come be a follower with me.”

Mission 4—Disciple Believer

Once our disciples choose to join us in our journey, then we can start opening the Scriptures and helping them experience the truths that we have. It is at this stage that we begin to challenge their Buddhist worldview—gently at first and then more pointedly as we progress through story based, Buddhists-specific Bible lessons. Bible studies should be focused on telling the stories of Scripture to help explain how God worked through history. Focus needs to be given to dealing with the following issues: karma, nirvana, samsara (cycle of life, death, and rebirth), merit, sin, honor and shame, and gratitude towards God.

We must also take time to disciple them in the various spiritual disciplines such as personal prayer and Bible study, Bible memorization and of claiming promises. Also, through the community of Buddhist background believers, new ceremonies and forms need to be developed to replace the old forms. These new functional substitutes should cover all categories of life including:

- Major Life Events—funerals, baby-naming, praying for success in school examinations
- Daily Life—family prayers, setting aside offerings, personal meditation on Scripture
- Seasonal events—prayers for planting, religious/civil holidays
- Corporate Worship—posture of worship, sacred music, order of service

This stage is complete when your disciple fully accepts Jesus, understands what it means to be a disciple, and is applying the learning to everyday life. Also by this point they should have learned how to spiritually self-feed through prayer, Bible study, and medication.

Mission 5—Coach Discipler

And then the circle becomes complete as they choose to become committed followers of Christ and begin winning the confidence of their friends and families. At this stage the focus is on helping the new disciplers understand the spiritual gifts and talents God has given them to willingly invest their time, energy, and means to making disciples for Jesus. You know you have accomplished this level when they are actively sharing stories of how God is guiding them in discipling other people for Jesus.

Conclusion

Gospel workers face significant challenges when trying to use traditional methods borrowed from other societies. While translated Bible studies, sermons, and books—even the inspired Word—are important tools for making disciples of Buddhists, in the early stages, these do not have the designed effect they might in traditionally Christian settings. Instead, a gospel worker seeking to make disciples of Buddhists will need to adapt his methodology and begin with the humility of a learner and the heart of a servant. We can benefit from the words Ellen White wrote to pioneer missionaries in Africa: “Too many of the methods and habits and fashions have been transported from America to Africa, and the result is not favorable” (1977:97). In *Gospel Workers* she wrote:

The worker in foreign fields will come in contact with all classes of people and all varieties of minds, and *he will find that different methods of labor are required to meet the needs of the people.* A sense of his own inefficiency will drive him to God and to the Bible for light and strength and knowledge.

The methods and means by which we reach certain ends are not always the same. The missionary must use reason and judgment. Experience will indicate the wisest choice to follow under existing circumstances. It is often the case that the customs and climate of a country make a condition of things that would not be tolerated in another country. (1915:468, emphasis supplied)

As we adapt our methods of labor to make disciples of Buddhists, we can be certain of God’s interest and help. Teaching about our beliefs and values is not the appropriate starting place for discipling Buddhists for Jesus. In the presented model, the first three phases of that mission is relational and experiential and then requires the disciple maker to be vulnerable by transparently pointing to how God is working to change his or her own life.

Once we have seen trust in us solidify, faith in God take root, and their desire to follow Jesus become strong, then we can enter into Bible studies with them to develop a new identity as children of the heavenly king. Ultimately, we coach them in making disciples of their family and friends.

By God's grace, we can expect success as we commit to cooperating closely with Jesus in this important work.

Works Cited

- Hattaway, Paul. 2004. *Peoples of the Buddhist World: A Christian Prayer Guide*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.
- White, Ellen G. 1905. *The Ministry of Healing*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.
- _____. 1915. *Gospel Workers*. Washington, DC: Review and Herald.
- _____. 1948. *Testimonies for the Church*. Vol. 4. Oakland, CA: Pacific Press.
- _____. 1977. *Testimonies to Southern Africa*. Bloemfontain, South Africa: South African Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.



Gregory Whitsett served for three years as a Literature Evangelist, then earned a Masters of Divinity degree with an emphasis in World Missions at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, graduating in December 2001. While at Andrews, Greg and his wife Amy felt the calling of the Holy Spirit to enter foreign mission service to reach the unreached Buddhist peoples of Asia. From 2002 to 2012 Greg and Amy served as self-supporting missionaries with Adventist Frontier Missions in Laos and from 2012 until the present, Greg is serving as the director for the Global Mission Center for East Asian Religions in Thailand. Greg and Amy have enjoyed 'team ministry' for 20 years and have two teenage sons and many other spiritual sons and daughters in whom they find great joy.