Short Introductions to the World Religions - Buddhism

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1. There are about 250 million Buddhists in the world. The estimate for Canada is around 100,000.2. Siddhartha Gautama (560-480 B.C.E.) became the Buddha, "the fully Enlightened One", when, after a long search of six years into the meaning of life, the final puzzle fell in place as he sat in meditation under a tree, which has since come to be known as the Bodhi tree. This experience of illumination was not a prophetic vision or a revelation

comparable to revelations in Judaism, Christianity, Islam or Hinduism. Rather he gained an insight, an awareness of the true way of life, which was neither to be found in extreme self-denial nor in self-indulgence, but in the "Middle Way" of serene detachment, through the evolution of consciousness.

3. Siddhartha Gautama"s main concern in his meditation had been the fact of human suffering and misery. His enlightenment led him to conclude that suffering is the result of desire and craving. The elimination of all desire would lead to serenity and eventually to the cessation of suffering and from the circle of rebirths (to Nirvana). Buddha taught and preached the insights he developed for the remaining 45 years of his life.

4. Truth and virtue must be realized through spiritual evolution. They cannot be acquired by merely assenting to creeds or

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believing doctrines. Buddhism relies very little on the supernatural. It places stress on rational guidance to human behavior.

When the clouds of passion and ignorance are dispelled, the sun of insight will illuminate this world and will reveal that its true nature is Buddhahood.

Buddhahood is perfect wisdom, perfect compassion, perfect power of accomplishing good, the underlying ground of all existing things, and the seed of enlightenment which lies within all living beings.

5. The fact that Buddhism does not believe in the notion of an infinite supreme being, a creator God, sets it in contrast to all major religions.

6. Buddhism is extremely practical compared with the theological and metaphysical speculations of other religions. Frequently Buddha answered speculative questions by silence or parables:

If you were hit by a

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poisonous arrow, would you ask which direction the arrow came from, what the poison is made of, and so on and so forth, before you treat the wound? You would first extract the arrow and treat the wound. Then you would ask these questions. You are here now, what are you going to do about it? This is the most important question. Once you solve this, the question of who created the universe will fall into place.

7. Through missionary work of various groups or quiet witness of others Buddhism has influenced more people in the Western world than any other Eastern religion.

8. The primary precepts of Buddhist teaching were expressed by the Buddha in the "Sermon at Benares" shortly after his enlightenment. The discourse is also called "Setting in Motion the Wheel of Law" (the eight-spoked wheel is one of the symbols of Buddhism). The discourse contains the kernel of Buddha"s religious

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teaching, the "Four Noble Truths".

9. The Four Noble Truths:

(1) The Truth of Suffering;
(2) The Truth of the Cause of Suffering;
(3) The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (Nirvana);
(4) The Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering, which is also called "The Noble Eightfold Path".

10. The Noble Eightfold Path (or The Middle Way):

(1) Excellent View;
(2) Excellent Thought;
(3) Excellent Speech;
(4) Excellent Conduct;
(5) Excellent Livelihood;
(6) Excellent Effort;
(7) Excellent Mindfulness;
(8) Excellent Meditation.

11. Since the Eight-fold Path can be divided into the three categories of discipline (morality), meditation and wisdom, Buddhists speak about "The Three Vehicles of Learning":

Through discipline mind and body are controlled. By

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meditation the mind is unified. Through these two wisdom is obtained. By wisdom all ignorance and passions are eliminated and the true state of Enlightenment can be realized.

12. Major historical traditions in Buddhism are:

a) Theravada or Hinayana (Lesser Vehicle) - Burma, Cambodia, India, Laos, Sri Lanka, Thailand;
b) Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) - Orient and Nepal, Jodo Shinshu in China and Japan, Zen Buddhism;
c) Vajrayana (Diamond Vehicle) - Tibetan Lamaism.

13. Sectarianism means straying from Buddhism. By accepting all that is good in every religion, while keeping free from dogmatism, Buddhism sees itself as a universal religion. Attachment to views is a hindrance to understanding, universal kindness and mental purity.

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