

Longing for the Golden City

How 42,500 Buddhist-Background Believers are Proclaiming the Gospel

By JAY JUDSON

After meeting Dr. George Patterson at a Perspectives class in 1999, Jay Judson was mentored by George for a year at Western Seminary where he learned the dynamics of worship in small house churches as well as how to multiply them in a two-month underground church training simulation. In July 2002 Jay moved to Myanmar, serving as Strategy Coordinator for a Buddhist people group numbering 2.8 million. Within three years he established 252 churches. The movements have now spilled across the borders into surrounding countries.

All illustrations were drawn by Saya Sitthu



The author of this article would like to clarify that this work is C4, and all believers call themselves “Christians” or “Children of God.”

There have been tremendous evangelistic breakthroughs among animistic Tribals, Chinese, nominal Christians, Hindus and now even Muslims, but there have been very few breakthroughs among the 350 million Buddhists of the world. Surely the Buddhists are one of the few remaining giants in global evangelization.¹

Indigenous elements of church multiplication movement vision and principles

In February 2004 two of my trainees, the Lawyer and the Farmer, started to see a breakthrough among their Buddhist Unreached People Group. Within two months we saw the first seven new churches. Six months earlier we had started a temporary training church modeled after what we learned from Dr. George Patterson. This training allowed the Lawyer and the Farmer

to develop a Buddhist-friendly style of worship. I asked, “How can we help Buddhist seekers and Buddhist background believers feel comfortable worshipping Jesus?”² The trainees decided to use a Buddhist *gyzee* bell available on the prayer alter in every Buddhist home in the country.³ We adapted its purpose and the *gyzee* is struck three times to indicate the beginning and end of worship in homes. The trainees adapted the basic outline and terminology of the Buddhist monk’s ordination ceremony to baptism. New believers (novices) are trained in an easily reproducible curriculum we call the Ten Commands of Christ⁴ and asked if they lovingly commit to obey our Abbot wherever they go. The novices reply with a Buddhist Pali term *amabondi* (I promise). There is only one Monk—Jesus—whom they bow before.⁵

² All Buddhist background believers identify themselves “Christians” or “Children of God.”

³ In an email to me in 2006 Dr. David Garrison states that there is a difference between contextualization and indigenization. Contextualization is the form and concepts outsiders choose to bridge the gospel cross-culturally as Acts 17 clearly shows. In regard to contextualization and indigenization, mission workers in the Muslim and Hindu context are light years ahead of those of us in the Buddhist context.

⁴ Ten things from the gospels that Christ taught his followers to do, including repent, pray, give joyfully and make disciples. This is an adaptation of the Seven Commands of Christ Dr. Patterson developed with Honduran house church leaders. For a further description see www.justobeyjesus.com/#/who-jay-has-served/c1i0v.

⁵ 1 Tim. 2:5, NIV.

¹ With the advice of Dr. Victor Choudhrie, I have identified six church multiplication movements across the Buddhist world. There are hundreds occurring across the Muslim world even though there are far more missions focused on Buddhists. My Thai friends are seeing one of these Church-Planting Movements. I have interviewed their first-generation leaders who reported to me 17,000 baptisms in 2012.

When they pray, the believers use the Buddhist term for amen or well done, *thadu*.⁶ In Adoniram Judson's translation of the Bible into Burmese, Jesus uses this word in Matt 25:23, giving precedent for its use.

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Rapid obedience to Christ's commands has led to rapid multiplication of new disciples and churches.⁷

Sister Than Than's alcoholic husband left her in 2005 because he found out that she was earning money by way of the oldest profession in the world. When Than Than traveled to the city where the Lawyer and I lived looking for her runaway husband, she heard the gospel, was baptized a week later and was shown a simple model for church. We trained her, shared the vision for a movement and sent her back home. By Christmas 2005, Than Than had started fourteen churches in her area. I asked her how she did this and she was irritated at my amazement. She went on to share her waterfall strategy: "People come to my house on Sunday morning and my daughter Phyu Phyu tells a Bible story using our picture Bible.⁸ Then the trainees repeat the Bible story back to the group and I ask the four inductive questions." The last question is "Who are you going to share this story and truth with?" She challenges the trainees to repeat this story

6 We learned this term from the Thai Covenant Church. www.thaicov.org.

7 I have noticed that over emphasizing "rapidity" frustrates new house church network trainers. Rapid multiplication will come when seekers and leaders learn to lovingly obey Jesus rapidly and radically rather than rushing them to multiply churches.

8 We have developed a Picture Bible with a beardless Christ that emphasizes the missionary theme of the Bible. This theme of Scripture is preferred in the Perspectives course over the sacrificial theme popularized in animistic contexts. Buddhists can relate to an all-powerful, all-loving Lord of Compassion for all nations.

at their homes that afternoon. Therefore the Bible flows out of Than Than's house to the second, third, and fourth generation like a cascading waterfall. Nine-year-old Phyu Phyu is the best preacher in that area out of 200 new house church leaders.

The networks often hold leadership trainings inside monasteries and homes. The Lawyer works with monks on community development projects. A handful of monks have been identified as persons of peace⁹ who have embraced the Messiah while others have been identified as persons of goodwill.¹⁰ A few monks, however, have proven to be strong opponents of the gospel and have driven 300 believers from nine villages. They are jealous of the large numbers turning to Christ and have placed curses on our leaders, which we have broken.¹¹ We have learned a great deal about handling spiritual warfare thanks to these monks.

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Living in an area with one of the lowest cell phone penetrations in the world, our network leaders continue to struggle with lack of communication between mentors. We have sent "runners" with hand-written letters to encourage other leaders and organize future trainings. The house church networks have taken up offerings to build schools, care for children at risk and provide aid in natural disasters and ethnic conflict zones. After cyclone Nargis washed away 140,000 people in May 2008, the movement crossed cultural barriers and spread into the majority people group numbering sixty million Buddhists.

9 Luke 10:6, NIV.

10 Dan. 1:9, NIV.

11 Gal. 3:13, NIV.

Eight barriers to Buddhists receiving Christ¹²



While many cross-cultural workers have developed various methods for sharing the gospel with Buddhists, it is more crucial to identify the barriers.

1. The term for heaven: Buddhists desire to be set free from the cycle of sin and suffering (reincarnation).
2. God's wrath and justice: "Your God killed people in the Red Sea?"
3. The term for sacrifice: "Your God wants me to drink blood and eat flesh? Is he like a hungry ghost?" See the story of the Rabbit in the Moon for our way of dealing with this issue.¹³
4. Eternal life: "You want me to be stuck in reincarnation forever? No thanks."
5. The preeminence of Buddha: "Buddha lived before Jesus; therefore Buddhism is correct."
6. God's grace versus merit: "If salvation is free, then it must be worthless."
7. Sin versus crime: "You said 'for all have committed crime and fallen short of the glory of God.' I am not a criminal."

¹² With the guidance of T. Wolf I listed the barriers that were discovered by the leaders of the Buddhist background believers church multiplication movement and are described further at www.justobeyjesus.com/#!8-barriers-for-buddhists/c1c4x.

¹³ www.justobeyjesus.com/#!sacrifice-story/c24zj.

8. Creation: "The monks told us not to think about creation; that it is not important in our religion."

The Lawyer's Method (The Four Noble Truths of Christ)¹⁴

Taking these barriers into account, my trainee the Lawyer developed a presentation of the gospel for those who live under the four laws of Buddhism (Four Noble Truths).¹⁵ He presents the bad news of Buddha's law before proclaiming the liberating good news of Christ. Buddhists call this liberation *nirvana*¹⁶ in Sanskrit (*nibbana* in Pali). The Lawyer proclaims Christ as the way to *nirvana*. The following is my version of his method.¹⁷

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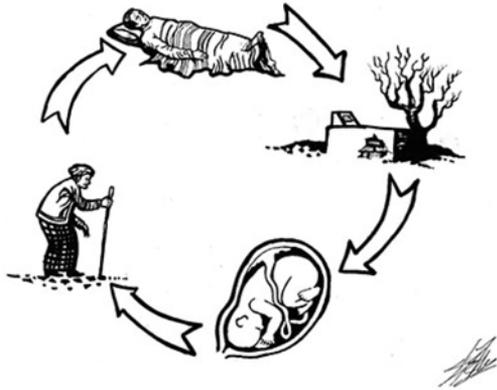
¹⁴ Before I could describe the Lawyer's Method and how my Buddhist background friends are leading Buddhists to Christ, Church-Planting Movement consultant David Watson said to me in a phone conversation, "You know how Buddhists understand the gospel? They need to hear about Heaven."

¹⁵ For a list of the Four Noble Truths, see www.buddhaweb.org

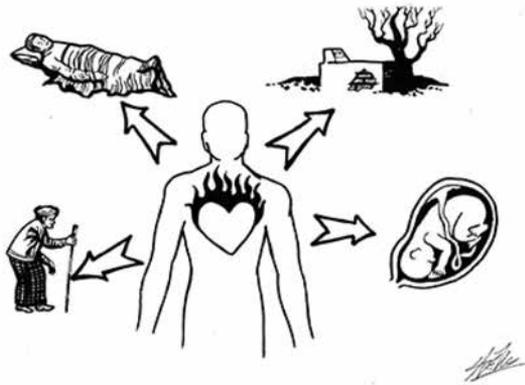
¹⁶ Spiro, Melford E. 1970 *Buddhism and Society*. New York: Harper and Row, 74. The contemporary Burmese Buddhist exhibits three points of view concerning the meaning of *nirvana* (*nibbana*). A small group says that short of experiencing *nirvana*, nothing can be said about it (other than that it entails that absence of suffering). A second group says that although we cannot say what *nirvana* is, it is not extinction or annihilation. Some members of this group argue that although *nirvana* means complete extinction of the physical aspect of life, its spiritual aspect of the mind remains. Others insist that although mind, too, is destroyed, there remains a special kind of awareness.

¹⁷ The Lawyer's Method was developed and written before I found a very similar presentation described in "From Buddha to Jesus" by Thai pastor Steve Cioccolanti www.buddhabook.org.

1st truth: Suffering and death have an origin (a cause). Suffering and death is the effect of that cause.



2nd truth: The origin of death is sin. Share the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience Gen. 3:3 and Rom. 6:23.



3rd truth: There is a place where suffering and sin no longer exist. "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." (Rev. 21:4, NIV) The goal is to go to *nirvana*. *Ni* means no, *vana* means fire or burning. *Nirvana* is a place of no sin and no suffering.

[Editorial Note: My Buddhist-background friends have redrawn the diagram above in a simplified way, since the average layman would recognize only the general categories into which the abodes can be grouped, rather than all the individual Pali names. Their simplified diagram shows a huge gap between the top of the triangle and *nibbana*, in order to emphasize the enormous difficulty in reaching there from any one of the planes, according to Gautama Buddha.]

4th truth: The way out of the cycle of sin and suffering is faith in Christ's death, burial and resurrection. Christ walks the perfect road through his disciples. He makes them perfect in his eyes. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21, NIV)

After praying for the sick, the Lawyer reminds persons of peace that there are many stories in Theravada Buddhism about salvation by grace through faith. For example, most are familiar with the story of a man named Angulimala who murdered his father and repented before the enlightened Gautama Buddha.¹⁸ The Buddhist background believers announce that Christ is very similar to the Lord of Compassion, the *Ari Metteya*.¹⁹

Miracles, Muslims, Hindus and Jews

Not only have the Buddhist-background believers in Myanmar seen a missiological breakthrough among Buddhists, they are also spearheading church multiplication movements among Muslims who have recently embraced the good news. Through them over 400 Hindus have also been baptized and are worshipping in 70 churches. My trainees from Israel have conducted a signs and wonders training in Asia. Now our networks in Myanmar are reporting hundreds more healings and even one resurrection. Only Jesus can bring Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Jews together in the body of Christ. All the power in the world cannot break down the walls of religion, but with Christ all things are possible.

When I inquired to why he made this comparison of Buddha's grace to Christ's grace the Lawyer stated that according to Buddhism, Buddha has already gone to Nirvana and cannot offer grace for people of today. He could only offer salvation during Buddha's and Angulimala's lifetime. ❏

¹⁸ www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/hecker/wheel312.html

¹⁹ Buddhists in our country are familiar with three facts about this Coming One; he is called the *Ari Metteya*, he is the Savior of the world, and when he comes the world will be cleansed with fire. It is highly likely that Gautama Buddha learned of King Darius' decree in Daniel 6:25-28 and that he learned about the Coming Savior and the cleansing of the world through fire.