

Can a Buddhist Become a Mason

The topic of this lecture originated last year at Grand Lodge while a group of Frontenac Masons were discussing what the requirements are to become a Mason. One member had mentioned that “You must belong to one of the three monotheistic faiths; so you must be a Christian, a Jew, or a Muslim.

We all know that an Atheist cannot be a Mason through any lodge in enmity with our Grand Lodge. With the prevalence of free thought and religious criticism today many individuals find they cannot conscientiously adhere to the strict dogma of any specific organized religion and more readily classify themselves as Agnostics, or some would say Gnostic, signifying that they are non-committal, and still searching. A primary reason for men to express their agnosticism is that many aspects of religion such as the truth value of metaphysics and ultimate reality are beyond reason, so unless one is to take that leap-of-faith and commit to a predetermined dogma, they choose to search for their own truth. As many of the members in this room, that were present, openly admit they do not conform to one of the monotheistic faiths, our Grand Lodge discussion ensued and no one could give a clear answer to the question if a Buddhist could become a Mason. Tonight I hope to present some information which can shed some light on Buddhism.

Prince Siddhartha Gautama was born in the 5th Century BCE in Ancient Nepal to Queen Maya and King Suddhodana. The King sheltered his son from the entire world allowing him to reside within three seasonal palaces and shielded him from all evidence of sickness, aging, and suffering. At age 29, Siddhartha set out to meet his subjects and despite his father’s attempts to remove everyone in his journey except young, healthy subjects, the Prince spied an elderly man and became intrigued with the newfound concept that people would suffer and die. Deeply depressed by the sights of disease and death, he sought to overcome old age, illness, and death by living the life of an ascetic. The prince escaped his fathers grasp and chose to live in the wilderness. The purpose of ascetism is to achieve a mind-body transformation which results in peace of mind with increased clarity and power of thought that you can contemplate the “meaning of existence”.

Siddhartha tried to find enlightenment through near total deprivation of worldly goods, including food and practicing [self-mortification](#). After nearly starving himself to death by

restricting his food intake to around a leaf or nut per day, he collapsed in a river and almost drowned. As he laid there, a boat passed him and he overheard the conversation that the two musicians aboard it were saying: "If you tighten the string too tight it will snap, but if it is too loose it will not play." From this, he realised that he would have to take a "middle-way" to reach enlightenment and not by using extremes. Siddhartha had already experienced the extreme of self-indulgence living under the protection of his father and the extreme of self-mortification as an ascetic.

Siddhartha then ate, regained his health and sat under the Bodhi Tree and meditated for 49 days until he attained Enlightenment and became the Buddha or "Enlightened One". At this point, he realized complete awakening and insight into the nature and cause of human suffering which was ignorance, along with steps necessary to eliminate it. These truths were then categorized into the Four Noble Truths.

Before I discuss the Four Noble Truths I should point out that Buddhism asserts that man's position is supreme, there is no higher being or power that sits in judgement over his destiny. Man's emancipation depends on his own realization of Truth and not on the benevolent grace of a god or external power as a reward for his obedient good behavior. Almost all religions are built on faith but in Buddhism emphasis is placed on seeing, knowing, understanding and not in faith or believing. The moment you "see", the question of belief disappears. Buddhism is a practical program which seeks to ultimately bring safety, peace, tranquility, and happiness to attain Nirvana. The Buddhist teaching on God is neither agnostic nor vague, but very clear and logical; if there is a Supreme Being, a Boundless Light, it must clearly be infinite, unlimited, and without attributes, while we on the other hand are clearly finite, limited, and conditioned by numerous attributes; it follows that we can neither define, describe, nor usefully discuss the nature of "That" which is beyond the comprehension of our finite consciousness. Buddhism does not discuss unnecessary metaphysical questions which are purely speculative and which create imaginary problems.

The First Noble Truth is termed Dukka, which many translate incompletely as suffering. Dukkha also includes deeper meanings such as imperfection, impermanence, emptiness, and insubstantiality. Dukkha is a difficult concept to relay but I have found a short piece that I would like to read that I'm sure everyone can relate to:

Striving for what we desire, we may experience stress and suffering. Getting what we desired, we may find delight and happiness. Soon after, the novelty may wear out and we may get bored with it. Boredom is a form of dissatisfaction (or suffering) and to escape from it, we divert ourselves from such boredom by indulging in a pursuit of new forms of pleasure. Sometimes not willing to relinquish objects that we are already uninterested in, we start to collect and amass possessions instead of sharing with others who may have better uses for them than we do. Boredom is a result of change: the change of our interest in that object of desire which so captivated us in the first place.

If we do not get bored already, then change may instead occur in the object of desire. Silverware may become tarnished, a new dress worn thin or a gadget gone obsolete. Or it may become broken, causing us to grieve. In some cases it may get lost or stolen. In some cases, we may worry about such losses even before they happen. Husbands and wives worry about losing their spouses even though their partners are faithful. Unfortunately, sometimes our very worry and fear drives us to act irrationally, resulting in distrust and breaking up of the very relationship that we cherished so much.

While we like changes such as becoming an adult when we are in our teens, we dislike the change called aging. While we strive for change to become rich, we fear the change of retrenchment. We are selective in our attitude towards the transient nature of our very existence. Unfortunately, this transient nature is unselective. We can try to fight it, just as many have tried since time immemorial, only to have our efforts washed away through the passages of time. As a result, we continually experience dissatisfaction or suffering due to the very impermanence of compounded phenomena.

The Second Noble Truth, Samudaya, can be translated as the cause of dukkha or more properly as “what comes up with suffering”. Desire, attachment, greed, thirst, wanting, and volition are the causes. Sense-pleasures can be taste of good food, sexual experiences, or delight in music. Desires of becoming consist of wanting attainment in status or fame. There is also the desire to get rid of anger, fear, and jealousy. Karma literally means doing or action but in Buddhist philosophy it specifically means volitional, or willed, action. Karma never means the effect of action; its effect is known as the fruit or result of karma. The theory of Karma is a natural law of cause and effect

which has nothing to do with the idea of justice, reward, and punishment. Every willed action produces its effects or results. What's difficult to understand about Karma is that willed actions can have effects which still continue to manifest even after the death of an individual. Consider the effects of the actions of the director of a major company that embezzles millions; do not the effects of his actions extent out to his employees, his stockholders, etc. Time constraints do not allow us to explore the Buddhist concept of rebirth.

The Third Noble Truth, Nirodha, is translated as the cessation of dukkha, or the attainment of Nirvana. What is Nirvana? Nirvana is the supramundane experience of "seeing" the Absolute Truth or Ultimate Reality. Language cannot explain the concept accurately but some definitions are the cessation of thirst, the absence of desire. Nirvana is not a state of mind that can be achieved through meditation. Nirvana is not self-annihilation because there is no self in Buddhism. What is the Absolute Truth ? According to Buddhism there is nothing absolute in the world, that everything is relative, conditioned, and impermanent, and that there is no unchanging everlasting, absolute substance such as Self and Soul. In almost all religions the "highest good" can be attained only after death but Nirvana can be realized in life.

The Fourth Noble Path, Magga, is The Path to practice and develop the mind and body to achieve Nirvana. This is the Middle path as it avoids extremes. This middle path is referred to as the Noble Eightfold Path which is composed of 8 categories, namely Right Understanding, Thought, Speech, Action, Livelihood, Effort, Mindfulness, and Concentration. This path is a program of self-discipline, self-development, and self-purification and has nothing to do with prayer, worship, or belief. Knowledge of the path is incomplete; the individual must function to realize Nirvana.

That is an extremely brief overview of Buddhism that does not account for many variations within the divisions of Buddhism throughout the world. When a man decides to join Freemasonry he must conscientiously answer 3 questions. The first question is "Do you believe in the existence of a supreme being"? A Buddhist can not possibly answer this question in the affirmative because their entire philosophy is based on "seeing", not "believing". Buddhism does not discount the existence of a Creator, but any discussion on metaphysics is met with a noble silence.

The second question of “Do you believe this Supreme Being has revealed it’s will to man”? also cannot be answered affirmatively primarily because the question presupposes the existence of a Supreme Being.

The third question being “Do you believe this Supreme Being punishes vice and rewards virtue”? again cannot be answered affirmatively. Buddhism does acknowledge a Divine Intelligence however the creation of Karma through willed action is completely independent of a Supreme Being.

So in conclusion, although Buddhism has perhaps one of the worlds’ most comprehensive and compassionate moral systems, it does not meet the criteria for a Buddhist to become a Mason.

To force oneself to believe and to accept a thing without understanding is political, not spiritual or intellectual.