

The Cycle of Self-Liberation (Buddhism)

Brett Koerten · Let's Be Honest · James 4:14; Psalm 39:5; Ecclesiastes 1:8; Ecclesiastes 1:14; Genesis 3:6; Isaiah 53:4-5; Philippians 2:6-8; Ephesians 2:8-9

AT A GLANCE

Buddhism and Christianity share a diagnosis — human craving produces suffering — but prescribe opposite remedies. Buddhism demands that the self empty itself of attachment to find peace; Christianity announces that God emptied himself in Christ to fill what we cannot. The difference is not one of degree but of direction: self-liberation versus received grace, striving versus rest, a training plan versus an invitation.

- Buddhism correctly names craving as the engine of suffering, but misidentifies the cure as self-emptying rather than received grace.
- The gospel's emptying runs in the opposite direction: God empties himself into human suffering so we can be made whole.
- Syncretism with Buddhist practice is not neutral; the two paths move toward fundamentally different destinations and selves.

“The invitation of Jesus says come to me, bring your suffering, bring your striving, I'll make you full.”

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

[James 4:14](#) — What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then it vanishes.

[Psalm 39:5](#) — Everyone is but a breath, even those who seem secure.

[Ecclesiastes 1:8](#) — Words cannot fully explain things, but people continue speaking. Words come again and again to our ears, but our ears don't become full. And our eyes don't become full of what we see. (ERV)

[Ecclesiastes 1:14](#) — I looked at everything done on earth, and I saw that it is all a waste of time. It is like trying to catch the wind. (ERV)

[Genesis 3:6](#) — When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye and was also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took and she ate. She also gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate it as well.

[Isaiah 53:4-5](#) — Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was on him and by his wounds we are healed.

[Philippians 2:6-8](#) — Jesus, who being the very nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be used for his own advantage. Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man. He humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross.

[Ephesians 2:8-9](#) — Salvation, the life that God offers, is not by our own doing. It is by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

The argument

Buddhism begins with an accurate phenomenology of suffering — Dukkha names impermanence, not merely pain

The First Noble Truth — dukkha — is not simply the observation that bad things happen. The preacher pressed its deeper meaning: because everything is in flux, nothing is complete, and anything incomplete is, in the Buddhist sense, suffering. The glass illustration made this concrete: life is not a stable fullness but constant change, sometimes filling, sometimes emptying, never settled. The preacher reinforced this with James 4:14 and Psalm 39:5 — Scripture's own acknowledgment that life is a mist, a breath. He also surfaced anatta, the no-self doctrine: beneath thoughts and feelings there is no permanent 'you,' only a stream of momentary inputs. This is not pessimism but precision — a serious accounting of impermanence that the preacher credited as genuine wisdom, not dismissed as error.

Insight — A diagnosis does not require a shared cure; taking Buddhist phenomenology seriously is the prerequisite to an honest Christian response.

Craving, not circumstance, perpetuates the cycle — The Second Noble Truth links karma to the disordered will

The Second Noble Truth locates the cause of suffering not in external events but in craving — the drive to make temporary things permanently satisfying. The preacher illustrated this with the moving goalpost of career success and the competitive parenting loop triggered by Instagram. Karma enters here not as moral ledger but as cause-and-effect continuity: cravings generate actions, actions generate consequences, consequences carry the cycle forward from life to life. Ecclesiastes 1 was enlisted as corroboration — 'the eye never has enough of seeing' — to show that Scripture independently identifies the insatiability of human desire. The craving is not wrong because desire itself is wrong; it is wrong because it fastens onto things constitutionally incapable of satisfying it.

Insight — When we demand permanence from what is inherently temporary, we do not end suffering — we manufacture it.

The Christian diagnosis is sin, not impermanence — Disordered desire, not desire itself, is the root problem

Here the sermon's sharpest exegetical move occurs. Buddhism locates the problem in the structure of existence — impermanence is the given, craving the response. Christianity, reading Genesis 3, locates the problem in a historical rupture of relationship. God's declaration over creation — 'it is very good' — establishes that desires, emotions, embodiment, and individual selfhood are not errors to be transcended but gifts to be rightly ordered. The snake's offer reframes craving as wisdom — 'your eyes will be opened' — and sin enters when the creature substitutes its own judgment for God's. 'Sin makes us believe that our cravings are gonna satisfy us.' The preacher was precise: suffering is not the root; suffering is what a sin-fractured world produces. This shifts the question from 'how do I detach?' to 'how is the fracture healed?'

Insight — Christianity does not call the self an illusion to be dissolved but a dignity to be restored — the problem is not that we want, but what and how we want.

The gospel reverses the direction of emptying — God descends into suffering rather than requiring ascent out of it

The sermon's structural climax rests on a single, precise inversion. Buddhism prescribes self-emptying — release attachment, dissolve the craving self, and peace follows. The preacher set Philippians 2:6-8 against this: Jesus 'made himself nothing,' not as a spiritual discipline we perform but as a divine act on our behalf. Isaiah 53 had already framed the movement — 'he took up our pain and bore our suffering' — as entry into suffering, not escape from it. The preacher made the contrast explicit: 'Instead of that emptying being a requirement by us to receive our freedom from suffering, in Jesus, God emptied himself to enter into our suffering.' The glass that Buddhism says must be poured out is, in the gospel, filled — 'I have come that you may have life and have it to the full.'

Insight — The gospel does not offer a technique for transcending need; it offers a Person who met us inside our need and absorbs it.

Grace and self-liberation are mutually exclusive systems — Syncretism is not neutral blending but directional confusion

The sermon's closing movement addressed the 'dabblers' — those who incorporate Buddhist meditation or mindfulness while identifying as Christian — with pastoral precision rather than alarm. The preacher introduced syncretism by name: blending two religious belief systems that are, despite surface resonances, moving in opposite directions. The diagnostic test he offered is directional: 'Is this leading me toward emptying myself or is it helping me be filled by Jesus?' The Ephesians 2 anchor — 'not by our own doing, it is by grace, through faith' — underlines why the distinction is structural, not cosmetic. Self-liberation and received grace are not complementary disciplines; one terminates in the emptied self, the other in a Person who says

'come to me and I will give you rest.'

Insight — A practice is never spiritually neutral; the question is always which telos — self-achieved peace or Christ-given fullness — it is training you toward.

Cross-references

- [John 6:35](#) — Quoted in paraphrase — 'whoever comes to me will never go hungry, will never go thirsty' — as evidence that Jesus offers fullness rather than emptying.
- [Matthew 11:28](#) — Paraphrased — 'come to me all who are weary and I will give you rest' — as the contrasting invitation to Buddhism's self-effort eightfold path.
- [John 10:10](#) — Cited as the gospel's answer to Buddhism's nirvana: 'I have come that you may have life and have it to the full.'
- [Genesis 1:31](#) — God's declaration 'it is very good' used to establish that desire, embodiment, and individual selfhood are created goods, not errors Buddhism's anatta doctrine would dissolve.

DEVOTIONAL

There is a kind of exhaustion that does not come from working too hard but from holding on too tightly. We clutch at the promotion, the reputation, the version of ourselves we have worked so carefully to construct — and then lie awake when any of it trembles. Buddhism looked at this exhaustion with uncommon honesty and said: the problem is the grip. Let go. Empty yourself. It is not wrong advice as far as it goes, and the long tradition of people who have found some quiet in the releasing deserves honest acknowledgment. But there is a question Buddhism cannot answer with emptiness alone: emptied into what? Poured out toward what? A glass drained of craving is still a glass, and glasses are made to be filled. The scandal of the gospel is not that it offers a superior technique. It is that it turns the whole movement around. Before you could empty yourself, God emptied himself — took on flesh, entered the impermanence, bore the suffering, absorbed the fracture that sin had opened in the world. 'He was pierced for our transgressions. The punishment that brought us peace was on him.' This is not a training plan. This is not a path you walk by accumulating right effort and right intention until the craving finally loosens its hold. This is a Person walking toward you while you are still mid-craving, mid-striving, mid-collapse. 'Come to me, bring your suffering, bring your striving, I'll make you full.' The invitation does not wait for you to be emptied first. It meets you full of all the wrong things and offers to replace them — not with nothing, but with himself. You were made with purpose on purpose, given desires that were meant to find their home in him. The glass was never meant to be drained. It was made to hold living water.

Reflection

- Where in your life are you currently gripping something temporary as though it were permanent — and what would it mean to bring that craving to Jesus rather than simply releasing it into emptiness?
- When you engage practices like meditation, mindfulness, or spiritual wellness — what are you training yourself toward, and how would you know if the direction had quietly shifted away from Christ?
- Buddhism says peace comes when you stop expecting impermanent things to complete you; the gospel says you were made for a Person who can actually complete you — how does that difference change the way you understand your deepest longings?

Closing prayer

God, we love you. Thank you for being a God who is not distant from suffering but entered into it — who emptied yourself so that we could be filled. Thank you that you made us on purpose, with purpose, that our desires and our longings and even our restlessness are not mistakes but invitations back to you. Help us be people who bring our striving to you rather than carrying it alone. Help us love our neighbors well — to listen before we speak, to understand before we answer. Let every person around us know they were made with dignity and that there is a God who has already taken the first step toward them. We give this day to you. In your name, amen.
