

From Buddha to Jesus: An Insider's View of Buddhism & Christianity
Steve Cioccolanti. UK: Monarch, 2007.

About the Author

Steve Cioccolanti was born in Thailand and raised as a Buddhist till his conversion at the age of 20.

This book is a mixed bag. Some good and helpful insights are to be found alongside what can only be described as disturbing incompetence in dealing with some of the fundamentals of Buddhism. While during his childhood and adolescence Cioccolanti experienced the practice of Buddhism within his family and social circle, it does not appear that he ever gained much understanding of Buddhist thought. At least there are some glaring gaps in his knowledge with unfortunate consequences. His credibility as an 'insider' able to help 'outsiders' understand Buddhism is seriously undermined by his inability to grasp and explain some of the most basic foundations of Buddhism.

Cioccolanti's upbringing and his evangelistic ministry among Buddhists enables him to present a perspective on Buddhism that many Westerners find difficult to grasp. In particular he stresses that for most Buddhists Buddhism is not about so much about doctrine but about practice. But while there are many helpful things said in this book there are some glaring problems:

1. Cioccolanti does not source some of the important material he presents. For example, he makes much of "The Lotus Parable", which he compares with Jesus' Parable of the Sower. But where does this Lotus Parable come from? How many Buddhists are familiar with this parable? Is it really mainstream? It is a dubious practice to take a peripheral element from a religion and compare it with something of significance in Christianity.
2. Cioccolanti does not appear to have a good understanding of The Four Noble Truths. This is a very serious problem for one who is seeking to help us to understand Buddhism, given the foundational importance of these truths. His explanation of the first truth is alright as far as it goes, but inadequate. His explanation of the second truth is downright incorrect. The Buddha did NOT teach that the cause of suffering is sin. It is rather desire or craving. This is radically different from the biblical concept of sin and needs to be recognised as such. He adds to his error by saying that Indians teach that *karma* is the cause of suffering. This again is quite wrong. Unfortunately, Cioccolanti's deficiencies in understanding the philosophical foundations of Buddhism sap confidence in other dogmatic assertions he makes throughout the book, some of which may well be right, if we could only trust his judgment.
3. The fourth noble truth is very poorly presented, with Cioccolanti apparently unaware of the fact that The Noble Eightfold Path is the fourth noble truth (56).
4. Cioccolanti says that the Thai word for *karma* is *gum* (52) and because of his own Thai background the reader's natural inclination is to assume Cioccolanti must know what he is talking about. Cioccolanti wants to make much of this and contend that for the ordinary Buddhist *karma* is sin. However, according to the review of Cioccolanti's book by Bhikkhu Aggacitto (a forest-trained Theravada Buddhist monk who, as we might expect, is highly critical) Cioccolanti is guilty of a deceitful word play, because he does not mention that the proper Thai word for *karma* is *gi ri yaa*, which, according to Aggacitto, "is a word which simply means

an action or deed without necessarily any moral value judgment and is reserved *specifically* for the teachings of the Buddha.” At the very least Aggacitto’s critique at this point raises serious questions as to the competence of Cioccolanti’s handling of this linguistic issue.

5. Aggacitto rightly draws attention to Cioccolanti’s completely incorrect statement that “Buddha taught that human nature is a sinful nature” (53).
6. Having given some examples of the 227 rules for Buddhist monks, Cioccolanti says: “If you can do all of the above (plus more!) consistently every day of your life, you may have hope of going to Heaven. But if you can’t, you have absolutely no hope. It is hopeless, according to Buddha!” Aggacitto responds: “This is complete nonsense, this is never taught in the Tipitaka...” Here is a challenge then for Cioccolanti. Where in the Three Baskets of Pali Buddhist scripture is there evidence that the Buddha taught what Cioccolanti says he taught. Further, why does Cioccolanti insist on continually confusing “Heaven” with “nirvana”? These are very different concepts! I raise these questions while agreeing with Cioccolanti that Buddhism ultimately requires each person to ‘save’ himself, whereas Christians are totally dependent for their salvation on what Christ has done. Nevertheless, Aggacitto’s critique needs to be answered.
7. There are, however, some valid criticisms of Buddhism made by Cioccolanti that are poorly answered by Aggacitto. Cioccolanti gives the example of a polio victim who was told by a local monk that his physical deformity prevented him from becoming a monk. It is a pity Cioccolanti does not source this exclusion in Buddhist texts, which it is actually quite possible to do. Aggacitto’s weak counter is to say that this custom came about because many people wanted to join the Sangha so that others would care for them. Here Aggacitto is doing less than justice to Buddhist texts.
8. Aggacitto denies that Siddhartha Gautama taught that only monks can go to “Heaven” (Cioccolanti’s ill-advised substitution again!). However, the Pali texts repeatedly treat the monks as an elite group and do clearly indicate that one’s chances are slim of attaining enlightenment outside the Sangha.
9. Cioccolanti drops another clanger, also rightly picked up by Aggacitto, when he comments: “‘Don’t kill’ also means you can’t eat any meat, you must be a vegetarian” (78). This is quite simply wrong and it is disturbing that Cioccolanti, for all his claims to have ‘inside’ knowledge, should get something so basic so wrong. Pali scripture clearly teaches that the Buddha himself ate meat and does allow the eating of meat with certain provisos. But the damage has been done by Cioccolanti. His mishandling of the fundamental Four Noble Truths and now his mistreatment of this very basic ethical issue seriously undermine his credibility as a commentator on Buddhism.
10. Associated with the point above is Cioccolanti’s extravagant and unsubstantiated claim: “‘Technically speaking, a Buddhist can’t even kill bacteria, and every time you take antibiotics, you kill not only bad bacteria, but probiotics (good bacteria) as well” (78). Here Cioccolanti is confusing Buddhism with Jainism.
11. I have made the point above that Cioccolanti regularly makes unsubstantiated dogmatic assertions. Some of these are very basic and desperately need to be sourced. For example, he states, referring to “The Ten Karmas”: “Buddha said this: there are 10 ways to go to Hell.” This is such a fundamental point that Cioccolanti needs to demonstrate that the Ten Karmas are identifiable with “10 ways of death that will cause a human to go to Hell” (95). Indeed, the whole treatment of this issue in this chapter is ill-advised. Cioccolanti presents himself as

able to summarise and outline the Buddha's teaching on this issue, yet never provides any substantiation for what he says. This opens up Cioccolanti to the accusation that he is reading into Buddhism what is simply not there. His very opening statement is a case in point: "It shocks most Westerners to learn that Buddha taught and clearly defined sin." However, Cioccolanti fails to demonstrate two things: (1) that the Ten Karmas constitute central Buddhist teaching (the vast majority of books on Buddhism don't deal with this and a quick Google search immediately indicates it is not a mainstream idea; (2) that the Ten Karmas, for all their clear ethical relevance, constitute a Buddhist definition of sin comparable to biblical notions of sin.