

BUDDHIST ATTITUDE TO THE IDEA OF GOD

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1. "God" is normally considered as the Supreme Creator of the world, with such qualities as omnipotence (all-powerful), omniscience (all-knowing), omnipresence (all-present), and all-benevolence (all-good).

1. To the question, "Does God exist?" , there could be four possible answers: (a) Theists who say "yes" and affirm God's existence; (b) Atheists who say "no" and deny God's existence; (c) Skeptics and Agnostics who say "we do not know"; (d) Positivists, who say that the question is meaningless, because the meaning of the term "God" is not clear.

2. In the history of Indian thought, we see four stages in the evolution of God idea: (a) Polytheism, belief in many gods; (b) Henotheism , the recognition of one god from among many for one particular purpose; (c) Pantheism, God is identical with the Cosmos, (c) Monotheism, the belief in one God.

3. The idea of God-Head: the recognition of an impersonal reality as the ultimate ground of existence, as for example, Brahman as the Cosmic Soul in the Upanishads/Vedanta. The earlier idea of Brahma, the Creator God, gave rise to the idea of Brahman, the Cosmic Soul. Only the transcendent Cosmic Soul is real; the world is illusory.

4. The idea of a Personal God or an Impersonal God-Head, does not find a place in early Buddhist teachings, or in the subsequent schools of Buddhist thought in the continent of Asia, namely, Theravada in the South, Mahayana in the East, and Vajrayana in the North. The idea of Soul and the idea of God come under what Buddhism calls "spiritual eternal-ism" (sassatavada). "Spiritual Eternal-ism" is the belief in an eternal metaphysical self, and a perishable physical body.

5. "Issara" is the term used in the Buddhist Discourses to mean what some other religions called "Creator God". The Buddhist expression to mean "the belief in Creation by God" is "issara-nimmana-vada"

6. The main reason adduced in support of the idea of God is that all higher knowledge should necessarily come from a higher source, i.e., an omniscient or all-knowing divine being. As recorded in a Buddhist discourse, Pokkharasati, a Brahmin teacher, maintained that those religious teachers who claimed to possess knowledge leading to salvation are making an assertion that is "ridiculous, worthless, empty and vain. For how can a mere human being (manussa-bhuto) have such kind of super-normal knowledge?" (Majjhimanikaya, PTS, II 200-201).

7. Buddhism has many arguments against the belief in God. Among them, one is the epistemological argument. It is observed that a religion based on revelation is not satisfactory (anassasika), because what is revealed can lend itself to four interpretations:

(a) It is well remembered (well transmitted), and true;

(b) It is well remembered (well transmitted), and false;

© It is ill remembered (badly transmitted), and true;

(d) It is ill remembered (badly transmitted), and false. (Canki Sutta in Majjhimanikaya).

Since what is revealed lends itself to more than one interpretation, what is claimed to be true, is not trustworthy. Even if its origins are true, there is no guarantee that the message has been accurately transmitted by those who transmitted it. Lack of caution and circumspection, or lapse of memory, could easily distort what is claimed to be divinely revealed.

8. The Buddhist Moral Argument against the belief in God:

From the Buddhist perspective, the belief in a Creator God cannot provide a proper foundation for the theory and practice of moral life (kammavada). It is true that a theistic theory recognizes the need to practice moral life. But it fails to justify the efficacy of moral acts (kiriyaavada) and, the necessity and desirability of human effort in pursuing the moral life (viriyavada).

9. In this connection, the Buddha says:

“There are some ascetics and Brahmins who believe that whatever a man experiences, be it pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, all that is caused by God’s act of creation. I went to them and questioned them (whether they held such a view), and when they affirmed it, I said : ‘If that is so, venerable sirs, then people commit murder, theft and unchaste deeds due to God’ act of creation; they indulge in lying, slanderous, harsh and idle talk due to God’s act of creation. Those who believe that God’s act of creation to be the decisive factor will lack the impulse and effort for doing this and not doing that. Since for them, in truth and fact, (the necessity for) action or inaction does not obtain”. (Anguttaranikaya, Buddha-Jayanti Edition, I 310 ff.).

10. Here, as the Buddha argues, a theory of divine creation is totally unacceptable because of two reasons. One is that it fails to establish a causal correlation between acts and their consequences. The other is that it equally fails to justify the desirability and the necessity of human effort in pursuing the moral life. The idea that “everything is due to the fiat of a Creator God” (sabbam issara-nimmana-hetu) amounts to Theistic Determinism, just as the idea that everything is due to past kamma (sabbam pubbekata-hetu) leads to Karmic Determinism.

11. In the Buddhist Mahabodhi Jataka (V. 238), we read:

(a) “If God design the life of the entire world – the glory and the misery, the good and the evil acts – man is but an instrument (niddeśakari) of his will, and God (alone) is responsible.”

(b) “If Brahma is the Lord of the Whole World and Creator of the multitude of beings, then why has he ordained misfortune in the world, without making the whole world happy, for what purpose has he made the world full of injustice, deceit, falsehood, and conceit, or the Lord of Beings is evil in that he ordained injustice when there could have been justice.”

12. As we mentioned above, it is claimed by a Brahmin that all higher knowledge should come from an Omniscient Divine Being, not from a mere human being. Buddhism adopts the opposite position. To underpin this position, there is this story, recorded in a Buddhist discourse.

13. The story begins with a Buddhist monk who lived during the time of the Buddha. One day he came to be disturbed by a serious metaphysical problem: “Where do the four great elements of matter cease without any remainder?” In modern terms, this problem translates as: “Where does matter come to complete end?” He thought that no human being could answer his question, so he thought of putting it to heavenly beings. Since he had already developed mental concentration, the way to the heavenly realms appeared before him. He first came to the lowest heaven. However, the denizens there could not provide the answer to his question. So he went from heaven to heaven until he came to the Brahma World and put the question to the Great Brahma: “Friend, where do the four great elements of matter cease without any remainder”. Then the Great Brahma said:

“Monk, I am Brahma, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Lord, the Maker and Creator, the Ruler, Appointer and the One who Orders, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be”.

For the second and third time, the monk repeated the question. Yet he again received the same evasive reply. When he insisted on receiving an unequivocal answer, the Great Brahma took him by the arm, led him to a corner, and said: “Monk, these heavenly beings believe there is nothing Brahma does not see, there is nothing he does not know, there is nothing he is unaware of. That is why I did not speak in front of them. But, monk, I myself don’t know where the four great elements of matter cease without any remainder. You did a mistake in bypassing the Buddha in your search for an answer to this question”.

So the monk came to the world of human beings and, put the question to the Buddha. The Buddha said: “You should not ask where the four great elements of matter cease without remainder. Instead the question should be rephrased, as:

Where do earth, water, fire, and air find no footing?

And the answer is:

Where consciousness is sign-less, boundless, all-luminous

That’s where earth, water, fire, and air find no footing” (Kevaddha Sutta in Majjhimanikaya).

14. Whether this rather hilarious story is true or not, is not relevant. What is really relevant is the message it conveys. The message it conveys is that higher knowledge comes not from All-Knowing God, but from an Enlightened Human Being. What is highlighted through the story is that **if** there is anything called “Divinity”, it is but “Exalted Humanity”. An Enlightened Human Being, who is free from passion, aversion, and delusion, is superior to all gods, including the Great Brahma whom the Brahmins considered as the Creator of the World.

15. The Brahmins claimed that Brahma, the Creator God, created us. The Buddha’s response is that it is our mother and father, who created us, not Brahma. Therefore, it is our Mother and Father who should be considered as the Brahma: “Brahmati matapitaro”, i.e. “Brahma is an expression to our Mother and Father” (Anguttaranikaya, PTS I 132).

16. The Parable of the Staircase:

As the Buddha says, the attempt to find union with Great Brahma, whose existence cannot be verified, is like making a staircase without knowing where it is leading to. Addressing Vasettha, a Brahmin student, the Buddha says,

“Vasettha, it is just as if a man were to build a staircase for a palace at a crossroads. People might say, ‘This staircase for a palace – do you know whether the palace will face east or west, north or south, whether it will be high, low or of medium height?’ And he would say: ‘No’. And they might say: ‘Well then, you don’t know or see what kind of a palace you are building the staircase for?’ And he would say: ‘No’. Does not the talk of that man turn out to be stupid?’

Vasettha: “Certainly, reverend Gotama.”

(Long Discourses of the Buddha, tr.Dighanikaya, Maurice Walshe, p. 190.

17. God as the Ineffable Highest Splendour:

A dialogue between the Buddha and Udayin, a believer in God:

The Buddha, “Well then, Udayi, what is your own teacher’s doctrine?”

Udayi, “Our own teacher’s doctrine, venerable sir, says thus: ‘This is the highest splendour’.

The Buddha, “But what is that highest splendor, Udayi, of which your teacher’s doctrine speaks?”

Udayi: “It is, venerable sir, a splendor, greater and loftier than which there is none. That is the highest splendor.”

The Buddha: “But, Udayi, what is that splendor, greater and loftier than which there is none?”

Udayi: “It is, venerable sir, that highest splendor, greater loftier than which there is none.”

The Buddha: “For a long time, Udayi, you can continue in this way, saying, ‘a splendor greater and loftier than which there is none; that is the highest splendor. But still you will not have explained that splendor.” (Venerable Nyanaponika, ‘Buddhism and the God Idea’: Majjhimanikaya , PTS II 62).

Falling in love with the Beauty Queen of the Kingdom

The Buddha: “Suppose a man were to say: ‘I love and desire the most beautiful woman in this land and then he is asked: ‘Good man, the most beautiful woman whom you love and desire, do you know whether she is a lady from the nobility, or from a Brahmin family, or from the trader class, or worker class?’ And he replies, ‘No’. Then good man, do you know her name and that of her clan? Or whether she is tall, short or of middle height, whether she is dark, brunette or golden-skinned, or in what village or town or city she dwells? And he replies: ‘No’. And then he is asked: ‘Hence, good man, you love and desire what you neither know nor see?’ And he answers: ‘Yes’. What do you think, Udayi, that being so, would not that man’s talk amount to nonsense?”

Udayi: “Certainly, Venerable Sir, that being so, that man’s talk would amount to nonsense.”

The Buddha: “But in the same way, you Udayi, say ‘A splendor greater and loftier than which there is none, that is the highest splendour’ and, yet you have not explained that splendor.” (Venerable Nyanaponika’s Buddhism and the God-Idea : Majjhimanikaya, PTS II 62).

18. Futility of Prayers

Union with Brahma, the Creator God is the final religious goal of the Brahmins. However, over this matter there was no unanimity among them. One day, two Brahmins Vasettha and Bharadvaja, referred this matter to the Buddha. Then the Buddha told Vasettha:

“Vasettha, it is just as if this River Aciravati were brimful of water so that a crow could drink out of it, and a man should come along wishing to cross over, to get to the other side, to get across, and, standing on this bank, were to call out: ‘Come here, other bank, come here’. What do you think, Vasettha? Would the other bank of the River Aciravati come over to this side on account of that man’s calling, begging, requesting or wheedling?

No, Reverend Gotama.

Well now, Vasettha, those Brahmins learned in the Three Vedas who persistently neglect what a Brahmin should do, and persistently do what a Brahmin should not do, declare: ‘We call on Indra, Soma, Varuna, Isana, Pajapati, Brahma, Mahiddhi, Yama’. But that such Brahmins who persistently neglect what a Brahmin should do, ... will, as a consequence of their calling, begging, requesting or wheedling, attain after death, at the break-up of the body, to union with Brahma – that is just not possible” (Long Discourses of the Buddha, tr. Dighanikaya, Maurice Walsche, 190-91).

19. The Notion of God-Head as the Ultimate Ground of Existence

Sometimes the notion of God is interpreted in an impersonal sense, as the ultimate ground of existence. The best example is the Upanishadic (Vedantic) teaching relating to Brahman, the Cosmic Soul as the ultimate ground of being. Only the Transcendent Cosmic Soul is real, the world is illusory.

It is worth noting here that Buddhism does not distinguish between two levels of reality, one as transcendent and metaphysical, and the other as empirical. It is the metaphysical reality that is normally interpreted either as a Personal God, or as an impersonal God-Head. What connects the two levels of reality is the soul. Since Buddhism rejects the notion of soul, the notion of a metaphysical background to the world of experience, finds no place in Buddhism.

20. Can we consider jhana-experience as providing evidence for a higher metaphysical reality?

The Buddhist teaching on jhana recognizes an experience gained through higher stages of the mind's concentration and unification. The question that arises here is whether one who attains jhana gets a glimpse of a Higher Metaphysical Reality, which was hidden to him during normal times. Can we interpret jhana experience as communion or absorption with a metaphysical reality?

21. As Venerable Nyanaponika Thera observes:

"A fertile ground for the origin and persistence of beliefs and ideas about a self, soul, god or any other form of an absolute entity is misinterpreted meditative experience occurring in devotional rapture or mystical trance. Such experience is generally interpreted by the mystic, or theologian as revelation of, or union with, a godhead; or it is taken for a manifestation of man's true and eternal Self."

22. Buddhism does not interpret jhana experience in a mystical or metaphysical sense. This is shown by a Buddhist discourse where Venerable Sariputta analyzes its content, without leaving any residue for any kind of mystical interpretation. What is noteworthy is the observation made that the mental factors of each jhana are said to arise in full awareness of the meditator: "He is fully aware of their arising, their persistence, and their passing away. Then he comes to the conclusion that these mental factors, having not been, come to be (ahutva sambhonti), and, having been, they pass away (hutva pativenti)". Since Venerable Sariputta fully understands the constituents of each jhana, he does not get attracted by them nor does he get repelled by them, nor does he get attached to them, or infatuated by them. Then he comes to the conclusion that final emancipation is higher than the jhana experience (atthi uttarim nissaranan ti pajanati).

23. This account establishes three facts: one is that the content of jhana can be fully analyzed without leaving any residue. The second is that its constituents arise and vanish in full knowledge of the meditator. The third is that it does not in itself constitute final emancipation. For, according to Buddhism, the jhana experience too is impermanent, unsatisfactory, devoid of a self, and conditioned (sankhata).

24. Buddhism seems to be fully aware of the possibility of misinterpreting jhana experience in the light of theological or metaphysical theories. This appears to be the reason why the meditator is advised to review the content of his jhana experience in the light of the three marks of phenomenal existence, as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and devoid of a self-subsisting entity.

25. Jhana or higher levels of mind's unification is only a means to an end, the end being the realization of wisdom. Exclusive emphasis only on higher levels of mind's unification as an end in itself can have many pitfalls

26. Can Nibbana be considered as Buddhism's counterpart to the idea of the Ultimate Ground of Being? To state briefly, Nibbanic experience means the de-construction (visamkhara) of consciousness, which results from the destruction of passion, aversion, and delusion. Nibbanic experience is not projected against a metaphysical background. Nibbana is not the primordial cause, or the ultimate ground of existence.

27. The Buddhist teaching on non-self, or non-substantiality, excludes the possibility of an impersonal God-Head in whichever way it is understood. Non-self means the absence of an abiding self-entity, both in its microcosmic and macrocosmic sense.

28. The Role of Miracles (Patihariya) in Buddhism:

Mention is made of three kinds of miracles:

(1) Iddhi-patihariya: the ability to project mind-made images of oneself; to become invisible; to pass through solid things, such as a wall; to penetrate solid ground as if it were water; to walk on water; to fly through the air; to touch sun and moon.

(2) Adesana-patihariya: it is some kind of hypnotic power, mind reading, or guessing other people's character.

(3) Anusasani-patihariya: the "miracle of instruction." Referring to the first two kinds of miracle, the Buddha says: "It is because I see danger in the practice of these mystic wonders that I loathe and abhor and am ashamed thereof".

The "Mystic Wonder" that the Buddha himself believed in and advocated was the "Miracle of Instruction", that is, giving instruction or teaching (Dighanikaya, PTS I 212; Samyuttanikaya PTS IV 290. Let us remember here that the Buddha is called Sattha, which means Teacher.

29. Devas as Heavenly Beings

(a) Although Buddhism does not believe in a Creator God, it recognizes a large number of heavenly beings that inhabit the many planes of existence recognized in Buddhist cosmology. This does not in any way go against Buddhist teachings, because of the following reasons:

(b) None of these heavenly beings are portrayed as omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. If the Great Brahma believes that he is the Creator of the World, it is a delusion on his part.

© All heavenly existence is within samsara, the cycle of births and deaths. No heavenly being is free from impermanence, un-satisfactoriness, and non-substantiality. Long heavenly life does not mean eternal life. According to the Buddhist definition of suffering, "suffering" means any kind of conditioned existence, whether it is extremely pleasant or otherwise.

(d) The final goal of Buddhism is the complete elimination of passion (raga), aversion (dosa), and delusion (moha), all while living as a human being, not birth in heaven. The Buddha says that if a Buddhist monk practices the higher life expecting to be born in heaven, he is aspiring for a lower goal.

(e) In point of fact, as the Buddha himself says, the heavenly beings themselves fancy that to be born as human beings is to go to heaven (Manussattam kho bhikkhu devanam sugati-gamana-sankhatam). For Buddhism, the true heaven is not up above, but here below in the terrestrial world of human beings.

(f) Prayers to gods have no role to play in the Buddhist path to emancipation.

30. According to Buddhism, the moral order is not an imposition from above by a Supreme God. Nor is it an invention on the part of the Buddha. For Buddhism the basic moral law is inherent in life: it is a special case of the principle of cause and effect. The Buddha only discovers it. In this connection the Buddha says: "You yourselves ought to do what ought to be done. The Tathagatas show the way". (Tumhehi kiccam atappam, akkhataro Tathagata). The Buddha does not claim to be a Divine Saviour, who can redeem mankind. He is the Awakened One, who shows the way to others' awakening, the awakening from the slumber of ignorance.

31. For those who follow the Buddha, the Buddha is a Moral Authority, not in the sense that he has authoritative power to impose his "moral will", but in the sense that he has authoritative knowledge on the subject of morality. Accordingly, we need to understand the moral teachings in Buddhism, not as divine injunctions and commandments, but as guidelines for moral action. They are not coercive, but persuasive, more descriptive than prescriptive. This means morally good and morally bad actions are neither rewarded nor punished by a Supreme Lawgiver. Rather, they have their consequences according to the principles of moral causation.

32. In whichever way the idea of God is understood, as a Personal God or as Impersonal God-Head, it does not have its counterpart in Buddhism. What we have in Buddhism is not theology (studies on the nature of God), but "anthropology" (studies on the nature of human beings). The main thrust of the Buddha's teachings is not on a search for metaphysical first principles, or final consummations of the universe. Rather, it is a search for the meaning of human life. As a religion, Buddhism begins with what is immediately given, our immediate experience, which nobody can deny. The Four Noble Truths begin with the fact of suffering as our immediate indubitable experience. In conquering suffering we have to fall back upon our own resources, without depending on grace and divine intervention. Unlike in theistic religions, in Buddhism the final emancipation has to be sought and found within this world, as a human being, and not as birth in a divine realm.

33. Seek not rebirth afar in future states

Pray, what could heaven itself advantage you!

Now, in this present world, and in the state,

In which you find yourselves, be conquerors!

(A verse attributed to the Buddha in the Milindapanha, The Questions of King Milinda).

34. Concluding remarks:

Since Buddhism is a non-theistic religion, the Buddha is not considered as an Incarnation of God, or as a Prophet with a Divine Message. The Dhamma taught by the Buddha is not a Divine Revelation, or a Divine Message. The members of the Buddhist monastic organization are not priests, but monks and nuns, because they do not act as mediatory agents between God and human beings.

35. How Buddhism understands the idea of “divine”: It is said that the cultivation of compassion in its purest form is called the “divine life in this world” (Brahmam etam viharam idham-ahu). When one lives the moral and spiritual life with confidence in the Buddha, then one dwells with God (Brahmuna saddhim samvasati). The Wheel of Righteousness (Dhamma-cakka) is elsewhere called “The Wheel of God” (Brahma-cakka). The one who has realized Nibbana is said “to abide with self-become-God” (Brahma-bhutena viharati). The one who has realized Nibbana, “may justifiably employ theological terminology” (Dhammena so Brahmavadam vadeyya). (See K. N. Jayatilleke, Facets of Buddhist Thought: Collected Essays).

Recommended for Reference:

Venerable Nyanaponika Thera, ‘Buddhism and the God-Idea’, in ‘The Vision of Dhamma: Buddhist Writings of Nyanaponika Thera’, Buddhist Publications Society, Sri Lanka.

Professor K. N. Jayatilleke, ‘The Buddhist Attitude to Revelation’, ‘The Buddhist Attitude to God’, Facets of Buddhist Thought, Collected Essays of K. N. Jayatilleke, Buddhist Publication Society, Sri Lanka.