

Essay

Did the Buddha Believe in God?

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ABSTRACT

It is argued that Buddha, contrary to being an atheist or a person who never answered or avoided answering the question of God's existence, as some of the present day Buddhist sects and most Western and Eastern scholars portray, also believed in One God.

Key Words: Buddha, belief, GOD.

In the most famous of its scriptures, the Dhammapada [1], the Buddha clearly espouses a belief in a supreme Creator. Buddha, contrary to being an atheist or a person who never answered or avoided answering the question of God's existence, as some of the present day Buddhist sects and most Western and Eastern scholars portray, also believed in One God:

Who is capable of praising one like a coin of finest gold, one whom the knowing praise after finding him impeccable, controlled, intelligent, insightful, ethical, and composed day in and day out? Even the gods [2] praise such a one, even the Creator [brahmuna] (17:9,10).[3]

In the Sutta-Pitaka which is part of the Tripitaka texts, translated by T.W. R. Davids of the Buddhist Pali Text Society, the Buddha has categorically stated, in the Tevigga Sutta, that he had a relationship with the Creator and they should listen to him and follow his ways, since they too want to know how to relate to the Creator:

...to the Tathagat [the fully enlightened person] when asked touching the path which leads to the world of Brahma [the Creator], there can be neither doubt nor difficulty. For Brahma I [do] know Vashetta [the young Brahmin the Buddha was addressing], and the world of Brahma and the path that leads to it. Yes, I know it ever as one who has entered the Brahma world, and has been born within it! [4]

To paraphrase, Buddha is saying that: "Vashetta, I know, as an enlightened person that the path to God has certainty and is easy. I know God and the path that leads to God, since I am part of

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God's creation." Buddha also believed in hell, a paradisiacal state in the next life, and the accountability of deeds in the hereafter:

One who speaks untruth goes to hell, as does one who claims not to have done what he has in fact done. Both become equal after death, people of base deeds in the hereafter. (22:1)

When a person long absent from home returns safely from afar, relatives, friends, and well-wishers rejoice at his return. In the same way, when one who has done good is gone from this world to the beyond, his good deeds receive him, like relatives receiving a returning loved one. (16:11, 12)

In the book *Outline of Mahayana* (Chapter IX) D.T. Suzuki explains that God is referred to by the term Dharmakaya-Buddha or the religious object of Buddhism. In fact in a Tibetan text, the Dharmakaya is described with eight attributes, which are: Sameness, Depth, Everlastingness, Oneness, Harmony, Purity, Radiance, and Enjoyment [some of which are explained as]:

Sameness, because the Dharmakayas of all Buddhas are not different. Depth, because it is ineffable. Everlastingness, because it has no beginning or end. Oneness, because the Dharmadhatu (Absolute Reality) and Transcendent Awareness (are not different). Harmony, because it is beyond positive and negative poles. Purity, because it is free from the three taints of hatred, greed, and delusion.

Possessing enjoyment, because with its wealth of qualities it is the basis of all enjoyment.(5)

Suzuki elaborates that "The Dharmakaya assumes three essential aspects: intelligence (prajna), love (karuna) and will (pranidhanabala)." In fact, Professor Robert F. Thurman, Columbia University, who is also a Buddhist monk, passionately emphasizes that: "Buddha not only believed in God, he knew God. There were numerous atheists in Buddha's time – the Charvaka materialists - and the Buddha specifically critiqued their lack of belief in any spiritual reality."(6). In a chapter entitled: "The Differing Viewpoints of Buddhism and the Other World Religions regarding Ultimate Reality" William Stoddart, in his book, *Outline of Buddhism*, explains that the true Buddhist belief is really theistic, but that the existence of Ultimate Reality (i.e. God) who is both immanent and transcendent, has been misunderstood because of the emphasis of the immanence component. In fact, Thurman emphasizes that Islam clearly depicts the physical inconceivability of God, in that there is nothing like God and that Buddhism, if understood correctly, has one and the same goal. It is easy to see how the emphasis of the Buddha on the non-corporeality of God has led to many erroneously believing that there is no God in Buddhism.

References

1. Thomas Cleary (Translator), (1995), *Dhammapada: The Sayings of Buddha*.
2. Deva in the original Pali; this likely refers to the created angels or the good spirit entities.
3. Thomas Cleary (Translator), (1995), *Dhammapada: The Sayings of Buddha*.
4. Muller, F. Max, (1881), *The Sacred Books of the East*, p. 186.
5. Guenther, Herbert (Translator), (1970), *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, p.264-5.
<http://www.kheper.net/topics/Buddhism/dharmakaya.htm>
6. Henry, Gray (Editor), (1997), *Islam in Tibet and the Illustrated Narrative: Tibetan Caravans*, pp. 35-37.