



Buddhism and the God-Idea

Selected Texts

Edited and introduced by

Nyanaponika Thera

Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka

The Wheel Publication No. 47

First Edition 1962

Second Edition 1970

Third Printing 1981

BPS Online Edition © (2008)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS Transcription Project

For free distribution. This work may be republished, reformatted, reprinted and redistributed in any medium. However, any such republication and redistribution is to be made available to the public on a free and unrestricted basis, and translations and other derivative works are to be clearly marked as such.

Buddhism and the God-Idea

Quite contradictory views have been expressed in Western literature on the attitude of Buddhism toward the concept of God and gods. From a study of the discourses of the Buddha preserved in the Pali Canon, it will be seen that the idea of a *personal deity*, a creator god conceived to be eternal and omnipotent, is incompatible with the Buddha's teachings. On the other hand, conceptions of an *impersonal godhead* of any description, such as world-soul, etc., are excluded by the Buddha's teaching on *anattā*, non-self or unsubstantiality.

In Buddhist literature, the belief in a creator god (*issara-nimmāna-vāda*) is frequently mentioned and rejected, along with other causes wrongly adduced to explain the origin of the world, as, for instance, world-soul, time, nature, etc. God-belief, however, is not placed in the same category as those morally destructive wrong views which deny the kammic results of action, assume a fortuitous origin of man and nature, or teach absolute determinism. These views are said to be altogether pernicious, having definite bad results due to their effect on ethical conduct.

Theism, however, is regarded as a kind of kamma-teaching in so far as it upholds the moral efficacy of actions. Hence a theist who leads a moral life may, like anyone else doing so, expect a favourable rebirth. He may possibly even be reborn in a heavenly world that resembles his own conception of it, though it will not be of eternal duration as he may have expected. If, however, fanaticism induces him to persecute those who do not share his beliefs, this will have grave consequences for his future destiny. For fanatical attitudes, intolerance, and violence against others, create unwholesome kamma leading to moral degeneration and an unhappy rebirth.

Although belief in God does not exclude a favourable rebirth, it is a variety of eternalism, a false affirmation of permanence rooted in the craving for existence, and as such an obstacle to final deliverance.

Among the fetters (*samyojana*) that bind to existence, theism is particularly subject to those of personality-belief, attachment to rites and rituals, and desire for fine-material existence or for a "heaven of the sense sphere," as the case may be.

As an attempt at explaining the universe, its origin, and man's situation in his world, the God-idea was found entirely unconvincing by the Buddhist thinkers of old. Through the centuries, Buddhist philosophers have formulated detailed arguments refuting the doctrine of a creator god. It should be of interest to compare these with the ways in which Western philosophers have refuted the theological proofs of the existence of God.

But for an earnest believer, the God-idea is more than a mere device for explaining external facts like the origin of the world. For him it is an object of faith that can bestow a strong feeling of certainty, not only as to God's existence "somewhere out there," but as to God's consoling presence and closeness to himself. This feeling of certainty requires close scrutiny. Such scrutiny will reveal that in most cases the God-idea is only the devotee's projection of his ideal—generally a noble one—and of his fervent wish and deeply felt need to believe. These projections are largely conditioned by external influences, such as childhood impressions, education, tradition and social environment. Charged with a strong emotional emphasis, brought to life by man's powerful capacity for image-formation, visualization and the creation of myth, they then come to be identified with the images and concepts of whatever religion the devotee follows. In the case of many of the most sincere believers, a searching analysis would show that their "God-experience" has no more specific content than this.

Yet the range and significance of God-belief and God-experience are not fully exhausted by the preceding remarks. The lives and writings of the mystics of all great religions bear witness to religious experiences of great intensity, in which considerable changes are effected in the quality of consciousness. Profound absorption in prayer or meditation can bring about a deepening and widening, a brightening and intensifying, of consciousness, accompanied by a transporting feeling of rapture and bliss. The contrast between these states and normal conscious awareness is so great that the mystic believes his experiences to be manifestations of the divine; and given the contrast, this assumption is quite understandable. Mystical experiences are also characterized by a marked reduction or temporary exclusion of the multiplicity of sense-perceptions and restless thoughts. This relative unification of mind is then interpreted as a union or communion with the One God. All these deeply moving impressions, and the first spontaneous interpretations of them, the mystic subsequently identifies with his particular theology. It is interesting to note, however, that the attempts of most great Western mystics to relate their mystical experiences to the official dogmas of their respective churches often resulted in teachings which were looked upon askance by the orthodox, if not considered downright heretical.

The psychological facts underlying those religious experiences are accepted by the Buddhist and are well-known to him; but he carefully distinguishes the experiences themselves from the theological interpretations imposed upon them. After rising from deep meditative absorption (*jhāna*), the Buddhist meditator is advised to view the physical and mental factors constituting his experience in the light of the three characteristics of all conditioned existence: impermanence, liability to suffering, and absence of an abiding ego or eternal substance. This is done primarily in order to utilize the meditative purity and strength of consciousness for the highest purpose: liberating insight. But this procedure also has a very important side effect which concerns us here: the meditator will not be overwhelmed by any uncontrolled emotions and thoughts evoked by his singular experience, and will thus be able to avoid interpretations of that experience not warranted by the facts.

Hence a Buddhist meditator, while benefiting from the refinement of consciousness he has achieved, will be able to see these meditative experiences for what they are; and he will further know that they are without any abiding substance that could be attributed to a deity manifesting itself to his mind. Therefore, the Buddhist's conclusion must be that the highest mystical states do not provide evidence for the existence of a personal God or an impersonal godhead.

Buddhism has sometimes been called an atheistic teaching, either in an approving sense by freethinkers and rationalists, or in a derogatory sense by people of theistic persuasion. Only in one way can Buddhism be described as atheistic, namely, in so far as it denies the existence of an eternal, omnipotent, God or godhead who is the creator and ordainer of the world. The word "atheism," however, like the word "godless," frequently carries a number of disparaging overtones or implications, which in no way apply to the Buddha's teaching.

Those who use the word "atheism" often associate it with a materialistic doctrine that knows nothing higher than this world of the senses and the slight happiness it can bestow. Buddhism is nothing of that sort. In this respect it agrees with the teachings of other religions: true lasting happiness cannot be found in this world, nor, the Buddha adds, can it be found on any higher plane of existence, conceived as a heavenly or divine world, since all planes of existence are impermanent and thus incapable of giving lasting bliss. The spiritual values advocated by Buddhism are directed not towards a new life in some higher world, but towards a state utterly transcending the world, namely, *Nibbāna*. In making this statement, however, we must point out that Buddhist spiritual values do not draw an absolute separation between the beyond and

the here-and-now. They have firm roots in the world itself for they aim at the highest realization in this present existence. Along with such spiritual aspirations, Buddhism encourages earnest endeavour to make this world a better place to live in.

The materialistic philosophy of annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*) is emphatically rejected by the Buddha as a false doctrine. The doctrine of kamma is sufficient to prove that Buddhism does not teach annihilation after death. It accepts survival, not of an eternal soul, but of a mental process subject to renewed becoming; thus it teaches rebirth without transmigration. Again, the Buddha's teaching is not a nihilism that gives suffering humanity no better hope than a final cold nothingness. On the contrary, it is a teaching of salvation (*niyyānika-dhamma*) or deliverance (*vimutti*) which attributes to man the faculty to realize by his own efforts the highest goal, Nibbāna: the ultimate cessation of suffering and the final eradication of greed, hate and delusion. Nibbāna is far from being the blank zero of annihilation; yet it also cannot be identified with any form of God-idea, as it is neither the origin nor the immanent ground or essence of the world.

Buddhism is not an enemy of religion as atheism is believed to be. Buddhism, indeed, is the enemy of none. A Buddhist will recognize and appreciate whatever ethical, spiritual and cultural values have been created by God-belief in its long and chequered history. We cannot, however, close our eyes to the fact that the God-concept has served too often as a cloak for man's desire for power, and the reckless and cruel use of that power, thus adding considerably to the ample measure of misery in this world supposed to be an all-loving God's creation. For centuries free thought, free research and the expression of dissident views were obstructed and stifled in the name of service to God. And alas, these and other negative consequences are not yet entirely things of the past.

The word "atheism" also carries the innuendo of an attitude countenancing moral laxity, or a belief that man-made ethics, having no divine sanction, rest on shaky foundations. For Buddhism, however, the basic moral law is inherent in life itself. It is a special case of the law of cause and effect, needing neither a divine law-giver nor depending upon the fluctuating human conceptions of socially-conditioned minor moralities and conventions. For an increasing section of humanity, the belief in God is breaking down rapidly, as well as the accustomed motivations for moral conduct. This shows the risk of basing moral postulates on divine commandments when their alleged source rapidly loses credence and authority. There is a need for an autonomous foundation for ethics, one that has deeper roots than a social contract and is capable of protecting the security of the individual and of human institutions. Buddhism offers such a foundation for ethics.

Buddhism does not deny that there are in the universe planes of existence and levels of consciousness which in some ways may be superior to our terrestrial world and to average human consciousness. To deny this would indeed be provincial in this age of space travel. Bertrand Russell rightly says: "It is improbable that the universe contains nothing better than ourselves."

Yet, according to Buddhist teachings, such higher planes of existence, like our familiar world, are subject to the law of impermanence and change. The inhabitants of such worlds may well be, in different degrees, more powerful than human beings, happier and longer-lived. Whether we call those superior beings gods, deities, devas or angels is of little importance, since it is improbable that they call themselves by any of those names. They are inhabitants of this universe, fellow-wanderers in this round of existence; and though more powerful, they need not be wiser than man. Further, it need not be denied that such worlds and such beings may have their lord and ruler. In all probability they do. But like any human ruler, a divine ruler too might

be inclined to misjudge his own status and power, until a greater one comes along and points out to him his error, as our texts report of the Buddha.

These, however, are largely matters beyond the range and concern of average human experience. They have been mentioned here chiefly for the purpose of defining the Buddhist position, and not to serve as a topic of speculation and argument. Such involvements can only divert attention and effort from what ought to be our principal object: the overcoming of greed, hatred and delusion where they are found in the here and now.

An ancient verse ascribed to the Buddha in the *Questions of King Milinda* says:

Not far from here do you need to look!
Highest existence—what can it avail?
Here in this present aggregate,
In your own body overcome the world!

The Texts

Origin of the Belief in a Creator God

Now, there comes a time, monks, when, sooner or later, after the lapse of a long period, this world-system passes away. And when this happens, beings have mostly been reborn in the World of Radiance, and there they dwell made of mind, feeding on joy, radiating light from themselves, traversing the air, continuing in glory; and thus they remain for a long period of time.

Now, there comes a time, monks, when, sooner or later, this world-system begins to re-evolve. When this happens the Palace of Brahmā appears, but it is empty. And some being or other, either because his span of years has passed or his merit is exhausted, falls from the World of Radiance, and comes to life in the Palace of Brahmā. And there also he lives made of mind, feeding on joy, radiating light from himself, traversing the air, continuing in glory; and thus does he remain for a long, long period of time.

Now there arises in him, from his dwelling there so long alone, a dissatisfaction and a longing: "O! would that other beings might come to join me in this place!", And, just then, either because their span of years had passed or their merit was exhausted, other beings fall from the World of Radiance, and appear in the Palace of Brahmā as companions to him, and in all respects like him.

On this, monks, the one who was first reborn thinks thus to himself: "I am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Supreme One, the Mighty, the All-Seeing, the Ruler, the Lord of all, the Maker, the Creator, the Chief of all, appointing to each his place, the Ancient of days, the Father of all that are and are to be. These other beings are of my creation. And why is that so? A while ago I thought, 'Would that they might come!' And on my mental aspiration, behold the beings came."

And those beings themselves too think thus: "This must be Brahmā, the Supreme, the Mighty, the All-Seeing, the Ruler, the Lord of all, the Maker, the Creator, the Chief of all, appointing to each his place, the Ancient of days, the Father of all that are and are to be. And we must have been created by him. And why? Because, as we see, it was he who was here first, and we came after that."

On this, monks, the one who first came into existence there is of longer life and more glorious, and more powerful than those who appeared after him. And it might well be, monks, that some being on his falling from that state, should come hither. And having come hither he might go forth from the household life into the homeless state. And having thus become a recluse he, by reason of ardour, of exertion, of application, of earnestness, of careful thought, reaches such rapture of heart that, rapt in heart, he calls to mind his last dwelling-place, but not the previous ones. He says to himself: “That illustrious Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Supreme One, the Mighty, the All-Seeing, the Ruler, the Lord of all, the Maker, the Creator, the Chief of all, appointing to each his place, the Ancient of days, the Father of all that are and are to be, he by whom we were created, he is steadfast, immutable, eternal, of a nature that knows no change, and he will remain so for ever and ever. But we who were created by him have come hither as being impermanent, mutable, limited in duration of life.”

This, monks, is the first state of things on account of which, starting out from which, some recluses and brahmans, being eternalists as to some things, and non-eternalists as to others, maintain that the soul and the world are partly eternal and partly not.

From Dīgha Nikāya No. 1: Brahmajāla Sutta.
Translated by Prof. Rhys Davids.

The Inexplicable God

“Well then, Udāyi what is your own teacher’s doctrine?”

“Our own teacher’s doctrine, venerable sir, says thus: ‘This is the highest splendour ! This is the highest splendour!’”¹

“But what is that highest splendour, Udāyi, of which your teacher’s doctrine speaks?”

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

“But, Udāyi what is that splendour, greater and loftier than which there is none?”

“It is, venerable sir, that highest splendour, greater and loftier than which there is none.”

“For a long time, Udāyi, you can continue in this way, saying, ‘A splendour greater and loftier than which there is none; that is the highest splendour.’ But still you will not have explained that splendour.

“Suppose a man were to say: ‘I love and desire the most beautiful woman in this land.’ and then he is asked: ‘Good man, that most beautiful woman whom you love and desire, do you know whether she is a lady from the nobility or from a brahman family or from the trader class or sudra?’ 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, Udāyi; that being so, would not that man’s talk amount to nonsense?’

“Certainly, venerable sir, that being so, that man’s talk would amount to nonsense.”

¹ *Deve devato abhijānāti*. In earlier sections of this discourse, a similar formulation occurs, referring to other terms. In this context, the commentary to our discourse explains (and this applies also to our passage): “Without ignoring [the respective term; here, it is gods, lord of creatures, etc.], he knows it distinctly [*abhijānāti*] as impermanent, liable to suffering, void of self and substance.”

“But in the same way, you, Udāyi, say, ‘A splendour, greater and loftier than which there is none. That is the highest splendour’, and yet you have not explained that splendour.”

From Majjhima Nikāya No. 79: Cūla-Sakuludāyi Sutta.

Blind Faith

“Is there, Vāseṭṭha, a single one of the brahmans versed in the three Vedas who has ever seen Brahmā face to face?”

“No, indeed, Gotama.”

“Or is there, then, Vāseṭṭha, a single one of the teachers of the brahmans versed in the three Vedas, who has seen brahma face to face?”

“No, indeed, Gotama.”

“Or is there, then, Vāseṭṭha, a single one of the pupils of the teachers of the brahmans versed in the three Vedas who has seen Brahmā face to face?”

“No, indeed, Gotama.”

“Or is there then, Vāseṭṭha, a single one of the brahmans up to the seventh generation who has seen Brahmā face to face?”

“No, indeed, Gotama.”

“Well then, Vāseṭṭha, those ancient rishis of the brahmans versed in the three Vedas, the authors of the verses, the utterers of the verses, whose ancient form of words so chanted, uttered or composed, the brahmans of today chant over again and repeat, intoning or reciting exactly as has been intoned or recited—to wit, Aṭṭhaka ... and Bhāgu, did even they speak thus, saying: ‘We know it. We have seen it: where Brahmā is, whence Brahmā is, whither Brahmā is?’”

“Not so, Gotama.”

“Then you say, Vāseṭṭha, that none of the brahmans, nor of their teachers, nor of their pupils, even up to the seventh generation, has ever seen Brahmā face to face. And that even the rishis of old, the authors and utterers of the verses, of the ancient form of words which the brahmans of today so carefully intone and recite precisely as they have been handed down—even they did not pretend to know or to have seen where or whence or whither Brahmā is. So the brahmans versed in the three Vedas have in fact said thus: ‘What we know not, what we have not seen, to a state of union with that we can show the way, and can say: “This is the straight path, this the direct way that makes for salvation, and leads him who acts according to it into a state of union with Brahmā.”’”

“Now what think you, Vāseṭṭha? Does it not follow, this being so, that the talk of the brahmans versed in the three Vedas, turns out to be foolish talk?”

“Certainly, Gotama, that being so, it follows that the talk of the brahmans versed in the three Vedas is foolish talk.”

The String of Blind Men

“Verily, Vāseṭṭha, that brahmans versed in the three Vedas should be able to show the way to a state of union with that which they do not know, nor have seen—such a condition of things can in no wise be!

“Just, Vāseṭṭha, as when a string of blind men are clinging one to the other, neither can the foremost see, nor can the middle one see, nor can the hindmost see—even so, I think, Vāseṭṭha,

is the talk of the brahmins versed in the three Vedas but blind talk: the first sees not, the middle one sees not, nor can the last see. The talk, then, of these brahmins versed in the three Vedas turns out to be ridiculous, mere words, a vain and empty thing!”

The Staircase to Nowhere

“Just, Vāseṭṭha, as if a man should make a staircase in the place where four roads cross, to mount up into a mansion. And people should say to him, ‘Well, good friend, this mansion, to mount up into which you are making this staircase, do you know whether it is in the east, or in the south, or in the west, or in the north? Whether it is high or low or of middle size?’

“And when so asked he should answer, ‘No’. And people should say to him, ‘But then, good friend, you are making a staircase to mount up into something—taking it for a mansion—which, all the while, you knew not, neither have seen.’”

Praying for the Beyond

“Again, Vāseṭṭha, if this river Aciravatī were full of water even to the brim, and overflowing. And a man with business on the other side, bound for the other side, making for the other side, should come up, and want to cross over. And he, standing on this bank, should invoke the further bank, and say, ‘Come hither, further bank! Come over to this side!’

“Now what think you, Vāseṭṭha? Would the further bank of the river Aciravatī by reason of the man’s invoking and praying, and hoping and praising, come over to this side?”

“Certainly not, Gotama.”

“In just the same way, Vāseṭṭha, do the brahmins versed in the three Vedas—omitting the practice of those qualities which really make a man a brahmin, and adopting the practice of those qualities which really make men non-brahmins—say thus: ‘Indra we call upon, Soma we call upon, Varuṇa, Isāna, Pajāpati, Brahmā, Mahiddhi, Yama we call upon.’

“Verily, Vāseṭṭha, that those brahmins versed in the three Vedas—omitting the practice of those qualities which really make man a brahmin, adopting the practice of those qualities which really make men non-brahmins—may, by reason of their invoking and praying, and hoping and praising, after the breaking up of the body after death, attain to union with Brahmā; such a condition of things can in no wise be.”

From *Dīgha Nikāya* No. 13: *Tevijjā Sutta*.

Translated by Prof. Rhys Davids.

Revealed Religion

“Again, Sandaka, here some teacher depends on hearsay, takes hearsay for truth, he teaches his doctrine [relying on] legendary lore and scripture. But when, Sandaka, a teacher depends on hearsay, takes hearsay for truth, this he will have heard well and that he will have heard badly, this will be thus and that will be otherwise.

“Herein a wise man will consider: ‘This teacher depends on hearsay, takes hearsay for truth, he teaches his doctrine [relying on] legendary lore and scripture. But when a teacher depends on hearsay, takes hearsay for truth, this he will have heard well, and that he will have heard badly this, will be thus, and that will be otherwise.’

“So when he finds that this kind of religious life is unsatisfactory, he becomes disappointed and leaves it. This, Sandaka, is the second unsatisfactory religious life declared by the Blessed One who knows and sees, who is the Arahāt, fully enlightened, wherein a wise man certainly

would not lead the religious life, or, when leading it, would miss the true path-teaching that is profitable.”

From Majjhima Nikāya No. 76: Sandaka Sutta.

The Buddhist Saint (Arahat) and the God-Idea

Also a monk who is a saint [*arahat*], canker-free, who has lived the life, accomplished his task, laid down the burden, reached the true goal, who has destroyed the fetters to existence, and is liberated through right final knowledge—he too has full knowledge of the gods as gods; and knowing them as such, he does not imagine [anything] about the gods¹, he does not imagine himself among the gods², he does not imagine himself as [originating] from a god³, he does not imagine, “Mine are the gods”⁴, and he does not find delight in the gods. And why not? Because this has been comprehended by him; and because he is freed from greed through greed’s extinction, freed from hate through hate’s extinction, freed from delusion through delusion’s extinction.

Also a monk who is a saint, canker-free, who has lived the life, accomplished his task, laid down the burden, reached the true goal, who has destroyed the fetters to existence, and is liberated through right final knowledge—he, too, has full knowledge of the lord of creatures as lord of creatures; and knowing him as such, he does not imagine [anything] about the lord of creatures⁵, he does not imagine [the qualities] in the lord of creatures,⁶ he does not imagine himself as [originated] from the lord of creatures,⁷ he does not imagine, “Mine is the lord of creature,”⁸ and he does not find delight in the lord of creatures. And why not? Because this has been comprehended by him; and because he is freed from greed through greed’s extinction, freed from hate through hate’s extinction, freed from delusion through delusion’s extinction.

Also a monk who is a saint, canker-free, who has lived the life, accomplished his task, laid down the burden, reached the true goal, who has destroyed the fetters to existence, and is liberated through right final knowledge—he, too, has full knowledge of Brahmā as Brahmā; and knowing him as such, he does not imagine [anything] about Brahmā, he does not imagine [the qualities] in Brahmā,⁹ he does not imagine himself as [originated] from Brahmā,¹ he does not

¹ *deve na maññati*. According to the commentary, the “imagination” (*maññanā*) which he avoids appears in three forms, as craving, conceit and wrong views. These three pertain also to most of the other types of imaginings in this paragraph and in the following ones, with exceptions mentioned in the Commentary (where only one or two apply, which space does not permit us to specify here).

² *devesu na maññati*.

³ *devato na maññati*.

⁴ Here we may think, for instance, of tribal deities, of the possessiveness exhibited by fetish worshippers, but also by devotees of higher religions.

⁵ In the Commentary, the lord of creatures (*pajāpati*) is identified with Māra who, in Buddhist cosmology, is the ruler over the *Paranimmitavasavatti* Gods, “those who wield power over the creations of others.”

⁶ Namely his permanence, immutability, that in him there is no evil, etc. (Commentary)

⁷ By creation or emanation. (Commentary)

⁸ “Thinking, ‘He is my Lord and Master.’” (Commentary) The statement of the text may also be applied to the belief that a God-concept adhered to individually, or by one’s own religion, can claim exclusive validity or superiority.

⁹ *Brahmasmiṃ maññati*. The Commentary restricts its explanation to imaginings about the qualities or attributes found in Brahmā (See Note #5). But it appears possible to render the locative case of the Pali term *Brahmasmiṃ* as literally as the commentary does with other terms of the discourse, and to translate by “he imagines himself in Brahmā.” This, then, would refer to a mystic union with the deity.

imagine, “Mine is Brahmā,” and he does not find delight in Brahmā.² And why not? Because this has been comprehended by him; and because he is freed from greed through greed’s extinction, freed from hate through hate’s extinction, freed from delusion through delusion’s extinction.

From Majjhima Nikāya, No. 1: Mūlapariyāya Sutta.

God Belief and Fatalism

There are ascetics and brahmans who maintain and 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’s act of creation; they indulge in lying, slanderous, harsh and idle talk due to God’s act of creation; they are covetous, full of hate and hold wrong views due to God’s act of creation.”

Those who fall back on God’s act of creation, as the decisive factor, will lack the impulse and effort for doing this and not doing that. Since for them, in truth and fact, [a necessity for] action or inaction does not obtain the designation “ascetic,” does not fit them who live without mindfulness and self-control.

From Aṅguttara Nikāya, Book of the Threes, No. 62.

If God is the cause of all that happens, what is the use of man’s striving?

From Aśvaghōṣa, *Buddhacarita* 9.53.

The Transient Deity

As far as suns and moons revolve and the sky’s directions brilliantly shine, so far reaches a thousand fold world-system. In that thousand-fold world-system, there are a thousand moons, a thousand suns, a thousand Sinerus, a thousand kings of the mountains, a thousand of the four continents, a thousand of the four oceans, a thousand of the heavenly worlds of the sense plane, and a thousand Brahmā-worlds. As far as this thousand-fold world-system reaches, so far is the great Brahmā deemed the highest there.

But even in that great Brahmā, monks, there is transformation, there is change. Seeing this, monks, a well-instructed disciple feels disgust even with that. Being disgusted with it, his attachment even to the highest fades away; how much more to what is low!

From Aṅguttara Nikāya, Book of the Tens, No. 29.

¹ *Brahmato maññati*. Here, too, the Commentary explains the ablative case only in the sense of originating from Brahmā by way of creation or emanation (see Note 6). But when explaining the parallel phrase applied to other terms, the Commentary mentions an alternative interpretation of the ablative case, as signifying “different from.” The rendering here would then be: “He imagines himself different from Brahmā.” This would refer to a strict dualism of God and man. One will also be reminded here of those Christian theologians who emphasize the deep gulf between the creator and creature.

² The Commentary says that he delights (in Brahmā) by way of craving (*taṇhā*) and wrong views (*diṭṭhi*), which may be exemplified by the “yearnings for the delights of divine love,” and by indulging in theological speculations.

The Disillusionment of the Gods

Now there arises in the world the Blessed One, who is holy, fully enlightened, endowed with knowledge and pure conduct, sublime, the knower of worlds, the incomparable leader of men in need of guidance, the teacher of gods and men, enlightened and blessed.

He thus teaches Dhamma: “This is personality; this the origination of personality; this the cessation of personality; this is the way leading to the cessation of personality.”

And those gods who are long-lived, resplendent in beauty, who dwell full of happiness and for a long time in lofty heavenly mansions, even they, having heard the Perfect One teaching Dhamma, are mostly beset by fear, agitation and trembling:

“Alas, we who, in fact, are impermanent, believed that we were permanent! We who, in fact, are evanescent, believed that we were ever lasting! We who, in fact, are non-eternal, believed that we were eternal! But, truly, we are impermanent, evanescent, non-eternal, engrossed in personality!”

From Aṅguttara Nikāya, Book of the Fours, No. 33.

Brahmā Admits His Transiency

One there is¹ who thought of posing
The Divinity² this question
In Sudhamma Hall in Heaven:
“Is there still in you existing,
Friend, the view that once existed?
Is the radiance of heaven
Clearly seen by you as passing?”

The Divinity gave answer
Truly to my question’s order:
“There exists in me no longer,
Sir, the view that once existed;
All the radiance of heaven
I now clearly see as passing;
I condemn my erstwhile claiming
To be permanent, eternal.”

From Majjhima Nikāya, No. 50

God’s Responsibility

If there exists some lord all-powerful to fulfil, in every creature, bliss or woe, and action good or ill, that lord is stained with sin. Man does but work his will.

From the Mahābodhi Jātaka, Jātaka No. 528 (J-a V 238).

*He who has eyes can see the sickening sight;
Why does not Brahmā set his creatures right?
If his wide power no limit can restrain,
Why is his hand so rarely spread to bless?
Why are his creatures all condemned to pain?*

¹ Mahā-Moggallāna Thera, a chief disciple of the Buddha.

² Brahmā.

Why does he not to all give happiness?
Why do fraud, lies, and ignorance prevail?
Why triumphs falsehood—truth and justice fail?
I count your Brahmā one th'unjust among
Who made a world in which to shelter wrong.¹

From the Bhūridatta Jātaka, Jātaka No. 543 (J-a VI 208).

Creation and Cause

The assumption that a God [*īśvara*] is the cause, etc. [of the world] rests upon the false belief in an eternal self; but that belief has to be abandoned if one has clearly understood that everything is [impermanent, and therefore] subject to suffering.

From Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa*, 5.8 (vol. IV p. 19); *Sphuṭārtha* p. 445, 26.

Refutation of the Absolute Creator

A certain school holds that there is a *Maheśvara* God who is absolute, omnipresent, and eternal; and that he is the creator of all dharmas [i. e. phenomena].

This theory is illogical. And why?

(a) That which creates is not eternally present, is not eternal, is not omnipresent; that which is not omnipresent is not absolute.

(b) If he is eternal and omnipresent, and complete with all kinds of capacities, he should, in all times and at all places, produce all of a sudden all dharmas [phenomena].

(c) [If they say] that his creation depends upon desire and conditions, then they contradict their own doctrine of "unique cause." Alternatively, we may say that desire and conditions should also all arise of a sudden, since the cause [which produces them] is there always.

From Vijñaptimātratā Siddhi Śāstra².

Śāntideva

The creative nature of one who is incomprehensible must likewise be incomprehensible. Why then talk about it?

From Bodhicaryāvatāra 9, 121.

If the cause [God] has no beginning, how can the effect [God's creation] have a beginning?

Ibid. 9, 123

¹ The above is a poetic and rather free rendering. An alternative, more literal translation is:

If indeed he is the master in the whole world, Brahmā, the lord of many beings, his offspring,
Then why did he create the world in such a miserable way, why didn't he make the world happy?
If indeed he is the master of the whole world, Brahmā, the lord of many beings, his offspring,
Then why did he make the world with unrighteous means, involving deceit, false speech, and
madness.
If indeed he is the master of the whole world, Brahmā, the lord of many beings, his offspring,
An unjust lord of beings he is, who, although justness exists, created in an unjust manner.

² A standard work of the Buddhist idealistic school. Translated from the Chinese version by Wong Mow Lam, *The Chinese Buddhist*, Vol. 11, No. 2. Shanghai, 1932.

Why did [God] not produce always?¹ There is no other person or thing he need consider. For there is no other person or thing he has not created. Why then, should he thus consider?

Ibid. 9, 124.

If he has to consider the completeness of conditions, then God is not the cause [of the world]. For he is then not free² to refrain from creating when that completeness of conditions is present; nor is he free to create when it is absent.

Ibid. 9, 125.

If God acts without wishing it, he creates in dependence upon something else; but if he has the wish, then he will be dependent upon that wish. Hence where is the creator's sovereignty?³

Ibid. 9, 126.

Śāntarakṣita

Extracts from the *Tattvasaṃgraha*, *The Compendium of Truth*, with the commentary of Kāmalasīla. Translated by Gaṅganāth Jha, *Gaekwads Oriental Series*, Oriental Institute, Baroda.

From Chapter II—Doctrine of God

1. The One and the Many (Paley's "Watchmaker" Argument)

The existence of a being who is eternal, one, and the substratum of eternal all-embracing consciousness—can never be proven (Text 72)

... for the simple reason that any corroborative instance that might be cited in the form of a jar and such things, would be lacking in the element of similarity that is essential [the maker of the jar not having all the character that is predicated of God]. (Commentary to Text 72)

For instance, all such products as houses, steps, gateways, towers and the like definitely known to have been fashioned by makers who have been many, and with fleeting ideas. (Text 73)

2. The Eternal Cannot be Productive

Eternal things cannot produce any effects, because "consecutive" action and "concurrent" action are mutually contradictory; and if objects are consecutive, there must be the same consecutiveness in their cognitions also. (Text 76.)

Only non-eternal things can be productive causes, as it is these alone which go on unceasingly changing their sequential character—of being present now and past at the next moment. Thus it is proven that an intelligent maker must be evanescent and many. (Commentary to Text 76.)

God's cognitions must be consecutive, because they are related to consecutive cognizable things (Text 77.)

¹ That is, produce the whole creation all at once.

² Literally, the master, the Lord (*īśā*).

³ These arguments and those in the preceding section from the *Vīñaptīmātratā* are elaborated in the following extracts from the *Tattvasaṃgraha*.

If God's cognition manifesting itself is produced by objects which are consecutive, then it becomes proven that it must be consecutive; if it is not so produced, then, as there would be no proximate contact [with the object and the cognition], God could not cognize the object at all (Commentary to Text 77.)

3. An Unobstructed Divine Cause Requires Simultaneous Creation

God cannot be the cause of born things, because he is himself devoid of birth, like the sky-lotus. Otherwise all things would come into existence simultaneously. (Text 81.)

If the cause were one whose efficiency is never obstructed, then all things would come into existence simultaneously

The absurdity [involved in the theist's position] is to be shown in this manner: When the cause is present in its complete form, then the effect must appear as a matter of course; just as it is found in the case of the sprout which appears as soon as the final stage has been reached by the causal conditions conducive to it. Now under the doctrine of the theist, as God, the cause of all things, would always be there and free from defects, all things, the whole world, should come into existence at once.

The following argument might be urged: "God is not the only cause [of all things]; in fact, what he does he does through the help of such auxiliary causes as merit and the rest, God himself being only the efficient [controlling] cause. So that so long as merit and the rest are not there, the cause of things cannot be said to be present there in its efficient form."

This is not valid. If there is help that has got to be rendered to God by the auxiliary causes, then he must be regarded as dependent upon their aid. As a matter of fact, however, God is [said to be] eternal, and as nothing can introduce into him any efficiency that is not there already, there can be no help that he should receive from the auxiliary causes. Why then, should he need such auxiliaries as are of no use to him?

Uddyotakara has argued as follows: "Though the cause of things, named God, is eternal and perfect and always present, yet the producing of things is not simultaneous because God always acts intelligently and purposely. If God has produced things by his mere presence, without intelligence [and purpose], then the objection urged would have applied to our doctrine. As a matter of fact, however, God acts intelligently; hence the objection is not applicable, as God operates towards products solely by his own wish. Thus our reason is not 'inconclusive.'"

This is not valid. The activity and inactivity of things are not dependent upon the wish of the cause; only if it were so, the appearance of all effects would not be possible, even in the constant presence of the untrammelled cause in the shape of God, simply on account of his wish being absent. The fact of the matter is that the appearance and non-appearance of things are dependent upon the presence and absence of due efficiency in the cause. For instance, even though a man may have the wish, things do not appear if he has not the efficiency or power to produce them; and when the cause in the form of seed has the efficiency or faculty to produce the sprout, the sprout does appear, even though the seed has no wish at all. If then the cause called God is always there, fully endowed with the due untrammelled efficiency (as he is at the time of the producing of a particular thing), then why should things stand in need of his wish, which can serve no purpose at all? And the result of this should be that all things should appear simultaneously, at the same time as the appearance of any one thing. Thus alone could the untrammelled causal efficiency of God be shown, if things were produced simultaneously. Nor can God, who cannot be helped by other things, stand in need of anything, for which he would need his wish.

Further, in the absence of intelligence, there can be no desire for anything else, and the intelligence of God is held to be eternally uniform; so that, even if God acted intelligently, why should there not be a simultaneous production of things? Because like God himself, his intelligence is always there. If then, his intelligence be regarded as evanescent, even so it must co-exist with God, and its presence must be as constant as God himself; so that the objection on that score remains in force.

And yet the production of things is not found to be simultaneous; hence the conclusion must be contrary to that desired by the theist.

The argument may be formulated as follows: "When a certain thing is not found to be produced at a certain time, it must be taken to be one whose cause at that time is not untrammelled in its efficiency as it is found in the case of the sprout not appearing while the seed is still in the granary; it is found that at the appearance of one thing the whole world is not produced. Hence what has been stated [by the opponent] as a universal proposition is not found to be true. (Commentary to Text 87.)

From Chapter 6

Doctrine of the Puruṣa (Spirit, Personality) as Cause of the World

Others, however, postulate the *puruṣa* [spirit], similar in character to God, as the cause of the world The refutation of this also is to be set forth in the same manner as that of God: for what purpose does this spirit perform such an act [as the creating, of the world]? (Text 155.)

If he does it because he is prompted by another being, then he cannot be self-sufficient [independent]. If he does it through compassion, then he should make the world absolutely happy. When he is found to have created people beset with misery, poverty, sorrow and other troubles, where can his compassion be perceived? (Texts 156–157.)

Further, inasmuch as, prior to creation, the objects of compassion would not be there, there could not be even that compassion through the presence of which the ordainer is assumed. (Text 158)

Nor should he bring about the dissolution of those beings who would always be prosperous. If in so doing he be regarded as dependent upon the unseen force [of destiny], then his self-sufficiency ceases. (Text 159.)

It might be argued that "He makes people happy or unhappy in accordance with their destiny, in the shape of merit and demerit." That cannot be right, as in that case his self-sufficiency, which has been postulated, would cease. One who is himself endowed with power does not depend upon anything else; if he is wanting in power, then the creation of the world itself might be attributed to that on which he is dependent; and in that case he would cease to be the cause. (Commentary to Text 159.)

Then again, why should he make himself dependent upon that destiny, which is conducive to suffering and pain? In fact, full of mercy as he is, the right course for him would be to ignore that destiny. (Text 160)

Merciful persons do not seek for such causes as bring about suffering, because the sole motive behind their actions consists in the desire to remove the suffering of others. (Commentary to Text 160.)

The Buddhist Publication Society

The BPS is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for all people.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is—a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

For more information about the BPS and our publications, please visit our website, or contact:

The Administrative Secretary
Buddhist Publication Society
P.O. Box 61
54 Sangharaja Mawatha
Kandy, Sri Lanka
E-mail: bps@bps.lk
Web site: <http://www.bps.lk>
Tel: 0094 81 223 7283
Fax: 0094 81 222 3679