

Buddhism and God

I'd like to start this talk with a story from my own experience

I've told you this story because aspects of it seem to me to reflect the experience of many people in the west today. In Europe in particular we live in a culture that has been steeped for hundreds of years in Christianity. This has taken different forms but central to it is the belief in one God, a being who created the world and is active within it. Until relatively recently, this was not so much a belief but an integral part of how people functioned in the world. It would not have occurred to the vast majority of people to doubt God's existence. This meant that for everyone, there were two dimensions to life – that of the world of sense experience and another invisible dimension which provided a sense of overall meaning and purpose to human life. We were God's creatures and part of an eternal plan for his world. A person could feel special; not only was he or she created individually by God, but if he or she obeyed God's will, he or she could be assured of eternal life with God in Heaven. Naturally this had a strong effect on the way people lived their lives. They knew why they were here and, in theory at least, death need hold no fear for them. If things went wrong, as they do in every life, then you would pray or get a priest to intercede for you and your prayers would either be answered to your satisfaction or you would learn to humbly accept God's will. Each person had an individual destiny and would never perish.

Of course, there was a downside to all this. People lived in fear of God's wrath – He loved them but also judged them, would forgive them but might also damn them to eternal torment. This life was often short and tough – the prospect of an eternal life of bliss was very alluring, but conversely, the thought of eternal damnation was terrifying in the extreme (cp martyrs of Reformation). It allowed terrible misuses of power by the Church, both Catholic and Protestant (indulgences, predestination)

Over the past hundred and fifty years, this confidence in divine providence has been increasingly eroded by the advances in scientific knowledge. Darwin's theory of Evolution in particular has had a devastating effect on people's sense of being individually created by God "in His image". We understand so much more about the world and how it came into existence and how it stays in existence – so that we no longer need God as an explanation. "God is a superfluous hypothesis" as Dawkins puts it. We have also learned to look at the world through scientific spectacles, so to speak. We have learned to demand evidence, to assume that the world is as we experience it through our senses and that science can tell us all there is to know about this world.

In many ways, this has been incredibly liberating (as it was for me....). We can now predict and control the world in ways that we never could before and we no longer have to feel at the mercy of a powerful, unpredictable God. The old certainties have disappeared and we are free to discover truth for ourselves. Released from the fear of eternal punishment, we can work out for ourselves how best to live with each other. Evolution has shown us how much we have in common with other species, helping us to move away from the Biblical idea of the natural world being there for man's disposal to use as he wishes.

However, the other side of the coin to this is that we are increasingly losing that other dimension to our lives – a dimension that is spiritual, not material; that is transcendental, i.e. not accessible through sense experience. There is a vacuum – a 'God-shaped hole in the universe'. We are persuaded that 'what we see is what we get' – that there is nothing beyond the material world and that when we die, we die and that is the end of the matter. At its best, this becomes a benevolent humanism where it is felt that as we are all in this meaningless cosmos together, it makes sense for us to cooperate so that we live can live our lives as happily and productively as possible. At its worst, it manifests as rampant consumerism. Shopping malls become the new cathedrals and we spend our Sundays not in prayer and worship but in buying as much as we can to shore up our fragile sense of ourselves. We have lost our sense of the sacred – I doubt if this word even has any meaning for many people today, along with 'reverence' or 'worship'.

Yet many people are realising that this utopia of consumerism is not making us any happier – quite the reverse. Depression and stress are on the increase and this in a society where most people enjoy a level of affluence unheard of only 50 years ago.

So why is this and what has this to do with Buddhism? The Buddha lived and taught in India two and a half thousand years ago in a culture radically different from the Middle Eastern context that Jesus was born into. His was not a culture dominated by belief in one God. Indeed though the Buddha refers to gods, he clearly doesn't take them very seriously and seems to have seen them as somewhat deluded beings and not to be compared with what he taught as the pinnacle of spiritual worth – the enlightened human consciousness. Having attained Enlightenment himself, he saw clearly the plight of all human beings. He saw that human consciousness contains within itself the seeds of its own transcendence. What does this mean? Well, the image the Buddha used was of a lotus that spends most of its life in the murky muddy waters of a lake. Yet given the right conditions, it can break through the surface of the water into the light and unfold into a spotlessly pure and beautiful flower. We are like that, according to the Buddha. We grope around trying to make ourselves happy with things that can never give us more than temporary satisfaction. This is not just because everything is

impermanent and eventually turns to dust in our hands, but because there is something in all of us that cannot be satisfied until we reach towards our highest potential. Over the centuries here in the west, we have tended to project that potential on to what we have called God. Buddhism invites us to discover that potential in ourselves.

There are various names for this potential – Enlightenment, Awakening, Nirvana, all of which give a flavour of it but the Buddha rarely said very much about it for the simple reason that it refers to a state of being beyond anything our language can adequately describe. Nirvana literally means ‘blowing out’ which doesn’t sound very exciting and has sometimes been taken to mean literally ‘extinction’. But it simply refers to the ‘blowing out’ of greed, of hatred and of ignorance, those 3 poisons or fires that the Buddha identified as raging within us. Anyone who sits down to try to meditate will quickly notice that their mind is doing just this – in varying degrees.

More positive descriptions refer to Nirvana as a state of peace, of purity, sublime, wonderful, marvellous, the source of supreme happiness... Generally, the Enlightened consciousness is seen as one characterised by wisdom, clarity, compassion and freedom.

So Nirvana or Enlightenment is a transcendental state which takes us way beyond the limitations of ordinary human psychology. For this reason, it is a mistake to see Buddhism as simply a philosophy of life, though it is this as well... In my view it rightly takes its place among the great religions of the world. It is a religion but one that is unique in not requiring belief in God or gods.

Something that surprises people when they start coming along to this centre is that they might find themselves taking part in a puja. This is an act of worship where we are invited to reverence and make offerings to “those mighty warriors that overcome suffering every where”. We are invited to use our imaginations to bring to life Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who symbolise aspects of the enlightened mind. When I first came along here, I was somewhat fazed by this – was this God being smuggled in by the back door. I then realised that something deep within me was being stirred. Vessantara, writing about this, says that it is as if ‘the kings and queens’ of our energies, that normally lie dormant within us, unable to respond to our mediocre aims in life, will come to life when they hear the call of ‘distant trumpets’ from what is our truest destiny. Sangharakshita uses the lovely phrase that what is ultimate in us responds to what is ultimate in the universe.

What I realised I had missed in Buddhism was that sense of relationship to an ideal. A strength of God-based religions is the relationship between God and man that is personal yet sublime – what Martin Buber calls the “I – Thou” relationship. If there is an ideal beyond ourselves to which we aspire, we need

to find ways of coming into relationship with it, of bridging the gap between our present limited selves to what we can become. The problem arises when we get too literal and this is the biggest drawback with belief in God as an actually existing separate and all-powerful being. It reduces us and cuts us off from our true potential.

So, to conclude, my own journey has taken me from a belief in God that I couldn't sustain into an atheism that couldn't satisfy me and then to what feels like a true vision of what we are really here for. The Buddha advised us not to take what he said on trust but to test it out in our own experience and all I can do is invite you to do the same.

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