

## Heaven can wait

Every religion has a set of beliefs, which become the basis for the conduct of the believer, giving him meaning and purpose in life. What sets religion apart from other fields of human knowledge and conduct (such as science and commerce) is religious ideals. It is also one religion's ideals that differentiate it from other religions.

For the purpose of this discussion, let us work on the assumption that there are two ideals of a religion, that is, the worldly and the spiritual, or the mundane and the supramundane. The worldly or mundane ideal is usually the founder of the religion himself, while the spiritual or supramundane ideal, as a rule, is the summum bonum or highest good.

In the God-religions, the worldly ideal is their religious founder or prophet, whom believers try to emulate in their daily or religious lives. In the case of Buddhism, our worldly ideal is the historical Buddha, whose life-story gives deep meaning to our lives, and our spiritual ideal is nirvana.

What is interesting with Buddhism is that for most Buddhists today the reality is that nirvana is like a distant star which not many think they can reach. The reality (of our times, that is) is that we have a self-limiting view, the real causes of which are our own worldliness (that is, our level of wealth, knowledge or delusion). However, those who respect the Buddha's wisdom, know that although they may not reach the stars (in this life anyway), they can still chart their lives by them.

There are at least two important reasons why Buddhists generally do not take the wish to attain nirvana lightly. Firstly, it is not a belief like "heaven" or some paradise which we could simply say "I believe" or say a prayer or a mantra, and be "assured" of it. If this were possible, there would not be as many conceptions of such heavens as there are their believers.

The point is that this is only a *view*, even a self-fulfilling wish, that tries to compensate for a deeper sense of inadequacy. That is why we are more likely to see such heaven-believers as being intolerant of others who do not hold such a view, or even of heaven-believers who define it differently. Such unbelievers or detractors are wishfully threatened with "hell."

So if there is a heaven (or heavens), there is also a hell (or hells). The Buddhist teachings are that such states are not only *impermanent* – whatever exists must be impermanent – but they are also *mind-made*. There is a joke amongst some materialists, for example, that only good boring people are found in heaven, and that they would rather be in hell!

Such views however are mostly based on a notion of duality, of pleasure and pain, that heaven in a place of eternal pleasure, and hell, of eternal pain. We all know that such views are introduced by religions, and a religion starts at some point in human history (when humans are more developed in thinking and expressing themselves). The question that even an intelligent child might ask is "What about those people who lived before the religion started? Do they go to hell for something that has not happened?" It is like saying that we are suffering now because of something that happened in the future!

Using the ideas of heaven and hell to induce faith or strike fear in others is very unhealthy. They create problems where there were none. At best, we can say that these are *beliefs* – we have no empirical proof for this: we are unable to test them for truth and reality. We can only say "our holy book says so" (but there are many holy books, so it becomes political: my holy book is right, yours wrong); or "this reliable person says so" (again we need to define "reliable").

If a belief – even a belief in heaven or paradise – is unhealthy, it is best not to have it. It is merely a belief, so we can choose what not to believe. We can and should free our minds from such beliefs by

constantly examining why we are attracted to them in the first place, and why we are so intolerant of others. We need to seriously examine what and why it means to say, "I believe."

Safer than saying "I believe" is to be able to say "I know." To *know* means that we are able to experience something as real. Something is *real* when we can experience or feel it through any or all of our five physical senses. It is real when the same conditions arise again, we are *likely* to experience the same things again. So we know thus.

The word "likely" here is to caution us that our minds may not be paying attention to what is happening. If our mind is narrow, then we are likely to see only what we want to see. Indeed, the mind might even conjure up its own inner vision and project it onto our outside world. In this way, we are creating our own make-believe world.

Since we are talking about possible worlds, let us ask: "What is the best possible state of being?" Let us start with what we know: (1) We know that pleasure and pain are relative to and dependent on each other. So it is meaningless to define heaven as a place of eternal pleasure: no pain, no pleasure. (2) We know that a sense-based world exists because we can experience it. We can *know* things through our senses, and *what* we can know are sense-objects. If we work on understanding this second statement, we are on the right track to self-understanding.

Notice how when our senses, or any of them, have experienced to their fullest, surfeiting of their objects, they are momentarily at rest. After we have had a good meal, for example, we rest satiated. Or, conversely, once we see no reason for getting angry, we feel a deep sense of relief. In the language of our senses, this is a momentary experience of nirvana. A deep sense of not needing to do anything else as all have been done, as it were.

In short, nirvana is not only a better alternative to ideas of heaven or paradise or some other sense-based notions, nirvana is also possible. If not, there would be no true and complete way out of our sufferings.

Revisioning Buddhism 35

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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