

The ascended ones

All religions have some kind of belief in gods and demons. Early Buddhism adopted the gods, spirits and demons of the religions and beliefs of the day and converted them into Buddhist mythology (psychologically themed stories) and cosmology (evolution and nature of the universe, including its realms). The Buddhist universe is populated by beings inhabiting various realms, and characterized as having various levels of goodness, beauty and spirituality depending basically on their karma. On the higher planes, their being and mentality are also related to deep meditation.

Such ideas often influenced other religions which, in turn, adopted and adapted them. In recent times, we often see familiar Buddhist themes in various movies and TV series, such as Star Wars, Star Trek and Stargate. Interestingly, such series are themed on space fiction (science fiction featuring space travel, and exotic beings and parts of the universe) that are often futuristic and spiritual.

The second season episode 12 of Stargate: Atlantis¹ (2005), entitled “Epiphany,” has interesting examples of Buddhist themes, especially of the higher realms of beings. In this episode, the maverick but likeable and loyal Lieutenant-Colonel John Sheppard is sucked through an event horizon at a cave-entrance, and cannot get out the same way.

To make matters worse, the hidden world (actually a village that resembles a Buddhist meditation retreat community) has a “time dilation field” (its own relative time, like in the 31 planes of Buddhist cosmology).² This means that minutes in relative conditions become hours for Sheppard. If the Atlantis team does not find a way to save him soon, he is going to die of old age well before our time!³

Weeks turn into months as, with local village inhabitant Teer's help, Sheppard struggles to adapt to his new life. One day, a huge ethereal beast (reminding us of Māra the bad one) attacks the villagers. To Sheppard's disappointment, the villagers hide, leaving him to face the beast alone. He barely survives.

Feeling abandoned by his teammates and now by the passive villagers, the deeply frustrated Sheppard tries to inspire his new village friends to act together against the beast. The villagers have explained to him that they all have chosen a one-way path of meditation, peace and non-violence, involving daily meditation, so that they would “ascend” to a bodyless realm of pure energy (like the Buddhist realms of form dhyana and of formless attainments).

Sheppard thinks that they are being escapist and too focused on the hereafter. In fact, he warns them that ascension won't mean anything if they are killed by the beast before they can achieve it.

Meanwhile, back on the Atlantis side, only a few hours have passed and the team has returned to look for Sheppard. Although a probe sent through the event-field at the cave entrance is destroyed, it locates the field's power source and the team's loud high-strung scientist, Dr Rodney McKay, calculates that time in that field passes about 250 times faster than in real time, which would mean that a single hour in real time would equate to at least 10 days within the field.

¹ In the series, Atlantis is a high-tech fortress city (located in the Pegasus galaxy) built by the ancients (our spiritually advanced ancestors) to battle the life-sucking vampire-like Wraiths (an alien race of mutants with human and insect genes), the dominant power of that galaxy. In some ways, they are like the yakshas or ogres of Buddhist mythology.

² On the 31 planes of Buddhist cosmology, see SD 1.7 (Appendix): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/1.7-Kevaddha-S-d11-piya-proto.pdf>

³ For an example of time relativity in the suttas, see eg **Pāyāsi Sutta** (D 23, see §§10-11), SD 39.4: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/39.4-Payasi-S-d23-piya.pdf>

In Buddhist cosmology, for example, one day in Tāvātimsa (the heaven of the thirty-three) is equivalent to a hundred earth years. If someone from our world were reborn there,⁴ settle in and then were to visit earth again the next morning, all the people they knew on earth would have died!⁵

Now, back in the village, Teer confidently responds that her lifetime of spiritual practice has given her clairvoyance. She warns that the beast will attack Sheppard's team. By this time (reflecting on what Sheppard has instigated them) the villagers realize that the beast is really only a manifestation of their own fears. It is mind-made (another familiar Buddhist theme.)

Having realized this, the villagers have reached the end of their spiritual quest, and are ready to ascend. They invite Sheppard to join them, but he declines. Then, their bodies turned into light that ascends heavenward. The Atlantic team manages to reach the village by then. Teer then advises Dr McKay not to remove the ZPM (zero-point module) -- the energy source that powers entire cities, such as Atlantis, and intergalactic spacecrafts -- for, it must remain there protecting the realm for others to inhabit and work towards ascension. However, they will open the barrier for them to return to Atlantis.

Ascension, in the Stargate mythos, is a process that allows beings to be able to separate from their physical bodies and to live eternally as pure energy in a superior plane with a greater amount of knowledge and power. It can be a mental, spiritual or evolutionary process -- a direct result of obtaining a certain level of wisdom and knowledge as a civilization. When a being "ascends," his mortal physical body becomes energy (leaving a heap of empty clothes), and he rises upwards as glowing light.

In the Stargate stories, the Ancients were the first race to ascend and some of them attempted to teach the "lowers" to ascend without the use of technology. In the "SG1" season 5 episode 21, entitled "Meridian," Dr Daniel Jackson speculates that this is what the earth religion of Buddhism is based on, and that one of the Ancients, Oma Desala, is Mother Nature herself (called Thāvarā in Buddhist mythology).

Just before our Buddha's awakening, as he sits meditating under the bodhi tree, Māra appears to distract him by claiming that the Bodhisattva is not worthy to sit under that tree. The Bodhisattva touches the earth and calls her to witness. Mother Earth (or Mother Nature) that rises up from the earth's depths and wrings her long hair from which huge torrents of water gushed forth and wash away Māra and his bad host. The allusion to the pervasive and supportive role of our karma is clear here.

Some modern religions and religious people are attracted to the idea of "Ascended Ones" or "Ascended Masters." It is helpful to understand them as the visions of the pious. Very often the kind of gods we worship, esteem or create are the externalizations or manifestations of the goodness that we lack or desire (not knowing we only need to learn look within where they lie dormant).

Like the Ascended of the Stargate universe, the gods live when we worship them. The truth is that the gods dies, too, when we do *not* worship them (as is in the case of the Greek gods). These Ascended ones are virtual realities that touch the depths of our inner being, which crave for life, love, light, and liberation (represented by the 4 L's of the Buddhist swastika).

It is expedient to understand that our life is our breath, and if we really learn to breathe with the heart (as in breath meditation), then we have love (as in lovingkindness meditation). When our life is bright with love, we emanate our inner light, so that our joy benefits all around us and those we mentally

⁴ These devas are reborn looking like 16-year-old youths. The rebirth is not biological, but "spontaneous."

⁵ See note 2 above on **Pāyāsi Sutta** (D 23).

touch. And if we understand the impermanence of all this, we also appreciate their value. Then we are surely heading for liberation in this life itself.⁶

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

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⁶ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), SD 16.7: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/16.7-Anicca-Cakkhu-S-s25.1-piya.pdf>