

Natural Buddhism, supernatural Buddhism

If we have lived for some time in a house or worked long enough in an office, we would one day need to tidy it up. When we begin this enterprise, we have to decide what things we want to keep, and what we do not need to keep. Buddhism today is like an old house or ancient palace with a complex of houses, rooms and structures. If we are the housekeeper or caretaker, or even just an inhabitant, we need to examine what are really useful for us today, and what not.

A helpful way to do this is to differentiate between “natural Buddhism” and “supernatural Buddhism.” **Natural Buddhism** is the understanding and practising of the Buddha’s teaching without relying on supernatural explanations, that is, on beliefs that fall outside of the laws of nature as we know them.

In relying on a natural approach to Buddhism, I am not claiming that what might be called “supernatural” to be unreal or untrue. If we believe in ghosts, for example, then we are likely to interpret whatever scares us, such as a dark corner, or hidden space, or some strange event, to be ghosts. If we believe in God or gods, we might explain our fortune or misfortune, and those of others, in terms of some higher power or agency.

Beliefs found in Buddhism that could be called supernatural include stories of heavens and hells, devas and Maras, miracles, merit and merit transfer, and the various psychic powers mentioned in Buddhist texts and related by teachers and people we know. Such psychic powers include self-multiplication, flying, walking through barriers, and talking with gods. We might even include teachings on the workings of karma and rebirth, that is, how what we do now affect us over many future lives,

Even in the absence of any natural explanations for such psychic phenomena and supernatural teachings, we can only accept them, if we do, merely on belief or pious faith. Perhaps, some day we may have natural explanations for such things. However, for now, if we are serious about practising Buddhism as taught by the Buddha, in what is called early Buddhism, then we do not need such beliefs, to begin with.

In an important way, we don’t really have to decide whether we should or should not believe in any such supernatural thing. According to early Buddhist teachings, there are two other ways of dealing with this problem. A third way is to accept the possibility of both – that we both believe and unbelieve in them, or some of them.

We can, for example, regard such supernatural ideas and teachings as literature and stories. Most, if not all, of us love good stories, and many of us love reading good books, especially the great classics of literature. One reason for this is that they are educational: they relate the pains, weaknesses and mistakes of others, and how they overcome them, or that we are all capable of finding true happiness, the highest good and the greatest wisdom. Or, they entertain us: they help us see life in a more positive way, or we simply feel happy because of such stories.

Even though they are not really true, they are based on human qualities and nature. More importantly, they inspire us to look for our own strength and goodness to discover true happiness. This way of looking at the supernatural in Buddhism is called the “**provisional**” way.

Another way to deal with the supernatural in Buddhism is neither to believe nor unbelieve in them. In other words, we take a neutral stand, even admitting that we cannot really prove them to be true or false. In other words, we don’t even have to think about them, because they do not really affect our living good moral lives, living mindfully or practising meditation, and gaining wisdom into our lives. This approach is called an “**agnostic**” one, one of avoiding both belief and unbelieve by accepting the fact that we do not really know about such things.

No wise Buddhist teachers in Asia or the West require that we have faith in unverifiable beliefs. Instead, they teach us to be deeply mindful of our experiences, including our views and beliefs. We don’t need to

question or reject such beliefs, but we need to accept them as they really are: simply, views and beliefs. They are passing or recurring mental states. We simply let them come, and let them go.

Furthermore, if we carefully study the earliest surviving texts of Indian Buddhism, we will discover that there are many teachings free of supernatural ideas. The suttas most widely accepted as being perhaps the most ancient texts are the Chapter of Eights (Aṭṭhaka Vagga) (Sn 4/766-975) and the Chapter on the Way Across (Pārāyana Vagga) (Sn 5/1032-1149), both found in the Sutta Nipāta. They are so ancient that they are quoted in other suttas,¹ in Sanskrit² and in Chinese texts.³

Scholars believe that both these texts were composed before the other early Buddhist suttas, and they teach the best examples of natural Buddhism. None of these teachings rely on any supernatural beliefs. Not only are teaching on rebirth not found in any of these texts, they, in fact, discourage any desire for any state of being. The Chapter on the Way Across, as the title clearly suggests, advises us to work our way over the waters of suffering for the security of nirvana.

Even the word “faith” is mentioned only once in the Chapter of Eights – where it admonishes us *not* to rely on faith, but on wisdom to attain peace (Sn 853) – and twice in the Chapter on the Way Across (Sn 1143 & 1146).⁴ Faith, after all, is the basis for having supernatural beliefs. Moreover, the focus of these teachings is direct experience of the nature of our mind, especially the various forms of clinging and views, and letting them go.

The Chapter of Eights often points out the problems of clinging, craving, mindsets and disputes, and that they are to be abandoned. We are advised to work towards true peace of mind through the abandoning of clinging and views. The same themes are developed in the rest of the Pali Tipitaka, presented with more stories and teachings for the benefit of a wider audience, both monastic and lay.

Although we see faith as a central teaching in numerous suttas, it is always presented as “wise faith,” that is, faith rooted in direct experience, or faith directed towards direct experience. It’s just like we know that fire is hot when we get burnt, or just being near it. We don’t need any scientific evidence that being burnt by fire hurts and can harm life. Similarly, if we fall into the fires of greed, hate and delusion, we will get hurt in some way, often seriously.

Natural Buddhism, then, is based on a direct experience of life, not merely the words of another. Or we listen to wise teachings, but go on to test them out for ourselves, just like a good goldsmith tests the truth and purity of gold. Most of Buddhism we see today is predominantly supernatural Buddhism, but natural Buddhism is an equally valid form of Buddhism, if not more authentic, as it brings us back to the teachings and experiences of early Buddhism.

One last point: If we simply accept some teachings or belief we cannot really verify, then we are building our faith or practice on shaky, even dangerous, ground. As the French philosopher Voltaire warns us, “Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities.”⁵

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

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¹ S 2:47,12; A 1:134,9; A 4:63,13.

² Divyāvadāna 20,23 f & 35,1; Abhidharma,kośa 1.13d,i (under Artha,vargiya); Bodhisattva,bhūmi; Gilgit Manuscripts (ed N Dutt, Srinagar, 1939-1959) 3:4,188,1-10.

³ M Anesaki, “Sutta-nipāta in Chinese,” *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 1906-1907:50 f; M Winternitz says that the Pārāyana Vagga also occurs in the Chinese Tripiṭaka (*History of Indian Literature*, 1933:92 n3).

⁴ “Faith” is mentioned once in the Vatthu,gāthā (Sn 1026), but this is a late preamble added to Pārāyana Vagga,

⁵ Voltaire, alternative translation of passage from “Questions sur les miracles,” 1765.