

Good heavens

The kind of heaven that a religion promises is the mirror and measure of its spiritual strength. On this tiny blue planet in this neck of boundless space, its denizens offer two kinds of heaven. There are those who promise an eternal heaven for believers who show complete faith in a supreme deity, just as the citizens of a powerful empire gives undivided loyalty to a monarch or potentate. The everlasting heaven of this system is a place of eternal pleasure, with the kind of reward depending on what their founders see as desirable, mostly on account of their social and geographical ambience and political fortunes.

A religious system that arose in difficult desert environment understandably would envision a heaven of lush greenery, a sort of garden of Eden. A feudal imperial system would see its heaven as a divinized version of power and justice (as characterized by traditional east Asian religions). As on earth so in heaven.

The conception of an eternal heaven and its pleasures is only meaningful when foiled against an eternal hell and unimaginable suffering. But who decides who goes to this heaven, who goes to that hell? It is decided by people called “rulers,” so called because they measure the worth of those they lord over in fact or by law.

On the other hand, a life-centred religion, and here I think Buddhism is a very good example (perhaps the only one), promises neither eternal heaven nor eternal hell. The reason is simple: what is eternal only exists in our imagination, but never in the real world. Whatever exists must exist in time; whatever exists in time is impermanent. Perhaps we can say that the only eternity is impermanence itself, but this is stepping too close to the edge of language as we know it.

Now let us for a moment imagine that the well-regulated heaven-hell system of the God-religions is a behavioural set-up to reward believers and punish unbelievers, backsliders, apostates, and those whom the rulers see as unruly or unruleable. The Buddhist afterlife-worlds, on the other hand, are really much more complicated, because although the hells are the lowest realm, populated by the habitually violent and tortured, these are not the only possible worlds.

There is the asura world, dominated by power-centred demons who habitually use and abuse others for their own purposes and pleasure. They are those who would not think twice to fell a whole tree just to sample a few of its fruits, or to kill a golden-egg-laying goose to get all the valued eggs at once.

Next we have the preta world, haunted by those who find no satisfaction in anything, those who collect things, but are unable to delight in any. Whatever they hold or hold dear turns into dirt, dust or dung. Some would fancy the golden-touch king Midas of myth to be a pleasant-looking preta.

Then there is the animal kingdom that is without any real king; for, its beasts are predictable, fear-driven, self-procreating bodies at worst, or loyal and loved companions and entertainers of humans at best. Many animals are mouth-born: they are borne in the mouths of other animals, including humans, and then chewed and eaten.

Then there are the heavens, which are generally very spacious and delightful, where pleasures are most satiating as they arise just as we would like them, limited only by our desires. But there is a catch: it is like spending a long holiday in a Club Med resort. The bills there run by the second, surely draining our karmic reserves. Although such elysian stays can last beyond

world-periods, even the gods must fall from their heavens in time. This is the only way heaven can exist, that is, in impermanence.

There is a silver lining to this heavenly cloud though: even animals can go to heaven, especially our pets. All we need to do is treat them well, and let them pass on peacefully. They will be reborn in the heavens as divine beings.¹ All beings with a heart have a chance to go to heaven.

The best of these realms is the human, who knows both joy and sorrow, and as such, have golden opportunities for learning about life to the full. Unlike the denizens of the other worlds, humans have a capacity for choice between good and evil. Good is the natural course of living beings: it allows us to grow, to evolve out of the cyclic rut of the realms, to spiral into a realm-free state.

Within the limitation of words, such a state has been described as without here, nor hereafter, nor in between; neither coming nor going; beyond earth, water, fire, wind or space; beyond present, past or future; where consciousness truly find no footing. If there is any “forever” state, this is it.

Revisioning Buddhism 18

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

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¹ See **Animals to heaven**: <http://piyaweeeklyreflection.googlepages.com/090121AnimalsGoToHeaven.pdf>