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The Conception of Divinity in Early Buddhism: A Study Based on the Pali Canon

Madhav Chaudhary

St. Stephen's College

Introduction

My first encounter with practicing Buddhists was via Nichiren Buddhism, an offshoot of Buddhism that reveres the Lotus Sutra and believes in its recitation. The mantra *nam myoho rengo kyu* caught my interest. *Nam* means to devote, *myo* can be translated as wonderful or ultimate, and *ho* means law. *Ren* meaning lotus bloom, can also be read synonymous with the Lotus Sutra and *kyo* literally means sutra. Nam-myoho-rengo-kyo is thus a vow, an expression of determination, to embrace and manifest our Buddha nature. It is a pledge to oneself to never yield to difficulties and to win over one's suffering. At the same time, it is a vow to help others reveal this law in their own lives and achieve happiness.¹ This raises a very pertinent Buddhist idea that is central to the philosophy. It focuses on oneself. It is the evocation of a sutra, its chanting and *dhyaana*² which eventually leads to enlightenment. What made me curious was, while it evokes the teaching of Buddha, it does not evoke the Buddha himself. It is not Buddha the God or man, who can uplift you from the suffering, it is your own chartered efforts which will liberate you from the cycle of *dukkha*.³

This became the ground for me to explore- What is the conception of God in Buddhism? Tied to which are various questions which arise simultaneously. Is Buddha a God? How did Buddha view himself? Did he try to project himself as God? What lies at the centre of Buddhist Philosophy?

It is a known fact that Buddhism has a lot of Gods. Especially, Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhism has its own set of Gods and Goddesses, while the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas have their own significance. The existence of Gods in Buddhism has been there since the very beginning, going back to the Pali canon but their position is not as revered as the Buddha, for they too are not the 'awakened ones'. For this essay, we will confine our study to the Pali canon, and analyze the conception of Gods in early Buddhism as advocated by Gautama himself.

¹Soka Gakai <https://www.sokaglobal.org/resources/study-materials/buddhist-concepts/the-meaning-of-nam-myoho-rengo-kyo.html>

² mindfulness

³ In Buddhism, *dukkha* or suffering is a part of 4 noble truths and one of the three marks of existence.

CORE OF BUDDHISM: BUDDHA OR NIBBANA

Buddha, today, is revered no less than a God. His statue is worshipped and enshrined in monasteries. But Buddha would have been appalled to see this if he would have been alive. Throughout his historical lifespan what he fought the most, the danger of personality cult, was attributed to him upon his death. The founder of Zen Buddhism remarked, “If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha!”- to emphasize the importance of maintaining distance from authority figures. The Pali canon too is replete with instances where Gautama seems to be fighting against his own deification. He endlessly deflected all attention of his disciples from himself to his teachings or the *dhamma*⁴. Dhamma for him, was the fundamental law of life for Gods, humans and animals alike. It embodies the universal truth of the antiquity which had been lost over the ages and completely faded during the historical Buddha of Sakya’s time period. Buddhahood is promised to every practitioner of Buddhism, for it is innate and latent in everyone and no divinity can infuse it or awaken it except the person himself. If people started to revere Gautama the man, they would distract themselves from the task, and the deflection from the goal of enlightenment to worship of somebody, and dependence over them would only impede spiritual progress.

It can not be better explained than looking at the 6 year journey of Gautama of attaining the enlightenment. After experimenting with a number of ascetic activities and yoga, he reached his first teacher Alara Kalama, followed into his footsteps and eventually leaving his tutelage

⁴ Teachings and doctrines of Buddha. They explain and describe the nature of things the way they are.

when he discovered that he had not discovered ‘the Self’, as he was still subject to passion, desires and emotions⁵. Thereafter, he followed the lead of Uddaka Ramaputta, another renowned teacher of his time, only to abandon his path too. Gautama was destined to attain Buddhahood, for he was a born Boddhisattva.⁶ Once he attained *nibbana*⁷, he insisted that he had discovered a path of great antiquity, an ancient trail traveled by human beings in far-off, distant era.⁸ The enlightenment or *nibbana* led him to re-discover this lost glorious truth, famously called the 4 Noble Truths. According to him, this exact knowledge of dhamma was taught by the previous Buddhas as well. He never claimed that this was unique, nor he was the first person to realize this.⁹

This is repeated numerous times in the Pali canon by Buddha himself, that, there have been many Buddhas before him, each of whom delivered the same dhamma, and had the same experience. Buddhist tradition claims that there have been 27 such enlightened beings before the historical Buddha¹⁰. When knowledge of this essential truth had faded, a new Buddha, called Maitreya will come to Earth. The mythological stories of the previous Buddhas are very similar to that of the Buddha of Sakya. The Lotus Sutra talks about the lifespan of the historical Buddha, where he iterates that he has to die via mortal means to inspire others to seek the dhamma and awaken their Buddha nature. The Buddha’s lifespan is immeasurable and not limited to a single lifespan. This is not a literal death, it’s a temporary manifestation to further the dhamma’s propagation.

The story of his ‘Going Forth’ (Pabbajja) from his father’s house is an archetypal story applicable to all Buddhas, and is said to have happened to his predecessor, Buddha Vipassi.¹¹ The interest here is not so much on the personalities, but on the philosophy of dhamma which is realized and preached by Buddhas in different time periods. The knowledge is perennial and its realization would free one from the *samsara*.¹²

Nibbana is at the centre of Buddhist practices, attainment of which is the ultimate goal. It is concept difficult to explain, since the Buddha himself failed to do so. He was at loss of words to describe his experience of *nibbana*. The word which can be reach nearest to explain it is

⁵ The Noble Search Ariyapariyesana Sutta, MN 26

⁶ Sutta Nipata mentions Buddha being a Boddhisattva before his enlightenment.

⁷ Nibbana or nirvana is the extinguishing of passions. It is the soteriological goal in Buddhism.

⁸ Samyutta Nikaya 12:65

⁹ Majjhima Nikaya 36

¹⁰ Sutra of Golden Light

¹¹ Nidana Katha

¹² Samsara in Buddhism is the beginningless cycle of repeated birth, mundane existence and dying again.

‘nothing’, not because it leads to annihilation of everything, but it doesn’t correspond to anything that we know¹³. Like monotheists claim that no words can properly describe ‘God’, Buddha would say the same for nibbana. “He who has gone to the final rest (Parinibbana) cannot be defined by any measure.”¹⁴

ROLE OF GODS IN BUDHA’S LIFE

Gods have always been a part of the Buddhist cosmology, and more so in the later Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. However, their roles and importance are relegated to the Buddha. In the Pali canon, the question of Gods is irrelevant and immaterial, not at all significant for a Bodhisattva striving for his enlightenment. In early Buddhism, Gods often appear allegorically to symbolize one’s own inner self, so does the evil shadow-self called Mara.

It has been made absolutely clear that Gods or divine intervention is not helpful in attaining nibbana. One cannot seek the divine aid to attain enlightenment, because gods are a false prop. It would destroy the very purpose of enlightenment, i.e. to awaken the innate Buddhahood. The gods too needed the guidance of the Buddha to get enlightened for they were also trapped in the samsara.¹⁵ The path to self-liberation in Buddhist philosophy is realized by the Buddha, which he shared in his discourses. It is like a ‘self-help guidebook’ to work on your own for attainment of nibbana. Because the Buddha cannot save the world vicariously, every single creature would have to put Gautama’s program into practice to achieve its own enlightenment. He could not do it for them, nor any god could.

Gautama, when a Bodhisattva prior to his enlightenment, tried the methods of other people such as Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, but eventually attained nibbana on his own. He admitted that he had not achieved his ‘direct knowledge’ of samsara by contemplation alone. He had not penetrated these doctrines simply by normal rational thoughts, but by also using the discipline of yoga.¹⁶

¹³ The Noble Search Ariyapariyesana Sutta, MN 26

¹⁴ Aggivacchasaṅgaha Sutta, MN 72

¹⁵ Devaduta Sutta, MN

¹⁶ Majjhima Nikaya

Although we seldom find appearance of gods in the Buddha's course of enlightenment, they act as nudges, rather than aids to lead Buddha to his enlightenment. At first, the Buddha had decided not to preach his dhamma to the world because it was too difficult to explain and cannot be described in words easily. The layperson would not understand it. It is then Brahma decides to intervene and plead the Buddha to begin preaching the dhamma, so that others could also attain enlightenment.¹⁷ The appearance of Brahma can be read allegorically as a projection of sub-conscious human force, the latent inner-guide which solves moral dilemmas and shows the direction when the path seems convoluted.

Similarly, the occurrence of Mara, the evil-one, happens just before the Buddha's enlightenment. Mara literally means delusion, a shadow self which hinders the ultimate liberation. The Buddha deals with Mara on his own, and destroys it with his purity. Even Buddha is subject to the occurrence of Mara, even after he had attained his nibbana. It re-appears right before his Parinibbana for one last time when again Buddha defeats it. It is significant that Gods and demons exist in Buddhist cosmology but they can be read as an extension of the Self. They are a part of the Boddhisattva who is on the path to awaken the Buddha within himself and he has to deal with them on the way.

WHO IS THE BUDDHA THEN?

Gautama Buddha was born in the 'Axial age', that witnessed quite a few spiritual revolutions in many parts of the world such as the Indian subcontinent, China, Iran, and Greece. Pretty much like Socrates, Confucius, and Zoroaster, Gautama too was filling a philosophical void in the minds and hearts and people which emanated from the fatigue with the already existing philosophy and spirituality. The Buddha, Confucius, Socrates, and Plato did not base their teachings on divine authority. Nor did the Buddha, Confucius, or Socrates claim any authority for themselves, though followers of the Buddha and Confucius spoke and behaved as if they had.¹⁸ It is arguable that why some of other later appeared as religious figures while others did not. The distinction between philosophy and religion was not familiar to ancient thinkers,

¹⁷ Brahma-nimantanika Sutta (MN 49)

¹⁸ Black Antony, *The "Axial Period": What Was It and What Does It Signify?* Cambridge University Press, 2012

and more so to their lay followers. While Buddha was constantly negating the divinity of Gods and their influence on one's personal liberation, he subconsciously displayed qualities par excellence which equated him with the divinity. Like Jesus, Muhammad and Socrates, Buddha was teaching men and women how to transcend the world and its suffering, and how to reach beyond human pettiness. For the same, he negated the interference of any outside authority and emphasised on the importance of individual efforts.

According to his discourses on dhamma, the ultimate truth of life existed beyond any personality. One cannot claim to have attained nibbana if one reveres any external authority because it indicates the lack of self-reliance, and shelves human passions, greed, and emotions. Nibbana is not temporary, it frees you of greed, passion and lust in perpetuity.

Buddha's favourite disciple, Ananda could not attain nibbana, exactly because of the reason that his emotions were too attached with the mortal Buddha. He lamented the fact that he was not enlightened while Buddha's other disciples like Sariputta and Mogallana has attained their Parinibbana. He was inconsolable when the Buddha was about to attain his Parinibbana.¹⁹ When he inquired about how to proceed with the corpse of the 'realised one', the buddha cautioned against indulging in in the rites for veneration of his corpse. "Please Ananda, you must all strive and practice for your own goal"²⁰ Mahaparinibbana sutta is the longest sutta of the Digha Nikaya, narrating that one sorrowful incident in the history of Buddhism that turns out, in its true meaning, to be really the most blissful. Something which the Buddha repeated throughout his lifetime, he reiterated it once again before truly becoming the 'Tathagata'- "He who sees the dhamma, sees me; he who sees me, sees the dhamma".²¹

To the grieving Ananda, Buddha said, "Ananda, each of you should make himself his island, make himself and no one else his refuge; each one of you must make the dhamma his island, the dhamma and nothing else his refuge."²² The Buddha clearly defied ordinary categories which shrouded the minds of his followers but he too, was incapable of leading his followers to their absolute value. What he could do at most was to guide them and teach them the path of dhamma. Being a Buddha not only implies to have attained nibbana alone, but to also strive for the upliftment of others. The Buddha cannot be a God because the existence of God

¹⁹ Mahaparinibbanasutta, DN16

²⁰ Mahaparinibbanasutta, DN16

²¹ Vakkali Sutta, SN 22.87

²² Anguttara nikaya 8.10

is irrelevant as long as one follows the path of dhamma. Gods, are but a false prop, if one decides to worship them in the quest of enlightenment.

Then, in what words can we describe the Buddha? Perhaps the Buddha answered this as well. One day, a brahmin found Buddha sitting under a tree, composed and contemplative. The brahmin completely enchanted, wondered who this great man was and asked the Buddha if he were a god. The Buddha replied “No.” “Are you becoming an angel or a spirit?” asked the brahmin again. The Buddha replied “No.” “Are you a human being?” this was the brahmin’s last resort and the Buddha again answered “No.” The Buddha explained that in previous lives, he had lived as a god, an animal and as an ordinary man but everything had confined him to the old, unregenerate humanity. By attaining nibbana in this life, he had revealed a new potential in human nature. The brahmin at last asked how to categorize the Buddha. The Buddha said, “Remember me, as one who has woken up.”²³

²³ Anguttara nikaya 4.36