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978-1-009-57870-7 — The Problem of God in Buddhism
Signe Cohen
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1 Buddhism as "Atheism"?

What Is Buddhism?

The Buddhist tradition originated in northern India around the 5th century BCE.[1] According to Buddhist texts, Siddhattha Gotama,[2] who later came to be known as the Buddha ("The Awakened One"), was born as a prince in the town of Lumbini (in what is today southern Nepal). His father, Suddhodana, was king of Kapilavastu, a city in today's northern India. According to the legends about the life of the Buddha, his mother, Queen Māyā, had a dream about a white elephant touching her side. This dream was interpreted by the wise men at the court to mean that she was pregnant and would give birth to a son. But this son, it was predicted, was either going to be the greatest ruler the world had ever seen, or the greatest renouncer. To make sure that he became a great king, rather than a renouncer, his father kept him sheltered from the suffering of the world outside the palace. Although he was raised in luxury inside a royal palace, away from all suffering, prince Siddhattha longed to know more about life outside the palace walls.

Siddhattha married his cousin Yasodharā, and they had a son, Rahūla, but the young father was still not happy. Sneaking out of the palace accompanied by his servant, Siddhattha eventually saw four things that would change the course of his life forever ("The four signs"): an old man, a sick man, a dead body, and a wandering ascetic. For the first time in his life, the spoiled prince was confronted with the reality of old age, disease, and death, and he realized the

[1] The precise dates of the life of Siddhattha Gotama are debated. The Ceylonese Long Chronology based on chronicles from Sri Lanka dates the life of the Buddha from 624 to 544 BCE. The Corrected Long Chronology uses the dates 567–487 BCE, while the Indian Short Chronology based on Indian sources as well as Tibetan and Chinese translations uses the dates 448–368 BCE. The Modern Chronology has adjusted the dates of the Buddha to 563–483 BCE. The chronicles from Sri Lanka state that the Buddha died 218 years before the consecration of the emperor Aśoka, which they date to 326 BCE. The Corrected Long Chronology accepts that 218 years passed between the death of the Buddha and the consecration of Aśoka, but dates the consecration to 268 BCE. The Indian Short Chronology is based on Vinaya (monastic discipline) texts that place the Buddhist Council of Vaiśālī as well as Aśoka's consecration a mere 100 or 110 years after the Buddha's death. The Modern Chronology, accepted by many (but not all) modern scholars of Buddhism, is based on a slight adjustment of the Corrected Long Chronology and considers that sources that suggest that three years passed between Aśoka's ascent to power and his consecration ceremony. For further discussion, see Bechert 1992.

[2] Siddhattha Gotama is the Pāli version of his name, while Siddhārtha Gautama is the Sanskrit form. Sanskrit is the oldest attested language of India, and the sacred language of the Hindu scriptures. The oldest Buddhist texts are composed in the vernacular language Pāli, which was understood over large parts of North India. It is likely that the Buddha deliberately chose to give his sermons in a language that regular people could understand, rather than in Sanskrit, which would only have been understood by the learned elite. In this Element, Pāli forms will be used when discussing concepts from the Pāli canon of Theravāda Buddhism, and Sanskrit forms will be used when discussing Mahāyāna Buddhism.

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impermanence of all things. But when he saw an expression of great happiness on the face of the ascetic, he decided to discover for himself what possible source of joy there could be in a world so marred by suffering. At age twenty-nine, he left his royal life and his family behind and became a wandering ascetic to discover the meaning of life. He eventually reached enlightenment while meditating under the tree that came to be known as the *bodhi* ("enlightenment") tree, and from then on, he became known as "the Buddha". Other names given to him in the Buddhist tradition are Sakyamuni ("The Sage of the Sakya Clan") and Tathāgata ("The One Who Has Gone Thus").[3] The Buddha spent the rest of his life wandering around Northern India and sharing his ideas with the people he met. He distilled his main teachings into four simple theses, which he called "The Four Noble Truths":

(1) All this is dissatisfaction (*dukkha,* Sanskrit *duḥkha*).[4]
(2) The root of dissatisfaction is desire (*taṇhā*, Sanskrit *tṛṣṇā*).
(3) Dissatisfaction is extinguished when desire is extinguished.
(4) This is accomplished by following the eightfold path.

The eightfold path to the extinction of dissatisfaction includes right understanding (*sammā diṭṭhi*), right thought (*sammā saṅkappa*), right speech (*sammā vācā*), right action (*sammā kammanta*), right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*), right effort (*sammā vāyāma*), right mindfulness (*sammā sati*), and right concentration (*sammā samādhi*). Right understanding involves understanding the four noble truths, while right thought implies detachment from desires and loving compassion toward all living beings. Right speech encompasses abstaining from lying, harsh language, divisive speech, and idle chatter, while right action is defined as abstaining from killing, stealing, and illegitimate sexual acts. Right livelihood means making one's living in a way that does not harm others. Right effort, mindfulness, and concentration, the last three stages of the eightfold path, are progressive stages of mental focus. Right effort is defined as restraining the senses and preventing unwholesome mental states from arising, while creating wholesome mental states. Right mindfulness involves a further weakening of unwholesome mental states and an unwavering focus, while right concentration is a state of complete absorption accompanied by a perfect awareness of reality.

[3] *Tathāgata* means either "one who has gone (*gata*) thus (*tathā*)" or "one who has come (*āgata*) thus (*tathā*)." *Tathā* ("thus") is also a term used to characterize the ultimate reality, and *Tathāgata* can also be interpreted as "one who has arrived at reality as it truly is."

[4] *Dukkha* is often translated as "suffering," but this translation is somewhat misleading. *Dukkha* is not just acute suffering and misery, but generally everything that makes a person less than satisfied with life.

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How can a man who grew up in a palace claim that "all this is dissatisfaction"? Isn't this an overly pessimistic assessment of human life, which for most people contains both joy and suffering? The first noble truth should not be interpreted to mean that there is no joy in life; rather it means that all joy in *this* life is fleeting and ultimately nonsatisfactory because it is built on things that are not eternal. Human beings do not live forever; they will eventually get old and die. Youth does not last, life does not last, and any joy that is built on attachments to fleeting things will eventually be supplanted by grief. The reason why the loss of nonpermanent things leads to pain and dissatisfaction is, as the second noble truth suggests, that we are too attached to things that cannot last. The way to end dissatisfaction, then, is to free ourselves from attachments and desires. The eightfold path is meant to be a training program to achieve this.

An essential part of this eightfold path, right understanding, is grasping the impermanence of all things: everything that exists will eventually cease to exist. According to the Buddha's teachings as presented in the Pāli Canon, there is nothing eternal in this world, and therefore also no such thing as an eternal self or soul (*attā*). This lack of self is immensely difficult for humans to accept; we yearn for eternity and permanence and delude ourselves into thinking that we have an eternal soul, but this delusion is ultimately just another cause of dissatisfaction. Freedom from dissatisfaction can only be reached once humans realize that all things are fleeting and without any eternal substance. Right understanding also involves understanding the principles of *kamma* (Sanskrit *karma*) and reincarnation. The law of *kamma* (literally "action") is a moral causality inherent in the world, which means that when someone acts in a kind and helpful manner, good things will happen to them, and when someone acts in a selfish or cruel manner, bad things will come to them as a result. This is not a system of reward or punishment doled out by a divine being, but rather a universal law believed to be operating throughout the cosmos. A person's *kamma*, good or bad, will not only determine what happens to them later in this life, but also influence what sort of rebirth they will have in their next life. Many Buddhist texts postulate that there are six (sometimes five) different realms into which living beings are born: Gods (*devas*), demi-gods (*asuras*),[5] humans, animals, hungry ghosts (*peta*, Sanskrit *preta*), and hell-beings. It should be noted that while several Buddhist texts describe hellish realms, hells are merely impermanent states of terrible suffering in Buddhism, brought about by bad *kamma,* rather than any form of eternal damnation. Neither the heavens of the

[5] In the earliest Brahmanical texts of India, the Vedas, the *asuras* and the *devas* are two different types of gods. In later Hinduism, the *asuras* become demons. In Buddhist texts, *asuras* can also be viewed negatively, but not to the same extent as in classical Hinduism. The realm of the *asuras* is not always included in Buddhist lists of possible forms of rebirth.

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gods nor the hells of the hell-beings are permanent in Buddhism. While gods certainly live a more luxurious existence than humans, it is nevertheless considered especially fortunate to be born a human being. Gods have it too easy and may not be sufficiently motivated to seek liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth quite yet, while animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings suffer too much to be able to focus on the path to enlightenment. Human life, however, contains just the optimal amount of suffering to motivate us to seek liberation.

The four noble truths are not articles of faith in Buddhism, but, rather, from the Buddhist perspective, a prescription to cure the suffering of the world. The four noble truth schema is based on the ancient Indian method for medical diagnosis: (1) What is the patient's symptoms? (2) What is the cause of the symptoms? (3) What can cure the symptom? (4) What is the doctor's prescription? In this case, the disease is the dissatisfaction inherent in human existence, and the prescription is the eightfold path that leads to *nibbāna* (Sanskrit *nirvāṇa*), a state where all dissatisfaction has ceased. How did this dissatisfaction arise in the first place? This is not an issue that is of great concern to the Buddhist texts. The Buddha addresses the irrelevance of this question with a touch of humor:

> Imagine that a man was wounded with an arrow smeared with poison. His friends and companions and relatives would bring him a doctor, but the man would say "I won't have this arrow taken out until I know whether the man who shot me was a warrior, a priest, a merchant, or a servant." He would say, "I won't have this arrow taken until I know the first and last name of the man who shot me, whether he was tall, medium, or short, whether his skin was dark, reddish brown, or golden, until I know the village, town, or city he was from, and whether the bow he shot me with was a long bow or a short one, whether the bowstring was made of plant fiber, bamboo threads, sinew, hemp, or bark, whether the bow shaft was from wild or cultivated wood, whether the feathers of the shaft came from a vulture, a stork, a hawk, a peacock, or different bird, whether it was bound with the sinew of an ox, a water buffalo, a langur, or a monkey." He would say, "I won't have this arrow taken out until I know whether it was a regular arrow, a curved arrow, a barbed arrow, a toothed arrow, or an oleander arrow." That man would die, and he still wouldn't know those things.[6]

When a person is struck by an arrow, the Buddha suggests, the important thing is to remove the arrow and alleviate his suffering, rather than worry about where exactly the arrow came from. By implication, then, the important question in Buddhism is not where suffering comes from in the first place, but what we can do to stop it.

[6] From the *Cūḷamāluṅkyovāda Sutta*, *Majjhima Nikāya* 63. Text from Trenckner 1979 (1888), I, 429–430.

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Buddhism shares many main ideas with Hinduism, such as the concepts of *kamma* (*karma*) and reincarnation and the goal of escaping the endless cycle of death and rebirth. But while the post-Vedic Brahmanical tradition insists that there exists an eternal soul or self (*ātman*) in all living beings, an indestructible essence that will survive from one reincarnation to another and ultimately reach eternal union with the divine, Buddhism regards the idea of an eternal self as wishful thinking. There is *nothing* eternal, insists Buddhism – not the self, and not even gods. While Buddhist texts often feature Hindu gods, these deities are just minor characters who are neither eternal nor all-knowing.

What Is a Human Being in Buddhism?

But if there is no eternal self in Buddhism, what is a human being? Buddhism teaches that all things, including humans, are made up of psycho-physical atoms (*dhammas*, Sanskrit *dharmas*); physical objects are made up of physical atoms, while mental aspects of our existence are constructed of mental atoms. These atoms cluster together into temporary constructions. A human being is in its totality made up of five such clusters or aggregates (Pāli *khandhas,* Sanskrit: *skandhas*) of *dhammas*: physical form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), perceptions (*saññā,* Sanskrit *saṃjñā*), mental formations (*saṅkhāra,* Sanskrit *saṃskāra)* and consciousness (*viññāna*, Sanskrit *vijñāna*). The aggregate of physical form includes the five elements (earth, water, fire, air, and ether) as well as the six sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind) and their objects (visible form, sound, smell, taste, things that can be touched, and things that can be thought). Sensations are classified as pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings that arise through contact with sense-objects. There are six kinds of perceptions, corresponding to the six sense organs of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. We should note that mind is regarded as one of the sense organs, capable of producing mental perceptions in the same way that the eye produces perceptions of visible things. Mental formations are psychological imprints are left behind by any voluntary actions humans do, which again create dispositions to act in certain ways in the future. In other words, these mental formations are habits or tendencies formed by our past actions. Consciousness is the response to the perception of an external object through one of the sense organs. Thus, when the eyes see a visible object, a visual consciousness is formed, and when the mind perceives a mental object, a mental consciousness is created, and so forth. Consciousness must not be confused with an eternal self, however; consciousness is merely a temporary formation which may last through several reincarnations but will eventually be dissolved.

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The five aggregates are all marked by impermanence. The physical form that constitutes a body will be dissolved into its constituent parts when a person dies, and while the other *dhammas* may continue to hold together as aggregates through several reincarnations and attach themselves to a series of other physical forms, they too will eventually be dissolved into *dhammas* after a person reaches enlightenment.

This enlightenment is known as *nibbāna* or *nirvāṇa* in Buddhism. The term literally means "blowing out," or "extinction," as in the extinction of a flame. *Nibbāna* is extinction of all dissatisfaction and suffering and freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth. But if there is no self in Buddhism, who or what is it that reaches this state? The answer is: nobody. The person who reaches this insight was simply a construct, a conglomerate of *dhammas* that can finally dissolve. And yet this final dissolution is not perceived as nothingness in Buddhism, but rather as the ultimate bliss, a joy greater than any that is filtered through the experiences of the false ego.

The Buddha

What role does the Buddha play in helping humans reach the goal of *nibbāna*? In Theravāda Buddhism, the tradition based on the text collection called the Pāli Canon or the *Tipiṭaka*, the Buddha is primarily a teacher. Born human, he never attains any sort of divine status, although he does perform supernatural feats and miracles. Most importantly, he does attain enlightenment, and that is the most extraordinary thing of all. But although Siddhattha Gotama is often referred to as the "founder" of Buddhism, he is not regarded as unique in the Buddhist tradition. He is a Buddha by means of his extraordinary insight, but anyone who reaches the same insight on their own will also become a buddha. In the Buddhist universe, there is not just one Buddha, but countless buddhas, all defined by their ability to find release from the cycle of death and rebirth. The Pāli canon does not suggest that the Buddha should be worshipped; he is a man, not a god, and he is dead, not still living. But his teachings, his *dhamma*, remains in the world as a source of inspiration for those who similarly wish to follow the eightfold path to enlightenment and freedom from dissatisfaction.

Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism

After the first few centuries of Buddhist history, the Buddhist community split into several branches. Today, the two main forms of Buddhism are Theravāda ("The Doctrine of the Elders") and Mahāyāna ("The Great Vehicle"). Theravāda Buddhism is primarily found in South and Southeast Asia (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos), while Mahāyāna Buddhism is found in Tibet,

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China, Mongolia, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. An offshoot of Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna ("The Thunderbolt Vehicle") is sometimes regarded as a separate branch of Buddhism. This branch, often associated with Tibetan culture, is found in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Mongolia.

Theravāda Buddhism still uses the language of the oldest Buddhist scriptures, Pāli, a simple vernacular language assumed to have been used by the Buddha to communicate to regular people in the 5th century BCE, as a sacred language. Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures, on the other hand, are composed in India's ancient culture language Sanskrit, the sacred language of Hinduism, as well as in regional languages like Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese. Another essential distinction between the two branches of Buddhism lies in how they view the Buddha and other enlightened beings. In Theravāda Buddhism, the ideal figure is an *arahat*, a human monk who has devoted himself to the eightfold path and works diligently through meditation to reach *nibbāna*. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, on the other hand, the ideal figure is a *bodhisattva* (Sanskrit: "one whose very being (*sattva*) is enlightenment (*bodhi*)"). A bodhisattva is a being (often human, but not always) who has reached enlightenment, but chooses to step back on the very brink of *nirvāṇa* and return to the cycle of death and rebirth to assist suffering beings in reaching enlightenment as well. A bodhisattva is not reborn because of *karma* like humans, animals, or even gods are, but rather voluntarily and out of their great compassion. A bodhisattva will take on any form – human, animal, or other – and work tirelessly for the benefit of all living beings. As we will discuss in a later section, although they are not regarded as gods, bodhisattvas can become something akin to savior figures in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Buddhist Canons

As Lewis Lancaster has observed, the term "Buddhist canon" is something of a misnomer; instead of a single authoritative collection of sacred texts, Buddhism has a veritable library of such collections: the Pāli canon of Theravāda Buddhism, the Sanskrit *Mahāyāna Sūtras*, the Chinese Buddhist canon, the Tibetan Kanjur (*bka'-'gyur*) and Tenjur (*bstan-'gyur*), the Korean *Tripiṭaka*, the Mongolian Buddhist canon, the Manchu Buddhist canon, the Tangut Buddhist canon, and so on, preserved in tens of thousands of manuscripts in different scripts and languages.[7]

The Pāli Canon is the primary scripture collection of Theravāda Buddhism, the oldest surviving Buddhist school. It is composed in Pāli, a Middle Indic language derived from Sanskrit and is also known as the *Tipiṭaka* ("Three

[7] Lancaster 1979, 215.

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