

# Is the Buddha an Atheist?

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 26:35

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*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*

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*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

The question this evening is: did the Buddha believe in God? Did Buddha believe in a God? Or was he an atheist, a non-theist, a non-creator theist, or an agnostic? From this another question arises: is Buddhism, the teaching of the Buddha, a religion or is it not?

First of all, to understand the Buddhist position, we have to put aside the Abrahamic God of the Jews, Christians and Muslims. This Abrahamic God created the world and also created the moral order, so he can punish and reward depending on our behaviour. This Abrahamic God is the one who created the world and established the rules and therefore can punish or reward.

In the West we have this atheism which is quite aggressive against this omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent God. These atheists base their understanding on scientific materialism.

We can safely say that the Buddha never talked about this sort of God. In fact, I don't think it arises in the Indian tradition at all. The Buddha never talked about this type of God, and no other Indian traditions do either.

In the Brahminical system there was Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer. The Law of Karma was included in this vision. So it wasn't that God either punished or rewarded you - there was the Lord of Karma.

There are many other types of theisms: pantheism, panentheism, polytheism. Even though in the scriptures they talk about the *devas*, the gods, these can be seen more like angels. They're more like angels. None of these has power over the world, the power of creation.

The Buddha definitely was not an agnostic. He doesn't say anywhere that he cannot decide whether there's a god or not because he hasn't got enough information. In fact, the idea of God simply doesn't arise in his teachings. In this sense he can be called a non-theist. There simply isn't the mention of a God in that sense. We also have a similar situation with Taoism. The Tao is seen as maybe the ground of being, but there's no personal God or anything like that.

There were other questions that the Buddha didn't answer. He would not go beyond what can be personally experienced. For instance: Is the cosmos eternal or not eternal? Is it finite or infinite? He doesn't answer that. He says it's not determined.

Another question was: Is the body the same as the everlasting soul or is the body one thing and the everlasting soul something else? The objection here would be the definition of a soul, and he didn't answer that.

Then there are the four questions to do with the Buddha himself. Does the Tathāgata, the Buddha, exist after death or does he not exist? Does he both exist and not exist? Or does he neither exist nor not exist? This was known as the quadrilemma - we have a dilemma; this is the quadrilemma - and he didn't answer.

In those days, on full moon nights, the teachers would come to these shrines, which were like beautiful parks, and they would argue their different doctrines against each other. The Buddha wouldn't go to them. He said it was a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. It is accompanied by suffering, distress, despair and fever, and it does not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, to calm, direct knowledge, full awakening, *Nibbāna*.

Does this mean that there is no teaching about transcendence in the Buddhadhamma? Many times he talks about *Nibbāna* as a transcendental experience, something beyond the body and mind.

Now we are going to read this discourse which is where the Buddha really makes fun of the idea of a creator god but goes on to tell us that there is a transcendent state. This discourse is known as the Kevaddha discourse. He's a monk.

This is his question: Where do the four primary elements cease completely - namely the element of the earth, water, fire and air? In other words, where is the material world annihilated?

He approaches the various realms of the gods. Firstly the Four Kings, but they don't know. They send him to the gods of the Thirty-Three, and they in turn to the gods of Yāma, and so on to the Suyāma gods, the Joyful gods, the gods of Santussita, the gods who delight in creation, all the way up to the gods of Brahma's host. Even they say they don't know, but Great Brahma will.

It was not long before the Great Brahma became manifest, and that monk drew near to him and said, "Where, friend, do the four great elements - earth, water, fire, and wind - cease without remainder?"

When he had thus spoken, the Great Brahma said to him, "Monk, I am the Great Brahma, the Supreme, the Mighty, the All-seeing, the Ruler, the Lord of all, the Controller, the Creator, the Chief of all, appointing each to his place, the Ancient of Days, the Father of all that is and is to be."

Then that monk said to Brahma, "I did not ask you, friend, as to whether you were the Great Brahma the Supreme and Mighty, the All-seeing, the Ruler, the Lord. I wanted to know where do the four great elements - earth, water, fire and wind - cease without remainder?"

And the Great Brahma said to him the same thing again. And then again, the third time, Kevaddha said, "I didn't ask you, friend, as to whether you were the Great Brahma the Supreme, the Mighty and so on. I wanted to know where do the great elements - earth, water, fire and wind - cease without remainder?"

Now the Great Brahma took that monk by the arm and led him aside and said, "These gods, these *devas* of the retinue of Brahma, believe there is nothing I cannot see, nothing I have not understood, nothing I have not realized. Therefore I gave no answer in their presence. I do not know, monk, where these four elements - earth, water, fire and wind - cease without remainder. Therefore, monk, you have done wrong, have acted unwisely in that ignoring the Exalted One, the Buddha, you have undertaken this long search among others for an answer to this question. Go now, return to the Exalted One and ask him the question and accept the answer he gives you."

So Kevaddha finds the Buddha and asks him the same question, and the Buddha corrects him, saying the question should be asked like this: "Where do earth, water, fire and air find no footing? Where are long and short, small and great, fair and foul? Where are the body and mind brought to an end?"

The Buddha's answer now refers to the body, the mind and consciousness: "There is a consciousness that is non-manifestive, limitless and all luminous. Here water, earth, fire and wind find no footing. Here long and short, small and large, pleasant and unpleasant - here matter and mind are all brought to an end. With the cessation of consciousness, this is all brought to an end."

Here we have a very clear statement. The first consciousness is the transcendent, having no boundary and no objects. It is unconditioned, not depending on anything outside itself.

The second consciousness cannot be the same because that comes to an end. This is the consciousness of the five *khandhas*, the five aggregates, the body and mind. This is the consciousness that operates within the mind, constantly arising and passing away, dependent on the sense-bases. Hence the Buddha talks of eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness and so on.

Returning to our other question: can you have a religion without a god? Is the Buddhadhamma a religion? The answer depends upon whether you believe in a god or not, and whether that means that it's a religion.

If you define religion as teaching that there is a transcendent, non-changing reality beyond the material and mental worlds, then it is a religion.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused confusion, and that your devotion to the practice and the Eightfold Path will mean that you will be liberated from suffering sooner rather than later.

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