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**Buddhism: The Divine, the Sacred, the Inner Path**

# **Buddhism: The Divine, the Sacred, the Inner Path**

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## **Abstract**

This brief was prompted by a round table discussion on the important themes of God, love, justice and interreligious dialogue. These themes are addressed from the perspective of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, but with an effort to generalize in an intercultural and interreligious key in order to try to define some aspects that characterize Buddhism as a religion. While the idea of God may differ in different Buddhist traditions, in Buddhism, as in other religions, we find the link between the sacred and the divine. The concept of love, closer to the Christian view, must be accompanied by that of compassion, while the theme of justice requires the thematization of self-reform, education and dialogue.

It is not possible here to provide an exhaustive analysis of the perspectives expressed by different Buddhist traditions and schools on the various important themes being discussed: God, love, justice, and interreligious dialogue. Greater reference will be made to the Mahayana tradition, but with an effort at generalization, attempting to define some aspects that characterize Buddhism as a religion and to offer ideas for possible further exploration.

## **I. GOD AND THE DIVINE IN BUDDHISM**

1. In a certain sense, the idea advanced by Raimon Panikkar—namely, that when faced with the question of God, the Buddha chooses silence—can be applied (in different ways) to the various Buddhist traditions and schools. He observes:

The Buddha wants to teach us to know silence, to love it, and to grasp its message. He speaks of noble silence and says that the monk is a lover of silence. He thus wants to demonstrate that the reality of language, the world of signs and expressions, can be transcended. Regarding God, total silence must be maintained. Neither his affirmation nor his denial can lead us to cross the threshold where divinity is found (or not). His message invites us to go beyond the world of signs, words, and language, to the realm of the logos. You will deify the logos, he would have said, if you continue to seek to penetrate everything with the logos and to push yourself everywhere with the power of your discourse.

A famous apocryphal chronicle concerning Shakyamuni reveals Buddhism's critical attitude toward speculative questions and claims of rational knowledge and understanding of transcendent and ultimate phenomena. One day, Shakyamuni, walking in the Deer Park near Benares (now Varanasi), comes across two Brahmins who, observing a deer dying from an arrow in its side, are discussing the moment when life leaves a body and existence after death. Seeing Shakyamuni, whom they know to be a wise man, they ask his opinion. But Shakyamuni does not respond; he quickly approaches the deer and pulls the arrow from its flank.

In fact, the spirit of Buddhism has, since its origins, been characterized by a concrete and practical focus on the problems of suffering, happiness, and salvation, rather than by a speculative, philosophical focus. This does not mean that Buddhism expresses a negative judgment on the doctrines, rituals, and reflections on God of other religions. It simply does not express any opinion. This demonstrates the characterization of a different religion and religiosity.

2. But, throughout its twenty-six centuries of history, Buddhism has not only developed a vast and varied doctrinal heritage spanning the various provinces and regions of the East—from India to Japan, passing through China, Korea, and Southeast Asia—but has also absorbed insights from ancient mythology, cosmology, and philosophy, especially Indian. Thus, in its texts (sutras, treatises, commentaries, letters) we find an almost perpetual reference to the gods and the divine. This also persists in the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin (to whose teachings my interests in and studies of Buddhism are primarily linked)—a Japanese monk and reformer of the Lotus School (Hokke-shu; a school of Chinese origin [Chih-i or T'ien-t'ai, Chan-jan or Miao-lo], linked to the Mahayana Buddhist tradition).

So, how does the theme of the divine and the gods enter Buddhism?

I would begin with the following general consideration by scholar Paul Williams regarding the deification of the Buddha:

Deification, that is, the attribution of divine qualities to a given being, was [...] quite common in ancient India, and did not at all have the dramatic implications attributed to it in monotheistic culture: namely, that the being thus deified became part of a category entirely different from that of common men. [...] The king, the Brahmins, the ascetic saints, even cows were all called gods, or goddesses [...]. Furthermore, trees could be gods, and a god dwelt in the privacy of every home in the form of Agni, the Fire. It was quite natural, therefore, to speak of the Buddha in the terms usually used for gods, and this implied little more than an attitude of profound respect and humility on the part of his followers. [...] Nonetheless, the Buddha had discovered truths unknown to the Brahmin priests and to the gods themselves. In a cosmos where, according to the Buddhist conception, humans can become gods through acquired merit, and gods can fall into the deepest hells through the exhaustion of those same merits, the Buddha had transcended the very cycle of rebirth, and therefore the condition of both man and god.

This passage deserves a detailed commentary (especially the last part). I will simply note that William contrasts this perspective with the interpretation according to which "over the centuries following the death of the Master [Shakyamuni, Siddhartha Gautama], the growing band of Shakyamuni's followers gradually lost sight of the historical individual and deified the Buddha, to the point of placing him alongside the teeming myriads of other Indian gods and goddesses." In my opinion, the two interpretative perspectives can coexist: on the one hand, we find, in fact, Buddhist schools that consider the Buddha an exceptional and 'divine' being well beyond deification in the broad sense and the sign of respect paid to a saint (and this is not the case with the Buddhism of the Daishonin, which, teaching that every human being can attain Buddhahood, declares: "When a person is deluded, he is called an ordinary being; when he is enlightened, he is called a Buddha"); on the other, in Buddhist theology we find deities (*devas*) who are intrinsically such, not having become 'divine' through merit and, therefore, susceptible to decay. We also find this in Nichiren Buddhism, which recognizes both deities transmitted by Indian mythology, such as Brahma and Shakra, and deities from Japanese mythology, such as the Sun Goddess. Originally, Brahma was thought of as the personification of the fundamental universal principle (*Brahman*); In Vedic mythology, Shakra or Indra is the god of thunder; in esoteric Buddhism, he is one of the twelve protective gods of the world; the Sun Goddess (Tensho Daijin or Amaterasu Omikami) is conceived as the protector of the imperial dynasty. From the perspective of the Lotus School, these principal deities and all the deities of the Buddhist pantheon are among the so-called *celestial gods and benevolent deities*, or shoten-zenjin, functions that protect both the correct Buddhist teaching and its devotees and the people and their lands, bringing good fortune. But there are also negative "deities" – above all, Mara, the deity of illusion, destruction, and the fundamental evil inherent in life. This deity is present in almost all Buddhist scriptures.

While the Daishonin does not make it an object of veneration, nor does he place the divinity above human beings and the Mystic Law (*Myoho*), other Buddhist schools frame things differently. The Buddha himself is deified: consider, for example, the cult of the Buddha Amithaba (lit. "light" [*abha*]; "endless" [*amita*]; Amita in Korean, Amida in Japanese), which is perhaps the most famous reference. By invoking his name and basing one's daily practice on this devout invocation, one is guaranteed rebirth in a pure land, free from the suffering and evils of this world. (Amidism is still widespread in Japan, but is also significantly present in China, South Korea, Vietnam, and Taiwan.)

We should add that in traditional Buddhism, veneration of the Buddha's relics and the stupas that enshrine them is widespread. It is a cult intertwined with the veneration of icons and images related to the life of the Buddha, used in rituals and considered sacred.

In Buddhism, therefore, we also find, to a certain extent, the connection between the divine and the sacred.

## II. THE EAST AND THE SACRED

1. Undoubtedly, a study of the sacred in Buddhism, and more broadly of the sacred and the East, requires an immense effort of clarification and definition.

In the various forms of Buddhism, sacred objects, rites, writings, and formulas (*mudras*, *daranis*, *mantras*) can be considered sacred, but, predominantly, the adjective and qualification "sacred" is attributed to a place and to life. The connection between the two terms is close when we discuss Mahāyāna Buddhism—particularly some of its lineages that conceive of the living as "Buddha".

In various Buddhist cultures, a sense of sacredness is also attributed to amulets, understood as objects imbued with mystical power. This is primarily a Theravada custom, and is found in various parts of Southeast Asia: Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. These amulets represent small images of Buddha or Buddhist saints, but they can also represent other types of sacred objects or reliquary monuments. Generally, these sacred objects are connected to the Buddha's biography: they are equivalent to what our Christian culture recognizes as "relics", but with a sacred significance and/or function and/or connection to specific rituals.

In a syncretic manner, various Buddhist schools—for example, in Japan, the Tendai and Ritsu (Japanese: *Risshū*) schools—have promoted, in different ways, a true cult of the sacredness of images. And in any case, one certainly cannot deny the widespread use of rituals consecrating places, objects, and people in the Buddhist world. In this regard, a whole discourse that harks back to ancient Indian traditions and customs deserves further exploration. A significant clue lies in the Sanskrit term *ābhiṣeka* itself, which is commonly translated as "consecration" and extends its meaning to "belonging"/"adhesion", and this is in connection with a well-known ritual involving the blessing of sacred water.

2. The differences within Buddhism are innumerable, but one perspective unites the various schools: the tendency (despite instances of veneration and invocation of salvific figures) to understand religious practice, in one way or another, as an inner path, as an "instrument" for promoting liberation through personal emancipation, through a process of spiritual transformation. In this sense, Max Weber's definition of Buddhism remains fully valid: *religious practice as intra-worldly asceticism*.

It is precisely here that the most appropriate critical discussion (1) of the question of the sacred in Buddhism and (2) of the question of religious practice in relation to the themes of love, justice, and the mutual commitment of faiths comes into play. Today, we struggle to seek the profound. Authentic religious experience no longer seems to be sustainable. We struggle to conceive of the possibility of a life founded on *religious* spiritual search: only the formula of individualized or "do-it-yourself" spiritual itineraries (called by Berzanos "spirituality of lifestyles") seems adequate and practicable today.

The sacred is a question of great importance today. It is also linked to a reason for urgency, both reflective and practical (ethical-civic) – to the extent that both the loss of the sense of the sacred and the improper investiture of new forms of sacredness (both rapidly spreading phenomena) alter and distort the quality and meaning of human existence.

We, who are heirs and co-architects of the *Entzauberung der Welt*, of its rationalization, certainly have greater difficulty focusing on the specific features of true religiosity, religious search, and religious

experience, compared to the (albeit entirely legitimate) paths of spiritual search and participation. The paradox lies not only in the fact that the new expressions of the current wave of neo-paganism seem to respond more appropriately and effectively to the questions of meaning (and related aptitudes for receiving/welcoming responses) than the capacity of religions and religious figures.

The problem is rooted here: both the practice and experience of love and compassion, as well as the commitment to justice and goodness, are fundamental aspects of human conduct pursuing full moral and spiritual flourishing. They are central to Buddhist practice, especially in the various forms of Mahayana Buddhism—where the model of the religious practitioner is predominantly that of the bodhisattva, or one who acts and lives based on a spirit of complete altruistic dedication (i.e., fighting one's own selfishness, seeking compassion, recognizing the dignity and sacredness of life, etc.). However, this practice requires great dedication, a vocation for the search for depth, and even a willingness to renounce secondary and illusory fulfillments. (Ignorance still persists in limiting Buddhism to the definition of "philosophy." But not only is there a difference between teachings based on argumentative force, such as philosophical teachings, and teachings based on the force of faith, such as religious teachings, and indeed Buddhist teachings, but in the various forms of Buddhism we find objects of worship and altars, religious rituals, and daily meditation and prayer practices.)

But let's delve deeper into these themes, starting with the difference between love and compassion—the former closer to the Christian lesson, the latter more appropriate for Buddhism.

### III. LOVE AND COMPASSION

The Christian concept of love and the Buddhist concept of compassion are certainly comparable. We can observe two things. First of all, compassion should not be understood in its etymological sense, that is, from the Late Latin *compassio -onis*, derived from *compāti*, "to sympathize," a calque of the Greek συμπάθεια. The Buddhist concept of compassion is linked to the Pali word *karunā* and the Japanese *jīhi*. In Buddhism, it is understood as the inner attitude and practice of those who perform altruistic actions based on the desire to "remove suffering and give joy." The bodhisattva embodies its highest expression, as his or her search for the path and personal emancipation consists in the practice of revering and caring for others.

Secondly, Christianity and Buddhism reveal an intrinsic difference in their respective ideas of love and compassion. To illustrate this difference, we can refer to the book-dialogue between Daisaku Ikeda—a Buddhist master and philosopher of the Daishonin school, whose observations cited here can, however, be extended to Mahayana Buddhism in general—and Felix Unger—an Austrian academic and cardiologist of Christian background—titled *The Humanist Principle: On Compassion and Tolerance* (2016). The title of the dialogue itself aptly captures the two key aspects of the exchange between Ikeda and Unger: on the one hand, the centrality of humanism, given the urgent need to open up to a new era of the human person and human bonds; on the other, the need to rediscover and engage in dialogue with the values and virtues of tolerance and compassion from a Christian and Buddhist perspective. In the second chapter of this book-dialogue between Ikeda and Unger we compare the Buddhist concept of 'compassion' with the Christian concept of 'love', starting with an initial reflection on compassion and its distinction from the concept of tolerance. While both schools, despite their differences in meaning, place great emphasis on compassion—making it the foundation of their respective ethics—for Unger, the difference between tolerance and compassion is clear. These are different virtues: the latter, from a

Christian perspective, has to do with interrelationality, "it means putting oneself in the place of others, being commiserable, offering support"; and it implies the presence of another virtue, "namely, charity." Tolerance is a deeper expression, part of the virtue of love derived from God. It is linked to compassion, and "can inspire the desire to forgive." In Christianity, love is the "supreme charismatic virtue." Unger recalls other virtues of the same nature—faith and hope—but it is above all wisdom that he draws upon to explain that Christian love is not abstract and divorced from the concrete circumstances, sufferings, and vicissitudes of daily life. For his part, Ikeda speaks of the closeness of the Buddhist perspective—which is "a religion of wisdom and compassion"—but immediately offers a very different characterization of Buddhist compassion: it "is a manifestation of cosmic compassion in relationships between individuals." Contrary to the idea that survival instinct sustains life, Buddhism teaches that compassion is more profound.

Compassion is the fundamental and most original force of life, which binds all things, which sustains and harmonizes them, which allows them to exist and coexist.

The relationship between wisdom, compassion, and tolerance requires a more defined—if only brief—examination of some Buddhist tenets. While Christianity is founded on faith in God as the "omnipotent creator", Buddhism bases this discourse on the fundamental essence of life.

## **IV. COMPASSION AND JUSTICE**

### **1. Justice and Human Revolution**

The theme of justice is a central aspect of the Buddhist practice of human emancipation, that is, personal emancipation through religion.

At the core of the human problem is ignorance. From ignorance arises offense. And if, strictly speaking, "[...] offense means disbelief and contempt for the Mystic Law," more broadly, it equates to the negative action that occurs whenever we act undignifiedly, disrespectfully, lacking courage and a sense of justice. Living with courage is essential because ignorance is an effective counterforce, capable of inhibiting and blocking any emancipatory impulse, and preventing us from gaining clarity about ourselves, about the best course of action to take within a given context, and about what is truly good. Ignorance, first and foremost, prevents us from standing up to ourselves, particularly against the action of the three poisons of greed, anger, and stupidity within our hearts.

Ours, as we can see, is an age of conflict and violence. "As if driven by an unstoppable force, entire nations and individuals are driven from one conflict to another. The strength to remain steadfast amidst this furious current of the times lies in an unshakeable faith in Buddha's nature, our own and that of others, combined with actions to concretely put this belief into practice and demonstrate respect for the lives of all people. This is because the irresistible impulse that leads to conflict arises from ignorance. In Buddhism, ignorance means a lack of awareness or faith in the fact that people possess Buddha's nature. It is also the dark impulse that leads to disrespecting human life and violating its innate dignity."

## **2. Justice and Happiness**

Fighting for justice is fighting for the happiness of others. And the path of courage is none other than the path of compassion. "In fact, if we act with courage, we will discover that our compassion for others deepens. Courage is the supreme virtue for which we can fight."

## **3. Justice and Education**

The issue of justice is so important in Buddhism that many teachers and philosophers have made it a key term in the educational process.

The fight for justice, the spirit of dedication, belief, and pacifism are expressions of a humanism that nourishes the vital-spiritual force, and is nourished by the vital-spiritual force. There truly is a spiritual path of communication and exchange, including educational exchange, between human beings—and it begins with the education of children within the family context.

This is the path on which parents must persevere and commit themselves. In this regard, Buddhist philosopher Ikeda observes:

From the age of three, the child begins to search for his father. The desire to be with the father is natural. Freud explained the nature of conflicts between father and child. A child's rejection of his father and mother should make us rejoice because it is evidence of the marvelous formation of his ego: he withdraws from the mother's security and takes his first steps as an autonomous individual. (...) The assertion of the ego, the search for one's own autonomy, is not a simple revolt against the parents; it is supported by feelings of respect and trust toward the father. There is a compelling need in the child to become strong and courageous like his father. We must take advantage of this developing strength in the child to raise him with a strong sense of justice and joy in life.

## **V. COMPASSION, JUSTICE, AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE**

As we have essentially said, compassion, justice, and courage become profoundly interrelated terms in Buddhism. And it is clear that, as they are still interrelated, they come into play when we speak of interfaith and act in agreement with and in favor of the culture of interfaith and the mutual recognition of religions.

First of all, regarding the value attributed to interreligious dialogue, Buddhism takes a broadly open position. The best-known and most eloquent example comes from the extraordinary decades-long commitment carried out by the Dalai Lama.

Ikeda, whom I cite as representing the essence of the Mahayana tradition, observes (and it is significant that he does so in the Preface to the Italian edition of the Collected Writings of Nichiren Daishonin):

In the context of modern interreligious dialogue, it is necessary (...) to accept and value the multiple characteristics of each individual faith and, at the same time, grasp the profound truth and wisdom present in its doctrines. // There is no doubt that, by doing so, each religion will be able to exert a positive influence on the others and increasingly become a religion dedicated to the happiness of humankind. Furthermore, by continuing to follow this path of dialogue and mutual improvement, each faith will be able to demonstrate its intrinsic value, contributing to the creation of a partnership of "religions for the human being" capable of transforming himself into the greatest force for the achievement of peace in the world.

Second, a sense of justice and compassion are essential to dialogue. For dialogue to not be rhetorical and empty, dogmatic and false, the moral maturity of those engaging in dialogue and the courage to engage in genuine and open dialogue are essential—with all the risks this entails. The very foundations of humanism are at stake.

Dialogue is a difficult and subtle art, equivalent to one person encountering another—to use an image from the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (*Dialogisches Leben*, 1947)—"on a narrow ridge": the slightest error can prove disastrous. "Intense and high-risk," dialogue is capable of operating with the same efficiency and incisiveness as the trim adjusters on airplanes and ships: conducted patiently, in the right direction. By challenging "(...) the theories and attachments that imprison and condition people"—that is, dogmatism and fanaticism—dialogue can bring about a reorientation of phenomena and time.

In this regard, fanaticism and dogmatism constitute the greatest obstacle to dialogue. They tend to be associated with monotheistic religions, but, on the one hand, no area of human life is a priori exempt from them; on the other, even non-monotheistic religions, such as Buddhism, can fall prey to them. The same can be said for humanism itself, when it claims to translate into a systematic regulation of human judgments and actions. Undoubtedly, the opposite is the vagueness of indifference, rhetoric, and the ambiguous and unreflective acceptance of current trends and motives. However, the essence of true humanism lies in the full and free responsibility of the individual, in his or her personal perception/understanding of humanity. Ultimately, freedom from fanaticism and dogmatism means that in decisive moments it is not the position of one's creed or doctrine that is called into question, but "our ability to remain faithful to a process of free and autonomous decision-making – to be faithful to what we personally perceive as 'human' (...)."

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<sup>1</sup> The text of this brief is a translation of the original Italian brief. The bibliographical sources appear in their original form.

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