

Gods and the Universe

in

Buddhist Perspective

**Essays on Buddhist Cosmology
and related subjects**

by

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**Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy Sri Lanka**

First Edition 1972

Second Reprint 1983

The Wheel Publication No. 180/181

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Opening Essay

Gods And Their Place in Buddhism

by
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Thus is he, the Blessed One, the Arahāt, the Fully Enlightened, endowed with Knowledge and Conduct, the Happy One, Knower of the World, Peerless Charioteer of men to be tamed, Teacher of Gods and Men, the Buddha, the Blessed One.

The Meditation on the Recollection of the Buddha.

One of the descriptive titles given to the Buddha is that of *sathā-deva-manussānaī*, the Teacher of Gods and Men. It is found in the earliest texts of the Tipiṭaka and was accepted by the Buddha Himself.

That the expression was no mere oriental hyperbole, but is to be taken in its literal sense, is borne out by the numerous incidents in which devas figure in the Buddhist canonical literature, where, like human beings, they come to the Master for religious instruction.

These beings, whose generic name of deva means Shining Ones, appear so often that there is every

justification for an enquiry into their nature and the precise place they occupy in the doctrines of Buddhism.

The Buddhist conception of the universe and of the laws of cause and effect that govern it leaves no room whatever for the idea of a supreme deity in the role of creator or ruler.

It is not even necessary for Buddhism to deny the existence of a Creator-god; its philosophy automatically excludes the theory.

No God, no Brahmá can be found,
Creator of Saísára's¹ round;
Empty phenomena roll on,
Subject to cause and condition.

Visuddhimagga, XIX.

This being so, a deva is not a God in the usual sense, and the word is apt to be misleading through its association with Western theism.

If modern man could enter into the spirit of ancient Greek thought and understand the attitude of, say, Socrates² towards the Greek gods he would come closer to the Buddhist view of the devas.

¹ Saísára—the cycle of rebirths; the world.
² Who had his "*daimon*".

The likeness is not perfect, for the devas, unlike the Greek deities, are not immortal; but they resemble them in being neither omnipotent nor omniscient. They are not creators of the world, but are themselves subject to the law of causality in much the same way that the Greek gods were subject to *ananke*, the higher law of necessity.

They exhibit many of the weaknesses of human beings, and often less than their wisdom. Their present relatively happy circumstances, as well as such power as they possess, are the result of previous merit acquired as human beings.

They are in fact simply beings of another order of existence, in some ways superior to men but in others at a disadvantage.

But before going further into their nature it is necessary to distinguish between (1) *samutti devas* (“by convention”), (2) *upápati devas* (“through rebirth”) and (3) *visuddhi devas* (“by their purity”).

The first class are human beings of high worldly status; kings; ministers and the like. The second are beings living in the *deva-lokas*, or higher spheres, while the third and greatest are human beings who have attained the final degree of self-liberation, and so are known as devas by purification while yet alive. These are the Supreme Buddhas, Silent Buddhas (*Pacceka Buddhas*) and arahats.

In ordinary usage the word deva nearly always denotes the non-human beings of the second order, and it is with them that we are now concerned. But while in the following pages, the word *deva* wherever it occurs is to be understood as meaning *upápatti deva*, it is well to note in passing that the term *deva* in itself has a very wide connotation and makes no fundamental distinction between human and non-human beings where the former are of exalted position.

It may be taken to signify nothing more than a superior personage of some kind. It is important that this should be remembered, for just as the superiority of a king lies only in his position and has no connection with his qualities of intellect or character, so the superiority of a deva rests in the fact of his occupying that position by virtue of his past merits.

Like all other beings the deva is revolving in the circle of saísára; he is characterised by the three signs of impermanence, suffering and lack of any essence of selfhood; when the good kamma of the past which sustains the current of his existence as a deva becomes exhausted, he must inevitably pass away from that state to be reborn elsewhere.

Another point to be remembered is that although, as has been said, the devas hold an important place. In Buddhist thought, they are in no wise necessary to

Buddhist philosophy. Everything that Buddhism asserts concerning the nature of reality can be stated with equal truth and force without reference to devas or any other class of non-human beings.

Indeed, the view has been put forward that the frequent appearance of the Brahmanical deities as disciples of the Buddha in the canonical literature was intended only to emphasise the falsity of the Brahmanical belief in the power and omniscience of gods.

However that may be, it is a fact that Buddhist philosophy is a complete and self-supporting system, requiring no intervention of supernatural agencies, and not capable of being affected by the presence or absence of beings of a non-human order.

No matter what kind of sentient beings science may ultimately discover in the universe besides those on our own planet, it is certain that they will all be in their nature subject to the same laws which Buddhism reveals as governing the life of man.

The living organisms on Jupiter, if there are any, must turn out to be different from those on earth in their physical construction, chemical composition and all other external aspects of their being; but even though they must breathe methane and ammonia instead of oxygen, and live in temperatures far below any endurable to organic life on our own planet, the

fundamental and universal laws of cause and effect must obtain for them as they do for us.

So the number and variety of beings in the cosmos may be multiplied to infinity, yet so long as they are subject to arising and passing away they belong unalterably to the Buddhist pattern of saísáric existence.

The only kind of being that could be correctly termed supernatural would be one that is eternal, unchanging and not limited by any physical laws. It is the possibility of such a being as this that both Buddhism and modern science deny, but the denial does not go any further than that.

As Bertrand Russell has somewhere observed, there is no reason whatever to suppose that man is the highest form of sentient life in the universe.