

## World Religions A q&a about Buddhism

Source: *John Kahila, June 1996*

Do Buddhists worship the Buddha as a deity?

No. The Buddha achieved perfect victory over the causes of rebirth. His Parinirvana was 2500 years ago. All that remain are relics and monuments. Of course Buddhists have religious observances of many kinds, including offerings of fruit and incense before Buddha-images. These practices are an expression of our shared faith and practice, and a means of acquiring merit. They are not gestures of deference to a

Do Buddhists believe in God?

Buddhism has been characterized as 'atheist' by the Pope and others -- but 'non-eternalist' is a more accurate term. Deities are mentioned many times in the scriptures. People often interpret such references metaphorically (especially in the West); but even if they are taken literally, there is no conflict with the Teaching. However, the idea of an eternal Creator God is contrary to the Buddhist doctrines of anicca and anatta, and is flatly contradicted in scripture (see, for example, the second section of the Brahmajala Sutta, pp.75-83 of Walshe's translation of the Digha Nikaya). Theists, agnostics and atheists are all welcome within Buddhism (and in this group); Buddhists make up their own minds about the existence or nonexistence of deities, if they get around to it. Some people find this question uninteresting, feeling that neither a 'yes' nor a 'no' answer contributes meaningfully to the elimination of suffering. See also next item.

Do Buddhists believe in a soul?

Some would say that questions like 3.04 and 3.05 are in the same general category as "Does Nonexistence Exist?" Such questions are unanswerable. But even if one does not take this stand, the semantics of the questions are very difficult. In both cases, someone who answers with a categorical "yes" needs to reconcile the answer with the characteristics of conditioned phenomena: unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), impermanence (anicca) and the nonexistence of a substantial Self (anatta). Those who answer with a categorical "no" face a different set of problems, e.g. making sure that what they are negating is the same as what is being affirmed by the people to whom they are speaking. Suffice it to say that there are ways to give a coherent sense to either answer, if one is so inclined. Is there "something" that is experienced as a self having continuity in time -- a self with will, and joy, and pain? Of course there is, there would be no need for the Buddha's teaching otherwise. But is there a permanent and substantial self? Buddhist doctrine says no. It is not possible to deal with this question adequately in a FAQ. Those who are interested can try starting with The Questions of Milinda, a classic Buddhist text in which the matter is considered in some detail (see for instance 'The Distinguishing Marks' beginning at page 34 of I.B. Horner's translation).

If there is no self, who am I talking to?

The word 'self' has a multitude of meanings in English. Not all of those meanings are relevant to the notion of self (//attaa//) that is negated in the doctrine of anatta. Sometimes 'self' is used in English to suggest a permanent identity (or soul) of a type that would be foreign to Buddhist thought. At other times, 'self' is used only to denote a "conventional person" (as in "make yourself at home"); this usage presents no problems.

Do Buddhists believe in reincarnation?

People who ask this question usually mean transmigration of souls. People who answer it sometimes mean rebirth. This can lead to confusion. Buddhism does not teach transmigration of souls, nor does it teach against it (see 3.05). As long as the 'soul' is regarded as just a bundle of transient phenomena, subject to arising and passing away, transmigration is not objectionable. Of course, that gives both 'soul' and 'reincarnation' meanings quite different from the ones usually intended by people of other faiths, which can lead to miscommunication; thus it is probably best to avoid this usage. If 'soul' is taken in its usual popular sense -- an eternal unchanging something, or a spark of an eternal unchanging perfect Someone -- then the scriptures and commentaries are unanimous in denying its existence: For there is suffering, but none who suffers; Doing exists although there is no doer; Extinction is but no extinguished person; Although there is a path, there is no goer. --

Buddhaghosa, Visuddhimagga XIV 90 (tr. Nanamoli) Usually, someone who uses the word 'reincarnation' means the "re-instantiation" of a substantial and permanent personal essence of some kind -- an atman, or a soul in the sense of some Western religions. The existence of such a thing is rejected in the suttas (except as a convention), and is categorically denied in the Abhidhamma. Discussion of the transmigration of something that doesn't exist is pointless. Buddhism \*does\* teach liberation from rebirth. Rebirth in this context means bondage to the causes of suffering, not renewed physical embodiment of a permanent spiritual substance in the form of an animal or human.

If there is no self, what is reborn?

One traditional view is that karma and its results "belong" to a particular life continuum, not to the "person" identified with that life continuum in our minds at any particular time. The standard comparison is to a candle: if the flame from one candle is transferred to another, the second flame is "neither the same nor different"; it may have different fuel, but it is still causally connected to the first flame.

What does Buddhism say about sex?

Monks, nuns and other ordained persons may (or may not) be expected to observe strict celibacy, depending on the sect they belong to. The laity of most traditions are expected to observe the Precepts, which call for \*nonharmful\* sexual behavior. At a minimum, this means refraining from sexual behavior that is a cause of non-mindfulness and suffering, our own or anyone else's. In some Buddhist countries it may mean other things as well, reflecting the prevailing values of the cultures involved. Such cultural overlays vary from country to

country. If your interest is primarily cultural, you may be able to find a knowledgeable person in a pertinent soc.culture.\* group. Please do not crosspost soc.culture.\* messages to t.r.b. If you receive information from soc.culture.\* that you feel would be of general interest to readers of this newsgroup, please post a separate summary to t.r.b. instead.

What does Buddhism say about homosexuality?

Homosexual behavior is off-limits to ordained persons in traditions that follow traditional monastic rules (Vinaya). However, \*all\* sexual behavior is off-limits in this case; homosexuality is merely one of the forms of proscribed behavior that is explicitly mentioned. Where lay people are concerned, Buddhism says nothing about homosexuality. Individual Buddhists or Buddhist cultures may have views on the subject, but such views are not germane to this FAQ. A good historical overview can be found in Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender (Jose Ignacio Cabezon, ed.); see booklist in Part 3. As a general rule, Buddhists of most major traditions do not regard sexual orientation as being terribly relevant to practice as long as one's sexual behavior is in line with the precepts

What does Buddhism say about morality in general?

In Buddhism, unwholesome behavior is not a sign of defection to the camp of a sinister being. Nor is it a "sin" that brings upon us the wrath of a vengeful God. "Immoral" behavior is a product of mistaken view. It is wrong not because it violates some external set of laws handed down from on high, but because it strengthens the bonds of clinging and engenders suffering. In Buddhism, unwholesome impulses are not things to be violently suppressed by a schizoid act of will; they are to be noted and understood. As we come to recognize how mental defilements give rise to unwholesome attitudes, we will be able to work on developing wholesome attitudes instead. If our behavior does harm, we can try to avoid the twin pitfalls of self-protection and self-flagellation; both reinforce the myth of a substantial self. We can acknowledge errors, try to make amends, and try to have compassion for ourselves as well as others. So much for unwholesome behavior -- what about wholesome behavior? For Buddhists, morality (sila) is behavior that is consistent with the Eightfold Path (see glossary) -- in particular with those parts of the Path that are concerned with body, speech and livelihood. The moral code of Buddhism is summarized in the Precepts (see glossary). The Precepts are not "commandments" in the sense of some Western religions. They are rules of training, intended to help us move closer to liberation and compassionate action.

3.10 Are all Buddhists vegetarians?

No. The First Precept admonishes us to refrain from killing, but meat eating is not regarded as an instance of killing, and it is not forbidden in the scriptures. (We are speaking here mainly of the Pali scriptures. Some of the Mahayana scriptures, notably the Lankavatara Sutra, take a strong position in favor of vegetarianism.) As recorded in the Pali scriptures, the Buddha did not prohibit consumption of meat, even by monks. In fact, he explicitly rejected a suggestion from Devadatta to do so. In modern Theravada societies, a bhikkhu who adheres to vegetarianism to impress others with his superior spirituality may be committing an infringement of the monastic rules.

On the other hand, the Buddha categorically prohibited consumption of the flesh of any animal that was "seen, heard or suspected" to have been killed specifically for the benefit of monks (Jivaka Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya 55). This rule technically applies only to monastics, but it can be used as a reasonable guide by devout lay people.

Aren't you being a bit obsessive about not-self?

Maybe so. It is possible to get carried away with the doctrine of anatta, seeing it as justification for a view that is very close to scientific materialism. Suffice it to say that this is not how most Buddhists see things. It would be very difficult to put together any kind of coherent doctrine of moral responsibility if a person was just a disaggregated assemblage of momentary phenomena. However, the doctrine of anatta tends to receive strong emphasis among Buddhists for several reasons. First, many people who seek to understand Buddhism come from religious backgrounds in which it is customary to speak of a permanent soul. Of course it is not necessary to be a Buddhist to study Buddhism, and disbelief in a soul is not a "requirement" for intellectual understanding (any more than belief in one is a requirement for an intellectual understanding of Christianity). But understanding is not likely to be furthered if one attempts to find an "esoteric" soul doctrine of some kind in the teaching. Second, although Buddhism does not agree with the moral nihilism that some persons see in science (or at least in positivism), it seems that scientific scepticism is more easily reconciled with anatta than with at least some of the religious alternatives. Finally, anatta is proclaimed in the scriptures as one of the two distinctive teachings of the Buddhas (the other being the Four Noble Truths, see Majjhima Nikaya 56.18 [I.380]). Much of Buddhist thought is consistent with other systems of Indian religion and philosophy; but these two doctrines are unique.

What do you think of Hesse's Siddhartha?

This is a nice book that says a lot about Hesse's views about spirituality and freedom. But it does not say a whole lot about Buddhism, nor did Hesse intend for it to do so. The main character in Siddhartha is \*not\* the Buddha -- in fact, the Siddhartha of the title meets the Buddha and ultimately decides to follow a different path. Siddhartha has about the same relationship to orthodox Buddhism that Nikos Kazantzakis' The Last Temptation of Christ has to orthodox Christianity -- which is to say, it's a good read but not exactly canonical.

Why don't you folks speak English?

Buddhism has several canonical languages. The chief ones are Pali (the main language of the Theravada canon) and Sanskrit (the main language of the Mahayana canon). Other languages that are sometimes encountered: Sinhalese (Sri Lanka), Thai, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan. (These are not all of the languages of Buddhism -- they are only the languages of the earliest versions of key scriptures and commentaries.) Terms transliterated from Asian languages have an undeniable in-group appeal -- but there are other (and better) reasons for using them. One reason is simply that these "foreign" terms have the authority of 2500 years of tradition in many cases, and are understood by members of all Buddhist.