

Buddhism Goes Beyond God and Religion

by Piya Tan

The Greek philosopher, Epicurus (341-270 BCE), solved the riddle of the God-idea long ago. Even if these words were only attributed to him, the logic and reasoning are very clear:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent.
Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.
Is he both able and willing? Then whence evil?
Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God? (Epicurus, attributed)

The British philosopher **David Hume** (1711-1776) puts it in the form of a dilemma:

If the evil in the world is from the intention of the Deity, then he is not benevolent. If the evil in the world is contrary to his intention, then he is not omnipotent. But it is either in accordance with his intention or contrary to it. Therefore, either the Deity is not benevolent or he is not omnipotent.

(Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 1779: parts 10-11)

We can see that religious ideas, whether they are about God, or the soul, or any theological issue, can be very problematic. For this reason, God-believers need to say: “Seek not to understand that you may believe, but *believe that you may understand*,” which is essentially the same as saying: “Don’t think about it, just follow!”

However, on a more positive note, a Buddhist would interpret this statement as meaning, “I believe, so that I will understand.” That is, I have faith so that I will be wise in due course to understand how the mind creates God and religion, good and evil, suffering and liberation. Doesn’t this sound more true, sensible and spiritual, that is, to simply to say: “Seek to understand that you may believe—and be free.”

No matter how clear a religious statement may be, it is not knowledge. It tells us nothing about ourselves or the world. Examine such statements: “God created the world,” “God is love,” “Our lord died for you,” and so on. Now compare these statements: “Time created the world,” “Love is good,” “The soldier died for his country.” Clearly, these latter statements make more sense, because they talk about things that actually happened, and not cheat us into believing notions that are not only non-existent but harmful to life, happiness and progress.

Religious statements are not knowledge; they tell us nothing except what the speaker wants us to believe, and which probably the speaker himself knows nothing about. In other words, a religious statement always has an agenda: “Give up your way of thinking and listen to me. Do as I say.”

Religious statements belong to the same category of stories and symbols. We love fables, fairy tales and Star Wars, but we never take them to be real and true. They are entertaining, yet informative, that is, in-formative. They form ideas *in* our heads.

Fairy tales and fable often have a moral: the good may suffer at the beginning but they will prosper in the end; be kind to others, and you will be richly rewarded; good will ultimately triumph; and so on. In other words, we must remember the spirit of the letter; the truth behind the words; where the sign is pointing to.

Buddhism is at its unparalleled best when it goes beyond religious language. Some well known Buddhist statements are: “Every thing is impermanent; every thing is unsatisfactory; everything has no abiding essence.” By “thing” here is meant a material thing or mental state. Whether something is material or mental, a thing or an idea, it is impermanent and as such is never truly satisfying.

“Everything” means all things in this world and the principles (or “nature”) governing them. They have no abiding entity. In other words, there is no abiding entity, anything permanent, behind or underlying what we experience as physical or as mental.

Religion is often nothing but words, words, words, or a holy book. Where do the words come from; who made the book holy? Before there were words and before books, there were religions as we know them today. However, even without words and books, Buddhism will still be true because it is the knowledge and vision of the world as it really is.

This is the way things are. No one invented or created it. But the Buddha discovers it and teaches it to us in a systematic and effective way. If we allow ourselves to see this, we will understand it, and then we will believe it, so that we are free from suffering.

These wisdom and faith bring us great inner stillness. In our clarity of mind and openness of heart, we are able see that there is no *us* believers versus *them* sinners. There is just ignorance that needs to be removed.

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