

IS THERE A GOD? A BUDDHIST ANSWER

by

Rev Taitetsu Unno

IS THERE A GOD?

Yes, but a proper Buddhist answer requires some clarification. In the depth of human awareness is a supreme reality who is boundless in compassion and immeasurable in wisdom and who is involved in the endless activity to enlighten all existence.

Amida Buddha is this fullness of compassion, and his sole concern is the expression of unconditional love to every form of life.

AMIDA BUDDHA

Amida Buddha differs radically from the traditional Judaeo-Christian concept of God, because of the following characteristics.

1. Amida Buddha is not a creator, but he is a saviour who performs his compassionate work without any condition whatsoever.
2. Amida Buddha does not judge or punish man, for man is responsible for his own acts and invites the consequences, good or bad, of his acts.
3. Amida Buddha does not perform miracles, but he manifests his saving compassion through the rhythm of natural laws.
4. Amida Buddha is not transcendent, standing outside this world; but he is immanent, for his very being is rooted in the limitations of this world which will be transformed by the power of Amida's love.
5. Amida Buddha is not a wrathful or jealous God; rather, the power of compassion fulfilled in his Original Vow completes the promise that he will not rest until all beings attain the same enlightenment, Buddhahood, as himself.
6. Amida Buddha does not discriminate in any form, whether of belief or creed, moral good or moral evil, human life or animal life, but he embraces all in Oneness with equal warmth.
7. Amida Buddha does not show his love by the blood of crucifixion, sacrificing his own being, but by making his compassion accessible to mankind through the Nembutsu, his sacred name, which resounds throughout the universe. Wherever his sacred name, Namu Amida Butsu, is pronounced, there he is.

Amida Buddha is the timeless content of enlightenment realized by the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. Amida means boundless compassion and immeasurable wisdom. Immeasurable wisdom sees into the fragility of human life, and boundless compassion is moved by this insight to actively embrace all live into the timeless fulfillment of truth.

FRUITLESS QUESTIONS

Shakyamuni was asked many questions which are being asked today: such as,
Is there a God?
Who created the world?
Is there life after death?
Where is heaven and hell?

The classic answer given by the Buddha was silence. He refused to answer these questions purposely, because "these profit not, nor have they anything to do with the fundamentals of the religious life, nor do they lead to Supreme Wisdom, the Bliss of Nirvana."

Even if answers were given, he said, "there still remains the problems of birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair--all the grim facts of life--and it is for their extinction that I prescribe my teachings."

THE TASK BEFORE US

By his silence Shakyamuni wanted to divert our attention from fruitless questions to the all-important task before us: solving life's problems and living a life which would bring happiness to self as well as others.

To a follower who insisted on knowing, "Is there a God?", Shakyamuni replied with the parable of the poison arrow. "If you were shot by a poison arrow, and a doctor was summoned to extract it, what would you do? Would you ask such questions as who shot the arrow, from which tribe did he come, who made the arrow, who made the poison, etc., or would you have the doctor immediately pull out the arrow?"

"Of course," replied the man, "I would have the arrow pulled out as quickly as possible." The Buddha concluded, "That is wise O disciple, for the task before us is the solving of life's problems; when that is done, you may still ask the questions you put before me, if you so desire."

THE TEACHING

In Buddhism the teaching is a vehicle or a vessel. The value of a vehicle lies in its function of transporting man to his destination. Unless a vehicle, such as an automobile, is used, it is valueless. In fact, it is no longer a vehicle; it is a decoration piece.

The teaching must be practiced, if it is going to be of value in transporting us from the life of anxiety to a life of serenity. When the teaching is not practiced, it is like carrying around a vehicle on our backs without ever putting it to our use.

It is meaningless to discuss faith, enlightenment, and other goals, if we do not commit ourselves to the supreme importance of practicing the teaching in our homes and communities. "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

THE PRACTICE

To make others happy is the basic practice taught by Shakyamuni. It is a simple truth to learn, but a difficult practice to fully realize. In personal life it means to act by placing ourselves in the position of another, and in community life it means to give service with joy and gratitude for the betterment of all.

As a guide to making others happy, we can practice the Four Immeasurable Attitudes: friendliness, compassion, joy and equanimity. Friendliness is the constant endeavor to make others happy, compassion is the earnest attempt to alleviate discomfort and pain in those around us, joy is to be happy for the sake of another's happiness, and equanimity is the source of wisdom which helps us practice these equally to all life and after they are practiced not to become attached to them.

The practice of making others happy is based upon the clear understanding of life which is Oneness or interdependence. Since life is a dependently originated complex, when we make another unhappy, our world is that much unhappier; and when we make another happy, our world is that much happier. In the understanding of Oneness we realize that there is no enemy to love, for we are parts of one living organic whole.

But people will say that this practice is too simple without trying or after trying will give up easily to revert to indifference; therefore, the stress is made on effort, patience, and perseverance--the most important practices within the Eightfold Path and the Six Paramita.

A GROWING FAITH

The purpose of the practice is to make me aware of the fabric of my existence. In my attempts to make others happy I grow in understanding of myself; I become sensitive to the fragile good within me and the unreliability of my selfish whims. I realize the 84,000 blind passions within me for which Buddhism teaches 84,000 ways of deliverance. In ratio to the growing awareness of my limitations is the growing awareness of absolute compassion. Ultimately, I am made to drop my reliance upon my blind self, my self power, and I find a growing faith of my true self, nurtured by the stimulating compassion of Amida Buddha, the absolute other power.

In the scriptures it states, "If you desire to see the Buddha, you must see his form. If you wish to see his form, you must see his heart. And the heart of Buddha is great compassion." Great compassion vibrates in the heart of man who has been freed from attachment to blind self. This vibration, this response, helps us effectively realize the practice of making others happy.

WHERE IS AMIDA?

Amida Buddha is in the depth of my existential awareness. Without my awareness, there is no Amida Buddha. A famous Shin-shu work repeats, "When the faithful awakens to faith, for the first time a Buddha is born." This, of course, is the realization of man.

From the side of Amida Buddha, he has been with me from the beginningless beginning, striving to awaken me from the blind forces of my karma which cause the agitations of my life. Amida Buddha will not rest until the ripening of favorable conditions brings to fruition my awareness of my karmic bondage and transforms my whole being into the substance of enlightenment.

When the ultimate concern of Amida Buddha for this blind self is realized in my existential awareness, then I am at the very heart of living peace. From this center flows forth the name of Amida, Namu Amida Butsu, recited as the prayer of my gratitude. A new sense of being and a fresh source of strength are provided me as the basis of a creative morality and action, for wherever the name is recited, there he is.

IS THERE A GOD?

No, not a God of fear and mercy, who is creator and judge; but for me there is Amida Buddha. The fullness of compassion covers the horizon of my existential experience of reality, and my response is the reciting of the name in humbleness and gratitude, Namu Amida Butsu.

(Rev Taitetsu Unno was Assistant Minister at the Senshin Buddhist Church and UCLA lecturer when this piece was originally written.)