

GAUTAMA, JESUS, ETERNAL BUDDHA, COSMIC CHRIST (Part 1 of 2)

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I. Gods and Buddhas

Do Buddhists Believe in God?

“God” is not a neutral word that can be used universally to evaluate all religions as theism or atheism. It is specifically an Abrahamic (Jewish-Christian-Muslim) word that models God as a Father-God based on human personality. Buddhism sees Buddhas as **meta-personal**, beyond human personality.

Do Christians believe in Buddha? It is just as ridiculous to ask Buddhists whether they believe in God. Buddhists should believe in Buddhas, and Christians should believe in God. Many Buddhist clergy say that they can believe in God as verbs (action), but not as nouns (material being). Buddhist Kenneth Tanaka can think of God as Ocean (meta-personal), but not as Father¹.

It is helpful for Christians to think of “The Force” in Star Wars to imagine Buddhas beyond human personality. Buddhists do not pray or worship as if God were out there somewhere. The Force is inside us. So we open ourselves to the Force within, harmonizing our breath, our feelings, our thinking, and our actions with the Force—God Inside, “Buddha-nature.” So Christians pray outward, but Buddhists meditate inward. Buddhists speak of **Dharmakaya**, the Primordial Buddha Within.

Standing on the bare ground...a mean egotism vanishes.
I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing, I see all;
The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me.
I am part or particle of God. Ralph Waldo Emerson

Mahayana Buddhist Trinity (*Trikaya*, Three Bodies of the Buddha)

Few Americans know that Mahayana Buddhism has a Trinity in parallel with Christianity.² **Dharmakaya** is the original, formless Buddha as Absolute Truth. The parallel in Christianity would be the Cosmic Christ. **Sambhogakaya** is Absolute Truth taking human form to save human beings. The countless Cosmic Buddhas in the heavens and Buddha images worshipped on earth belong here. Their form is not really, really true, but only temporary evangelistic forms. The Christian parallel would be God the Father modeled as a human being, a temporary form to which humans can relate. Of course, God is not really a human father. **Nirmanakaya** is Absolute Truth entering human history as historical persons—primarily Siddhartha Gautama Buddha. Each Buddhist philosophical school, theological movement, or religious denomination, however, would add the outstanding persons who shaped their genealogical line. The Christian parallel would be Jesus Christ, perhaps including outstanding prophets like Abraham and Moses. Roman Catholics, of course, would include those declared to be Saints, especially the Virgin Mary. Theravada Buddhists accept **Dharmakaya** and **Nirmanakaya**, but reject **Sambhogakaya**.

Monotheistic Mahayana

Abrahamic religions are outraged at any signs of polytheism. **The Greater Sutra of Immeasurable Life** describes 21 billion Cosmic Buddhas! Also, who can ignore the hundreds of Buddha images displayed for common worship? But Mahayana Buddhism has the principle of “one equals many,” **ichi-soku-ta** 一即多. That is, the myriads of Buddhas are the many names and faces of the one primordial, eternal, formless, absolute Buddha, **Dharmakaya**. At heart, Mahayana is clearly monotheistic, if, for Christians, Buddhas are to be considered as Gods (theistic).

II. Gautama and Jesus

Similarities & Differences (See the June, 2014, issue of *Pacific Asian Vision*, p. 6)

Gautama As The Ideal Man

Siddhartha Gautama having reached the highest level of enlightenment was one of a kind. Theravada Buddhism singles him out as the Buddha. Yet some writings consider all arhats as Buddhas, being enlightened men. Gautama himself spoke of his enlightened disciples as equals. "The respect he [Gautama] elicited from his followers as a teacher was responsible for his elevation to the status of a 'god' or a 'Brahma' even during his lifetime."³ This elevation begins with Gautama being spotlighted as the "ideal man."

Gautama practiced the four stages of meditative rapture. He enjoyed super-natural powers, the working of miracles, levitation, and six extra-sensory types of knowledge. These included clairvoyance (He penetrated the cycles of rebirth to see for himself the effects of karma), retrocognition (He remembered his past lives), and telepathy (He could see the thoughts of others)⁴. He denied he was omniscient himself, but his omniscience became orthodox belief for Theravada Buddhists.

Jesus Becomes the Cosmic Christ

The earliest steps in the elevation of Jesus to become God-Man is called **Adoptionist Christology**. Jesus, a human being, was adopted as Son of God by his resurrection. Romans 1:3,4 "...the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead...."

The next step was **Incarnation**. Jesus was God even before he was born. John 1:1-3, 14, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.... And the Word became flesh and lived among us..."

Then comes the **Virgin Birth, a Miracle**. Jesus was conceived without a father through the Holy Spirit. Matthew 1: 20 "... an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.'"

After his death and resurrection, Jesus became the **Cosmic Christ**. He broke out of the earthly limitations of mere human life. Jesus is now the agent of the creation of the universe, John 1:3, Colossians 1:16. Jesus is the image of the invisible God, Colossians 1:15. All creation was made for Jesus and through Jesus, Colossians 1:16. Jesus is the glue that holds the entire universe together, Colossians 1:17. The fullness of God, *pleroma*, dwells in Jesus, Colossians 1:19.

Finally as the crowning event, Jesus becomes fully divine in **the Trinity**, fully equal with God. God, the Father in heaven. Jesus, the Son, as the Incarnation of God in a human being. The Holy Spirit as invisible, formless God within us and within all nature. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. One God in three Persons (*persona* as personality or masks). **Jesus is the face of God for humans, and the face of humans for God.**

Gautama Becomes the Eternal Buddha

Having lived as a human manifestation of Absolute Truth (*Nirmanakaya*), Gautama after death is elevated back to his original formless state as *Dharmakaya*, the Eternal Buddha. Even in Theravada Buddhism there are notions of Incarnation and Virgin Birth.

A transcendental conception of the Buddha seems to have emerged with greater force with the development of the conception of past Buddhas and the consequent belief that Siddhartha Gotama was no other than the representation of Buddhahood...even before he was actually born. Thus we find the idea that the **bodhisatta** [Pali for **bodhisattva**] descends "mindful and conscious" from the Tusita heaven, stays visible as a thread through a precious stone when he is in the mother's womb, and is received by the gods at his birth.... He was conceived by his mother, Mahamaya, at a time when she had observed the higher precepts, one of which is the practice of celibacy, thus hinting at a kind of virgin birth, like that of the Christ according to Biblical legends.⁵

This hesitancy to think of Buddha as some kind of superhuman deity disappears altogether in Mahayana. The historical Gautama in the early chapters of the **Lotus Sutra** is magnified in Chapter 16 as the **Eternal Buddha**.⁶ The **Mahaparinirvana Sutra** considers Gautama at death to be enlightened without the body, elevated to return to his original form as the Eternal Buddha, **Dharmakaya**.

But the Buddha is an absolute existence. He exists everywhere inside and outside us and is constant, from the infinite past to the infinite future. He is an existence inseparable from us even if we want to part from him. Therefore, he is an absolute existence....⁷

Historical Boundaries

The original followers of Gautama and Jesus record stories in sacred scriptures that become historical boundaries within which we can describe the person and activities of both men. One would become a heretic by claiming something outside those boundaries. But after Gautama and Jesus die and become divine beings, there are no longer any boundaries. Anything can be said about both men that is edifying, inspiring, and transforming to the community of believers. The Sangha and Church are limited only by the power of their creative imagination!!! In **The Greater Sutra of Immeasurable Life**, Gautama tells the story of Amida Buddha. Gautama here is no longer a human. He is clearly a divine, superhuman, Cosmic Buddha, just as Jesus becomes the divine, superhuman, Cosmic Christ or Logos of John 1:9. As the Cosmic Christ, he is the agent of the creation of the entire universe, John 1:3. ("All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.")

To be continued

¹ Kenneth Kenishi Tanaka, **Ocean: An Introduction to Jodo Shinshu Buddhism in America**, 1997.

² Ruben Habito, "The *Trikaya* Doctrine in Buddhism," **Buddhist-Christian Studies**, Vol. 6, pp. 53-62, 1986; J. C. Cleary, "Trikaya and Trinity: The Mediation of the Absolute," **Buddhist-Christian Studies**, Vol. 6, pp. 63-78, 1986.

³ David Kalupahana, **Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis**, 1976, pp.114-115.

⁴ Kalupahana, *op.cit.*, pp. 22-23.

⁵ Kalupahana, *op.cit.*, p. 117.

⁶ Nikkyo Niwano, **Buddhism for Today**, pp. 219-220.

⁷ *Ibid.*

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