



BUDDHA AND GOD

By Dr. Tony Page

IS THE BUDDHA GOD?

The fruit of more than 25 years' devoted study of the Buddhadharmā, this little book makes the surprising and controversial argument that not only is there room for the concept of God within the doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism, but that Lord Buddha himself declared His divinity. Is it not, Dr. Tony Page asks, time that we stopped calling Buddhism "atheistic"?

"I am the core of all that exists. I am the seed of all that exists. I am the cause of all that exists. I am the trunk of all that exists. I am the foundation of all that exists. I am the root of existence. I am 'the core' because I contain all phenomena. I am 'the seed' because I give birth to everything. I am 'the cause' because all comes forth from me. I am 'the trunk' because the ramifications of every event sprout from me. I am 'the foundation' because all abides in me. I am called 'the root' because I am everything." —From the "All-Creating King Tantra" (Kulayaraja Tantra), tr. Adriano Clemente and Andrew Lukianowicz

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REFLECTIONS ON DIVINITY WITHIN BUDDHA-DHARMA

by Dr. Tony Page

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Introduction

IS BUDDHISM (at least in its Mahayana manifestation) atheistic? This is a question which has preoccupied me throughout my 25-year-long study of the Buddha's teachings and to which the usual answer of 'yes!' from most Buddhists has always struck me as highly questionable.

In this little book, I attempt to show that there is most definitely room for the concept of God within the vast structure of doctrines which constitute Mahayana Buddhism.

Many Buddhists will dismiss my claim as contrary to the Buddhist traditions which they themselves follow. But those traditions may in fact be at variance with what the Buddha in the *sutras* (scriptural dialogues) and *tantras* (mystical treatises of meditative and ritual instruction) is seen to teach. All I ask is that the Buddhist and sympathetic general reader look at the evidence which I shall present—evidence which is almost exclusively drawn from the purported words and teachings of the Buddha himself—and then make up their own minds. Buddhists perhaps more than any other religious group should cherish independence of thought and openness of mind. Blind obedience to commentarial Tradition (whether Tibetan, Sri Lankan or Indian, etc.) is in my view highly undesirable.

The present book is only a short and simple one, but I hope that it might help to cast Buddhism in a brighter, more positive light than is usually its fate at the hands of many 'orthodox' commentators. Buddhism, I feel, should not be excessively 'doom and gloom', but joyous, affirmative towards blissful Truth, and filled with invigorating faith in an immanent and transcendent cosmically intelligent, all-knowing Reality called BUDDHA or TATHAGATA. I also hope that this little book might encourage scholars more competent and skilled than myself to pursue this investigation into the linkage between Buddha and God in greater detail and along similar lines. After all, not all Buddhists have denied God. As the great 20th-century Japanese Zen Buddhist monk and teacher Sokei-an rapturously affirmed:

The creative power of the universe is not a human being; it is Buddha. The one who sees, and the one who hears is not this eye or ear, but the one who is this consciousness.

This One is Buddha. This One appears in every mind. This One is common to all sentient beings, and is God. We worship This One, therefore, we join our hands and bend our heads before This One.¹

But let us now turn precisely to the basic question: what is God, and does Buddhism actually teach of anything that can fairly be called God?

¹ Mary Farkas, ed., *The Zen Eye* (New York: Weatherhill, 1994), p. 41.

CHAPTER ONE

What Is God?

BEFORE WE EMBARK on our journey of exploration into the Buddhist sutras (scriptures) in quest of God, we need to define our terms: just what do we mean by 'God'? *Webster's New International Dictionary* defines 'God' in this way:

the supreme or ultimate reality: the Deity variously conceived . . . the one ultimate infinite reality that is pure existence, consciousness, and bliss, without distinctions (as of time and space); the Being supreme in power, wisdom and goodness that men worship and to whom they pray; infinite Mind. . . .¹

John Ferguson's *Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Mysticism* defines God as: '. . . the Ultimate Being, usually conceived as personal. . . . God as LOVE and as the Universal Self.'²

The Cambridge Encyclopedia gives the following definition:

A supernatural being or power, the object of worship. . . . In the mainstream Western tradition, influenced by Classical Greek philosophy and well as Christianity, God is conceived as "being itself" as absolute, infinite, eternal, immutable, incomprehensible (i.e., unable to be comprehended by human thought), all-powerful (omnipotent), all-

¹ *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Merriam-Webster, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1981), entry for 'God', p. 973.

² John Ferguson, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Mysticism and the Mystery Religions* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), entry for 'God', p. 68.

wise (omniscient), all-good (omnibenevolent), and everywhere present (omnipresent). He is also said to be impassible, or incapable of suffering.³

The key points which emerge from all of this are the Absoluteness, the Ultimacy or Supremacy of God. Whether conceived of as a person or as a Power (and God can be viewed under both aspects), God is the highest Reality, present in everything, limitless, undying, free from all suffering, unchanging, universally good, all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-worshipful. Always God seems to be linked with the all-knowingness and wisdom/super-cognition of Absolute Mind. We must keep our eyes open for these qualities and attributes in the descriptions of Buddha and Dharma (cosmic Truth) which follow.

What, then, do the Buddhist sutras teach which has any bearing upon these exalted notions?

³ *The Cambridge Encyclopedia*, ed. by David Crystal, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), entry for 'God', p. 460.

CHAPTER TWO

The Basic Buddhist World-View

THERE ARE AT THE PRESENT TIME at least two main divisions—speaking very broadly—of Buddhism active in the world: the Theravada ('Doctrine of the Elders') and the Mahayana ('Great Vehicle/Great Causeway'). In this book, we shall focus chiefly upon Mahayana Buddhism—the more 'developed' or expanded form of the religion.

The vision of life which Mahayana Buddhism offers is essentially the following: There exist infinite numbers of universes, which emerge, endure for immense stretches of time, fade and die, only to be reborn. Within these universes are also infinite numbers of beings, who are likewise born, live for varying lengths of time, fade, die and then undergo rebirth into some other mode of existence. The moral Law which governs these rebirths is called Karma, and according as a being thinks, speaks or acts with intentional kindness or selfishness/malevolence, he or she will experience varying degrees of happiness or suffering in consequence.

There are six different realms or categories of being (*gatis*) within which a person can find rebirth: the Hell realm (for those who have been exceptionally cruel and evil); the 'hungry ghost' realm (for beings who are very greedy and materialistic); the animal realm (for those beings possessed of lower intelligence yet more passion than the human creature); the human realm (where there is a mixture of intelligence, stupidity, suffering and happiness—as well as varying levels of moral attainment); and finally the heavenly or 'godly' realm (which is characterised chiefly by great happiness). None of these realms or states, however, lasts forever. Beings stay in these realms only for as long as their Karma (the energy generated by their intentionally activated good and bad deeds) dictates.

This cycle of life, death and rebirth within the six realms of existence is called *samsara*. It is seemingly endless, and overall the constant changes it brings with it cause much **suffering** (an

important preoccupation of Buddhism)—unless the being is able to liberate himself or herself from the cycle of rebirths and pain into the ultimate, **blissful** realm of undying peace and eternity called **Nirvana**. Nirvana is a sphere, realm or state (*visaya*) beyond all the other six *gatis*, and transcends all human comprehension. It is the highest possible happiness—and it endures forever and beyond. It is the profoundest Knowledge (*jnana*), and the utmost purity. It is the Absolute.

The beings who have reached Nirvana and who are guides to all others on this quest for spiritual Liberation (*moksha*) are called fully Awakened Buddhas. Although they are infinite in number, their essence is One. It is in this sense that we can speak of **the Buddha** or **the Tathagata** (the 'One gone to Thusness')—a being in whom the *Buddha-dhatu* (Buddha Element, Buddha Principle, Buddha Nature) has been un-covered, seen and realised.

CHAPTER THREE

Dharma and the Nature of Buddha

WHEN A PERSON BECOMES a fully Awakened Buddha, that person becomes a vessel for the Cosmic Law of all universes. That sustaining, patterning and all-intelligent, spiritual Law of Reality is called **Dharma** or **Dharmata** (the essential nature of Dharma), but can also be called simply **Buddha**, or the Awakened Mind (*bodhi-citta*). This is the mysterious source of all that is—both the visible and the invisible.

Unlike all worldly things, Dharma is not made or constructed. It has not been constructed or assembled from different constituent elements—not fabricated or generated by any number of causes. It was always there, here and everywhere and always will be. It cannot be seen with the physical eye, yet it does exist and is in fact the sole highest Truth. To try to describe it is to enter into the world of paradox and apparent contradiction. This is because Dharma/ Dharmata is everything we know—and much more that we don't. It cannot be captured within our limited concepts. It goes beyond all human reasoning, time modalities and sensual experience.

In his final teachings before his physical death, in the *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, the Buddha told of how Dharma is correctly conceived of by a trainee Buddha (a “Bodhisattva”). He said:

The Dharma which the Buddhas have taught is most excellent and superlative. . . . This authentic Dharma alone has no time or season. If it is only seen with the Dharma-eye and not with the physical eye, no simile can serve as an analogy for it. It is unborn, unarisen, unabiding, not perishing, without beginning, without end, unconditioned [*asamskrta*] and immeasurable. It provides a dwelling for those who are homeless, a refuge for those without a refuge, light for those without light . . . it is unimpeded fragrance for places without fragrance, it displays what cannot be seen, it is

unwavering/ imperturbable, it does not change . . . it is tranquillity, the pinnacle of all *dharmas*. It can utterly eradicate all the *kleshas* [mental and moral afflictions]; it is totally pure; it is devoid of perceptual attributes [*animitta*], and it is liberated from perceptual attributes. It is the ultimate dwelling-place of countless beings, it extinguishes all the fires of samsara. It is the abode where the Buddhas disport themselves. It is eternal and unchanging [*aviparinama*].¹

This transcendent, mysterious Dharma-Realm is a kind of special, ultimate and immortal Body or Being (called the ‘Dharma Body’ or Absolute Body) which a person enters into or acquires on reaching Awakening (*bodhi*). This is the true Nature of Buddha, and is spoken of by the Buddha in the *Samadhiraja Sutra*:

Inconceivable, surpassing the sphere of thought, not oscillating between bliss and suffering, surpassing illusory differentiation, placeless, surpassing the voice of those aspiring to the Knowledge of the Buddha, essential, surpassing passion; indivisible, surpassing hatred; steadfast, surpassing infatuation; explained by the indication of emptiness, unborn, surpassing birth, eternal from the standpoint of common experience, undifferentiated in the aspect of Nirvana . . . cool, unscorched, placeless, unthinkable, blameless, infinite in terms of colours, born of the application of the great supernatural faculty—thus is the Body of the Tathagata to be called.²

The Buddha then says that this vast, unlocalised Buddhist Body (which we should understand to be a unified totality of Body-and-Mind) projects innumerable Buddha-realms or Buddha-spheres, but that beings simply cannot grasp this inconceivable Body of the Buddha:

¹ Translation by Stephen Hodge.

² Konstanty Regamey, *Philosophy in the Samadhiraja Sutra* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990), pp. 87-89.

Thousands of millions of spheres are magically created by me, and they serve beings. Even there my Body cannot be grasped. Markless, signless, as is the sky—thus is defined my Body, which is ineffable and hard to understand. The Great Hero [i.e., Buddha] is identical with the Absolute Body. Born of Dharma is his body; the Victorious One [i.e., Buddha] cannot be conceived in the aspect of the Material Body.³

This God-like vastness of Body and creative Mind, which surpasses the physical form of the Buddha that was visible while he was on earth 2,500 years ago in India, is active in redemptive work in all places and all times. It eternally and infinitely saves beings from the suffering of spiritually defiled life. The Buddha says:

Undeclared is my mind, for I save beings during inconceivable millions of aeons. And therefore my Body cannot be perceived. . . . Just as Space is immeasurable and cannot be measured by anyone, so is the Buddha, exactly like Space.⁴

It is clear from this that in his essence, the Buddha is open, spacious, invisible and ungraspable. He is beyond all limitation. Whatever categories we try to apply to him, he both fits and does not entirely fit them. He is the ineffable Beyond.

Let us listen to the Buddha's own paradox-filled characterisation of what BUDDHA or TATHAGATA ("He who has come from Thatness"—Ultimate Reality) bafflingly is. These words of the Buddha's come from the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* (based on Stephen Hodge's translation) and express the two aspects of the Buddha: the phenomenal (the historical person, Siddhartha Gautama, who could be seen and touched in the India of 2,500 years ago) and the supra-phenomenal or Absolute, which is not confined to a physical body:

³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁴ *Ibid.*

The Tathagata is not human: because the Tathagata has abandoned human existence for a long time over countless *kalpas* [aeons], he is not human. He is not not human: because he was born in the city of Kapilavastu, he is not not human. . . . He is also not a sentient being: because he has abandoned the nature of a sentient being for a long time, the Tathagata is not a sentient being. He is also not not a sentient being: because he has spoken with the attributes of sentient beings on some occasions, the Tathagata is not not a sentient being.

The Tathagata is not a phenomenon: because the various phenomena each have distinct and different attributes, while the Tathagata is not thus but has only one attribute. He is not not a phenomenon: because the Tathagata is the Dharmadhatu [the all-encompassing realm of Truth itself], he is not not a phenomenon. . . .

The Tathagata is not an attribute: because he has long since been devoid of attributes, he is not an attribute. He is not not an attribute: because he fully comprehends all phenomena, he is not not an attribute.

The Tathagata is not a mind: because he has the attribute of space, he is not a mind. He is not not a mind: because he is endowed with the mental qualities of the Ten Powers and the knowledge of the minds of other beings, he is not not a mind.

The Tathagata is not compounded: because he is Eternal, Blissful, the Self, and utterly Pure, he is not compounded. He is not not compounded: because [in his physical manifestation] he comes, goes, sits and lies down and also displays Nirvana, he is not not compounded. . . .

The Tathagata has four departments [as a physical being], so he is not eternal. An eternally abiding thing has no location or direction, just as is space. The Tathagata emerged in India and dwelt in Shravasti or Rajagraha, so he is not eternal. For these reasons, the Tathagata is not eternal.

Yet he is also not not eternal. Why not? Because he has severed arising forever. Phenomena endowed with arising are not eternal, whereas phenomena devoid of

arising are eternal. The Tathagata is devoid of arising, so he is eternal. Phenomena which are eternal are devoid of intrinsic nature [*svabhava*], whereas phenomena endowed with intrinsic nature are not eternal. The Tathagata is devoid of arising and lineage. Because he is devoid of arising and lineage, he is eternal.

Phenomena associated with eternity pervade all places, just as there is no place where there is no space. The Tathagata also is thus and pervades all places, therefore he is eternal.

Phenomena which are not eternal are said to exist here and not exist there, but the Tathagata is not like that, for it is not possible to say that he exists [= is present] in one place and does not exist [= is not present] in another. Therefore he is eternal.

Phenomena which are associated with impermanence exist on some occasions and do not exist on other occasions, but the Tathagata is not thus—existing at some times and not existing at other times—: hence he is eternal. . . .

Phenomena which permanently abide are disassociated from the three times [i.e., past, present and future]. The Tathagata is also thus, disassociated from the three times, and thus is eternal. . . .

The Tathagata is not fixed. Why? Because the Tathagata manifests himself entering into Parinirvana between the two sala trees here at Kushinagara. Therefore he is not fixed. Again, he is not not fixed. Why not? Because he is Eternal, Blissful, the Self, and utterly Pure. (Dharmakshema)

We see that the Buddha is limitless, timeless, and omnipresent. These are pre-eminently attributes of God. He is also that which was never created or assembled and which will never die—another aspect of the Divine. He is true Selfhood, in a state of immortal purity and bliss. Again, we are essentially speaking of divine Perfection here. Buddha is the Mystery of mysteries, as the *Avatamsaka Sutra* indicates:

Buddha is not finite or infinite: the great sage has transcended finitude and infinity. Like the sun coursing through the sky, giving light every day, so does the sagacious guide appear, independent of past, present, and future. . . . As the wind blows swiftly through the sky, not sticking to anything, in the same way does the nature of Buddha operate in the world. . . . Unquantifiable, the Victor [Buddha] cannot be known by any scales; endowed with unobstructed knowledge, Buddha transcends the path of words. Radiant as the full moon, steady, adorned with a multitude of qualities, He passes infinite eons creating transformations. Thinking of the Buddha in every way with perfect concentration, even after untold billions of eons, Buddha would still be inconceivable.⁵

Another attribute of the Divine which emerges from this is that Buddha transcends time, as already mentioned. As a physically projected being, he has his feet within the temporal realm, it is true, but in his divine hypostasis he towers beyond Time in its threefold modality. Yet though timeless, he is not a non-entity. He is possessed of a mass of virtues, beyond reckoning. And chief amongst these is Loving-kindness—as we shall see in our next chapter.

⁵ *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*, tr. by Thomas Cleary (Boston & London: Shambhala Publications, 1993, pp. 1.153-1.155.

CHAPTER FOUR

Buddha as Love

PERHAPS THE SINGLE CHARACTERISTIC which many people associate with “God” is Love. This quality is pre-eminent in Buddha. It is called *maitri*, which can be translated as “friendliness”, “benevolence”, “kindliness”, “loving-kindness”, or simply “love”. The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* contains a veritable paean to Loving-kindness in the following words addressed by the Buddha to one of his disciples. When the Buddha refers to himself, he normally uses the term, “Tathagata”, which means the One who has gone to, and come from, the Absolute (“Tathata”). He states:

Loving-kindness is the Tathagata. O noble son! Loving-kindness acts as the parent of all beings. The parent is Loving-kindness. Loving-kindness is the Tathagata. O noble son! Loving-kindness is what exists in the inconceivable world of all Buddhas. What exists in the inconceivable world of all Buddhas is at once Loving-kindness. Know that Loving-kindness is the Tathagata. O noble son! Loving-kindness is the Buddha-*dhatu* [Buddha Principle, Buddha Core, Buddha Essence] of all beings. This Buddha-*dhatu* has long been overshadowed by defilements. That is why all beings are unable to see it. The Buddha-*dhatu* is Loving-kindness. Loving-kindness is the Tathagata. . . . O noble son! Loving-kindness is the Eternal. The Eternal is Dharma. Dharma is the Sangha [all the Awakened Beings in their entirety]. The Sangha is Loving-kindness. Loving-kindness is the Tathagata. O noble son! Loving-kindness is Bliss. Bliss is Dharma. Dharma is the Sangha. The Sangha is Loving-kindness. Loving-kindness is the Tathagata. O noble son! Loving-kindness is the Pure. The Pure is Dharma. Dharma is the Sangha. The Sangha is Loving-kindness. Loving-kindness is the Tathagata. O noble son! Loving-kindness is the Self (*atman*). The Self is Dharma. . . . O noble son! Loving-kindness is the Immortal (*amrta*). The Immortal is Loving-kindness. Loving-kindness is the Buddha-*dhatu*. The Buddha-

dhatu is Dharma. . . . O noble son! Loving-kindness is the limitless world of the Bhagavat [Blessed One]. The limitless world is Loving-kindness. Know that Loving-kindness is the Tathagata.¹

Here, everything ultimately resolves itself into one thing—Love. And interestingly, we learn from this passage that the quintessential, beneficent nature of the Buddha is in all beings, but covered up by their vices (chiefly, hatred, selfish desire, spiritual ignorance, pride and jealousy). Once those contaminants of our innermost nature are removed, we allow the fount of pure Love to spring forth from within us. This loving, immortal Buddha Principle (Buddha-*dhatu*) is referred to in this scripture and others as the True Self—as opposed to the deceptive, grasping, clinging, transitory, physically-based puny ego which dominates all of our unawakened lives. The Buddha is the embodiment of that True Self (the *atman*, as it is called in Sanskrit), and that True Self of Loving-kindness can be attained by all sentient beings.

Perhaps, at this juncture, we should say a few words about the Buddha-Self, since many people are under the mistaken impression that Mahayana Buddhism absolutely denies the existence of the eternal Self or Soul (which is Buddhically One in its nature, not multifarious and diverse). In the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, the Buddha states:

. . . all phenomena are not non-Self. The Self is real, the Self is eternal, the Self is virtue, the Self is everlasting, the Self is immovable, and the Self is peace.

This Self is what the Buddha truly is. But he has two other forms of manifested body-and-mind, which are less mysterious and more visible than his “Dharma-Being” (*dharma-kaya*): they are the “Enjoyment Body” (*sambhoga-kaya*), which is the radiant, heavenly form of the Buddha perceived by high-level beings, and the “Transformation Body” (*nirmana-kaya*), the physical body which the Buddha assumes here on earth. In his manifestation as Buddha in the world, as well as Buddha in the various Buddha-Paradises which he develops, the Buddha is very much a **person**. In fact, the Buddha is frequently called (and refers to himself as) the *maha-purusha*. This

¹ *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, op. cit., vol. 5 (2000), pp. 17-18.

means “Great Man” or “Great Person”—but crucially the term would have had connotations of “God” to Buddha’s Indian Brahmanic listeners of the day (just as the term “Bhagavat” was usually applied to a perceived Divine incarnation by the Brahmanic religionists of that time). The Brahmanic religion understood *purusha* to mean (and here I quote from Sri Swami Sivananda): “the Supreme Being; a being that lies in the city (of the heart of all beings). The term is applied to the Lord. The description applies to the Self which abides in the heart of all things.”² Interestingly, the Buddhas are specifically styled the “Hearts of All Beings” in the *Lalitavistara Sutra*.³ We should become sensitive to such important verbal resonances.

But is the Buddha actually worshipped like a God? After all, as we saw from our various dictionary definitions, worship is an element invariably associated with God. Let us see what the sutras reveal on this point.

² Sri Swami Sivananda, *Yoga Vedanta Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973), p. 135.

³ *The Lalitavistara Sutra: The Voice of the Buddha*, tr. by Gwendolyn Bays (Berkeley, CA: Dharma Publishing, 1983), p. 527.

CHAPTER FIVE

Buddha as Worthy of Worship

IN ALL THE GREAT WORLD RELIGIONS, God is regarded as the Supreme Being, who is worthy of veneration and worship. It is similar with Buddha.

Firstly, we should note that the term customarily used by many of his disciples in the scriptures when addressing the Buddha is “Bhagavat”—which means “The Blessed One” or Lord. It would have been linked with the idea of the Divine (“Ishvara”) by the Indians of his time. This alone gives us an indication of the highest regard in which he was held. In fact, when the Buddha was born on earth, the “gods” (*devas*) all bowed down before this “god of gods”, as the Buddha himself relates in the *Lalitavistara Sutra*:

When I was born, the three thousand worlds were shaken: Shakra and Brahma [great gods], the *asuras* [Titans], the *mahoragas* [great snake-like beings], Chandra [the moon] and Surya [the sun], as well as Vaisravana and Kumara, all bowed their heads at my feet and did homage to me. What god is so distinguished by his superiority over me . . . ? I am the god above the gods, superior to all the gods; no god is like me—how could there be a higher?¹

When the infant Buddha was taken to the temple of the gods, a miraculous event occurred: all the statues of the gods rose from their plinths and bowed down before baby Buddha. The *Lalitavistara Sutra* memorably relates this wonder:

As soon as the Bodhisattva set his right foot in the temple, the statues of the gods, including Shiva, Skanda, Narayana, Kubera, Chandra, Surya, Vaisravana, Shakra, Brahma,

¹ *The Lalitavistara Sutra*, pp. 174-175.

the Guardians of the World, and others, rose from their places and bowed at the feet of the Bodhisattva (i.e., the Buddha-to-be).²

When we turn to other sutras too, we find numerous instances of worship of Buddha. In the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, for example, human devotees of the Lord bow down before him when they are in his presence and display the greatest veneration. The following is just one example out of many from that scripture, and tells of how a host of great Bodhisattvas (aspirant Buddhas) behaved when they approached Lord Buddha himself:

They sped to where the Buddha was, walked around him 100,000 times, folded their hands, [and] paid homage. . . .³

Not only humans worship the Buddha, but gods and animals too, as the same *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* again makes clear. We read of the many offerings which the heavenly beings (the “gods”) make to Buddha as the latter prepares to leave his physical body:

All the devas [gods] up to the highest heaven were gathered there [before Buddha]. At that time, Great Brahma [a major god] and other devas put forth light which shone over the four lands. To the men and devas of the world of desire, the lights of the sun and moon were all hidden. They had bejewelled hanging-ensigns, banners and parasols of coloured silk [as offerings to Buddha]. . . . They came to where the Buddha was, touched his feet with their heads, and said to him: “O Bhagavat, O Tathagata! Have pity and accept our last offerings.”⁴

Even animals make offerings to Buddha, as the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* tells us:

² *The Lalitavistara Sutra*, pp. 175-176.

³ *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, vol. 1, p. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Also, there were lion kings there. . . . Bearing various flowers and fruits, they came to where the Buddha was, touched his feet with their heads, stepped back, and sat down to one side. . . . Also, there were buffaloes, cows and sheep present, who were as numerous as the sands of 20 Ganges, who all came to the Buddha and gave forth wonderfully fragrant milk. . . . There were (also) present all the kings of the bees. . . . They brought in many flowers, came to where the Buddha was, touched his feet with their heads, walked around him once, stepped back, and sat down to one side.⁵

Turning to the *Shrimaladevisimhanada Sutra*, we are presented with the following adulatory and venerating words of prayer of the great Queen Shrimala, who is inspired and empowered by the Buddha's wisdom:

Lord and Saviour—your Kayas [bodies] and Glory beyond analogy are in-conceivable and beyond all conceptual representation. Salutations—O Lord and Saviour of the World. You have the inconceivable creative, living essence. . . . Salutations—O Victorious King of Dharma. You know all that is knowable. . . . Salutations—O you who are measureless, Salutations—O you who are beyond all conceptual representation, Salutations—O you who are inconceivable, Salutations—O you whose *kayas* [bodies] are boundless. Lord and Saviour, take me now into your protection.⁶

We notice the characteristic stress on the incomprehensibility of Buddha, and the employment of the term “Saviour” in the foregoing homage to the Lord. It is of course a vital aspect of God, or of God's divine messengers, that they can save us from the suffering generated by our sins. In Buddhism, too, there is the teaching that by venerating the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life, “Amitabha-Amitayus”, we can be liberated from our karma and delivered into that Buddha's Land of Happiness (“Sukhavati”) from which there is no slipping back into the world of karmic misery.

⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

⁶ *The Shrimaladevi Sutra*, tr. by Dr. Shenpen Hookham (Oxford: Longchen Foundation, 1998), p. 18.

The larger *Sukhavativyuha Sutra* all but begins with the words: “Adoration to Amitabha! Adoration to him whose soul is endowed with incomprehensible virtues!”⁷ And the smaller *Sukhavativyuha Sutra* tells of how, when one is dying, one will be born in Buddha Amitayus’s Land of Happiness (a Paradise attainable prior to one’s reaching Nirvana) if one prays accordingly while thinking on Amitayus. Interestingly, the gaining of this paradisiacal world is not dependent on one’s having generated masses of good karma (although this is contradicted in some versions of the sutra)—but merely by dwelling in thought upon Buddha Amitayus, as Buddha relates:

. . . all beings . . . ought to make fervent prayer for that Buddha country. And why? Because they come together there with such excellent men. Beings are not born in that Buddha country of the Tathagata Amitayus as a reward and result of good works performed in this present life. No, whatever son or daughter of a family shall hear the name of the blessed Amitayus, the Tathagata, and having heard it, shall keep it in mind, and with thoughts undisturbed shall keep it in mind for one, two, three, four, five, six or seven nights—when that son or daughter of a family comes to die, then that Amitayus, the Tathagata, surrounded by an assembly of disciples and followed by a host of Bodhisattvas, will stand before them at their hour of death, and they will depart this life with tranquil minds. After their death they will be born in the world Sukhavati, in the Buddha country of the same Amitayus, the Tathagata. Therefore . . . every son and every daughter of a family ought with their whole mind to make fervent prayer for that Buddha country.⁸

⁷ “The Larger *Sukhavati-Vyuha Sutra*,” tr. by Max Müller, in *Buddhist Mahayana Texts*, ed. by E. B. Cowell et al. (New York: Dover, 1969; orig. 1894). p. 1.

⁸ “The Smaller *Sukhavati-Vyuha Sutra*” in *Buddhist Mahayana Texts*, op. cit., p. 99.

This is reminiscent of a Christian's praying to Jesus for entry into Heaven. Buddha (in his varying guises—here as Amitayus) is Leader into Paradise. Buddha is seen as the Supreme Being who can save humanity. The famous *Lotus Sutra* specifically records Buddha as saying that the entire world (viewed as of a threefold nature in Buddhism) is his domain and that he is its father and Saviour:

Now this triple world, All is my domain; the living beings in it all are my sons. But now this place abounds with distresses; and I alone am able to save and protect them.⁹

In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, we read of how Bodhisattvas (aspirants to Buddhahood) see all the countless manifestations of Buddha in the cosmos and worship them severally and as one. We have to remember that although there are infinite numbers of Buddhas, in essence there is only One. As Robert Thurman, expert on Tibetan Buddhism, writes: "In the absolute sense, there is only one Buddha, as the Truth Bodies ["Dharmakayas"] of different Buddhas cannot be distinguished from each other."¹⁰ The *Avatamsaka Sutra (Gandavyuha)* speaks of the Bodhisattvas who are ". . . intent upon one and the same inconceivable body of all buddhas."¹¹ It is precisely to Buddha, sometimes viewed as one, sometimes as multiform, that these Bodhisattvas make their religiously inspired offerings. We read:

The Buddhas are as infinite as living beings;
They [Bodhisattvas] generously present offerings to them all.
All kinds of wonderfully scented flowers,
Jewels, clothes, pennants, and parasols,
They distribute throughout the cosmos,
Determined to offer them to all Buddhas. . . .

⁹ *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, tr. by B. Kato, W. E. Soothill, et al. (Tokyo: Kosei, 1975), p. 98.

¹⁰ *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, tr. by Robert A. F. Thurman (London: Thorsons, 1994), p. 249.

¹¹ *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, op. cit., p. 1.265.

With their whole bodies they successively bow
In respect for those boundless Victors [i.e., Buddhas];
They also praise them with their words
Forever and ever more.

Their offerings to one Buddha
Are as numberless as sentient beings;
Thus do they make offerings to one Buddha
And to all Buddhas in the same way.

They provide for and laud the Buddhas
Throughout all ages of the world;
The ages of the world may come to an end,
But [Bodhisattvas'] offerings never cease.

In the various ages of all worlds
They cultivate practices there,
Honoring and attending one Buddha
Tirelessly throughout all ages.¹²

Clearly such devotion could only be called forth by what is the Highest of the High. It is nothing less than the God-Principle which these Bodhisattvas are worshipping.

Of course the real veneration of Buddha does not focus on his earthly, physical body—it is directed towards Dharma, Buddha's unchanging Essence. By giving up earthly pleasures and practising the spiritual attainments that come from following Dharma, the Bodhisattva is truly according with Buddha's teaching. The Buddha speaks of such correct reverence and practice in the *Bhadrakalpika Sutra*:

¹² "Ten Dedications", from *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, op. cit. p. 690.

But the ones who have true reverence for me are those who, after having listened to these Sutras, give up all pleasures and abide in the pure attainments. For example, the way Subhuti worshipped me: rejecting the need for my physical presence, he worshipped the Dharma itself—for why should there be veneration of my material body?¹³

As the Buddha indicates in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, it is within “Dharmata” (the Essence of Dharma and all phenomena) that virtuous people expect to behold Buddha. They do not fixate on his terrestrial appearance, but seek him out within the Essence of Reality (“Dharmata”):

All good men and women desire to see me, to respect me, to see me in Dharmata...¹⁴

And the definite teaching is that, by reverentially seeking Buddha thus, Buddha will indeed be found.

¹³ *The Bhadrakalpika Sutra*, tr. as *The Fortunate Aeon* (Berkeley, CA: Dharma Publishing, 1986), vol. 1, p.71.

¹⁴ *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, op. cit., vol. 7, p. 11.

CHAPTER SIX

The Powers of the Buddha

TRANSCENDENTAL POWER is an important attribute of God—complete freedom to act as willed. How do matters stand in this regard with the Buddha?

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* speaks of the “. . . infinity of the power of all buddhas”,¹ and the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* indicates that Buddha is Freedom itself. The Buddha is possessed of the “Great Self” of unlimited freedom and can make himself as vast as the cosmos or as small as a dust-mote; he can project an infinite number of bodies across all universes, and can make his body such that nothing can obstruct it; he can dwell in one place and yet enable the beings of all other places to see him; he can gain anything he wants, and he can use any one of his sense-organs to register any sense-impression normally conveyed (in humans) by one of the other four organs of sense; he can expound the deep meaning of Dharma for aeons to come, and yet he has no egocentric sense of “I say and they listen”; finally, as we heard earlier, the Buddha exists everywhere, filling all space—in fact, there is nowhere where he does not exist.²

In the *Lalitavistara Sutra*, Buddha calls himself the “Lord of the Dharma . . . Driver of the caravan; Master over all *dharmas* [i.e., over all things]; Master of the Dharma.”³ He thus enjoys sovereign mastery over Absolute Truth and over all other things, as is further emphasised when the same scripture has Buddha describe himself as “the one possessing power”⁴ and as “He who

¹ *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, op. cit., p. 955.

² For all these capabilities of the Buddha, see the *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, op. cit., vol. 7, pp. 29-30.

³ *The Lalitavistara Sutra*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 639.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 643.

has obtained power over all *dharmas* [i.e., over all things].”⁵ The important *Srimaladevisimhanada Sutra* similarly says of the Buddha: “The Lord is the root of all *dharmas* [things]; the Lord is all-powerful”. Furthermore, his Body of Truth (*dharmakaya*) is said by himself to be uncreated, adamant and indestructible.⁶

Since the Buddha is “the boundless Dharmadhatu” (the expanse of all things), according to the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, nothing remains unknown to him, nothing is hidden from his sight. He has the power of complete knowledge. Indeed, he is called All-Knowing (*sarvajna*), or termed “Omniscience” (*sarvajnana*) itself.⁷

There are also 10 specific powers which are credited to the Buddha. These relate to his knowledge and are said to be the following:

1. He knows wisely, as it really is, what is right and wrong.
2. He knows wisely, as they really are, the cause and effect of the karmic results of past, present and future.
3. He knows wisely, as they really are, the order and grades of all meditative states and attainments.
4. He knows wisely, as they really are, the higher and lower faculties of sentient beings.
5. He knows wisely, as they really are, the various understandings and aspirations of sentient beings.
6. He knows wisely, as they really are, the various conditions and circumstances of sentient beings.
7. He knows wisely, as they really are, which ways and practices lead to which types of rebirth.
8. He remembers, as they really were, the past lives of all beings, including his own.
9. With his divine eye, he knows, as it really is, the decease and rebirth of sentient beings, and the maturing of their good and evil karma in future lives.

⁵ Ibid. p. 661.

⁶ The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, vol. 1, pp. 31, 65.

⁷ The *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, vol. 1, p. 24.

10. He knows wisely, as it really is, the present extinction of spiritual defilements within himself and other purified beings.⁸

Clearly, Buddha is multi-powered. But is he any kind of Creator? Is he the Ground of all that is?

⁸ The formulation of these powers here is chiefly based on Garma C. C. Chang's second list of the 10 Buddhist powers in the "Numerical Glossary" of his book *A Treasury of Mahayana Sutras* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), p. 494.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Buddha as Universal Source

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS of God is that he is the source, the well-spring, the sustainer of all that exists. Does this quality of divine progenitorship apply to Buddha?

Here we encounter some difficulties. The Buddhist sutras are generally quite reluctant to present Buddha or Dharma as the creative fount of all phenomena. Yet there are definite hints—and more than that—indicating that ultimately all things do indeed owe their continued existence and sustenance to Dharma or Buddha. In actual fact, the word “Dharma” essentially means that which “upholds” or “supports”. One Buddhist dictionary gives as the literal meaning of “Dharma”: “carrying”, “holding”.¹ Dharma is thus the supporting ground that upholds all that exists.

But before we come to this in more detail, let us consider an area where the Mahayana sutras definitely present Buddha as a world-creating being: this is in connection with the “Buddha worlds” (also called “Buddha paradises”, “Buddha fields” or “Buddha lands”).

Every Buddha projects from his mind a vast world in which he becomes active as a redemptive teacher and guide to the beings born therein. These “Buddha lands” (each of which can comprise a billion worlds) are home to highly spiritual or religious persons who have faith in the Buddha and who are just one step distant from Nirvana.

To indicate that the Buddhas do indeed **make** these Buddha-worlds, we shall quote briefly from *The Lotus Sutra*. Here we hear Shakyamuni Buddha speak of a Buddha yet to come, called “Radiance of Dharma Buddha”. Of that Buddha we learn:

¹ *The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen* by Ingrid Fischer-Schreiber, Franz-Karl Ehrhard and Michael S. Diener (Boston & London: Shambhala Publications, 1991), entry on “Dharma”, p. 54.

That buddha will **make** [his] buddha-land of a three-thousand-great-thousandfold universe [of worlds as many] as the sands of the Ganges . . .²

Interestingly, our own universe—called the “saha world” (“world of endurance”!)—is said in *The Lotus Sutra* to be the property and domain of Shakyamuni Buddha (the historical Buddha of India). We read:

. . . in **my** saha-world there are in fact *bodhisattva-mahasattvas* [numerous] as the sands of sixty thousand Ganges. . .³

One can therefore presume that this universe, like the other Buddha-worlds, was actually **created** or **projected** by the Buddha. Although our world may not seem exactly paradisiacal, we must remember that all its beings enshrine the “Buddha-Principle” (the Buddha-*dhatu*—the inner potency for attaining Nirvanic Eternity, Bliss, True Selfhood and Purity) within themselves, so that they are assured of one day reaching Nirvana, from which perspective everything becomes essentially BUDDHA. Perhaps it is in this sense that our universe too can be viewed as a Buddha-land. And perhaps that is why *The Lotus Sutra* contains the specific admonition (from a Buddha called “King Wisdom of the Pure Flower Constellation”) that one should not look down disparagingly upon this world:

“Do not look lightly on that domain or conceive a low opinion of it”, that Buddha says of our world.⁴

But there are stronger indications within the sutras that the entire cosmos—all things phenomenal and noumenal—are grounded in the underlying and uncreated Buddha-Essence (sometimes called in Sanskrit *Tathagata-garbha*—the Womb of Buddha—which term indirectly

² Emphasis added; *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, tr. by Bunno Kato, Yoshiro Tura and Kojiro Miyasaka (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing, 1975), p. 172.

³ Emphasis added; *ibid.*, p. 237.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

and interestingly portrays Buddha as a birth-giving Mother). In the *Shrimaladevi Sutra*, we hear of how this Tathagatagarbha sustains both *samsara* (the cycles of birth, death and rebirth—our phenomenal universe) and the realm of the Buddhas. The scripture states:

. . . there is only one support . . . and this is supreme over all supports and is supramundane. It is the true support and Refuge.

. . . the Tathagatagarbha is the support of *samsara*. It is with reference to the Tathagatagarbha that the Lord teaches that there is no beginning . . . it is because the Tathagatagarbha exists that there is such a thing as that which is called *samsara*. What is called “*samsara*” is the cycle of grasping at [new] faculties of those who seize [are reborn] as soon as they have passed away [lit. transferred]. . . . “Death” and “birth” are worldly conventions. Death is the faculties ceasing, and birth is the faculties arising anew. The Tathagatagarbha, however, is not born, does not die, does not transfer, does not arise. It is beyond the sphere of the characteristics of the compounded; it is permanent, stable and changeless.

It is therefore the ground, support and dwelling place of those who have the knowledge of liberation from the sheaths [of spiritual ignorance], who are connected and not separate from it. In this way, the Tathagatagarbha [also] is the ground, support and dwelling place of all outer compounded *dharmas* [phenomena] that do not have the knowledge of liberation and which are not connected and are separate from it. . . . The Lord is the master, the Lord is the support.⁵

This complicated passage crucially communicates that the Essence of Buddha—the Buddha-Matrix or Tathagata-garbha—is upholding all things and persons, both those who are “Awakened” and those who are not. And that source, that root and sustainer of everything—is Lord Buddha.

⁵ *The Shrimaladevi Sutra*, op. cit., pp. 40-42.

In the *Maharatnakuta Sutra* (in a discourse called “On the Elucidation of Consciousness”), it is made clear that this all-sustaining Buddha-Sphere is actually a universal Consciousness (although this should not be equated with the normal, imperfect, often flitting, anxious, ego-dominated consciousness that we normally cling to). In the *Maharatnakuta* scripture the Buddha tells of how Consciousness underlies and upholds all that is visible and invisible, the entire cosmos (the *dharmadhatu*—realm of Dharma, realm of total, all-inclusive Reality). He declares:

Consciousness is devoid of form and substance, but it upholds all in the *dharmadhatu*; it is fully endowed with the power of wisdom . . . from the same consciousness that upholds the entire *dharmadhatu* come all the samsaric beings with bodies of different colors, such as white, black, yellow, and red; and with different dispositions, such as gentleness and irascibility. . . . **Apart from consciousness, there is no *dharmadhatu*, and apart from the *dharmadhatu*, there is no consciousness.**⁶

This cosmic Consciousness is simply called “Mind” in the *Lankavatara Sutra*. We shall come to that scripture in our final chapter, but at this point we must take a look at what is probably amongst the most explicit of Buddhist texts regarding the doctrine (now become overt and unhidden) that all things spring from a single Source—Buddhic Mind, or “Awakened Mind”.

The relevant scripture is not officially a sutra (although it does on occasion refer to itself as such), but a Buddhist “tantra” (a more mystical, secret manual for Buddhist practice). It is entitled *The All-Creating King*. This is what it teaches: all things spring from the Awakened Mind (*bodhicitta*), which is called Samantabhadra Buddha. “Samantabhadra” means “All-Good” (we remember that one of the definitions of God earlier in this study stated that God is “all good”). This Samantabhadra Buddha is the source of all Buddhas and all beings. Apart from Samantabhadra Buddha, nothing truly exists, since all depends on Buddha, but Buddha depends

⁶ Emphasis added; from *A Treasury of Mahayana Sutras*, op. cit., pp. 226-227.

on nothing. This Primaeval Buddha is called “Adi-Buddha” (Primordial Buddha) elsewhere in Buddhism, and is sometimes named Vairochana or Vajrasattva. The important point, however, is that this Buddha represents the Ultimate Source of all things, whether of the past, present or future. Without Samantabhadra Buddha—the all-good, universal Mind of Awake-ness—nothing can exist. Here are some quotes from the *All-Creating King Tantra*, in which Samantabhadra speaks directly to the listener:

I, the supreme source [“All-Creating King”], am the sole maker, and no other agent exists in the world. The nature of phenomena is created through me. . . . The very manifestation of existence itself depends on me. . . . I am self-arising wisdom that has existed from the beginning. I am the supreme source of everything, pure and total consciousness. . . . “Consciousness” means that self-arising wisdom, the true essence, dominates and clearly perceives all the phenomena of the animate and inanimate universe. This self-arising fundamental substance, not produced by causes and condition, governs all things and gives life to all things. . . . As my nature is unhindered and all-pervading, it is the celestial abode of wisdom and luminous space: therein abides only self-arising wisdom. As I am the substance whence everything arises, the five great elements, the three worlds [i.e., the worlds of Desire, Form, and Formlessness] and the six classes of beings [hell-denzens, ghosts, animals, humans, Titans, and gods] are only my body, my voice, and my mind: I myself create my own nature. . . . The root of all phenomena is pure and total consciousness, the source. All that appears is my nature. All that manifests is my magical display. All sounds and words express only my meaning. . . .

I am the core of all that exists. I am the seed of all that exists. I am the foundation of all that exists. I am the root of existence. I am “the core”, because I contain all phenomena. I am “the seed”, because I give birth to everything. I am “the cause”, because all comes forth from me. I am “the trunk”, because the ramifications of every event sprout from

me. I am “the foundation”, because all abides in me. I am called “the root”, because I **am everything**.⁷

This amazing “theos-en-pan” (“God-in-all”), divine declaration establishes a number of important points. Firstly, the Absolute Reality is Universal Mind or Consciousness. Secondly, that Consciousness generates all things, from ordinary creatures, people and animals to the highest Buddhist beings. Thirdly, that Consciousness is able to **communicate** with its creation (that is precisely what it is doing here)—there is a potential relationship between Creator and Created. Fourthly, this Supreme Source is in some senses a **personal being**, however transcendent (it speaks of possessing universal body, speech and mind, and of “my nature”, etc.). Fifthly, it was never created but has existed from the very beginning. Finally, everything enshrines this All-Making King’s very own Nature within itself—nothing is cut off from “God”, the essence of the intelligent Totality.

Some readers might be surprised to see Buddha presented so unambiguously as a creative God (in effect), but this Buddhist scripture is not alone in so portraying the Original Buddha. The short Buddhist text called *Advayasiddhi*, by Laksminkara, refers to the “supreme Lord” who is “omniscient” and “the progenitor of the three worlds” [i.e., the entire threefold universe] and states that “all creatures are generated from Vairochana”,⁸ the Primordial Buddha. Moreover, there is a whole separate religion which reveres Buddha as God incarnate—part of the Vedic religion of India, popularly known as “Hinduism”. We might do well in this context to see what it teaches.

⁷ Emphasis added. Translation of “The All-Creating King”, published as *The Supreme Source*, tr. by Adriano Clemente and Andrew Lukianowicz (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1999), pp. 137-141, 157.

⁸ *Advayasiddhi: The Tantric View of Laksminkara*, tr. by Dr. Ramprasad Mishra (Delhi: Kant Publications, 1993), pp. 31, 34.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Vedic View of the Buddha

WITHIN THE VAST STRUCTURE of spiritual teachings which constitute the Vedic religion of India (the Vedas and Vedic-based scriptures are the great, ancient holy books of that religion), there is a view of the Buddha which sees him as an incarnation of Divinity.

The monumental scripture called the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (revered by the Vaishnavas, devotees of Krishna-Vishnu, as one of the most sacred books of all time) contains the following reference to the Lord Buddha:

Then, in the beginning of Kali-yuga [the age of quarrel and hypocrisy], the Lord [Krishna] will appear as Lord Buddha, the son of Anjana, in the province of Gaya, just for the purpose of deluding those who are envious of the faithful theist.¹

Prince Siddhartha did indeed “become” the historical Buddha under the Bodhi Tree at Gaya, and the Vaishnava understanding of the Buddha’s mission is that it was to attract people of atheistic propensities and cause them to revere him. The atheists thus (unwittingly) were paying homage to a great Divine Being, whom Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (founder of the modern Krishna Consciousness Movement) describes as “a powerful incarnation of the Personality of Godhead.”²

Commenting on the above passage from the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, Srila Prabhupada writes:

¹ *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 1.3.24, quoted in *Vedic Paradigm* by Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, ed. by Danavir Goswami (Kansas City: Rupanuga Vedic College, 2000), p. 323.

² *Vedic Paradigm*, op. cit., p. 323.

He [Buddha] deluded the atheists because such atheists who followed his principles did not believe in God, but they kept their absolute faith in Lord Buddha, who himself was the incarnation of God. Thus the faithless people were made to believe in God in the form of Lord Buddha. That was the mercy of Lord Buddha: he made the faithless faithful to him.³

It is the Vaishnava teaching that Buddha's chief mission was to stop the animal sacrifices which were being heavily indulged in at that time in the name of the Vedas. The Buddha preached non-violence (*ahimsa*), spoke out against the slaughter of animals and advocated vegetarianism (a number of the Mahayana sutras confirm this, although regrettably and shockingly many modern-day Mahayana Buddhists insist on eating meat!). According to Srila Prabhupada, Buddha outwardly rejected the authority of the Vedas, so that people would renounce the animal sacrifices which those sacred books seemed to recommend. Srila Prabhupada comments:

The animal sacrifice as stated in the Vedas is different from the unrestricted animal-killing in the slaughterhouse. Because the *asuras* [aggressive, demonic beings] or the so-called scholars of Vedic literatures put forward the evidence of animal-killing in the Vedas, Lord Buddha superficially denied the authority of the Vedas. This rejection of the Vedas by Lord Buddha was adopted in order to save people from the vice of animal-killing as well as to save the poor animals from the slaughtering process of their big brothers who clamor for universal brotherhood, peace, justice and equity. There is no justice when there is animal-killing. Lord Buddha wanted to stop it completely, and therefore his cult of *ahimsa* was propagated not only in India but also outside the country. Technically Lord Buddha's philosophy is called atheistic because there is no acceptance of the Supreme Lord and because that system of philosophy denied the authority of the Vedas. But that is an act of camouflage by the Lord. **Lord Buddha is the incarnation of Godhead. As such, he is the original propounder of Vedic knowledge.** He therefore cannot reject Vedic philosophy. But he rejected it outwardly because the

³ Ibid.

sura-dvisa, or the demons who are always envious of the devotees of Godhead, try to support cow-killing or animal-killing from the pages of the Vedas, and this is now being done by the modernized *sannyasis* [renunciates]. Lord Buddha had to reject the authority of the Vedas altogether.⁴

Srila Prabhupada goes on to say that a follower of Krishna should submit him/herself to Buddha, since Buddha can assist that person in not mis-applying the Vedic teachings:

One should therefore surrender to Lord Buddha so that he can help one avoid misusing the injunctions of the Vedas.⁵

It is very interesting that Srila Prabhupada indicates Buddha's "camouflaging" of his divinity. When we look carefully at some of the statements which issue from the Buddha (as we have done in earlier chapters), we see many clues as to his divine hypostasis. It is as though the Buddha did not wish **totally** to conceal his godlike identity. It peeks through here and there. And it seems that in this regard (as with Buddha's vegetarianism) the Krishna devotees have preserved a vital aspect of Buddha-understanding which many "orthodox" Buddhists (in my view) mistakenly deny.

But let us return to the *Srimad Bhagavatam*. Most fascinatingly, this scripture contains the following revelation, in which seeming UFOs and their malevolent operators find mention in connection with an interplanetary war, along with a saving Buddha:

When the atheists, after being well versed in the Vedic scientific knowledge, annihilate inhabitants of different planets, flying unseen in the sky on well-built rockets prepared

⁴ Emphasis added; *ibid.*, p. 324.

⁵ *Ibid.*

by the great scientist, Maya, the Lord will bewilder their minds by dressing Himself attractively as Buddha and will preach on subreligious principles.⁶

Srila Prabhupada comments on this passage:

This incarnation of Lord Buddha is not the same Buddha incarnation we have in the present history of mankind. According to Srila Jiva Gosvami, the Buddha incarnation mentioned in this verse appeared in a different Kali age. In the duration of life of one Manu there are more than seventy-two Kali-yugas, and in one of them the particular type of Buddha mentioned here would appear. Lord Buddha incarnates at a time when the people are most materialistic and preaches commonsense religious principles.⁷

In view of the Vaishnavite understanding that Buddha is Krishna come to help living beings in the form of Buddha, we should not be surprised to hear Srila Prabhupada aver:

. . . we Vaisnava, we worship Lord Buddha,
kesava dhrta-Buddha-sarira jaya jagadisa hare.
*Nindas yajna-vidher ahaha sruti-jatam.*⁸

[“O Kesava! O Lord of the universe! O Lord Hari, who have assumed the form of Buddha! All glories to You! O Buddha of compassionate heart, you decry the slaughtering of poor animals performed according to the rules of Vedic sacrifice.”]

For followers of Krishna, Buddha is nothing less than a divine incarnation with a special mission to liberate the animals from slaughter and abuse. He is a personalised embodiment of God, utterly and totally worthy of worship.

⁶ *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, tr. by Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (Los Angeles: ISKCON), canto 2, ch. 7, p. 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Vedic Paradigm*, op. cit., p. 325. A quote from “Sri Dasavatara-stotra”, from *Gita-Govinda* by Jayadeva Goswami.

But does Buddha himself ever actually state anywhere in the Buddhist sutras that he is God—or at least align himself with what is popularly viewed as God? According to the Vedic view, a divine incarnation (an avatar) never directly says, “I am God”.⁹ But what of the specifically **Buddhist** scriptures? Does the Buddha indicate there that he is God? This fascinating question will form the subject-matter of our final chapter.

⁹ See *Vedic Paradigm*, p. 137.

CHAPTER NINE

Buddha Is Recognised Under Multitudinous Different Names

IT IS OFTEN CLAIMED by Buddhists that Buddha never once said that he was God. Yet this is not entirely true and requires qualification, for there are definite virtual admissions or strong hints from the Buddha that he is God.

As we have seen, within Buddhism, “Dharma” has much of the character normally ascribed to the more mystical conceptions of Divinity: Dharma is the intelligent, powerful, mysterious, sustaining Law of the cosmos.

Professor Alex Wayman refers to a book by Maryla Falk (entitled *Nama Rupa and Dharma Rupa*) in which the author makes the following important point regarding research carried out by a Professor Geiger and his wife:

One of the principal results of the long and detailed inquiry made by Mrs. M. Geiger and Prof. W. Geiger into the use of the term *dhamma* [i.e., Dharma] in the Pali Canon [i.e., the earliest extant Buddhist scriptures] . . . is the conclusion that ‘the concept *dhamma* takes in Buddhism the place of the brahman of older Vedanta’. . . We have shown above that in Upanishadic thought, ever since its Vedic beginnings, the equivalence of both terms [i.e., Dharma and Brahman] reflects the sameness of the entity they designate.¹

¹ Quoted in *Yoga of the Guhyasamajatantra* by Professor Alex Wayman (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977), p. 79.

Brahman is the mystical, all-pervasive, effulgent, impersonal, divine Reality—the Essence of the All, which informs everything—the Spirit or Soul of the universe. Dharma is very much like this. And, speaking to a disciple called Vakkali, the Buddha says in an early Pali Scripture:

Vakkali, **he who sees the *dhamma* sees me; he who sees me sees the *dhamma*. Indeed, Vakkali, seeing the *dhamma* is seeing me; seeing me is seeing the *dhamma*.**²

In the *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, Buddha re-states this, saying, “The Tathagata is Dharma, and Dharma is the Eternal.”³ Although Dharma is essentially abstract and impersonal, it projects and manifests through a **personal** being, who is Buddha. The impersonal and the personal thus become inextricably entwined and interwoven. Buddha manifests as the vessel or visible embodiment of Dharma, or Dharma in personalised, human form. And in a major Mahayana scripture called the *Lankavatara Sutra*, the Buddha goes much further. He reveals how he is praised and revered by people under a multitude of different names, some denoting a personal God, others an impersonal Ultimate; but in their ignorance these people fail to realise that the birthless and deathless Being they are all worshipping is actually one and the same—the Tathagata (Buddha). In the highly important passage which we now present, we hear Buddha clearly communicate that he is in fact what people deem to be “God”, known under countless diverse names:

I come into the hearing range of the ignorant in this Sahaloka [world of endurance—our world] in hundreds of thousands of three *asamkhyeyas* [numberless amounts] of names, and **they talk to me under these names, yet they fail to recognise that they are all my own appellations. There are some who call me the Self-existing One (*svayambhuva*), the Leader (*nayaka*), the Remover-of-obstacles (*vinayaka*), the Guiding One (*parinayaka*), Buddha, Rishi, Bull-king, Brahma, Vishnu, Isvara [God], the Originator (*pradhana*), Kapila, the Destroyer (*bhutanta*) [or: the Extreme of Reality],**

² Emphasis added; *Vakkali Sutta*, from *Khandha Samyutta* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1996), p. 244.

³ *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, vol. 4, p. 54.

the Imperishable (*arishta*), Nemina, Soma (moon), Fire, Rama, Vyasa, Suka, Indra, the Strong One (Balin), or Varuna; there are others who know me as Immortality (*anirodhanutpada*) [literally: non-Cessation, non-Arising], Emptiness, Suchness, Truth (*satyata*), Reality (*bhutata*), Limit of Reality (*bhutakoti*), Dharmadhatu [Realm of Dharma], Nirvana, Eternity (*nitya*), Sameness (*samata*), Non-Duality (*advaya*), the Imperishable (*anirodha*) [literally: Non-Cessation; Non-Extinction, Non-Ending], Formless (*animitta*) [literally: Without Characteristic Marks/ Qualities], Causality (*pratyaya*), Teaching the Cause of Buddhahood (*buddha-hetupadesa*), the All-Knowing (*sarvajna*), the Conquering One [or Conqueror] (*jina*), or the Will-body (*manomayakaya*).

While I am thus known in hundreds of thousands of three *asamkhyeyas* of titles, **not only in this world, but in other worlds** [too], my names are not exhausted; I am like the moon casting its shadow [reflection] on water, I am neither in it nor out of it. **Those who know me will recognise me everywhere**, but the ignorant who cannot rise above dualism will not know me.

They pay respect and make me offerings, but they do not understand well the meaning of words, do not distinguish ideas, the true from the false; they do not recognise the truth itself; clinging to words of teaching **they erroneously discriminate that the unborn and undying means a non-existence. They are thus unable to comprehend that one Tathagata may be known in many different names and titles.**⁴

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<sup>4</sup> Emphasis added; From the *Lankavatara Sutra*, quoted in *Studies in the Lankavatara Sutra* by Dr. D. T. Suzuki, orig. ed. 1930; (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), pp. 353-354.

We have reached the end of our quest. It is much to be regretted that most Buddhists seem unaware of, or if aware then unstirred by, this vital passage, where the Buddha finally lays to rest any lingering doubts which the aspirant Buddhist may have as to whether or not the Buddha is Divine. The Buddha here indicates that as the beginningless and indestructible embodiment of Ultimate Reality, he is worshipped as the personal God Vishnu or Rama (also famously known as Krishna), Isvara (i.e., the general name for the Supreme God, later identified with Shiva), the primal Original Source (*pradhana*) of all things. But he can also be linked with the more impersonal concepts of Nirvana, Emptiness, and Truth. There are in fact infinitudes of names and terms for Buddha, yet they all ultimately denote the same Godhead. As the Buddha declares in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*: “Truth is one, but names are many.”<sup>5</sup> Yet none of these names or concepts fully captures or embraces Him—neither in this world nor on other planets, where the inhabitants have still further names for Him. The Ultimate is reflected in everything, yet cannot be grasped by the mind of ignorance—any more than we can grab hold of the moon mirrored in a body of water. Yet this does not in any way mean that Buddha or God is a non-entity or that He cannot be reached. Far from it. In fact, the wise see God in all things. And as the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* makes clear, the nature of Buddha-Dharma is BENEVOLENCE or LOVE (*maitri*). It is by connecting with that LOVE through wise and selfless kindness, through self-purification (eradication of all inner moral negativity) and ego-transcendence that one is finally enabled to enter the divine realm of the eternal, blissful and pure **SELF**, which is the **SELF OF BUDDHA**. It is here at last that we find immortality and eternal release into limitless and unclouded, unceasing happiness. It is here that we finally come to SEE the Absolute—*bhuta-tathata/dharmata*—which speaks of itself in decidedly **personal** terms. As the Buddha in the *Lankavatara Sutra* has it in connection with the self-purified seeker after Truth:

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<sup>5</sup> *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, vol. 4, p. 47.

When the truth-seeker sees [the Truth] devoid of discrimination and free from impurities, then he is accomplished in his contemplation; **he sees me, there is no doubt.**<sup>6</sup>

And the “Me” that is seen is the indwelling and transcendent Divine—supreme, omniscient, omnipresent, infinite in power and measureless in virtue and universal Buddhic Mind. It is this One Supreme Reality, this One Without a Second, which has been hidden from our tarnished vision for uncountable millennia, and with whom we now, after aeons of searching, joyously connect in fully realised freedom.

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<sup>6</sup> Emphasis added; *The Lankavatara Sutra*, tr. by Dr. D. T. Suzuki (Boulder: Prajna, 1978; orig. edition 1932), p. 228.

## About Dr. Tony Page



I am English, a full-time university lecturer and researcher, and an academically published scholar. I was born in 1957 in London, England, where I spent most of my life. I was educated at London University, Freiburg University and Vienna University, and took my Doctorate of Philosophy (German/Austrian Literature) at the University of Oxford in 1988; as part of my research during my doctoral years I extensively investigated the affinities of world-view between the 19th-century Austrian poet, thinker, novella writer and dramatist, Friedrich Halm, and the philosophy of Buddhism. My mentor on Buddhism was the Buddhist scholar Maurice Walshe (of London University), and later I studied Mahayana Buddhism extensively and deeply for nearly ten years on a private basis with Buddhist scholar and translator, Stephen Hodge (the first Westerner to become a monk of the Shingon tradition in Japan).

I am a practising (but still sensuous-*klesha*-afflicted!) Mahayana Buddhist and an independent lecturer on Buddhism, and for decades have felt a strong inner link with the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* (and have lectured on the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* at the School of Oriental and African

Studies, the University of London, at the request of that university). In December 2004 I set up the first-ever website devoted to the *Nirvana Sutra* (at <http://www.nirvanasutra.net/>), to attempt to shine more light on what may be called “*Nirvana Sutra* Buddhism” or “Tathagatagarbha Buddhism”. My aim is to communicate accurately what the Buddha in the *Nirvana Sutra* and other Tathagatagarbha sutras actually says, rather than propagate the doctrinal distortions into which some later commentators have twisted these teachings.

In 2006 I established the first-ever website centred on the texts of key Tathagatagarbha sutras. I have worked in close collaboration on the *Nirvana Sutra* with the Buddhist scholar and translator Stephen Hodge, to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for his splendid translation work. In 2009 my German translation of Stephen Hodge’s unpublished English rendering of the Tibetan *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* was completed on my website (the bulk of its having been up on the website for some years previously). This was the first time that the Tibetan *Nirvana Sutra* had ever appeared in any Western language. But all praise must go not to me, but to Stephen Hodge, who is the real pioneer in this field. However, Stephen wanted the German version withdrawn, as he felt that his English version (of which the German version was an accurate translation) was not yet good enough for publication. Nevertheless, it is my hope that by propagating the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* and other Tathagatagarbha sutras I will bring more spiritual light and uplift into people’s lives and that my engagement with the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* will extend into many years (and indeed lives!) to come. . . .

I am a committed vegetarian, and an advocate of human rights, fairness, liberty and justice. I particularly deplore the ruthless oppression of the poor and powerless of this world, and the ever-increasing surveillance and petty-power-wielding control over countless people upon our planet. This large-scale assault on humanity is being carried out by Maric forces dominated by greed, anti-compassion, cruelty, the craving for centralisation of political power, and authoritarian, Orwellian control. This deliberate world-wide spread of inhumanity, nihilism, lies and 1984-style tyranny is called the ‘New World Order’ or ‘globalisation/globalism’ (headed up by the inhumane ‘elite’ known as the ‘Illuminati’, who are anything but illuminated or Awakened!), and must vigorously be opposed and replaced by kindness, spiritual integrity and empathetic humanity. The call for a ‘one-world government’ is a call for the destruction of our

individual and collective liberty and should be rejected. The Dharma always honours the dignity of each individual, as each individual is the bearer of the Buddha Essence (the Buddha Dhatu). I am further a strong supporter of animal rights and human rights. I am equally a firm believer in non-violence and non-killing (thus totally oppose the West's murderous invasion of Iraq, Afghanistan and, if it takes place, Iran). Furthermore, I am gay and oppose all racial, sexual and religious hatred and intolerance.

## Books by Tony Page

*Buddha-Self: The 'Secret' Teachings of the Buddha in the Mahaparinirvana Sutra.* London: Nirvana Publications, 2003.

*Buddha and God.* London: Nirvana Publications, 2000.

*The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra in 12 Volumes* (editor). London: Nirvana Publications, 1999-2000.

*Buddhism and Animals: A Buddhist Vision of Humanity's Rightful Relationship with the Animal Kingdom.* London: UKAVIS, 1999.

*Vivisection Unveiled: An Exposé of the Medical Futility of Animal Experimentation.* Oxford: Jon Carpenter, 1997.