

BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF HEAVEN AND HELL

One of the oldest problems which confronted the human race when it became self conscious was to ask about the after life. Where did we come from? Where do we go after death? In between we ask ourselves what is the purpose of being good. After all most people would agree that being good is much harder than being bad and unless there were very good reasons we would much rather do the easy thing. To my mind this is why religions came into existence and together with them came the notions of heaven and hell. Good behaviour promised an eternity of happiness and pleasure in heaven while bad behaviour threatened us with eternity in the other place. Thus with the twin weapons of promise and threat people were made to behave in a manner which would be beneficial to society.

However, at a higher level of mental development and spiritual maturity people were urged to lead a noble life because it raised their dignity and righteous behaviour brought its own rewards. To do this people were led to develop Perfect Understanding about the nature of their own existence and to realise their highest potential not out of fear of punishment but because true lasting happiness results from pursuing a noble way of life. The aim of this teaching was to

encourage people to lead blameless lives for themselves and this would naturally protect and ensure the well being of everyone around them.

The second approach was the one taught by the Buddha. According to the Buddha merely behaving oneself by following religious laws to gain entry into heaven was not enough. One had to work diligently to develop concentration of the mind, because all actions originate in the mind. It is only by controlling the mind that one can control one's actions. When mind and body are harmoniously balanced True Understanding which leads to Ultimate Happiness can be reached.

According to the Buddha heaven and hell are not places which one is consigned to after death but attitudes of mind which can be experienced here and now. Simply put, be happy and you are in heaven, be upset and you are in hell. Of course it is not just as simple as that, so let us ask ourselves what is meant by heaven and hell.

Let us explain the nature of hell and heaven by using common sense without depending on belief, holy books or traditions. We should not depend on traditions, beliefs or texts to understand the truth. Of course, there are some guidelines in every religious book. It depends on how we interpret this concept. Some people believe that there are eternal heavens and hells. So according to

them, those who do not follow their religions have no chance to enjoy heavenly bliss or to escape from hell. On this basis, it seems that they have assumed sole monopoly for heaven. But the Buddhist concept of this issue is entirely different. "Whether we have religious labels or not, there is no difficulty whatsoever for us to experience heavenly bliss if we lead a noble and reasonable life". According to the Buddha, heaven is not reserved for the members of any one particular religion; it is open to every person who can lead a noble life.

Some people come and frighten us saying that we will miss the chance to go to heaven if we do not follow their religion. On the other hand, they also try to frighten us by saying that we will be in hell, if we do not accept their religions. This is how they try to introduce their religions by creating fear in the ignorant. Buddhists over the last 2,500 years never adopted this kind of tactic to disseminate Buddhism. The Buddha neither introduced heaven to create temptation, nor did he create fear of hell to promote Buddhism. He also did not decline that the aim of Buddhists is to go to heaven to enjoy sensual pleasure. Many religionists promise people that they would gain everything after their death but they have nothing very much to offer to the living. They generally encourage their followers to endure suffering here, because nothing can be done about it, but they make many promises about permanent, eternal

happiness in heaven. They are not reluctant to make such promises because they very well know that nobody will ever come back from the next world and report to them that they could not gain what those religionists had promised.

During the Buddha's time, some people who wanted to enjoy heavenly bliss after death, came to see the Buddha and told him that being lay people they found it difficult to lead a pure religious life. As worldly people they would like to enjoy worldly pleasures and requested him to explain how to gain happiness without turning their backs on the material world. Then the Buddha asked, "Why do you have to wait to experience heavenly bliss after death? You can experience this heavenly bliss while you are living in this world." If you know how to handle your way of life in a respectable way, you too can experience heavenly bliss here and hereafter as well. There are other similar discourses delivered by the Buddha regarding this heavenly life. With regard to the concept of hell he also mentioned in another discourse that we should not think that hell is located somewhere under this earth, at the bottom of the great oceans or at the bottom of the Maha Meru (a mythical rock reputed to be the greatest in this world). In the Buddhist context, heaven and hell are neither located in one particular area nor a ready-made place created by somebody. When people talk about about heaven and hell , they say heaven is above

and hell is below. But when we define the words, heaven and hell by considering the position of this earth in space, the object that we point to others would in fact be situated below. If we were to dig this earth up to the other end, I think it is impossible to find out hell.

According to the Buddha, anybody can experience heavenly bliss if his or her mind rests constantly on four divine abodes in this very life: we call them the four Brahma Viharas or the four Divine Abidings. These are Metta (loving kindness), Karuna (compassion), Mudita (Sympathetic Joy) and Upekkha (Equanimity). To be happy a person must develop Right Understanding which among other things is the ability to see that one exists only in relation to all other living beings. This means that in order to be happy one must ensure the well being and happiness of others. When we practise Metta, we suffuse the entire universe, beginning with ourselves, with pure unselfish love without discrimination. We also radiate our feelings of compassion (Karuna) towards those less fortunate than we are and work actively and ceaselessly to reduce their suffering. Then we rejoice at the happiness enjoyed by others (Mudita) because by so doing we eradicate the poisonous feelings of jealousy and ill-will. But the highest of all these positive states of well-being is Upekkha where the mind remains unaffected by any emotions positive or negative but is supremely calm,

serene and undisturbed. Anyone who lives in these four states can be said to be living in Heaven on earth. Of course those who dwell in the opposite states of ill-will, anger, hatred and so on are in hell, here on earth.

Usually people create imaginary heavens to which the faithful go according to their worldly needs. Long ago those who lived in deserts too had their own beliefs on heaven and hell. They illustrated heaven as a place where they could enjoy beautiful waterfalls. To them, heaven provided them with things (water, coolness, greenery) which they lacked in this life. To the Red Indians, heaven was a happy hunting ground where they could hunt any number of animals according to their needs. This of course was because they had difficulty in hunting enough animals for their daily survival. When Tibetans experience Himalayan winter, the suffering they face is described as hell. To them warmth or fire is Heaven. I think now you can understand how people create images of heaven and hell according to their own earthly needs. Our instinct is to desire something good and avoid another thing which is bad. In this sense we can say that the Buddha did not deny the existence of a heaven and hell, but unlike some belief that Heaven and Hell in specific locations. Buddhism declares that Heaven and Hell are not located in any one particular area, but in various "planes of existence". Buddhism categorises all living beings existing in the world and beyond into 31

states , which are put together into several groups.

The first of these groups are: hell, animal kingdom, spirits and demons who are in a suffering state in different ways. Some are visible and others are invisible. Then there is human life, six kinds of celestial kingdoms where beings experience more sensual pleasures than any other living beings. Devas (or beings of light) in the celestial kingdom concentrate more on pleasure than on spiritual development. Of these birth in the human plane is the most desirable because being blessed with a superior mind and the opportunity to observe both suffering and pleasure as well as death, decay and disease, humans can more readily understand the truth of the Buddha's Teaching.

All other religions talk about Heaven and they say that heaven is permanent or everlasting. But Buddhism does not agree with this belief that there is an eternal Heaven for people to experience their pleasure forever since everything is impermanent. On the other hand according to Buddhism, there are six kinds of Devaloka or Heavenly realms. Their way of life and worldly pleasure that they experience is far superior compared to human life span. However, although they experience sensual pleasures up to the maximum level, they are not free from selfish desire, anger, jealousy and worries.

Buddhism says that they are born in one of the heavenly realms according to their own good karma that they have accumulated during their existence as human beings in the previous births. Rebirth takes place in different forms of existence according to their own karma and not due to the influence of any supernatural or divine being. But no one can remain in any of these places of existence forever because the power of their good karmic energy is limited and when it is exhausted they must move on according to previously accumulated karma which is stored in the consciousness. Therefore Buddhism says that heaven and hell are not permanent places where living beings can enjoy or suffer forever.

Many scholars, philosophers, scientists, rationalists and great thinkers also do not agree with the belief of a permanent existence. A well-known western philosopher – Julian Huxley ridiculed this belief saying, “How can we believe that there is an eternal hell created by a god to punish beings forever for a mistake done by man? How can they justify this?. Give another chance for this poor man to try again - how can god condemn a man forever in this manner?”.

There are many ways in which ignorant people are enslaved to their religious beliefs by the threat of punishment in hell. Let us examine a few of these.

There are some who believe that entering into the place of worship of another religion for paying respect to its founder is a sin and because of that they will have to go to hell. How could they have committed a sin, because those people have not done any harm to anybody and have never polluted their minds with jealousy, hatred or any other evil thoughts. So how can their leaders justify the argument that they have committed such a bad sin as to go to hell? If they say that their God would get angry if his followers go and respect another God or a founder of another religion, how can they claim that this God is merciful? Could it not be said that this God is jealous just like a human being? They also teach that those who lead a very respectable life by upholding all the good virtues and humane qualities and serve others in every possible way would have no chance to go to heaven if they do not believe in their God. It is reasonable to say no matter how people behave they surely can go to heaven if only they believe in God and pray to him. Those who succumb to such irrational teachings, following their emotions are fickle minded. They change their religion which they have been practising for generations and shift to another religion in the simple minded belief that they can be miraculously 'saved'. They have no common sense to reason whether these claims are reasonable or practical. This is the reason why many sick and old people are converted at their death beds. Being ignorant of the true nature of

existence, they are afraid to die, but are easily persuaded they can go to heaven if they accept a particular religion, that their sins will somehow be 'wasted' away.

They may think that their lives are at the mercy of a God and they have no way to mould their future lives according to their own effort and understanding. Buddhism teaches us how to mould our future lives according to our way of life, good and bad thoughts, words and actions without depending on any eternal agent and to also take the responsibility of our lives with conviction. A well known American rationalist who lived a long time ago, once said that to his observation, he would prefer to go to hell rather than heaven, because of the concept maintained by some religionists that all intellectuals, scholars, scientists, psychologists, free-thinkers, rationalists, including the Buddha, were all in hell as they did not believe in their God. He said that in that case, if he happened to go to Heaven, he would feel out of place there without any intellectuals, and heaven would be a very dull place. As far as he was concerned heaven is a place only for those who want to enjoy worldly pleasures without using their brains. Buddhism certainly does not regard an afterlife in heaven as the most important aim of life or as a place where people can have eternal rest.

Beyond this earthly life, there is a category of beings called Devas who experience

peace calm and tranquility and spend an immensely long period in the celestial realms . They are known as Brahmas in the sixteen kind of Brahma realms. They have reduced craving towards worldly sense pleasures to a certain degree and experience more calmness which they have developed during their previous existence specially through meditation. Although this existence is also not permanent because of the immensely long time span, they are considered eternal. This is why some religionists still believe that the attainment of the Brahma (or God) state is permanent. The Buddha pointed out that it is not so.

Four more stages of Brahma life are mentioned in Buddhism. These Beings exist only in their consciousness without any visible physical bodies. Another state of life in the Brahma realm is existence of a physical body but without any perception in their minds. They spend such lives without any perception in their minds. They do not experience physical and mental burdens for a long period, more than the peace experienced by other Brahmas, and their life span is also longer than the others running into millions of years. Even so, these states of existence are impermanent according to the Buddha. All these states are the 31 planes of existence as explained in the Buddhist texts. The concept is close to Indian cosmology. However, in Buddhist perspective, we interpret them as different states of the human mind. They vary

according to the development and deterioration of the human mind. They do not manifest themselves in gross or material form. In addition to this, there is no doubt about the existence also of different kinds of living beings in various forms according to environment or atmosphere, elements and many other factors. They exist in different world cycles depending on their mental forces and experience pleasure or suffering according to their good and bad Karmic energies gained in their previous existences.

The following story may explain how buddhists view heaven and hell. A monk was once preaching about heaven and hell. Someone from the audience who did not believe in heaven and hell challenged the monk, stating that he was misleading innocent people by talking about non-existent places. The man was very fierce and in a raised voice he asked the monk to prove where these two places exist.

Seeing his angry mood, the monk said: "Do you know that you are now in hell?" The man at once realised the concept of hell according to the monk's expression.

Then with a smiling face, again he asked: "All right. Now tell me, where heaven is." The monk calmly replied: "Now you are in heaven".

This simple yet meaningful simile gives us some idea how to use our common sense to understand that we create heaven and hell according to our own mental attitude.

In certain homes, husbands and wives, parents and children every day quarrel each other, cry, lament and curse each other, and though they live in the same house. They sometimes go without enough food to eat, proper clothing to wear, or without enough space even to sleep. Such places can be regarded as hells on this earth. In certain other cases, although people have more than enough things for them to live comfortably, their poor mental attitude completely disturbs the peace and happiness. Therefore, such people make their lives more miserable due to their anger, narrow-mindedness, jealousy and selfishness. This is also another kind of hell that people create here within this life.

On the other hand there are certain families where people experience peace, happiness, harmony and satisfaction due to their understanding, patience and kindness even though they are poor. And some others with enough material wealth enjoy their worldly lives in good health, by maintaining mutual understanding and love. Such people have created their heavenly bliss here on this very earth itself.

Heaven and hell are portrayed in many religious books to suit the mentality of

human nature. They know that unless there is reward and punishment in the other life people would never take their way of life seriously. Usually, portrayal of heaven and hell in this way is the only effective method for people not to be selfish but to do some service to others and also not to harm others for their own benefit. In the past heaven was depicted as a place where sensual pleasures as enjoyed by the rich and the powerful was easily obtained, as a reward for having lived a good life on earth. Torture as punishment in hell was portrayed as nothing more than the punishment given by the rulers to the culprits who had violated peace and order.

According to Buddhism, suffering in hell and enjoyment in heaven are not permanent. At the same time, heaven and hell is not confined to one particular area but exists where living beings experience pleasant and unpleasant states of existence in any part of the universe, in any physical form and according to their mental state of pleasure or pain regarded as heavenly bliss and suffering in hell.

On another level the belief which some people maintain that all our pleasant and unpleasant feelings are only experienced within this life time is not acceptable to Buddhism. Either we experience pain and pleasure as the effects of our own good and bad Karma, as long as existence or rebirth takes place. Just by praying to or

worshipping anybody, we cannot escape from the effect of our bad deeds that we have committed. This is the Buddhist attitude. If anybody can forgive our sins at all it must be ourselves not an outsider. According to the Buddha, good and bad deeds are done by ourselves and we are responsible for the purity or the impurity of our own mind. It is therefore impossible for another person either to purify or to pollute our minds.

Is there any chance for us either to overcome or to escape the bad effects? Yes, it is not impossible but it is not very easy either. Buddhism does not accept the belief which many others hold regarding forgiveness of sins, of worshipping and praying to God to ask for forgiveness, of performing various kinds of religious rites and rituals, of offering animal sacrifices to please God and of torturing physical body in order to escape punishment. Such practices are not justifiable from the Buddhist point of view. Is there any practical and reasonable method to be practised in the Buddhist context when we realize that our actions are wrong and harmful? Once we realize we have done wrong the first thing that we have to do is to create a strong determination not to commit such evil deeds again. But that itself is not enough. After that we should try to do more and more good deeds or meritorious deeds by cultivating kindness, honesty, generosity and proper understanding. The

cultivation of such good qualities and meritorious deeds accumulates good Karma. The increasing purity of the mind and good Karma create more powerful energy to strengthen the mind and provide confidence on our future life is produced. When the good Karma is powerful and active in the mind the bad Karmas that we had committed earlier would subside, become weak or inactive. If death occurs with this state of mind predominating rebirth takes place in a favourable condition. This explanation helps us understand how we can eradicate the effects of our own sins. However, this is not the end of our bad Karma, because it is not possible to eradicate them completely so easily. In the process of continuing to accumulate more good and meritorious deeds, by serving others and reducing mental impurities, we can overcome the effects of bad Karma because good Karma can eclipse the effects of bad Karma. In this way, we can continue to improve the life process and consolidate our spiritual progress until we attain perfection or sainthood and the final goal. When craving, which conditions rebirth, is extinguished, bad Karmic forces are also eliminated automatically. Only after that will we be free from the effects of the bad Karmas. Although this method is meaningful and rational still some people try to find a short cut to avoid the effects and try to go to heaven simply by praying to God and performing some rites and rituals. Many believe that Heaven and Hell were

created by God and that those places are ready made. When a preacher was giving a talk on the creation of Heaven and Earth, somebody from the audience asked: "May I know actually what was he doing before he started to create Heaven and Earth?" Then the speaker answered: "Do you know during that period he was creating hell for those who ask such kind of questions."

Heaven and Hell are very important to many people. But this is a concept introduced by primitive religions. When people could not understand how to perform their duties as human beings, to cultivate certain virtues, to maintain human dignity and to understand how to behave as cultured people, their leaders introduced this belief to make them behave in a good way. They said that if people follow such religious principles, fulfilling their duties towards parents, wives, husbands, neighbours, after their death, they can have a wonderful eternal life in Heaven. That was the only way to convince people to do good – just like training small children to do good because they cannot understand or appreciate the necessity to do good. With children it is necessary to promise something for them in the form of something desirable like chocolates, sweets or a toy. Only then will they pay attention. The Buddha did not adopt that attitude to introduce his religious way of life. He regarded us as mature human beings. He did not use sweet language to create temptation. He knew

that we have the potential to understand things although many of us do not take the trouble to do so. His method is not to promise anything but to teach people to understand what is right and what is wrong and the nature of cause and effect. According to him, if we do a good thing only aiming at heaven, we are selfish, because according to that motive we would not develop virtues such as compassion, honesty and understanding and would never reduce selfishness and altruistic behaviour. True happiness can only come about when a person completely loses his or her egoistic concept of a Self or "I".

In one of his discourses the Buddha says that those who have worldly happiness are fortunate in their household lives but they must be wise to make use of their wealth without developing selfishness. They must be kind enough to share the happiness with others. The Buddha did not condemn worldly gains and happiness. But if we know how to utilise them, experience pleasure in a respectable way, we can gain this heavenly bliss whilst we are here and not only after death. But physical burdens in a heavenly existence are fewer than in human existence. On the other hand the intellectual capacity of the human minds has the potential for spiritual development. Celestial beings do not think of performing meritorious deeds. Humans are more fortunate in that respect. We have the chance to enrich our knowledge.

According to our Buddhist stories, when the Devas had certain subtle problems, they too had come to the Buddha to find out the solution. As human beings we 'spend' the good Karmic energy we have accumulated as merits in a previous birth. While spending we can also accumulate more and more merit and deposit such merits for the future as well as for the next life because we know that this is not the complete end of our life existence. The continuity of life process again takes place according to our merits, whether we believe it or not, whether we can understand it or not. The celestial beings cannot create new Karma s human being can.

We say that animals are unfortunate although they get food and many other things. They are unfortunate because they do not know anything about the fate of their life. It is impossible for them to accumulate merits or acquire spiritual development. That is why human beings can do anything to them by using their human intelligence. They catch them, torture them and kill them for their pleasure. Animals have no idea according to their animal way of thinking that there will be continuity in life. They do not understand that animal life does not necessarily end at the end of that life itself. Existence again takes place because in that animal's mind, there exists residual anger, jealousy, craving and ignorance developed in past existences and which have not been expended. These are the main evil forces

latent in each and every living being. Since they are not free from such thoughts rebirth takes place again. In our case, we have controlled certain evil thoughts but they still exist. We can tame animals by beating, training and frightening them. Because of that fear, they behave like tame animals. When they associate with us for a time, they automatically become tame. In the same way cats, dogs, cows, goats and elephants, become docile because they have been with us for generations. But still they have their own animal instinct or nature. Although we are humans still many of us do not know how to make use of our valuable human life. We abuse the opportunities or facilities that we have to cultivate our way of life. We abuse our valuable human life due to our selfishness and cunningness. For this reason the Buddha's Teaching is important to pave the way for such ignorant people to think properly and to develop human values.

According to the Buddha, human life is more important than any other kind of life amongst the 31 planes of existence. Devas are not superior to human beings as far as virtues and the spiritual development of the Mind are concerned. According to Buddhism it is pointless to aspire to go to Heaven even though the other religions have portrayed it in such a way to tempt us. In heaven we spend millions of years enjoying the benefits of past good karmas, but have no opportunity to develop our

minds to remove the three evils of ignorance, greed and hatred.

Now let us discuss hell, since many religions take advantage of the concept of Hell to propagate their religion. This is a very strong weapon for them to frighten people. Once the medical authorities in England made an appeal to missionaries not to create fear in the minds of people by threatening them about hell fire to introduce their religion, because they have come across many people who suffered from mental disturbance due to that fear of hell fire. Creating fear in man's mind has become a very effective method to introduce religion mostly in Asian countries today. They say that the Buddha cannot save you because He being a Man is long dead and gone. "Why do you pray and worship a man who is no more here", they say. "Our God is the only saviour who can save you because he is alive in heaven." Buddhist missionaries for the last 2,500 years never used this kind of technique to introduce Buddhism. Buddhists never say that others who do not accept their religion will have to go to hell. The Buddha's attitude to other religions is very compassionate and reasonable.

Life is uncertain. When we neglect our life, then falling down or declining is very easy. After that to rise up again becomes a big problem. The belief in rebirth is another subject which some missionaries take

advantage of to ridicule Buddhism. They say that those who follow Buddhism, will have to suffer more, since their rebirth only prolongs the final salvation by becoming animals, ghosts and so on. But those who follow their religion, do not become animals or ghosts but straight away can go to heaven without remaining here to suffer after their death. Many people believe what they preach without using their common sense.

Rebirth does not take place according to different religious labels but by man's way of thinking, way of speech and by way of doing things with good and evil thoughts. So our thoughts and actions are responsible for moulding the life hereafter. Whether people have a religion or not is not the important factor to condition rebirth.

However, their concept of hell is eternal suffering, but Buddhism teaches that wherever rebirth takes place it is not permanent. One day they can end their suffering. Think for yourself – which is more reasonable. We leave it to your better judgement.

Although the Buddha advised people not to violate religious principles but to uphold human dignity, he did not lay down religious principles as commandments or laws. In simple language, he said that if you commit evil deeds, you would have to face the

consequences in the form of suffering either physically or mentally, within this life time or hereafter. You should also consider the nature of pleasure or suffering in different stages of existence, and these stages are introduced by giving different names such as heaven, hell, ghost world and animal world.

Today many people are educated. Modern science and technology have widened their knowledge and perceptions to understand many things in this world and the universe which early primitive people could not understand. Due to their ignorance they explained life and death in very primitive terms, which they later accepted as religious truths or Dogmas.

We do not know that every day we are moulding our own heaven and hell according to our way of life, as well as the good and bad effects which we also experience here and hereafter. It does not mean that Buddhism denies outright the belief of a 'heavenly' life or a suffering 'Hell' after our deaths. But the Buddhist concept of this belief is different from the others. This means that when we live by cultivating our humane qualities and virtues by following certain religious principles without violating the peace and happiness of others we also can experience a more comfortable, happy, prosperous and peaceful life in any part of the universe after our death where life exists. To us, that is Heaven.

On the other hand if we spend our lives by harbouring our anger, jealousy, grudge, ill-will and various evil thoughts in our Minds by worrying, crying, fighting and disturbing others, we have to face the consequences in the form of suffering either within this life time or hereafter. It would also be difficult for us to have a better rebirth in a good environment to cultivate good virtues. When life becomes more miserable, we regard this state of existence as Hell.

By knowing the real situation in worldly life, understanding people try to mould their way of life and live peacefully without hurting others and also by doing some service to them. We prefer to have a favourable, nice and pleasant existence. But our ambitions are very seldom realised. The world is not positioned in our favour. The formation of this world did not take place just to suit us. The world operates according to its own universal law and nature. These things are impartial – whether we are rich or poor, educated or not, as religious people we can maintain happiness and contentment through this understanding. When troubles, sickness, worries, disturbances, calamities come to us, we should not grumble nor should we curse or accuse others. We should consider the situation carefully to understand who or what is responsible for all our problems or if anything outside of us can be blamed. Sometimes we ourselves have done something wrong. Do not think

that we are always right and that others are wrong. Every person in this world makes mistakes.

We are living in a world where we always experience clashes, disagreements, conflicts, calamities, disturbances and war. The world is saturated with these worldly conditions. Therefore, the challenge is to find peace in a world where friction and clashes are daily occurrences.