

The Transcendent Buddha

We have seen that in Buddhist tradition the Buddha is not strictly speaking considered to be a god, even though the India of his time was undoubtedly one that recognized the existence of many gods, who were assumed to be powerful beings who are apart from humanity but can interact with us. A buddha, in fact, is more than this.

The Sanskrit word that we normally translate as “god” is *deva*. But Ancient India did not have just one simple notion of “gods”; rather, Indian literature, whether Buddhist or Hindu, talks about all kinds of intelligent, non-human beings who exist alongside and above humans. Importantly, in specifically Buddhist literature all of these kinds of beings – from the highest of the gods to troublesome spirits that inhabit the wilderness – venerate the Buddha (even if they sometimes first need some convincing). The Buddha’s appearance in the world is not just for humans but for the benefit of all “sentient beings” (Pali *sattas*; Sanskrit *sattvas*); that is, anyone who is undergoing the beginningless, and seemingly endless, process of being born, ageing and dying, only to be reborn again.

Early Buddhism accepted that the Buddha has achieved a status apart from this process. Sometimes he is called “a god among gods”, a sign of his importance even to gods, but strictly speaking a buddha had achieved a nature and status qualitatively different from that of any human, spirit or deity. The significant point here is that in Buddhism all deities are understood to still be mortal: they will all, eventually but necessarily, die; and when they do, they will be reborn as inferior beings once again. This all happens because of our deeds (*karma*): do enough good deeds, over enough lifetimes, and one can be reborn as a god, and enjoy that status for a very long time. But it is still finite, and after having been a god for a great length of time one would still, without doubt, die and transmigrate again.

Buddhism holds that the Buddha (or any buddha) is different: he has ended the causes for his transmigration, and along the way achieved all kinds of knowledge and power that exceeds what any human or deity can have, and when he dies he will finally, permanently, be apart from further birth and death. The buddha teaches other beings to achieve this same peace, or in other words nirvana, but he himself has achieved more than just this. A buddha, as we have discussed elsewhere, is someone who is totally awakened to the Dharma, and who then teaches it at a time when the Dharma is otherwise not known in the world. By doing this, a buddha transforms the world, so that other sentient beings can learn from the Dharma and attain nirvana themselves. This much is accepted by all Buddhist traditions of Asia.

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In other Buddhist contexts things get more interesting still. In another document [TBC] we introduced the fact that Mahāyāna Buddhism, which builds upon and develops forms of early Buddhism in India, teaches things about the Buddha that were not accepted by all Buddhist communities. One of the most important aspects of Mahāyāna Buddhism that developed in India is the idea that the Buddha has not just transcended the world of gods and men because he has become a buddha, but that he *remains* something transcendent, and that this is what real, final nirvana properly is.

Remember that Mahāyāna Buddhism takes as its goal not simply becoming an arhat, or someone who has achieved nirvana, but rather being a bodhisattva; and then eventually, at the end of this process, a buddha, which as we have explained above is more than being an arhat. A Buddha reintroduces the Dharma to the world when it has been lost, but to do this one must along the way become an incredibly knowledgeable, supremely powerful being who achieves things that even gods cannot.

In some important Mahāyāna literature, we learn new things about just how powerful the Buddha is, and how he is even more than he appeared to be in the world. Traditional narratives of the Buddha's life-story understand that he was born (having spent his previous life in a heavenly realm, in the company of gods), then grew up, married and had a son, all before renouncing his life of luxury and going on to achieve complete awakening and teaching the Dharma to his followers. This means that in his early life, Siddhārtha Gautama was a bodhisattva, but not *yet* a buddha. However, some Mahāyāna sources emphasizes that to be a bodhisattva close to achieving buddhahood – after many, many lifetimes of effort – and moreover to become a buddha oneself, means that one must have *already* left behind the necessity of being born, ageing and dying. These Mahāyāna texts reveal that everything in the traditional story of the Buddha's life (which did still happen) was a kind of performative display, like an illusion projected into the world by the Buddha, who is in fact *already* awakened, and who occupies a transcendent status above and beyond the world of humans, animals and gods.

One way of thinking about this (with some limitations!) is that gods in Indian Buddhism are not like the transcendent God of Western religions because they are still bound to birth and death, but in Mahāyāna Buddhism the Buddha who is transcendent, immortally beyond birth and death, is something slightly closer to an idea of God as a figure who can always influence the world from beyond it. Still the Buddha is no creator, and he himself does not “decide” what happens to us upon death, but Mahāyāna Buddhism often teaches that the Buddha did not “depart” when he finally died, because everything that was seen of him in the world was a kind of projection anyway, produced for the benefit of people who are suffering. A buddha understood in this way is totally free to exist above and beyond the workings of the world, but his great compassion means that he will still project forms into the world – like an illusionist, creating a body that walks, talks and teaches – for the sake of those who wish to achieve the same freedom that is his.

The *Dona Sutta* – What kind of thing is a buddha?

At one time the Buddha was on the road between two cities, and some way behind him was walking a brahmin, called Dona. Dona noticed the footprints that had been left behind by the Buddha, and saw in them the markings of a wheel that must be imprinted on the sole of whoever made them. Knowing that this was an auspicious sign – that a wheel on the sole of a foot was supposedly a feature of a remarkable being, and certainly no ordinary human – he hurried ahead.

When Dona caught up with the Buddha, the Buddha had left the road and was sitting under a tree, in a state of calm concentration. He could see that the Buddha had a remarkable form: glowing skin, perfectly symmetrical features, and indeed (among other remarkable characteristics) the outline of wheels upon the soles of his feet.

Dona wished to know what this person was, so enquired:

“Sir, are you a deity?”

The Buddha replied: “I am not.”

“Are you then a spirit of the air?”

The Buddha replied: “I am not.”

“Are you then a spirit of the wilderness?”

The Buddha replied, again: “I am not.”

“Are you then a human being?”

The Buddha replied: “I am not.”

“Then what kind of being are you?”

The Buddha then replied, speaking in eloquent verse:

“The defilements of one’s character, by which one would become a deity, or a spirit of the air, or a spirit of the wilderness, or a human being, I have entirely destroyed, eradicated, removing them at the stem. Like a blue lotus flower that rises up from muddy water but is undefiled by it, I am undefiled by the world. Brahmin, I am, quite simply, awoken (*buddha*).”

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the source

What gives the brahmin the impression that the person he is searching for, and then speaking to, is special?

What is the Buddha *not*?

So what *is* the Buddha? And for what reason(s)?

What does the image of the lotus flower communicate?

Application to other contexts

How does the Buddha compare to notions of God / gods?

Can you think of other examples where it is easier to describe what something is by saying what it is *not*?

Reflection on wider Buddhist issues

How does this story relate to accounts of the Buddha's birth?

How does this story relate to Buddhist accounts of his discussions with gods?

How might a modern, Western Buddhist audience understand what is being taught in the *Doṇasutta*?

Does the fact that not all Buddhists today believe in different types of gods and spirits change how the story might be understood?

Sources / Further Reading

This is a paraphrase based on the Pali *Doṇasutta*, or sometimes *Doṇalokasutta*, a translation of which can be found here:

<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an04/an04.036.than.html>

Note the complicated matter, mentioned at the bottom of that webpage, about the present/future tense in the questions of the story: do not worry about this (either understanding is fine!), but it is a good example of the kinds of issues and arguments that confront scholars of Buddhist texts.

The types of being discussed in the text are these:

God = Sanskrit *deva*. This is a very broad class of beings, including all of the gods of the ancient Vedic pantheon and (later) Hindu tradition, as well as others besides.

Spirit of the air = Sanskrit *gandharva*/Pali *gandhabba*. These are a class of benign spirits associated with the sky, elegance, and music.

Spirit of the wilderness = Sanskrit *yakṣa*/Pali *yakkha*. These are another class of spirit, only sometimes friendly, associated with natural sites like forests and mountains. We know *yakṣas* were widely worshipped alongside gods in ancient India.

The Lotus Sūtra (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*) – The Buddha reveals his true nature

According to the Mahāyāna tradition, at one time the Buddha was teaching atop a mountain, surrounded by a vast audience of monks and devotees, as well as gods and spirits. He had just revealed to them all, to their great surprise (and, it would seem, contrary to what he had taught before) that in the fullness of time all of them would eventually achieve not only nirvana, but the still more exalted status of buddhas, just like him.

Still more surprisingly, the Buddha went on to teach that to be a Buddha is even more than any of his audience could have imagined.

“Listen carefully to the secret, transcendent power of the Buddha. The gods and humans in this world and other worlds think that I, the Buddha Śākyamuni, once left the palace in which I was raised, and then achieved awakening near the city of Bodhgayā, becoming then completely awakened. However, good people, it was already an incalculably long time ago that I actually attained the status of a buddha.”

The Buddha asked his audience to imagine all of the universe, with all of the many worlds in it; he asks them to imagine every particle in the universe, and to imagine that each of those particles represents an age of the universe, each one lasting from the time of its creation until its destruction (remembering that in this Indian context, the universe undergoes periods of creation and destruction, with billions of years in between). The cumulative time represented by all of those particles would, of course, be unimaginably long.

“Far further back than this time”, said the Buddha, “in fact by billions of ages more, was the point in time when I attained complete awakening, and became a buddha. Since then I have been residing in this world, down the ages, teaching the Dharma and inspiring sentient beings to follow me. I have been doing the same for sentient beings in innumerable, incalculable other worlds, also.”

“Furthermore,” the Buddha continued, “the lifespan that I have achieved, by practicing the path of the bodhisattva as I did, still has not expired, and it is *twice* as long as the number of ages just mentioned. Although I do not actually depart from the world, I teach that I do, but this is a strategy for the sake of leading and inspiring sentient beings, so that they will appreciate the mortality that comes with transmigration.”

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the source

What is the Buddha revealing that is new?

According to the *Lotus Sūtra*, how would you describe what the Buddha is?

According to this passage, and if the Buddha is properly transcendent, what kind of thing is the physical Buddha, whom his audience see in front of them?

If he has indeed completely transcended the process of birth and death, why does the Buddha still appear in the world?

Application to other contexts

How does the Buddha as described in the *Lotus Sūtra* compare to notions of God / gods?

Reflection on wider Buddhist issues

How far does the passage of the *Lotus Sūtra* diverge from how other Buddhist traditions think of the Buddha? Is there a way to reconcile them?

How would you feel if you were a Buddhist among the audience of the *Lotus Sūtra*, hearing what it teaches?

What repercussions does the Buddha's teaching in the *Lotus Sūtra* have for Buddhist practice?

Sources / Further Reading

This is a paraphrase of just one chapter (numbered differently, depending on the version!) of what is usually just called the *Lotus Sūtra*, or in Sanskrit *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*: 'The Discourse on the White Lotus of the True Dharma'.

The *Lotus Sūtra* is one of the most influential Mahāyāna Buddhist texts in history, and was perhaps finished in the second century of the Common Era. Although somewhat important in India, it went on to become arguably the most important Buddhist text in China and, still more influentially, in Japan. It holds many surprises for students of Buddhism, and remains the foundational text for forms of Nichiren Buddhism and, on a global stage, the Soka Gakkai movement.

There were several subtly different versions of the *Lotus Sūtra* that circulated Asia. The most influential is one of the translations made from Sanskrit into Chinese in the fifth century, and an English version of this can be downloaded here (see link at bottom of page):

<https://www.bdkamerica.org/product/the-lotus-sutra-revised-second-edition/>

An excellent book about the *Lotus Sūtra* and its history as a work of world literature is this: Donald S. Lopez Jnr., *The Lotus Sūtra: A Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

Keep in mind that teachings in Mahāyāna Buddhism go beyond what is found in, for example, Theravāda Buddhism – do not expect them to agree, in every regard!