

Divine Reality in Mahāyāna Buddhism

By John Paraskevopoulos

Introduction

The Buddhist tradition represents, perhaps, the only major Eastern religion that offers itself completely to all aspirants, regardless of circumstances or caste. As a living faith with over 500 million adherents, it promises spiritual deliverance for every person. In its Mahāyāna phase, especially, it caters to the whole gamut of human temperaments, thus opening up a truly universal path to awakening.

This essay will discuss certain key insights from the 'Greater Vehicle' that address the relationship between ultimate reality and our realm of phenomena. It seeks to demonstrate that beneath a veil of contingency - this variegated and fleeting world of birth-and-death (*samsāra*) - there lies an enduring essence that eludes the vicissitudes of ephemeral existence.

In doing so, we will focus on a current of Mahāyāna thought that adopts a vision of this reality which is more 'positive' so to speak. In contrast to an outlook usually associated with the 'aporetic' Mādhyamika doctrines (and perhaps, to some extent, those of the Yogācāra), the lesser-known insights of the Tathāgata-garbha school offer a salutary corrective to the perceived excesses of its largely agnostic or sceptical predecessors - a limitation thought to have hindered a full appreciation of the Buddha's liberating message. This development arguably paved the way for a more coherent metaphysical framework and allowed devotional forms of Buddhism, in particular, to flourish beyond the restricted purview of a scholastic elite.

One of our objectives, therefore, is to question the widespread belief that Buddhism, in contrast to its ‘parent’ Hindu tradition, does not posit an Absolute that is eternal and unconditioned. Indeed, as will become readily apparent, the Mahāyāna clearly envisages a transcendent reality that is comparable to *Brahman* (in both its *nirguṇa* and *sagūṇa* aspects) – along with the notion of *Ātman* as its immanent dimension – which we find most fully elaborated in the Advaita Vedānta school of Hinduism. As a corollary, we think it proper to challenge the notion – seeing as certain doubts regarding this question persist – that Buddhism is but a variety of ‘atheism’, very broadly conceived, insofar as it doesn’t acknowledge a divine reality (certainly not one that, in any sense, has a ‘personal’ facet).

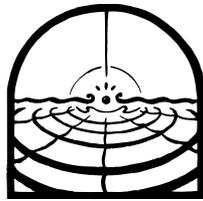
Despite ample evidence to the contrary, some still take the view that Buddhist beliefs are practically indistinguishable from a profane rationalism, with any religious elements being dismissed as an aberration or a compromise necessary for less ‘sophisticated’ minds. In other words, to believe that its teachings espouse a transcendent reality is often considered illegitimate, especially in Western dharma circles permeated by secular influences. By probing this dubious claim, we will come to see that Buddhism very much belongs to the great family of world religions within which it rightly holds its place as a beacon of unique insights into spiritual truth and the human condition.

It is not the objective of this paper to propound original theses that are only of interest to scholars. However, a useful purpose may be served by an interpretive synthesis that brings together some of the most noteworthy passages on this topic from the Mahāyāna tradition, and which draws out their deeper philosophical significance. In this sense, one can distinguish an academic position on these matters from an obligation that arises to question prevailing cultural or popular perceptions of Buddhism, which have led to harmful distortions. To that end, the conclusions of this essay might prove beneficial to a lay audience with spiritual interests that lie outside the narrow confines of the academy’s more erudite concerns.

The Metaphysical Vision

From the dawn of their tradition, Buddhists have spiritually discerned a realm that surpasses this transient world – blissful and free from

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