



The existence of God

From *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side

A significant part of Western philosophy of religion is concerned with arguments for and against the existence of God. Paradoxically perhaps, very few Buddhist texts address this question, and it is an assumption of most Buddhist doctrine that God does not exist. One of the few treatises that does set out the Buddhist arguments on this question is the *Tattvasamgraha* by the 8th century Indian scholar Shantarakshita. This work is like an encyclopaedia of Buddhist thought and has been compared to Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* for its thorough and comprehensive treatment of philosophical questions. The present chapter is based on this work.ⁱ

It is important to know how God is defined to appreciate why Buddhists refute his existence, because the Buddhist refutation is a logical and precise one. We have to remember that, in the Indian context, Buddhist scholars were refuting the Hindu idea of God and not the Judeo-Christian idea of God. The following characteristics were commonly ascribed to God by Indian theists and are those that define the 'God' that Buddhists refute.

Creator of the universe. The theist argument for this is based on the idea that insentient matter cannot produce itself, therefore the cause of the universe cannot be material and must be intelligent and mental/spiritual. In ancient India no distinction was made between theist and deist conceptions of creation, that is, one where God remains involved in his creation and one where he does not.

Omniscient. This theist argument follows from the previous one: if God created the universe, then he knows everything it contains.

Eternal. The meaning given to this divine characteristic is that God has no beginning and no end, and he is not produced by anything else.

Distinct from the soul. Some Indian philosophers argue that God is distinct from the soul since he is both eternal and omniscient and the soul is neither of these.

First cause and only efficient cause. As creator of the universe God is the First Cause, meaning that the chain of causality begins with him. All the other physical and mental factors that are involved in the creation of things – such as atoms, virtue, lack of virtue and so on – are only contributory causes. The example given is that God causes things to arise just like a potter creating a pot. God is an intelligent cause.

There are two other theistic arguments cited by Shantarakshita for the existence of God:

- The first is that the world is a place of suffering only because it is controlled by an intelligent being or cause. Suffering cannot be produced by unconscious matter. The very existence of suffering is therefore a proof of the existence of God.



- The second concerns the idea that what exists is what is known, and only God can know all things in their entirety. Humans cannot perceive all things all the time, only God is able to do this. So the very fact that all things in the universe exist means that God must exist.

The Buddhist refutation

The following points present the key arguments used by Buddhist scholars to refute the existence of God as defined above.

God and the natural order

- Buddhists do not accept the notion that the world must have an intelligent First Cause simply because there is a natural order, that is, simply because there appears to be an intelligent arrangement of its parts.
- Even if one accepts that there is a natural order in the universe, Buddhists claim that this argument could equally be used to disprove the existence of God. If things function harmoniously according to natural laws, they say, then what need is there to posit the existence of God?
- For a Buddhist, the existence of things is unproven and the existence of a thing's parts is also unproven. Buddhists do not hold the universe to be ultimately real.

God as Creator of all things

- The metaphor of God as a cosmic builder is predicated by theists on the analogy of an architect who builds a house. Buddhists argue that there are no good reasons to extend this analogy to the natural world. For example, there is no evidence to suggest that mountains and so on are 'built' in the same sort of way as houses. And in the case of houses, the architect does not build them alone but employs many builders to help him; so how would this analogy work with the idea of God as the sole universal builder? If God needed the help of other agents to produce the universe then he would not be the Supreme Creator.
- Another refutation of God as Creator is that there is no certainty that the creator of one thing must be identical with the creator of another thing. For example, the architect of one house is not necessarily the same person as the architect of another house. The assertion that there must be one Creator of the whole universe, and only one, is unproven.
- Likewise, there is no certainty that the creator of a thing must be unitary and single rather than many. For example, there are many people involved in the building of a house, not just one, so why could this analogy not be applied to the universe? Could it not be the case that the universe was created by several gods?



God as eternal Being

- It is impossible to prove the existence of an eternal being. Such a being would be unitary and would be an eternal substratum embracing all things and consciousness itself. It follows that our consciousness could not conceive of such a being or prove his existence because he would be beyond the capacity and limitations of our minds.
- It is a contradiction to say that an eternal being created the world. Eternal things cannot produce effects because the notions of consecutive time and concurrent time are mutually contradictory with eternity. The Indian idea of 'eternity' means 'out of time' or beyond time, so this contradicts an act of creation because such an act necessarily occurs in time. If the universe has a beginning, then the Creation must happen at a particular time. Buddhists argue that it is irrational to say that a Being who is beyond time acts within time because the two are mutually exclusive.

God as omniscient

- Following on from the preceding argument, if objects exist consecutively then they must be known consecutively. In other words, something cannot be known until it exists. This contradicts the idea of God's omniscience because it would make it impossible for him to know all things at once, in any single moment.
- God's omniscience is justified by his creatorship of the world. As Buddhists reject the latter they reject the former as well.

Other difficulties with the creation process

- Buddhists argue that if God is an unobstructed, all-powerful cause, and if nothing can conceivably obstruct his ability to create, then he would have to produce everything simultaneously. This is because there can be no reason not to produce something, and there can be no reason to produce a thing at one time rather than another. If a theist responds by saying that it is the auxiliary factors involved in causation that constitute the reasons for producing things at one time rather than at another, then Buddhists reply that, if this is the case, it means that God's power to create is constrained by these other factors, and if God is all-powerful no kind of constriction should occur. The conclusion is therefore that the idea of God as an all-powerful Creator has internal contradictions. It would imply that God could never be dependent on auxiliary causes.
- Some theists respond to the previous argument by saying that the reason God creates different things at different times is simply because he wishes to do so, and this is a sufficient reason. Buddhists dismiss this argument on a number of counts. First, they say that the notion of 'wishing' is irrelevant here; a wish in itself is ineffective unless one has the power to create, and therefore the issue here is not God's wish but God's power to create. Second, they point out that there is ample evidence in the natural world for things being produced without any wish being involved. For example, a sprout appears without the wish of a seed. Wishing is therefore not a necessary factor in the process of causation.



Taken together, these Buddhist arguments are designed to show that the theist's position is flawed by self-contradiction. For Buddhists, theistic arguments are irrational in that they defy logic. Buddhists suppose that the truth of things is always compatible with reason, for if this were not the case we could never know anything at all. This is why Buddhism does not accept the existence of God in the sense of an omniscient, all-powerful, eternal Creator.

It may be useful to add, however, that some masters have expanded on the traditional Buddhist presentation as a result of Buddhism's recent contacts with Christianity. One modern interpretation of the Buddhist view is to say that Buddhists do not accept the existence of God as a *person* who acts, creates, judges, rewards and punishes in a similar way to the way human beings act. This is too much of an anthropocentric view of God, an understanding that describes God in the image of Man. Buddhists think it is a mistake to think of God as a person and it is more consistent to think of him as a universal principle. The Buddhist equivalent of this is the Dharmakaya, the body of truth out of which all things naturally manifest first as energy and light (Sambhogakaya) and then as matter (Nirmanakaya). And the Dharmakaya mind of enlightenment is characterized by clarity and lucidity on the one hand, and by boundless compassion on the other hand. In this sense, then, Buddhism does not reject the idea of an intelligent and loving principle at the heart of the world, and many Buddhists may have no objection to calling this 'God' provided that no hypostatisation was implied by this term. The Three Kaya principle is one Buddhist answer to the question of how the world and everything in the world arise.

Discussion

How do the Buddhist refutations of the existence of God apply to the Judaeo-Christian understanding of God? Do you think the Buddhist arguments are successful?



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ⁱ *The Tattvasangraha of Shantarakshita*, transl. G. Jha, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1986.