

What is a buddha's nature?

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1. Introductory remarks

Over the course of the fifteen centuries or so that Buddhism was in India, there came to be different views as to what kind of being a buddha is. Each of those views served a purpose, and the purpose of this lecture is to explore what those purposes might have been that various visions of buddhahood fulfilled.

2. The Pali canonical Buddha

There is a formula that occurs in many places in the Pali canon that states the attributes of the Buddha:

Itipi so bhagavā araham sammāsambuddho vijjācaraṇasampanno sugato lokavidū
anuttaro purisadammasārathi satthā devamanussānaṃ buddho bhagavāti.¹

That passage has been translated as follows by Piyadassi Thera:

Such Indeed is the Blessed One, arahant (Consummate One), supremely enlightened, endowed with knowledge and virtue, welcome being, knower of worlds, the peerless trainer of persons, teacher of gods and men, the Buddha, the Blessed One.²

In the Theravāda tradition, the principal consideration seems to be that the Buddha was once an ordinary human being who was subject to rebirth and prone to all the difficulties that sentient beings have to endure. Then he became an arahant and knew that there would be no more rebirths in any of the realms. That the Buddha was able to make the transition from ordinary sentient being to an arahant is something that should encourage all human beings; it is a transition that in principle any human being can make, although it is usually said that not many human beings are likely to embark on that journey and that even fewer will reach the goal in this lifetime.

1. This one happens to come from Dhajaggasuttam in volume one of the Saṃyuttanikāya. PTS edition, page 219.

2. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn11/sn11.003.piya.html>

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The Buddha of the Pali canon is, however, more than an arahant. He is distinguished from other arahants by the fact that he, unlike them, made the journey without the guidance of a buddha. He rediscovered truths that previous buddhas had known but that had been lost through disuse. Moreover, the Buddha is different from others who have made the journey without guidance in that he made the difficult choice to be a teacher. The formula describes him as “the peerless trainer of persons,” as well as “teacher of gods and men.” Many of the narratives of the Pali canon make the point that all manner of Brahmins and ascetics, as well as kings and merchants and ordinary householders seek out the Buddha for advice. As a teacher he is said to be “*anuttaro*,” that is, unsurpassed. No one is better than the Buddha as being a trainer of the human beast (*purisa-damma-sārathi*).

2.1. Was the Buddha omniscient?

The question of whether the Buddha was omniscient (*sarvajña*) took on increasing importance as the Buddhist tradition developed over the centuries. More will be said about the scholastic tradition of other schools later, but for now it is perhaps worth mentioning a view reported by Kulatissa Nanda Jayatilleke in his still-important work called *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*.³ Jayatilleke reports that it was common in the Theravāda tradition to say that there were no obstacles to what the Buddha could know. That does not mean that he was actively omniscient in the sense of knowing all things at all times; rather, it means that if the Buddha ever wanted to know anything, it mattered not whether the object of his knowledge was far away in time or space, or in some future time that no one had yet experienced, or even in some normally inaccessible place such as another person's mind. The Buddha could see and hear objects at a great distance, and he could know the thoughts of others. So he *could* know whatever he wanted to know but was not burdened with the informational overload that would go with knowing all things at all times.

2.2. Does the Buddha exist after the death of his physical body?

One of the questions that the Buddha of the Pali canon says is not worth pursuing was whether the Tathāgata exists after the death of his physical body. This question was said to be among those items of curiosity that were not edifying; nothing hinges on the answer to the question, so there is no possible advantage involved in knowing the answer. That the Buddha discouraged people from asking the question, however, did not prevent Buddhists from asking it and trying to provide answers. Since there are really only two possible answers to that question, it is not surprising that there were some Buddhists who answered it one way and some who answered it in the opposite way. For those who gave a positive answer, the view was that the Buddha's mind continues forever more to enjoy the bliss associated with liberation from greed, hatred and delusion. For those who gave a negative answer, the view was that since greed, hatred and delusion are the causes of being reborn, when greed, hatred and delusion are eliminated, there is nothing to cause the mind to continue into another life.

3. Kulatissa Nanda Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963).

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So for these Buddhists, buddhahood or nirvāṇa, are the definite end of the story. There would be no point in continuing to exist in a state of bliss.

3. Are there many Buddhas or just one? The Buddha of the Lotus Sutra

There were several Mahāyāna Sūtras that came to be regarded as literary masterpieces in classical Sanskrit literature. One of the most prominent of these was the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* or Lotus of the True Teaching. It is important not only as a literary masterpiece, but as one of the most important of a genre of literature that places a strong emphasis on the importance of faith. Probably no single Mahāyāna Sūtra enjoyed wider popularity than the Lotus Sutra. Unlike many other Mahāyāna texts, it was written in a dramatic style that was accessible to everyone. Its message is conveyed in parables and stories rather than abstractions. Moreover, the main doctrine of the Sutra is that of Universal Enlightenment, and this doctrine appealed to a wide range of people. Therefore, every school of Chinese Buddhism found some place for the Lotus Sutra, and a number of schools, especially the influential Tiantai, made the Lotus the centerpiece of their systematic exposition of Buddhist teaching.

The Lotus Sutra was evidently formed at a time when Buddhists were embroiled in controversy over the legitimacy of Mahāyāna teachings. A principal teaching of the sutra is that there is unifying force in Buddhism that solves the problem of legitimacy. That unifying force is the Buddha Śākyamuni, who is portrayed as a single principle that is manifested in all particular Buddhas. In contrast the the way the Buddha is portrayed in the Pali canon, the Śākyamuni of the Lotus Sutra is depicted as “the father of the world, the Self-born, the Healer, the Protector of all creatures.” This protector of all creatures tirelessly devotes himself to doing whatever may be necessary to lead all sentient beings, without exception, to unsurpassed full enlightenment, an everlasting condition of peace, harmony and bliss. That there are many Buddhists paths turns out to be an illusion, for in fact all paths are given by the same Śākyamuni. In fact there is but one vehicle, one path, and that is the Mahāyāna.

An integral theme in the narrative of the Lotus Sutra is that there will be some who will deny the legitimacy of the Lotus Sutra itself. This suspicion of the Lotus Sutra, says the Lotus Sutra, will especially strong during the age of degeneration, when the moral state of beings in the world will have fallen to such a low state that even the teachers of Buddhism cannot be trusted. Fraud and charlatanism will abound in that age, and many people who claim to be teaching the True Dharma will in fact be teaching a false dharma that will bring those who follow it to ruin. People who claim to be offering cures and antidotes will in fact be offering toxins that make their patients worse.

Within Buddhism, especially in India, there was always a perceived danger of putting forth doctrines that seemed too much like the teachings of the Vedas and the Upanisads. Making the Buddha sound too much like the Brahman described in the Vedānta was something to be avoided. It is noteworthy, therefore, that Śākyamuni Buddha as described in the Lotus Sutra is never at rest. He is dynamic, constantly adapting his teachings in order to reach the depths of degeneration that the sentient beings of the world descend into. And yet, this dynamic

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Buddha retains his unity, and there is a sense in which he never changes. The authors of the Lotus Sutra seem to have been fully aware of the metaphysical difficulties involved in having an entity that is unified and unchanging at yet never resting. Lest someone feel inclined to say that such a being cannot possibly exist, the Lotus Sutra emphasizes that the truth is entirely beyond reason. The Dharma is profoundly mysterious. No one but a fully enlightened Buddha can possibly grasp it. Trying to approach the Dharma through logic and reasoning is bound to fail. The Dharma can only be approached through a kind of innocent and unquestioning faith in the Buddha Śākyamuni who is alone in being able to grasp it in its profundity. To everyone else, it is unfathomable.

4. What kind of Buddha suits a philosopher?

In the early part of the seventh century, the problem of tension among various approaches to Buddhism had not been solved. Much of the controversy over which teachings were authentic was focused on the question of which texts are authentic in the sense of being accurate records of what the Buddha has actually taught. Rather than trying to solve this problem by discovering yet another sutra whose authenticity could be disputed, some Buddhists attempted to avoid the question of the authenticity of sutras altogether. For them the potentially unifying factor that could bring all Buddhists together was not the *word* of the Buddha, but the Buddha's *reason*. The strategy of these Buddhists was exactly the opposite of the Lotus Sutra. Whereas the Lotus Sutra presented the Dharma as something that was entirely beyond the reach of logic and reasoning, the Buddhist logicians claimed that nothing could be regarded as Dharma unless it passed the test of being logically coherent, free of contradictions and based upon principles that anyone could easily discover.

4.1. Dignāga

One of the chief architects of this rationalistic approach to Buddhism was Dignāga. He opens his *Pramāṇasamuccaya* by bowing to “to him who has become a source of knowledge, who yearns for the well-being of the world, who is a teacher, who has attained goodness, and who is a guide.” In his own prose commentary to his opening verse, Dignāga explains that the Buddha's authority consists in the excellence of his motivations and the excellence of the natural results of those motivations. The excellence of the Buddha's motivations can in turn be understood as the excellence of his intentions, and the excellence of his implementation of those motivations. The excellence of his intentions is expressed by the phrase “who yearns for the well-being of the world,” while the excellence of his implementation is expressed by the phrase “who is a teacher.” The excellence of the natural consequences of the Buddha's motivations, on the other hand, can be understood as the excellent attainments that are of benefit to the Buddha himself, and the excellent attainment that is of benefit to others. The attainments that benefit the Buddha himself are suggested by the phrase “who has attained goodness (*sugata*),” an epithet that is traditionally explained with reference to the fact that the Buddha a) is admired, b) will never again be reborn, and c) has achieved all his goals. The attainment that is of benefit to others is indicated by the phrase “who is a guide,” since his teachings guide people across the turbulent waters of life to the yonder shore of nirvana.

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4.2. Dharmakīrti

Dignāga's principal interpreter was Dharmakīrti, whose works drew far more attention over the centuries than did Dignāga's. Indeed, Dharmakīrti ranks as one of the most influential of all Indian Buddhist thinkers. His project was to show that the Buddha was a *pramāṇa*, that is, a reliable source of new knowledge. In his discussion of the Buddha's authority, or his being a source of knowledge, Dharmakīrti first of all defines knowledge as a particular type of cognition, which is unlike such cognitions as beliefs, opinions, conjectures, wishes and hopes. What differentiates knowledge from these other types of cognition, he says, is that knowledge is a belief that does not deceive or cheat the person who holds it. To be more precise, if a person acts on a piece of knowledge, then the goal that prompted the person to act may be achieved. In contrast, if one acts on a belief or hope or wish, then the goal that prompted the action may not be achieved. This claim, that what distinguishes knowledge from other types of cognition is its capacity to enable a person to realize a goal (*arthakriyā*), is not found in Dignāga's works on epistemology but is an innovation on Dharmakīrti's part.

Note that Dharmakīrti does not hold that the pragmatic test need actually be applied to every belief to determine whether or not it is practicable. If one believes, for example, that a particular fire is producing enough heat to boil water, it is not necessary to put this belief to the test in order to have confidence in its feasibility. One can draw on one's experience of previous fires to draw conclusions about this fire. If one has had the experience before that fires of a this magnitude generated enough heat to boil water, then one can reasonably believe that this fire also has that capacity. What is important about Dharmakīrti's pragmatic criterion for beliefs is that there are some kinds of beliefs that can never pass the test of practical experience, namely, beliefs about things that have never before been part of one's experience. Examples of such beliefs are the Brahmanical doctrine that the result of doing one's social and religious duties (*dharma*) will be entry into heaven, and various doctrines about the beginning and the end of the world.

In contrast to some of the beliefs of Brahmans, which can never pass a practical test, Dharmakīrti argues that the key doctrines taught by the Buddha can be put to a practical test in this life, and indeed have passed the practical test in the lives of a sufficient number of other people that one can have confidence in them even if one has not tested them thoroughly for oneself. Seeing that others have experienced an extinction (*nirvāṇa*) of the basic causes of their discontent, for example, is grounds for believing that nirvana is indeed possible to attain. According to Dharmakīrti, then, the belief in nirvana is, unlike the Brahman's belief in heaven, reasonable to hold, even for a person who has not yet experienced nirvana first hand.

5. What kind of Buddha do Western Buddhists crave?

Every setting in which Buddhism takes root has a cultural context that influences what Buddhists are seeking and, perhaps more importantly, seeking to avoid. Although it is risky and presumptuous to generalize, a few impressions of what Western Buddhists are seeking may be in order.

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On the positive side, many Western Buddhists appear to be most comfortable with a Buddha who supports social equality and environmental responsibility. What many Western Buddhists seem to wish to avoid is an authoritarian Buddha who expects his disciples to follow his teachings out of blind faith and whose teachings pose a conflict with the scientific findings of our age. What people seem to be seeking is a psychologically sophisticated therapist who gently nudges people in the direction of deeper self-understanding.

Works cited

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