



Deva Worship and Buddhism

Some Buddhists in modern Sri Lanka seem to have forgotten the fundamental concept of the Three Refuges. As substitute worship they invoke the blessings of non-human entities as well as deities of the Hindu pantheon.

Many may not realize how non-human forces work. It is worth examining the worship of deities in the context of the Buddha's Dispensation.

Question:

Are there deities (*Devas*) according to the Buddha's Doctrine?

The existence of deities is clearly mentioned in the Dispensation. Moreover, they can comprehend the Doctrine. One of the qualities of the Buddha is 'Teacher of Devas and humans' (*sattha Deva manussanam*). Thus, He achieved omniscience to benefit Devas as well as human beings. Devas also need deliverance through the Three Refuges.

In the Connected Discourses of the Buddha there are accounts of Devas hearing the Dhamma from the Buddha and realizing the fruition of the Paths (***Samyutta Nikaya: Devata Samyutta***). This shows not only that Devas exist, but that they have reached deliverance through the Doctrine.

Question:

We cannot see Devas. How can one accept the existence of Devas one cannot see?

Acceptance of the presence of Devas belongs to the category of the 'right view' of worldly things. The Supreme Buddha has taught us four ways in which living beings are born: beings are born in eggs, in a maternal womb, in a watery environment, and spontaneously without a visible cause (***andaja*¹, *jalabuja*², *samsedaja*³, *opapatika*⁴**). To be born spontaneously is to be born according to accumulated kamma-results, in completed physical form. Devas, Brahmas, Petas and beings in Hell are born spontaneously.

The Supreme Buddha explains that denying of spontaneous birth is a wrong view (***miccha ditthi***). One who cannot comprehend spontaneous birth has not grasped the deep meanings of kamma, volitions and results. Such a person needs to

¹ Andaja - beings are born in eggs.

² Jalabuja - beings are born in a maternal womb.

³ Samsedaja - beings are born in a watery environment

⁴ Opapatika – beings are born spontaneously without a visible cause

cultivate an understanding of birth as a function of the laws of Dependent Origination.

Question:

There are many Buddhists in Sri Lanka who place platters of offerings before images of Gods and seek favours. Is there anything wrong with that practice?

These modern-day offerings and worship are not for Gods. They are for non-human beings. Even in human society, however classless they may claim to be, there are divisions of class – upper, middle and lower – normally divided along lines of wealth. There can also be an unseen class that will keep control of all classes of society by intimidation, coercion and ‘protection’.

The platters that deity worshippers place in shrines inside temple premises invoke a lower class of non-human beings as Gods. When we make offerings to non-human entities our faith in the Three Refuges is weakened. The non-human beings may try to come forward to offer help of non-spiritual nature. Just as the turbulent underworld forces of society maintain political protocols, so do the under-world non-human beings have their protocols.

There are groups of non-human beings who claim to be the representation of God Kataragama or God Vishnu and possess people. Some even claim to represent God Suniyam and try to

influence people to follow them. They may then even engage in fortune-telling as a livelihood.

People who do not have the benefit of the Three Refuges become easy prey in the grip of the non-humans. The non-humans lead gullible people by a tether. Those in the grasp of non-human entities and their agents make offerings of expensive gifts and ask for all manner of benefits.

Those who make such offerings do so due to fear. They perhaps believe that Gods can be appeased by, and are gullible enough to do a lot for, a mere tray of fruit. Gods do not benefit from these material offerings, but other forces and other people do.

The occult forces perhaps treat a person reasonably well as long as offerings are made, but make trouble when offerings cease.

People who are not established in the Three Refuges walk from shrine to shrine invoking the blessings of such non-human beings. Anyone who takes the Three Refuges need not go that route.

Now, to answer the question that started this discussion: it is entirely wrong to make offerings to Gods in temple shrines.

Question:

Do deities residing in shrines and temples belong to the Buddha's Dispensation?

They do not belong to the Buddha's Dispensation. There is no room in the Buddha's Dispensation to worship Deities. Only the Three Refuges belong in the Dispensation. However, the practice of offering merits to Devas is mentioned in the Doctrine. But those Devas are not the ones residing in temples and shrines to receive platters of fruit and other such offerings.

A person established well in the Three Refuges and living a righteous family life will receive worshipful respect from Devas. The worship found in **Fanes** is none other than worship of non-humans. It does not suit a Noble Disciple established in the Three Refuges.

Question:

Are not Fanes a part and parcel of many Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka?

This is true. In numerous Buddhist temples there are **Fanes**. These are cultural symbols that have strayed on to a mistaken path. Some such places have degenerated to a point where they do not belong in the Buddha's Dispensation. When a monk in a temple neglects to take the Three Refuges seriously it is no wonder that the congregation follows suit.

Question:

Can we be reborn in the world of Devas?

Certainly we can be reborn in the world of Devas. Discourses speak of it (***Sankhara Uppatti Sutta, Sotanugata Sutta***). If a disciple so desires he or she can be reborn in the superior world of the Devas. One needs to develop qualities of righteousness – faith, virtue, thorough listening to the Doctrine, liberality and wisdom (***saddha, sila, sutta, caga, pañña***). The Supreme Buddha discoursed that a disciple with the five qualities of righteousness can establish concentration on a Deva world of that person's choice and seek rebirth in it.

Question:

Can a person of the Deva world realize the fruition of the Path (*magga phala*)?

The answer to this question has been clarified by the Supreme Buddha: On a certain occasion the Venerable Elder Ananda asked the Fortunate One, “Venerable Sir, have you visited the world of the Devas in your psychic form?”

The Fortunate One replied, “Ananda, I have visited the world of the Devas in my psychic form.”

Then the Venerable Ananda asked, “Venerable Sir, have you visited the world of the Devas in your physical form?”

The Fortunate One said, “Ananda, I have visited the Deva worlds in my physical form.”

When He visited the Devas’ world He spoke the Doctrine to the Devas. The fact that Devas can realize the fruition of the Paths is explained in a discourse on the ‘Questions of Sakra’ (***Sakka Pañha Sutta***).

On a certain occasion Sakka in the company of the Thirty Two Gods and Pancasikha of the Gandhabbas visited the Supreme Buddha. At that time the Fortunate One was in a retreat at the Indasala cave in Magadha. Sakka sought the Buddha’s clarification on several questions. When he had answers to all of them the pure and spotless Dhamma Eye (***dhammachakku***) arose within Sakka, the ruler of the Gods, and he knew: “Whatever things have an origin must come to cessation.”

Question:

There are many people today who have no desire for birth in Deva worlds. They reject the idea. Why is that?

Very few are those who have an understanding of the Deva worlds. That is not surprising, when one wonders how many understand the world of people.

In some parts of the world the worship of the One God is practised. In such places, people speak so much about the worship of One God, but what most strive for is a successful worldly life

and wealth. So, the world of a God is created within a physical, geographical world.

Many try to create a heaven within a physical and geographical world, possibly because they really do not believe that they will go to Heaven after death. Buddhists have come under the influence of such thinking, too – whatever happens after death the present life must be enjoyed with food, drink and merry-making.

Many Buddhists do not understand the Deva worlds spoken of in the Doctrine. Hence they have no particular reason to be interested in them...

