

GODS IN BUDDHISM

By L.G. Hewage

Buddhism does not believe in a Creator God who rules over man's destiny and who rewards or punishes human beings by sending them to heaven or eternal hell after their death.

Buddhism, however, believes in gods or devas – those heavenly beings who can assist the human race but who ironically may not be as powerful or privileged as humans. For man can attain Nibbana (full emancipation), devas cannot.

Ed.

The Pali word that comes closest to the English word 'god' or 'gods' is *DEVA*, therefore let me first emphasise this point in Buddhism. Now, Buddhist texts refer to three categories of *DEVAS*. *Sammuti-deva* or conventional gods is one of them. Kings and princes are generally referred to as Sammuti devas. In the society in which Prince Siddharta, the Buddha-to-be, was born, Kings and Princes also were considered to be a category of devas. In the society of today, the place of the constitutional monarch is gradually taken by the democratically elected Head of the State. Sometimes, of course, this place is taken by a dictator too. The extent of the respect each of them sometimes commands from the people may differ in quantity and quality. Those who have power to rule a country even in the contemporary society may be placed in this category of Sammuti devas.

Another category of Devas is called the *Visuddhi Devas*. They are the Aryan beings who have attained a sublime state by their purity. Buddhas (both Samma Sambuddha and Pacceka Buddha) and Arahants are included in this category. Samma Sambuddha also is called *Devatideva*, a god of gods. In this sense of Visuddhi Deva, we may therefore include all Aryans, including the Samma Sambuddha.

At present we are concerned with the third kind of Devas called *Uppatti Devas* – those who are born divine or in a heavenly state as heavenly beings. According to Buddhism there are thirty-one states of sentient beings. Out of these thirty-one, twenty-six are considered to be divine states. Twenty of these twenty-six are called Brahmaloкас where a higher category of gods called Brahmas are said to be living. The word 'Deva' is used generally in relation to the divine beings only in the other six planes. When we use the English word 'gods' or 'deities', we may include the divine beings in all these twenty-six

planes but in Buddhist literature those in the six *devalokas* referred to above are called *Devas*, while those in the other twenty are called *Brahmas*. Nevertheless all these may be taken into consideration for our purpose in this context.

This comparatively short article does not permit us to go into much detail about each of these devalokas and Brahmaloikas. Therefore we will have to limit ourselves only to some aspects of their relationship to Buddhism. Those who wish to know the names of all these Devalokas including Brahmaloikas, can get them in the first Sermon itself, namely the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* or the Discourse that set the wheel of truth rolling. There it is said that in addition to the five Bhikkhus a large number of Devas and Brahmas also listened to the discourse. At the end of the Sutta it is said that Devas and Brahmas in all the planes expressed their joy one after the other.

In the Jakata stories we come across several occasions when the Devas, particularly Sakka, the king of the Devas, rendered assistance to the Bodhisatva. Before he was born in India as Prince Siddhartha, he was a deva in *TUSITA* heaven. All leaders of Devas and Brahmas assembled in Tusita heaven to make the formal request to the Bodhisatva to be born in the human plane as the Buddha-to-be. From this request up to the time of His passing away according to our records, Devas have met Him on several occasions.

A large number of discourses have been preached to Devas, often after 10 p.m. in the night. The Buddha Himself is said to have visited Tusita heaven and preached the Abhidhamma to His mother in heaven. Sakka, the king of Devas who lives in *Tavatimsa* heaven, is said to preside at the assembly of gods, when it is in session, at the assembly hall called *Sudhamma*. He came to Buddha and got his doubts clarified. Sahampathi Brahma also met Buddha on several very important occasions and was converted to Buddhism. Reference is made to Devas in several discourses of the Buddha. For instance in the Maha Parinibbana Sutta, or His last discourse reference is made to hundreds of Bhikkhus – Bhikkhunis, Upasakas-Upasikas, who were known to Buddha and His disciples and who had been born in heavens after their death. Some of them had attained the first or second stage of Sainthood, and others had not, although they all had been born in one of the heavens.

Now, as Buddhists, we must believe in the three refugees we take daily, namely, the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. If we believe in these three and in the records available to us about these, we can be Buddhists. Karma, Rebirth and the concept of Samsara, are principles that are contained in these teachings. The thirty-one planes of existence are also an integral part of these teachings. According to these teachings devas also are worldlings who are subject to annica, dukka, anatta (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and soullessness) as we

human beings are. Because they are born as devas as a result of the good actions of their past lives, they do have better conditions than we humans for their worldly satisfaction. However, they too may be born as humans when their life-span is over or when their kusala Kamma vipaka is over.

It may be interesting to the readers, perhaps, to know how Sakka, the king of Devas, was blessed with this exalted position. Commentaries on the Dhammapada and the Sahbapana Sutta, and on the Digha Nikaya tell us the story of a person called Magha who lived in Magdha. He was in the habit of helping those who worked on the construction of roads. Land cleared by him was occupied by others by force and he, instead of getting annoyed with them, rejoiced when he saw others enjoying the results of his labour. He continued this *sramadana* campaign of voluntarily donating his labour for the welfare of others. Thirty-three others joined him; led by Magha, they went on constructing roads for the benefit of others. Some unscrupulous and selfish persons who were adversely affected by this donation of free labour complained to the king that Magha and his companions were a gang of robbers. The King ordered them to be punished but the loving kindness (Metta) practised by Magha and his friends protected them from all punishments. Magha and his group later constructed a large hall for use as a public resting place for passers-by. This hall was called Hall Sudhamma. Others near and dear to him also joined him in this voluntary service campaign. In addition to these humanitarian services he developed good qualities like looking after the parents, respecting the elders, abstaining from falsehood and using pleasant speech, practising liberality, sharing his comforts with others who were in need, extending loving kindness to all and leading a life useful to all. After his death he is said to have been born as Sakka, the king of Devas, as a result of all his socially useful services. Others who joined him in this type of service were born in the same heaven with him. This story indicates and emphasises the type of service that can bring you to divine levels.

A popular stanza in Pali says:

Give alms with sincerity of purpose,
Observe the Silas frequently,
Develop meditation with interest,
By them you get to divine levels.

According to Buddhism, you and I can also raise ourselves to divine levels by our own conscious behaviour here and now. However, gods too are subject to decay, change and death. They too are worldlings or *Putujjanas* but some of them are more powerful than most human beings. Nevertheless, all human beings are potentially more powerful than most devas because we humans have

the full opportunity conducive to spiritual development while the devas have all worldly comforts and facilities in excess to such an extent that these conditions are not always conducive to spiritual growth. As such, we are in one respect more privileged than the devas, because we are able to follow the Middle Path here and now and raise ourselves to divine levels or even attain full emancipation.

Now, there arises the common question whether a god or gods or heavenly beings can help human beings. Is a God in a position to reward or punish human beings? Can a God answer the prayers of human beings? These are specific universal and perennial questions and Buddhism has direct answers to them, recorded in Buddhist literature as and when those questions were asked during the time of the Buddha.

The belief about (a) one Creator God who can reward or punish human beings, (b) that our lives are limited to this human plane, (c) and that our lives end at our death, etc. is not accepted in Buddhism. That there may be divine beings who may be able and willing to help human beings in certain limited ways under certain conditions, is accepted in Buddhism. Therefore, according to Buddhism, if one lives a pure, meritorious, righteous and socially beneficial life, there is the possibility of such a person being assisted and encouraged by divine beings in certain fields of activity and under certain conditions. This possibility cannot be completely ruled out even in our progress on the path towards spiritual development leading to ultimate emancipation. However, it is entirely our own responsibility and is within our power to work towards that ultimate goal. It is also left to each one according to his own spiritual maturity to try out by his own direct experience whether some form of divine assistance may be available for such a noble effort. If we accept the obstructions presented by Mara, the evil one, who lives in one of the heavens (XI), there is no reason why we should not accept the possibility of such assistance too by other divine beings.

According to Buddhism, how can we human beings get the assistance of divine beings under conditions favourable for such divine-human relationship? During the lifetime of the Buddha alone, there were thousands and thousands of human beings who attained the Sotapana and Sakadagami stages of Sainthood but did not attain the Arahant stage. A great number of them, if not all, must have been born as human beings or as divine beings. Even after the life-time of the Buddha, thousands more may have been added to this number. Some of them may have attained the final stage by now, but others must be still living as divine beings. All those who attained the Anagami stage must have been born in the Suddhavasas (pure abodes) namely, Aviha, Atappa, Sudassa, and Akanita Brahmaloas indicated in the Appendix under numbers XXIII, XXIV, XXV,

XXVI and XXVII. These Suddhavasas live hundreds and thousands of times longer than human beings. This is especially so in Brahma realms.

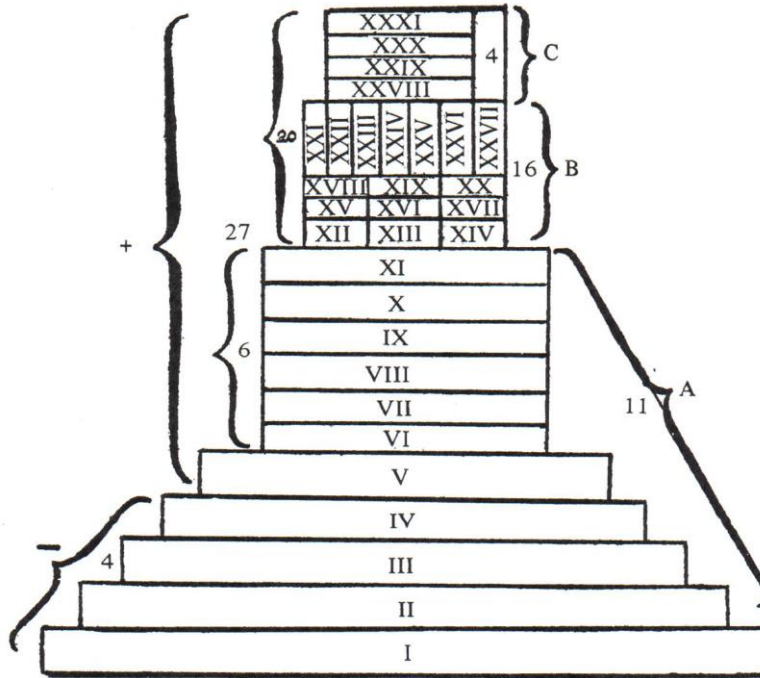
There must be hundreds and thousands of divine beings in the six devalokas (Numbers VI to XI in the figure) and the sixteen Brahmaloikas (Numbers VII to XXVII) who are willing and who are able to help us in our spiritual endeavors.

However, we cannot be sure of anything about gods and heavens according to Buddhism, till we have some direct experience about the presence of some forces or powers that cannot be satisfactorily explained by our sensory experiences. Till such personal experience is available, we have to suspend our judgement about what we do not know for certain. That is the Buddhist attitude and the scientific attitude too. If divine powers are there, as referred to in our Buddhist literature, we may be able to get their assistance by qualifying ourselves for such assistance. According to the eleven benefits of Metta (Loving-Kindness) you can attract not only divine beings but also human beings if you develop Metta. You can also protect yourself from beings in the unhappy states (Numbers I to IV).

As ordinary mundane human beings, we cannot see divine beings unless and until we develop the extra-sensory powers necessary for such perception. This is clearly stated by the Buddha in the Gayasisa Sutta of the Anguttara Nikaya in which He says that He Himself did not have such extra-sensory experience till He developed the psychic skills necessary for that purpose. Although you cannot see divine beings as such, you may be able to see them when they are in disguise and you may also experience their presence in certain other ways, like seeing a light emanating from them.

- (1) Egeron C. Baptist, *Thirty One States of Being and Becoming*.
- (2) See the Appendix for an illustration of the thirty-one states by a diagram.
- (3) Marasingha M.M.J. *Gods in Early Buddhism*, Vidyalankara University, Kelaniya Sri Lanka, 1974.
- (4) Hewage L.G., *METTA, (Loving-Kindness)* Sarvodaya Press, Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, 1974.

APPENDIX



Explanation of the Appendix

A = Kamaloka or Kama Bhava = Realms of Sensual Pleasures

Numbers I to IV	= Unhappy states	4
Number V	= Human realm	1
Number VI to XI	= Divine realms	<u>6</u>
		<u>11</u>

B = Rupaloka or Brahmaloaka = Realms of Fine Material Beings

Numbers XII to XXVII Brahma worlds	16
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C = Arupaloka or Arupa Brahmaloaka = Realms of Immaterial Beings

Numbers XXVIII to XXXI Immaterial Realms	4
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‘+ mark’ indicates the 27 happy states and ‘- mark’ indicates the 4 unhappy states, making a total of 31 states.

Kamaloka 11, Rupaloka 16 and Arupaloka 4 make a total of 31 states.

