

Pandeism and Buddhism

It may come as a surprise to many to see the idea of “deism” associated with Buddhism. This may be partly because Western atheists like Stephen Batchelor have written about Buddhism from that point of view. Practising Buddhists in the East will rarely identify themselves as atheists. Certainly, Buddhists reject the traditional Christian God, who is conceived of as transcendent, up there in heaven, with the power to “forgive” the sins of human beings. Pandeism too rejects that kind of God.

The association of pantheism with Buddhism is described particularly by practitioners of the Zen and Mahayana varieties. Soyen Shaku was the first Zen Buddhist master to teach in the United States. He published *Zen for Americans* in 1906. He wrote:

“At the outset, let me state that Buddhism is not atheistic as the term is ordinarily understood. It has certainly a God, the highest reality and truth, through which and in which this universe exists. However, the followers of Buddhism usually avoid the term God, for it savors so much of Christianity, whose spirit is not always exactly in accord with the Buddhist interpretation of religious experience. Again, Buddhism is not pantheistic in the sense that it identifies the universe with God.

“Thus, according to the proclamation of an enlightened mind, God or the principle of sameness is not transcendent, but immanent in the universe, and we sentient beings are manifesting the divine glory just as much as the lilies of the field. A God who, keeping aloof from his creations, sends down his words of command through specially favored personages, is rejected by Buddhists as against the constitution of human reason. God must be in us, who are made in his likeness. We cannot presume the duality of God and the world. Religion is

not to go to God by forsaking the world, but to find him in it.”

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/zfa/zfa04.htm>

It would seem from the above that Soyen Shaku was not satisfied with the term pantheism with reference to Buddhism. He had probably not heard the term pandeism in 1906, but his description of Buddhism seems to me consistent with our current understanding of pandeism.

Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki was another teacher of Zen Buddhism who lectured widely in the West. The following are extracts from a seminar on D.T.Suzuki's 'Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism', led by the venerable Sangharakshita:

“Buddhism is considered by some to be a religion without a God and without a soul. The statement is true and untrue according to what meaning we give to those terms.”

“Buddhism does not recognize the existence of a being, who stands aloof from his ‘creations,’ and who meddles occasionally with human affairs when his capricious will pleases him. This conception of a supreme being is very offensive to Buddhists.”

This brings us to the interesting topic of “dharmakaya” or dhammakāya in Buddhism. Wikipedia tells us that “trikaya” is the doctrine of the three bodies of the Buddha in Mahayana Buddhism, “kaya” being the Pali word for body:

The Dharmakāya or Truth body which embodies the very principle of enlightenment and knows no limits or boundaries;

The Saṃbhogakāya or body of mutual enjoyment which is a body of bliss or clear light manifestation;

The Nirmāṇakāya or created body which manifests in time and space.

The concept of dhammakāya is explored in a doctoral thesis written by Chanida Jantrasrisalai for the University of Sydney:

<https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/4130>

Jantrasrisalai writes:

“Generally, it (dharmakāya) is regarded as the only real body among the three bodies of the Buddha, being an expression of his ‘enlightened awareness.’...Some Mahāyāna Buddhists identify the dharmakāya with everything in the phenomenal world.”

Jantrasrisalai goes on to explore the views of Buddhaghōṣa, a 5th-century Indian Theravada Buddhist commentator:

“To summarise, Buddhaghōṣa uses the term dhammakāya mostly as a noun. In most of his explanations, he relates dhammakāya with the Buddha’s purified mental qualities, realities to be attained or experienced spiritually by his noble disciples, through the destruction of defilements.”

Interpreting the Buddhist concept of dhammakāya in terms of pandeism, we may speculate that when the original Divine Being disintegrated at the time of the Big Bang, the divine components remained as the dhammakāya. Every conscious being in the Universe possesses a fragment of the dhammakāya, which can be brought to manifestation by the destruction of defilements.