

## ***THE MORAL VALUE OF THE CONCEPT OF HEAVEN***

Ven; Dr, Medawachchiye Dhammajothi thero

Buddhism has accepted the concept of heaven in view of its ethical value. While the Buddha rejected contemporary concepts that were harmful to society, he endorsed ideas that were beneficial to mankind. For example the Brāhmin<sup>1</sup> and Athman<sup>2</sup> concepts which represent diving theories of creation deprives man of Independent Action<sup>3</sup> though the concept(5) of 'Mara' (death)<sup>4</sup> and heaven induce towards morality and consequently the latter two concepts have been incorporated into Buddhism. At the same time the concept of Brahma too has been accepted in a revised form. It may be that the ethical value in the idea of heaven made Buddhism adopt a flexible approach to it.

When we examine the origin of the concept of heaven it appears that there was no ethical background to it. The pre Buddhist concept of heaven developed in two stages before it assumed its present form. It is based mainly in the ideas: I. The shining area in the distant sky, II. the world of happiness to which one goes after death as a result of meritorious acts done during ones life time. Both these concepts have been discussed since the era of the Rig Veda. But the earliest of these two concepts is believed to be the first one the shining area of the distant sky). It is clear that the first concept gradually become mixed with the second view. The concept of heaven during the Veda period

was both attribution of nature as well as a mythical concept. It is entwined with the Vedic analysis of the world.. With the passing of time these different aspects merged to form the basis for the single concept of heaven.

### I The shining area in the distant sky.

This was earliest naturalistic concept of heaven formed during the earliest Vedic period. It is clear that the shining area in the distant sky was treated as being divine by the early Aryans. They treated natural objects either as diving revelations or as mysteries and miracles of nature. There were 33 such deities among the Vedic Gods, while II of them including Suriya and Varuna were called 'Naka'. According to this, the Gods living in the heaven, known as the Gods of the Skies, attained divinity by consuming Sorma as follows:<sup>5</sup> *"We drank Sorma - we went towards the light (Heaven) We saw the Gods"* <sup>6</sup>

According to this belief what is required to reach heaven is drinking Sorma.. Through that they can go towards light. (Jyotir or Astral) heaven. This makes it obvious that light has been treated as heaven. Hence the early Vedic concept of Heaven can be considered as a natural creation. This has been clearly shown by Mr. Wimala Wijesuriya .<sup>7</sup>

Analyzing this Mr. Jane Gonde says that the early Vedic concept of Heaven was not a place that is comparable to the Garden of Eden, a world where the innocent and blessed could live, a holy land or a sacred place created by God.<sup>8</sup> This too proves that the early Vedic heaven was a divine ascription of nature. We should examine why people of the early Vedic period treated the distant sky as heaven. Since natural phenomena and events in nature were generally treated as divinities it is possible that what was above the horizon was treated as the divine world. It is necessary to draw our attention to the fact that in Vedic

hymns death is very rarely referred to<sup>9</sup>. They always considered happiness in this earthly life a rather than in the hereafter<sup>10</sup>. Victory over enemies, Longevity, being blessed with many children and cattle were among the things they considered as means of happiness.<sup>11</sup> Death was unpleasant for them<sup>12</sup>. It was a tragic and horrifying experience to them. Death robbed them of all happiness. It was a dark abyss. It is possible that they thought of a heaven in order to counter their fear of death, particularly in view of the fact that they perceived heaven as something permanent and luminous. This heavenly God appears in the sky at certain times and thereafter disappears. It is a regular occurrence.

### II. Heaven is a world that can be reached after death through merit acquired in life.

The second stage of the development of the concept of heaven is as a world where one is born into after performing good deeds in life. This concept would have developed after the Vedic Aryans focused their attention on death. Critics believe that the belief in heaven developed among them towards the latter half of the Vedic period.<sup>13</sup> Here the critics have focused their attention on death. Critics believe that the belief in heaven developed among them towards the latter half of the Vedic Period.<sup>14</sup> Here the critics have focused their attention on the 10<sup>th</sup> Mandala (chapter) of the Rig Veda contains a Hymn<sup>15</sup> referring to the outcome of good and bad deeds (sins) and reincarnation. This Hymn is of course believed to be late.<sup>16</sup> According to the primitive concept of life after death, the next life was also in this earth. In some of the primitive societies the world after death was believed to be below the earth's surface, while those who departed from this life were supposed to have gone to heaven through a extra-terrestrial route.<sup>17</sup> The description of heaven by people of the Vedic period could be considered as an expansion of life after death and of a world of the Fathers (Petra Loka). The latter was located far away in the sky.

The first person born in the world of the Fathers was Yama, who provides accommodation to others who come there<sup>18</sup>. In the early days the world of the Fathers and heaven were treated as one<sup>19</sup>. This is shown in Rig Veda<sup>20</sup>. Most of the concepts that originated in the Vedic period were expanded and developed in Brahmic and Upanishadic literature. The concepts of the world of gods and religious discipline were thus developed to be the path to realize the objectives of both man and god. Sacrifice (Yagna) was raised to a level higher than that of the god. It was held that the more the sacrificial rituals were conducted the more comforts and wealth would be acquired. The development of these beliefs led to the concepts of the path of light and the path of darkness. There is reference to the sacrifice of the gods and the sacrifice of the fathers. They were mentioned in Bahamans and Upanishads.

The belief in persons being reborn after the merit they acquired is exhausted developed in later years. After the Brahmana literature the Upanishad too show the further development of the concept of heaven. Accordingly, there were three worlds, the world of humans, the world of the fathers and the world of the gods. Jnana marga (Wisdom) helped to reach the world of the Gods while Yajna or life of a hermit, of chastity and faith continued. This could be viewed as an instance of a mixture of the early and latter day concepts of heaven. But it is possible that towards the end of the rig Vedic period doubts had been expressed over the eternity of heaven.<sup>21</sup> The rituals seeking longevity were prayers for long life in heaven rather than a wish for eternity. This can be treated as the beginning of the Upanishadic concept of rebirth on the earth. Although these fathers and Gods lived together in heaven, they were different from each other. Analyzing this on the basis of Rig Vedha and Atharva Veda Prof. Keith says<sup>22</sup> “*The path of the gods, has always been shown as being higher than that of the fathers. The path of the latter is not peaceful like that of the gods. There are dogs on the path to the world and the Fathers unlike the peaceful way to*

*the world of the gods.*” The reasons for such differences may be attributed to the social concepts and rituals linked with them such as making offerings to the gods and Priests during the Vedic period. According to Vedic thinking those who observed religious discipline attained divinity while the others entered the paternal world. This is no contrast to the early view that all those who died attained the status of pitras. This influenced the Peta Vatthu and Vimana Vatthu (ordinary beings and divine beings) in Buddhist literature in later years.<sup>23</sup>

According to Prof. A. B. Keith, the early Aryans believed that the path to heaven lay in worshipping Gods rather than in meritorious deeds.<sup>24</sup> But since the Vedic period it was believed that those who meditate, those who make offerings to Brahmin priests, those who die in battle also go to heaven.<sup>25</sup> Yet in order to reach the world of the gods they believed in worshipping them<sup>26</sup>. In this connection they sought the help of Agni (fire) who took every sacrificial object to the next world.<sup>27</sup> According to this belief everything has been subjugated to the power of Gods. Many critics believe that since it was considered unjust for persons who failed to observe “**Rita**” or the universal Law to go to heaven, it gave birth to the concept of hell.<sup>28</sup> Radakrishnan has attributed the concept of Hell to the Brahman period.<sup>29</sup> Prior to that according to A.B. Keith it was believed that the sinner was never reborn. He also points out that there was also the belief that the sinner suffered in eternal dark hell after death.<sup>30</sup> Anyway it is clear that the concept of hell originated after that of heaven and the world of gods. During the Upanishadic period there was further development of the concept of heaven. Instead of the “**Way of Prayer**” of the Brahman period, “The way of Wisdom” was put forward in the Upanishad, it is stated. There are three worlds, the human world, the world of the fathers and the world of the Gods. One can reach the world of the fathers through yaga Ritual while to reach the world of the gods one had to practice wisdom (Jnana)<sup>31</sup>. However, Meditation, chastity and faith also helped

one to reach heaven, according to the Upanishads<sup>32</sup>. But wisdom was above all of them and consequently, wisdom was linked to morality and ethics as means of reaching heaven. According to these concepts those who reached the world of the fathers returned after their Istapurta karma was exhausted, but those who reached the world of gods never came back.<sup>33</sup> Later according to Prof .J., Tilakasiri, “Atman” and “Brahman” concepts were treated as supreme. “Brahman” was the highest and the world of the Brahman was even higher than that of the gods.<sup>34</sup> To reach heaven it was necessary to respect Brahma<sup>35</sup>. This analysis clearly shows how the pre-Buddhist concept of heaven evolved from the Vedic period via the Brahmin era by merging the mixing with the wisdom concepts during different times. Despite shortcomings heaven was linked to morality and ethics during the Vedic period. The origin of this concept was the fear of death and the hereafter. Buddhism, however, accepts this pre-Buddhist concept of heaven after different revisions. During the pre-Buddhist period morality and ethics were based on religious rituals and religious discipline. According to Radhakrishnan it was the criteria of civilized behavior 36 (Rita concept). The weak points and discrepancies in the pre-Buddhist concept of heaven have been removed by Buddhist thinkers, who have adapted the concept to fit into the karmas, rebirth, paticcasamuppada and trilakshana, which are the main teachings of Buddhism. The Buddhist Karma Theory has philosophical value, as well as a moral and ethical value. Accordingly, the good man is reborn in heaven and the sinner is reborn in hell.<sup>36</sup> Unlike in the pre-Buddhist era, there is no influence of god or Brahma here. But in theistic religions like Christianity, what is good and bad is determined by god.<sup>37</sup> Even in early Buddhism there are number of evidences which support the misunderstanding that everything is pre-determined by the previous kamma. This can be clearly depicted in the Culakammavibhanga Sutta (Shorter Exposition of Action) of the Majjhimanikaya as below:

*“Subha Todeyya’s son asked the blessed One; ‘Master Gotama, what is the course and condition, why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior?, for people are seen to be short-lived and long-lived, sickly and healthy, ugly and beautiful, helpless and influential, poor and wealthy, low by birth and high by birth, stupid and wise, what is the course and condition, Master Gotama, why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior?’. Then the Blessed One replied Student, beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions, they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior” 38.*

The Buddha further exposed the cause of the inequality that exists amongst mankind. The same Sutta records that what is seen as the course and condition for people are seen to be short – lived and long – lived, as follows: *“ This is the way student - someone may lead towards a short-life: namely when one kills living beings and become murderous, bloody-handed, gives blows and indulges in violence, and by being merciless to living beings”*. At the same time the Buddha explains that what is seen as the course and condition for people are seen as long lived is as follows: *“This is the way student - that someone may lead towards a long life: namely by abandoning the killing of living beings, by abstaining from killing living beings with rods and weapons by laying them aside gently and by kindly abiding compassionately to all living beings”*. In this manner the Buddha explained the many reasons which are the causes of the unevenness in the ill-balanced world. When one read only this Sutta, he might misunderstand that the Buddhist teaching of karma is the concept of fatalism or a pre-determinism. But this sutta tries to reveal only one area of the kamma and it is not the complete teaching of the Buddhist

kamma theory. There are many more evidences that can be found in the Nikaya texts itself. As an example; the Samyuttanikaya records :

*“According to the seeds that is sown,*

*So is the fruit ye reap there from.*”

*Doer of good(will gather) good.*

*Doer of evil, evil (reaps).*

*Sown is the seed and planted well.*

*Thou shalt enjoy the fruit thereof.”<sup>39</sup>*

This trend of the kamma has been named as **Kammasarikkhata**, which means that similar in consequence to the deed done, or in other words ‘the consequence is according to the action’. This trend of kamma not only can be seen in early Suttas itself, but also in the later Pali books such as Apadana, Petavatthu, and Vimanavatthu. This theory came in to prominence in popular Buddhism. But this is only a part of revelation of the Buddhist kamma theory. The Buddha is not a fatalist. Buddhism denies the deterministic interpretation of kamma, in other words Buddhism is not a determinism or everything related to the individual is not meted by a super natural judge. Therefore, though Buddhism accept the kamma and its results or action and its consequence it completely rejects the pre-determinism. This is very clearly cited in the Mahavibhanga Sutta of the Majjhimanikaya ( The Greater Exposition of Action). In this Sutta it is pointed out that there are four kind of persons to be found existing in the world, those are can be grouped in to four as follows; **I. One is born in hell by performing bad deed, II. One is also born in heaven despite bad deeds, III. One is also born in hell despite good deeds, IV. One is born in heaven by performing good deeds.** This theory did not attribute everything to Karma. One can say that this theory did not encourage people to perform meritorious deeds. But however, the latter part of the Sutta explains that though the Karma would not affect soon after the next life but it

does not mean Kamma has no results. But however, the first and fourth principles cited above did have a moral and ethnical impact. They made people fearful of sin and encouraged them to perform good deeds. The Devdaha Sutta of the Majjima Nikaya and Thathayathana Sutta of Anguttara Nikaya also proves that the moral value of the Buddhist Karmic theory increased as it evolved over the years. The Buddhist can go to heaven by performing good deeds. They manifest in various forms as shown by Dr. Marasinghe in his book.<sup>40</sup> The person who leads a noble life according to Buddhism is reborn in the heaven Thavthisa, according to Janawasabha Sutta.<sup>41</sup> of the Diga Nikaya. But committing the ten sinful acts one is born in hell and by performing the 10 meritorious deeds one is born in heaven, according to the Saleyyaka Sutta of the Majjima Nikaya.<sup>42</sup> One’ thoughts at the moment of performing meritorious deeds, too, leads to one being born in heaven. Mattakundali was born in the heaven simply because of his good thoughts about the Buddha.<sup>43</sup> Hence it can be considered that the theory of giving more prominence to the thought than the act was a step forward in the moral and ethnical development of Buddhism. Constructing Buddhist Temples, Stupas and Monasteries is also a way of reaching heaven. Buddhist ethnics and the concept of heaven is even extended to cover animals as well. For example is the story of an animal which was reborn in heaven, after listening to the voice of the Buddha. According to Prof; Jothiya Dheerasekara these stories were included in Buddhist Literature at a later stage. <sup>44</sup>

Sometimes the ethnical deeds performed in order to reach heaven appear to be unethical. For example is the story of a couple which sells their son and buy a cow to donate milk at an alms giving.<sup>45</sup> In certain instances these stories have become unrealistic. There is a story of a couple who gives alms to a monk their own flesh.<sup>46</sup> Social service, too, is highly regarded as a means of attaining heaven. A young man is reborn as the

God Sakra due to the social service he performed as a human being, facing threats and harassment from society. According to Buddhism (Magha story) <sup>47</sup>

- 1 Looking after parents
- 2 Respect for elders
- 3 Pleasant speech
- 4 Refraining from abusing people
- 5 Selflessness and generosity
- 6 Truthfulness
- 7 Charity

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Thou shalt enjoy the fruit thereof.”39*

This trend of the kamma has been named as **Kammasarikkhata**, which means that similar in consequence to the deed done, or in other words ‘the consequence is according to the action’. This trend of kamma not only can be seen in early Suttas itself, but also in the later Pali books such as Apadana, Petavatthu, and Vimanavatthu. This theory came in to prominence in popular Buddhism. But this is only a part of revelation of the Buddhist kamma theory. The Buddha is not a fatalist. Buddhism denies the deterministic interpretation of kamma, in other words Buddhism is not a determinism or everything related to the individual is not meted by a super natural judge. Therefore, though Buddhism accept the kamma and its results or action and its consequence it completely rejects the pre-determinism. This is very clearly cited in the Mahavibhanga Sutta of the Majjhimanikaya ( The Greater Exposition of Action). In this Sutta it is pointed out that there are four kind of persons to be found existing in the world, those are can be grouped in to four as follows; **I. One is born in hell by performing bad deed, II. One is also born in heaven despite bad deeds, III. One is also born in hell despite good deeds, IV. One is born in heaven by performing good deeds.** This theory did not attribute everything to Karma. One can say that this theory did not encourage people to perform meritorious deeds. But however, the latter part of the Sutta explains

that though the Karma would not affect soon after the next life but it does not mean Kamma has no results. But however, the first and fourth principles cited above did have a moral and ethnical impact. They made people fearful of sin and encouraged them to perform good deeds. The Devdaha Sutta of the Majjima Nikaya and Thathayathana Sutta of Anguttara Nikaya also proves that the moral value of the Buddhist Karmic theory increased as it evolved over the years. The Buddhist can go to heaven by performing good deeds. They manifest in various forms as shown by Dr. Marasinghe in his book.<sup>40</sup> The person who leads a noble life according to Buddhism is reborn in the heaven Thavthisa, according to Janawasabha Sutta.<sup>41</sup> of the Diga Nikaya. But committing the ten sinful acts one is born in hell and by performing the 10 meritorious deeds one is born in heaven, according to the Saleyyaka Sutta of the Majjima Nikaya.<sup>42</sup> One' thoughts at the moment of performing meritorious deeds, too, leads to one being born in heaven. Mattakundali was born in the heaven simply because of his good thoughts about the Buddha.<sup>43</sup> Hence it can be considered that the theory of giving more prominence to the thought than the act was a step forward in the moral and ethnical development of Buddhism. Constructing Buddhist Temples, Stupas and Monasteries is also a way of reaching heaven. Buddhist ethnics and the concept of heaven is even extended to cover animals as well. For example is the story of an animal which was reborn in heaven, after listening to the voice of the Buddha. According to Prof; Jothiya Dheerasekara these stories were included in Buddhist Literature at a later stage.<sup>44</sup>

Sometimes the ethnical deeds performed in order to reach heaven appear to be unethical. For example is the story of a couple which sells their son and buy a cow to donate milk at an alms giving.<sup>45</sup> In certain instances these stories have become unrealistic. There is a story of a couple who gives alms to a monk their own flesh.<sup>46</sup> Social

service, too, is highly regarded as a means of attaining heaven. A young man is reborn as the

God Sakra due to the social service he performed as a human being, facing threats and harassment from society. According to Buddhism (Magha story)<sup>47</sup>

- 1 Looking after parents
- 2 Respect for elders
- 3 Pleasant speech
- 4 Refraining from abusing people
- 5 Selflessness and generosity
- 6 Truthfulness
- 7 Charity

Helps a person to be reborn in heaven as God Sakra. All these seven points have very high social values. This outlines the many duties of man in society. The character of God Sakra reflect these values. Before boarding his chariot he salutes all people who live according to the Dhamma.<sup>47</sup> This highlights the fact that even Gods worship those who lead ethnical and noble lives. Loving kindness and compassion and respect towards good people are the qualities of God Sakra. The position which God Indra enjoyed as the Guardian of Truth and moral values during Vedic Period was taken over by God Sakra during the Buddhist era. Mara was believed to be a divine but an evil force that destroys morality. People who are trapped by Mara are led to commit sin and consequently they suffer in hell after death. God Sakra was the concept of Gods and was the opposite of Mara, evil forces, to protect the moral value in the society. On full moon (Poya) days he himself descends on earth and travels in disguise to find out about people performing good deeds. If the majority are leading noble lives he is happy for he knows that more people will be born in heaven.<sup>48</sup>

Hence this Buddhist analysis of heaven can be considered in invaluable concept that directs people towards ethical behaviour and social service and also it is clear that though this concept was not originated by the influence of morality, it has expanded and developed for the purpose of morality or ethical value.

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## What became of the Buddhist Texts in early Days after Their Transmission to Sri Lanka?

Prof. Toshiichi Endo

### Introduction:

The *Tipiaka* together with their commentaries are generally believed to have been brought to Sri Lanka by the *thera* Mahinda when he officially introduced Buddhism to that country in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.<sup>1</sup> Being a disciple of Moggaliputtatissa, the President of the Third Buddhist Council held during the time of King Asoka, the *thera* Mahinda would have naturally gathered the texts sanctioned at that meeting to be transmitted to Sri Lanka. The language in which they were transmitted is traditionally accepted as what is now called ‘Pāli’. While the origin of the Pāli language still remains a controversy,<sup>2</sup> it is clear that the word ‘Pāli’ in the Pāli commentaries primarily means the canonical texts either singly<sup>3</sup> or collectively.<sup>4</sup> Be that as it may, it can be safely assumed that it was one of the Indian dialects.

With the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism began its early expansion. Commentaries preserved in the language of the Sinhala-s known as the *S’haĀa--hakathĒ* began to be composed with many anecdotes and events of both Indian and Sri Lankan origin and their major portions were