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## **Demythologizing the Dharma**

Many have been the times both online and offline that I have heard people claim that in Buddhism there are no heavens or hells. Usually these are peripheral Buddhists or Buddhist sympathizers who have perhaps read some popular books on Zen or mindfulness practice and they have not yet encountered the rich mythology and elaborate cosmology of Buddhism. Rather, these Buddhists are concerned with the here and now and only look to those aspects of the Dharma that seem immediately applicable to the here and now. They may also have heard the story of the Zen Master who is asked, "What happens to us after we die?" The Zen Master replies, "Why are you asking me? I have not died yet." I think this is an appropriate response. People do need to stop speculating and worrying about what they were in their past lives or will be in a future life (if anything) but with what kind of life they are creating right here and now.

The fact is that the Buddha did teach rebirth in heavens, hells, and other states. For instance in the *Greater Discourse on the Lion's Roar* in the *Middle Length Discourses* he enumerates five possible rebirths, "Sariputta, there are these five destinations. What are the five? Hell, the animal realm, the realm of ghosts, human beings, and gods." (p. 169) Other discourses describe the realm of the fighting demons as a sixth realm while others like this one include the fighting demons within the god realm. All of these realms are viewed as co-existing within what one might call the Mt. Sumeru cosmology. The Mt. Sumeru cosmology is taken for granted in the sutras. In this mythic view the world is composed of four continents with Mt. Sumeru at their center. Deep beneath the surface are the realms of hell and the hungry ghosts, on the continents are humans and animals and various nature spirits, in the oceans

are the fighting demons and the dragons, on the slopes and on the peak of Mt. Sumeru are various gods and goddesses, and above Mt. Sumeru in ascending order of excellence, refinement, and grandeur are even more heavenly realms. Mahayana Buddhism posited a universe filled with such world-systems as well as the pure lands of the various cosmic buddhas of the ten directions.

Such a worldview can no longer be taken literally by Buddhists today anymore than those who follow the Bible can continue to argue that the world is flat or that hell is underground and heaven in the clouds above. So how do Buddhists deal with this outmoded mythic cosmology? One solution is to simply ignore it and to focus on the more rational side of Buddhism expressed in doctrines such as the four noble truths or practices like mindfulness or meditation on the breath. Another method is to demythologize the Dharma. According to Van Harvey's *A Handbook of Theological Terms*:

“Demythologization refers to a type of interpretation of the N.T. first systematically proposed in 1941 by Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), a German N.T. scholar and theologian. He argued that the message of the N.T. was couched in the language of a primitive and prescientific mentality that, from the standpoint of the history of religions, must be called mythological. In this mentality, demons and angels are at war in the spirits of men, and all unusual events are directly caused by supernatural powers.” (p. 67)

A little further on the Handbook says:

“Myth expresses certain fundamental intuitions about human existence and its relation to the powers that man experiences as the ground and limit of his life. In order to understand these intuitions, however, it is necessary to separate them from its outmoded form, that is, it is necessary to demythologize.”

One way of demythologizing the Dharma is to psychologize it. In other words, to assert that the hells, hungry ghost realms, heavens, pure lands and so forth along with their supernatural inhabitants are not so much descriptions of geographical locations and actual beings as they are metaphors for states of mind and ways of viewing and interacting with the world based on our habits, tendencies and assumptions. This is nothing new to Buddhism however. One could even say the Buddha himself initiated the psychologizing of mythic cosmology. For instance, there is this passage from the *Connected Discourses*:

“Bhikkhus, when the uninstructed worldling makes the statement, ‘In the great ocean there is a bottomless abyss,’ he makes such a statement about something that is nonexistent and unreal. This, bhikkhus, is rather a designation for painful bodily feelings, that is, ‘bottomless abyss.’ (p. 1262)

In 13<sup>th</sup> century Japan, Nichiren Shonin also demythologized the Dharma by psychologizing the six worlds of the hells, hungry ghosts, animals, fighting demons, humanity, and the heavens in his most important treatise, *Kanjin no honzon sho (Spiritual Contemplation and the Focus of Devotion)*, Nichiren observed:

As we often look at each other’s faces, we notice our facial expression changes from time to time. It is full of delight, anger, or calm sometimes; but other times it changes to greed, ignorance, or flattery. Rage represents the hells, greed - hungry ghosts, ignorance - animals, perversity - fighting demons, delight - gods, and calm - humanity. Thus we see six worlds of illusion in the countenance of people, from the hells to the worlds of the gods. (pp. 134-135)

I would be wary, however, of assuming that medieval Buddhists like Nichiren understood these worlds and beings as only psychological realities. Like pre-modern Christians, pre-modern Buddhists like Nichiren understood that one could approach scripture on many levels and that the literal meaning

was not the only one. Medieval Christians interpreted the Bible in terms of the literal meaning, the allegorical meaning, the moral meaning, and anagogical meaning, thus relating a given passage to historical events, and various metaphorical meanings relating to faith, morals and eschatology. All of these interpretations would be seen as complimentary and in no way contradictory. Putting it simply, they did not view the Bible as either literally true or figuratively true, but as both literally and figuratively true. In the same way, Nichiren could relate to the six worlds (actually he was speaking of ten including the “worlds” of the arhats, pratyekabuddhas, bodhisattvas and buddhas) as both mental states and as literal realms inhabited by mundane and supernatural beings wherein one could be reborn.

This ability to hold both a subjective or psychological understanding of the ten worlds, and a more objective or mythic view as literal truth explains how a medieval Buddhist like Nichiren could write as though these worlds were mental states as in the *Kanjin Honzon Sho*, but in other works like the *Ken Hobo-sho (Clarification of Slandering the True Dharma)* Nichiren could write in great detail about the sufferings found in each of the eight great hells and the kinds of deeds that will lead to rebirth in them without even a hint that any of it is just metaphor or allegory. This can be very disconcerting to modern Buddhists who have come to think that the impeccable founders of whatever lineage they happen to follow were modern rationalists like themselves who understood and related to Buddhist cosmology in purely psychological terms. This is simply not the case, and I believe that with very rare exceptions pre-modern Buddhists were not much different than their Christian counterparts in accepting the mythic and as yet-unchallenged worldviews of their respective traditions.

How do we as modern Buddhists in America following the lineage of various Asian traditions account for this? Do we sweep it under the rug by pretending that our founders didn't really mean what they were saying when they spoke in terms of literal heavens and hells and point instead to other passages where they speak in terms of metaphor? Or do we acknowledge that their worldview was very different from ours and just dismiss them or at least those passages that do not gibe with our own understanding of the world?

I would like to suggest, however, that we look again at Bultmann's idea of demythologizing. Instead of dismissing anything that is stated in mythic terms or reducing everything to psychological explanations, we should perhaps open ourselves to the possibility that these mythic forms could also be conveying something that transcends mere subjectivity or objectivity. Again, I would like to return to Nichiren's *Kanjin Honzon Sho* to supply an example.

In the *Kanjin Honzon Sho*, Nichiren goes to great length to explain the significance of the doctrine of the 3,000 worlds in a single thought-moment taught by the founder of the T'ien-t'ai school, Chih-i (528-597), in his magnum opus the *Great Concentration and Insight*. Describing this doctrine in detail is outside the scope of this paper, but the relevant point is that this doctrine teaches that each of the ten worlds from hell to buddhahood contains the ten worlds and these 100 worlds manifest in accord with ten factors of causal relations. Ten worlds times ten worlds times ten factors is 1,000 aspects and these are applied the three realms of (1) the five aggregates of a single entity, (2) the community of sentient beings, and to (3) the environment. One now has three thousand "worlds" that encompass the manifestation of all the states from hell to buddhahood in terms of individuals, societies, and the insentient environment. It was this doctrine that gave rise to the T'ien-t'ai claim that even grasses and trees could attain enlightenment. Nichiren states: "Speaking of a mind having '1,000 aspects contained in 100 realms,' we consider sentient beings only. When we talk about '3,000 existences contained in one thought,' we consider both sentient as well as insentient beings." (p. 130) I think this shows that Nichiren did not consider the ten worlds as only applicable to mental states, and furthermore he saw Chih-i's doctrine of the 3,000 worlds in a single thought-moment as revolutionary precisely because it did not confine itself to the psychology of a single individual but pointed to the manifestation of the ten worlds in social aggregates and in the environment of living beings as well.

I think that this is an insight that we can still learn from. We can still demythologize the ten worlds and do not have to accept that there is literally a fiery hell filled with ox-headed demons beneath our feet or heavenly palaces floating overhead. But at the same time we can acknowledge the insight that we do create hells and heavens not just within ourselves but also in our social arrangements and in the so-called objective world around us. In other words, we are part of an interdependent system that takes in our minds, bodies other

people and living beings, and the earth itself. When we create an infrastructure and the kind of wealth that allow us to fly all over the world in a matter of hours or to communicate instantly with people all over the world via the internet, isn't this an example of heavenly blessings that are by no means simply subjective? On the other hand, when famine claims the lives of thousands due to civil wars or genocidal policies, is the hungry ghost world still just a mythic symbol of a state of mind? It sounds trite to say that our attitudes affect our relationships with others and that our civilization impacts the environment for better or worse, but it is easy to forget this and to neglect our responsibility for cultivating ourselves, bringing out the best in others, and ensuring that our society's impact on the environment and on other people is wholesome and beneficial rather than callous and destructive. I hope that American Buddhists will utilize these mythic Buddhist teachings, once demythologized and not merely psychologized, as a helpful way of awakening to the interconnections between individuals, society, and the environment.

## Sources

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