

Buddhist Spirituality

A phenomenon of vast outward complexity calls for a synthesizing and delineating response, lest the forest's shape, for example, be lost sight of amid its countless trees. Stoddart's book, *An Illustrated Outline of Buddhism*, attempts a response of this kind to the spiritual world of Buddhism. It aims at summarizing its essential doctrines and practices – as well as noting its principal schools and cultural forms.

Because of Buddhism's several perspectives and ethnicities, it is difficult to write a "unitary" account of it – without running the risk of oversimplification. For example, there are the *Hinayana* (*Theravada*) and *Mahayana* views regarding the nature of Ultimate Reality, namely whether this be looked on as a Supreme State (*Nirvana*) or a Supreme Being (variously referred to as *Adi-Buddha*, *Vajradhara*, or *Dharmakaya*). Neither school has a watertight viewpoint, in that each perspective contains the other within itself – at least implicitly.

The "Supreme State" (*Nirvana*) in Buddhism and the "Supreme Being" in other religions are each expressions of the same transcendent Reality: That which is absolute, infinite, and perfect.

Buddhism, like the other religions, has both its origin and its goal in the Eternal, the Sovereign Good. This is the nature of Ultimate Reality, and it is with Ultimate Reality that religion as such is concerned.

Buddhism is neither "atheistic" (in the usual connotation of this term), nor a "philosophy" (in the sense of being man-made); it is a revealed religion, coming from Ultimate Reality and leading to Ultimate Reality. There is no religion without revelation, that is to say: without revealed truth and without revealed sacramental means of liberation, deliverance, or salvation. These fundamentals are present in Buddhism, as in every other traditional and orthodox religion, and constitute its essence and its *raison d'être*.

Every religion – be it Semitic, Hindu, Buddhist, or Shamanist – takes account of the two divine aspects of Transcendence and Immanence. These can be expressed by different pairs of terms: Height and Depth, Above and Within, Remoteness and Proximity, Transcendent Being and Immanent Self, and so forth.

Ultimate Reality is both Transcendence and Immanence, and every religion, in its theology and spirituality, expounds and has recourse to these two divine aspects in its own way.

In the history of religions, some heresies have had their origin in the neglect of one or other of these realities. In general terms, "transcendentism" without "immanentism" can lead to a kind of deism, whereas "immanentism" without "transcendentism" can lead to subjectivistic illusion.

The Semitic religions – except occasionally in the context of their mysticism or spirituality – tend to emphasize the aspect of Transcendence (the Divine Being), whereas Buddhism tends to emphasize the aspect of Immanence (the Divine State). Nevertheless, the transcendentist – or "theistic" – perspective is also present in Buddhism, and characteristically comes to the fore in the *Mahayana* school. Yet, even in the *Hinayana* branch, the theistic perspective is by no means entirely absent.

In *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*, D. T. Suzuki states that "God, or the religious Object of Buddhism, is generally called *Dharmakaya-Buddha* . . . still another name for it is *Amitabha-Buddha*." The last term is mostly used by the followers of the *Sukhavati* ("Pure Land") school of Japan and China. Suzuki states further: "The *Dharmakaya* assumes three essential aspects: intelligence (*prajna*), love (*karuna*), and will (*pranidhanabala*)."

In summary: whereas most religions emphasize the "transcendent" aspect of Ultimate Reality, namely the Supreme Being or God, Buddhism characteristically emphasizes the "immanent" aspect, namely the Supreme State or *Nirvana*. Nevertheless, Buddhism, in its total breadth, contains both aspects, the immanent and the transcendent, recognizing Ultimate Reality either as a Supreme State (*Nirvana*) or as a Supreme Being (*Dharmakaya*). In either case, the essential nature of Ultimate Reality remains the same: it is absolute, infinite, and perfect. Thus, in its conception of Ultimate Reality, Buddhism is essentially in accord with every other world religion.

Source: Stoddart, William. *An Illustrated Outline of Buddhism: The Essentials of Buddhist Spirituality*. With a foreword by Joseph A. Fitzgerald. Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2013.

Notes taken from the Stoddart's book by Alexander Peck (pages ix-xi, 1-3).

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There is an Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned. If that Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned were not, there could be no escape from this that is born, originated, created, conditioned. But because there is That which is Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned, an escape from this that is born, originated, created, conditioned can be proclaimed. (Khuddaka-Nikaya, Udana, 80ff.)