The last of the seven tendencies is ignorance. Ignoring the four noble truths. Ignorance is the so-called starting point in the chain of cause and effect which brings us back to birth and death again and again. Ignorance opposes wisdom, and here it concerns the fact that we disregard reality by not realizing that all our dukkha comes from wanting, even if our desire may be a wholesome one. If we continue to ignore the first two noble truths, not to speak of the third truth, which is nibbana, we are enmeshed in dukkha. Our underlying tendency of ignorance eventuates in the wrong view of “self” — the conceiving of a “self” — showing us the interconnection of all the underlying tendencies. Without ignorance there wouldn’t be any sensuality and irritation, nor any hesitation or doubt, no wrong view, nor pride and conceit, nor clinging to existence.

It’s very useful to pick the characteristic that creates difficulties for us over and over again and make it one’s focus of attention. Since they are all interconnected, minimizing one will help to reduce the others to more manageable proportions.

To see these underlying tendencies in oneself takes a great deal of attention directed towards oneself, which needs time and solitude. One can’t do it while talking with others. If the mind is clear one can do it during meditation sessions or through contemplation.

Contemplation is a valid adjunct to meditation, an important helpmate and is always directed towards insight, while meditation may at times be geared towards serenity. Contemplation means looking inward and trying to see what arises: “What makes me tick?” With utter truthfulness, remembering the underlying tendencies, knowing that everybody has them, one can ask: “How are they manifesting in me?” Once that has been seen, there is further validity in contemplating: “What can I do about getting rid of this particular tendency, or at least minimizing it?” One should allot some time during each day for contemplation. If one has spent a whole day without introspection, one can’t hope to go inward at meditation time.

Meditation and contemplation complement and need each other.

Ayya Khema (1923-1997) was born in Berlin to Jewish parents. In 1938, she escaped from Germany with two hundred other children and was taken to Scotland. Her parents went to China and, two years later, she joined then in Shanghai. With the outbreak of the war, however, the family was put into a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp and it was here her father died.

Her experiences led her to become a Buddhist nun in Sri Lanka in 1979. She established several Thai forest monasteries and Buddhist centers throughout the world, and wrote twenty-five books on meditation and the Buddha's teachings, books whichhave been translated into seven languages. She has served as a model and inspiration for women from all the Buddhist traditions who have sought to revive the practice of women's monasticism in modern times.

BUDDHISM AND THE GOD-IDEA

By Nyanaponika Thera

Quite contradictory views have been expressed in Western literature on the attitude of Buddhism toward the concept of God and gods. From a study of the discourses of the Buddha preserved in the Pali canon, it will be seen that the idea of a personal deity, a creator god conceived to be eternal and omnipotent, is incompatible with the Buddha's teachings. On the other hand, conceptions of an impersonal godhead of any description, such as world-soul, etc., are excluded by the Buddha's teachings non-self and impermanence.

In Buddhist literature, the belief in a creator god is frequently mentioned and rejected, along with other causes wrongly adduced to explain the origin of the world; as, for instance, world-soul, time, nature, etc. God-belief, however, is placed in the same category as those morally destructive wrong views that deny the kammic results of action, assume a fortuitous origin of man and nature, or teach absolute determinism. These views are said to be altogether pernicious, having definite bad results due to their effect on ethical conduct.

Theism, however, is regarded as a kind of kamma-teaching in so far as it upholds the moral efficacy of actions. Hence a theist who leads a moral life may, like anyone else doing so, expect a favorable rebirth. He may possibly even be reborn in a heavenly world that resembles his own conception of it, though it will not be of eternal duration as he may have expected. If, however, fanaticism induces him to persecute those who do not share his beliefs, this will have grave consequences for his future destiny. For fanatical attitudes, intolerance, and violence against others create unwholesome kamma leading to moral degeneration and to an unhappy rebirth.

Although belief in God does not exclude a favorable rebirth, it is a variety of eternalism, a false affirmation of permanence rooted in the craving for existence, and as such an obstacle to final deliverance.

Among the fetters that bind to existence, theism is particularly subject to those of personality-belief, attachment to rites and rituals, and desire for fine-material existence or for a "heaven of the sense sphere," as the case may be.

As an attempt at explaining the universe, its origin, and man's situation in his world, the God-idea was found entirely unconvincing by the Buddhist thinkers of old. Through the centuries, Buddhist philosophers have formulated detailed arguments refuting the doctrine of a creator god. It should be of interest to compare these with the ways in which Western philosophers have refuted the theological proofs of the existence of God.

But for an earnest believer, the God-idea is more than a mere device for explaining external facts like the origin of the world. For him it is an object of faith that can bestow a strong feeling of certainty, not only as to God's existence "somewhere out there," but as to God's consoling presence and closeness to himself. This feeling of certainty requires close scrutiny. Such scrutiny will reveal that in most cases the God-idea is only the devotee's projection of his ideal–generally a noble one–and of his fervent wish and deeply felt need to believe. These projections are largely conditioned by external influences, such as childhood impressions, education, tradition and social environment. Charged with a strong emotional emphasis, brought to life by man's powerful capacity for image-formation, visualization and the creation of myth, they then come to be identified with the images and concepts of whatever religion the devotee follows. In the case of many of the most sincere believers, a searching analysis would show that their "God-experience" has no more specific content than this.

Yet the range and significance of God-belief and God-experience are not fully exhausted by the preceding remarks. The lives and writings of the mystics of all great religions bear witness to religious experiences of great intensity, in which considerable changes are effected in the quality of consciousness. Profound absorption in prayer or meditation can bring about a deepening and widening, a brightening and intensifying of consciousness, accompanied by a transporting feeling of rapture and bliss. The contrast between these states and normal conscious awareness is so great that the mystic believes his experience to be manifestations of the divine; and given the contrast, this assumption is quite understandable.

Mystical experiences are also characterized by a marked reduction or temporary exclusion of the multiplicity of sense-perceptions and restless thoughts, and this relative unification of mind is then interpreted as a union or

communion with the One God. All these deeply moving impressions and the first spontaneous interpretations the mystic subsequently identifies with his particular theology. It is interesting to note, however, that the attempts of most great Western mystics to relate their mystical experiences to the official dogmas of their respective churches often resulted in teachings which were looked upon askance by the orthodox, if not considered downright heretical.

The psychological facts underlying those religious experiences are accepted by the Buddhist and well-known to him; but he carefully distinguishes the experiences themselves from the theological interpretations imposed upon them. After rising from deep meditative absorption (jhana), the Buddhist meditator is advised to view the physical and mental factors constituting his experience in the light of the three characteristics of all conditioned existence: impermanency, liability to suffering, and absence of an abiding ego or eternal substance. This is done primarily in order to utilize the meditative purity and strength of consciousness for the highest purpose: liberating insight. But this procedure also has a very important side-effect which concerns us here: the meditator will not be overwhelmed by any uncontrolled emotions and thoughts evoked by his singular experience, and will thus be able to avoid interpretations of that experience not warranted by the facts.

Hence a Buddhist meditator, while benefiting by the refinement of consciousness he has achieved, will be able to see these meditative experiences for what they are; and he will further know that they are without any abiding substance that could be attributed to a deity manifesting itself to the mind. Therefore, the Buddhist's conclusion must be that the highest mystic states do not provide evidence for the existence of a personal God or an impersonal godhead.

Buddhism has sometimes been called an atheistic teaching, either in an approving sense by freethinkers and rationalists, or in a derogatory sense by people of theistic persuasion. Only in one way can Buddhism be described as atheistic, namely, in so far as it denies the existence of an eternal, omnipotent God or godhead who is the creator and ordainer of the world. The word "atheism," however, like the word "godless," frequently carries a number of disparaging overtones or implications, which in no way apply to the Buddha's teaching.

Those who use the word "atheism" often associate it with a materialistic doctrine that knows nothing higher than this world of the senses and the slight happiness it can bestow. Buddhism is nothing of that sort. In this respect it agrees with the teachings of other religions, that true lasting happiness cannot be found in this world; nor, the Buddha adds, can it be found on any higher plane of existence, conceived as a heavenly or divine world, since all planes of existence are impermanent and thus incapable of giving lasting bliss. The spiritual values advocated by Buddhism are directed, not towards a new life in some higher world, but towards a state utterly transcending the world, namely, Nibbana. In making this statement, however, we must point out that Buddhist spiritual values do not draw an absolute separation between

the beyond and the here and now. They have firm roots in the world itself for they aim at the highest realization in this present existence. Along with such spiritual aspirations, Buddhism encourages earnest endeavor to make this world a better place to live in.

The materialistic philosophy of annihilationism is emphatically rejected by the Buddha as a false doctrine. The doctrine of kamma is sufficient to prove that Buddhism does not teach annihilation after death. It accepts survival, not of an eternal soul, but of a mental process subject to renewed becoming; thus it teaches rebirth without transmigration. Again, the Buddha's teaching is not a nihilism that gives suffering humanity no better hope than a final cold nothingness. On the contrary, it is a teaching of salvation or deliverance which attributes to man the faculty to realize by his own efforts the highest goal, Nibbana, the ultimate cessation of suffering and the final eradication of greed, hatred and delusion. Nibbana is far from being the blank zero of annihilation; yet it also cannot be identified with any form of God-idea, as it is neither the origin nor the immanent ground or essence of the world.

Buddhism is not an enemy of religion as atheism is believed to be. Buddhism, indeed, is the enemy of none. A Buddhist will recognize and appreciate whatever ethical, spiritual and cultural values have been created by God-belief in its long and checkered history. We cannot, however, close our eyes to the fact that the God-concept has served too often as a cloak for man's will to power, and the reckless and cruel use of that power, thus adding considerably to the ample measure of misery in this world supposed to be an all-loving God's creation. For centuries free thought, free research and the expression of dissident views were obstructed and stifled in the name of service to God. And alas, these and other negative consequences are not yet entirely things of the past.

There is a need for an autonomous foundation for ethics, one that has deeper roots than a social contract and is capable of protecting the security of the individual and of human institutions. Buddhism offers such a foundation for ethics.

The word "atheism" also carries the innuendo of an attitude countenancing moral laxity, or a belief that man-made ethics, having no divine sanction, rest on shaky foundations. For Buddhism, however, the basic moral law is inherent in life itself. It is a special case of the law of cause and effect, needing neither a divine law-giver nor depending upon the fluctuating human conceptions of socially conditioned minor moralities and conventions. For an increasing section of humanity, the belief in God is breaking down rapidly, as well as the accustomed motivations for moral conduct. This shows the risk of basing moral postulates on divine commandments, when their alleged source rapidly loses credence and authority. There is a need for an autonomous foundation for ethics, one that has deeper roots than a social contract and is capable of protecting the security of the individual and of human institutions. Buddhism offers such a foundation for ethics.

Buddhism does not deny that there are in the universe planes of existence and levels of consciousness which in some ways may be superior to our terrestrial world and to average human consciousness. To deny this would indeed be provincial. Bertrand Russell rightly says: "It is improbable that the universe contains nothing better than ourselves."

Yet, according to Buddhist teachings, such higher planes of existence, like our familiar world, are subject to the law of impermanence and change. The inhabitants of such worlds may well be, in different degrees, more powerful than human beings, happier and longer-lived. Whether we call those superior beings gods, deities, devas or angels is of little importance, since it is improbable that they call themselves by any of those names. They are inhabitants of this universe, fellow-wanderers in this round of existence; and though more powerful, they need not be wiser than man. Further, it need not be denied that such worlds and such beings may have their lord and ruler. In all probability they do. But like any human ruler, a divine ruler too might be inclined to misjudge his own status and power, until a greater one comes along and points out to him his error, as our texts report of the Buddha.

These, however, are largely matters beyond the range and concern of average human experience. They have been mentioned here chiefly for the purpose of defining the Buddhist position, and not to serve as a topic of speculation and argument. Such involvement can only divert attention and effort from what ought to be our principal object: the overcoming of greed, hatred and delusion where they are found in the here and now.

Nyanaponika Thera (1901-1994) was a German-born Theravada monk who co-founded the Buddhist Publication Society. He was a world-renowned translator and Buddhist author, devoting virtually his entire life to writing and publishing for the Buddhist Publication Society. He wrote tracts, encouraged others to write, collated, translated, and published a huge number of Pali sutras. In addition to his own writings he commissioned and published more than 200 articles and 100 booklets by numerous scholars worldwise during his tenure as editor of the society. His most notable Western student, who succeeded him as editor of the society, is Bhikkhu Bodhi.