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# THE BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF HEAVEN AND HELL

One of the oldest problems which confronted the human race when it became self-conscious was to ask about life after death. Where did we come from? And where do we go after death? Some people believe that life will continue either in heaven or hell, and some others believe life may exist in other forms in different parts of the world, while some others believe that nothing remains hereafter.

Before religion came into existence, there was a common belief that everybody who departs from this world will be reborn in spirit form. Later people started to believe that life exists again through rebirth.

Another aspect is that those who do not believe in a creator God maintain a concept that every being comes from the universal consciousness. Upon a person's death, the universal consciousness will absorb everything into itself again. While most religions teach that there will be an eternal life after death, many scholars, philosophers, scientists, rationalists and great thinkers do not agree with the belief of a permanent existence in one place after death.

According to the historian, H. G. Wells, God is unfair because he has given only one life for human beings to prepare to go to heaven. If they make a minor mistake, the God will condemn them to eternal hell. What is the difficulty for God to give them a few more rounds of lives in order for them to perfect themselves to experience heavenly bliss?

When H.H Dalai Lama was invited to give a talk in a church in London, he started his talk by stating jokingly: 'I think we buddhists are more fortunate than you people. Because God has given you only one life for you to prepare for everything but we buddhists have more than enough lives to prepare for our salvation.'

Another western philosopher - Julian Huxley ridiculed this belief saying, 'How can we believe that there is an eternal hell created by a God to punish beings forever for a mistake done by man? How can they justify this? Give another chance for this poor man to try again - how can god condemn a man forever in this manner?'

When a speaker was talking about Creation, he started his talk by stating when God started to create Heaven and Earth. Somebody interrupted him and asked, 'Can you tell me actually what he was doing before he started to create Heaven and Earth?' The speaker said, 'I think at that time, he was creating Hell for those who ask this kind of question!'

## **Rebirth**

Rebirth does not take place according to one's religious labels but according to our way of thinking, speech and doing things with good or bad intentions. Therefore our thoughts and actions are responsible for moulding life hereafter. Whether people have a religion or not is not the important factor to condition rebirth because today there are many evidences to prove that rebirth is true even without depending on any religion.

The belief in rebirth is a subject which some missionaries use to ridicule buddhism. One argument they use is that those who follow buddhism will have to suffer more, since their rebirth by becoming animals, ghosts and so on only prolongs final salvation. But those who believe in their God, will go straight to heaven without remaining here to suffer after their death. It must be pointed out that their concept of hell is eternal suffering, but buddhism teaches us that wherever rebirth takes place it is only for a certain period of time. A person can end his or her suffering once he or she understands that the way to gain happiness is within oneself. Therefore in buddhism we can end sufferings tomorrow if we develop the right understanding and make the right effort.

The Buddha advised people not to violate religious principles but to uphold human dignity. He did not lay down religious

principles as commandments or laws. He said that if one commits evil deeds, one would have to face the consequences in the form of sufferings either physically or mentally within this lifetime or hereafter.

The Buddha says:

' I am giving this advice *according* to my own experience, not as a concept, theory or message given to me *through divine inspiration*. I remember how I had to suffer during my previous lives for committing *bad* deeds. I also can remember how I lived very fortunate and peaceful lives due to certain good deeds that I had done for the well *being* of others. That is why I am giving you this advice.'

There are many cases where even those who did not believe in rebirth remembered their previous births when they were hypnotized.

Some children between 7 and 9 years old, suddenly remembered their previous birth and explained in detail the way of life of their previous birth. When people investigated this information, they proved what these children remembered is correct. Some psychiatrists from United States of America, Germany and England have investigated such cases and found that they are true.

### ***The General Perception Of Heaven And Hell***

The concept of heaven and hell was introduced by some religious authorities. When people could not understand how to perform their duties as human beings, to cultivate certain virtues, to maintain human dignity and to understand how to behave as cultured people, their leaders introduced this belief to make them behave in a harmless way. They said that if people follow such principles, fulfilling their duties towards others, after their death, they can have a wonderful eternal life in heaven. That was the only way to convince people to do good - just like training small children to do good because they cannot understand or appreciate the necessity to do good. The Buddha did not adopt that attitude to introduce his religious way of life. He regards people as mature human beings. He did not use sugarcoated language to create temptation. He knew that we have the potential to understand things although many of us do not take the trouble to do so. He did not promise anything but taught people to understand what is right and what is wrong and the nature of cause and effect. According to him, if we do good things with the selfish motive of going to heaven, we will not develop virtues such as compassion, honesty, understanding and we can never reduce selfishness. True happiness can only come about when a person completely uproots his or her egoistic concept of a Self.

If any one can prove that in reality there is no such place as heaven or hell I think many existing religions will have to close down their activities. Buddhism can exist without introducing heaven and hell.

In one of his discourses the Buddha says that those who have worldly happiness are fortunate in their household lives but they must be wise to make use of their lives and wealth without developing selfishness. They must be kind and share their happiness with others. The Buddha did not condemn worldly gains and happiness. But if we know how to utilize them, and experience pleasure in a respectable way, we can gain this heavenly bliss not only after death but whilst we are here. We do not deny the existence of other planes where living beings exist. But the beings who inhabit these planes are not necessarily more intelligent than humans. The intellectual capacity of the human mind has the potential for spiritual development. Celestial beings do not think of performing meritorious deeds. Humans are more fortunate in that respect. We have the chance to enrich our knowledge and understanding.

According to the Buddha, heaven and hell are not places where one is consigned to after death, but attitudes of mind which can be experienced here and now. In simple language: 'Be happy and you

are in heaven, be upset and you are in hell.' Of course in reality it is not as simple as that, so let us ask ourselves what is meant by heaven and hell.

The following story may explain how buddhists view on heaven and hell. A monk was once preaching about heaven and hell. Someone from the audience who did not believe in heaven and hell challenged the monk, stating that he was misleading innocent people by talking about non-existent places. The man was very fierce and in a raised voice he asked the monk to prove where these two places exist.

Seeing his angry mood, the monk said: 'Do you know that you are now in hell?' The man at once realised the concept of hell according to the monk's expression.

Then with a smiling face, again he asked: 'All right. Now tell me, where heaven is.' The monk calmly replied: 'Now you are in heaven.'

This simple yet meaningful simile gives us some idea of how to use our common sense to understand that we create heaven and hell according to our own mental attitude.

In certain homes, husbands and wives, parents and children quarrel with each other every day; they cry, lament and curse each other even though they live in the same house. They sometimes go without enough food to eat, proper clothing to wear, or without enough space even to sleep.

Such places can be regarded as hells on this earth. In certain other cases, although people have more than enough things for them to live comfortably, their poor mental attitude completely disturbs the peace and happiness. Therefore, such people make their lives more miserable due to their anger, narrow-mindedness, jealousy and selfishness. This is also another kind of hell that people create here within this life.

On the other hand, there are certain families where people experience peace, happiness, harmony and satisfaction due to their understanding, patience and kindness even though they are poor. And some others with enough material wealth enjoy their worldly lives in good health, by maintaining mutual understanding and love. Such people have created their heavenly bliss here on this very earth itself.

There are some guidelines in every religious book to explain the nature of heaven and hell. It depends on how we interpret this concept. Some people believe that there are eternal heavens and hells. According to them, those who do not follow their particular religion have no chance to enjoy heavenly bliss or to escape from hell. For example, a monk who is staying in the United States was once invited to attend a christian seminar and he gave a buddhist talk. The audience were very impressed by his talk, but as he was about to leave the place, the organisers said, 'Reverend, we really appreciate your talk, but we pity you because you will have to go to hell.' On this basis, it seems that they have assumed whole monopoly of heaven. But the buddhist concept on this issue is entirely different. 'Whether we have religious labels or not, we can experience heavenly bliss if we lead a noble and reasonable life.'

We should realise that if every religion condemns the followers of other religions to hell, reserving heavens only for their own followers, it only reflects poor management on the part of God, since many of these religions claim to have come from god.

It is well worth considering that buddhists do not choose people by following them to convert with promises of heaven. It is people who choose buddhism.

### ***The Buddhist View About Heaven***

According to the Buddha, heaven is not reserved for the members of any one particular religion; it is open to every person who can lead a noble life. To do this, people were taught by the Buddha to develop Perfect Understanding about the nature of their own existence and to realise their highest potential not out of fear of punishment but from pursuing a noble way of life. The aim of this teaching

is to encourage people to lead harmless lives for themselves. At the same time, this would naturally protect and ensure the well-being of everyone around them.

According to the Buddha, merely behaving oneself by following religious laws to gain entry into heaven is not enough. One has to work diligently to develop the mind, because all actions originate in the mind. It is only by training the mind that one can control one's actions. When mind and body are harmoniously balanced true Understanding which leads to Ultimate Happiness can be reached.

During the Buddha's time, some people who wanted to enjoy heavenly bliss after death came to see him and told him that being laypeople they found it difficult to lead a pure religious life. As worldly people they would like to enjoy heavenly bliss after their death and requested him to explain how to gain that happiness without turning their backs on the material world. Then the Buddha asked, 'Why do you have to wait to experience heavenly bliss after death? You can experience heavenly bliss while you are living in this world.' If you know how to handle your way of life in a respectable way, you too can experience heavenly bliss here and hereafter as well. There are some other similar discourses delivered by the Buddha regarding this heavenly life. With regard to the concept of hell he also mentioned in another discourse that heaven and hell are neither located in one particular area nor are they ready-made places created by somebody. When people talk about heaven and hell, they say heaven is above and hell is below. But when we define the words, heaven and hell, by considering the position of this earth in space, the object that we point to as above would in fact be situated below. Even if we were to dig this earth up to the other end, it would be impossible to find hell.

All other religions talk about heaven and they say that heaven is permanent or everlasting. But buddhism does not agree with this belief that there is an eternal heaven for people to experience their pleasure forever, since everything is impermanent. On the other hand according to buddhism, there are six kinds of *devaloka* or heavenly realms. The way of life and worldly pleasure that the beings there experience is far superior compared to human life. However, although they experience sensual pleasures up to the maximum level, they are not free from ignorance, selfish desire, anger, jealousy and worries.

Future existence in the next life is conditioned by the last thought-moment a person experiences at the point of death. This last thought which determines the next existence results from the past actions of a man either in this life or before that. Hence, if the predominant thought reflects meritorious action, then he or she will find future existence in a happy state. But that state is temporary and when it is exhausted a new life must begin all over again, determined by another dominating 'kammic' energy. This repetitious process goes on endlessly unless one arrives at 'Right View' and makes a firm resolve to follow the Noble Path which produces the ultimate happiness of *Nibbana*.

Buddhism says that beings are born in one of the heavenly realms according to the good karma that they have accumulated during their existence as human beings in the previous births. Rebirth takes place in different forms of existence according to a person's own karma and not due to the influence of any supernatural or divine being. But no one can remain in any of these places of existence forever because the power of the good karmic energy is limited and when it is exhausted the being must move on according to some other previously accumulated karma which is stored in the consciousness.

### ***The Four Divine Abidings***

According to the Buddha, anybody can experience heavenly bliss if his or her mind rests constantly on four divine abodes in this very life: we call them the four Brahma Viharas or the four Divine Abidings. These are Metta (loving-kindness), Karuna (Compassion), Mudita (Sympathetic Joy) and Upekkha (Equanimity). To be happy a person must develop Right Understanding which among other things is the ability to see that one exists only in relation to all other living beings. This means that in order to be happy, one must ensure the wellbeing and happiness of others. When we practise Metta, we suffuse the entire universe, beginning with ourselves, with pure unselfish love without

discrimination. We also radiate our feelings of compassion (Karuna) towards those less fortunate, then we work actively and ceaselessly to reduce their sufferings. Then we rejoice at the happiness enjoyed by others (Mudita) because by so doing we eradicate the poisonous feelings of jealousy and ill-will. But the highest of all these positive states of well-being is Upekkha where the mind remains unaffected by any emotions positive or negative but is supremely calm, serene and undisturbed. Anyone who lives in these four states can be said to be living in heaven on earth. Of course those who dwell in the opposite states of ill-will, anger, hatred and so on are in hell, here on earth. If there really was only one glorious eternal heaven, then all the peoples of the world should conceive of it in a similar manner. We know of course that this is not so.

### ***Imaginary Heavens And Hells***

People tend to create imaginary heavens according to their worldly needs. Long ago those who lived in deserts had their own beliefs about heaven and hell. They imagined heaven as a place where they could enjoy beautiful waterfalls. To them, heaven provided them with things (water, coolness, greenery) which they lacked in this life. To the Red Indians, heaven was a happy hunting ground where they could hunt any number of animals according to their needs. This of course was because they had difficulty in hunting enough animals for their daily survival. When Tibetans experience Himalayan winter, the suffering they face is described as hell. To them warmth or fire is heaven. When one considers these attitudes one can understand how people create images of heaven and hell according to their own earthly needs. Our instinct is to desire something good and avoid another thing which is bad. In this sense, we can say that the Buddha did not deny the existence of a heaven and hell in specific locations. Buddhism declares that heaven and hell are not located in any one particular area, but in various 'planes of existence'. Buddhism categorises all living beings existing in the world and beyond into 31 states, which are put together into several groups.

The first of these groups are: hell, animal kingdom, spirits and demons who are in a suffering state in different ways. Some are visible and others are invisible. Then there is human life, and six kinds of celestial kingdoms where beings experience more sensual pleasures than any other living beings. Devas (or beings of light) in the celestial kingdom concentrate more on pleasure than on spiritual development. Of these, birth in the human plane is the most desirable because being blessed with a superior mind and the opportunity to observe both suffering and pleasure as well as death, decay and disease, humans can more readily understand the universal truth explained by the Buddha.

### ***Animal Life***

We say that animals are unfortunate although they get food and have comfortable lives. They are unfortunate because they do not know anything about the fate of their existence. It is impossible for them to accumulate good karma or acquire spiritual development. That is why human beings can do anything to them by using their superior intelligence. They catch them, torture them and kill them for pleasure. According to their animal way of life, they have no idea that there will be continuity in life. Existence takes place again because in that mind, there exists residual good Karma and bad Karma developed in the past existence which have not been expended. Since they are not free from Karma, rebirth takes place again. In our case, we can suppress certain evil thoughts but they still exist in our minds. We can tame animals by beating, training and frightening them. Because of that fear, they behave like tame animals. But they still have their own animal instinct or nature. This is why we say that sometimes we behave like animals. Although we are humans, many of us still do not know how to make use of our valuable human life. We abuse the opportunities or facilities that we have, due to our selfishness. For this reason the Buddha's Teaching is important to pave the way for such ignorant people to think properly and to develop human values.

## ***Brahma Realms***

Beyond this earthly life, there is a category of beings called devas who experience peace calm and tranquility and spend an immensely long period in the celestial realms. They are known as Brahmans in the sixteen kinds of Brahma realms. They have reduced craving towards worldly sense pleasures to a certain degree and experience more calmness which they have developed during their previous existence specially through meditation. They are mistakenly regarded as eternal because of the immensely long time span during which they exist, although this existence is also not permanent. Those who dwell here too have certain degrees of ignorance and craving for existence. That is why these gods are sometimes described in some religious books as jealous, vindictive and revengeful, although they can be loving and forgiving at other times. Some religionists still believe that the attainment of the Brahma (or God) state is permanent and perfect. The Buddha pointed out that it is not so.

Four more stages of the Brahma realms are mentioned in buddhism. These Beings exist only in their consciousness without any visible physical bodies. Another state of life in the Brahma realm is existence of a physical body but without any perception in the minds. They spend such lives without any perception in their minds. They do not experience physical and mental burdens for a long period. Therefore their happiness is more than the peace experienced by other Brahmans, and their life span is also longer than the others. Even so, these states of existence are impermanent according to the Buddha.

All these states are the 31 planes of existence as explained in the buddhist texts. This concept is also close to Indian cosmology. However, in the buddhist perspective, we can also interpret them as different states of the human mind. They vary according to the development and deterioration of the human mind. They do not manifest themselves in gross or material forms. All those living beings in various forms exist according to environment or atmosphere, elements and many other factors. They exist in different world cycles depending on their mental forces and experience pleasure or suffering according to the good and bad Karmic energies gained in their previous existences.

As human beings we 'spend' the good Karmic energy we have accumulated as merits in a previous birth. While spending we can also accumulate more and more merits and deposit such merits for the future as well as for the next life because we know that this is not the complete end of our life existence. The continuity of the life process again takes place after death according to our merits. The celestial beings do not create new Karma as human beings can.

The Buddha says: 'Human life is more important than any other kind of life in the 31 planes of existence.' Devas are not superior to human beings as far as virtues and the spiritual development of the mind are concerned. According to buddhist stories, when the devas had certain subtle problems, they too had come to the Buddha to look for a solution. According to buddhism therefore it is pointless to aspire to go to heaven even though the other religions have portrayed it in glorious terms to tempt us. In heaven we spend a long time enjoying the benefits of past good karma, but do not develop the minds to remove the three evils of ignorance, greed and hatred.

## ***What Is Hell?***

Now let us discuss hell. It is a strong weapon to frighten people. Once the medical authorities in England made an appeal to missionaries not to create fear in the minds of people by threatening them about hell fire to introduce their religion, as they have come across many people who suffered from mental disturbances due to the fear of hell fire. These missionaries realised that it is a very effective method to introduce religion especially among illiterate people. Buddhist missionaries for the last 2,500 years never used this kind of technique to introduce buddhism. Buddhists never say that others who do not accept buddhism will have to go to hell. The Buddha's attitude to other religions is very compassionate and reasonable.

Buddhists do not maintain that the present life is the only life between two eternities of misery and happiness; nor do they believe angels will carry them to heaven and leave them there for all eternity. They believe that this present life is only one of the indefinite numbers of states of being and that this



earthly life is but one episode among many others. They believe that all beings will be reborn some where in some form for a limited period of time as long as their good and bad karma remains.

### ***Heaven and Hell On This Earth***

The Buddha's teaching shows us that there are heavens and hells not only beyond this world, but in this very world itself. Thus the buddhist conception of heaven and hell is very reasonable. For instance, the Buddha once said, 'When the average ignorant person makes an assertion to the effect that there is a Hell (patala) under the ocean he is making a statement which is false and without basis. The word 'Hell' is a term for painful sensations.' The idea of one particular ready-made place or a place created by god as heaven and hell is not acceptable to the buddhist concept.

Buddhism teaches us how to mould our future lives according to our way of life, without depending on any external agent and to also take the responsibility for our lives with confidence. An American rationalist once said that to his observation, he would prefer to go to hell rather than heaven, because of the concept maintained by some religionists that all intellectuals, scholars, scientists, psychologists, freethinkers, rationalists, including the Buddha, are in hell as they did not believe in their God. He said, in that case, if he happened to go to Heaven, he would feel out of place there without any intellectuals, and heaven would be a very dull place. As far as he was concerned heaven is a place only for those who want to enjoy worldly pleasures without using their minds properly.

Buddhism certainly does not regard heaven as the most important aim of life or as a place where people can have eternal rest.

The fire of hell in this world is hotter than that of the hell in the world-beyond. There is no fire equal to anger, lust or greed and ignorance. According to the Buddha, we are burning from eleven kinds of physical pain and mental agony: lust, hatred, illusion sickness, decay, death, worry, lamentation, pain (physical and mental), melancholy and grief. People can bum the entire world with some of these fires of mental discord. From a buddhist point of view, the easiest way to define hell and heaven is that wherever there is more suffering, either in this world or any other plane, that place is the hell to those who suffer. And where there is more pleasure and happiness, either in this world or any other plane of existence, that place is a heaven to those who enjoy their worldly life in that particular place. However, as the human realm is a mixture of both pain and happiness, human beings experience both pain and happiness and will be able to realise the real nature of life. But in many other planes of existence inhabitants have less opportunity for this realisation.

There are many ways in which ignorant people are enslaved to their religious beliefs by the threat of punishment in hell without allowing them to open their minds to see things with free minds.

One should not come to a hasty conclusion either to judge the validity of a religion or to condemn it simply by observing what people perform in the name of that religion. To understand and evaluate the real nature of a religion one must study the original teachings of the founder of that religion. The basic teaching of the Buddha still exists in the original Buddhist texts.

### ***Why Is It Forbidden?***

There are some who believe that entering into the place of worship of another religion is a sin and because of that they will have to go to hell. How could they have committed a sin, when these people have not done any harm to anybody and have never polluted their minds with jealousy, hatred or any other evil thoughts. So how can their leaders justify the argument that they have committed such a bad sin as to go to hell? If they say that their God would get angry if his followers go and respect another God or a founder of another religion, how can they claim that this God is merciful or just? Could it not be said that this God is jealous just like a human being? They also teach that although some people lead a very respectable life by upholding all the good virtues and

humane qualities and serve others in every possible way they would have no chance to go to heaven if they do not believe in their God. According to the Buddha, even the worst sinner, after paying for what he has done, can attain salvation. Buddhism offers every human being the hope of attaining his or her salvation one day. Other religions, however, take it for granted that some people will be bad forever and have an eternal hell waiting for them. In that respect, such religions are more pessimistic. Buddhists deny such a belief. Is it reasonable to say that no matter how people behave they surely can go to heaven if only they believe in God and pray to him? Being ignorant of the true nature of existence, many succumb to such irrational teachings.

The authorities advise their followers not to read other religious books and not to attend other religious talks. They do this out of fear that their followers may drop the beliefs that they are holding in their minds.

### ***What Is Good And What Is Bad?***

The Buddha had given advice on the conditions which were most wholesome and conducive to long term benefit for self and others. Rather than addressing sinners with such words as 'shameful', 'wicked', 'wretched', 'unworthy'. He would merely say, 'You are foolish in acting such a way, because you are acting out of ignorance.'

In buddhism, the distinction between what is good and what is bad is very simple; all actions that have their roots in greed, hatred, and delusion that spring from selfishness foster the harmful delusion of selfhood. These actions are demeritorious or unskillful or bad. They are called Akusala Karma. All those actions which are rooted in the virtues of generosity, love and wisdom, are meritorious - Kusala Karma.

### ***How Religions Portray Heaven and Hell?***

Heaven and hell are portrayed in many religious books to suit the mentality of human nature. They know that unless there is reward and punishment in the other life, people would never take their way of life seriously. Usually, portrayal of heaven and hell in this way is the only effective method for people not to be selfish but to do some service to others and also not to harm others for their own benefit. In the past heaven was depicted as a place where sensual pleasures as enjoyed by the rich and the powerful were easily obtained, as a reward for having lived a good life on earth. Torture as punishment in hell was portrayed as nothing more than the punishment given by the rulers to the culprits who had violated peace and order.

### ***The Buddhist Perspective***

Everyday we are moulding our own heaven and hell according to our way of life. We also experience the good and bad effects here and hereafter. It does not mean that buddhism denies outright the belief in a 'heavenly' life or a suffering 'hell' after our deaths. The buddhist concept of this belief is that when we live by cultivating our humane qualities and virtues by following certain religious principles as universal law, without violating the peace and happiness of others, we can experience a more happy, prosperous and peaceful life in any part of the universe where life exists after our death. To us, that is heaven.

If we spend our lives by harbouring anger, jealousy, grudges, ill-will and various evil thoughts in our minds, and by disturbing others, we have to face the consequences in the form of suffering whether within this lifetime or hereafter. It would also be difficult for us to have a better rebirth in a good environment to cultivate good virtues. When life becomes miserable, we regard this state of existence as hell.

## ***Animal Sacrifice***

The Buddha was very clear in His teachings against any form of cruelty to any living being. One day the Buddha saw a man preparing to make an animal sacrifice. On being asked why he was going to kill innocent animals, the man replied that it would please the gods. The Buddha then offered Himself as the sacrifice, saying that if the life of an animal would please the gods, then a human life is more valuable, should please the gods more. Needless to say, the man was so moved by the Buddha's practical gesture that he gave up the animal sacrifice and accepted the Buddha's Teachings.

## ***Everything Is Not Due To Past Karmas***

Some people maintain that all the pleasant and unpleasant feelings that we experience are due to our good and bad karma that we have done during our previous birth. This is only true to a certain extent, because it would mean that we are totally powerless to change our fate because everything is determined by our past actions. Buddhism maintains that while we are the result of the past, we have the power to determine the future. According to the Buddha, good and bad deeds are done by ourselves and we are responsible for the purity or the impurity of our own mind. Others can influence us but we either purify or pollute the mind with the deeds that we have committed.

## ***Easy Passage To Heaven***

Very often we come across cases of people who change their religion at the last moment when they are about to die. By embracing another religion, some people are under the mistaken belief that they can 'wash away their sins' and gain an easy passage to heaven. They also hope to ensure themselves a simple and cheaper burial. For people who have been living a whole lifetime with a particular religion, to suddenly embrace a religion which is totally new and unfamiliar and to expect an immediate salvation through their new faith is indeed very far-fetched. This is only a dream. Some people are even known to have been converted into another faith when they are in a state of unconsciousness and in some cases, even posthumously. Those who are over zealous and crazy about converting others into their faith, have misled uneducated people into believing that theirs is the one and only faith with an easy method or shortcut to heaven. If people are led to believe that there is someone sitting somewhere up there who can wash away all the sins committed during a lifetime, then this belief will only encourage others to commit more evil.

According to the Teachings of the Buddha there is no belief that there is someone who can wash away sins. It is only when people sincerely realise that what they are doing is wrong and after having realised this, try to mend their ways and do good that they can suppress or counter the bad reactions that would accrue to them for the evil they had committed.

## ***Undertakers***

It has become a common sight in many hospitals to see funeral under-takers who take away the dead bodies and missionaries who try to convert the dying people to send them to heaven. This is exploiting the basic ignorance and psychological fear of the patients. If they really want to help, then they must be able to work the 'miracles' they so proudly claim lies in their holy books. If they can work miracles, we will not need hospitals. Buddhists must not become the victims to these people. They must learn the basic teachings of their noble religion which tell them that all suffering is the basic lot of mankind. The only way to end suffering is by purifying the mind. The individual creates his or her own suffering and only he or she can end it. One cannot hope to eradicate the consequences of one's evil actions simply by changing ones' religious label at the door-step of death.

A dying man's destiny in his next life depends on the last thoughts which appear to him according to the good and bad karma he had accumulated during his current lifetime, irrespective of what type of religious label that person prefers to wear at the last moment.

Buddhists do not believe that one day someone will come and awaken the departed persons' spirits from their grave yards or give life to the ashes from their urns and decide who should go to heaven and who should go to hell.

### ***How To Overcome Our Bad Karma***

Is there any chance for us either to overcome or to escape the bad effects of our past evil actions? Yes, it is not impossible but it is not very easy either. Buddhism does not accept the belief which many others hold regarding forgiveness of sins, of worshipping and praying to God to ask for forgiveness, or performing various kinds of religious rites and rituals, offering animal sacrifices to please God or torturing the physical body in order to escape the effects of the bad karma. Such practices are not justifiable from the buddhist point of view. The practical and reasonable way to practise the correct actions in the buddhist context is when we realize that our actions are wrong and harmful. We have to create a strong determination not to commit such evil deeds again. But that itself is not enough. We should try to do more and more good deeds or meritorious deeds by cultivating kindness, honesty, generosity and proper understanding and by doing some service for the well-being of others. The cultivation of such good qualities and meritorious deeds accumulates good Karma. The increasing purity of the mind and good Karma creates more powerful energy to strengthen the mind and provide confidence in our future life. When the good Karma is powerful and active in the mind, the bad Karma that we had committed earlier would subside, become weak or inactive. If death occurs with this state of mind predominating rebirth takes place in a favourable condition.

### ***Paradise Sellers***

There is no difficulty at all for buddhists to go to heaven if they really want to. But there are some people who go from house to house trying to convert other religionists into their faith and promising them the heaven they carry in their bags. They claim that they are the only blessed people who can go to heaven; they also claim that they have the exclusive authority to send others to the same goal. They introduce their religion like a patent medicine and this has become a nuisance to the public today. Many innocent people who lack the knowledge of their own religion, have become victims of these paradise sellers.

If buddhists can understand the value of the noble teachings of the Buddha, they will not be misled by such people. These paradise sellers are also trying to mislead the people by saying that this world which is created by their God, is going to end very soon. Those who want to have a wonderful everlasting life in heaven must accept their particular religion before the end of the world comes, otherwise people would miss this golden opportunity and would have to suffer in eternal hell.

This threat of the end of the world, has been going on for hundreds of years. The wonder of it all is that there are still people today who believe in such a threat which is irrational and imaginary. Some people get converted after hearing such preaching; without using their common sense.

In buddhism, there is no personal judge either to condemn or to reward but only the workings of an impersonal moral causation and natural law.

In summary we can say that heaven and hell are mental states which are created by ourselves. Wise people make their own heaven while foolish people create their hell here and hereafter. If we make ourselves miserable we will continue to be miserable in the next life. On the other hand, if we develop our mental states and maintain a happy life, then when we die we will continue to be happy in the next life also.

'They do not worry about the past They do not worry about the future But by remaining ever in the present Are the saints always calm and collected'

(The Buddha)