

## 5

## The existence of God and revelation

## 5.1

## The Design and First Cause arguments

## ■ Buddhism and God

Buddhism is generally regarded as a non-theistic religion, which means that it does not include worship of a creator God. Instead, Buddhists aim to liberate themselves from suffering by moving towards enlightenment. However, this does not mean that there are no divine beings. Buddhist traditions do acknowledge the presence of many kinds of spirits and even gods, but not a creator God who is responsible for everything.



▲ Buddhists do not believe in a creator God, but some believe there are divine beings who can help them to achieve enlightenment

## ■ Arguments for the existence of God

Over the centuries, Christian thinkers and other people have presented various arguments that aim to prove the existence of God. Two of these are the First Cause argument and the Design argument.

## The First Cause argument

The **First Cause argument** is also called the cosmological argument because it aims to explain the origins of the universe. It argues that at some point in time, the universe began to exist, and also that one day it will come to an end. In other words, the universe is finite. The medieval thinker Thomas Aquinas explained the First Cause argument like this: everything must have a beginning and this beginning must have a cause. So what was the cause that began the universe? It was God. God does not have a cause because he is **eternal**. Therefore, God was the First Cause of everything else that came into being. If God had needed a cause to begin his existence, he would not be all powerful and so would not be God. Since God is all powerful, he cannot have a cause.

The First Cause argument attempts to use reason to prove the existence of God. However, some people argue that there are a number of difficulties with this approach. They might disagree with the First Cause argument for the following reasons:

## Objectives

- Understand the First Cause and Design arguments, examining their strengths and weaknesses.
- Understand a Buddhist response to these arguments.

## Key terms

- **First Cause argument:** also called the cosmological argument; the argument that there has to be an uncaused cause that made everything else happen, otherwise there would be nothing now
- **eternal:** without beginning or end
- **Design argument:** the argument that God designed the universe, because everything is so intricately made in its detail that it could not have happened by chance
- **samsara:** the repeating cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth

## Activities

- 1 In two sentences, explain the Design argument for the existence of God.
- 2 How might a Buddhist criticise the First Cause argument?

- The First Cause argument rests on the idea that everything must have a cause, yet resorts to the claim that there is an uncaused cause (God). If everything has a cause, surely the first cause too must have a cause?
- Although we generally think everything must have a cause, perhaps there are some things we don't know about that don't have causes.
- Even if there were such a thing as an uncaused cause, this does not prove that the cause was God.

## The Design argument

The **Design argument** states that because nature is so complex and intricate, God must have designed it. It could not have come about by accident or random chance. Most Christians believe that the account of creation in Genesis 1 in the Bible supports the Design argument, because it shows that God planned the development of the universe.

Different philosophers have come up with their own examples to support the Design argument. For example, Thomas Aquinas said that only an intelligent being could keep things in regular order. The planets, sun, moon, and stars rotate in the solar system in a set pattern because God holds them in place. In the 1930s, the theologian F. R. Tennant said that God must have designed the world because everything was just right for human life to develop.

Some of the objections to the Design Argument include the following:

- Since the process of natural selection happens by chance, species must have designed themselves over time. Complex life forms are the result of evolution, not a designer God.
- If God designed the universe, why is there so much suffering in the world? Why would God have designed the universe with evil in it?
- The order of the universe is necessary to support life, so it merely gives the appearance of design. Humans impose order on nature to try to explain it.

## ■ A Buddhist response to these arguments

The idea of causation and the First Cause argument is based on the idea that the universe is linear: it began and it will end. However, Buddhism presents a vision of the universe that is more like an endless cycle. **Samsara** is the endless process of birth, death and rebirth. There is no absolute beginning and no absolute end. After all, where does a circle begin? So the Buddhist response to the question of how the universe began is: it didn't. There was no beginning of time and there will be no end of time. Instead, there is just endless change. So the idea of a first cause does not come into the discussion.

Similarly, Buddhism does not teach that there is a creator God who designed the universe. Instead, it teaches that all things come into existence when the necessary conditions are there. For example, life first came into existence when the necessary conditions were present for this to happen. This process of change happens by itself, without any help from an outside creator or god.

## Discussion activity

Discuss with a partner the differences between gaining knowledge by learning something yourself, through your own personal experience, versus gaining knowledge by learning from someone or something else, such as a teacher or a book.

Which method do you think is better? Do you tend to learn different things through each method? Are there instances where it is only possible to learn something through one of the methods?

## Links

Read more about the Buddha's approach to questions about the origins of the universe on page 93.

## Links

Read more about Buddhist views on how life came into being on page 94.

## ★ Study tip

When analysing any argument, try to identify its strengths and weaknesses.

## Summary

You should now be able to explain the First Cause and Design arguments. You should have considered the strengths and weaknesses of these arguments. You should also be able to compare them with Buddhist ideas of a cyclical universe that has no beginning and therefore no creator.



## 5.2 Further arguments against the existence of God

### ■ The problem of evil and suffering

For some people, the existence of **evil** in the world is an obstacle to belief in the existence of God. According to this line of reasoning, if God really is **benevolent** and created a good world, how can there be so much evil in it? Some people argue that God, being good, could not have created a world that allows so much evil. Therefore he did not create the world and so does not exist. Alternatively, if he did create a world that allows so much evil, then he is not really benevolent or **omnipotent** (with the power to destroy all evil). If God is able to see all and know all, he could not permit all of the evil that goes on in human life.

One counter-argument to this is that God has given humans **free will**. This is a good thing, but it also allows people to choose whether to act in a good or evil way. If God were to stop people acting in an evil way, he would be undermining their free will. However, this argument does not address evil situations that are not caused by human choice, such as natural disasters (like earthquakes or famines) that cause many people to die. Moreover, some people say that the free-will argument does not help to explain why animals suffer (because they do not have free will).

Some people try to explain that God and evil both exist because suffering and evil offer the chance for spiritual growth. Through confronting and overcoming evil, human beings develop spiritually. Suffering also enables people to recognise what is truly valuable.

In the Christian Bible, God sends all kinds of afflictions on Job, who thinks he is a righteous man. At first, he cannot understand why he is being afflicted if he serves God. However, he eventually sees that serving God has nothing to do with worldly benefits. Suffering then is a test of faith. The Bible teaches that one should love God independently of whether life is easy or difficult.

### ■ Buddhism and evil

The existence of evil does not go against the Buddhist vision of the world. From a Buddhist point of view, it is perfectly understandable that evil exists. According to Buddhism, people act in evil ways because they are in the grip of greed, hatred, and ignorance. Each person has the ability to act in a good or evil way, but much of the time they do not have enough awareness to be able to make good choices.



▲ Why does God allow natural disasters to happen, such as earthquakes that kill many people?

#### Objectives

- Examine arguments against the existence of God based on science and on the problem of suffering and evil.
- Understand Buddhist teachings about evil and how they compare with Christian ideas.

#### Key terms

- **evil**: the opposite of good, a force or personification of a negative power that is seen in many traditions as destructive and against God
- **benevolent**: all-loving, all-good; a quality of God
- **omnipotent**: almighty, having unlimited power; a quality of God
- **free will**: belief that God gives people the opportunity to make decisions for themselves

Buddhism teaches that people who do evil are not punished by God. Instead, they suffer the consequences of their actions because of kamma.

It is sometimes said that Buddhists believe in an 'ethical universe'. This does not necessarily mean that people are always punished by the law for their evil. It means that, because of kamma, evil actions always lead to suffering for the person who acts in an evil way. It usually means that others suffer too.

For Buddhists, natural disasters are not punishments for acting in an evil way. Instead, natural disasters are simply caused by biological and climatic conditions. For example, the fact that someone lives in a country that suffers a famine does not mean that they must be a bad person.

Sometimes, evil is understood as a force outside a person that tempts them to act in evil ways. Usually, Buddhism sees evil as coming from within a person. However, in early Buddhism, evil was sometimes personified as a figure called Mara. Mara represents the forces that want to undermine progress towards enlightenment: greed, hatred and ignorance.

Some people argue that Buddhism has the opposite problem to Christianity: not how to explain the existence of evil, but how to explain the existence of good. If all beings are driven by greed, hatred and ignorance, where does the impulse towards enlightenment come from? One answer to this has been to say that within each person there is the essence of a Buddha that, given the right conditions, can grow into enlightenment.

### ■ Science and belief in God

Some atheists and humanists use developments in scientific knowledge to challenge belief in God. For example, in the past, the origins of life on Earth could not be explained, so people thought that life was created and controlled by God. Today, some people use the theory of evolution to argue that God did not create life. Instead, it just happened by chance through the process of natural selection.

The question of whether science proves or disproves the existence of a creator God is not relevant to Buddhism, which does not teach that there is such a god. In general, Buddhists do not regard scientific explanations as presenting a challenge to Buddhist teachings.

#### Activities

- 1 Why do some people think that the existence of evil means there cannot be a God?
- 2 Give two arguments that people use to explain why God allows evil to exist.
- 3 According to Buddhism, why do people act in evil ways?

“ Not in the sky, not in the middle of the sea, not entering an opening in the mountains is there that place on earth where standing one might be freed from evil action. ”

The Buddha in the *Dhammapada*, verse 127

#### Discussion activity

Think of three evil things happening in the world today. Discuss with a friend how you think:

- a people who believe in God might explain these events
- b people who don't believe in God might explain them.

#### Links

Read more about the idea that everyone has the essence of the Buddha inside them on page 39.

#### ★ Study tip

The Buddha taught that everyone has the potential to change for the better and move towards enlightenment. This means that most Buddhists do not believe there are 'evil people'. Instead, they believe that everyone is suffering, to a greater or lesser extent, from the three poisons of greed, hatred and ignorance, from which they need to free themselves.

#### Summary

You should now understand how evil can be used to argue against the existence of God, and some of the arguments to counter this. You should also understand Buddhist attitudes to evil.



## 5.3 The argument from miracles

### What is a miracle?

The argument from miracles is usually regarded as one of the less convincing arguments for the existence of God. A **miracle** is an event outside the usual range of human experience that causes amazement and wonder. It is something that seems supernatural which cannot be explained. Some religious believers think that such events are caused by God and so prove his existence. For example, Christians believe that Jesus performed various miracles (including rising from the dead) and this is seen as evidence of his divine status.

Miracles are sometimes divided into different types. For example, a nature miracle is when something happens in the natural world which seems to contradict the laws of science. An example of this in the Bible is when Jesus and his disciple Peter walked on water. There are also healing miracles, which seem to cure people who are dying or in terrible pain, even when doctors have given up. A famous example from Christianity is when Jesus restored the dead Lazarus to life.

### Objections to the argument from miracles

Many **atheists** might say that a miracle is simply a natural event that science has yet to explain. They would argue that the existence of God is not necessary to explain supposed miracles, especially where natural explanations can be found.

Some people argue that when miracles happened so long ago, it is difficult to prove that they really took place. Even where a miracle has happened in recent times, it is still difficult to prove, because it is usually based on personal testimony. In addition, with many supposed miracles it is difficult to show that they could not have happened by natural means.

### David Hume's objection to miracles

According to the philosopher David Hume, even when there is good evidence in favour of a miracle, it is always more rational to reject this explanation. He noted that there are two ways to judge whether a miracle seems likely to have happened or not. First, how reliable the witness is, and second, how possible the miracle itself is. If someone claims to have seen a UFO, for example, it is more likely that their claim is false rather than true.

Hume argued that a miracle is very unlikely to occur because it involves breaking the laws of nature, which are well established. It is therefore more likely that a miracle claim will be false rather than true, and so it is more rational to reject a miracle claim than to accept it.

Hume did not reject the possibility of miracles. He simply said that it will always be more rational to believe that the supposed miracle can

### Objectives

- Understand the concept of miracles and how, for some people, they offer proof of God's existence.
- Consider how Buddhists might understand the significance of miracles.

### Key terms

- **miracle:** a seemingly impossible event, usually good, that cannot be explained by natural or scientific laws, and is thought to be the action of God
- **atheist:** a person who believes that there is no God

### Contrasting beliefs

Use the internet or a library to research different beliefs about miracles. Note down different opinions between religious believers (including Christians) and non-religious believers.

### Activities

- 1 Write your own definition of a miracle.
- 2 How do some people use miracles to justify the existence of God?
- 3 How might a Buddhist interpret a story about a miracle?

be explained in other ways. The cosmologist Carl Sagan once said that 'extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.'

The evidence from miracles is unlikely to convince someone who doubts that God is real, but for some religious believers it helps to confirm their faith.

### Buddhism and miracles

According to Buddhist tradition, meditators are able to develop all kinds of extraordinary powers. However, these powers in themselves are not necessarily signs of spirituality, and are not seen as evidence of the existence of God. For example, the power to see beings in all worlds (as well as in the past and future), and the ability to read other people's minds, are just two of the powers which, according to tradition, are said to result from meditation practice.

The Buddhist scriptures are full of examples of the Buddha, and of other monks, doing things that seem outside the natural order. Many of these miracles serve to show how the Buddha has gone beyond the limitations of ordinary experience. For example, as the Buddha was meditating after his enlightenment, a heavy rainstorm occurred. Mucalinda, king of the serpents, emerged from his lair, encircled the Buddha and spread his great hood over him to give him protection from the rain. After seven days, the Buddha emerged from his deep meditation and Mucalinda, seeing that the storm had passed, uncoiled himself, assuming the appearance of a youth. He then bowed before the Buddha.

For many traditional Buddhists, some statues and scriptures are seen as sources of miracles. Through praying or making offerings to a special statue, or by reciting a scripture, they believe that they will be healed from illness or protected from danger. For example, there is a temple in Tokyo, Japan, that houses a statue of the Bodhisattva Jizo. It is a curious figure because it is bound by thousands of ropes. It is believed that this figure can help bring justice to people who have been robbed, as well as fulfil other wishes. In order to ask the statue for aid, you tie a rope around it. If your request is granted, you should return to the statue and 'release it' by untying one of the ropes.

The Buddhist scriptures make clear that supernatural powers should not be used to convince people to become Buddhists, because it is not really what the practice of Buddhism is about. They are likely to be convinced for the wrong reasons. It is clear that 'miracles' often serve a symbolic function in order to communicate a spiritual truth. They need not necessarily be taken literally. For example, according to legend, when the Buddha was born it is said that he took seven steps and with each step a lotus blossom miraculously appeared for him to step on. He then declared that he would become enlightened in this very lifetime. While some traditional Buddhists might take this story literally, many see it as symbolising how special and important the birth of the Buddha was.

### Research activity

Use the internet to research the details of a miracle claim. For example, you could research one of the miracles said to have happened at the Grotto in Lourdes, France.

Using your research, explain why it is difficult to prove whether the miracle actually happened or not. (How reliable was the witness? Could there have been an alternative natural explanation for the miracle?)



▲ The Buddha being protected by Mucalinda

### Study tip

Remember that you should be able to explain contrasting beliefs about miracles from Christian and non-religious perspectives.

### Summary

You should now be able to discuss and evaluate the argument from miracles.



## 5.4 General revelation

### What is revelation?

**General revelation** refers to knowledge of God, or the **divine**, that is discovered through natural means. For example, through seeing the beauty of nature, or through philosophy and reasoning. Christians use the term to describe knowledge of God that is available to all. Examples of general revelation might include experiencing or coming to know God through seeing a beautiful sunset, or attending worship and hearing the scriptures.

For Christians, the world itself is evidence of God. They believe that God is revealed to them through his creation. Just as a painting gives insight into an artist, so nature gives believers an insight into God.



▲ Coming to know God through seeing a beautiful landscape is one example of general revelation

In contrast, atheists might argue that nature only confirms the existence of God to those who already believe in God. Non-believers may see the world as confirming a process of evolution, not an all-powerful God. Atheists might say that it is possible to marvel at the beauty and mystery of the world without thinking that God is behind it all.

Many religious believers think that God reveals himself to some chosen followers. This is known as **special revelation** and usually has a dramatic, transformative effect. It sometimes inspires people to found new religions or movements.

### Buddhism and revelation

Revelation is not a term that is generally used in Buddhism. However, the Buddha's enlightenment can be thought of as a type of revelation. According to Buddhism, everyone can reach the same insight into the nature of reality that the Buddha achieved. He is only special because

#### Objectives

- Understand the meaning of general revelation.
- Consider how Buddhists might think about the concept of revelation or enlightenment.

#### Key terms

- **general revelation:** God or the divine as revealed through ordinary, common human experiences
- **divine:** that which relates to God, gods or ultimate reality
- **special revelation:** the revelation of God, or the divine, through direct personal experience or an unusual specific event

#### Contrasting beliefs

Use the internet or the library to find out more about the idea of God being revealed through nature. How do Christians and non-religious believers differ in their opinions of nature as general revelation?

#### Activities

- 1 Explain what is meant by general revelation.
- 2 Explain how the following can be seen as examples of general revelation:
  - a nature
  - b the Bible
  - c Buddhist enlightenment.
- 3 Give two differences between Buddhist and Christian ideas about revelation.

he accomplished this before others and so opened the way for them. For Buddhists, revelation does not provide evidence of God. Instead, the Buddha revealed the true nature of reality. This revelation inspires people to change, so they begin to live with less selfishness, and more generosity and compassion for others. Importantly, people can gain an understanding of the nature of reality through everyday experience.

For Buddhists, teachings about the three marks of existence can help to reveal the nature of reality. These teachings say that:

1. suffering is an unavoidable part of reality
2. everything is impermanent
3. nothing has a fixed, unchanging nature.

Through these teachings, Buddhists can deepen their awareness of the nature of reality, which inspires a way of living that is in harmony with how things are.

For Buddhists, images can also help to reveal the nature of reality. For example, through an image of the Buddha or other sacred figure, Buddhists may recognise that they too can become enlightened. Some Mahayana Buddhists believe they can also communicate directly with the sacred figure, who shows the nature of reality.

### Revelation and scripture

For Christians, scripture is perhaps the most important expression of general revelation. Christians believe that the Bible is a sacred book because it contains the words of God. However, they often disagree about how to interpret the Bible, and over which passages are most important. Consequently, they reach different conclusions about God and spiritual life based on the same general revelation.

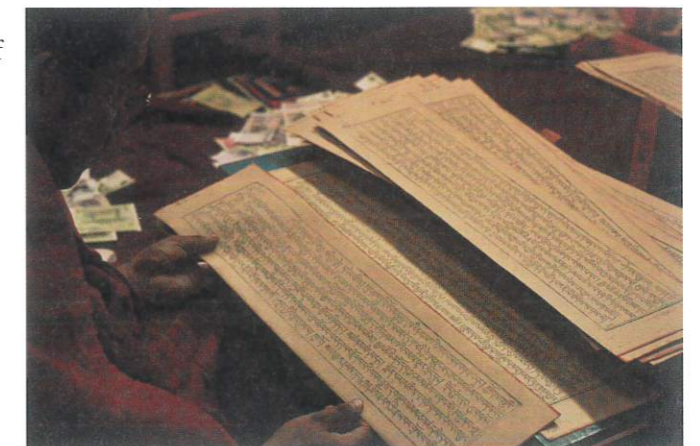
Buddhists too give special importance to scripture. Generally, Buddhist scriptures are regarded as the 'enlightened word', which means they are seen as expressing the enlightened mind, and usually the mind of the Buddha. For this reason, they act as a form of general revelation about the nature of truth or reality. Some Buddhists think they contain a sacred power that affects people who hear the words. Certain scriptures are even believed to heal or protect people.

### Nagarjuna and the revelation of perfect wisdom

According to legend, the Buddhist monk Nagarjuna received a whole body of sacred texts, known as the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures, from the serpent deities who had been guarding them at the bottom of the ocean. These scriptures were given to the serpent deities by the Buddha so they could keep them safe until humans were ready to understand them. The idea of buried or hidden revelations, which are later discovered and shared, has been important in some Mahayana traditions.

#### Links

To read more about the three marks of existence, see pages 20–25.



▲ Buddhist scriptures can be thought of as revealing the true nature of reality

#### Study tip

Make sure you can explain the differences between general and special revelation. Remember that anyone can experience general revelation through everyday experiences; special revelations are unique, rare, life-changing events.

#### Summary

You should now understand what general revelation is, and how it is seen as a way to know God. You should also understand what revelation means for Buddhists, and some of the ways through which the nature of reality is revealed to them.



## 5.5 Special revelation and visions

### ■ What is special revelation?

**Special revelation** describes a situation when a person, or even a group of people, experiences a vision or a miraculous event which they, and others, consider to be a communication from God. In many religious traditions, knowledge of the divine is believed to have been given to individuals or groups of people through special revelation. They were then inspired to start new religions, or to develop existing traditions with new ideas.

Scriptures can be understood as either special or general revelations, depending on the circumstances. For example, Jews and Christians believe that the Ten Commandments were revealed to Moses, and Muslims believe that the Qur'an was given to Muhammad. These are both examples of special revelation. Special revelation may be transmitted through the appearance of a vision or even through dreams.

### An example of special revelation

In 1917, three Portuguese shepherd girls reportedly saw a series of visions of the Virgin Mary (Our Lady of Fátima) and received spiritual teachings from her. When word got around, thousands of people flocked to the site in Fátima, Portugal. The visions were later agreed to be authentic and believable by the Catholic Church. Following the reported visions, Fátima quickly became a Catholic pilgrimage site and now attracts hundreds of thousands of people each year.

Pope John Paul II credited Our Lady of Fátima with saving his life following an assassination attempt which occurred on the Feast of Our Lady of Fátima in 1981. The bullet that wounded him was later placed in the crown of the statue of the Virgin Mary in the sanctuary at Fátima.

### ■ Arguments against special revelation

One argument against special revelation is that it often depends on the word of just one person. First, how can the person who experiences the revelation know that it is a revelation from God and not simply their own imagination? Second, how can others trust that they are telling the truth? Maybe the person is making it all up to get attention or maybe they are mentally ill. Special revelation is really only a revelation to one person, and others must take the revelation on trust because they have not experienced it directly.

A special revelation seems unlikely to bring someone to believe in God, but is more likely to confirm the faith they already have. It may also help others, who did not experience the special revelation, to deepen their faith. Whether a believer interprets an experience as a special revelation (as opposed to simply a strange experience) will depend on their belief system.

#### Objectives

- Examine special revelation, including visions, as a source of knowledge about the divine.
- Be able to give examples of special revelation within Buddhism and Christianity.

#### Key term

- **special revelation:** the revelation of God, or the divine, through direct personal experience or an unusual specific event

#### Contrasting beliefs

Use the internet or the library to research visions. Note down different opinions between religious believers (including Christians) and non-religious believers.

#### Activities

- 1 How is special revelation different to general revelation?
- 2 How might the meaning of a special revelation be different for a Buddhist and a Christian?
- 3 Why do some people find it difficult to believe in the concept of special revelation?

#### Discussion activity

Discuss with a partner whether you think it is possible to experience visions if you are not a religious person.

### ■ Buddhism and revelation

Buddhists are unlikely to interpret an apparent revelation as the intervention of God, because they do not believe in the concept of an omnipotent, omniscient God. However, they generally accept the possibility that special wisdom may be transmitted through visionary experiences, and even by visionary figures. Many Buddhists practise teachings that were supposedly revealed to revered teachers. The content of these teachings is often more important than their supposed source. For instance, if a Buddhist claimed to have received a revelation that contradicted basic Buddhist teachings, it is unlikely that other Buddhists would want to follow such a teaching.



▲ Buddhists may have visions when meditating

### Bahiya's vision

An example of a vision from the Buddhist scriptures is the story of Bahiya, who lived in the western part of India. Bahiya was revered and respected as a holy man, but a doubt entered his mind: was he really enlightened? When this doubt emerged, he had a vision of a deva (spiritual being) who confirmed that he wasn't as wise as he could be. Bahiya then asked the deva, 'So who is enlightened? Who can I learn from?' The deva advised him to go and seek out the Buddha. So Bahiya travelled hundreds of miles on foot to find the Buddha, asked for his teaching, and immediately became enlightened. Shortly afterwards, he died.

### Meditation and visionary experience

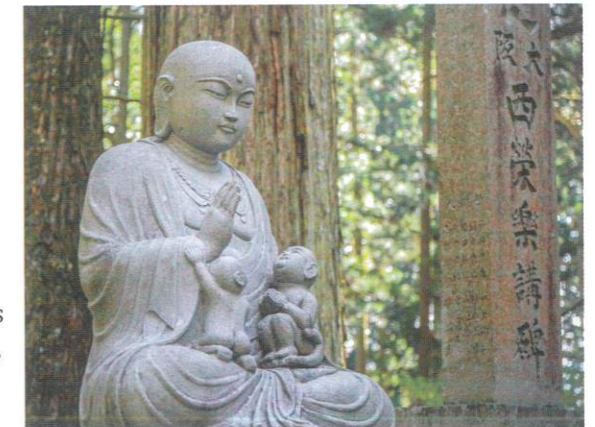
In Buddhism, people may have visions while meditating. They may see Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, who are seen as specific sources of knowledge, and who can influence the spiritual development of the meditator. In some cases, such visions may be seen as special revelation. In addition, in some Mahayana traditions, believers regularly meditate on Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, chant mantras, and perform various rituals, in the belief that this will bring them into direct contact with the Buddha or Bodhisattva. Through doing these things, they may believe that they have received a specific revelation, which they may then transmit to others.

### The Tibetan Book of the Dead

There is a famous Tibetan text widely known in English as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which emerged through what could be understood as a special revelation. Tibet has a tradition of 'hidden treasures' and a tradition of treasure finders. Tibetan Buddhists believe that *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* was written by the great monk Padmasambhava in the eighth century. He decided to hide it until a later date when people would be ready to study it. It was then discovered several centuries later, and has become central in the Tibetan Buddhist approach to dying, death, and rebirth.

### ★ Study tip

It would be helpful to know one example of a vision that you could write about in detail.



▲ In Japan, the Bodhisattva Jizo is particularly called on by mothers who have lost babies or children

#### Summary

You should now be able to explain the meaning of special revelation, and understand how visions can be a source of knowledge about the divine.



## 5.6 Enlightenment and the nature of God

### What is enlightenment?

**Enlightenment** is a term that describes a profound spiritual insight which transforms the life of the individual. Some religions believe that through enlightenment, people come to know God. In contrast, Buddhism teaches that people can gain a deep understanding of themselves and of the nature of reality.

Enlightenment may be gained through spiritual discipline, such as prayer, silence and solitude. For example, the Anchorites were Christians who lived austere lives of solitude, with the intention of knowing God and releasing themselves from sin. Through separating themselves from the world, they believed that they could come to know God more intimately through personal experience.

In Buddhism, enlightenment is gained through practising the Dhamma (the teachings of the Buddha). The path to enlightenment is often presented as having three elements: ethics, meditation and wisdom. While each of these aspects can be developed at the same time, Buddhists believe that if a person improves their ethical behaviour, then they will be able to have deeper meditation experiences. Through the stability and concentration developed in meditation, Buddhists can gain an understanding of the nature of reality, which leads to enlightenment. Enlightenment results in a state of profound freedom, peace, wisdom and compassion.



▲ Buddhists use meditation to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of reality

### The enlightenment of the Buddha

The most famous example of an enlightened person in Buddhism is, of course, the Buddha. He is said to have gained enlightenment after six years of strenuous spiritual practices. When sitting under a peepul tree, the Buddha saw how all things come into being because of certain conditions, and cease when those conditions cease. In particular, he came to understand how people create their own suffering, and how they can release themselves from that suffering through letting go of desire and hatred. The Buddha's enlightenment is said to be beyond words. It produced a profound transformation that inspired him to share his experience with others, and to begin what later turned out to become a major world religion.

### Objectives

- Understand what enlightenment means for different religious believers.
- Understand terms that attempt to describe the nature of God or the divine.

### Key terms

- **enlightenment:** the gaining of true knowledge about God, self or the nature of reality, usually through meditation and self-discipline; in Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh traditions, gaining freedom from the cycle of rebirth
- **omnipotent:** almighty, having unlimited power; a quality of God
- **omniscient:** knowing everything; a quality of God
- **omnibenevolent:** all good; a quality of God
- **impersonal:** the idea that God has no 'human' characteristics, is unknowable and mysterious, more like an idea or force
- **personal:** the idea that God is an individual or person with whom people are able to have a relationship or feel close to
- **transcendent:** the idea that God is beyond and outside life on Earth and the universe; a quality of God
- **immanent:** the idea that God is present in and involved with life on Earth and in the universe; a quality of God

While in English the term commonly used to refer to the Buddha's experience is 'enlightenment', it may be more accurate to talk about 'awakening'. Both of these terms are metaphors that point to something that is perhaps indescribable.

### Different ideas about the nature of God

Different religions, and even different followers, sometimes have very different ideas about the nature of God or the divine. Some of these ideas are not easy to understand and may seem to involve contradictions.

For example, God is sometimes described as all powerful (**omnipotent**), all knowing (**omniscient**), and all loving (**omnibenevolent**). However, if God really does have these qualities, how can he permit evil and suffering to continue?

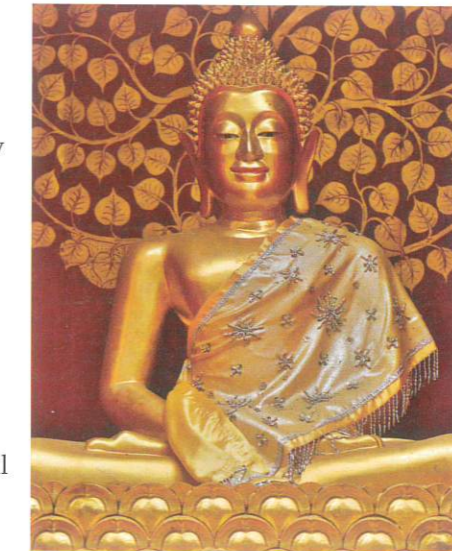
Sometimes God is seen as **impersonal**, beyond the world, and so detached from people. Other believers regard God as **personal**: someone with whom they can develop a relationship and who may answer their prayers.

Some religious believers think of God as **transcendent**, remote from day-to-day events, beyond the world. When understood in this way, the divine may be seen as beyond the grasp of human understanding, something unknowable, even mysterious. Others believe that God, or the divine, is constantly at work in the world and is therefore **immanent**, present in all things, accessible at each moment. The ideas that God or the divine is transcendent or immanent do not necessarily exclude one another. The divine may be accessible through the world but still be somehow beyond it.

### Ideas about the nature of the Buddha

Different Buddhists think of the Buddha in many different ways:

- Some see him as a person; a teacher and example to be followed.
- Others see him as a symbol of their own potential.
- Some see him as a transcendent figure to be worshipped.
- Others believe that the Buddha is immanent: an ever-present reality with which they can enter into a relationship through meditation and devotional practices.
- The Buddha is sometimes seen as a supremely compassionate force that is actively reaching out to help human beings in order to relieve their suffering. If people become more receptive then they can experience this influence, and it will direct their lives in a more fulfilling way.



▲ The Buddha sitting under the peepul tree

### Activities

- 1 Write your own definition of enlightenment.
- 2 What are the differences and similarities between Buddhist and Christian ideas about enlightenment?
- 3 Make two spider diagrams, writing the words 'nature of God' in the middle of one, and 'nature of the Buddha' in the middle of the other. Around these, write the terms used to describe each, with brief definitions. Compare and contrast the two.

### Links

Read more about the Buddha's enlightenment on pages 14–15.

### Discussion activity

Discuss with a partner whether you think it is possible for God to be both impersonal and personal, and transcendent and immanent. Do you think describing God as all of these things is contradictory, or is it possible for God to be all of these things at once?

### Study tip

You will find many overlaps in descriptions of the nature of the Buddha and of God. The single most important difference is that the Buddha is never described as a creator.

### Summary

You should now be able to explain what enlightenment means for different religious believers, and be able to describe the Buddha's enlightenment. You should also understand a range of terms that are used to describe the nature of God or the divine.



### Philosophical arguments for and against the existence of God – summary

You should now be able to:

- ✓ explain and evaluate the Design argument, including its strengths and weaknesses
- ✓ explain and evaluate the First Cause argument, including its strengths and weaknesses
- ✓ explain and evaluate the argument from miracles, including its strengths and weaknesses
- ✓ describe one example of a miracle
- ✓ explain and evaluate the arguments against the existence of God posed by science and by the problem of evil and suffering.

### The nature of the divine and revelation – summary

You should now be able to:

- ✓ explain what is meant by special revelation and enlightenment as sources of knowledge about the divine (God, gods or ultimate reality)
- ✓ describe one example of a vision
- ✓ explain what is meant by general revelation, including nature and scripture as a way of understanding the divine
- ✓ explain the different ideas about the divine that come from revelation
- ✓ explain the meaning of qualities of God such as omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent, personal, impersonal, immanent and transcendent
- ✓ explain the value of revelation and enlightenment as sources of knowledge about the divine
- ✓ explain and evaluate the difficulties in accepting the reality of some examples of revelation
- ✓ explain and evaluate the problem of different ideas about the divine arising from these experiences
- ✓ explain and evaluate alternative explanations for the experiences and the possibility that the people who claimed to have them were lying or mistaken
- ✓ explain similar and contrasting perspectives in contemporary British society to all the above issues
- ✓ explain similar and contrasting beliefs in contemporary British society to the three issues of miracles, visions, and nature as a source of revelation, with reference to the main religious tradition in Britain (Christianity) and non-religious beliefs such as atheism or humanism.

#### Sample student answer – the 12-mark question

1. Write an answer to the following practice question:

'The enlightenment of the Buddha has little value for Buddhists today.'

Evaluate this statement. In your answer you:

- should give reasoned arguments to support this statement
- should give reasoned arguments to support a different point of view
- should refer to religious arguments
- may refer to non-religious arguments
- should reach a justified conclusion.

[12 marks]  
[+ 3 SPaG marks]

2. Read the following sample student answer:

*"Most Buddhists think that even describing or explaining what it means to be enlightened, to someone who has not had the experience, is a difficult thing to do. That makes it really hard to become enlightened if no one can really explain what it means. There are descriptions of what it's like to overcome problems that might stop someone from achieving enlightenment, so this might have value for Buddhists today. Though they were written so long ago, maybe they're not helpful for Buddhists today. The Buddha described nibbana or enlightenment in different ways, like supreme happiness, peace and immortality, but these are hard concepts to understand and not so useful today.*

*But it could be argued that the Buddhist aim in life is complete freedom from conflict and selfishness, and to end craving, hatred and ignorance. The Buddha was just a man who achieved this very thing, so why not others too? The Buddha was a great example of how nibbana can be achieved in a person's lifetime. Every religion has a goal for its followers to achieve and for Buddhists it is becoming enlightened, so if this state was not achievable, what would be the point in following the religion at all?"*

3. With a partner, discuss the sample answer. Is the focus of the answer correct? Is anything missing from the answer? How do you think it could be improved?
4. What mark (out of 12) would you give this answer? Look at the mark scheme in the Introduction (AO2). What are the reasons for the mark you have given?
5. Swap your answer with your partner's and mark each other's responses. What mark (out of 12) would you give? Refer to the mark scheme and give reasons for the mark you award.

#### Practice questions

- 1 Which **one** of the following best expresses the idea that the divine (God, gods or ultimate reality) is all-powerful?  
A) Omnipotent    B) Immanent    C) Transcendent    D) Impersonal    [1 mark]
- 2 Give **two** descriptions of nibbana.    [2 marks]
- 3 Explain **two** contrasting beliefs about miracles as an argument for the existence of God. In your answer you must refer to one or more religious traditions.    [4 marks]
- 4 Explain **two** religious beliefs about visions. Refer to sacred writings or another source of religious belief and teaching in your answer.    [5 marks]
- 5 'The First Cause argument is the strongest argument for the existence of God.' Evaluate this statement. In your answer you:  
• should give reasoned arguments to support this statement  
• should give reasoned arguments to support a different point of view  
• should refer to religious arguments  
• may refer to non-religious arguments  
• should reach a justified conclusion.    [12 marks]  
[+ 3 SPaG marks]