

Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Yifa, one of the questions that has obsessed me, maybe even tormented me, my whole life, is whether God exists. And I've talked to scientists, philosophers, theologians. The question I want to ask, from a Buddhist point of view, is how do we think about God's existence? What is the best way to think about it?

Venerable Dr. Yifa:

Well, you know, for these years I have been engaging with interface dialogue. So, it's a really great education for me, because even though I have been a nun for like, you know, 29 years, almost 30 years, lots of things I just take granted. Even, you know, some, you know, the concept. I just, you know, it's there. I never challenge myself. And through this interface dialogue, I have the chance to make a friend with a Catholic nun, a sister, you know Meg Fung, and remember we've become really like sisters. And I remember, there was one time we were in elevator, just she and I. And I asked, "Meg," I say, "Meg, you are so smart. Intelligent. Why you believe in God?" And then, you know, Meg just reply to me, she said, "Yifa, you are so intelligent, too. Why you believe in reincarnation?" Well, we got even, okay. But I think that was a conversation really hit me, and then made me to start to think. Not think about God, but think about reincarnation, because the environment growing up in Taiwan, and in kind of a Chinese, Buddhist community, I never thought about reincarnation. But since I came to west, and you know, you study, encounter many people to, to ask you even there are some young people, they even practice Buddhism with me. But they say, well, I don't think that I have to believe in reincarnation either. So, I started to think about, well, is that, you know, reincarnation, or the concept of God? It's more like in our consciousness, you know, the, the, the, environment we grow up. Regarding the concept of God, the creator; it's very hard for me, because for me, I never have the idea about -- there must be, you know, someone create the whole world, you know. And so, just like maybe for some westerner, they never cannot understand why we need to have the reincarnation, like a previous life, a next life, and even you think about, you could be -- your next life could be end, you know. So, so, I, I think this is very interesting for we to re-examine, what does it mean, about God, and what does it mean, about reincarnation?

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Because we each have a cultural environment in which we've grown up with that makes our view seem like the rational and the normal view.

Venerable Dr. Yifa:

Exactly.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And another view is not normal.

Venerable Dr. Yifa:

Exactly, and it also could be, you know -- what all we understand, what we call the pre-conceptualizing. Like, the more we learn, it's kind of a conceptualization.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But it's exactly this reason why I want to know your understanding of God. Because you're coming at it fresh. I've been in an environment that has always assumed it to be the case, with certain stereotypes and certain assumptions and biases. Whether it's a scientific bias, or a religious bias, it's a bias. So, if you come at that question of, of, of the existence of God, how do you think about it? How, how does, how does Buddhism relate to it?

Venerable Dr. Yifa:

Well, when I learned about Christianity, about the God, okay, the creator, God well, that's also in Judaism and Islam as well. Well, the first thing is, you say, okay, there was a creator. And then you ask, where did he come from? And then you tell me, say, oh, okay. He exist forever, okay. And then I say, something exists forever, or, you know, it's already has been there, that means that God it's, you know, no beginning, no not no end. But, of course, also for you from Bible, you also can see the history, the concept of the God hasn't been changed. Maybe at the beginning, you know, in the Old Testament, the God is more like a personal, a personal a personality, okay. And maybe later you can tell that some Christian, when they describe God, they say, oh, you know Buddhist and Nirvana means God. Okay. Well, how come? Because it means no beginning and no end. So, of course, the reason we want to ask why God exists, because we want to know why what is the existence of this world? Who, who created or who made it? And from Buddhists view, it says, okay, it's not start from one point and someone make it happen. Always thinks, it's always when, when the condition together, and then things come you know, come to be, but it would change. More like, you know, an evolution, you know. More like evolution. So, you probably cannot find okay, when someone start with a refrigerator, well right now you probably see a fridge with a computer, can even talk. But maybe at the beginning was, you know, someone tried to hide the food in the snow, and then we couldn't find it, and then we, we, we find a box, and put it there and then find.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

It evolved. It developed.

Venerable Dr. Yifa:

It evolved. You know, when I was young, there was an old refrigerator. I remember my mom would put, you know, the ice cube in, in the box. So now we talk about, you know, the refrigerator

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

With computers and talking

Venerable Dr. Yifa:

Exactly. So, everything, they're not really just at the certain point start is the way we, you know, we say it, we put it.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, your view of God would take that as an analogy, so that the process of thinking about God has developed in a similar way.

Venerable Dr. Yifa:

Well, you know what? If you can recognize that word, you know, come to be without a creator, then you don't need a God. We don't need a God. If you, you, you can see the things, you know, because all the conditions come together. By, you know, the condition itself.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, a westerner pardon me for being a westerner. A westerner would say, okay, the conditions are coming together to make the world, but where did the conditions come from?

Venerable Dr. Yifa:

The conditions come from conditions. The conditions come from conditions. Yes. And then, you know, the problem is, okay, it's so incomprehensible, okay, when you talk about there was no beginning. But it's, it's also incomprehensible, when you talk about there was a beginning. Because you, you were -- after then, where did the beginning point come from? And this is all to do with our mind. And that's why -- come to Buddhism, when we come to what we call Zen or Chan. Okay. And why you practice Chan or Zen, it's because the master wants to push you, you know, your, your logic, or the way you conceptualize to the corner, to the end. There was no reason, and then you break through. You break through. The problem is, I was joking. The reason we cannot understand the nature of the universe or, you know, the kind of object of, of God, is because, you know, just like it's because of the limitation of our mind and our conception. Just like a computer. If you don't have the program, you try you put a file you cannot read.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Impossible.

Venerable Dr. Yifa:

You cannot read. Exactly. So, so, so, you know, there was something beyond.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, whether the universe had a beginning, or had no beginning, or is there a God, or where God came from; these are questions of logic. And my mind is trapped in logic?

Venerable Dr. Yifa:

Yeah, yeah. Well, that's what I, when I say it's beyond. It's because if we would look at the, our, the function of our mind, the conceptualization, we only can find like two answers. Okay. There was end, or without end. But if you look at those answers, always is a problem. So, the, the Buddhist view is when we come to this what we call the metaphysical or fundamental question about existence, you don't -- from this what we call the, you know, ordinary logic to find the answer. It's just like a computer. If you only have one or two programs. But, you know, you have the other, you know, a better file. You need another program. But you don't have the program in your mind. You just won't get open it. You won't open the, the, the file. So, you know, the, the God, and -- or the existent -- it's, it's you cannot understand just from very -- an ordinary concept.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And so -- what, in Buddhism do you have to do to approach the subject of God?

Venerable Dr. Yifa:

Well, just to see the limitation of our conceptualization. I think that -- I always tell people that to be a Buddhist, it is to see the limitation of all our conceptualization, the function of the mind, but not stop there; but to break through and to beyond, you know. And so, about God -- I try to, you know, I try to understand like people from different languages. Maybe we are looking for the same thing. You know, it just, it just that -- we should not get caught in that ordinary logic. Okay, he created this world, and there must be something, you know -- a beginning. Okay, or maybe it's already set there. There's something beyond that, and it could be in our mind, beyond that kind of logic, and I think that's why, when the Buddha attended the enlightened man, he'd realize it.