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## **Exploring the Interplay between Mythology and Religion: An Early Buddhist Perspective**

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**Abstract:**

This study explores the complex interrelationship between mythology and religion, emphasising Early Buddhism's unique viewpoint. With an emphasis on the influence of legendary narratives on religious practices, beliefs, and followers' broader worldview, the research seeks to illuminate the mutually beneficial relationship between mythology and religion in the setting of Early Buddhism.

**Introduction:**

Early Buddhism provides a distinctive viewpoint on the relationship between mythology and religion as it is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama. Mythic stories that offer deep spiritual lessons may be found in the Pali Canon, the tradition's core texts. These stories function as teaching aids, offering a clear way to comprehend the intricate ideas of Buddhism, such as impermanence, suffering, and the road to enlightenment. They also influence Early Buddhist followers' cosmological perspective by offering a thorough knowledge of the cosmos and assisting practitioners on their spiritual path. Ritual activities like festivals and devotions also use mythological themes, strengthening the religious experience and establishing a link between the worlds beyond the stories and their practices. Investigating mythology demonstrates a dynamic and complex connection with religion in Early Buddhism, influencing the followers' religious identity, rituals, and moral compass. The purpose of this study is to shed light on this link and offer insights into the transformational role that mythology plays in the early stages of Buddhist thinking and spirituality.

**Mythology in Early Buddhist Texts:**

The Pali Canon, which contains the scriptures of the Early Buddhists, is a complex tapestry of mythological stories that go beyond conventional storytelling. These stories which include tales of heavenly entities, cosmogonic myths, and symbolic allegories offer a framework for comprehending the cosmology, moral precepts, and spiritual journeys of practitioners. Cosmogonic stories, like the Aggañña Sutta, explain birth, death, and rebirth as well as the cyclical nature of existence. Additionally, by giving the cosmos moral and ethical importance, these narratives influence practitioners' worldviews and ethical trajectories. The Lotus Sutra and the Snake Simile are two examples of symbolic allegories that provide a complex and metaphorical vocabulary to explain important lessons about impermanence, suffering, and the road to enlightenment. These stories cut over cultural and chronological barriers, encouraging professionals to Religious Significance of Mythology in Early Buddhism:

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Mythology in Early Buddhist teachings is a significant aspect of the religious worldview, shaping the spiritual journey of practitioners. Mythological narratives serve as pedagogical tools, translating complex philosophical concepts into accessible stories and providing a rich metaphorical language for practitioners to navigate the spiritual landscape. For example, the Four Noble Truths, a foundational teaching in Buddhism, is enriched through mythological elements in texts like the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, known as the "Turning of the Wheel of Dharma." Mythology also assumes a symbolic nature, providing practitioners with a metaphorical language to explore the human condition, reality, and the path to enlightenment. The Lotus Sutra uses the symbol of the lotus flower to convey the idea that spiritual purity and enlightenment can arise even in worldly impurities. This metaphorical language transcends linguistic and cultural barriers, inviting practitioners to engage with the teachings at a deeper, symbolic level. Mythological narratives also contribute to the cultivation of a moral and ethical framework, with Jataka tales replete with moral lessons and ethical dilemmas. These stories serve as parables that guide practitioners in navigating ethical conduct and reinforce the interconnectedness of ethical living with the spiritual journey. In summary, mythology in Early Buddhism is a dynamic and integral aspect of the religious framework, serving as a transformative lens through which practitioners can explore the profound teachings of the tradition.

#### **Mythological Motifs and Ritual Practices:**

Mythological motifs are deeply ingrained in Early Buddhist scriptures and are deeply reflected in the ritual practices of the tradition. These motifs form a dynamic aspect of Early Buddhist spirituality, shaping ceremonial elements, influencing festivals, and imbuing devotional practices with profound meaning. Rituals within Early Buddhism are not mere scripted performances but intricate expressions of faith, embodying the core teachings of the tradition. Mythological motifs guide the ceremonial aspects of these rituals, infusing them with symbolism and meaning. For example, rituals associated with the veneration of relics often draw upon mythic narratives surrounding the Buddha's life, emphasizing the significance of relics as tangible connections to the enlightened one. Festivals, marking important events in the

Buddhist calendar, are enriched by the incorporation of mythological narratives. Devotional practices within Early Buddhism are infused with mythological motifs, fostering a sense of connection between practitioners and the transcendent realms depicted in mythic narratives. The recitation of protective chants or mantras, often derived from mythological sources, invokes the benevolent presence of deities or celestial beings, providing spiritual guidance and protection. The interplay between mythology and ritual deepens the religious experience by providing practitioners with a tangible and experiential dimension to their faith. Through participation in these rituals, practitioners find a sense of belonging and communion with the larger Buddhist community. In summary, the infusion of mythological motifs into Early Buddhist ritual practices is an integral and transformative aspect of the religious framework. Rituals, festivals, and devotional practices become avenues for practitioners to immerse themselves in the mythic dimensions of the tradition, fostering a deeper connection with the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

#### **Mythology and Morality in Early Buddhism:**

The relationship between mythology and morality in Early Buddhism is a testament to the holistic nature of the tradition. Mythological narratives, preserved in Early Buddhist scriptures, serve as conduits for conveying spiritual insights and providing moral guidance. These narratives, such as the Jataka tales, illustrate ethical principles through narrative storytelling and symbolic language. The stories depict the Buddha's past lives, illustrating the consequences of virtuous conduct and the perils of unwholesome actions. The Jataka tales also emphasize the interconnectedness of ethical conduct with the broader pursuit of enlightenment, with the concept of karma deeply embedded in the mythic fabric. The myth of the Bodhisattva's journey exemplifies the close relationship between moral living and the aspirational path towards Buddhahood. Mythological narratives provide archetypal models of virtuous behavior, inspiring practitioners to cultivate similar qualities in their own lives. The use of symbolic language and allegory in mythological narratives also imparts moral lessons indirectly, allowing for deeper contemplation and interpretation. The symbolism of the lotus flower, for example, carries profound ethical implications, symbolizing the possibility of cultivating

virtue and enlightenment even in the midst of worldly challenges. In short, the symbiotic relationship between mythology and morality in Early Buddhism reflects the holistic approach of the tradition, where ethical living is not separate from the pursuit of enlightenment but an integral part of the transformative journey towards awakening.

Is mythology an inevitable part of Buddhism:

Buddhism, founded on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, has a rich tradition of mythological narratives that have significantly shaped its doctrinal, ethical, and ritual dimensions. While not doctrinally necessary, mythology has become an intrinsic and influential aspect of the religion. Buddhism is a path of spiritual awakening, emphasizing the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the pursuit of Nirvana. As Buddhism spread across diverse cultural landscapes, it encountered local mythologies, cosmologies, and belief systems, integrating them into its religious expression. Mythology serves various functions, including as a pedagogical tool, intertwined with ritual practices, and contributing to the ethical dimension of the tradition. Mythological narratives, such as the stories of the Buddha's ethical choices, serve as moral exemplars, guiding practitioners in ethical decision-making. The symbiotic relationship between Buddhism and mythology has not only enriched the religious experience for practitioners but also allowed the tradition to resonate across cultural boundaries, contributing to its enduring and evolving nature.

### **Conclusion:**

The study explores the relationship between mythology and religion in Early Buddhism, focusing on the integration of mythic narratives into the religious framework. Early Buddhist texts, particularly the Pali Canon, contain rich mythological narratives that transcend conventional storytelling, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding cosmology, moral precepts, and spiritual journeys. These myths act as pedagogical tools, translating complex philosophical concepts into accessible stories, and providing practitioners with a metaphorical language to navigate the spiritual landscape. Mythology also shapes ritual practices, infusing them with symbolism and profound meaning. It also extends to the ethical dimension of the tradition, emphasizing the interconnectedness of ethical conduct with the pursuit of

enlightenment. The research reveals that mythology has become an intrinsic and influential aspect of Buddhism, adapting to diverse cultural contexts and assimilation of local mythologies. The transformative role of mythology in Early Buddhism is evident, shaping beliefs, practices, and ethical norms, contributing to its enduring and evolving nature. Further inquiry into the relationship between mythology and religion is needed to ensure the rich tapestry of mythic narratives continues to inspire and guide practitioners on their spiritual journey.

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