RETHINKING THE BUDDHA

A cornerstone of Buddhist philosophy, the doctrine of the four noble truths maintains that life is replete with suffering, desire is the cause of suffering, nirvana is the end of suffering, and the way to nirvana is the eightfold noble path. Although the attribution of this seminal doctrine to the historical Buddha is ubiquitous, *Rethinking the Buddha* demonstrates through a careful examination of early Buddhist texts that he did not envision them in this way. Shulman traces the development of what we now call the four noble truths, which in fact originated as observations to be cultivated during deep meditation. The early texts reveal that other central Buddhist doctrines, such as dependent-origination and selflessness, similarly derived from meditative observations. This book challenges the conventional view that the Buddha's teachings represent universal themes of human existence, allowing for a fresh, compelling explanation of the Buddhist theory of liberation.

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Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception

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For my parents,
who taught me to rethink.

Contents

Preface

Buddhist philosophy has something of a magical appeal. Many expect the Buddha, the man who is thought to have brought human potential to its fullest possible fruition, to supply penetrating insights into and solutions for our personal and collective ailments. The Buddha is supposedly capable of this since he is "enlightened" or "awake"; resonant images of mature philosophical presence and cultured awareness. These grand hopes tend, however, to obscure the deep chasm between us and the Buddha, the renunciate who flourished in the Indian forests some two and one-half millennia ago. The beliefs harbored by his fellow men and the realities they were troubled by were very different from our own. Although it is uncontestable that he designed a compelling system of thought and of spiritual praxis that is pregnant with therapeutic potential, his teachings – or at least the main doctrines attributed to him – have so far been presented in ways that cater too easily to the tastes and preferences of modern audiences. The reading strategies of this new Buddhist crowd were eager to appropriate the elements of Buddhist discourse they found meaningful and to ignore the developmental processes the teachings went through. They thus adopted later formulations of Buddhist doctrine and identified these as the message of the awakened Buddha. This study aims to evaluate the philosophy articulated in the early Buddhist texts without reading modern aspirations and existential problems into them; these were themselves nourished by interpretations that were more often than not developed within the Buddhist traditions of Asia.

This book makes two revisionary claims, both of which dramatically challenge the prevalent understanding of the teachings attributed to the historical Buddha. The first is that the early Buddhist discourses betray almost no familiarity with the doctrine known as the four noble truths, generally regarded as the hallmark of Buddhist thought; the Buddha – to the degree that he can be accessed through the early discourses of the Pāli canon – did not teach that life is replete with pain, that desire is the cause

of this pain, that nirvāṇa is the end of pain, and that the eightfold noble path paves the way toward this blessed end. Rather, when the early discourses refer to the instruction that grew to become "the four noble truths," they speak of a specific, concise set of meditative observations, which reflect on the conditioned contents of awareness and witness the processes by which these rise and fall. Almost ubiquitously, "the four noble truths" are not "noble" and are not "truths" but are tightly structured forms of meditative perception that allow a practitioner to react to the contents she encounters in her meditation in a way that was sanctioned by the early Buddhists. She is to practice this method of reflection to the degree that she spontaneously sees and experiences the events that arise in her mind according to its imprint.

A similar point can be made regarding the two other seminal philosophical doctrines of Buddhism – dependent-origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and selflessness (*anatta*). These were not, originally, universally applicable laws of conditionality and of essencelessness, respectively, but complementary methods of observing mental occurrences in meditation. These doctrines were at first schemes of analysis that were meant to guide the running perceptual process of meditation. They were fashioned in order to instruct one to see things in a way that accords with Buddhist metaphysical intuitions and to induce a mental stance of detachment. This is a lived philosophy in the deepest sense possible, in which theoretical positions are to be ingrained in the mind as the result of diligent practice. We are not speaking of ideas but of intense, dedicated, meditative practice.

The philosophical doctrines of Buddhism thus emerged from specific, well-defined meditative perceptions, which were part of a sustained effort to give new shape to (or at times possibly to transcend) experience. The early Buddhist teachings were first of all verbalized reflections on meditative events. These reflections were then meant to guide meditative observation in order to cause future experiences to conform to these patterns of thought. Early Buddhist philosophy was thus first and foremost both a description of and a prescription for meditative experience.

How theses meditative perceptions became the doctrines we are familiar with today is a story that will not be told here. This was a natural, organic development, albeit one that had a remarkably powerful impact on the Buddhist philosophical culture. Theoretical philosophical impulses were surely not alien to the early Buddhists; indeed, the lived philosophy we are speaking of is entrenched in a comprehensive, powerful, and demanding metaphysic, which contrasts karma and liberation and which one would have had to contemplate in order to perform the practice.

The need to address larger philosophical concerns and wider audiences with less expertise is evident as well. The meditative perceptions we will be discussing also easily lend themselves to captivating philosophical positions: the general law of causality that is referred to today by the concept of dependent-origination is surely related to the observation of the conditionality of mental events that was at the earlier heart of the doctrine: that "desire is the cause of suffering" is a legitimate, if somewhat diluted, abstraction of the four observations that became the four noble truths; and essencelessness is the natural philosophical gravitational center of the doctrine of selflessness. But the cogency of Buddhist doctrine should not conceal the earlier layers of the teachings, which are the main interest of the early texts. A good, close-enough reading of these texts teaches us much more than has yet to be appreciated about the methods and goals of the early Buddhists.

The second main claim that will be developed in the following pages is that the central early Buddhist theory of liberation makes sense and can be understood. When we appreciate that Buddhist philosophy was at first a form of meditative perception, we can grasp the way the authors of the Pāli discourses viewed liberation. There are different approaches to liberation in the early texts, but one appears to have been favored as an account of the specific event of enlightenment. This description or theory – here we regrettably have to put aside the creative and aesthetic elements at work in shaping the image of "enlightenment"[1] – speaks of a counter intuitive combination between profound, densely calm, meditative *samādhi*, on the one hand, and philosophical insight on the other. At first sight, the joining of philosophy and supposedly "mystical" states of mind seems unreasonable, and in fact this approach to liberation was normally discarded by scholars of Buddhism. Their approach relies, however, on a fundamental mistake – they read younger philosophical doctrines into the more restricted, carefully designed words of the texts. When the later philosophical developments are set aside and philosophy is understood to be a structured form of meditative observation, the logic of this particular notion of liberation becomes clearer – awakening was perceived as a philosophical perception and not as a philosophical understanding, which was experienced in the deep meditative state of *jhāna*. At liberation, one spontaneously interprets the events that arise in meditation according to the logic of the philosophy, without having to contemplate its ideas

[1] For initial steps in this direction, see Shulman (forthcoming).

conceptually. Philosophy, as a form of direct perception that has been practiced to perfection, can be *perceived* in *jhāna*.

In order to make these claims, prevalent conceptions of the Buddha and of his message must be reworked so that they will better reflect the texts. Indeed, it must be highlighted that this study is about texts: I will be discussing the early *suttas* ("discourses") and my main contribution will be an improved comprehension of their approach to philosophy. Scholars have grown overly suspicious, however, of the reliability of these texts as representations of the historical realities of early Buddhism, given the vagueness regarding the manner in which they were composed. These experts have warned of romanticized images of the Buddha, which are based on idealized textual presentations and that may have had little to do with Buddhism on the ground.[2] I am both sympathetic to these claims and uneasy about the forcefulness with which they have been advocated. I express my personal understanding below that the texts do go back to the earlier stages of Buddhism *to some degree*. I am, nonetheless, content to rest with the position that the Buddha of the Pāli canon, as a literary hero, can be better understood and to leave the judgment regarding the historicity of the materials to my readers. This thorny problem is addressed in the concluding section of Chapter 1.

The heart of the present study can be defined as an attempt to explain early Buddhist philosophy as a meditative phenomenon. Philosophy had other venues as well, but its most cherished function was to provide the structure for liberating meditative visions. That philosophy functioned in meditation is not my axiomatic assumption; it is what the texts unambiguously say. Specifically, the main theory of enlightenment in the early discourses says that the Buddha awoke to three types of knowledge in the deep meditative *samādhi* of the fourth *jhāna*. The third and definitive knowledge, titled "the destruction of the inflows" (*āsavānaṃ khayo*), is achieved through a meditative vision at the heart of which appears a condensed formulaic presentation of the philosophical doctrine known as the four noble truths. My goal is to explain the logic behind this textual statement by showing how philosophy can be thought to function in such a limpid, quieted mind.

In order to understand the texts at this point, we need a "non-conceptual philosophy," or a philosophy that can become a form of immediate experience rather than remain an abstract theory or inquiry. I argue that when Buddhist philosophical understanding is cultivated to a degree that it

[2] Schopen (1997: ch. 1) is the most eloquent and forceful expression of this position.

becomes cognitive nature, when it functions as insight in a deeply embodied sense, it no longer needs to be thought of or contemplated but can be directly seen and experienced in meditation. It is this philosophy that has become profoundly ingrained in the mind that structures the events that the texts describe as liberating. This language of condensed philosophical perceptions is also the one that the texts employ when they introduce the most fundamental Buddhist philosophical doctrines, most notably that of the four noble truths.

My exposition will proceed along the following path. Chapter 1 highlights the need to integrate philosophy and meditation in light of the principal scriptural depictions of liberation. It shows how scholars have avoided trusting the texts and have forced them to voice positions not their own. I then focus on the central theory of liberation advanced in the Nikāyas and ask what kind of thinking is behind it. I also demonstrate that other important theories of liberation in the early texts conform to the same basic pattern as the central theory of liberation – most of these theories speak of the destruction of negative potencies (*āsava*) through wisdom in a state of deep meditation. The attempt to understand this statement is thus set as a main goal for this study. I then situate the discussion in two broader theoretical perspectives, which relate to the role of meditative experience in the creation of Buddhist philosophy and the position of Buddhism as an ascetic, renunciate tradition. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the delicate issue of the relationship between the texts and the historical realities of early Buddhism.

Chapter 2 moves on to discuss the Buddha's overall approach to philosophy and offers fresh insights into the theme of the unanswered questions and the early meanings of dependent-origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and selflessness (*anatta*). The chapter shows that although early Buddhist philosophy was couched in a comprehensive metaphysical framework, it had little interest in abstract philosophizing. Its main goal was to make sense of subjective, human reality in order to allow its dedicated students to obtain a psychological solution to a metaphysical problem – the inherent connection between life and repeated, uncontrollable afterlife. From the start, this philosophy concerned itself only with what is of direct consequence to experienced human life. Dependent-origination, for example, focused initially on the nature of what can be called mental or subjective conditioning; this includes the conditioning of both present experience and future rebirth through subjective input. This idea is not, at this stage, a general theory of conditionality with ontological ramifications. This chapter thus demonstrates that philosophical analysis in early

Buddhism had little pure theoretical impulse and was naturally connected to a culture of mental cultivation. Ideally, it worked teleologically toward liberation. Although to some degree this theme is not new, my discussion takes this understanding a step further by showing how it operates in the most central Buddhist philosophical doctrines; along the way these doctrines are defined anew.

Chapter 3, which in some ways is the most demanding of this book, inquires into the manner in which the more general philosophical interest in human subjectivity is translated into concrete meditative experiences – it explains how philosophical ideas become direct perception. This crucial understanding is reached through a discussion of the notion of "mindfulness," (*sati*) mainly in light of the seminal *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (SPS). The chapter shows that "mindfulness" expresses a mental reality that has become fully attuned to early Buddhist philosophical ideas. The SPS is shown to be a compendium of meditations that are shaped in order to habituate the mind to naturally envisage its experiences in light of Buddhist understanding. Then I discuss how *sati* is related to *jhāna*. Ultimately, the point is that Buddhist philosophy is to be immediately experienced as a concrete perception of specific mental events in *jhāna*.

Chapter 4, which in many respects is the heart of this book, focuses on the earlier textual presentation of the four noble truths. The early texts have next to no interest in "noble truths," but are intensely engaged in a set of four concrete, meditative observations that later became the "four noble truths" (4NTs); not "life is suffering," but "*this* is suffering," etc. I then unravel the relationship between this teaching of the four (noble) truths as a meditative perception and the teachings of dependent-origination and selflessness; all three doctrines originate from one fundamental vision that focuses on the arising and passing away of conditioned, mental events. Equipped with this understanding, the central theory of liberation is explained. This chapter ends by recommending a new approach to the first Buddhist sermon, the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*, an approach which sees its conventional presentation of the 4NTs as a late addition.

What I present here is no more and no less than a fresh reading of the Pāli texts, which I believe can be trusted at least to mean what they say. If this basic assumption can be granted, a renewed encounter with these texts is called for since they rarely speak the messages modern students of Buddhism have seen as the most fundamental outlook of the tradition. I believe this new encounter affords fresh insights into the way both philosophy and liberation were envisioned by the authors of the Pāli discourses.

Before proceeding to the main body of the study, some advice to the different audiences that may read this book is in order. In this contribution to the august tradition of Buddhist textual interpretation, I have attempted to tread a fine line between too much and too little detail, that is between hedonism and asceticism. Some readers will feel I have been too careful and will benefit more from my persistent effort to make the main issues as clear as I possibly can as I proceed. These readers may wish to skip parts of the textual presentations and of the discussion of technicalities. Others will feel that too many texts have not been referred to and that I have not been careful enough in choosing and interpreting my sources. They may consider my conclusions too strong. To these readers, I recommend paying close attention to the footnotes, which fill in much of the missing pieces of the puzzle. I trust most readers will reach the far shore of this book with open questions. I hope, however, that at the same time they will acknowledge that the framework for the discussion of early Buddhist philosophy has shifted from the realms of theory to those of meditative observation.

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Abbreviations

4NTs	The Four Noble Truths
AN	*Aṅguttara Nikāya*
APS	*Ariyapariyesanā-sutta*
ĀSS	*Ānāpānasati-sutta*
AV	*Aṭṭhakavagga* of the *Sutta Nipāta*
BHSD	Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary
BJS	*Brahmajāla-sutta*
CPD	*Critical Pāli Dictionary*
DBS	*Dantabhūmi-sutta*
DCP	*Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*
DN	*Dīgha Nikāya*
KGSS	*Kāyagatāsati-sutta*
KN	*Khuddaka Nikāya*
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya*
MWSD	Monier-Williams Sanskrit Dictionary
NS	*Nidāna-saṃyutta*
PED	*Pāli-English Dictionary*
Skt	Sanskrit
SN	*Saṃyutta-Nikāya*
SNip	*Sutta Nipāta*
SPS	*Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*
SPhS	*Sāmaññaphala-sutta*