

RECONSTRUCTING EARLY BUDDHISM

Buddhist origins and discussion of the Buddha's teachings are amongst the most controversial and contested areas in the field. This bold and authoritative book tackles head-on some of the key questions regarding early Buddhism and its primary canon of precepts. Noting that the earliest texts in Pali, Sanskrit, and Chinese belong to different Buddhist schools, Roderick S. Bucknell addresses the development of these writings during the period of oral transmission between the Buddha's death and their initial redaction in the first century BCE. A meticulous comparative analysis reveals the likely original path of meditative practice applied and taught by Gotama. Fresh perspectives now emerge on both the Buddha himself and his enlightenment. Drawing on his own years of meditative experience as a Buddhist monk, the author offers here remarkable new interpretations of advanced practices of meditation, as well as of Buddhism itself. It is a landmark work in Buddhist studies.

RODERICK S. BUCKNELL holds a doctorate in Chinese linguistics and is Honorary Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Queensland, where for eighteen years – prior to his retirement – he taught Chinese and Buddhist studies. Having become interested in the techniques of insight meditation on an earlier visit to the country, he was formerly (from 1967 to 1971) a *bhikkhu* (Buddhist monk) based in Thailand. His previous works include *The Twilight Language: Explorations in Buddhist Meditation and Symbolism* (1995, co-authored with Martin Stuart-Fox, who has edited and provided the Postscript to the present volume) and *Sanskrit Manual: A Quick Reference Guide to the Phonology and Grammar of Classical Sanskrit* (2010).

“This book proposes a radical and new understanding of the Buddha’s path to awakening (based on a detailed analysis of the earliest textual sources available to us) that will undoubtedly prove provocative and controversial. It will certainly generate much discussion in scholarly circles, within Buddhist communities, and among those interested in understanding the Buddha’s teaching and engaging in its practice.”

– Mark Allon, Senior Lecturer in South Asian Buddhist studies,
University of Sydney

“This book is the culmination of fifty years of Roderick Bucknell’s Buddhist studies scholarship, in which he has explored issues in the nature of the path of practice in early Buddhism, especially by comparing a range of parallel texts in Pali and Chinese. The work is clear, informative, well written, and well referenced. It contains illuminating analyses of details of the Buddhist path – and of how they relate together, and evolved in different forms – in the first few centuries of Buddhism. It is thought-provoking and thus includes controversial aspects with which other scholars may not agree. It will prompt deeper thought on the nature of the path of Buddhist practice and be of great interest both to scholars of Buddhist studies and to Buddhist meditators.”

– Peter Harvey, Emeritus Professor of Buddhist studies,
University of Sunderland

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With a Postscript by Martin Stuart-Fox



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Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xv
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xvii
PART I BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT	
1 Introducing the Project	3
2 The <i>Saṅgha</i> and the Oral Transmission	25
3 Scriptural Sources	51
PART II THE PATH	
4 The Stepwise Training	83
5 Derivative Accounts of the Path	106
6 The Eightfold Path	130
PART III THE PRACTICE	
7 Mindfulness	167
8 Concentration	192
9 The Three Knowledges	216
PART IV IN CONCLUSION	
10 Summary and Interpretation	245
Postscript	265
<i>References</i>	269
<i>Index</i>	278

Tables

1.1	The three versions of the “Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness”	<i>page</i> 10
1.2	Correspondence between the three groups and the eightfold path according to Dhammadinnā	15
3.1	The four <i>āgamas</i> in Chinese	61
3.2	Chinese translation terms for <i>vedanā</i> and <i>upādāna</i>	72
4.1	The stepwise training – long account, Pali	91
4.2	First discrepant portion of stepwise training (long account)	94
4.3	Suggested explanation for different locations of “contentment”	96
4.4	Second discrepant portion of stepwise training (long account)	100
4.5	Composition of MN27 and its Sarvāstivādin parallel, MA146	103
5.1	The two versions of the <i>Mahā-Assapura-sutta</i>	107
5.2	Listing of <i>jhānas</i> and knowledges	108
5.3	The stages of taming	116
5.4	The “Discourse on the Trainee” (MN53)	118
5.5	The seven “good qualities” (<i>satta saddhammā</i>)	119
5.6	The three attainments (<i>sampadā</i>) (as in AN3.115)	123
5.7	The three purities (<i>soceyya</i>) and three attainments (<i>sampadā</i>)	125
5.8	Correlation of purities and attainments in terms of four implied divisions	126
6.1	Definitions of the eight path factors	131
6.2	Correspondences between the eightfold path and the three <i>Dhamma</i> groups	132
6.3	The tenfold path	138

	<i>List of Tables</i>	vii
6.4	Structural correspondences of the proposed original eightfold path	160
7.1	The three <i>sutta</i> versions of the “Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness”	175
7.2	The foundations of mindfulness as quoted in three <i>Abhidhamma</i> works	181
7.3	Objects of mindfulness in body-contemplation section of the Pali and Sarvāstivāda versions of the <i>Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta</i> and <i>Kāyagatāsati-sutta</i>	188
8.1	Summary of <i>jhānas</i> 1 to 4	201
8.2	<i>Jhāna</i> factors in the <i>Sutta-piṭaka</i>	203
8.3	<i>Jhāna</i> factors in the <i>Abhidhamma</i> : fourfold <i>jhāna</i>	204
8.4	<i>Jhāna</i> factors in the <i>Abhidhamma</i> : fivefold <i>jhāna</i>	204
9.1	The set of eight attainments	220
10.1	Reconstruction of the Buddha’s path to enlightenment	251

Preface

The many questions addressed in this book began to confront me some fifty years ago, while I was practising and studying in a Buddhist monastery in northern Thailand. Having been introduced to Buddhism through a six-week meditation retreat, I had quickly developed a keen interest in the doctrinal side of this, to me, exotic religious tradition. Consequently, I stayed on at the monastery, dividing my time between meditation practice and reading every book I could find on Buddhist doctrine.

The monastery library contained a disorganised but adequate collection, and the resident monks gladly gave me support and encouragement. A combination of practice and study was, they agreed, the right way to learn about the *Dhamma*, the Buddha's teaching. As for reading, books about Buddhism were a good place to start, but eventually I would need to "go to the *suttas*", to consult the texts themselves, preferably in the original Pali language. Trained in marine biology and with little prior knowledge of Buddhism, I doubted that I would be reading Pali texts in the near future. The library did, however, have a complete set of the *Sutta-piṭaka* in English translation, so I was optimistic as I embarked on my search.

The first aspect of the *Dhamma* on which I hoped to get clarification was that blueprint for Buddhist praxis, the noble eightfold path. The Buddha was said to have outlined his course of practice in a set of eight stages: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. I was particularly interested in the last two of these, right mindfulness and right concentration, which clearly referred to types of meditation.

In the retreat I had been taught to alternate between two different meditation techniques. The first consisted in keeping attention closely focussed on my breathing while seated with eyes closed. The second entailed observing, with a wider and often shifting focus of attention, the varied sensations experienced while engaged in walking, eating, bathing, and other everyday activities, all of which were to be performed in slow motion.

I had also been told that these represented two broad classes of meditation recognised in Buddhism. The exercise based on the breathing was meditation for stillness (*samatha*); the one based on everyday activities was meditation for insight (*vipassanā*). Examining the eightfold path, I had little trouble locating these two styles of meditation within it. *Samatha* practice, meditation for stillness, clearly matched the eighth path stage, right concentration, and *vipassanā* practice was surely to be equated with the seventh stage, right mindfulness.

However, there was a problem. My teacher had taught me to understand that there existed a definite sequential relationship between the two meditation styles: stillness practice was preparation for insight practice. Insight was what would overcome delusion and thus ultimately bring liberation. Stillness practice was a means for making the mind ready to develop that liberating insight. This had made good sense at the time, but now it became problematic. If the progression was meant to be from stillness to insight, why did the eightfold path list right concentration (stillness) *after* right mindfulness (insight)?

The monks and other people I consulted on this question all agreed, first of all, that the order of progression was indeed from stillness to insight. This could be confirmed in the texts, including the Buddha's accounts of his own attainment. On the night of his awakening he had first stilled his mind through concentration and then gone on to attain a series of "knowledges" culminating in full liberating insight. The problem, I was told, lay in my understanding of the eightfold path, and on this point my informants held a variety of opinions. Most maintained that, despite what the term "path" might suggest, this was not a series of eight successive stages or steps. The eight items (literally "limbs" in Pali) were meant to be developed together, although at any given time a practitioner might be focussing on one of them in particular. The sequence of listing was not necessarily the sequence to be followed in practice. Some people surprised me by saying that the culmination of this "path" was actually the item that came first in the list: right view. Others explained this sequential anomaly by asserting that right view is of two kinds. Initially it is a preliminary understanding of the *Dhamma*, sufficient to motivate a potential aspirant – hence its location in the first place; but subsequently it is developed into the penetrating insight that will bring liberation – which in practice comes *after* concentration.

To me it seemed unlikely that a fully awakened being, as the Buddha was supposed to have been, would have formulated his path of practice so illogically and so unclearly. In time I discovered that I was not the

first person to have queried the sequence of the eightfold path. Even the recorded *suttas* contained examples of such questioning. One of them told of how a certain layman had asked a *bhikkhunī* (Buddhist nun) a question resembling mine – and received an answer that I found equally unsatisfactory.

Reading further, I found alternative accounts of the Buddhist pilgrim’s progress to awakening, accounts that seemed much more coherent. In addition to terse lists of stages resembling the eightfold path there were relatively detailed descriptions of a “stepwise training”. These included intelligible sketches of meditation techniques applied by actual people in a consistent and seemingly logical sequence. Especially welcome were first-person accounts by the Buddha of his own progress towards liberation. Confident that the problems posed by the eightfold path would eventually be resolved, I pressed on with my study and practice.

Although a coherent picture of the overall course of practice did seem to be gradually emerging, new questions kept arising, questions that my monk friends were often unable to answer to my satisfaction. By the ninth month of my stay I was confronting a different kind of question: should I go the whole way and become a monk myself? I decided that I would. After due preparation, I went through the traditional ordination ceremony and was admitted as a member of the *Saṅgha* (community of monks). Because I had already been living very much like the resident monks, the transition to monkhood came easily. The morning alms-round, participation in reciting Pali texts, and other monastic obligations were now added to my already established routine of meditation and study.

During my four years as a monk I delved into many aspects of the *Dhamma*. I was deeply impressed with the logic and coherence of the vast doctrinal edifice that is Buddhism, but at the same time I was repeatedly baffled by seeming inconsistencies, missing links, and instances of downright unintelligibility. Initially my main objective was to gain further clarity regarding the theory and practice of meditation. Study of the lengthy “Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness” (*Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*) suggested that what I knew as mindfulness practice was only one small aspect of mindfulness as it had been taught by the Buddha – unless, as suggested in some scholarly articles, much of the *sutta*’s content was actually extraneous material that had been added in the course of its centuries-long transmission.

Other pieces of doctrine presented more serious difficulties. One of these was the five “aggregates” (*khandha*), listed as “form” or the physical body, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. These

were said to be the basic components that could be recognised as making up the individual being or “person”, but what *were* they? Neither introspective contemplation nor textual study yielded satisfactory answers. The accuracy of the usual English renderings of the five Pali terms appeared to be very much in doubt, particularly in the case of the closely similar *saññā* (perception?) and *viññāṇa* (consciousness?). Modern attempts to explain the distinction between these two left me unconvinced.

I also struggled, as many others have done, to make sense of the doctrine of “conditioned arising” (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), best known in the twelve-membered formula that begins with “conditioned by ignorance are volitional formations; conditioned by volitional formations is consciousness” and concludes with “[t]hus is the arising of this entire great mass of suffering (*dukkha*)”. Often claimed to be the most profound aspect of the Buddha’s teachings, conditioned arising must surely also be the most baffling. One troublesome question was how the conditioned arising formula related to the five “aggregates”. Four of the aggregates – the body, feeling, formations, and consciousness – were named in the formula, but why in a different sequence? And why was perception, the one remaining aggregate, not specifically mentioned at all?

As my *Dhamma* investigation proceeded, the way I went about it gradually changed. My principal source soon became the *suttas*, the texts that purported to be records of discourses delivered by the Buddha himself or, occasionally, by his principal disciples. Working with these texts led me to wonder how reliable they were as records of what the Buddha had actually said 2,500 years ago. Occasionally a *sutta* would jump suddenly from one theme to another, suggesting that part of the text might have been lost in transmission. Also, frequent references to miraculous supernatural powers or to interventions by divine beings aroused the suspicion that the record might have been subsequently embellished by over-zealous devotees.

In order to get still closer to the tradition, I belatedly began studying Pali, memorising my favourite *suttas* and reciting them daily. This practice provided insight into how the *suttas* had been orally preserved and handed down during the three centuries or more between the Buddha’s death and the time they were first written down. The task of memorising lengthy *suttas* proved to be less difficult than I had expected. Nevertheless I did note with interest how easy it was to make errors while reciting them.

Four years and one month after taking ordination I left the *Saṅgha* and returned as a layman to my home town in Australia. For the next few years I worked as a high-school teacher, studied the Chinese language at

my old university, and continued my private research into the teachings of Buddhism.

Initially the study of Chinese was just a hobby, based on a long-standing fascination with the complex script. At some point, however, about four years into the process, I realised that this newly acquired language was opening an unexpected window on Buddhism – by giving me access to the vast corpus of Buddhist texts in Chinese. Roughly corresponding to the *sutta* collections in Pali, I discovered that there existed a counterpart set of texts in Chinese. Translated about a millennium after the time of the Buddha, the Chinese texts represented different though related schools of Buddhism, such as the Sarvāstivāda and the Dharmaguptaka, which had by then developed. Having by this time gained a university position as lecturer in both Asian languages and studies in religion, I was well placed to make good use of this new-found textual resource.

Previously my research into the Buddhist teachings had been based on the Pali *suttas* alone. Now it could be extended to include comparison of any given Pali *sutta* with its Chinese equivalent. Often the Chinese version of a *sutta* proved to differ, in some detail of sequence or wording, from the Pali, and in some cases the alternative Chinese reading threw helpful light on a problem of interpretation that I had been grappling with. At that time, as far as I could ascertain, this comparative approach was being employed by only a handful of researchers around the world, but to judge by their publications, it was proving to be a highly effective method.

Before long I was planning the project that has resulted in this book. In the beginning the objective was to resolve the various issues that had arisen in my studies of Buddhist doctrine. Later, as the work progressed, a more comprehensive and ambitious objective came into view, namely: to identify, for each significant aspect of the *Dhamma*, the earliest form that could be inferred by the comparative methods I was developing. That is, the newly defined task was to recover or reconstruct what some scholars were calling “early Buddhism”. At that time I thought this enterprise might take about ten years to complete. It has actually taken more than twenty, and even now it is not really finished. There are, no doubt, many more relevant articles and monographs that I could profitably have read, and there are certainly relevant Chinese texts that I have not even glanced at. But at some point I had to leave off gathering and interpreting data and concentrate instead on presenting the still incomplete results.

In planning this book I have heeded some lessons learnt from an earlier one: *The Twilight Language: Explorations in Buddhist Meditation and Symbolism* (1986), co-authored by myself and Martin Stuart-Fox. To

provide a basis for interpreting certain Buddhist technical terms, metaphors, and symbols, *The Twilight Language* laid emphasis on meditation techniques and resulting mental states. Such an approach is problematic for readers who have not practiced meditation, because it is difficult for them to evaluate what the author is saying. Except in the final chapter, this present book makes almost no reference to meditation experience or mental states. It is purely a textual study focussing on matters of doctrine; for only when textual discrepancies and contradictions have been sorted out can an attempt be made to interpret how doctrine relates to practice.

But a purely textual study poses problems too. Naturally, I wanted the book to meet the expectations of scholars in Buddhist studies; however, I also wanted it to be intelligible to non-specialists with an interest in Buddhism and a working knowledge of its basic teachings and meditation practices. Given this second target readership, and given also that the primary sources are in Chinese as well as Pali, I have preferred to use English terminology in the main discussion, while giving the Pali original (less often the Chinese as well) in parentheses when a term first occurs. The English translations I have used, as in the above references to the five aggregates, generally follow those used by Bhikkhu Bodhi in his recent translations of the Pali *nikāyas*. However, I adopt these for convenience only, as a kind of lingua franca, without thereby endorsing them as “correct” or well chosen.

In a similar vein, because most readers will be more familiar with the Pali texts than with their Chinese counterparts, I begin each topic with the Pali version, before turning to the Chinese. Again, this policy is adopted for convenience only; no judgement is implied regarding the relative value of different textual traditions, let alone languages. Indeed, one of the main findings of this study is that none of the various textual traditions can be deemed more reliable than the others as a record of the Buddha’s message.

A few sections of the book have appeared in published articles. The issues addressed interlock so closely, however, that one cannot do justice to any one of them in isolation. The extent to which Buddhist doctrines are interconnected is not immediately apparent, and the unsystematic way that the *Dhamma* is presented in the *Sutta-piṭaka* will become progressively more evident as the present discussion develops. Later chapters will reinforce conclusions reached only tentatively in earlier chapters. Some of the conclusions reached may appear radical at first, but I ask readers to reserve judgement until the entire picture has been presented.

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A list of the friends, colleagues, and organisations to whom I am indebted for assistance with this project would be a long one. The person who deserves to top that list, however, is Martin Stuart-Fox. Martin and I first met as classmates in zoology at university and soon became good friends. He was the son of an Anglican priest, and we spent many a lunchtime break discussing religion in the light of Darwin's theory of evolution. After graduating, we both worked as biologists in Papua New Guinea before going our separate ways, Martin to Hong Kong, Japan, and Indochina, I to Southeast Asia, India, and Europe. Our next meeting came years later in the north of Thailand. I was a newly ordained Buddhist monk, and he was at the start of an overland trip to Paris to get married. We kept in touch, and later spent six months in India together, researching Buddhist symbolism.

Somehow we both gravitated back to our *alma mater*, the University of Queensland, and before long we were collaborating in writing a book: *The Twilight Language*. When I told him, years later, of my plan to produce a book that would be entitled *Reconstructing Early Buddhism*, he was immediately interested. Over the next decade and more he read, with a critical eye, every draft chapter as I produced it, and finally edited the entire manuscript. I derived much help and encouragement from his expert feedback, and the resulting book might well not have seen the light of day without him. "Thank you, Martin."

I am also most grateful to Peter Harvey, Professor Emeritus of Buddhist Studies at the University of Sunderland and author of probably the most widely read *Introduction to Buddhism*, for the meticulous critique he provided of the manuscript of this book, even though disagreeing with several of my interpretations. His corrections and suggestions have greatly improved the finished work.

Among others to whom I am indebted, I would like to acknowledge the two people who most influenced my early study of Buddhism, both now deceased. The first is Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa, an influential Thai monk

whose many *Dhamma* talks and resulting booklets proved to be a constant source of inspiration. Translating some of these into English greatly contributed to my understanding of Buddhism. The second is Chao Chuen, a devout Buddhist layman and hardworking supporter of the monastery where I stayed for four years, who constantly encouraged me in my study and practice. I learned from his example much about the role Buddhism played in Thai society.

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To all of the above I am deeply grateful. Not all would agree with the conclusions I have reached. For these, I alone am responsible.

Abbreviations

Pali Texts

<i>AN</i>	<i>Anguttara-nikāya</i>	Numerical Discourses
<i>DN</i>	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>	Long Discourses
<i>MN</i>	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>	Middle-Length Discourses
<i>SN</i>	<i>Saṃyutta-nikāya</i>	Connected Discourses
<i>BGS</i>	<i>Book of the Gradual Sayings</i>	
<i>CDB</i>	<i>Connected Discourses of the Buddha</i>	
<i>Dhp</i>	<i>Dhammapada</i>	
<i>MLDB</i>	<i>The Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha</i> (translation of MN)	
<i>NDB</i>	<i>The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha</i> (translation of AN)	
<i>PED</i>	<i>Pali–English Dictionary</i>	
<i>PTS</i>	Pali Text Society	
<i>Sn</i>	<i>Sutta Nipāta</i>	
<i>Skt</i>	Sanskrit	
<i>Vibh</i>	<i>Vibhaṅga</i>	
<i>Vin</i>	<i>Vinaya</i>	
<i>Vism</i>	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>	

Chinese Texts

<i>DA</i>	<i>Dirghāgama</i> (長阿含經)	Long Discourses = T1–T25
<i>DAc</i>	Parallel <i>Dirghāgama</i> of the Dharmaguptaka school	
<i>EA</i>	<i>Ekottarikāgama</i> (增一阿含經)	Numerical Discourses = T125–T151
<i>MA</i>	<i>Madhyamāgama</i> (中阿含經)	Middle-Length Discourses = T26–T98

xviii

List of Abbreviations

- SA* *Samyuktāgama* (雜阿含經) Connected Discourses = T99–T124
BDK *Būkkhō Dendō Kyōkai*
T Taisho edition (1924). *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*. (Reprinted 1962). Tokyo: Taishō shinshū daizōkyō kankō kai

Sanskrit Texts

- DA*s Sanskrit text of the Sarvāstivāda *Dīrghāgama*