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**17. Religious Experience in Early Buddhism?**

by

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## Religious Experience in Early Buddhism?<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I propose to examine on the one hand the related and I think overlapping concepts of religious experience and of mystical experience, and on the other hand the religious and/or mystical experiences of the Buddha and his immediate followers, in so far as these are accessible to us through the early Pali texts; and I hope that the two sides of my examination may shed some light on each other.

### 1.

When we attempt to study religious experience, the founder and patron saint of our studies must surely be William James, and I make no apology for taking his great book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*<sup>2</sup>, as the basis of my exposition of that topic. When I began thinking what to say about religious experience in general, before applying it to the Buddha, I had a few ideas which seemed to be worth communicating. But then, when I picked up that book, I found most of my ideas in it. I had forgotten they were there; but I can safely assume that it was reading that book, getting on for forty years ago, which implanted them in my mind. That is what characterises the true classic: its influence is even greater than we are usually aware, for its treatment of its subject has entered our very way of thinking.

On this occasion I have been particularly struck by how well James agrees with the Buddha, as I understand him – even though James, writing a century ago, was naturally not very well informed about Buddhism.<sup>3</sup>

The first similarity that strikes me between the views of William James and the Buddha is set out in a letter that James wrote about his aim in writing the book: “The problem I have set myself is a hard one: first, to defend ... ‘experience’ against philosophy as being the real backbone of the world’s religious life ...” (p. xix)<sup>4</sup> With this we may compare, for example, the Buddha’s answer to the monk Mālunkya-putta, who wanted him to solve such metaphysical problems as whether the world was eternal. The Buddha replied that anyone who refused to lead the religious life till those questions were answered would be like a man wounded by an arrow who refused to have it removed till he knew the name and caste of the man who had shot it; his teaching was merely the practical way to release from misery (MN sutta 63). Most of the long sermon which tradition places first in the canonical compilation of the Buddha’s sermons, the Brahma-jāla Sutta (DN sutta i), is in effect an expansion of the same position.<sup>5</sup>

A second important similarity between William James and the Buddha lies in the emphasis on results as the criterion by which to judge experiences. “By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots,” says James (p. 20), and calls this an “empiricist criterion”. Regardless of their neurological origin<sup>6</sup>, says James, for the value of “religious opinions” “immediate luminousness, ... philosophical reasonableness, and moral helpfulness are the only available criteria” (p. 18). In his famous sermon to the

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the lecture of the same title which I delivered on 11 September 1997 at Harris-Manchester College, Oxford, to the annual conference of the British Association for the Study of Religion. The theme of the conference was “Religious Experience”. I have made changes and additions to the text. Many of the changes result from questions and objections put to me after the lecture, and I am grateful to those who reacted in this way. Other changes derive from things I learnt in the rest of the conference. I have taken the opportunity of revision to remove some stylistic features appropriate only to oral presentation.

<sup>2</sup> I am using the Penguin Classics edition, London etc. 1985

<sup>3</sup> He refers to it only four times in the book, and the longest of those references (on p. 401) contains some inaccuracies.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Martin E. Marty in his “Introduction” to the Penguin edition. In my quotations from James, all emphases are in the original.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the Buddha’s refusal to philosophise and his pragmatism (see next paragraph), see my *How Buddhism Began* (London 1996), pp. 27–31.

<sup>6</sup> In the conference session preceding my lecture, Michael Argyle informed us that religious experiences appeared to originate in the brain’s left hemisphere.

Kālāmas (AN I, 188–193) the Buddha urges them to test whatever they are told on the touchstone of their own experience. I would prefer to call this pragmatic rather than empiricist, but that is not important. What is important is the congruence between this view of religion and the general epistemological stance with which I agree. James himself says: “Scientific theories are organically conditioned just as much as religious emotions are” (p. 14); that is a slight exaggeration, but the main point is valid: Karl Popper has argued – I would say demonstrated – that the origin of any hypothesis can tell us nothing about its validity; that can only be determined by testing it against observable reality. The Buddha was not so directly concerned with epistemology in the abstract, but in effect said the same: that the only test of a religious teaching that counts is whether it works.

James devotes his second lecture to what he calls “Circumscription of the Topic”: what are to count as “religious experiences”? Here again, I venture to suggest a similarity between James, the Buddha, and Karl Popper. James writes: “It would indeed be foolish to set up an abstract definition of religion’s essence, and then proceed to defend that definition against all comers, yet this need not prevent me from taking my own narrow view of what religion shall consist in for the purpose of these lectures ... and proclaiming arbitrarily that when I say ‘religion’ I mean that.” Of course I can supply no similar quotation from the Buddha, but his insistence that his precise words were of no importance, it was the general meaning that counted, and that his teaching could be translated into any language (unlike the sacred brahminical Sanskrit texts), carries the same message. Karl Popper likewise has shown the fatuity of seeking for definitions: that words are tools and do not themselves convey (or conceal) truths.

I have always emphatically espoused this position myself<sup>7</sup>. I have likewise always taken what is often called an emic rather than an etic position, preferring to let informants speak for themselves. But if we are to provide analysis as well as description, we cannot in the end avoid, after doing our best to report the concepts and categories of our informants, applying to them our own concepts and categories; in no other way is discussion among us possible, let alone meaningful comparison of our data.

If there is no general agreement among us what is meant by the term “religious experience”, that does not mean that we have to abandon it; I even hope to show that considering the problem may have heuristic value, or at least clarify our thoughts. For it is obvious that while we disagree about what religious experience is, there are an infinite number of things we can agree to be not religion, not experiences, and not religious experiences. We can also agree that the conversion of St. Paul on the road to Damascus was a religious experience, and that William James collected many other valid examples. So our disagreement amounts to no more than saying that there is a large grey area and there are all sorts of contentious and borderline cases. And investigating those might turn out to be interesting.

As academics, we are trained to be sensitive to such problems. However, at the very beginning of our conference I became aware, as soon as Michael Argyle stood up to speak, that for many people in Britain the meaning of the term “religious experience” does not seem to be all that problematic. His extremely informative presentation followed the lines of his paper “The Psychological Perspective on Religious Experience”, published by the Religious Experience Research Centre here in Oxford.<sup>8</sup> Neither he nor the Centre seems to find definition a problem, for they deal with social surveys in which people are asked about their religious experiences, and the informants themselves seem (on the data provided) to have no trouble in understanding what is meant. Evidently the title of James’ third lecture, “The Reality of the Unseen”, plays a central role in their understanding.

The American researcher W. T. Stace, after inspecting a wide range of data from around the world (in the spirit of James), constructed a table of eight “Features of Religious Experience” which he had deduced to be valid across cultures; it appears as

<sup>7</sup> See especially How Buddhism Began, pp. 1–2.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Series Occasional Paper 8, Oxford 1997.



Table 2 in Argyle's booklet.<sup>9</sup> Two things strike me about the table. Firstly, that to my understanding it might more aptly have been headed "mystical" rather than "religious" experiences. Secondly, that most of the features listed may characterise experiences which the subject may not consider religious. For example, I have myself experienced the loss of sense of self, but it never occurred to me to think of it as religious. On ineffability I shall (I hope not paradoxically) have a great deal to say. But let me now return to James, for whom many religious experiences – indeed, the majority of those with which he deals – are not mystical.

## 2.

James draws a distinction between two types of religion: "At the outset we are struck by one great partition which divides the religious field. On the one side lies institutional, on the other personal religion." (p. 28) As one might expect of a man whose personal and cultural background was Protestant, the latter is not merely the focus of James' interests, but for him is primary in every sense: institutionalised religion could not exist without it. "Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, as far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine." (p. 31) James thinks that without the private experience there would be no religion. Religion as it is studied by social scientists is in the public sphere, a patterned, systematised phenomenon. It may be practised or believed by anyone, whether they have themselves had a religious experience or not.

James' narrow definition of religion leads him into an apparent circularity. He argues (p. 27) that "religious sentiment" is "a collective name for the many sentiments which religious objects may arouse," so that "it probably contains nothing whatever of a psychologically specific nature. There is religious fear, religious love, religious awe, religious joy, and so forth. But religious love is only man's natural emotion of love directed to a religious object," while religious awe "comes over us at the thought of our supernatural relations."

James is clearly aware that it is unsatisfactory to define religious feelings as feelings directed towards what is religious. The subject of the feelings, he is saying, is having a religious experience if the object of his experience is religious. The circularity might be avoided by saying that religious objects were so by virtue of their having become "religious" in what for James is the secondary sense: if they had become associated with institutionalised, public religion. That would help with the logical difficulty. But it would leave one with far too broad a definition. "I hate going to church," for example, would become an expression of religious sentiment.

James, as we have seen, tries to find another way out of his difficulty, by drawing into his definition "whatever they may consider divine". He has to do some special pleading here. "There are systems of thought which the world usually calls religious, and yet which do not positively assume a God. Buddhism is in this case ... Modern transcendental idealism, Emersonianism, for instance, also seems to let God evaporate into abstract Ideality. Not a deity in concreto, not a superhuman person, but the immanent divinity in things, the essentially spiritual structure of the universe, is the object of the transcendentalist cult." (pp. 31–2) This recalls another form of Indian religion, the monism of the classical Upaniṣads.

For James, therefore, an experience is religious if its referent so defines it. He goes on, however, to consider once again the character of the subjective experience. "Religion, whatever it is, is a man's total reaction upon life." (p. 35) But not every "total reaction upon life" can be called religious. "There are trifling, sneering attitudes even towards the whole of life; and in some men these attitudes are final and systematic" (pp. 35–6). "There must be something solemn, serious, and tender about

<sup>9</sup> 1. Unifying vision, all things are one, part of a whole; 2. timeless and spaceless; 3. sense of reality, not subjective but a valid source of knowledge; 4. blessedness, joy, peace and happiness; 5. feeling of the holy, sacred, divine; 6. paradoxical, defies logic; 7. ineffable, can't be described in words; 8. loss of sense of self.

any attitude which we denominate religious. If glad, it must not grin or snicker; if sad, it must not scream or curse. It is precisely as being solemn experiences that I wish to interest you in religious experiences" (p. 38). He goes on to make a further point: that religious experience gives an "added dimension of emotion" (p. 48). "Religious feeling is ... an absolute addition to the Subject's range of life. It gives him a new sphere of power" (ibid.). As a generalisation this may be rather too highly coloured. But James is surely right to say that we call an experience religious only if it seems to us to be significant. In fact I would go a step further and say that we find such an experience transformative, that we feel ourselves to be a different person after having it, even if that feeling may rapidly wear off. Again, however, I am not saying that we interpret all transformative experiences as religious – very far from it. Life and literature are full of experiences which have transformed people's lives for better or for worse, filling them with loving bliss or the desire for revenge.

It is sometimes said that religious experiences are discontinuous from previous experience: that they are felt to arrive suddenly, "out of the blue", and not as the result of normal recognised causal processes. No doubt this is generally true of religious experiences in the sense used by Stace and Argyle. But we shall see that to consider as "religious" only experiences which arrive in this manner does not do justice to the data.

### 3.

I thus feel happier with James' circumscription of his topic when he focuses on the quality of a religious experience than when he is trying to define its referent or contents. Indeed, it comes naturally to me, as a student of Indian religions, to wonder whether in discussing religious experience it is necessary to consider the referents of the experience – whether one needs to consider both subject and object. Of course, most thoughts have an external referent, and to communicate at all (which as humans we normally do through language) we need to refer to the public sphere, to those experiences which we can assume that we share with others. But what James may possibly have missed is that the very privacy of the experience he is out to explore as the quintessence of religion will make it extremely hard to communicate.

In this, religious experience is like all private experience. Communication about it is a hit and miss affair and depends for its success largely on whether the communicator can appeal to shared experience in the audience. Philosophers have for centuries toyed with the problem that we cannot communicate to a man blind from birth what it is to experience light. Communication about our experience of the external world is imperfect, but can better rely on shared experience of a common referent than can communication about our internal states. By "internal states" I mean both physical and mental states. If I try to communicate to my doctor the feeling of pain in my leg, words are unlikely to convey it; but the doctor does not need to know just what I feel like. With him, communication is purely pragmatic: it is enough if he can find out what, for instance, makes the pain worse, so that he can then work out what to do about it.

If I describe an emotion, I can only do so by appealing to common experience. I can try to tell my sweetheart what my love for her is like, but if she has never experienced a similar sentiment I shall fail. In fact, I am likely to experience much anxiety about whether her sentiments do match my own. In a culture which is less romantically inclined than ours, this may matter little; there the aim of my communication to her may be primarily pragmatic: if I can convince her and her parents of the strength and durability of my feelings I may secure the desired result. But whether she – or anyone else – has ever experienced just what I experience in my love, I shall never know. However, that is not peculiar to an emotion like love: to a greater or lesser extent it must be true of all experience. I shall never know whether you experience red exactly as I do; I shall only know it well enough for pragmatic purposes. When you drive through a red light I can deduce that you may be red-green colour-blind.

The less we can rely on common experience in our attempt to communicate, the more important becomes our skill as communicators. Any normal person can give a fairly adequate account of the external world. For experiences with internal referents,

however, we need poets, painters, musicians. It is perhaps above all the musicians who can convey, at least to other people who are both musical and familiar with the conventions of the musical idiom used in the musicians' culture, the experiences which words cannot reach.

For James, however, the experiences which words cannot reach are a special sub-category of religious experience: mystical experience. I must admit that I do not find it easy to grasp exactly what he means by a mystical experience, but it seems that for him it differs from other religious experience in having no external referent: the mystic is looking inwards. The person who has a religious experience by feeling an unseen presence is not, I think, having an experience with a public referent – but he is different from the mystic – for James – in feeling the referent of his experience to be outside himself.

James says (pp. 380–1) that mystical states have four main characteristics: ineffability; noetic quality; transiency; passivity. The latter two are however “less sharply marked”, though “usually found”, and I propose to ignore them.

This is what James write about ineffability.

“The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists. One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one's self to understand a lover's state of mind. Lacking the heart or ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the lover justly, and are even likely to consider him weak-minded or absurd. The mystic finds that most of us accord to his experiences an equally incompetent treatment.”

Though mystical experiences, on this account, are feelings rather than thoughts (“states of intellect”), James goes on to write of their “noetic quality”; by this he means that “mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect” (p. 380), “and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time” (p. 381). Though they are felt to be states of knowledge, it follows from their ineffability that what is known cannot be articulated in words. I shall suggest that on this last point the Buddha might have disagreed with James.

I think that James' stress on the personal, psychological character of religious experience has led him into a confusion. All experiences, in so far as they are private, are ineffable. But when we try to talk about them – in other words interpret them to ourselves and others – we use language, which is irreducibly social. So the experience enters the public sphere at one remove. Defining an experience as religious is already a social act because it uses the word “religious”, the meaning of which is socially constructed. Similarly, a mystical experience is (to follow James as closely as possible) distinctive not in being ineffable but in being talked of (almost paradoxically) as ineffable. Why this should be I have already suggested.

I must emphasise that I am not reducing religious or mystical experience to a language game, nor am I content to accept that you have had a religious experience just because you use those words to me, perhaps in jest or to mislead me. I do think that there must be at least some kind of generic resemblance among the experiences to which these expressions refer. So our examination of James, despite the confusion between an experience and its interpretation has not, I believe, been a waste of time.

#### 4.

According both to William James and to the general western understanding of the matter, the Buddha's Enlightenment was a mystical experience. But that is not at all

how Buddhists see it. When I began to study Theravada Buddhism, both from books and in the field, I found to my surprise that there is nothing in that tradition or culture corresponding to James' idea of the mystical. Neither Pali nor Sinhala contains any word for "mystical" or "mysticism" or for anything remotely like it. Indeed, when I interviewed a famous Theravadin monk in Sinhala and he wanted to speak of mysticism, he had recourse to the English word.

What the Buddha achieved is expressed in various ways. He saw the truth; he destroyed passion, hatred and delusion; he saw things as they really are. This last expression, which occurs often in the Pali canon and tradition, is particularly significant: the Buddha saw reality – and described it. He saw the dhamma, a word which refers both to his teaching and to the content of that teaching; it is the truth, which can be and was expounded in a list of truths (dhammā in the plural), true propositions which can be found in the texts. What makes his experience of importance to us is the truth that he discovered and taught; had it been ineffable, he could not have done that.

What is, of course, ineffable is the emotional quality of the experience that the Buddha enjoyed at his Enlightenment (and was indeed held to enjoy for the rest of his life). This is described negatively as the absence of passion (sometimes they say greed), hatred and delusion. This experience is more difficult to describe than other experiences because it is not an experience that most people have ever had. Indeed, at the time when the Buddha had it there was no one else in the world who had, which is why he at first despaired of being able to explain himself to anyone and was disinclined to preach. Luckily he was persuaded, according to the story, to change his mind, so that in due course, as a result of following his preaching, other people had the experience too.

The experience at which Buddhists aim is called either bodhi (which is usually translated "enlightenment" but literally means "awakening"), which stresses its cognitive aspect, or nirvana. Nirvana is a metaphor. Its precise reference was forgotten after a while in the Buddhist tradition, but not for reasons connected with ineffability. Nirvana means blowing out. The Buddha preached that we are all on fire with three fires, the fires of passion, hatred and delusion, and that our salvation consists in extinguishing those fires. The three fires are an allusion to the three fires which it was the duty of the brahmin householder to maintain and in which he was obliged to sacrifice daily. When Buddhism expanded beyond its original milieu in north India, where evidently brahmins formed an important part of the Buddha's audience, the structure of this metaphor was forgotten.

Extinguishing the fire of illusion is exactly the same thing for Buddhists as "seeing things as they are" – a common phrase in the early scriptures. This means clarity of vision, bringing everything into focus, knowing and being able to articulate everything that really needs to be known.

While this runs counter to the "ineffability" of mysticism as James conceives it, it does take us back to his remark that religion is a "total reaction upon life". This "total reaction" does not mean dealing with everything in any detail; on the contrary, it means putting most things aside as unimportant. It deals with life by telling us what is important and what to think or feel about that.

What did the Buddha consider important? We cannot know as a certain historical fact what he said as soon as he had attained Enlightenment, or what he put in his first sermon; but the tradition is in no doubt about the contents of the first sermon. He began by commending a style of life which he called the middle way, a way between self-indulgence and mortification of the flesh; he commended it because it enabled one to see the truth. The truth was expressed as fourfold. The first truth is just the single word dukkha. This word has most often been translated into English as suffering. The other three truths are the arising of suffering, the extinction of suffering, and the path leading to the extinction of suffering. Obviously these are not themselves truths, as they are not statements: the terms are shorthand, mnemonics.

It has been reasonably objected by the modern west, and we may indeed deduce that the objection was an ancient one, that life is not all suffering. Luckily we see that living beings are also sometimes happy and comfortable. The translation "suffering" gave Buddhism an undeserved reputation in the West for pessimism. I therefore prefer

the translation "dissatisfaction", which I myself owe to Andrew Skilton and Kate Crosby (though it may have been used many times before them). We end up being dissatisfied even with the best of comforts, says Buddhism, because they are transient and repeatedly end in death. Only when we no longer have death looming ahead of us can we be truly satisfied.

The Buddha had a transformative experience, his Enlightenment, which enabled him to tell us what the true quality of all our other experience is like. He could realise this because he (at first uniquely) realised its opposite: he could grasp the nature of normal human experience because he had something with which to contrast it. This did not render him inarticulate; quite the opposite. On the other hand, it gave him certainty that he had found out what was most important in life and how to deal with it.

In his interpretation of his experience and insights, the Buddha was deeply influenced by brahminical religious texts, notably the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. The early Upaniṣads argue that salvation (freedom from rebirth and from the suffering that that entails) is to be achieved by realisation that the essence of every individual living being and the essence of the universe are ultimately the same (though there are various interpretations of just what that means). What they have in common is that they are existence, consciousness and bliss – and nothing else. Existence is a plenum and so lacks nothing. Since suffering is always the lack of something, this plenum cannot lack and so cannot suffer. So man in his true nature is a part or aspect or apparent aspect of what cannot include suffering. The salvific experience, moreover, merges subject and object into a blissful unity.

While the Buddha rejected some central features of Upaniṣadic metaphysics, there is obviously a close analogy between his experience of nirvana, the end of suffering, and the Upaniṣadic account of salvation. However, he seems to have interpreted his experience differently. On this more below.

I have argued in my recent book, *How Buddhism Began* (and in this I follow Dr. Sue Hamilton)<sup>10</sup> that the Buddha's argument with the details of Upaniṣadic metaphysics is of secondary importance; that what really matters is his insistence that experience is the primary concern. In my book I have called this "How, not What", and I shall not here repeat what I have published there. I have already mentioned the Buddha's sermon to the *Kālāmas*, in which he tells them not to accept any doctrine on authority alone; they are to test what religious teachers say on the touchstone of their own experience. This will, of course, show them that the Buddha is preaching the truth; but that is not the main point: the point is that to follow his advice will lead to nirvana, salvation. The truth of his teaching is to be experienced.

This emphasis on experience is just what William James called "the real backbone of the world's religious life" (*vide supra*). For it does not apply to the final goal of religion alone, but to the entire religious life which the Buddha prescribes. This has been beautifully captured in a modern ethnographic work about Buddhist monks. In the final, climactic chapter of *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka*<sup>11</sup>, Michael Carrithers, meditating on the life of one of his informants, writes,

"The hallmark of the daily schedule, as of insight, is the principle of psychological pragmatism, of practicality. In giving oneself up to strict observance of the daily round, one effectively gives up both remorse and anxiety ... [T]he monk's way of life is more than merely a means to an end: it is very nearly the end in itself. And indeed one never gets the idea from the canon and commentaries that a monk who attains release might then hang up his robes and do something else: the goal is wholly within the ambit of the monk's life." (pp. 280–1)

<sup>10</sup> See note 5 above. Dr. Hamilton's thesis has been published (in revised form) as *Identity and Experience in Early Buddhism*, London 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Delhi 1983. The entire passage can be seen as an ideal complement to supplement my more analytical exposition.

I used myself to translate *dukkha*, the first noble truth, as “unsatisfactoriness”, because this word, while clumsy, seemed to convey as well as any single word can in English what the Buddha was saying about life in general. If I now prefer “dissatisfaction”, it is because of its subjective flavour. The Buddha’s entire teaching is not about changing the world but about changing our experience of it. Indeed, it is not even clear whether he thought in the final analysis that there was a world as we would say “objectively”, outside our experience<sup>12</sup>, though the Theravādin systematisation of his teaching, the *abhidhamma*, certainly did think so. However, it would both negate my message and defeat my purpose to pursue this ontological problem.

## 5.

The Buddha’s message, then, is about how we should train and develop ourselves so as to lead less dissatisfied lives.<sup>13</sup> Spiritual progress, in the Buddhist formulation, has three components: morality, concentration, understanding (*sīla*, *saṃādhi*, *paññā*). Each is a pre-requisite for the next, though none is perfectible alone. The normal western expectation, I suppose, would be to look for religious experience primarily under the rubric of concentration. But I want to argue that for the Buddha all three have an equal title to be called religious experience. And I want to argue further that this is not idiosyncratic but a helpful way of looking at the whole topic.

The Buddha had an experience which concerned the very nature of experience: one could even call it a meta-experience. He saw that normal experience is vitiated by the transience of all worldly phenomena, a transience which renders them unsatisfying in the last resort. Our experience of their transience can only successfully be handled, he argued, by coming to terms with it: we should not want permanence, for ourselves or our loved ones, because we are not going to get it. We need of course to understand this fundamental fact if we are going to stop our vain desires. So we have both to control our emotions and to train our intellect. In other words, we have to adapt our entire mentality to reality, the reality of what life is like, including the fact that we all must die.

Morality, concentration and understanding correspond rather well to James’ three criteria for judging religious opinions: immediate luminousness, philosophical reasonableness and moral helpfulness. Moral helpfulness corresponds to *sīla* and reasonableness to *paññā*, or at least to the content of that understanding. The experiential component in that set of criteria is the luminousness; this aptly describes the quality of the prized experience of salvific understanding. It is meditation which Buddhism prescribes as the training for that experience. Is it possible briefly to say anything useful about the kind of meditation prescribed?

I think it is, even though meditation is so clearly an area of private experience where words are likely to prove inadequate. What I wish to do, however, is to take a brief, even if a necessarily superficial, look at what kinds of mental training and activity the early texts seem to be referring to.

The most general word for meditation is *bhāvanā*, which means “development”; this is a training of the mind. At a very early stage, before the canonical collection of texts was closed, this had been systematised into two sections, in some contexts called concentration and understanding, in others calming (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*). “Calming” is supposed to discipline the emotions, “insight” to sharpen the understanding until one sees the world as the Buddha saw it. In this doctrinal system,

<sup>12</sup> At the conference Dr. Hamilton gave a fascinating paper on this topic which seems to me to advance our understanding considerably; but I must of course leave it to her to present the results of her research.

<sup>13</sup> The first generations of Buddhists believed that with the inspiration of the Buddha before them they could attain nirvana. In Theravādin societies it came to be believed, a few centuries after the Buddha, that this was no longer possible, and that to attain nirvana one would have to await the arrival on earth of the next Buddha, Metteyya. In modern times this belief has again been superseded among educated people. No matter: all Buddhists believe that, even if perfection is out of reach, spiritual progress is possible during one’s lifetime if one follows the Buddha’s advice.

“calming” is in the last resort a training for “insight”; in the canon it is probably considered to be indispensable, but later a minority tradition appears to have argued that for some people salvific insight might be achieved without that kind of meditation.<sup>14</sup>

The pair “calming” and “insight” seems to be a formulation which to some extent took over from another pair: “awareness” (*sati*) and concentration (*saṃādhi*). The latter two are the seventh and eighth components of the noble eightfold path which tradition considers the Buddha to have enunciated in his first sermon; they thus look like the culmination of that path, whatever later tradition may say about it. Similarly, the full description of how one reaches Enlightenment found in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, “The Text on the Fruits of Renunciation” (DN sutta ii), has the renunciate first training himself in awareness at every moment before it has him sit down to practise what we would regard as meditation proper.

The systematised tradition aligns, and even identifies, awareness with insight, but that falsifies the early texts. The other most famous canonical text on meditation in the Canon, besides the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, is the *Mahā Sati-paṭṭhāna Sutta* (DN sutta xxii), “The Text on Establishing Awareness”. Here awareness is to be directed to four kinds of things: bodies (one’s own and other people’s), feelings (as of pleasure and pain), states of mind, and finally to seeing the world in Buddhist terms as fleeting, unsatisfactory and devoid of essence. It is only this last of the four kinds of awareness that corresponds to the insight of the developed system.

As soon as we thus venture to deconstruct the systematised and homogenised account of the commentaries, we find it riddled with inconsistencies. And I make so bold as to say that this goes even for systematised accounts within the canon. The kind of awareness with which the renunciate begins to train his mind in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* is simply awareness of his own body. It is only after practising meditation in the narrow sense and achieving the four levels of concentration known as *jhāna* that the renunciate becomes fully aware of all his and other people’s mental states. This achievement, in fact, immediately precedes the “three knowledges” which constitute the culminating salvific experience.<sup>15</sup> In the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* the term “awareness” applies only to the awareness of one’s body; the awareness of mental states is referred to as recognising them for what they are.

Close scrutiny of the four *jhāna*, the four levels of concentration, reveals something I find even more puzzling and discordant with the systematised account. According to that account, all achievement in calming or in concentration – whichever term you choose to use – is measured by these *jhāna*, and they are interpreted as a straightforward progression, the first being the lowest and the fourth the highest state. (It is irrelevant here that the scholastic tradition sometimes splits up the first into two, giving five *jhāna* in all.) The *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* gives the classic description of the *jhāna*; and so far as I know there is no account of them that lacks the feature I am about to discuss.

One can achieve the first *jhāna* only after ridding oneself of all sensual desires and other immoral states of mind. One then calms one’s body and concentrates one’s mind so that one feels delight, but one is still thinking, in the normal sense of the term. In the second *jhāna* one intensifies the concentration to such an extent that what is translated “discursive thought” disappears altogether and the mind is said to be “one-pointed” (*cetaso ekodi-bhāva*). Everyone who discusses this assumes, and I suppose rightly, that this condition is what is referred to in the brahminical yoga system as “cessation of the operation of thought” (*citta-vṛtti-nirodha*).<sup>16</sup> Certainly I would argue that if the mind is “one-pointed” there is no thought, for a thought consists in making a connection.

The description of the third *jhāna*, which can be attained only on the basis of having attained the second, strikes a different note. On the emotional level, the

<sup>14</sup> See *How Buddhism Began* chapter IV, especially pp. 123–7.

<sup>15</sup> This text says nothing about applying the awareness of one’s own physical states to other people, and I suspect that this move in the *Satipatthāna* account was prompted by doctrinal considerations rather than the fruit of meditative experience.

<sup>16</sup> This is how yoga is defined at *Yoga-sūtra* 1,1.



meditator moves from delight to equanimity. One-pointedness of mind is no longer mentioned; instead he is said to be "aware and cognisant" (sato sampajāno). In the fourth jhāna equanimity and awareness are simply carried to their highest pitch, metaphorically described as "purity" (upekkhā-sati-pārisuddhi).

I know that this is controversial, but it seems to me that the third and fourth jhānas are thus quite unlike the second. I suppose that one can be "aware and cognisant" without being aware of anything in particular: the terms "aware and cognisant" could perhaps be describing a state of receptivity, of potential rather than actual thought. But I find this an unsatisfying argument. One has to ask whether a real meditator would or would not notice a flashing light or a loud noise in his vicinity. The natural explanation of the text, in my view, is that in the third and fourth jhāna he would, but in the second he would not. If that is correct, this description of the jhāna describes (and prescribes) two quite different cognitive states, and the later tradition has falsified the jhāna by classifying them as the quintessence of the concentrated, calming kind of meditation, ignoring the other – and indeed higher – element.

6.

We need, I think, to take a fresh look at the kinds of mental training that the Buddha prescribes, using our own vocabulary rather than that of the commentator Buddhaghosa. Here I can do so only very summarily: since I myself have no experience of meditation, I broach this topic with extreme diffidence.

First: it seems to me that on the whole the Buddha is not talking about what we nowadays call altered states of consciousness. These do however come up at two points. Firstly, the states known as the "formless jhāna", which are sometimes classified as coming after and above the four jhāna already mentioned, are surely such altered states: they are the plane of the infinity of space, the plane of the infinity of consciousness, the plane of the infinity of nothingness, the plane of neither apperception nor its absence. According to tradition the Buddha had been taught to attain these states by his teachers, but found them insufficient, and added to the eight jhāna a ninth state, the extinction of apperception and feeling. These are states of what Eliade called *enstasis*. Unlike the four jhāna, the higher *enstatic* states do not constitute an essential part of the path to enlightenment.

Altered states of consciousness also crop up in descriptions of the supernormal powers (*iddhi*) that are available to someone who has achieved the four jhāna, powers such as flying and *clairaudience*. These are described by comparative religionists as *shamanic*; they are *ecstatic* as against *enstatic*. The Buddha accepts these experiences as facts but says that they are of no spiritual value.

What is it then that the Buddha recommends that we do with our minds? What are we to experience? In the first place, one cannot repeat too often that he states morality, and in particular self-restraint, to be pre-requisite for spiritual progress.

To consider what comes next, we must recall the cultural context of early Buddhism. There was no writing, so no reading. Educational institutions in any modern sense did not exist. What did education consist of? Most men were trained to follow in their fathers' footsteps. A few brahmins learnt sacred texts by heart, and a tiny number of those even learnt to discuss their contents, but these were quite exceptional in society at large. I think it is easy for us to forget that schooling does not just teach us specific facts or skills; it teaches us while we are still children to be sensitive to people and things around us and to be able to concentrate on a task or a problem. In the Buddha's social environment there were of course skilled craftsmen, trained to concentrate on their work; and it is notable how they appear in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* in similes for the meditator as he acquires control over his mind. But even such people were in a small minority in the population. And the Buddha aimed his message at people of all classes and both genders, even if we do find a disproportionate number of brahmins among his disciples.

I suggest, therefore, that we today tend to over-interpret what was meant at one level by awareness and concentration. This over-interpretation began, no doubt, with the professional monks who systematised the Buddha's teachings. I am not denying



that in order to achieve Enlightenment, awareness and concentration have to be cultivated to a very high pitch. But what the Buddha was prescribing as mental training must initially have been what we more or less take for granted in an educated person, unless he be mentally unbalanced.

Another mental faculty which the Buddha encouraged people to cultivate was the imagination. Use of the imagination is prescribed in various meditation exercises. For example, the monk is encouraged to visualise his body as composed of thirty-two listed components, all described in unattractive terms. For the somewhat similar exercise of observing the disintegration of a corpse, monks are encouraged to visit actual charnel grounds; but they are also encouraged to apply to their own bodies what can be observed on such a visit, to imagine how their own corpses will rot away. A different use of the imagination comes into play with the standard meditative technique known as the *kaṣiṇa*. In this technique one concentrates on a visual phenomenon, such as a coloured clay disc, until one can see it without actually looking at it. This is not an after-image but an eidetic memory. One then extends this image by stages until it covers the whole world – *kaṣiṇa* means “whole”.

Two other instances of the use of the imagination are worthy of attention. The *Mahāsamaya Sutta* (DN xx) begins by recounting how while the Buddha is staying in a forest with attendant monks, a vast number of gods arrive to see him. He tells the monks what is going on and says he will teach them the gods’ names. “Then the Teacher spoke to his disciples, who delighted in his teaching: ‘Troops of gods have arrived; be aware of them, O monks.’ On hearing the Buddha’s teaching they exerted themselves, and there appeared to them a true vision of non-humans (literally: “knowledge, sight of non-humans”). Some saw a hundred, some a thousand ... some an infinity, filling space in all directions.” (DN II, 256, 2–7) Centuries later, with the rise of tantra, such visions of gods were systematically prescribed and accorded religious value. In the Pali canon I find no indication that this particular ability is to be cultivated, but it looks as if, like the shamanic powers of the meditative adept, some degree of it was taken for granted.

Visualising gods may not have been considered a valuable accomplishment, and indeed in his terms the Buddha might not have classified it as a “religious experience”. It would be more difficult to exclude from that category the ability to visualise the Buddha himself. The Buddha seems to have discouraged such a personality cult, as when he said, “He who sees the Dhamma sees me.” (SN III, 120) However, the old monk Pīṇiya complains of failing eyesight (Snip 1120), but says of the Buddha: “I cannot stay away from him even for a moment .... I see him with my mind as if with my eye, being vigilant day and night ... I pass the night revering him. For that very reason I think that I am not staying away from him ... In whatever direction the one of great wisdom goes, in that very direction I bow down ... I constantly go on a mental journey, for my mind is joined to him” (Snip 1140–43 tr Norman slightly adapted). Here we find visualisation combined with the most familiar of religious sentiments, devotion.

Though devotion is not an emotion that the Buddha asked his followers to cultivate, no survey of the kinds of experience gathered under the rubric of meditation in early Buddhism would be complete without mention of the four ways of living with Brahman, also known as the “boundless” (*appamāṇa*) states. The meditator is told gradually to suffuse the entire world with kindness, with compassion, with empathetic joy, and with equanimity. I have argued in *How Buddhism Began* that originally this form of meditation was taught by the Buddha to be salvific. The tradition accords it great spiritual value but denies that it can by itself produce Enlightenment.

This leads me to the last use of the mind I wish to mention: reasoning. The reason why the four boundless states were somewhat demoted (if you accept my view), or could never alone lead to Enlightenment (to accept orthodoxy), is that they omit the use of the intellect to understand what the Buddha preached and so “see things as they are”. I think it needs no lengthy argument to state that the Buddha’s teaching was an intellectual tour de force and that Buddhism in all its forms admires the use of the intellect. Monks and nuns, as well as the more educated laity, have been taught to apply

their intelligence so as to change their experiences, just as cognitive therapy – which seems to owe a lot to Buddhism – does today.

7.

My list of ways in which early Buddhism recommends the harnessing of the emotions, the imagination and the intellect to religious experience is surely not exhaustive. However, rather than pursue this topic further I feel it will be more productive to turn to another part of the Pali canon. What I have dealt with so far has been mainly a composite picture of how the Buddha himself envisaged religious experience, or, more accurately, what others reconstructed as his sayings on the subject. However, the Canon also offers us more direct evidence of religious experience, the kind of first-person testimony which makes James' book such a memorable read.

The Buddhist canon of the Theravādins contains a collection of Pali poems written in the first person by monks and nuns, the Thera-gāthā and the Therī-gāthā respectively. Most of these poems are very short. All give some account of the author's experiences, though a few of them – notably those that read like moral adages – do not do so obviously or directly. A few of them make no reference to Buddhist (or other) moral or religious doctrine; for example: "Coloured like the dark blue clouds, delightful with cool streams of pure water, carpeted with cochineal insects, those rocks give me joy." (Tha 13). However, Buddhists regard all these poems as authentic records of what we would call religious or spiritual experiences, and to deny their claim would seem to me to be wholly arbitrary. Let us take a brief look at what they say.

In our comparative context, what the authors say about themselves is perhaps less remarkable than what they do not say. The first thing to which I would like to draw attention is that while many of the authors claim explicitly, by their use of some Buddhist doctrinal expression, to have attained Enlightenment, many others do not. Yet one would not, I think, notice the difference between the two categories unless one were specially on the lookout for it. I anticipated this point when I quoted Carrithers. The monk with whom Carrithers is dealing in that final chapter, Ānandasiri, is – so far as one can tell – leading a life in a remote jungle area in modern Sri Lanka which replicates the milieu evoked by the poems of the Buddhist elders which we can read in the canon.

The second feature of these records which is noteworthy for our purposes is that nobody says that what they have experienced is beyond words, ineffable. The Buddha has supplied them with a vocabulary, a set of concepts, with which they can and do express their feelings.

The general tone of these feelings is not dramatic or heroic, even though it is not uncommon for an elder to describe himself as "victorious" (e.g. Thaḡ 5–8 inclusive). What does come across, both explicitly and implicitly, is that by well-directed effort the author has had experiences which are the opposite of those of normal life, experiences which give him a sense of liberation.

The elements which constantly recur are those summed up in the triad morality, concentration and understanding; and, pervading all three, words denoting self-control, vigilance and awareness (primarily of oneself). Let me cite just three typical verses, taken almost at random from the first few pages of the Theragāthā:

"Strong through understanding, behaving with moral restraint  
(sīlavatūpapaṇṇo), concentrated, delighting in meditation (jhāna), aware, eating just  
what is necessary, one should await one's time in this world, all passion gone." (Thaḡ  
12)  
This verse contains all the three terms sīla, samādhī, paññā.

"For a sage who is attentive, vigilant, training himself in the paths of sagehood,  
venerable, calm, always possessed of mindfulness, griefs do not come into existence."  
(Thaḡ 68 trans Norman)

"Expert in imagination (citta-nimittassa kovido), recognising the flavour of  
solitude, meditating, wise, aware, one may achieve the bliss without carnality." (Thaḡ  
85)

The phrase I have translated "expert in imagination" probably refers to skill in manipulating edictic images like the *kaṣiṇa*.

From other texts we know what "understanding" refers to. But in these poems there is not much about the content of what is understood; it is spelled out, if at all, mostly in doctrinal formulae. More than the content of the understanding, it is its flavour that matters: it carries James' "noetic quality", with its sensation of certainty. Indeed, freedom from doubt is quite often mentioned (e.g. Thag 5). I hesitate to follow James in calling it "self-authenticating", for it has been authenticated by the Buddha; but it is clearly solemn and transformative.

What has been conquered? Sensuality, all kinds of moral and mental weakness. But also, crucially, fear. "I fear no danger. Our teacher is expert in the deathless. Monks go by that path on which no fear remains." (Thag 21) The immediate cause of fear, no doubt, is living alone in the jungle; but the fear behind all fears, of course, is the fear of death. The Buddha overcame Māra, death personified, in a sense by meeting him halfway. One is reminded of James' wise remark: "Religion thus makes easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary." (p. 51)

8.

Let me try to put the above data on early Buddhism into a comparative context by making use of another booklet published by the Oxford Religious Experience Research Centre. This one is by my teacher and friend Dr Bryan Wilson, and is entitled *Religious Experience: a Sociological Perspective*.<sup>17</sup> Wilson demonstrates, to my mind, that James' ambitious programme cannot be fulfilled: we cannot fully understand religious experience if we attend only to "individual men in their solitude", without any regard for social context. For though all experience is private, and by that token and to that degree ineffable, our mere articulation of that experience is social because it uses a particular language, a social phenomenon, and our interpretation of what we have experienced is conditioned by society. Wilson puts it better than I ever could, so let me quote the whole of his opening paragraph.

"The usual idea of a religious experience is conceived in largely individual terms. It is generally seen as an uninduced, unanticipated and most probably sudden sense of some force, power, or mood which transcends everyday comprehension, and which is beyond ordinary empirical explanation. Where an explanation of such phenomena is attempted, the tendency is to seek to understand them in essentially psychological terms. What I wish to suggest is that, although this is the common understanding of what is implied by the term "religious experience", in fact by no means all such experience is of a purely psychological kind. Many people, who would not claim to have encountered such a numinous sense of a force or a presence, would certainly claim to have acquired new religious insight by quite different means and in what would usually be quite different circumstances. These are people who have been introduced into a context – a congregation or a community – in which a special religious awakening is not only expected but which may even be canvassed. Its very form, sequence and effect, and even the occasion of its occurring, may indeed be well understood in advance. Although it is not involuntary, and is almost (to employ a metaphor) a ready-made experience, such a religious sensation is none the less valid for all that, and its effects, since it occurs in a much more structured context, may indeed be very much more influential and enduring." (p. 1)

Wilson focuses on conversion as typical of what most people would regard as a religious experience; but he argues

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<sup>17</sup> 2nd Series Occasional Paper 2, Oxford 1996.

“that the religious experience that leads to, or accompanies, conversion is not necessarily of the type that conforms to the recorded account of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus ... [T]hat narrative assumes that conversion must be sudden, dramatic, emotional, and the result of the operation of an external agency operating on the convert. It is seen as a single life-changing event, the effects of which are expected to last the entire span of an individual’s lifetime. As a consequence of the experience, it is assumed that there will be a total transformation in the attitudes, dispositions and behaviour of the individual” (p. 5) However, “Religious experience need not be confined to this one intense manifestation of emotional turmoil. Sects differ in the extent to which emotional expression is regarded as necessary, desirable, permissive or prohibited. By no means all sects expect would-be converts to undergo the sense of being born-again. For many – Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christadelphians, most conspicuously among them – religious experience is couched in intellectual terms. What candidates for admission must show is that they have studied and learned and understood a range of doctrinal propositions: their religious experience has been a steady, cumulative learning process, undertaken often with the help of sect elders, until candidates have mastered certain central tenets which qualify them for membership. The candidates have to learn quite consciously what they must do, and how they must henceforth comport themselves, since their experience must be sustained and their intellectual grasp of what the sect teaches must be constantly nourished by recurrent and continuous exposure to basic texts.” (p. 5)

Wilson goes on to contrast the emotional type of conversion sought at revival meetings with the slow process of becoming, for example, a Witness. Common to both cases is that the future convert knows what is expected; this is as true of those who attend the revival meetings as of those who attend regular Bible classes. On the other hand: “It follows, from the differences in the way in which conversion is conceived and experienced between different sectarian groups, that sectarians of diverse kinds will both account for their experiences and will recount those experiences, in distinctive terms – terms indeed that would be neither appropriate nor recognizable to sectarians of a different persuasion. Equally, the points chosen for emphasis in the consequential significance of conversion also differ.” (p. 6)

To rectify the bias in James’ too personalised and hence too emotionalistic presentation, we need to consider the gradualist approach to conversion.

“Among Witnesses there is nothing approaching the ‘road to Damascus’ syndrome: indeed, to claim conversion in the terms suitable to Pentecostalism would create the powerful suspicion that the speaker was totally deluded. For Witnesses, salvation depends on an understanding of the Bible and on persistent application to it through the media of the Watchtower Society’s publications. There is no moment when this conversion experience is marked by a qualitatively different sense of things. Rather there is a slow, accretive growth of understanding in (sic) the way in which things fit together, until the convert becomes the recruit and decides that he must now undergo baptism as a mark of his commitment. The experience is intellectual rather than emotional, and to recount the conversion is really to take the auditor through the stages of learning that have brought the outsider to his present allegiance.

When Witnesses talk about their conversion they, too, tell a ‘before and after’ story but that story is not one in which God or the Holy Spirit wrought a transformation in a sinner, but the story of how an individual achieved a new sense of things, and came to understand God’s purposes in the world. Their tales are more articulate and invoke neither mystical imagery nor a repertoire of emotive recollections.” (p. 7)

Wilson then quotes at some length a Witness's account of his own conversion, which ends with the words, "I feel a better person than I was – no violent temper, which I had. I'm not me any more!" Wilson comments, "The religious experience of the Witness is not a sudden instance of illumination but rather a steady application in intellectual understanding and moral apprehension. It is not the less a religious experience for being protracted and cumulative: indeed, in terms of consequences, it is perhaps of more profound and persisting importance. Because there is no one occasion on which the Witness recognizes a life-transforming experience, he does not (unlike the Pentecostalist) seek to re-live the moment at which the Spirit is supposed to have struck." (p. 8)

9.

It would be redundant to expatiate on the similarities that suggest themselves between the experiences of Wilson's Witnesses and the Theravāda Buddhist elders. In both the religious experience is something worked for, clearly envisaged, and not necessarily dramatic or sudden. For the participants, the difference between the monotheistic and the non-theistic belief framework is of course of great importance. For comparativists, it may be no less important to point out that the moment of conversion for the Witness, occurring as part of a long process, is primarily a social event: others tell him when he is ready. How does the Buddhist monk know when he has attained nirvana? Sometimes, no doubt, his teacher tells him, when he has reported particular thoughts or feelings. But the Buddhists probably lack a precise functional analogue to the community of a Christian sect, and this would explain why whether an individual has or has not reached the religious goal – the analogue of conversion – will in many cases remain vague; in other cases the individual is entitled by his *certitudo salutis* to speak out.

It may not be too far-fetched to suggest that those who thus spoke out were those who had had the more dramatic, emotional type of experience. (In this case "emotional" refers to a sensation of cooling, not heightening, the emotions.) Foremost among those, obviously, was the Buddha himself. But even the Buddha had, according to the received account, been living in the jungle seeking Enlightenment for six years. He had consorted with other ascetics who were following a similar lifestyle and pursuing the same quest for liberation from the dissatisfactions of normal worldly life. He was not the only one in that milieu to have religious experiences – far from it: he studied with teachers who had routinised their attainment. What was distinctive about his final achievement was the intellectual discovery which embraced both the path and the goal of such a liberation.

Throughout the history of Buddhism there has been a certain tension between the quest for altered states of consciousness and rationalism, the effort to understand the way things really are; and most forms of Buddhism have a place for both. This tension can already be found in the Canon. There are rather diverse accounts of what nirvana, or Enlightenment, consists of, and no doubt there were divergent opinions about this among the compilers of the canon. Primarily these are differences of emphasis or perspective, but there may, if one honestly looks behind the commentarial homogenisation, be real disagreements.

The Buddha knew of the Upaniṣads and their goal, an experience of loss of self through the sensation of merging into the essence of the universe. His own experience of loss of self may or may not have been a similarly monistic experience; on that there seems to be disagreement. Certainly, however, his teaching articulated it in a way which took issue with the Upaniṣadic interpretation. There are many ways of losing the self; even Wilson's Witness, from an utterly different background, says, "I'm not me any more." In the Buddha's case it is clear that the loss of self has both an emotional and an intellectual component. The emotional component is expressed as the extinction of the fires of passion and hatred, the intellectual as the extinction of the fire of delusion. The emotional component is the abolition of selfishness, as in the repeated canonical expression, "This is not mine"; the intellectual component is the abolition of the idea that one has a self (in the Upaniṣadic sense), as in the paired expression, "This is not I".

The traditional account of the Buddha's spiritual progress tells the same story. During his search for liberation he studied meditation with other teachers, who taught him what the Buddhists came to call the "calming" meditation to discipline the emotions, up to a high level of the "formless *jhāna*". But these altered states of consciousness did not bring him liberation, for all were impermanent. What he added to these, what tradition regards as the distinctively Buddhist achievement, was the set of realisations which came to be classified as insight (*vipassanā*), which are tantamount to "seeing things as they are".

In fact I believe the situation was slightly more complicated than that. For the same tradition holds that the Buddha learnt from his teachers only as far as the penultimate level of "calming", "the plane of neither apperception nor its absence"; he added the final "extinction of apperception and feeling" himself. So it looks as if there may have been a rival account of what the Buddha achieved, which made his crowning accomplishment an altered state of consciousness, an enstatic state.

However, if this interpretation ever existed, it was decisively defeated. That the extinction of apperception and feeling is or was the same as nirvana is firmly denied by orthodoxy. The later tradition holds that a person who has attained that state of what we would call trance cannot survive in it for more than seven days. Thus it is impermanent, which in turn means that it is not nirvana but belongs to *saṃsāra*, the phenomenal world.

This recalls Wilson's contrast between the revivalist and the Witness. The revivalist's conversion experience is emotional and dramatic; then, however, its effects are liable to wear off, and revivalists often gather to repeat their ecstatic experiences. The Witness reaches his more intellectual experience methodically and it is an irreversible process. Buddhists likewise believe that once one has attained nirvana one cannot relapse, whereas the attainment of "calming" states is more like a skill which one can practise when one wishes.

It seems likely that a famous Buddhist controversy can be interpreted as centring on the same issue. In Tibet in the late 8th century the ruler organised a debate between a Chinese Buddhist monk who claimed that Enlightenment came suddenly and outside the sequence of causation and an Indian monk who said that it was acquired gradually, by methodical preparation. The latter won. If I am right, Buddhists in India and in the Theravāda tradition have always tended to favour the gradualist tradition, both because the effects of that kind of spiritual attainment are longer-lasting and because their Buddhism has a large cognitive content, an intellectual and rational emphasis, which to the more mystically inclined seems of little relevance.

## 10.

I said above that mysticism is the religious experience which is interpreted as being indescribable in ordinary language; that it is apophatic is its hallmark. I shall now give a couple of examples to show both that this phenomenon was known at the very beginning of the Buddhist tradition and that the tradition soon came to downplay it.

That the Buddha felt the quality of his salvific experience, his Enlightenment, to be ineffable is shown, I would argue, by the title he gave himself, *Tathāgata*. According to the Pali canonical texts, it is by this word that he always refers to himself. It has two parts: *tathā*, which means "thus", and *gata*, which commonly means "gone". Thus the whole word is often translated into English as "Thus-gone". The Buddhist tradition has made various attempts to etymologise the term, attempts which I regard as fanciful. The word *gata* when it occurs as the second member of a compound of this type often loses its primary meaning and means simply "being". For example, *citravatā nārī* is not "the woman who has gone into the picture" but simply "the woman in the picture". (I draw my example from Coulson's *Teach Yourself Sanskrit*.<sup>18</sup>) So the Buddha is referring to himself as "the one who is like that". In my opinion, this is tantamount to saying that he can find no words to describe his state; he can only point to it. Moreover, though the epithet *Tathāgata* most commonly refers to a Buddha, and in later texts does so

<sup>18</sup> London 1976, p. 111.

exclusively, in the Pali canon it can refer to any enlightened person (MN I, 140). Similarly, the epithet *tādi*, derived from Sanskrit *tādrś*, also originally meant just “such” or “like that”, though the commentators read other meanings into it. This word too could in the Pali texts be applied to any enlightened person (Thag 68). The word had a colourful history, for through phonetic change it was reconstituted, or should I say reinterpreted, in the Sanskrit of Mahāyāna Buddhists as *trāyin*, “saving”, and so became an epithet of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, denoting their compassion.

The fact that the Buddhist tradition lost the original meanings of *tathāgata* and *tādi* bears witness, I suggest, to the anti-mystical (or at least non-mystical) stance of that tradition. The Buddha could not describe the quality of his experience because it was a unique private experience with no publicly available referent, but this in no way implies that the truths he discovered or the way to direct oneself or others towards a similar experience were inexpressible.

There is another canonical fragment which points in the same direction. There is a famous verse in the brahminical *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*:

“Before they reach it, words turn back,  
together with the mind;  
One who knows that bliss of brahman,  
he is never afraid.”

This describes the salvific experience according to the Vedānta, in which the individual self is felt to merge into brahman, the only true reality. It is not, I think, well known that there is a short poem in the Pali canon (SN I, 15) which begins by asking “From what do words turn back?” The answer (by implication) is *nibbāna*. But again, the tradition has apparently misinterpreted the question. The Pali word here used for “words” is *sarā* (from Sanskrit *svara*); but the commentator seems to have interpreted it as a homonym which means “streams” and assumed a reference to another metaphor, that of rivers merging into the ocean (see *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3,2,8). The Pali commentators were, it appears, no mystics.

It would seem, therefore, that the fact that there is no word approximating to “mystical” in the Pali language or tradition is not decisive: it may reflect not the original events described but their later interpretation. Both the Buddha and, more than likely, some of his immediate followers, seem to have had experiences as a result of which they could only describe themselves as being “like that” – they felt quite changed. On the other hand, what the tradition laid stress on was the understanding that resulted from this experience; and such evidence as we have from individuals other than the Buddha strongly suggests that they systematically cultivated a path to that experience and that understanding, so that the distinction between being on the path and reaching the goal became relatively unimportant.

If the tradition valued the religious life more than the moments of mystical experience – and indeed the latter may well not have figured in the lives of many excellent monks and nuns – we may finally ask what was distinctively religious about Buddhist religious experience in this broader sense.

## 11.

As I have mentioned above, the Buddha singled out certain things as being important and connected with a “total reaction upon life”. This reminds us that to say that an experience is religious is an interpretation of that experience. But it is more than an interpretation in a purely intellectual sense, for it is also a feeling about the experience. One might say that it is a style of experiencing. Other possible examples of such styles or reactions would be the ironic<sup>19</sup> or the cynical, both of which stand in contrast to the religious, in that they refuse to take the primary experiences seriously, whereas the religious style accords them a special seriousness.

<sup>19</sup> This is normally the only style permissible in an Oxford Senior Common Room.



Religion is a polythetic category, which means that it has several characteristics of which not all need be present in every instance. One could take a similar view of religious experience, and say that in most cases it will include behaviour based on a firm belief in what James calls "the reality of the unseen"; and by emphasising this criterion one could certainly call something like the sensation of being outside one's own body or feeling an unseen presence "religious experience". One must always remember that one is not out to find definitions, but to add to understanding.

However, I hope to have demonstrated that early Buddhist religious experience has a right to that title, and yet seems in most cases to have nothing at all in common with encountering a poltergeist. Is my main conclusion thus negative?

I hope it is a little more. I have suggested that it may be helpful to view religious experience not as experience of a particular content or even a particular flavour, but rather as a way of reacting to one's own experience by setting it in a particular context, imparting to it a particular significance. Religious experience, in other words, is on this view a second-order experience.

I have mentioned that the value of an experience cannot be even affected by, let alone reduced to, its origins. But my view of religious experience moves even further in this direction. For if this is a way of experiencing one's experiences, it cannot be reduced to components in the way that James suggests when he says that "religious love is only man's natural emotion of love directed to a religious object" (p. 27). If we shift attention from the object to the subject, the experiencer, religious love becomes rather an experience of loving which one endows with a certain kind of significance, an experience which one experiences as somehow self-authenticating and (at least temporarily) transformative. For me this makes better sense of erotic mysticism than does the distinction between a divine and a human object, and I feel no qualms about declaring that love for a human being may be a religious experience.

## 12.

In sum, my main conclusions are these. Firstly, that while I agree with James that experience is "the real backbone of the world's religious life", or at least its basis, I think that all experience is to a greater or lesser degree ineffable, and that mystical experience is not a special category characterised by ineffability, but simply a strong case of it.

Secondly, that James was too sanguine about the possibility of finding religious experience in its pure personal form, uncontaminated by social pressures, because he confused experience with its interpretation.

Thirdly, that the Pali texts concerned with the earliest recorded Buddhist experiences refer to a great variety of experiences which are considered religious because of their context, a context set by the Buddha's teachings and experiences.

Finally, that this suggests that a religious experience may usefully be viewed not as a type of experience, like an erotic experience or a tragic experience or a hallucinatory experience, but rather as a way of experiencing one's experiences, a way which will involve attaching considerable significance to them, and that this reaction is likely to have been learnt.



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