

# Early Buddhist Meditation

## A Philosophical Investigation

Lecture 5

The Gateway

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# The standard view of early Buddhist Thought

**Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Thought*, p.20**

What we call a 'being', or an 'individual', or I, according to Buddhist philosophy, is only a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies, which may be divided into five groups or aggregates (*pañcakkhandha*).

**Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Thought*, p.55**

According to the doctrine of Conditioned Genesis, as well as according to the analysis of being into Five Aggregates, the idea of an abiding, immortal substance in man or outside, whether it is called Atman, I, Soul, Self, or Ego, is considered only a false belief, a mental projection.

**Rupert Gethin, 'On the practice of Buddhist Meditation. According to the Pali Nikāyas and Exegetical Sources', p.215**

the method of developing insight (*vipassanā*) is to direct the perfect mindfulness, stillness and lucidity that has been cultivated in the *jhānas* ... to the contemplation ... of 'reality'—reality in the sense of the ways things are, or, perhaps better, the way things work. This involves watching dhammas—the mental and physical qualities that constitute our experience of the world. The meditator is instructed to watch the rise and fall of dhammas and see them as impermanent (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and not self (*anattā*).

# Bare cognition and liberating insight

## *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (MN 18)*

**The source** from which conceptual proliferation, apperception and reckoning afflict a person, **if this is not delighted in, approved of or clung to** ... it is here that these evil, unskilful phenomena cease without remainder.

## *Mahā-taṇhā-saṅkhaya Sutta (MN 38)*

That (*bhikkhu*) having seen a form with his eye, does not become impassioned if the form is attractive, or repulsed if the form is unattractive; he abides with mindfulness of the body established, and with an immeasurable mind. He understands as it really is that release of mind, a release by understanding, in which for him all bad, unskilful phenomena cease without remainder. Letting go of favouring and opposing, whatever sensation he senses - pleasure, pain or neither pleasure nor pain - **he does not delight, approve, or linger clinging to it.**

# Opposing the standard view of Buddhist thought

The standard view is part of the early Buddhist tradition.

In the Pali Suttas, the theory of calm and insight occupies an important position; but there is also much that is in open disagreement with it. This divergence has been ignored.

Text-critical scholarship, a major achievement of the Enlightenment, has gone into reverse gear.

Kaccāna's philosophy of mind: consciousness as 'pre-noetic sentience', in apparent disagreement with the idea of mind found in insight meditation.

The teachings to Māluṅkyaputta and Vacchagotta: the real reason for the Buddha's silence.

Māluṅkyaputta's liberation: a 'bare cognition' understanding of mindfulness.

The *Aṭṭhaka-* and *Pārāyana-vaggas*, and *jhāna*: a 'methodless method'.

# A new understanding

The five aggregates teaching, and dependent origination, do not focus on the fact that a person is made up of 'ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies'.

Suttanta soteriology is not a form of calm-insight; mindfulness is a simplification of cognition, the four *jhānas* are not concentrations.

**Dependent Origination:** a *metaphysical* critique of *knowledge* or *view formation*.

**Mindfulness:** the simplification of cognition to *deconstruct knowledge/view formation*.

**Absorption:** the four *jhānas* as a natural process of psycho-somatic transformation, allowing sentience to be suffused or distributed back to its somatic roots.

**Liberating insight:** a *non-conceptual awareness* of the way things really are.

# From the 'methodless method' to the standard view

The 'standard view' dominated Theravāda Buddhism in South Asia. But an earlier understanding was interpreted away, and adapted to calm-insight. How did this happen?

An influx of non-Buddhist ideas and practices distorted the clarity of the Buddha's teachings. Practices and ideas related to the Buddha's teachers were taken over. Formless meditation was Buddhicized.

The dialogue with the young Brahmin Uttara: a critique of the Pārāsariya's yogic goal of shutting out sense perception.

The discussion with the Brahmin Upasīva: asked about concentration, the Buddha focuses on mindfulness.

Meditation as concentration is described in the early Upaniṣads; early Buddhists were influenced by this stream of thought.

# Two types of Nirvana: *sa-upādi-sesa* & *an-upādi-sesa*

## **Itivuttaka 44**

There are these two Nirvana realms, bhikkhus. Which two? Nirvana with a remnant of material substratum, and Nirvana without a remnant of material substratum...

Just one realm pertains to the present, and has a remnant of material substratum, through the destruction of a connection with becoming. But that which lacks a remnant of material substratum pertains to the hereafter, in which all states of being cease, completely.

## ***Kalahavivāda Sutta***

### **Q. (Sn 882)**

Indeed some wise men say that just this much is the purity of a *yakkha*, here (in the world); but some among them, claiming to be wise, say there is a time when there is no remnant of material substratum.

### **A. (Sn 883)**

Understanding these at 'dependent', the sage, having understood, investigates dependency. Having (then) understood, he is released and does not get involved in dispute; the wise one does not associate with being and non-being.

Liberating insight: in the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, and the standard view

**The *Suddhaṭṭhaka Sutta* on ‘purification’ (Sn 795)**

If a man’s purification occurs through what is seen, or one abandons suffering through knowledge, being purified by another, one has a (conceptual) foundation (*sopadhīko*); his view proclaims the person as he speaks thus.

**Rupert Gettin on insight**

The meditator is instructed to watch the rise and fall of dhammas and see them as impermanent (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and not self (*anattā*).

**Calm-insight in the pre-Buddhist *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (IV.4.23)**

Therefore knowing this (teaching), having become calm, tamed, quiet, patient (and) absorbed, he sees the self in the self, he sees the self as everything.

# Early Buddhism Transformed

## **Neo-Upaniṣadic ideas in Buddhicized form**

- Meditation as inner concentration: yoga.
- The idea of insight as a mystical 'vision' achieved when the mind has been sufficiently stilled through yoga.
- Nirvana as a non-temporal dimension outside the world, beyond *dukkha*.
- A distinction between two types of liberation: Nirvana anticipated in life, through yogic insight, and the final entry into Nirvana at death.

## **The earlier understanding distorted and lost**

- Meditation as mindfulness, which means bare cognition
- Jhāna as a psycho-somatic transformation of the entire human being.
- Nirvana as simply the cessation of thirst.
- No distinction between Nirvana in life or beyond it.

# Mind and non-self

## **Vinaya Mahāvagga account of the liberation of the first five *bhikkhus*:**

The Blessed One said this. Delighted, the group of five *bhikkhus* rejoiced in what the Blessed One had said. When this discourse was being given, **the minds of the group of five *bhikkhus* were released from the corruptions without clinging**. At that time there were six arahants in the world.

## ***Sāmaññaphala Sutta* account of *bhikkhu*'s liberation**

The *bhikkhu*'s 'mind is freed from the corruptions of sensual pleasure, being, and ignorance. When (it) is released, there is the knowledge '(it is) released'.'

- The Buddha's critical attitude inclined early Buddhists to believe in 'no self'
- Attempts were made to avoid assigning a place to a person in the metaphysics of awakening
- But liberation insight into an object requires a perceiving subject
- An essential subject of perception was needed: 'mind'

# Reductionism

## Not-self liberation pattern of a *bhikkhu*

Seeing thus, the learned, disciple of the noble becomes disillusioned with form, sensation, apperception, volitions and consciousness. Being disillusioned he becomes dispassionate, through dispassion he is released. **When (it) is released, there is the knowledge '(it is) released'**, and he understands: 'birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived, done is what had to be done, nothing more is required for the state thus.

- vimuttasmim̐ vimuttam **iti** ñāṇaṃ hoti
- vimuttam **iti** is irregular
- vimuttan **ti** is the regular, expected, Pali

## A well-attested variant

- vimuttasmim̐ vimutt' amhī **ti** ñāṇaṃ hoti
- When (the *bhikkhu* is) released (/in the released *bhikkhu*), there is the knowledge 'I am released'

# Selfless persons

## **Tuvaṭṭaka Sutta, Sn 992**

The root of conceptual proliferation and reckoning, (so said the Blessed One),  
(the thought) 'I am', the sage should stop, completely.

Whatever thirst (there is) internally,  
by dispelling those, one should train, ever mindful.

- Nirvana must be a **selfless experience**.

## **Brahmajāla Sutta**

The body of the Tathāgata remains, *bhikkhus*, but its connection with 'being' (*bhava-*) has been severed. As long as his body remains gods and men see him; when the body breaks up, after life has been exhausted, gods and men do not see him.

- The sentient 'cadaver', **the person as a whole**, experiences liberation.

# Early Buddhism as mysticism

**Johannes Bronkhorst, *Absorption. Human Nature and Buddhist Liberation*, 2012, pp.25-26**

Such a person may be expected to experience the world differently, and in a more direct and immediate fashion, since ordinary human experience is always separated from its objects by the web of symbolic representation. The claim that mystical experience gives access to a different and higher reality is, though not strictly true, almost correct. Experience through symbolic representation is indirect, mediate. Experience without it, or with less of it, is direct, immediate. Strictly speaking it is the same 'objective' reality that is experienced, but it is experienced so differently that the experiencer may have difficulty recognizing it...

# Bronkhorst on mysticism and concentration

**p.26.** The subject is, as a result, easily convinced that he or she is confronted with a different reality, where in actual fact it is the same reality that is experienced differently ... The mystical experience is so much more direct and undoubtedly real that the choice is obvious: the reality presumably experienced in the mystical state is more real than that of ordinary experience.

**p.29.** How does one stop innumerable associations, most of which are not even conscious? Focusing the mind presents itself as a plausible method ... The faculty is to some extent subject to ordinary conscious control. We then speak of concentration.

## ***Mahā-nidāna Sutta, DN II.68***

Ānanda, the extent of terminology and the ways of terminology, of language and the ways of language, of designation and the ways of designation, of understanding and the ways of understanding, of continuity and its continuation - the *bhikkhu* who is released from that through insight, about him the view 'he neither knows nor sees' is not appropriate.

# Is Nirvana a mystical experience? AN 4.173

**Q.** Venerable sir, with the fading away and cessation without remainder of the six bases of contact, is there anything else?

**A.** Do not speak thus, sir....

When one affirms, 'with the fading away and cessation without remainder of the six bases of contact, there is something else', one conceptually proliferates that which is without conceptual proliferation ...

The extent to which, sir, the six bases of contact function, to that extent conceptual proliferation functions; the extent to which conceptual proliferation functions, to that extent the six bases of contact function. With the fading away and cessation, without remainder, of the six sense bases, conceptual proliferation ceases, conceptual proliferation is calmed.

# Cognitive transformation and anti-realism

## Udaya-māṇava-pucchā, Sn 1116-17

**Q.** How does consciousness cease for the person who wanders mindfully? We have come to question the Blessed One, and will listen to your teaching.

**A.** Internally and externally, not delighting in sensation, consciousness ceases for the one who wanders thus, mindful.

## Kalahavivāda Sutta, Sn 875-76

**Q.** The agreeable and disagreeable depend on what, when what is not do they not occur? And this matter of being and non-being, tell this to me, on what they depend.

**A.** The agreeable and disagreeable depend on contact, when contact is not they do not occur; and this matter of being and non-being, it depends on this, I say.

## SN I.62

I declare that the world, its arising, cessation and the way thereto occurs in this very fathom-long 'cadaver' (*kaḷevare*), endowed with perception and mind.

# Conditioning, anti-realism and the ‘methodless method’

**Mūlapariyāya Sutta:** a normal person conceives and thinks about objects, an arahant does not.

*assutavā puthujjano ... pathaviṃ pathavito sañjānāti, ... saññatvā pathaviṃ maññati*

*arahaṃ khīṇāsavo ... so pi pathaviṃ pathavito abhijānāti, ... abhiññāya pathaviṃ na maññati*

**Ogha-taraṇa Sutta** (SN I.1) on the ‘methodless method’

How did you, respected sir, cross the flood?

By not standing still, sir, and not struggling, I crossed over the flood...

When, sir, I settled down, I sank; but when I struggled, I was carried away. Thus, sir, without standing still or struggling, I crossed the flood.

**Uraga Sutta** (Sn 1.8-9)

The one who neither oversteps nor lags behind, by going beyond **all this conceptual proliferation**, that *bhikkhu* abandons the near and far shore, like a snake (abandons) its old, decrepit skin.

The one who neither oversteps nor lags behind, having realised that **all this is unreal**, that *bhikkhu* abandons the near and far shore, like a snake (abandons) its old, decrepit skin.

# Epistemological conditioning in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*

## DN I.41

ye te samaṇabrāhmaṇā ... pubbantāparantaṃ ārabba anekavihitāni adhimuttipadāni abhivadanti, tad api tesam bhavataṃ samaṇabrāhmaṇānaṃ ajānataṃ apassataṃ vedayitaṃ taṇhāgatānaṃ paritassita-vipphanditaṃ eva.

Therein, *bhikkhus*, whatever ascetics or Brahmins ... make all sorts of claims with reference to the past and future, this is because (*tad api*) what is sensed (*vedayita*) by these venerable ascetics and Brahmins, who have no knowledge and vision and are affected by thirst, is subjected to ‘trembling’ and ‘quivering’ (*paritasita-vipphandita*).

## Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation

When those recluses and brahmins ... assert on sixty-two grounds various conceptual theorems referring to the past and the future, that too is only the feeling of those who do not know and do not see; that is only the agitation and vacillation of those who are immersed in craving.

# The Gateway

The opening Suttas, of the Dīgha, Majjhima and Saṃyutta Nikāyas, and the Sutta-nipāta, state clearly the key ideas of early Buddhist philosophy according to our analysis:

- Arahants do not apperceive, conceptualise or even 'think'
- 'View' - or knowledge - is a construct based on a particular way cognition works
- The world of ordinary experience is an unreal conceptual construction
- Liberation requires a methodless method, whereby one neither endeavours or 'stands still'

The gateway to the correct interpretation of early Buddhism has always been open.

We, and tradition, have chosen not to enter it.