

THE RATIONALIST TENDENCY IN MODERN BUDDHIST SCHOLARSHIP: A REVALUATION

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Is Buddhism a philosophy or a religion? My answer to this much-asked question is that Buddhism is both a religious doctrine and a philosophical system. This contention presupposes that both approaches, religious and philosophical, can provide complementary, rather than contradictory, perspectives for a better understanding of Buddhist thought.

Yet this dual perspective has been difficult to envision within the context of modern Buddhist scholarship in both East Asia and the West. One reason is that the very concept of “philosophy” in East Asian scholarship relies heavily on the Western philosophical tradition, and the Western world has long made a clear distinction between philosophy and religion. In the West, philosophy is defined as that which can be understood and confirmed through reason; whatever is beyond this realm is labeled “irrational,” “meta-rational,” or “religious.” As a result, Western philosophy has strictly limited its scope to the analysis of the realm of ordinary experience. In the case of Buddhism, the impact of this situation has been further exacerbated by the fact that epistemology has come to play a major role in Western philosophical discourse, while ontology—the field most relevant to Buddhism—has been increasingly de-emphasized.

However, in the tradition of Indian thought, from which Buddhism emerged, the demarcation between philosophy and religion has never been clear, and this fact has remained integral to Buddhism throughout its far-flung cultural migration. From the Buddhist perspective, all philosophical speculation is based on a meditative experience, which is clearly distinguished from our daily, rational experience. In the Western philosophical tradition, this could provide sufficient reason to disqualify Buddhism as a philosophical system.¹ The lack of division between philosophy and religion within the Buddhist tradition, however, does not imply that Buddhist thought is primitive or less philosophically sophisticated than Western thought. One should avoid the temptation to ask whether it is Western philosophy or Buddhism that is more philosophical. Buddhism is rather a different way of engaging in philosophy that emerged from a different culture.

Meditation, as the ground for Buddhist philosophical thought, produces two features unique to Buddhism. First, the Buddhist believes that the experience of meditation, or *samādhi*, provides a more reliable foundation for epistemology than daily life. The basic doctrines of Buddhism do not result from daily experience but from the practitioner’s meditative experience, which is then applied to the examination of daily life. Second, since meditation is the means for apprehending truth, it is believed that the level of a practitioner’s maturity in meditation defines the depth

of his or her understanding. For this reason, Buddhism presupposes that different levels of practice yield different levels of truth. This means that yesterday's truth can be superseded by today's practice; similarly, it means that one practitioner's understanding can be contradicted by that of another, more advanced practitioner. This clearly distinguishes the Buddhist position from the basic dictum of Western philosophy: that the only universal truth is that which can be known to everybody.

In this essay, I will point out that one problem of modern Buddhist scholarship is its tendency to view Buddhism exclusively from a rationalistic standpoint. I will explore this view by briefly looking at three central topics in Buddhist studies: the identity of the Buddha, the strategy of reading Buddhist texts, and the problem of determining the Buddha's teachings.

Who Is/Was the Buddha?

This question should be posed differently: how has the Buddha been understood or interpreted throughout the various traditions of Buddhism? The scholarship of both Eastern and Western Buddhism often presupposes that in earlier times the Buddha was first viewed as a human being, a Master, and was later transformed into a mythological figure or God. This is often related to another issue, which concerns the different characteristics of Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism, the former being rational and philosophical and the latter mythological and religious. This unwarranted demarcation between Theravāda and Mahāyāna further leads scholars to the mistaken assumption that the Pāli text tradition is closer to the original teaching of the Buddha. Indeed, the attempt to reconstruct precanonic Buddhism—often labeled the original Buddhism or, by Japanese scholars, *kenshi bukkyō* or *konbon bukkyō*—is often initiated through the simple elimination of all irrational, mythological elements from the Pāli texts. This strategy is based on the presupposition that the Buddha and his teaching would have been more rational, and that irrational (meta-rational) elements in the texts are therefore later accretions. This rationalistic tendency is evident among Korean scholars as well. It can be seen in Haeju Chŏn's *Pulgyo kyori kangjwa* (Lectures on Buddhist doctrines), in which she says:

Since these Mahayana Buddhist canons highly valued actual facts but also recorded no small numbers of selections in which the Buddha was idealized in a mythological way, we should consider that their descriptions are removed from the actual image of the Buddha.²

In the *Pulgyo ūi ihae wa silch'ŏn* (Understanding and practice of Buddhism), Chungp'yo Yi says, "In the Āgamas Buddha discussed everything, without reservation, which can be expressed by language. . . . As generally understood, Mahayana texts are not the canons spoken by the Buddha himself."³ Yi also states that the goal of his book is to interpret the Āgamas' thought in a philosophical way, saying, "I regard everything in the Āgamas as spoken by the Buddha himself."⁴

Although we cannot deny that the Pāli textual tradition displays a rational ten-

dency in comparison to the Mahāyāna tradition, if we study the Pāli text in depth without any preconceptions about the Buddha or his teaching, we will see that this is not always the case. The Buddha, in the Pāli sources, appears either as a Master or a God. Whether Master or God, rational or mythological, the conflicts in interpretation exist not only between Theravāda and Mahāyāna but among Pāli sources as well. In the ancient Community there were many differences of opinion regarding their Teacher, Śākyamuni the Buddha. Consider this passage from the *Gradual Sayings*:

[Brahmin Doṇa asked the Honored One about what kind of being a Buddha is.]

I am not a god, not a man. Know, O Brahman, that I am a Buddha.⁵

(*Na kho ahaṃ brāhmaṇa devo bhavissāmīti. . . Na . . . manusso bhavissāmīti Buddhho ti maṃ brāhmaṇa dhārehīti*) (*Āṅguttara-nikāya* II.38)

Modern scholars have offered various interpretations of this passage. H. Kern, for example, held that here the Buddha denies that he is a man. He says, “Consequently, in all periods of the creed the Buddha is only anthropomorphic, not a man.”⁶ However, based on the interpretation of Buddhaghosa, the fifth-century C.E. commentator on the Pāli Canon, Hermann Oldenberg has argued that whatever the passage’s general intent may be, it can ultimately only mean that the Buddha’s humanity is merely apparent. Oldenberg claims, “It is a dogma of the Sthāvira that Śākyamuni, since he became a Buddha, possesses ‘*nirvāṇa* with residue’ (*sopadhi-śeṣanirvāṇa*) [only] when he is *parinirvṛta*, that is to say, altogether passionless, ergo not a man.”⁷ Here, Oldenberg presumably is representing the views of the Sthāviravādins. However, even though many texts refer to the Sthāvira’s belief in Buddha’s humanity, the ancient Buddhist tradition did not always faithfully follow such a “dogmatic” view. After the Buddha declares “I am not a man. . . I am a Buddha,” he continues, “Just so, Brahmin, though born in the world, grown up in the world, having overcome the world, I abide unsoiled by the world. Take it that I am a Buddha.” (. . . *evam eva kho brāhmaṇa loka jāto loka saṃvaḍḍhao lokaṃ abhibhuyya viharāmi anupalitto lokena. Buddhho ti maṃ brāhmaṇa dhārehīti*).⁸ With regard to the conception and birth of the Bodhisattva, and the previous existences of the Buddha before Enlightenment, all of the texts in the Pāli canon state that he is *aupapāduka*; that is, he became incarnate by his own wish, and without regard to the ordinary law of conception.⁹ One text asserts that to deny this possibility would be a great heresy.¹⁰

All of these statements in the Pāli texts demonstrate that whatever view of Buddha’s human nature the old tradition may have held as its dogma, the *lokottara*, the supramundane interpretation of the Buddha, was possible from the beginning of Buddhism. This interpretation was therefore not unique to Mahāyānists or proto-Mahāyānists. For Buddhists, whether from the stance of euhemerism or apotheosis, the Buddha was transformed from a mundane into a supramundane being. In this sense, we note that the passage “I am not a god, not a man” is complemented by the following passage: “Though born in the world, grown up in the world, having overcome the world, I abide unsoiled by the world. Take it that I am a Buddha.”

According to this passage, the Buddha does not belong to either category, man or god. He is a Being transformed by awakening, an Awakened One.¹¹

Here we need to understand two things: first, that the *lokottara* interpretation was available from the beginning of Buddhism, and, more importantly, that the binary opposition of human being and God did not exist in the ideology of the Buddhists. Śākyamuni was a charismatic figure who was understood by his followers as a Buddha, neither human being nor God.

Why, then, do modern scholars insist on seeing the Buddha as either a man or a god, and not as he saw himself, a Buddha? This problem can be traced back to British scholarship on Buddhism during the Victorian age, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. As Philip Almond brilliantly discusses in his book *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, the Buddha was “interpreted in the light of the Victorian ideal of humanity.”¹² Furthermore, he observes:

Buddhism was not only constructed and interpreted through Western images of the Oriental Mind. Its interpretation was influenced by many concerns of the Victorian age, and it too played a role in the shaping of nineteenth century ideals.¹³

The Victorian age can be characterized not only as the period of British colonial rule in India but also as the period of a developing naturalistic view of the universe, of developing historicism among scholars, and of the secularization of religious spirituality as evidenced in the emergence of critical views of the Bible. The Buddha was often compared to Martin Luther, as it was believed that he destroyed the idols of Brahmanism and threw off the burden of Brahmanic ritualism.¹⁴ The Buddha was also interpreted as a social reformer who broke up the caste system, as “the victorious champion of the lower classes against a haughty aristocracy of birth and brain.”¹⁵ This image, exemplifying the Victorian image of humanity, is still held today by scholars in both East and West; their image of the Buddha is thus a predominantly rational one.

It was through British scholarship on Pāli texts that Japanese and, later, Korean scholars learned about early Buddhism. While the critical reading of these texts by means of a developed philology contributed to East Asian studies of early Buddhism, rigid notions of Buddhist history, as well as unnecessary disputes concerning the person of the Buddha, negatively affected the course of later scholarship. Furthermore, we need to note the mentality of Asian intellectuals during the period of modernization. Intoxicated by the powerful impact of “scientific” and “rational” ideas imported from the West, Eastern intellectuals seemed to lose their critical perspective. They failed to notice the deeper implications of “scientific” and “rational.” The Japanese scholar Sueki Takehiro exemplifies the feelings of inferiority of East Asian intellectuals in the face of the “rational” and “scientific” West when he writes:

Indian thought has very rational and intellectual aspects. Early Buddhism is a good example. . . . If we look at Buddhism during the time when the Buddha was alive, it was quite different from the Buddhism that we see and hear in Japan. Since [the Japanese] people formerly believed that Buddhism represents lack of rationality and therefore must be anti-rational, they are astonished when they hear that Buddhism represents rational thought.¹⁶

Sueki seems to imply that Japanese Buddhism, lacking “rationality,” is in a deteriorated condition, degraded from the rational character of early Buddhism. Also, he implies that Buddhism should be highly regarded insofar as it represents rational thought. Yet I believe that rationality cannot be the measure of value in the Buddhist tradition and, furthermore, that the rationality he is perceiving in early Buddhism is, in fact, nothing more than the rationalized recasting of Buddhism created by Victorian scholars from the West.

The Strategy of Reading Buddhist Texts

The impact of the Western bias in favor of the rational and analytic can also be seen in current scholarly attitudes toward the interpretation of Buddhist texts. Before we discuss this issue, however, it is necessary first to define the nature of these texts.

Buddhist texts are not holy scriptures meant to reveal the intent of a God or gods; no divine origin or authority is attributed to them. This distinguishes them from other religious texts such as the Bible and Vedic literature. Nevertheless, Buddhist texts are not purely philosophical, either, in the modern sense; their philosophical arguments are presented in the form of religious narratives, and their richly metaphoric use of language diverges sharply from modern philosophical practice.

Moreover, Buddhist truth differs from truth in the modern philosophical sense, in which it has to do with a certain rational validity and cognitive cohesion, strongly influenced as it is by the methodology of the hard sciences. Buddhist truth, on the other hand, is based on meditational experience, and therefore often has no apparent relation to our ordinary daily experience. In fact, for Buddhists, the validity of our ordinary experience is often devalued or even negated as a result of what is experienced in the meditational realm. As there are various levels or dimensions of meditation, so are there various levels of truth or reality; in Buddhist thought these are termed conventional truth and ultimate truth.¹⁷ Modern scholarship often ignores this hierarchical system and thus prefers to consider meditational experience as mystical.

I am not arguing that meditational experience is more valid or real than ordinary experience. Rather, what I would like to discuss here is the proper way to understand Buddhist texts as they affirm the validity of a higher experience, that is, the ultimate truth, through meditation. Whether or not one accepts the Buddhist truth that results from meditational experience as more valid than truth obtained from ordinary experience, when studying Buddhist texts we should be aware of the Buddhist way of realizing truth, which is through meditation. Here again, the rationalistic approach to Buddhist texts becomes a problem in modern Buddhist scholarship.

The teachings of the Buddha, as incorporated in the narratives of the Buddhist texts, appear in the form of either a “theory” or a “description” of the enlightenment experience. Modern scholarship tends to concentrate on the theory while ignoring the description because, in the scholarly view, theory is rational while description is “mystical,” and therefore untrustworthy. However, as seen in the discussion by Lambert Schmithausen on the distinction between these two communicative modes,

theory in Buddhist texts is not always rational. Schmithausen defines description as a primary verbalization of the actual (spiritual) experience, and theory as “The secondary transformation of such a primary verbalization effected for logical, doctrinal or even tactical reasons.”¹⁸

The important point for us here is that the dichotomy between conceptualization and actual experience is found not only in the description but in the theory as well. Theory and description differ only in that one is more systematized than the other. A proper understanding of the Buddhist texts, therefore, encompasses the fact that there is an inherent tension between conceptualization and concrete experience in Buddhism.

The ancient Buddhists must have been well aware of the problems that arise from the theorization of actual experiences. For example, the well-known four rules of textual interpretation are mentioned in various places in the Buddhist texts under the name of refuges (*pratisaraṇa*): (1) *dharma* is the refuge, not the person; (2) the *spirit* is the refuge, not the letter; (3) the *sūtra of precise meaning (nītārtha)* is the refuge, not the *sūtra of provisional meaning (neyārtha)*; and (4) (direct) *knowledge* is the refuge, not (discursive) consciousness.¹⁹ Among these four exegetical rules, the first three are all contained implicitly in the last one, the rule of direct knowledge. On this point Etienne Lamotte states that “this last exegetical principle, which summarizes the previous three, shows that sound hermeneutics are based not on a literal though theoretical understanding of the noble truths, but on direct knowledge.”²⁰ Regarding this “direct knowledge” he quotes passages from the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*:

The bodhisattva attaches great importance to the knowledge of the direct comprehension of [the truths], and not to mere discursive consciousness of the letter of the meaning, which [consciousness] arises from listening and reflecting. Understanding that what should be known through knowledge arising from meditation cannot be recognized only through discursive consciousness arising from listening and reflecting, he abstains from rejecting or denying the teachings given by the Tathāgata, profound as they are.²¹

As we see here, Buddhist theories are a product not of discursive thinking but of meditation; their validity can be neither proved nor disproved by use of reason. Modern scholarship tends to ignore this fact, however, attempting to analyze Buddhist theory through a purely rationalistic approach. The deficiency of this approach can be seen in contemporary discussions of the first of the Four Noble Truths, that everything is suffering.

Scholars often picture the first Noble Truth as either a psychological or a philosophical axiom of Buddhism, reflecting the socioreligious atmosphere of the Buddha’s time. David Kalupahana admits that the Four Noble Truths “are not truths in the ordinary sense of the word, namely, truths that are distinguished from untruths or falsehood primarily on the basis of cognitive validity or rational consistency, in terms of correspondence or of coherence.”²² However, he continues:

In the context of these definitions of truth, what the Buddha referred to as a truth about existence may be termed a psychological truth. However, the Buddha spoke of them as “noble truth” (*ariya-saccāni*). This means that they are not merely epistemological or

rational truths. The conception of “nobility” involves a value judgment. Value is not decided in terms of higher or lower, as the term “noble” sometimes signifies; instead, it implies relevance or worth.²³

Kalupahana is certainly right to say that the truth of suffering includes a certain value judgment. However, he is wrong to say that it simply implies “relevance” or “worth,” as if it were nothing but an ethical or moral judgment on the human condition. Similarly, he elsewhere views the truth of suffering to be a pragmatic, empirical judgment.²⁴

Other scholars, such as the Buddhist historian Richard Gombrich, attempt to understand the truth of suffering in a historical context, essentially picturing the first Noble Truth as a response to the misery of the world of the Buddha’s time. After introducing Gosh’s opinion regarding socioeconomic changes in the Indian environment at that time, he continues:

There is, however, another factor which may have made reflective people gloomier about life. . . . I hasten to add that I am not putting it forward as total explanation for the axiom that life is suffering, but merely as a possible contributory cause, in conjunction with Gosh’s list and doubtless others not yet thought of. But reading McNeill’s *Plagues and Peoples* persuaded me that one should consider problems of public health and morality.²⁵

Thus, he considers that ecological disaster in the Ganges region, which was in the Buddha’s time the center of Indian civilization, caused the Buddha to view life in pessimistic terms.

This view can also be found in contemporary Korean Buddhist scholarship. In *Pulgyo kyori kangjwa*, Haeju Chŏn writes:

Why do we consider life to be suffering? It is because we are under the compulsion of old age and death, which approach quickly toward us, despite the fact that we desire longevity, cannot gratify our desire, and desire much more. And while it is true that sometimes we desire death, this is because we have, in fact, a hidden desire for a better life.²⁶

Chŏn’s understanding of the Noble Truth of suffering is based on her assumption that it derives not from an enlightenment experience but from phenomenal, ordinary experience. Thus she adds, “The suffering of the phenomenal world is indisputable fact, whether we are conscious of it or not, and whether we enter the priesthood or not.”²⁷

Because Kalupahana, Gombrich, and Chŏn consider the truth of suffering to be an ethical or empirical statement, they are misled by the passage, frequently quoted by scholars, in which each type of suffering experienced in life is specified: “Birth is suffering; decay is suffering; illness is suffering; death is suffering.” This list is really just the conceptualization of an insight derived from enlightenment. It is used for pedagogical purposes, offering clarification for those who, without the benefit of an enlightenment experience, might be puzzled by the phrase, “Everything is suffering.” It is thus a theoretical scheme to show the universal validity of a particular experience.

At this point, it might be helpful to look at a brief description, in contrast to a theoretical explanation, of the enlightenment experience preserved in the work of Aśvaghōṣa of the first century C.E.²⁸ It reads:

Then as the third watch of that night drew on, *the supreme master of trance turned his meditation to the real nature of this world*: “Alas, living beings obtain but toil; Over and over again they are born, grow old, die, pass on to a new life, and are reborn! Further, passion and dark delusion obscure their sight, and from the excess of their blindness, they yet, do not know how to get out of this great mass of suffering.”²⁹

Since the statement “Everything is suffering” derives not from rational contemplation but meditation, it is in a certain sense a retrospective truth, meaning that it comes to be known only when, having become enlightened, one looks back on one’s previous experience. This means that, for the unenlightened, it must be accepted on faith, and not as a logical proposition to be judged through reason. Buddhism recognizes this movement from faith to experiential knowledge through meditation in the three stages of *mārga*: the Path of Seeing (*darśana mārga*), the Path of Meditation (*bhāvana mārga*), and the Path of Realization (*aśaikṣa*).³⁰ In the first stage, the Path of Seeing, one must learn the teaching and accept it on faith. In the second stage, the Path of Meditation, one meditates on the teaching and tries to realize it as one’s own experience. In the final stage, the Path of Realization, one confirms as one’s own experience what one previously merely accepted on faith. In this scheme of practice, there is no difference at all between the content of faith and that of enlightenment; however, one’s experiential dimension expands from the ordinary experiential realm to that of enlightenment. This entails that one’s view of reality similarly expands with the expansion of the experiential realm.

This structure of Buddhist practice is found not just in the scheme of Theravāda Buddhist practice or of early Buddhism but also in Mahāyāna Buddhist practice and specifically in Ch’an practice as well. The noted Mahāyānist dicta “At the very stage of the initial faith one came to be endowed with the full, perfect enlightenment” and “The ordinary being is the very Buddha,” in fact, signify the same structure of practice as the above-mentioned three paths. Similarly, the famous passage that describes the path of Ch’an practice, beginning with “Mountain is mountain,” through “Mountain is water,” and finally ending with “Mountain is mountain,” once again also exemplifies the same structure, thus attesting to the fact that the content of enlightenment is not different from the content of initial faith.

Scholars tend to understand this structure by means of Hegelian dialectics, which is a linear movement toward synthesis. However, the structure of Buddhist practice, returning back to the starting point, is a circular movement rather than a linear one. Through such a circular movement, Buddhist practitioners experience different ontological dimensions, each of which affords them a different level of insight into the reality of the world. This is what Edward Conze meant by “degrees of reality,” or “A hierarchy of insights depend on (one’s) spiritual maturity.”³¹

Thus, if we understand the truth of suffering only with our empirical, ordinary experience, it becomes trivialized; after all, since we all know that illness is suffering

and that decay is suffering, what more is there to discuss?³² The Buddha did not teach us the way not to die, or the way not to be ill. Rather, the happiness that the Buddha prescribed for us can be achieved only by knowing the groundlessness of our desire, and this can only be realized through meditation culminating in enlightenment. Thus, the reason why the truth is qualified as “noble” is not, as Kalupahana assumes, that it signifies any virtue or worth. It is noble, as the ancient Abhidharmists were aware, because it is “the truth of the noble and by the noble one.” This fact cannot be understood properly without the insight attained through meditational experience.

Conclusion: What Did the Buddha Teach?

So far we have discussed the problem of current Buddhist scholarship in terms of the interpretation of the Buddha figure and the strategy of reading Buddhist texts. These two issues, as described in the previous pages, reflect one common problem, the tendency of modern scholars to take a rationalistic approach to Buddhism.

At present the “rational” greatly influences our reading of Buddhist texts, confining it within the limits of scholasticism. The mentality involved in such a selective reading is, on the one hand, the overestimation of the explanatory power of human reason and, on the other, a tendency to separate the realm of religion from the human existential realm. Western scholarship arrived at this standpoint from the traumatic experience of the dominance of the Church during the Medieval period. Failing to see the historical context of concepts like “rational” and “scientific,” East Asian scholars accepted them as part of modernity, and the East Asian tradition began to be reinterpreted in the light of the Western legacy.

Buddhist texts are a record of the enlightenment experience. This does not mean, however, that enlightenment is necessary in order properly to understand a Buddhist text. In fact, whether such an experience is possible or available to us may not be our primary concern. It is more important for scholars in the field of Buddhist studies to understand Buddhist texts, which reflect a verbalized experience of enlightenment, and thus include another dimension of reality. This dimension is impossible to reach through reason, even though reason is relied upon so heavily by people in the modern world. If we attempt to understand the enlightenment experience only in the light of our rationality, the Buddhist texts will serve as nothing but mythological narratives or, at most, edifying stories that merely tell us to live ethically, as we have seen in our discussion of the first Noble Truth of suffering.

That said, I would like to suggest the approach of “methodological agnosticism” as a strategy for reading Buddhist texts. Through this approach we may overcome the dilemma caused by the fact that although Buddhist texts are a record of enlightenment, modern scholars, who are not necessarily practitioners, tend to rely on rationality as their primary system of reference. However, in order properly to understand this reading method, we have to distinguish “rationality” from “a rationalistic approach.” “Methodological agnosticism” requires that, while using rationality as

the primary tool for scholarly study, we accept a certain realm as it is; in doing so, we deny our rationality access to it. In this way we may, at the very least, prevent the proper meaning of the texts from being distorted.

The traditional methodology of Buddhism has much to offer modern scholarly method on this point. The ancient East Asian scholar-monks created the interrelated concepts of *t'i* and *yung* as a method of interpreting Buddhism. They delineated *yung* as the realm of things that can be explained by reason, and *t'i* as the realm of things beyond reason. Although these realms are clearly delineated, the fact that *t'i* and *yung* exist in a nondualistic relationship means that human beings are in fact able, in a certain sense, to attain the world of *t'i* through their rational understanding. If we employ the words of the *Awakening of Mahayana Faith*: although the world of ineffable suchness, which corresponds to *t'i*, the domain of enlightenment, cannot be known through our reason, the world of *yung* can be known by us through the world of rationality. Thus, the term "methodological agnosticism" describes the process by which we can reach a qualified understanding of *t'i* through *yung*. Most importantly, by making clear the distinction between the two realms, and by acknowledging the limits of reason, we can avoid mistaking *yung* for *t'i*.

Moreover, as Stanislaw Schayer proposed long ago, this methodological agnosticism can be a valid tool for reconstructing precanonical Buddhism. So far, the enterprise of reconstructing precanonical Buddhism has been pursued, mostly by Japanese scholars, by collecting common doctrines scattered among various Buddhist texts. However, my survey of the Buddhist canon leads me to believe that the common doctrines are not necessarily old strata; on the contrary, they could well be younger ones that came to be subscribed to by various Buddhist schools. As Schayer brilliantly discusses, uncommon doctrines or sometimes contradictory ones, which survived among canonical doctrines, could very well be older strata:

There arises a further question: why have those texts not been suppressed in spite of their contradictory, non-canonical character? There is only one answer: evidently they have been transmitted by a tradition old enough and considered to be authoritative by the compilers of the Canon. The last conclusion follows of itself: these texts representing ideas and doctrines contradictory to the generally admitted canonical viewpoint are survivals of older, precanonical Buddhism.³³

Viewed in this way, the history of Buddhism cannot be reconstructed, as we often assume, simply by tracing the history of texts. Rather, the real history of Buddhism can be more accurately reconstructed by tracing the history of ideas. Regarding this point, Lamotte remarks that "we cannot, therefore, accept, as does a certain critic, that as from the first Buddhist Council 'a continual process of divergence from the original doctrine of the Teacher is evident'; on the contrary, we are of the opinion that the Buddhist doctrine evolved along the lines which its discoverer had unconsciously traced for it."³⁴ Given the unreliability of the historical records of the extant Buddhist canons, however, the rationalistic approach of modern Buddhist studies makes it difficult to trace what the Buddha actually taught us.

Notes

- 1 – Regarding this point, Stanislaw Schayer argues: “The notion of what is philosophical or not is indeed entirely lacking in precision. If, for instance, Professor de La Vallée Poussin in his book, *Le dogma et la philosophie du Bouddhisme*, p. 45, pretends that the doctrine of Buddhist Yogins about real worlds corresponding to each ecstatic state is ‘hardly philosophical’ (peu philosophique), there is no doubt that other scholars may be found who will consider the same notion as decidedly philosophical” (Schayer 1935, p. 122). Also, Philip Almond discussed Victorian British scholarship on this issue in a chapter of his book *The British Discovery of Buddhism*; see Almond 1988, pp. 93–96.
- 2 – Chön 1993, p. 24.
- 3 – Yi 1995, p. 6.
- 4 – Yi 1991, p. 20.
- 5 – Woodward and Hare 1932–1936, 2:44.
- 6 – Kern 1968, p. 64.
- 7 – Oldenberg 1882, p. 381.
- 8 – *Aṅguttara-Nikāya* II.38, in Woodward and Hare 1932–1936, 2:44 (emphasis added). This passage appears also in *Samyutta-Nikāya* III.140 and elsewhere. However, in the *Kathāvatthu* (XIII.1) it is quoted by certain heretics. According to the Commentary, the heretics are Vetulyakas. Thus, it is stated: “That it is not right to say ‘The Exalted Buddha lived in the world of mankind’ . . . [But] Surely then the Exalted Buddha lived among men. Hence it is not right to say ‘The Exalted Buddha lived in the world of mankind’” (Aung 1910, pp. 323–324). Concerning Vetulyakas mentioned in the Commentary of *Kathāvatthu*, Minayeff has noticed that this sect is much later than the traditional but disputable date of the *Kathāvatthu* (246 B.C.). See the footnote in La Vallée Poussin 1962, p. 743a.
- 9 – La Vallée Poussin, p. 741b n.
- 10 – The *Sāmañña-phala Sutta* (*Dīgha-Nikāya* I.55) (cited as the heretic views of Ajita Kesa-kambalī): “. . . *n’ atthi mātā n’ atthi pitā, n’ atthi sattāopapātikā, . . .*” (“. . . There is neither father nor mother, *nor beings without them*”) (emphasis added) (Rhys Davids et al. 1899–1921, 1:73). It is only in the *Mahāvastu* that the virginity of the mother of the Buddha is asserted. See the footnote in La Vallée Poussin 1962, p. 741.
- 11 – The same interpretation can be made in the following passages of the *Mahā Parinibbāna Suttanta* (*Dīgha-Nikāya* II.109): The Buddha said to Ānanda, “Now I call to mind, Ānanda, how when I used to enter into an assembly of many hundred nobles, before I had seated myself there or talked to them . . . , I used to become in colour like unto their colour, and in voice like unto their

voice. . . . But they knew me not when I spoke, and would say: *'Who may this be who thus speaks? a man or a god?'* Then having instructed, . . . I would vanish away. But they knew me not even when I vanished away: and would say: *'Who may this be who has thus vanished away? a man or a god?'*" (emphasis added) (Rhys Davids et al. 1899–1921, 2:117).

12 – Almond 1988, p. 140.

13 – Ibid.

14 – Ibid., p. 74.

15 – Ibid., p. 75 (cited from the account in the *Saturday Review* of Oldenberg's *Buddha*).

16 – Sueki 1970, p. 24 (translation mine).

17 – The identity of conventional truth and ultimate truth cannot be seen from the lower level, only from the higher one.

18 – Schmithausen 1981, p. 200.

19 – Cited from Lamotte 1985, p. 5; the same article appears in Lopez 1988, pp. 11–27. For the original reference, see Wogihara 1971, p. 704. It reads:

catvārīmāni bhikṣavaḥ pratisaraṇāni. katamāni catvāri. dharmāḥ pratisaraṇam na pudgalaḥ, arthaḥ pratisaraṇam na vyañjanam, nīrtham. sūtram pratisaraṇam na neyārtham. jñānam pratisaraṇam na vijñānam.

20 – Lamotte 1985, p. 18.

21 – Cited from ibid. For the original reference, see Wogihara 1971, p. 257.

22 – Kalupahana 1992, p. 85.

23 – Ibid.

24 – Ibid., p. 87.

25 – Gombrich 1988, p. 58.

26 – Chōn 1993, p. 37.

27 – Ibid.

28 – Although the precise date of Aśvaghōṣa is not certain, it is safe to say he was active between 50 B.C.E. and 100 C.E. For a more detailed discussion, see Johnston 1984, pp. xiii–xvii.

29 – Ibid., pp. 208–209 (with slight modifications; emphasis added). Since this portion is not available in the extant Sanskrit text, the translation was based on the Tibetan version.

30 – Literally, the Path of no further training, the stage of *arhat*.

31 – Conze 1962, p. 17.

32 – Buddhist tradition, particularly in the Abhidharma, listed three different types of suffering: (1) suffering that is suffering in and of itself (*duḥkhaduḥkhatā*), (2) suffering that is change or transformation (*vipariṇāma duḥkhatā*), and (3) suffering through the fact of being conditioned (*saṃskāra duḥkhatā*). The first two types are empirical sufferings and only the last one is significant enough to be referred to as a truth, which, again, resulted from the insight of the enlightenment experience. Thus, it is mentioned in the sixth chapter of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*:

sarve tu saṃskārāḥ saṃskāraduḥkhatayā duḥkhāḥ. āha cātra:

*ūrṇapakṣma yathā eva hi karatalasaṃstham na vedyate pumbhiḥ
akṣigataṃ tu tathā eva hi janayaty aratiṃ ca pīḍāṃ ca
karatala sadṛśo vālo na vetti saṃskāraduḥkhatā pakṣma
akṣisadṛśas tu vidvāṃste na eva udvejyate gāḍham iti. (Pradhan 1967, p. 329)*

Yet, these are all ‘conditioned’ things which are suffering through the nature of ‘being conditioned’. These are recognized only by Aryas.

Thus it is said:

It is like a hair on the palm of the hand, which is not felt by people. However, the same in the eye causes suffering and injury. The foolish one, representing the hand, does not see the hair, which is suffering through being conditioned. However, Aryas, representing the eye, would be greatly agitated by it. (my translation)

33 – Schayer 1935, p. 124.

34 – Lamotte 1985, p. 20.

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