Buddhism as Philosophy

An Introduction

MARK SIDERITS

Published in the UK by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Great Britain

Published in North America by
Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
Indianapolis/Cambridge

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CHAPTER TWO

Early Buddhism: Basic Teachings

In this chapter we will explore the basic teachings of early Buddhism, the teachings of the Buddha and his immediate disciples. This will serve to introduce a set of core principles that all Buddhist philosophers accept. In later chapters we will examine how various Buddhist philosophers developed these core teachings in different ways. But before we get to those basic ideas that are common to all schools of Buddhism, it might be useful to say a few words about the life of the Buddha.

2.1

Apart from his career as a teacher, there is little that is known with much confidence about the details of Gautama's life. Until recently, scholars were fairly certain that he lived from 566 to 486 BCE. But recent research suggests that his death may have been as late as 404 BCE. So if we accept the traditional claim that he lived for 80 years, then perhaps his life was lived wholly within the fifth century BCE. He was born in the city-state of Kapilavastu, the home of the Śākyas,[1] in what is now the western part of Nepal, near the Indian border. He grew up in relatively comfortable circumstances. But in early adulthood he chose to abandon the settled life of a householder and became a wandering renunciant or *śramaṇa*, someone whose life is dedicated to finding answers to certain spiritual questions.

The *śramaṇas* of sixth and fifth century BCE India represented a new phenomenon in Indian religious life. They rejected key elements of the prevailing Brahmanical orthodoxy as inadequate to their spiritual concerns. The Vedic religion that they challenged was centered on a set of texts, the *Vedas*, that the Brahmin priests considered supernatural in origin and authoritative. These texts enjoin performance of various rituals and sacrifices, both to uphold the cosmic order and to obtain various benefits for the person in whose name the ritual or sacrifice is carried out. But the new set of ideas associated with the notions of karma and rebirth made these older religious practices seem unsatisfying. If after I die I shall just be born into some new life, what point is there in trying to make my present situation more comfortable? Shouldn't I be more concerned with the lives to come after this one? Indeed what exactly is the point of going on to life after life? Is that cycle to go on forever? The Vedic religion seemed satisfactory as long as people held on to conventional views of human life and human happiness. If we each have just this one life on earth (and perhaps an afterlife thereafter), then it might make sense to devote it to things like

[1] Hence the epithet he later acquired, 'Śākyamuni' or 'sage of the Śākyas'.

sensual pleasure, wealth and power, and the social standing of a virtuous person.[2] But with the advent of new ideas about the nature of human life, the old answers no longer seemed to work. And so the *śramaṇas* sought a new account of human happiness and how to attain it.

Among the many *śramaṇas*, there were some who claimed to have found a solution to the problem of human existence, and offered to teach it to others. Their answers differed, but most shared the idea that true happiness could only be found by overcoming our ignorance about our true nature. And most also agreed that the truly ideal state for us must involve liberation (*mokṣa*) from the cycle of rebirths. The *śramaṇas* also explored a wide variety of techniques for attaining this ideal state they sought. These included various ascetic practices – performing austerities such as fasting, remaining utterly motionless for long periods, abstaining from sleep, and the like. They also included various meditational or yogic practices: learning to calm the mind and focus it in one-pointed concentration, exploring a variety of altered states of consciousness, and the like.[3]

Like other new renunciants, after abandoning his life as a householder Gautama sought to find a suitable *śramaṇa* teacher. According to our oldest accounts, he studied with several, and mastered the theories and techniques they taught, but found these inadequate. He then struck out on his own. Coming across an isolated forest grove, he resolved to devote a full night of concentrated effort to solving the problem of human suffering. Employing a variety of yogic techniques, he entered into four successive stages of meditation, and thereby acquired three sorts of knowledge: recollection of his own past lives, understanding of the general laws of karma, and knowledge of what would come to be called the four noble truths. This knowledge signaled his enlightenment (*bodhi*), his attainment of nirvāna or liberation from rebirth. Having thus attained his goal, he considered whether or not to teach his discovery to others. At first he is said to have been deterred by the difficulty and subtlety of the truths he had discovered. But he eventually concluded that there were some who could grasp these truths and thereby profit from his discovery. So he

[2]While the *Vedas* did not teach rebirth, they were not entirely clear on the question of an afterlife. Brahmanical culture of the time also recognized three possible goals in life: sensual pleasure (*kāma*), material wealth and power (*artha*), and virtue and social repute (*dharma*). For each of these goals there was thought to be a special science concerning methods for obtaining it. And a literature developed around each of these sciences. So the *Kāma Sātra*, for instance, is the foundational text for the traditional science of obtaining sensual pleasure.

[3]While the *śraṇana* movement may have started as a protest against Brahmanical orthodoxy, the Vedic tradition eventually responded to this challenge by developing a number of its own systems for attaining liberation or *mokṣa*. These included such philosophical schools as Sāṃkhya, Nyāya and Advaita Vedānta. These schools are referred to as 'orthodox' because they accept the authority of the *Vedas*. In this they differ from Buddhism and the other 'heterodox' schools (such as Jainism), which deny that the *Vedas* have any special authoritative status. Through the orthodox schools the Brahmanical tradition was in effect countenancing *mokṣa* as a fourth possible goal in life, in addition to the original three of *kāma*, *artha* and *dharma*.

embarked on the career of a Buddha, one who has solved the problem of human suffering through their own efforts (without reliance on the teachings of others) and imparts that knowledge to others out of compassion.

There is another, far more elaborate account of Gautama's life before his enlightenment. On that account, Gautama is a prince, his father, Śuddhodana, being a powerful and wealthy king. Gautama's conception is immaculate, and he is born not in the normal way but by emerging from his mother's side without breaking her skin or otherwise causing her pain. Immediately after birth he takes seven steps in each of the four cardinal directions; the world roars in response, and blossoms spring up under his feet. A seer tells Śuddhodana that the infant will grow up to be either a Buddha or a world monarch. He will become a Buddha if he sees four things in his youth: an old person, a sick person, a corpse, and a wandering renunciant. If he does not see all four he will become a world monarch. Śuddhodana wishes to ensure that his first-born son becomes a mighty king, so he has Gautama raised in a luxurious palace surrounded by only young, healthy and attractive people. Gautama grows up in these surroundings, marries and has a son. Yet on four successive days while out hunting he sees each of the four sights. He then resolves to become a *śramaṇa*, and makes his escape from the palace at night. He spends several years with a succession of teachers, but only after striking out on his own does he succeed in attaining the goal of liberation. Upon attaining enlightenment, it is Māra, the evil god of death, who tries to persuade him not to convey his discoveries to the world. Other gods then intercede to protect him from Māra's powers and ensure that there is a Buddha in the world.

This more elaborate account of Gautama's early life is the basis of popular depictions of the Buddha in Buddhist art and literature. But this version of the story only emerges several centuries after the Buddha's death. And it clearly reflects the common process whereby the life of a sect's founder comes to be draped in legend. We know, for instance, that Gautama cannot have been a prince nor his father a king, since Kapilavastu was not a monarchy in his day. Likewise the Buddha was quite insistent on the point that he was no more than an ordinary human being. This would seem to explain why the tales of miracles surrounding his birth and enlightenment are absent from the earliest accounts of Gautama's life. Only much later did some of his followers, perhaps out of missionary zeal, transform the story of his early life into a hagiography. Still there are things we can learn from these legendary accretions to his biography. Consider the tale of the four sights, for instance. Why might those who shaped the legend have chosen an old person, a sick person, a corpse, and a *śramaṇa* as the sights that would spur a pampered prince to renounce his life of luxury? Clearly because the first three signify the fact of human mortality, and the existential crisis that results from this fact, while the fourth represents the possibility of averting the crisis. This point will prove useful when we try to understand the Buddha's teachings on suffering.

2.2

While there is not much we know with certainty about Gautama's life before his enlightenment, we know a great deal about his career as a teacher after enlightenment. For instance, we know that he first taught his new insights when he encountered five former companion renunciants at Sārnāth, near Vārānasī.[4] We will examine the record of that encounter later, but it might be helpful to begin with an overview. It seems that these renunciants followed a path of extreme asceticism, but when Gautama left them and struck out on his own he abandoned such practices. So they now suspect him of having lapsed into a dissolute life. He thus begins by describing the path he has discovered as a 'middle path' between the two extremes of asceticism and the life of sensual pleasure. He then describes this path as a 'noble eightfold path', listing its eight component practices: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right exertion, right self-possession and right concentration. This leads naturally to the enumeration of the four noble truths, since the claim that there is such a path is the fourth of the four truths. The four are, in summary form:

1. There is suffering.
2. There is the origination of suffering: suffering comes into existence in dependence on causes.
3. There is the cessation of suffering: all future suffering can be prevented.
4. There is a path to the cessation of suffering.

Now the second truth is later elaborated in terms of a twelve-linked chain of causes and effects, the first of which is ignorance. And the ignorance in question will be explained as failure to know three characteristics of reality: impermanence, suffering and non-self. It is thus significant that the Buddha goes on to teach the five renunciants the doctrine of non-self, and moreover that he argues for non-self on the grounds that all the constituents of the person are impermanent. Finally, according to the sūtra that recounts this first teaching, it ended with all five *śramaṇas* attaining enlightenment.

To summarize, in this early episode in the Buddha's teaching career we find reference to the following doctrines and ideas:

- the Dharma as a middle path,
- the eight-fold path,
- the four noble truths,
- the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination,
- the three characteristics of existence.

[4]The Buddha's teachings are referred to collectively as the Dharma. (This use of the word is often translated as 'law'; we will encounter other uses of the same Sanskrit term.) The Buddhist tradition refers to the encounter at Sārnāth as 'the first turning of the wheel of the Dharma'.

Let us now look at these in more detail. The doctrine of the four truths plays a central organizing function in the Buddha's teachings, so we should begin there. The first truth, that there is suffering, seems clear enough. And it would be hard to deny that it is true: there is all too much suffering in the world. But this raises the question why the Buddha should have thought it necessary to point it out. In fact, Buddhists claim this truth, properly understood, is among the hardest for most people to acknowledge. This is the first of the four truths because the Buddha thinks it is something about which ordinary people are all in denial. To see why, we need to understand just what is meant here by 'suffering'. And here is where the legend of the four sights becomes relevant. What it tells us is that by this term Buddhists do not mean ordinary pain, such as what we feel when we are injured or sick. Instead they mean existential suffering – the frustration, alienation and despair that result from the realization of our own mortality. Remember that according to the legend, Gautama would not have become a Buddha had he not encountered the facts of old age, disease, decay and death until late in his life. What is it about these facts that makes their recognition significant? Well, we each want our own lives to go well. We want to be happy. And when we want happiness, what we want requires a sense that our lives have meaning, value and purpose. Of course different individuals are made happy by different sorts of things. But when something makes someone happy, that's because they take it to say good things about who they are and where they are going. The difficulty is that once we are forced to acknowledge our own mortality, it becomes difficult to sustain the sense that events can have significance for my life. How can anything contribute to the meaning of my life when in the long run I shall be dead, with the world going merrily on its way without me? Now we all know at some level that some day we will die, yet we still seem to live our lives on the assumption that death can be indefinitely postponed. It is when events show this assumption to be false that existential suffering arises.

Here is one point at which you might think it makes a difference whether or not we accept the doctrine of karma and rebirth. Indeed you might think that the account of existential suffering that has just been given only makes sense if we deny this doctrine. And since the Buddhists accept the doctrine, you might suspect that they must mean something else by 'suffering' than existential suffering, the sense of alienation and despair that comes from recognizing the implications of our mortality. After all, if we live another life after we die, my death can't be the end of me. And if what I do in this life determines what sort of life I get next time around, wouldn't what happens to me now always have meaning for my future existence? So why would existential suffering arise for someone who accepted karma and rebirth? The Buddhist will reply, though, that these suspicions merely illustrate how difficult it can be to grasp the true nature of suffering. The tradition distinguishes among three different layers within the notion of suffering, each more subtle than its predecessor: suffering due to pain, suffering due to impermanence, and suffering due to conditions. It is the last of these that is meant to explain why the fact of rebirth itself constitutes a kind of existential suffering. But to see why Buddhiists think this, we

need to say something about the first two ways in which they claim we experience suffering.

The first includes all those experiences that we would ordinarily classify as painful: being cut, burnt or struck, having a toothache or headache, losing a prized possession, not getting the job we'd set our hearts on, and the like. Note that even with such simple cases as a toothache there are actually two levels to the negative nature of the experience. First there is the feeling of pain itself, the immediate sensation of hurting. But there is also the worry that we commonly experience when we have something like a toothache: what does this painful feeling say about who I am and where I am going? Even when we don't put it to ourselves in so many words, this sense of 'dis-ease', of not being at home with ourselves, can permeate our lives when we have some nagging pain, undermining even our enjoyment of ordinary pleasures.[5]

The second form of suffering includes all negative experiences deriving from impermanence. This has much wider scope than one might suspect. As we will later see in more detail, Buddhists claim that everything that originates in dependence on causes must also cease to exist. And since all those things we ordinarily care about are dependent on causes, it follows that they are all impermanent. Now the pain of a toothache could be counted among the experiences that derive from impermanence. We get toothaches because healthy teeth are impermanent. But it is not just getting something we don't want, like a toothache, that is included here. Getting something we do want also comes under the category of suffering as impermanence. Of course it seems counter-intuitive to classify getting what you desire – a car, a job, a child, the esteem of people you care about, happiness for a friend – as a negative experience. But this is why Buddhists call this kind of suffering more subtle than the first. There is suffering in getting what one wants because the desired object is impermanent. So the happiness we feel is always tinged with anxiety about losing it. Indeed the feeling of happiness we derive from getting what we want is itself impermanent. When the novelty wears off, so does the feeling of happiness. Which is why we seem to always be in pursuit of something new. This explains the pattern we follow: always formulating some new goal, some new object of desire, when we get what we previously wanted (or give it up as unattainable). And when we begin to notice this pattern in our behavior, the happiness we feel on obtaining something new begins to drain away.

The last point leads naturally to the third level of suffering, suffering due to conditions. By 'conditions' here is meant the factors that are said to be responsible for rebirth (namely the intentions or volitions that motivate actions and cause karmic fruit). So suffering due to conditions refers to the suffering that results from rebirth. But to revert to the question we asked earlier, why should the mere fact of rebirth

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[5]'Dis-ease' might be a better translation of the Sanskrit term we are discussing here, *duḥkha,* than is 'suffering'. This term is formed from the prefix *duḥ*, which is related to the English 'dis', plus the noun *kha*, which came to mean 'happiness' or 'ease'.

count as a form of suffering? Some specific rebirths might be quite unpleasant. But if we knew the karmic causal laws, we might be able to avoid those and obtain only rebirths in relatively fortunate circumstances. Why would that still count as suffering? The answer is encapsulated in the fact that re-birth also entails re-death. When we think that rebirth would help us avoid the suffering that is due to our own impermanence (that is, our mortality), we are forgetting that rebirth means re-encountering that very impermanence we wish to escape. Once we take this into account, the prospect no longer seems quite so inviting. Indeed the idea of perpetually going through this cycle – being born, living a life, losing that life and then starting anew – can only inspire a kind of cosmic ennui: what could possibly be the point? What we are now faced with is the requirement that there be an endless succession of future lives in order to sustain the sense that the life I am now living has a point. But if this life gets its point from the next, and that from its successor, and so on, will this really work? Perhaps the doctrine of karma and rebirth, instead of undercutting the claim that sentient beings are subject to suffering, actually reinforces the point.

It might be natural to wonder if the Buddha was not unduly pessimistic. Surely life is not all doom and gloom. And perhaps with a little luck and some good sense, one can live a life that is predominantly characterized by happiness. Of course the Buddhist will respond that this is just what nirvāna amounts to. But the opponent will say that seeking nirvāna seems a rather drastic step. For this requires abandoning much of what is usually thought to give life value: sensual pleasure, wealth and power, and virtue and repute. Surely at least some people can live lives that are happily devoted to such conventional ends as family, career and recreation. The Buddhist will respond that such pursuits can sometimes give pleasure and happiness. Buddhists do not deny that people sometimes experience pleasure and happiness. They claim, though, that pleasure and happiness are deceptive in nature: being in these states leads us to believe that they can be made to endure, when in fact, for the reasons sketched above, they cannot. And in the long run, they claim, those reasons dictate that the happiness one obtains from such pursuits will be outweighed by the suffering. The pursuit of happiness will become a kind of treadmill, and the sense that we are on this treadmill leads to alienation and despair. For anyone who is at all reflective about their life, it is inevitable that the happiness in their life will be outweighed by the suffering.

Here is one last question before we move on: might anti-depressants help? Modern medicine has created a class of drugs designed to help people who have lost all sense of enjoyment in their lives. And the more subtle sense of suffering that we have just been discussing sounds somewhat like this condition. Could a simple pill be an alternative to the arduous task of seeking enlightenment? Here is one possible way the Buddhist might respond to this question. First, they might claim that no pill can alter the facts. Taking a pill might alter how we assess those facts, but that is another matter entirely. For what the pill might actually do is foster an illusion, create the sense that we can continue to ignore those facts. Suppose that by taking an anti-depressant we could avoid the sense that the happiness-seeking project is an endless treadmill. We might then be looking at the same facts that led the Buddha to his

analysis of suffering, but we would be seeing those facts in a different light. The Buddhist would claim, though, that our assessment of the facts would be unrealistic. Taking the pill would simply re-instill the illusion that conventional happiness is attainable in the long run. And this, they would hold, is no alternative to facing the facts squarely and taking the appropriate action: seeking nirvāna.[6] It is an interesting question whether the assumption they would then be making is true.[7]

2.3

While the first of the four noble truths points out the existence of suffering, the second is meant to explain how it originates. The underlying idea at work here is that by learning the cause of some phenomenon we may become able to exercise control over it. So the Buddha gives a detailed account of the factors he claims are the conditions in dependence on which suffering arises. This account, the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination, is traditionally understood as describing a sequence that takes place over three successive lives. In one life there occurs (1) ignorance (namely ignorance of the fact that all sentient existence is characterized by impermanence, suffering and non-self), and because of its occurrence there occur (2) volitions (*saṃskāra*), understood as the active forces in karma. It is in dependence on these volitions in the one life that there occurs (3) consciousness in the next life. That is, rebirth (in the form of the first moment of consciousness in a new life) occurs because of the desires that led to the performance of actions in the past life. On this consciousness in turn depends the occurrence of (4) a sentient body. That is, it is due to that first moment of rebirth consciousness that the organized matter of the fetal body comes to be a sentient being. On the existence of the sentient body in turn depend (5) the six organs of sense (the organs of the five external senses plus an 'inner sense' that is aware of inner states such as pain). On these depend (6) contact or sensory stimulation. And given sensory stimulation there arises (7) feeling, that is, the hedonic states of pleasure, pain and indifference. Feeling in turn causes (8) desire, and desire leads to (9) appropriation (*upādāna*), the attitude whereby one takes certain

[6]This is not to deny that anti-depressants can be genuinely helpful for those suffering from clinical depression. The Buddhist claims that the happiness-seeking project cannot be sustained in the long run. While this might seem like a depressing analysis, remember that they also claim there is a better alternative to that project, namely nirvāna. And they think we should make the effort to seek that better alternative. Someone who is clinically depressed might not be capable of making such an effort. Their sense of the futility of it all might render them unable to do anything to better their situation. A Buddhist might then say that anti-depressants would be useful in their case.

[7]Assume that by taking a pill one could permanently prevent the subtle sense of suffering from arising. Assume as well that the Buddha's analysis is correct, that the happiness-seeking project really is an endless treadmill. Would it actually be better to not take the pill, face up to the facts, and seek nirvāna? The Buddhist claims it would be, but why? What assumption would their answer seem to be based on? And is that assumption correct?

things as being 'me' or 'mine'. In dependence on appropriation there originates (10) becoming. This consists of the volitions that bring about the next rebirth, as well as the psychophysical elements making up the sentient body in that rebirth. In dependence on this there is (11) birth, that is, rebirth into the third life. And in dependence on birth there is (12) old age and death, here standing for all existential suffering.

There are obviously some difficulties in this list. For instance the tenth condition, becoming, seems to involve a repetition of the second, volition, and the fourth, sentient body. It also seems odd that birth into the third life should be listed as a separate condition, while birth into the second life is not. There is another version of the list that omits the six organs of sense, and instead has the sentient body serve as the condition for consciousness. Since consciousness has already been said to be the condition for sentient body, this has the effect of making consciousness both the cause and the effect of sentient body.[8] And there are versions of the list with only ten links, omitting the first two conditions altogether. These and other problems have led some scholars to suggest that our list of twelve results from the fusion of what were originally two or more separate lists.

But let us put such questions to one side, and look instead at the basic logic underlying the list that we have. The idea seems to be this. One is born into this life because in the last life one acted on the basis of volitions that were formed in ignorance of the facts about our existence. Having been born with a body, senses and mind, one comes in contact with sense objects, and this cognitive contact brings about feelings of pleasure, pain and indifference. These feelings trigger desires, and desires that are conditioned by ignorance lead to the stance known as appropriation: taking certain things (including things that no longer exist or do not yet exist) as 'me', and other things as 'mine' or my possessions. It is this stance that fuels rebirth, and this produces the suffering that is associated with all sentient existence.

How, one might wonder, could the first condition, ignorance, occur without there already being a sentient being (something that is not found until the fourth link in the series)? Doesn't ignorance require someone whose ignorance it is? When we wonder this, we are taking this list as an account of the very beginning of the series of lives. But the list should not be taken this way. What is here treated as the first life in a sequence of three is itself the effect of prior conditions that occurred in some yet earlier life.[9] So it is not saying that ignorance occurred before there were mind and

[8]It is this version of the list that will later lead some Abhidharma philosophers to hold that two simultaneously existing things can be both cause and effect of one another. This notion of reciprocal causation will become the center of some Abhidharma controversies.

[9]The Buddha says that we cannot discern the very first life in the series of lives we have lived. In the later tradition this is often taken to mean that the series of lives (and so our ignorance as well) is beginningless. But the Buddha's statement might be interpreted another way: while there might have been a very first life in the series, we could never tell which one that is. For it's always possible that although there were earlier lives, we simply can't remember any. Given this difficulty, it is pointless to speculate about whether there is or is not a first life in the series, and what might explain this. Suffering exists in the present life, and such speculation won't help solve that problem.

body. Ignorance comes first on the list because of its key role in producing suffering. In effect what we have in this theory is an account of how ignorance, by bringing about suffering, reinforces and thus perpetuates itself. When the chain of dependent origination is seen in this way, it is even possible to separate it from the doctrine of karma and rebirth. What it then amounts to is basically just the claim that the ignorance occurring at any one point in one's life causes one to act in certain ways that set the stage for both later suffering and continued ignorance.

The third truth, that there is the cessation of suffering, follows directly from the second truth. Ignorance is a remediable condition. Since it is possible to cure our ignorance, it is possible to put an end to the feedback loop that results in suffering. The fourth truth then spells out a set of eight practices that are designed to bring about this cure. They are: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right exertion, right self-possession and right concentration. These eight are said to fall into three basic kinds: the first two represent wisdom, the next three are the factors of morality, and the final three are the practices that make up meditation. The factors are listed in a way that might suggest a sequential order: start with right view, follow the rules of right conduct, proceed to concentration, then attain nirvāna. But in actual practice the different factors are said to mutually reinforce one another, so that the mastery of each will involve contributions from the others. For instance, one might begin by acquiring a rudimentary grasp of the basic teachings of the Buddha (right view), on that basis form the (right) intention to seek nirvāna, and then set about trying to obey the moral rules set out for lay followers, such as not lying (right speech), not stealing (right action) and not working as a butcher (right livelihood). But when following these moral rules becomes habitual, this has the effect of clearing the mind of certain passions that can interfere with attaining wisdom. So this can lead to a deeper appreciation of the Buddha's teachings (right view), followed by the (right) intention to become a monk or nun. Entrance into the order of Buddhist monks and nuns (the *saṃgha*) brings with it a new set of moral virtues one must acquire. Practice in accordance with these virtues, along with the newly deepened understanding of the Dharma, helps one then begin to engage in meditation. But meditating also makes it easier to attain the required moral virtues. And meditation likewise produces insights into the nature of the mind that further strengthen one's appreciation of the Dharma. And so on.

For our purposes the reciprocal relation between wisdom and meditation is particularly significant. In the context of the Buddhist path, 'wisdom' means the practice of philosophy: analyzing concepts, investigating arguments, considering objections, and the like. So the content of this 'wisdom' is just the Buddhist philosophy that we are examining here. Now we already know that Buddhists claim ignorance is ultimately responsible for our suffering. And wisdom looks like the antidote to ignorance. So it makes sense that Buddhism should claim doing philosophy is necessary for attaining enlightenment. But will doing philosophy be sufficient? Buddhists generally say no. And it's not too difficult to guess why this is. For we also know something about what this ignorance supposedly consists in: the

failure to recognize the three characteristics, the facts of impermanence, suffering and non-self. This failure is exhibited in some fundamental assumptions we make about our lives: that we and the things we want can continue to exist indefinitely, that we can attain happiness by pursuing conventional goals, and that there is a true 'me' for whom this life can have meaning and value. Since almost everything we do is based on these assumptions, we are constantly in the business of reinforcing them. So even if our philosophical practice tells us they are false, it may not be so easy to uproot them. The situation here is like the case of a smoker. They may know perfectly well that smoking shortens their life. But each cigarette smoked reinforces their addiction, making it harder to act on that knowledge. So, the Buddhist says, meditation is needed in order to break the cycle and bring home the knowledge gained through philosophy.

To learn to meditate is to learn to control the mind. That control is then used to examine various mental processes, and to counteract those processes that perpetuate ignorance and suffering. So through meditation one can supposedly confirm that there is no self, by observing how impermanent mental states actually do all the work that we imagine could only be done by an enduring self. We can also see how certain mental states, such as anger and hatred, can reinforce belief in a self and thus perpetuate ignorance. And through meditation we can learn to counteract such states. In the case of anger and hatred, for instance, the adept is taught to cultivate feelings of kindness and sympathetic joy toward ever larger circles of beings, starting with friends and loved ones and eventually extending to those toward whom they feel anger and enmity. So meditation serves as a necessary supplement to philosophy in Buddhist practice. (This is why, even if the Buddhist philosophers are right about things, studying Buddhist philosophy wouldn't bring about liberation by itself.)

At the same time, doing philosophy is said to be necessary if the practice of meditation is to be effective. For one thing, many meditational attainments involve altered states of consciousness. What one is aware of in these states is very different from what goes on in our ordinary experience. This means that we need a conceptual framework to help us sort out our experiences in meditation and figure out their significance. Otherwise we would be confronted with what could only seem like a buzzing, whirring mass of confusion. Doing philosophy is said to help us acquire the conceptual tools we need to make sense of what we encounter in meditation. So, for instance, mastery of the philosophical arguments for the non-existence of a self will make it easier to appreciate the significance of the complex causal connections we find when we closely observe our mental processes. That there are these causal connections will then be seen to confirm that there is no self standing behind the scenes directing our mental lives. And this will bring home the truth of non-self as it applies to our own case. So while meditation is meant to help the practitioner apply the knowledge they acquire through philosophy, philosophy in turn plays an important role in facilitating meditational practice.

Just as there are interesting relationships among the components of the eight-fold path, so it is worthwhile to examine how the three characteristics are related to one

another. Suffering is caused, we are told, by ignorance of impermanence, suffering and non-self. And it is overcome by coming to know fully these three facts about the world. We now have some understanding of what Buddhists mean by the truth of suffering. Suppose they are right in their claims about what suffering is and why it is inevitable. They also claim that everything is impermanent, and that sentient beings are devoid of selves. Suppose these claims are also true. What might they have to do with the claim about suffering? It is tempting to think that impermanence is the chief factor here. On this interpretation, it is the fact that everything is impermanent that makes it true both that suffering is inevitable and also that there is no self. On this account, we wrongly believe that the things we desire are permanent, we become attached to them, and then we suffer when they reveal their impermanence by going out of existence. Likewise we base our lives on the assumption that we have permanent selves, and then suffer when our mortality shows this assumption to be false. The solution is then to learn to live with the fact of impermanence. Suffering will cease when we stop clinging to things and learn to live in the moment.

While this interpretation of the three characteristics is tempting, it is wrong. It is the truth of non-self that is said to be key to understanding suffering's genesis and dissolution. And the interpretation just offered does not take sufficiently seriously the fact of non-self. For what it assumes is that I do have a self, just a very impermanent one. This is the assumption behind the advice that we live our lives in the present moment. This advice would make sense only if there were a true 'me' that could derive value and significance from its experiences, but that existed only for a short while, to be replaced by a new self, someone who is not 'me' but someone else. We are advised to live in the present precisely because it is thought that when we plan for the future instead, we are letting the interests of that future self dictate what this present self does. Now while Buddhism is sometimes understood in this way, this is clearly incompatible with the claim that there is no self. Indeed this turns out to be one of the extreme views the Dharma is supposed to be a middle path between.[10] So this cannot be how to understand the three characteristics.

The doctrine of non-self is widely acknowledged to be the most difficult of all the basic teachings of Buddhism. We will examine it in detail in the next chapter. But we can now say this much about its relation to the other two of the three characteristics. Recall that by 'suffering' what Buddhists mean is existential suffering. And existential suffering arises from the assumption that there is a 'me' for whom events can have significance. Such suffering arises out of the suspicion that the kind of meaning we want is not to be had, that our best efforts at attaining happiness will inevitably be frustrated. And we experience suffering because this seems like such an affront to the dignity of the being we take ourselves to be. Now suppose it could be

[10]This is what is called 'annihilationism', the view that while I exist now, when the parts that presently make up me cease to exist, I will go utterly out of existence, typically to be replaced by someone else. The other extreme view is called 'eternalism'. It is the view that the true 'me' is eternal. The theory of dependent origination is said to constitute a middle path between these two extremes.

shown that while there are the experiences that make up a lifetime, those experiences have no owner. There is no 'me' whose experiences they are. In that case the conviction that my life should have uniquely special significance to me would turn out to be based on a mistake. For experiences in my life to have meaning, there must be more than just the experiences, there must be something separate from them for which they have good or bad meanings. Without belief in a separate self, existential suffering would no longer arise. Such suffering requires belief in something whose demand for meaning and significance is violated. It requires belief in a self. Impermanence also plays a role here. It is the fact of impermanence that first awakens us to suffering. And the fact that everything is impermanent will play a major role in the arguments for non-self. But it is non-self that plays the central role. And it is our false belief in a self that Buddhists identify as the core of our ignorance.

2.4

What might it be like to be enlightened? The Buddha claims that at the end of his path lies the cessation of suffering. And we've just had a glimpse of how following the path might bring that about. But even if we can make some sense of his path as a cure for suffering, this only tells us what being enlightened is not like. Being enlightened would mean being without existential suffering. Is there anything positive to be said about it? Is it pleasant? Is the enlightened person happy? Or is it just that because it's devoid of suffering, it's the best we can hope for? This would be a reasonable question to ask for someone considering whether or not to follow the Buddha's advice. The 'live for the moment' idea that was just rejected as an interpretation of the three characteristics did at least give an answer to this question. For then the enlightened person would appreciate their present experiences without any concern about what will come in the future. And perhaps this would enhance the enjoyment of any good experiences while diminishing the anxiety that normally accompanies bad experiences. So perhaps on that interpretation being enlightened would be pleasant. But since that is not what Buddhist enlightenment is like, this does not answer our question.

Here is another place where the doctrine of karma and rebirth has a role to play. To become enlightened is to enter into the state of nirvāna. The Sanskrit term *nirvāṇa* literally means 'extinction' or 'going out' (as when a fire is said to go out). What gets extinguished is, of course, suffering. But Buddhists sometimes equate this extinction with another sort, namely the end of the series of rebirths. What would that be like? Well, if there is no self, then to say I won't be reborn is to say I will cease to exist. Is this what nirvāna is, utter and complete annihilation? If so, then our question is answered in the negative: enlightenment would have no positive result, only the purely negative one of escape from all further suffering. And since this escape looks like a state of pure non-being, an utter blank, it also seems singularly unappealing.

That there is something wrong with this understanding of nirvāna is suggested by

the fact that one of the extreme views the Buddha rejects is called 'annihilationism'. Moreover, when the Buddha is asked about the fate of the enlightened person after death, he says it would not be correct to say they are utterly non-existent. But the explication of these claims will have to wait until Chapter 4. What we can say at this point is that there is more to nirvāna than what happens after the death of an enlightened person. There is also the state of the person between the time of enlightenment and their death. In discussing the goal of their practice, Buddhists draw a distinction between 'cessation with remainder' and 'cessation without remainder'. By 'cessation' is meant stopping the accumulation of new karma. And the 'remainder' is the residual karma that keeps the present life going. Once that residue is exhausted, this life ends. So they distinguish between nirvāna as the state of a living enlightened person, and nirvāna as the state of the enlightened person after death.[11] If we want to know if there is anything positive to the state of nirvāna, the place to look would seem to be this cessation with remainder.

Unfortunately, there isn't much in the early Buddhist texts about this state. There is a great deal about how to attain cessation, but not much about what it is like to have attained it and remain alive. Artistic depictions of the Buddha and other enlightened persons often portray them with a serene half-smile on their faces, and this suggests that there is a kind of quiet happiness to the state. But this is not stated explicitly in our sources. Buddhists were not, though, the only Indian philosophers to teach the goal of liberation from rebirth. And among the non-Buddhists there is also a debate as to whether or not liberation is pleasant or joyful. Now this debate concerns post-mortem liberation. It is possible for these schools to have such a debate because they all affirm the existence of a self. So unlike the Buddhists, they all claim that the liberated person continues to exist when their last life is over. Some, though, claim that the self enjoys eternal bliss in this state of post-mortem liberation, while others deny this. Indeed some of the latter go so far as to say that the self feels nothing in this state, that its existence forever after is indistinguishable from that of a rock.

Now all the parties to this debate agree that liberation is the supreme goal for humans. They also agree that ignorance about who we truly are is what keeps us in the unliberated state – by making us pursue inappropriate goals like sensual pleasure, wealth and power, and virtue and repute. Since they all seem to mean more or less the same thing by liberation, this makes us wonder why some would deny that the supremely valuable end has any intrinsically desirable features. Why would they expect anyone to seek a state whose only attraction lies in the absence of pain and suffering? If that were all that was being offered, wouldn't most people figure they could beat the odds and stick with the strategy of seeking ordinary happiness?

This is not a question that can be definitively answered by examining the texts of these orthodox schools. But a bit of speculation might throw some light on the situation here, and in so doing suggest an answer to our question about Buddhist

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[11] This is sometimes referred to as *parinirvāṇa*, though strictly speaking that term only applies to the death of a Buddha.

nirvāna. Suppose that, as the *Bhagavad Gītā* says, 'desire is here the enemy' (III.37). That is, what keeps us bound to the wheel of *saṃsāra* (the state of perpetual rebirth and consequently suffering) is our desire for things like sensual pleasure, wealth and power, and virtue and repute. Desire for these things is thought problematic because it is based on the false assumption that I am something that could be made better off by having them. Further, suppose that were it not for such desires, and the ignorance about our identity that they both presuppose and reinforce, we would be in a state that is intrinsically valuable. Suppose, that is, that to be liberated from *saṃsāra* is to enjoy true happiness, perhaps even true bliss. There then arises what we could call the paradox of liberation. This paradox involves the following propositions, each of which seems true to the orthodox Indian philosophers:

1 Liberation is inherently desirable.
2 Selfish desires prevent us from attaining liberation.
3 In order to attain liberation one must train oneself to live without selfish desires.
4 One does not engage in deliberate action unless one desires the foreseen result of the action.

Taken together, propositions (3) and (4) tell us that no one will set about trying to attain liberation unless they desire it. And proposition (2) tells us that no one will attain liberation unless they seek it. Liberation isn't something people just fall into through dumb luck: you have to make an effort to overcome ignorance, otherwise it will just perpetuate your bondage in *saṃsāra*. Putting these things together, we get the result that you have to desire liberation to obtain it. And (1) tells us that it's reasonable to desire liberation. The trouble is, (2) also tells us that if we desire liberation we won't get it. So although it's reasonable to want liberation, it's impossible to get it, so it isn't reasonable to want it after all. This is a paradox.

There are different strategies we might use to try to resolve this paradox. We might deny (1), though that would then raise the question why anyone should be interested in attaining liberation. Or we might claim that the desire for liberation is not a selfish desire. But this seems implausible if (1) is true. If liberation is such a good thing, then surely my wanting to attain it would count as a selfish desire – a desire to benefit myself. Perhaps, though, not all such desires are selfish in the sense that's relevant for (2) to apply. Remember that the trouble with desires is that they reinforce the wrong view about who we really are. What if liberation were joyful in a way that didn't conflict with the facts about who we really are? The difficulty is that even if this were true, those of us who have not experienced this bliss would have trouble thinking of it in anything other than conventional terms. When told that liberation is a state of bliss, we would imagine it to be like sensual pleasure, or the thrill that can come from gaining great wealth and power. We would then end up desiring liberation in just the wrong way – the way that (2) says prevents our attaining it. But this suggests a possible strategy: deny (1) not because it is false but because it is misleading for those with conventional views about what is desirable. For such people what should be

emphasized is not what is positively good about liberation, but the point that to be liberated is to be forever free of pain and suffering. Then they might attain the bliss of liberation without having aimed at it. Their desire would just have been to rid themselves of pain and suffering.

There are situations where this sort of indirect strategy works. Consider the warm feeling we get when we act benevolently, doing something good for someone else. We get this feeling of gratification when our aim is to help others instead of ourselves. But suppose the only reason I ever helped others were because I wanted to have this warm feeling. Then I would never succeed. If my helping someone else were part of a calculated strategy whose ultimate purpose was to benefit myself, I wouldn't get the warm feeling at all. I can't get the feeling by aiming at it. I only get the feeling when I aim at something else – benefitting another person. Does this mean there is a paradox of benevolence? No, we can and do sometimes act benevolently, and thereby get the warm feeling. The best advice to give someone who wants to feel good in this way is that they should become genuinely concerned about the welfare of others. And this is something we can learn to do. We can get the warm feeling indirectly – not by aiming at it but by aiming at something else. There is no paradox of benevolence.

Could something like this be what's going on in the case of those orthodox Indian schools that denied liberation is pleasant or happy? Perhaps they are simply tailoring their advice to the understanding of their audience. Perhaps because their audience would misunderstand the happiness that comes with liberation, and then want it in a way that would prevent their ever getting it, these schools advise their audience to aim at something else, the cessation of suffering. And perhaps we should understand what early Buddhism says about nirvāna in a similar way. On this interpretation, the fact that nirvāna is depicted primarily negatively, as just the permanent cessation of suffering, and the fact that virtually nothing positive is ever said about cessation with remainder, represent strategic choices. They do not necessarily reflect the nature of nirvāna. Perhaps cessation with remainder is a state of true happiness, though this is importantly different from what is ordinarily taken for happiness.

Something like this interpretation may be necessary if the Buddha's path is going to make sense to those who don't accept the doctrine of karma and rebirth. If there is no rebirth, but the Buddha is right that there is no self, then after I die there won't be any suffering regardless of whether or not I attain enlightenment. So telling me that cessation without remainder is devoid of suffering won't motivate me to try to attain enlightenment. I'll only be motivated by facts about cessation with remainder, the state of being enlightened but still alive. And it isn't clear that being told this state is devoid of all existential suffering would be enough. If that were all I thought I'd get out of enlightenment, I might calculate the odds and decide that I'd do better to pursue conventional happiness. It might be that only a positive portrayal of enlightenment as true happiness would motivate me to seek it. And then there is the question whether my desire for enlightenment would get in the way of my ever attaining it. But this is a question to which we will have to return. For we have not yet

considered what it might be like to come to believe that we do not have selves. And coming to believe this is an important component of being enlightened. The Buddhist doctrine of non-self will be the subject of our next chapter. Then in Chapter 4 we will come back to this question of what it might be like to be enlightened.

Further Reading

For more on the details of the Buddha's life and teaching career see Chapters 3 and 4 of A.K.Warder, *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970).

The account of the Buddha's first expounding of his path (S IV.420–4) may be found at *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha,* trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000), pp. 1843–47.

For a more detailed account of the reciprocal relationships among the different parts of the eightfold path, see David Burton, *Buddhism, Knowledge and Liberation* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 62–75.

For a very different account of the nature of cessation with remainder see Paul Griffiths, *On Being Buddha* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994).

For a discussion of the debate among Hindu schools concerning whether liberation is desirable, see Arindam Chakrabarti, 'Is liberation (*mokṣa*) pleasant?'. *Philosophy East and West*, 33 (1983), pp. 167–82.

The alleged paradox of benevolence, and its resolution, were formulated by the eighteenth-century British philosopher and theologian Joseph Butler. For a discussion of Butler's work see Terence Penelhum, *Butler* (London: Routledge, 1986).