WHAT THE BUDDHA THOUGHT

RICHARD GOMBRICH

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First Edition : **Delhi, 2018**
(Earlier published in 2009; corrected edition in 2013)

After arrangement with
Equinox Publishing Ltd.,
Office 415, The Workstation
15 Paternoster Row, Sheffield S1 2BX, UK

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ISBN: 978-81-208-4171-0

MOTILAL BANARSIDASS
41 U.A. Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi 110 007
1 B, Jyoti Studio Compound, Kennedy Bridge, Nana Chowk, Mumbai 400 007
203 Royapettah High Road, Mylapore, Chennai 600 004
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8 Camac Street, Kolkata 700 017
Ashok Rajpath, Patna 800 004
Chowk, Varanasi 221 001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Gombrich, Richard F. (Richard Francis), 1937-
What the Buddha thought/ Richard Gombrich
p. cm.—(Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies monographs)
Includes bibliographical references and index
ISBN: 978-81-208-4171-0 (Pb)
1. Gautama Buddha—Teachings. I. Title.

For Sale in South Asia Only

Printed in India
by RP Jain at NAB Printing Unit,
A-44, Naraina Industrial Area, Phase I, New Delhi–110028
and published by JP Jain for Motilal Banarsidass Publishers (P) Ltd,
41 U.A. Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi-110007

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For Geoff Bamford and Sarah Norman,
fellow enthusiasts

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PREFACE

This book argues that the Buddha was one of the most brilliant and original thinkers of all time.

While the book is intended to serve as an introduction to the Buddha's thought, and hence even to Buddhism itself, it also has larger aims: it argues that we can know far more about the Buddha than it is fashionable among scholars to admit, and that his thought has a greater coherence than is usually recognized. Interpreters both ancient and modern have taken little account of the historical context of the Buddha's teachings, but relating them to early brahminical texts, and also to ancient Jainism, gives a much richer picture of his meaning, especially when his satire and irony are appreciated. Incidentally, since many of the Buddha's allusions can only be traced in the Pali versions of surviving texts, the book establishes the importance of the Pali Canon as evidence.

Though the Buddha used metaphor extensively, he did not found his arguments upon it like earlier thinkers: his capacity for abstraction was an intellectual breakthrough. His ethicizing older ideas of rebirth and human action (karma) was also a breakthrough for civilization. His theory of karma is logically central to his thought. Karma is a process, not a thing; moreover, it is neither random nor wholly determined. These ideas about karma he generalized to every component of conscious experience – except nirvana, the liberation from that chain of experience. Morally, karma both provided a principle of individuation and asserted the individual's responsibility for his or her own destiny.

The book is based on the Numata Lectures which I gave by invitation at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, in autumn 2006. I gave ten lectures under the general title 'The Origin and Greatness of the Buddha's Ideas'. I am extremely grateful to the Numata Foundation, Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, for financing those lectures; they are by far the greatest

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patrons of the study of Buddhism in the world. I thank Dr Tadeusz Skorupski and Dr Kate Crosby for inviting me. The lectures were open to the public, and I am particularly grateful to members of the audience who came long distances and asked excellent questions, some of which have, I hope, enabled me to improve my material.

Like the lectures, the book is ambitious in being intended for two audiences. It contains much that is new, so that I dare to hope it will interest, perhaps even excite, experts in the field. It is, however, also intended to reach a wider public – in fact, anyone remotely interested in Buddhism – even though it does not fully cater for those who have no idea whatsoever about the Buddha's teachings. I have not used up space by providing the rudimentary knowledge which can be picked up from any work of reference – or better, perhaps, from such books as *What the Buddha Taught* by the Ven. Walpola Rahula or *The Buddha's Way* by the Ven H. Saddhatissa. On the other hand, I have included, for easy reference, the text of a handout which was distributed at the lectures, entitled 'Background Information'.

As I explain more fully below, I have tried to make the book accessible by not using foreign words in the body of the text when it is not absolutely necessary, but there are also places where I cannot convey my message without discussing Pali words in detail. I do hope that those discussions will not deter non-linguists; they should not. I have used initial capitals for some English words to indicate that they are standard translations of Pali fixed terms.

The title of this book is a gesture of homage to the late Ven. Dr Walpola Rahula, who taught me much of what I understand of early Buddhism. I trust it will not be taken amiss if I admit that at the same time I not only wish to supplement his book by approaching the subject more from a historical angle, but even on one topic, nirvana, venture to clarify what I fear is a somewhat muddled presentation.

This book is intended to be read through, rather than dipped into, since it contains some quite complex arguments and builds up the case for the Buddha's coherence and brilliance as a thinker cumulatively. Nevertheless, readers may find a brief guide to its contents useful.

After introductory remarks, the first two chapters are mainly occupied with karma. Chapters 3 and 4 then deal respectively with the brahminical and the Jain backgrounds to the Buddha's ideas.

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Chapter 5 shows how some of the Buddha's main concepts relate to concepts in the Upaniṣads and thus how they relate to each other.

Chapter 6 is a case study of a very important topic, the Buddha's view of love and compassion; it aspires to show by example how my approach, as a historian of ideas, can cast fresh light on the Buddha's thought. Chapter 7 then discusses the method I have exemplified in Chapter 6, and gives my view of the evidence for what I am saying. I realize that it is unusual not to explain my method until halfway through the book, but I hope it keeps people reading.

The next three chapters, 8 to 10, present what I take to be the main ideas underlying the Buddha's teaching; one might even call them his 'philosophy'. I would have liked to make my text as accessible as *What the Buddha Taught,* but here at least I have surely failed, because I have to deal with some sophisticated and unfamiliar ideas. Should any readers feel so discouraged that they lay the book down, I hope that they will nevertheless persevere with the remaining chapters, because those are not only more colourful but also (particularly Chapter 11) important for getting to know the Buddha's extraordinary mind and personality. The centrality of the theme of karma in the Buddha's thought is summarily reviewed in the final chapter.

In arriving at my own ideas, I owe enormous intellectual debts, above all to Joanna Jurewicz and to Sue Hamilton. I am conscious that my text does not adequately convey how much I owe to Sue Hamilton's insights; in particular, had I felt it appropriate to devote more space to cognition in Chapter 10, I would have cited her at length. Her demonstration that the Buddha is always talking about experience chimes beautifully with Joanna Jurewicz's early work on the Ṛg Vedic 'Hymn of Creation', in which she shows how from the recorded beginnings of Indian thought, existence and consciousness are intertwined. Though the Buddha disentangled them, this philosophy of experience, as one might call it, influenced him profoundly. Joanna Jurewicz's other discoveries are no less momentous. Not only has she deciphered the original meaning of the chain of dependent origination. Her discovery of belief in rebirth in the Ṛg Veda also makes the entire early history of Indian religion far more plausible and coherent. I wonder whether any

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other single scholar in the last hundred years has made so important a contribution to the field.

I must also make special mention of my comparatively recent students Noa Gal Ronkin and Alexander Wynne. Teachers can have no greater reward than to find their pupils reaching higher by standing on their shoulders. This is central to the process of conjecture and refutation which I regard as the only way forward.

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

You are advised to read this through quickly, and then use it for reference.

LANGUAGES

Sanskrit (S) is native to India. It is an Indo-European language, and therefore is related to English. The oldest texts in Sanskrit go back to the second millennium BC, but through an oral tradition (therefore very hard to date); writing was first used in India in the third century BC. The oldest texts are called the Vedas (see below) and were preserved as sacred by the males of a hereditary priestly group, the brahmins.

Prakrit is the Indian term for languages directly derived from Sanskrit. The oldest extensive Indian inscriptions, put up by the emperor Asoka in the mid-third century BC, are in Prakrit. Some words in Prakrit are the same as in Sanskrit.

Pali (P) is a Prakrit language. It is not exactly what the Buddha spoke, but fairly close to it. The sacred texts of the Theravada tradition, also known as Southern Buddhism, constitute the Pali Canon. Though not immune to change over time, some of these texts must be our oldest evidence for Buddhism.

For more on Pali, see my introduction, entitled "What is Pali?", to Wilhelm Geiger's *Pali Grammar* (1994).

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BASIC DATA ON BUDDHISM

The Three Jewels

Buddhism consists of the 'Three Jewels': the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha. They are also known as the 'Three Refuges', meaning that Buddhists rely on them, place trust in them. Though many dislike calling Buddhism a 'faith', it is not unfair to say that Buddhists have faith in the Three Jewels.

Buddha (S/P) is, strictly speaking, a title. Literally it means 'Awoken' but we tend to use 'Enlightened'. His family name was Gotama (P).

Non-Buddhists simply regard the Buddha as the founder of Buddhism. For Buddhists he re-founded it in the area and period of the universe in which we are living; there are other similar Buddhas who do the same when and/or where Buddhism is extinct.

Dhamma (P) or **Dharma** (S) is what the Buddha taught (according to Buddhists: what all Buddhas teach). The term has many applications and many translations, according to context. It is both descriptive and normative, the law of the universe.

Dhamma translates 'Buddhism' if by the latter is meant the system of ideas. For Buddhism as a historical, empirical phenomenon, Buddhists use a different word, *sāsana* (P) or *śāsana* (S) (accent on first syllable). This word also means 'teaching', but 'dispensation' captures the purport better. So a Buddha founds a *sāsana*, but the *dhamma* is a set of truths, eternal but sometimes forgotten.

Saṅgha (S/P) means 'community'. This term too has several applications but they are not hard to distinguish. The Buddha may originally have used it to refer to all his followers who had reached the first stage of spiritual progress. But by far its commonest use is to refer to the ordained: monks, nuns and novices of both sexes. (However, in orthodox Theravada the female Saṅgha is extinct.) The term may refer to the monastic community as a whole or to a particular local community.

The Saṅgha is governed by rules, collectively known as the ***Vinaya*** (S/P) 'discipline'. This term may refer to the rules or to the texts containing those rules.

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Fundamental texts

The **Pali Canon** is in Pali called the ***Tipiṭaka***, 'Three baskets'. They are (the order matters):

1. ***Vinaya Piṭaka***, the rules for the Saṅgha, both for individual members and for the whole community. The two codes of disciplinary rules for individuals (one for monks, one for nuns) are called the *pātimokkha* (P)/*prātimokṣa* (S). Though much of the *Vinaya Piṭaka* is a commentary on these rules, so that they are embedded in it, strictly speaking they stand outside the Canon; they have a kind of supreme status, because one cannot receive full ordination (at least in theory) without knowing the *pātimokkha* by heart.
2. ***Sutta Piṭaka***. *Sutta* is P, *sūtra* is S. A *sutta* is a text, prose or verse or both, containing teachings. Many are in a narrative setting. The main collection of the Buddha's sermons is in the four ***Nikāya***, collections arranged mainly on formal criteria.
3. ***Abhidhamma Piṭaka,*** 'higher teachings', the teachings analytically rearranged into a systematic and wholly literal presentation. While the early schools have the main texts of the first two *piṭaka* in common, they differ in *abhidhamma* (S: *abhidharma*).

When one says something like 'the early canonical texts', one is usually referring to most of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the four *Nikāya*, and a few other verse texts from the *Sutta Piṭaka*.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Time

Since the Buddha lived well before writing was used in India, it is not surprising that the various Buddhist traditions differ widely about his date. The canonical account of his death says that he passed away aged eighty. For a while modern scholarship dated this to 483 BC or thereabouts and this dating is still found in many reference works. But it is too early. He must have died round 405 BC.

For more detail, including an explanation of the limits of possible precision, see my 'Dating the Buddha: a red herring revealed', in

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The Dating of the Historical Buddha/Die Datierung des historischen Buddha, Part 2 (Symposien zur Buddhismusforschung, IV, 2), Heinz Bechert, editor (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1992), pp. 237–59. For a less technical account, see my 'Discovering the Buddha's date', in Lakshman S. Perera (ed.), *Buddhism for the New Millennium*, London: World Buddhist Foundation, 2000, pp. 9–25.

The emperor Asoka, who was largely responsible for the spread of Buddhism, ruled from *c.*269 to *c.*231 BC.

Space

The Buddha was born close to the modern border between India and Nepal, which did not then exist, into a tribe called the Shakyas. He spent his life in the part of north-east India now known as Bihar (the name is derived from the Buddhist word for 'monastery') and the eastern UP. Modern Benares (Varanasi in Indian languages) already existed; Patna (ancient name: Pataliputra), which was to be Asoka's capital, was founded soon after his lifetime.

Social environment

The Buddha lived when the first cities were coming up in India. (We ignore the prehistoric Indus Valley civilization.) With this arose larger and better organized states, mostly monarchies, and a great increase in trade, which led to contact with the world beyond India.

A complex religious and cultural system had already been articulated by the brahmins. Their leadership was, however, contested by the new political and mercantile classes, who tended to support heterodox teachers. ('Heterodox' means not accepting the authority of the Vedas and hence of their brahmin interpreters.) The Buddha's contemporary Mahāvīra was one of them; he taught, though he did not found, Jainism, a religion still alive today.

See my *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge, 2006, Chapters 2 and 3.

Brahmin religion and society

Brahmin ideology posited a hierarchic social structure which we call 'the caste system'. According to this, society had four strata, which they called 'colours' (S: *varṇa*). The brahmins (S: *brāhmaṇa*) were at the top, then came the nobility (S: *kṣatriya* or *rājanya*),

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then the *vaiśya*, originally stock-rearers and farmers but by the Buddha's day primarily traders, and then the *śūdra*, artisans and labourers. Even below these came the outcastes, who in theory were associated with unclean work dealing with corpses and/or excreta. This brahmin theory is first mentioned in the tenth book of the *Ṛg Veda*. Kings were supposed by the theory to enforce its rules. In fact, however, enforcement has always been extremely variable.

Early brahmin religious literature is vast. It all carries the name *Veda*, meaning 'knowledge', and is all in an ancient (but not uniform) kind of Sanskrit. It is internally stratified by genre and to some extent the genres also constitute a chronological sequence. The oldest genre is sometimes known in the West as the Vedas, which is confusing. The *Ṛg Veda*, a collection of 1,028 hymns, is the oldest text in this genre. The latest genre/stratum is that of the *Upaniṣads*. These were composed over several centuries; the oldest and longest is the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, which was certainly known to the Buddha, though not necessarily in exactly its present form, so it must antedate 500 BC.

Kinds of Buddhism

There are two main Buddhist traditions in the world today: Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada is a Pali word (*Theravāda*) meaning 'Doctrine of the Elders'. Mahayana is a Sanskrit word (*Mahāyāna*) and means either 'Great Path' or 'Great Vehicle' – it is ambiguous. The Theravada regards only the Pali Canon as authoritative, the Mahayana arose around the beginning of the Christian era and venerates many other texts. Theravada is dominant in most (not all) of South and Southeast Asia, Mahayana in East and Central Asia. Further details are not relevant to this book.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AN	*Aṅguttara Nikāya*
BĀU	*Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*
Ch.Up.	*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*
Dhp.	*Dhammapada*
Dhs.	*Dhammasaṅgaṇī*
DN	*Dīgha Nikāya*
J	*Jātaka*
MLD	*Middle Length Discourses*
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya*
PED	*Pali-English Dictionary*
RV	*Ṛg Veda*
Ś.Br.	*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*
SN	*Saṃyutta Nikāya*
Snip.	*Suttanipāta*
Thg.	*Therīgāthā*
Ud.	*Udāna*
Vin.	*Vinaya Piṭaka*
Vism.	*Visuddhimagga*

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

I have been motivated to write this book mainly by two feelings: admiration and exasperation.

My admiration is for the Buddha, whom I consider to be one of the greatest thinkers – and greatest personalities – of whom we have record in human history. Ranking people in an order of merit is a pursuit fit only for parlour games, but I maintain that the Buddha belongs in the same class as Plato and Aristotle, the giants who created the tradition of western philosophy. I think that his ideas should form part of the education of every child, the world over, and that this would help to make the world a more civilized place, both gentler and more intelligent.

This does not mean that I consider that all the Buddha's ideas were correct. Given the distance between the Buddha and me in time and space, it would be extraordinary if I did. I disagree with some of his theories and do not subscribe to all his values. I therefore do not call myself a Buddhist. However, I believe that my understanding of his ideas makes me at least as sincere an admirer of the Buddha as the millions who identify as Buddhists. Moreover, my admiration extends to a great deal of what those born into the Buddhist tradition think and do. And that admirable part of the Buddhist tradition, or traditions if you will, goes back, in my view, to the Buddha himself.

Those Buddhist traditions, which have lasted for over two and a half millennia and extended over a vast geographical area, are so diverse that some scholars scoff at the very notion that one can talk about 'Buddhism', and insist on using the word in scare quotes, if it has to be used at all. I disagree. Granted, Buddhism itself, as a human phenomenon, is subject to the Buddha's dictum that 'All compounded things are impermanent'.[1] It would be astonishing if over such a long time, as it moved to different regions and cultures,

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it had not undergone vast changes; the same has happened to every human tradition. But the historian should be able to trace every branch of the tradition back to another branch, until we arrive at the trunk and root, the Buddha himself. To change the metaphor from trees to rivers: on their way, the various streams of the Buddhist tradition have been joined and adulterated by streams from other cultures, whose influence must likewise be analysed. Yet I think that in most traditions – or at least in the scriptural traditions, which have done most to shape human history – it is what owes its origin to ancient Buddhism that preponderates.

Many will remain sceptical. They may grant that the Buddhist Order of monks and nuns, the Saṅgha, is the oldest institution in the world, and easily recognizable as the same institution from age to age and country to country; but they may protest that Buddhist beliefs today are hopelessly diverse, and ask why. I believe I have an answer. The Buddha was startlingly original. Many of his ideas were formulated to refute other ideas current in his day, but to put them across, he had inevitably to use the language of his opponents, for there was no other. As I shall explain at many points in this book, he infused old terms with new meanings. This inevitably led to misunderstandings, especially among those who knew his teachings only partially or superficially.

Let me give a salient example. Again and again I find propagated in modern Indian university teaching and publications the view that the Buddha taught virtually the same as the *Upaniṣad*s, texts sacred to the brahmins, and significantly differed from them only in attacking the caste system. This arises from the fact that the Buddha's main ideological opponents were brahmins of Upaniṣadic views, so he used their own terms to attack them. Moreover, those attacks were conducted mainly by using metaphor and irony, registers imperceptible to the literal-minded. To illustrate this will be one of the main themes of this book.

But more needs to be said. In many cases, the Buddha was not asking the same questions as his opponents, or indeed as the successors of his opponents in India down the centuries. He did not always follow the unspoken rules of what philosophy, or systematic thought, was supposed to be about. Naturally, this led to misunderstandings after his death, even well before Buddhism became implanted in countries beyond India. Another salient example may clarify this. The orthodox tradition, Vedic thought, was much concerned with ontological questions: what exists? The

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Buddha said that this is a wrong question. But this was too much for his followers. One major school, the *abhidharma*, gave his teachings a realist interpretation; another, the *Vijñānavāda*, an idealist interpretation; it is possible to derive both these interpretations from the early Canon, particularly if one highlights certain texts and ignores others. There are indeed also texts which, if taken in isolation, seem to be ambiguous on this matter.

Before many centuries had elapsed, things went even further than this. When Buddhism reached China, the great difficulties of translating Indian texts into Chinese, difficulties both of a practical character and inherent in the vast difference between the cultures of the two countries, soon led to mysticism: mysticism in the sense that the Buddha's teaching was held to transcend rationality and to be inexpressible in language. Though not the only view, this view has been dominant in Far Eastern Buddhism, particularly in the school known in the West by its Japanese name, Zen. While I shall show in this book that I agree that the Buddha held the goal of the religious life to be an experience which language has no power to express, I strongly disagree with interpretations of his teachings, which are of course expressed in language, as being mystical in the vulgar sense of defying normal logic.

I therefore hold that a successful interpretation of the Buddha will make clear not only the ideas he expressed but also how those ideas lent themselves to the various interpretations which are in fact historically attested. The Buddha will thus stand as the source for a successful history of Buddha ideas – even though to compose such a history, even in outline, may be beyond the powers of any single scholar. Moreover, that must be beyond the scope of this book.

MISUNDERSTANDING AND PSEUDO-PROFUNDITY

The above paragraphs may give the reader a first hint of why one of the motives that drives me to write is exasperation. However, I can put the matter even more plainly from another angle. I find the Buddha's ideas extraordinarily powerful and intelligent, a work of genius. I do not think those powerful ideas, properly understood, are very complex or difficult to grasp. Yet Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike persist in regarding the Buddha's thought as

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immensely 'deep' in the sense of complex and therefore difficult to understand. I do not share this view.

Just as traditional exegesis of the Four Gospels has not taken much account of Jesus' Jewish background, traditional exegesis of the Buddha operated in almost total ignorance of his historical context. After all, if he preached eternal truths, historical context did not appear to have any relevance! That may excuse the blinkered approach of the early commentators, but it will not serve for modern scholars. Statements, obviously, derive their meaning largely from context. Therefore to understand what anyone is saying, particularly if it transcends the banal, one needs to try to reconstruct its historical context.

I have taken first steps in this direction in the early chapters of my book *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History*, and gone further in my next book, *How Buddhism Began.* I shall follow the same path in this book; this will lead to my repeating myself a little, but I hope not too much. My method is therefore historical.

Most books written by academics – and I confess that I am one of those – feel that they must begin with a chapter on what they call methodology, i.e., 'How do I set about writing this book?' For historians this usually means how they find what they consider relevant evidence and how they treat it. For me, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and I find it boring and unhelpful to read about how something can or could be done in theory, before one has witnessed the practice. For this reason I discuss my method, i.e., my use of evidence, only halfway through the book, once the reader has had a chance to see how my method works.

Why do I think that the Buddha's thought has been so undervalued? I would not go so far as to say that the undervaluation is in proportion to the veneration; but there is something in that nevertheless. While I consider that Buddhism has been by and large a great force for good in human history, a civilizing influence, I think that regarding the Buddha purely as a religious teacher can be unhelpful. It is of course a fact that he founded what we call a religion; in his terms, indeed, he saw himself as teaching a path to salvation. But to stress that can be a hindrance in the educational systems of today. Naturally, I am not disputing that as the founder of a religion the Buddha can be classed with Moses, Jesus or Mohammed. But let us not thereby exclude him from the category of thinkers like Plato, Aristotle and Hume.

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TERMINOLOGY AND CLARITY

One of my teachers, the Ven. Dr Walpola Rahula, was given to saying that one could teach Buddhism to a non-Buddhist audience in their own language without using any foreign words at all. I agree. And yet at the same time I have always held that if one wants fully to grasp the meaning of a Buddhist text, one needs to read it in the original language. What do I mean?

The key terms in Buddhism – and probably in any system of ideas – do not refer to external objects, such as nose, tree, cup. They are abstractions. Linguists understand that there are very few words which have *precise* equivalents in another language, except sometimes in a closely related language: the word 'cup' will not have a precise equivalent in Chinese, because the Chinese traditionally have a different range of utensils from English-speakers, and the closest Chinese word may, for instance, cover a broader or a narrower range than 'cup'. Nevertheless, once the word 'cup' is used in a context, it is often no problem to convey what it refers to with enough precision to serve the needs of communication.

The translation of abstractions is much more problematic. This is not just because the terms do not have precise equivalents in foreign languages, though in the case of abstractions the ambiguities and semantic range of a term may well baffle translators and those dependent on their translations. Let me give two simple examples. Italian *coscienza* can be either 'conscience' or 'consciousness'. German *Geist* can be 'soul', 'spirit', 'ghost', 'mind' or 'wit'. The problem becomes far worse when the ideas one is trying to understand are expressed in the original by relating one to the other or even explaining one in terms of the other.[2]

The oldest extensive evidence for the Buddha's ideas, I hold, is found in large parts of a huge collection of texts known in English as the Pali Canon.[3] Pali is a language derived from pre-classical Sanskrit and closely related to it – even more closely than Italian is related to Latin. It is also closely related to the language (likewise derived from Sanskrit) that the Buddha himself must have spoken. Of that language we have no direct record, because writing was not used in India, so far as we can tell, in the Buddha's lifetime (unless it be that there was a system of writing numerals). For most purposes one can expound Indian Buddhism equally well whether one uses the Sanskrit terms or their Pali equivalents; there are a few exceptions to this, but they are mostly irrelevant to the contents of

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this book. On the other hand, Sanskrit has a very long history and many different genres of texts, and to gain insight into the meanings of Pali words one needs to compare them not to Sanskrit in general but to the Sanskrit of the Buddha's day – what is generally referred to as late Vedic Sanskrit.

From this point on, the discussion will use only Sanskrit (S) and Pali (P) terms; on the other hand, it is not useful in this context to stick to either S or P consistently.

THE BUDDHA'S USE OF METAPHOR

The preaching recorded in the *suttas*, the texts containing the Buddha's sermons and discourses, is mainly delivered with what Pali calls *pariyāya*.[4] Literally, this word means 'way round' and so 'indirect route', but it refers to a 'way of putting things'. The translation 'circumlocution' will not quite do, because that wrongly suggests long-windedness or evasiveness. *Pariyāya* refers to metaphor, allegory, parable, any use of speech which is not to be taken literally. A text delivered 'with *pariyāya*' is contrasted with one delivered without, in other words, with a text which is to be taken literally. In the early canons, it is the *abhidharma* texts which are 'without *pariyāya*' and thus claim to give us the Buddha's meaning literally.[5]

What does this mean for us? It is the primary task of a modern expositor like myself to present in our language what the Buddha meant, literally. Removing the figurative use of language which fills and enlivens his discourses is likely to make them less vivid and interesting; besides, it is always debatable to what extent that which is expressed by a metaphor can be conveyed by its literal equivalent, particularly when the subject matter is religious. I can, of course, try introducing metaphors of my own, but unless I am very careful to make clear what I am doing, this runs the risk of distorting the message, particularly because our own world is so far removed from that of ancient India. I had better stick to the task of decoding what the Buddha said by recognizing when he is speaking figuratively, and preferably also understanding why. But simply to ignore the metaphors is to lose an essential part of the meaning.

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SKILL IN MEANS

The Buddha's use of metaphor is linked to what became known as his Skill in Means. In the Mahayana, Skill in Means (S: *upāya-kauśalya*) acquired the status of a technical term. That term is not found in the early Pali texts, but what it stands for is found all over them.[6] The term refers to the Buddha's skill as a communicator. This, in turn, is manifested by the Buddha's ability to adapt what he says to his audience, to their prejudices, expectations and capacities. When he encounters non-Buddhists, the Buddha hardly ever initiates a discussion or begins by putting forward his own views. As T. W. Rhys Davids pointed out a century ago,[7] this reminds us of Socrates, who always got discussions going by asking the other party to state their views. When the Buddha's interlocutor has spoken, the Buddha's normal technique is to agree – and then to carry on. He says, 'Yes ... and ...'

This is a wonderful bargaining or diplomatic tactic, from which anyone can learn. The Buddha avoids an adversarial stance. What he does after his initial agreement is to take what has apparently been agreed on and turn it upside down. One of his main ways of doing that is to make the words used by his opponent mean something quite different.

The way in which the Buddha infuses new meaning into accepted terms is so bold that in some instances one might almost call it outrageous. The word 'karma' itself[8] offers a perfect example. It is a noun derived from one of the commonest of all Sanskrit roots, *kṛ*, meaning 'to do' or 'to make'. Sanskrit *karman* and Pali *kamma* thus mean 'act, action, deed'. Regardless of what kinds of action the word is used to refer to, an action is something which takes place in the physical world. So when the Buddha said, 'It is intention that I call karma,'[9] he was doing something logically analogous to saying that he chose to call black 'white', or to call left 'right'. This example is so extreme that perhaps it does not describe it adequately to say that what his opponents meant literally he took metaphorically. There are, however, many examples of the latter procedure. When he took a word for sacrifice which the brahmins meant literally, and turned that into a metaphor, we are on more familiar territory.

Already in ancient times, this matter became explicit in the Buddhists' view of their own tradition. Though every Buddha was thought to have attained moral perfection in a whole set of virtues, two were of paramount importance: compassion and wisdom. Odd

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as it may sound to our ears, the prime instance of his compassion was his preaching. There was no necessity for him to preach, but he was kind enough to do so, and thus show to all living creatures the path to liberation from rebirth. Consonant with the idea of individual responsibility, the Buddha's compassion consisted above all in helping others to help themselves. And it was his wisdom that provided the Skill in Means which made his preaching so effective.

DECODING AN IDEOLOGICAL STRUCTURE

The meaning of Buddhist texts is never going to be clear to us if we stick to reading word-for-word translations, or exegesis which clings closely to such translations. Here is a typical statement of one of the Buddha's basic teachings: 'The Buddha taught that living beings have no self, but what we think of as the self in fact consists of five aggregates.' Many people are so used to sentences like this, which are so obscure as to be meaningless, that they read (or listen) on without a murmur of complaint. Some even fancy that if they cannot understand such profundities, it must be their fault!

Of course, the teacher making such a statement may well have explained that 'self' here corresponds to S: *ātman* (P: *attā*), which besides 'self' can be translated 'soul', and that 'aggregates' translates S: *skandhāḥ* (P: *khandhā*). True. But as an explanation of what the Buddha was teaching, this is still totally inadequate.

The only way fully to explain matters to an English-speaker is to use clear, normal English. This will not be possible through just translating terms or sentences containing those terms. However, a large part of the explanation will consist of dealing with those terms, exploring their semantic range and discussing their uses, both literal and metaphorical.

Let me begin with the 'self', briefly postponing the 'aggregates'. Throughout ancient times, in the cultures where it was known, the salient doctrine of Buddhism, its most distinctive feature, was held to be the doctrine of No Self or No Soul. Both these two-word English phrases translate S: *anātman* and P: *anatta/anattā*. When Buddhism was discovered by the West (mainly in the nineteenth century), it was being expounded by and to Christians, who were no less struck by Buddhism's denial of a supreme creator god; but for modern scholars too, the denial of a self or soul has been the

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most striking characteristic of Buddhism and of the teaching ascribed to the Buddha.

It will be easiest to grasp my argument if I come straight to the main point, and say baldly that all the fuss and misunderstanding can be avoided if one inserts the word 'unchanging', so that the two-word English phrases become 'no unchanging self' and 'no unchanging soul'. I shall explore the matter in detail later in the book, but here it suffices to say that for the Buddha's audience *by definition* the word *ātman/attā* referred to something unchanging; in that linguistic environment, to add a word meaning 'unchanging' would have been redundant. Thus, there are several ways of expressing this doctrine clearly and accurately in English. One can say, for example, 'There is nothing in living beings that never changes,' or 'There is no unchanging essence in living beings.' (Since the main concern is with people, it may be helpful to substitute 'people' or 'human beings' for 'living beings'.)

So far, so good. If Buddhism is just a way to gain salvation, it seems enough to know that this applies to us humans. In fact, however, the doctrine is far wider. It applies to everything within our normal experience. In this broader context, the word 'soul' becomes inappropriate and one wants a word like 'essence'. So the cardinal teaching becomes: 'Nothing in the world has an unchanging essence,' or 'There is nothing in our normal experience that never changes.'

On the one hand, these are simple, intelligible statements. On the other hand, 'in the world' has been equated with 'in our normal experience'. Thus each statement of the doctrine leads us on to another. In other words – and this is my most fundamental point – we are dealing with a system which is not merely coherent but interlocking. It is perfectly understandable, but to understand it correctly you have to know how the entire set of key terms is being used. Thus, for the Buddha 'the world' is the same as 'that which we can normally experience'.

Yes, we should now go on to explain what is meant by 'normally'. But if we were thorough about following from link to link, the introduction would become the whole book. So for the moment it must suffice to point out that the Buddha is not primarily concerned with what exists – in fact, he thinks that is a red herring – but with what we can experience, what can be present to consciousness. For his purposes, what exists and the contents of experience are the

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same. At this level, if we want a label, his doctrine looks like pragmatic empiricism.

To go a step further: this accords with what is known as the First Noble Truth. Traditionally, this is expressed in a single Pali word, *dukkha* (S: *duḥkha*). This 'truth' is expressed as a single word, not a sentence, and thus looks more like an exclamation than a proposition. Again, there has been a lot of argument over how to translate the word *dukkha*; and again, the choice of translation must depend heavily on the context. But what is being expressed is that life as we normally experience it is unsatisfactory.

Thus we arrive at what is known in Pali dogmatics as the *ti-lakkhaṇa*, 'the three hallmarks'. The hallmarks of what? Of life as we can normally know it. The hallmarks are that it is *anicca, dukkha, anatta*: 'impermanent (i.e., ever-changing[10]), unsatisfactory, not/without self/essence'. We have already seen that since by definition self is unchanging, the first and third hallmarks are virtually tautologous. In Chapter 5 we shall show that the same applies to *dukkha*: that in the terms in which the Buddha was thinking and preaching, nothing impermanent could be fully satisfactory. This may not be obvious to us, and indeed it sets the bar for satisfaction far higher than many of us would want to, but for the Buddha, we shall see, this is a fundamental postulate.

Another point which we must for the moment be content to gloss over is the ambiguity between not *being* a self or essence and not *having* a self or essence. For the purposes of this summary exposition, the ambiguity hardly matters, and we shall return to it in Chapter 5.

The most basic point of the Buddha's teaching that we have so far displayed is that everything in our lives changes: that most of us have no experience of anything unchanging. Moreover, in this view of the world, to 'exist' is not to change: existence and becoming are defined as opposites. But is change random? Surely not. Even if we and everything around us change all the time, life could not go on if we did not recognize continuities at every step. The change, in other words, is not random. The Buddha axiomatized this in the proposition that nothing exists without a cause.

Another, simpler way of saying that all phenomena exhibit non-random change is to say that *everything is process*. That is indeed, in my view, the Buddha's position. But now the question must surely be: if the Buddha was saying something so simple and straightforward – which is not to say that all the implications are straightforward –

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why is this not what we read in every book about Buddhism? I am going to suggest that this may well be because Pali and Sanskrit lacked a word which closely corresponds to the idea of 'process', and had to express it figuratively. I also believe that the word *saṃkhārā*, which is translated in an astonishing variety of ways, often comes closer to 'process' than has hitherto been recognized.

KARMA AS PERSONAL CONTINUITY

It is time to return to where I began this summary exposition: to the human being, the suffering individual, doomed to continual change, while for both him and his loved ones the great change of life to death is forever looming. It is time, indeed, to say more about karma. Karma is my favourite point of entry to the Buddha's world-view. Rather than begin with a demolition job, as I did when I showed that the common understanding of No Soul is severely deficient, I can introduce karma as a positive doctrine. I believe that it is not only fundamental to the Buddha's whole view of life, but also a kind of lynchpin which holds the rest of the basic tenets together by providing the perfect example of what they mean.

If the doctrine of No Soul means that there is no personal continuity, this suggests the alarming consequence that there is no moral responsibility. But the slightest acquaintance with Buddhism, in virtually any of its forms, shows that this cannot be the correct interpretation, because Buddhism teaches that when people (or other beings) die, they are reborn according to their moral deserts. For those who consider the soul to be the locus of good and evil in the individual, this makes Buddhism bafflingly incoherent. How did such an illogical religion ever survive, let alone appeal to millions?

The answer, of course, is that the idea that Buddhism denies personal continuity could not be further from the truth. In fact, Buddhism probably has the strongest idea of personal continuity found anywhere. Christians, for example, believe in personal continuity through just the one life that we live here on earth, and perhaps in a second life in a place or state of reward or punishment, a heaven or a hell – although, since that is often considered to be 'outside time', it is not clear how the term 'continuity' can there apply. Buddhists, by contrast, believe in personal continuity over an infinite series of lives.

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Infinite? Well, the series can have no beginning, because the Buddha established that nothing can come into being without a cause. So, like the world, life cannot have a beginning. (The Buddha advised against spending time on racking one's brains about this.) All of us have already lived infinitely many lives. The series can, however, have an end: that is achieved by the attainment of nirvana. One who has attained nirvana, according to the Buddha, will not be reborn.

We are thus heirs of our own deeds over an infinite number of lives. The best-documented series of lives in Buddhism is that of the person whose last life was as the Buddha, Gotama Buddha. This person resolved to attain Buddhahood a vast number of years ago. (The Buddhist term for someone who takes such a resolution is *bodhisattva*.) Stories of more than five hundred of his previous lives (called *Jātaka*) are retold in scriptures[11] and sermons, painted on temple walls and dramatically recited or re-enacted; they form an integral part of Buddhist culture.

Karma is not the only element of continuity in our lives. Those lives have five sets of components, and each of these five sets is denoted by the term which above was translated by the English word 'aggregate'. In fact, the word should not be detached from a word that precedes it in a Pali compound, *upādāna-khandha*, and that compound is complicated, because it is a pun of which one meaning is a metaphor: 'a mass of burning fuel'. In this latter sense it is part of the same metaphorical structure as nirvana (P: *nibbāna*), which means the going out of a flame. I shall explain this metaphor in Chapter 8. For the moment, we need only note that these five masses of burning fuel are, metaphorically, the five sets of processes which constitute our lives. In the traditional order, these five are: interactions with the physical world through the five senses, feelings (as of pleasure and pain), apperceptions (perceptions which serve to identify objects), *saṃkhārā* and consciousness.

I have left the fourth untranslated. Common translations are 'mental formations' and 'volitions'. *Saṃkhārā* in this context refers to those mental processes not covered by the second, third and fifth categories, and they are indeed emotions and volitions. Far the most important of these processes is intention. While it is admitted that some intentions are morally neutral, the focus is on intentions which are morally good or bad.

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The Buddha taught that all thoughts, words and deeds derive their moral value, positive or negative, from the intention behind them. This does not make the effect of actions irrelevant: Buddhism is no less familiar than is modern law with the idea of negligence. But the basic criterion for morality is intention. Morality and immorality are mental properties of individuals. Metaphorically they were often referred to as purity and impurity. Each good deed makes a person purer and thus makes it slightly easier to repeat such a deed. For instance, I may find it a wrench to give money away the first time, but each time I do so the generosity will come more easily. The same applies to bad qualities, such as cruelty. An intention, carried out, becomes a propensity. A proverb cited by Damien Keown in his little book *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*[12] puts it admirably: 'Sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.'

Though karma, ethical volition, is thus only one of the elements of continuity in an individual's life (and beyond), from the religious point of view it is the most important. This volition, moreover, is presented as a process. It is far from random, and is partially conditioned by preceding volitions; but it is not wholly determined. If it were, the volition could not be the responsibility of its agent, and for that agent to suffer consequences would be completely unjust, and indeed make nonsense of the very idea of volition as a separate category of thought or mental event. While I shall have more to say about karma and determinism below, it suffices here to say that the entire Buddhist ideology depends on the proposition that karma is on the one hand conditioned but on the other not strictly determined.

INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Since ethical value lies in intention, the individual is autonomous and the final authority is what we would call his conscience. There is no external agent, such as a God, who can take the blame for our decisions. We have free will and are wholly responsible for ourselves. Further, this responsibility extends far beyond this present life. So we are entirely responsible for our moral condition and what we make of it.

As a general rule, a monk could not be disciplined for an offence to which he did not admit. Similarly, the moral rules laid down for

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the laity (which also apply, *a fortiori,* to the Saṅgha) are formulated as personal undertakings: the Buddhist layman declares, 'I undertake to abstain from taking life' and so forth, and thus articulates personal conscience. At least in theory, even the recitation of the words is useless and pointless unless one is consciously subscribing to their meaning.

The point of ritual lies in doing, not in intending. Thus ritual is ethically neutral for the Buddhist. It has no moral and hence no soteriological value. It is not normally forbidden, unless it involves an immoral act such as killing, but it is certainly not commended. The Buddha, following his custom of putting new meanings to old words, often asked his followers to substitute moral for ritual practices. One of the Three Fetters which tie men to continued existence in this world was declared to be infatuation with ritualistic observances,[13] clinging to the letter rather than the spirit of actions.

The Buddha took the brahmin word for 'ritual' and used it to denote ethical intention. This single move overturns brahminical, caste-bound ethics. For the intention of a brahmin cannot plausibly be claimed to be ethically of quite a different kind from the intention of an outcaste. Intention can only be virtuous or wicked. The very term *sva-dharma,* the Sanskrit word meaning one's own particularistic duty, is absent from the Buddhist Canon. It is 'purifying action' (*puñña kamma*) which brings the good Buddhist rewards in this and future lives. But since acting is really mental, doing a good act is actually purifying one's state of mind. In meditation, such purification is undertaken directly, without any accompanying action. Thus there is a logical continuum between the moral actions of a man in the world and the meditations of a recluse. This shows why the Buddhists claim morality to be a prerequisite for meditation. The system is all of a piece.[14]

A great deal of modern education and psychotherapy consists of making people aware that they are responsible for themselves. In fact, we consider that it constitutes a large part of what we mean by becoming a mature person. It is amazing that someone should have promulgated this idea in the fifth century BC, and hardly less remarkable that he found followers. In Chapter 2 I shall suggest what socio-economic conditions made this possible – though certainly not inevitable.

Introductions to Buddhism written for westerners tend to begin by quoting the Buddha's advice to a group of people called the

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Kālāmas.[15] They had complained to him that various teachers came and preached different doctrines to them, and they were confused about which to follow. The Buddha replied that everyone has to make up their own mind on such matters. One should not take any teaching on trust or external authority, but test it on the touchstone of one's own experience. Naturally, the implication is that people would then find out for themselves that it was the Buddha whose teaching their experience showed to be correct. It is natural and appropriate for modern authors to highlight this teaching: its implications for tolerance and egalitarianism, at least on the intellectual level, resonate with post-Enlightenment thought. The attitude was not unique in the ancient world: one can imagine the same advice coming from Socrates – though not from Plato. But it is astonishing to find it in the generally hierarchic society of India.

The Buddha's views on politics are fascinating, but since I have virtually nothing to add to what I have written about them elsewhere,[16] I shall leave them out of this book. So let me at this point draw attention to his egalitarianism: that the only true criterion for ranking people is moral, and that morality is closely linked to intellectual ability. The first of these propositions may remind us of Christianity, but the second less so.

If people are responsible for their own decisions, and in particular for deciding which teaching to follow, this sets a high premium on intelligence. The usual term that the Buddha seems to have used for a morally good act was a word, *kusala,* which in Sanskrit[17] can mean either 'healthy, wholesome' or 'skilful'. Scholars have debated which of these translations is more appropriate in Buddhism. Perhaps one need not really decide between them, for the ambiguity could have been intentional and words may be selected not only for their literal meanings but also for their overtones. Nevertheless, let me concede that it may make sense to ask which metaphor was uppermost in the Buddha's mind. My answer is that for him *kusala* primarily means 'skilled', because a good moral choice is an intelligent and informed choice. I have little doubt that 'skilful' fits the bill.[18]

If you have intellectual autonomy, you had better have the brains to make good use of it. In every traditional society, including that into which the Buddha was born, education consists largely in parroting what the teacher says. If later some Buddhists parroted, 'The teacher says I must think for myself,' we cannot blame the Buddha for that. The Buddha even made a monastic ruling that

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one of the duties of a pupil towards his teacher is to correct him when he is wrong on doctrine or in danger of saying something unsuitable.[19] That, I think, has few parallels in world history.

Though the Buddha's advice to the Kālāmas may not follow logically from his doctrine of karma, I see the two as closely connected: everyone is ultimately responsible for themselves and has to use their intelligence to make their own choices.

WHY HAVE I STARTED HERE?

In this Introduction I have tried to summarize, briefly but I hope clearly, what I consider to be the most important of the Buddha's ideas. I have shown that to take the key concepts in isolation is almost bound to lead to misunderstanding. Thus, the concept of 'no soul', commonly held to refer to the most characteristic Buddhist teaching, has at least to be taken in conjunction with the doctrine of karma.

It turns out, I would argue, that if one wants to expound the Buddha's core teaching, quite a lot hangs on where one begins. I have used No Soul and karma (moral causality) as my points of entry. The Buddhist tradition is unanimous that the Buddha began by preaching the Four Noble Truths, which deal with *dukkha* (let's call it 'suffering'). I have mentioned the First Noble Truth, that all living beings experience suffering, but neither did I make it my point of entry, nor have I yet explained the other three Noble Truths. Why?

Because the Buddha was preaching to an audience who already had a set of preconceptions, most of them very different from our own. They took rebirth for granted; they believed in some enduring entity at the centre of each human being, an entity which transmigrated from life to life; probably most of them believed that the cycle of rebirth could be brought to an end, but that that central entity would somehow survive eternally. Some of them believed that the form in which one was reborn was affected by how one behaved previously, but whether and how this happened was a hotly contested issue. So I have had to make these preconceptions explicit from the very outset; and indeed, after I have explained the Buddha's view of karma in more detail in the next chapter, the following two chapters will deal with the views of karma and rebirth which led up to the Buddha's own.

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Virtually everything I have so far written requires further elaboration, and I have not even touched on such important matters as nirvana, the Buddha's view of language, and – perhaps most important of all – ethical values. Other important features of the Buddha's teaching and practice, such as meditation and the monastic Order, must remain almost entirely outside the scope of this book. I hope, however, that I have done enough to show that the ideas here presented are not only powerful but also form a coherent system.

SUMMARY: DID ONE PERSON REALLY THINK OF ALL THIS?

I have mentioned above that some scholars do not like to talk of Buddhism in the singular at all, unless it be in scare quotes. Probably even more common, at least in the United States, is the view that if such a historical figure as the Buddha existed, we can know nothing about him. Academics who are prey to this fashion for 'deconstruction' are reluctant to consider anything in a Buddhist text to be older than that text itself. Since it is most unlikely that any text was written down before the reign of the Emperor Asoka in the middle of the third century BC, some 150 years after the Buddha's death, and indeed hardly any texts that we have were written down even that early,[20] the same sceptics claim that we can know nothing about Buddhism before it had already split into schools and sects. That means, of course, knowing nothing about the Buddha or his ideas. On this view, Buddhism emerges into the light of history from impenetrable darkness.

Surely this defies common sense. Firstly, it makes no sense to assume that Buddhism could have arisen without a historical person who founded it, and provided it with ideas and institutions. (About the ideology of the institution I shall have something to say in Chapter 11.) It is equally implausible, in my view, to claim that these ideas could just have accumulated among Buddhists as time went on, and that their coherence is a matter of historical accident. One remarkable brain must have been responsible for the basic ideology. The owner of that brain happens to be known, appropriately, as the Buddha, the 'Awakened'.

Moreover, as I began to show in *How Buddhism Began* and will further demonstrate below, that brain was strongly influenced by

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ideas current at a certain place and time. The ideas were original and brilliant, but fully to understand them requires also an understanding of what preceded them. It is because exegetes have had too little such understanding that the ideas have often been misinterpreted.

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Chapter 2

MORE ABOUT KARMA, AND ITS SOCIAL CONTEXT

For the Buddha, the idea of karma is inextricably connected with the idea of rebirth. He saw karma, intentional action, as a matter of cause and effect. Good karma would bring good effects for the doer, bad karma bad effects. It would not be right to call these rewards and punishments,[1] because there is no rewarder or punisher. The effects are produced, rather, by a law of nature, analogous for us to a law of physics. For the Buddha and others in ancient India, however, the model was agriculture. One sows a seed, there is a time lag during which some mysterious invisible process takes place, and then the plant pops up and can be harvested. The result of an intentional act is in fact normally referred to as its 'fruit'.[2] The time between the act and its fruit is unpredictable.

All the world religions face the problem known in theology as theodicy, literally 'god's justice'. This is also known as the problem of suffering, though its main concern is with apparently unjust suffering. It seems that sometimes wicked people die without having got their comeuppance, and that often babies who cannot yet have done wrong suffer and die too. This evidence from our common experience would seem to refute the doctrine of karma – if people had only one life. Karma works as a theodicy by claiming that the explanation for both triumphant rogues and suffering babies lies in what they have done in former lives.

For karma to work as an ethical doctrine, it must steer between the extremes of determinism and randomness. If we have no free will, if our actions are rigidly determined, we are not ethical agents and the rest of the Buddha's teaching makes no sense at all. So it is not surprising to find in the Pali Canon his condemnation of the determinist doctrines of the Ājīvaka teacher Makkhali Gosāla[3] and

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others. On the other hand, the teaching is equally flawed unless actions have consequences.

For the middle way between determinism and randomness, there is an important *sutta* in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*.[4] A non-Buddhist renunciate called Moliya Sīvaka asks the Buddha what he thinks of the view that everything one experiences, whether pleasure, pain or neutral, is the result of what one has done. The Buddha replies that this view is wrong and goes beyond both what one can know for oneself and what is commonly accepted to be true. One can know for oneself, and it is commonly accepted, that feelings arise from eight causes. He lists them. The first five are perfectly clear and refer to the medical knowledge of those days. First there are the three humours: bile, phlegm and wind. The fourth is a combination of these three. The fifth is a change in season. (We, with our more variable climate, would call it a change in the weather.) The sixth the *PED* translates as 'being attacked by adversities';[5] but I think the reference is still medical and it means inappropriate or inadequate care or treatment.[6] The seventh seems to mean 'caused by an act of violence'.[7] Only the eighth cause, says the Buddha, is the result of karma. In other words, he seems to be saying that ascribing good or bad experiences to karma is only suitable when no medical or common-sense explanation is available. But is this logical?

The Buddha's teaching of karma was a moral exhortation. So it is intended to be seen from the front, to be taken as an answer to the question 'How should I behave?' Since people are lazy, and tend to be more interested in saying, 'How did I get into this mess – surely it was not my fault?', the tendency has always been, probably from the Buddha's day until now, to see the same doctrine from the other end, backwards. Thus, it is easy for belief in karma to become a kind of fatalism, the very reverse of what the Buddha meant. In this perverse form of the doctrine, people say, 'This is my karma', when what they mean, to use the original terminology, is 'This is the result of my karma.'

Still, one can ask, 'Granted that we create our own futures, to what extent are things that happen to us the result of our own acts in this or a former life?' The Buddha's answer to Moliya Sīvaka, just quoted, says that medical conditions are to be explained by medical causes without having recourse to karma. But does this always apply? When we pose the problem of theodicy, often the first example of unjust suffering that comes to mind is the child born with AIDS.

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Does the fact that this is a condition of which we understand the medical causes mean that it is not a case of karmic causation? If so, what use is karma as a theodicy?

It seems that karma operates on a grand scale, for example, in determining where one is born and when one dies. At first sight the example of the child with AIDS may appear to contradict this. But no. One must realize that karma must operate through some specific cause; it is, as it were, the cause behind causes. In that sense the Buddha's answer to Moliya Sīvaka is misleading, for karma and the other causes cited are not on the same level.

The account that I wrote in my first book, based on fieldwork in a Sinhalese Buddhist village, will serve to give us a picture of how the Buddhist view of the results of karma probably has always operated:

> Bad karma means that one is due for misfortune ... Specific misfortunes are caused by other beings – gods, men or devils – who operate as freewill agents, or they may result from natural causes such as eating the wrong food. These causes interlock and cannot be rigidly schematised. A man who falls ill will probably first try western medicine at the local hospital, and if that fails try Ayurvedic medicine administered by a village specialist. If that fails his next resort will be determined by his sub-culture and individual temperament. He may ascribe it to human agency (black magic) and employ suitable counter-measures (white magic). He may ascribe it to demons of disease or to malign planetary influences ... and banish or appease them by more or less elaborate exorcistic ceremonies. He may ascribe it to the actions of a god, or rather the failure of that god's protection, and make the god a vow, promising him some present or service if he recovers. If the remedy does not work this may be due to a wrong diagnosis, or, much more likely, it may be because the man's karma is too bad, and he is due to suffer longer. The theories and remedies listed are not mutually exclusive.[8]

In practice, people tend to apply the theory backwards: when one has an illness and no treatment seems to do any good, one starts saying that this must be an effect of bad karma. The Buddha himself listed the effects of karma as one of the four things which are not to be thought about, because thinking about them will drive

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you crazy.[9] Presumably this warning is directed to unenlightened people, because the second of the three knowledges which are said to come with Enlightenment is the ability to see how beings are reborn in accordance with the moral quality of their deeds (*yathā-kammūpaga*).[10] So he witnessed the workings of karma, but we cannot. And what he saw convinced him that nothing could be as urgent as putting a stop to the whole process.

Very rarely in human history have people accepted that they are wholly responsible for themselves. Most people have lived under such conditions that this teaching has no plausibility. It has no plausibility for those whose food supply depends on the vagaries of the weather. A high rate of morbidity must also be demoralizing. Equally important, in societies where power is very unequally distributed, and those with little or none of it depend on the goodwill of their overlords, it is natural to believe that the world is run by a god or gods. What, then, were the exceptional circumstances which allowed the Buddha's teaching of individual responsibility to take root in a large segment of society, at least for a few generations?

My claim is not that the Buddha's conceiving these ideas was determined by the society and the economy in which he lived, for I think that remarkable individuals are capable of generating ideas under almost any circumstances. But we would never have heard of the Buddha and there would be no Buddhism had not a lot of people accepted his ideas, and it is their acceptance which I think can be attributed to their material conditions.

All historians agree that Buddhism arose early in India's second period of urbanization. (The first was the Indus Valley civilization, irrelevant to our story.) This urbanization must have come about through the production of an agricultural surplus. Radical changes in society and the economy ensued. The larger towns (still very small by modern standards) developed into city states, with courts, nobility and an administrative class. The surplus agricultural production led to trade on an ever increasing scale, and this in turn led to contact with more distant societies and a broadening of cultural horizons. Traders kept accounts; kings enforced laws. I have described all this in Chapter 2 of my *Theravada Buddhism* and many others have done so in more detail.[11]

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I suggest that in this period an unusually high proportion of people must have lived relatively free from oppression. It is clear both from the early texts and, a bit later, from archaeological evidence that Buddhism particularly appealed to the new social classes, such as traders. Traders were by no means the only people who were largely self-employed. Kosambi writes:

> The existence of new classes in the Gangetic basin of the sixth century is undeniable. The free peasants and farmers were one. The neo-Vedic pastoral class of vaiśyas within the tribe was replaced by agriculturists for whom the tribe had ceased to exist. ... The existence of free, tenant or land-owning peasants ... is clear from the texts ... [L]arge-scale slave labour was not available.[12]

Trade gave the farmers an incentive to produce a surplus, and because clan organization had broken down there was no obligation to share that surplus; the peasants now had 'private property in farm animals, in land and its produce'.[13]

The canonical texts can give us an idea of the social composition of the Buddha's lay support. The term which constantly recurs is *gahapati,* which literally means 'master of a house', i.e., 'householder'. To this day in Indian villages people think of the population very much in terms of family groups or 'houses', each one with its head. It is far easier to get from a villager an estimate of how many such units there are in an area than of the total number of human beings. It is from these 'householders' that such institutions as village councils have always recruited their membership. A household includes not only close kin but servants and other dependants. When ancient texts mention householders, they are referring to heads of families of the top three *varṇa*s; the other families do not count socially. Moreover, since brahmins and *kṣatriya*s can have formed only a small part of the population, the term must refer mainly to heads of families which brahminism classified as *vaiśya*. Indeed, the term *vaiśya* (P: *vessa*) is rare in Buddhist scripture; it occurs only when discussing brahmin classification, not as the natural designation for someone's primary social status. It is clear that the canonical *gahapati* is the head of a respectable family – but not a brahmin, unless specifically said to be so.

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Who were these people in terms of class or profession? In the Canon, most of them evidently own land, but they usually have labourers to do the physical work. Sometimes they are also in business. In fact, they illustrate how it is in the first instance wealth derived from agriculture which provides business capital. The average *gahapati* who gave material support to the Buddha and his Saṅgha thus seems to have been something like a gentleman farmer, perhaps with a town house. On the other hand, inscriptions in the western Deccan, where Buddhism flourished in the early centuries AD, use the term *gahapati* to refer to urban merchants. We must distinguish between reference and meaning: the meaning of *gahapati* is simple and unvarying, but the reference shifts with the social context.

I should add that since I first began to write about the socio-economic background to the rise of Buddhism, a large-scale British research project, led by Dr Michael Willis and Dr Julia Shaw, has conducted surveys and undertaken surface archaeology in the relevant parts of India, and their research has helped to fill in the picture I have been sketching. To quote from an abstract of a lecture given by Dr Willis: they conclude, *inter alia*, 'that the appearance of Buddhism and its relic cult in central India coincided with the building of a vast hydrological system which radically changed both agrarian production and the immediate environment,' and 'that a new social class of landed farmers were important instruments in the whole process, functioning both as constituents in a new polity and lay supporters of Buddhism.'[14]

I have been made aware of an even more important line of interpretation too late to do it full justice in this book. This concerns the radical effect on thought of monetization. Richard Seaford was kind enough to write to me, after reading my *Social History*: 'There is a striking similarity with what I have argued to be the socio-economic preconditions for the (roughly contemporary) beginnings of western "philosophy" (in my *Money and the Early Greek Mind*).' I find his book fascinating, and hope I can discuss its wider implications for early Indian thought elsewhere. Here let me just quote the passages which I find most relevant to the Buddha's karma theory. The 'metaphysics of money' involves 'the belief that we are primarily individual agents and only secondarily (if at all) members of a larger [social] entity ...'[15]

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> The individual with money, although he may find useful and desirable the personal relations of kinship and friendship (reciprocity) as well as participation in collective sacrifices (redistribution), can frequently do without them, relying instead on the impersonal power of money ... The power of money can increase human independence even from deity; ...[16]

This fits Buddhist karma perfectly.

Since it is explicitly stated in a canonical text,[17] it has often been noted that the organization of the Buddhist Saṅgha was modelled on that of a tribal republic or oligarchy: the only ranking principle was that of seniority, i.e., number of years since full ordination. The Buddha, according to the same text, refused to appoint a head of the Saṅgha, and told monks to rely on themselves, not on external authority. Obviously this fits well with a doctrine of free will: it attempts to put the teaching that everyone is fully responsible for themselves into practice. However, as Obeyesekere demonstrates,[18] Buddhist karma doctrine is just as much for the laity as for the Saṅgha.

In sum, my claim is that this teaching could only succeed because so many people found it did not run counter to their experience. For a modern audience I should perhaps repeat that the 'people' primarily – though not exclusively – involved were the heads of households, those who controlled the economic resources to support the Saṅgha and who also, no doubt, set the religious tone for the rest of their families.

KARMA THEORY'S BEARING ON SOCIETY AND COSMOLOGY

If karma is completely ethicized, the whole universe becomes an ethical arena, because everywhere all beings are placed according to their deserts. If this is generalized into a view of the world, as it has been in Theravādin cultures, it means that ultimately power (including the power to enjoy oneself) and goodness are always perfectly correlated, both increasing as one proceeds (literally) up the universe. Gods are more powerful than human beings, but since they owe their position to their virtue they may be expected to exercise that power justly. Human beings, in turn, are better and

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also better off than animals, let alone demons. Moreover, even demons are only rationally punitive: they can be the instruments to give people their just deserts, but if they try to go further, like an over-zealous policeman, they will themselves be punished for it. This picture of a universe under control is from one angle reassuring; but in its belief that there is really no undeserved suffering it can also be harsh. Logically it solves the problem of theodicy, but at a price. Many have found this solution as unbearable as the situation it resolves, and it is hardly surprising that Buddhism as it developed after the Buddha's death became rich in ways of obscuring or escaping such an intransigent law of the universe, often at the cost of logical consistency.

Obeyesekere has also shown[19] how it is logical that the ethicization of a society's eschatology should lead to its universalization. Once ethics is reduced to the simple values of right and wrong, and located in the mind, something common to all human beings, distinctions of gender, age and social class become irrelevant. Moreover, Buddhism – like mercantile wealth—was not ascribed but achieved. It appealed largely to new men who did not fit well into the four-*varṇa* system of brahmin ideology.

Buddhism, in origin an Indian ideology, spread over half the ancient world and took root in quite disparate civilizations. Despite huge setbacks, it is still spreading. I would suggest that it acquired this adaptability not by chance, but because the Buddha himself was able to see that local mores were man-made, and could show that what brahmins believed to be ingrained in nature was nothing but convention. In much the same period (though they started somewhat earlier) the Greeks were making the distinction between *phusis*, nature, and *nomos*, man-made rule, and drawing similar conclusions. The Buddha probably began with an advantage in that he was born and bred in north-eastern India on the very margin of Vedic civilization. But he was also addressing audiences among which were men who had acquired the same perception when they had travelled on business. Disputing with a young brahmin, the Buddha points out that in the far north-west and other distant countries there are only two *varṇa*, master and slave (or servant), and it happens on occasion that masters become slaves and slaves masters.[20] As has happened several times in history, awareness of foreign cultures had a truly liberating effect.

Buddhism was attached neither to community nor to locality, neither to shrine nor to hearth, but resided in the hearts of its

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it had to entail belief in rebirth. One tends to add, perhaps in an apologetic tone, that these were beliefs that the Buddha inherited and simply could not shake off. I hope I have shown that this is the very reverse of the truth. The Buddha's version of the law of karma was entirely his own; but to accept it was the leap of faith he demanded of every follower.

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Chapter 3

THE ANTECEDENTS OF THE KARMA DOCTRINE IN BRAHMINISM

In this chapter and the next I shall try to outline the earlier Indian ideas of rebirth and karma which led up to those taught by the Buddha. In this chapter I shall be dealing with brahminism, but only those aspects of it strictly relevant to that theme. Other aspects of brahminism which fundamentally influenced the Buddha are postponed till Chapter 5.

Until very recently, all scholars have agreed that the *Ṛg Veda* shows no signs of a belief in rebirth. Basing themselves on the 'Funeral Hymn', *RV* X.16, scholars have thought that when people (in fact, only men are explicitly referred to) died and were cremated, they went upwards to join their ancestors, who were known as 'fathers' (*pitaras*) and lived in the sky, or more precisely in the sun. Since no more was said about them, it was presumed that they stayed there, having a good time. The idea of a second death, which can be avoided by providing the ancestors with daily libations, is found in the *Brāhmaṇas*, a stratum of religious texts generally thought to be several centuries younger than the *Ṛg Veda*.

By this same agreed account, the idea of a cycle of rebirth first appears in the early *Upaniṣads*, texts which follow the *Brāhmaṇas*. But where did it come from?

The oldest *Upaniṣads* have been tentatively dated to the seventh or sixth century BC. The word *karma* is first mentioned in connection with rebirth in two brief passages in the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, one of the oldest, if not the very oldest, of the *Upaniṣads*. Towards the end of the text, the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* has a longer

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with part of the earliest full account of rebirth, the 'five fire doctrine', in the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad,* referred to above (see below for further details).

There are two fundamental differences between rebirth in the *Ṛg Veda* and all the later theories of rebirth. In the *Ṛg Veda* one oscillates between just two worlds, this one and the other one; and the process has nothing to do with one's good or bad actions, one's karma, on any interpretation of what exactly that term refers to. Nor is any end to the process envisaged.

When rebirth is first ethicized, the basic model remains simple. This world is the arena of action, the other world is the arena of pay-off. When the pay-off is complete, you come back to this world and start again. Let me call this a binary cosmology. There are Sanskrit terms for the two arenas in this model: this world is called *karma-bhūmi,* the sphere of action, and the other world is *bhoga-bhūmi,* the sphere of experiencing [the results]. This looks like an unending cycle. However, what characterizes all the Indian soteriologies – brahminical/Hindu, Jain and Buddhist – is that they add to rebirth the idea that one can escape from the cycle; in fact, it is precisely such an escape that constitutes salvation. So to the binary cosmology is added the idea of escaping from the cosmos altogether. There are two special dimensions to the Indian developments, of which this is the first.

Obeyesekere suggests (p.79) that once the world is thus ethicized, 'There can no longer be a single place [after death] for those who have done good and those who have done bad. The other world must minimally split into two, a world of retribution ("hell") and a world of reward ("heaven").' The 'minimal split' describes traditional Christianity (at least, if we ignore purgatory). But Indian religions have seen three possible destinies at death: heaven, hell and neither, which is to say escape from rebirth, and the different religions have arranged these in different permutations.

While each religion has its own terminology, the cycle of rebirth is generally called *saṃsāra,* a word which suggests the meaning 'keeping going'. By a different but equally common metaphor, this is felt to be a kind of slavery or imprisonment, so that release from it is called 'liberation'; the cognate words *mokṣa* and *mukti* are the commonest Sanskrit terms. All traditions agree that since a good

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rebirth will inevitably come to an end, the best solution – because the only final one – is liberation.

The second special Indian dimension concerns the relationship between ethics and ritual. Perhaps the most important characteristic of both Buddhism and Jainism was that they made an absolutely clear-cut distinction between the two. For them, only what we call morality was relevant for soteriology, for determining one's destiny: ritual *per se* was utterly irrelevant. Brahminism and Hinduism, by contrast, never decisively took this step. Although the word basically means 'act', in brahminical literature 'karma' refers first and foremost to a ritual act. One could even claim, I believe, that to this very day ritual and ethics have not been entirely disentangled in the mainstream of Hindu tradition. The theory underlying the commonest category of rituals is that they are necessary in order to purify human beings of impurities which inevitably arise from their very nature as animals, impurities connected with bodily functions such as excretion and menstruation.

The binary cosmology remains the underlying Hindu model. It is humans and the higher animals who are moral agents, and when they die they go to a heaven or a hell to be rewarded or punished. On the whole the inhabitants of heaven or hell (which may be subdivided and multiplied, but that does not affect the basic system) only experience the results of what they did on earth, and return once that process is complete. There are exceptions in mythology: gods commit sins (typically out of lust) and are cursed to suffer for them, or conversely an *asura* (an anti-god) may do something virtuous and be blessed for it; but that is not what people envisage for themselves. Most people aim for a rebirth in a heaven or a good station on earth; to escape rebirth altogether is seen as extremely difficult, but ultimately the best destiny. (In the monotheistic sects, this escape from rebirth is brought about or helped by one's God, and the distinction between heaven and escape from rebirth becomes blurred.)

The same binary pattern characterizes early Jainism, but in a remarkable variant. As Will Johnson demonstrates, the earliest form of Jain doctrine considers all karma to be bad, for almost all action is liable to involve injury to living beings. The karma will then stick to the life monad (the *jīva*) and weigh it down, preventing it from attaining liberation by floating to the top of the universe. (This will be further explained in the next chapter.)

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> The prospect of a better rebirth in heaven or on earth, as a result of good activity which attracts good karma, is hardly admitted .... [T]hat any rebirth is relatively undesirable remains a constant component of [Jain] doctrine. However, what is largely absent from the earliest texts is the idea that there is any gradation or progression through a series of births to ultimate liberation. Instead, what is emphasised is the critical nature of the present birth and, necessarily (since these texts are addressed to ascetics), those kinds of ascetic restraint which will ensure that there is no further rebirth. The *Āyāraṅga Sutta* 1.6.2, for instance, apparently considers that there are only two possibilities at death: 1) birth among hellish beings and animals, and 2) *mokṣa* [liberation]. The latter will be the condition of the *jīva* of the ideal monk, and the former that of the *jīvas* of everyone else, whether householder or monk.[11]

It is only in Buddhism that the binary model of the sphere of action and the sphere of experiencing the results is superseded, and the whole universe is ethicized. In other words, according to the Buddha's teaching all sentient beings throughout the universe are morally responsible and can be reborn in a higher or lower station because of the good and evil they have done. There are in fact some minor exceptions to this, inconsistencies in the general pattern, but they are of no importance for our present purposes. However, it is interesting to note in passing that the Pali Canon here and there preserves a verse which still assumes the old binary model of 'this world and the next'. For instance: 'He grieves here, he grieves after death, the evil-doer grieves in both places (*ubhayattha*)' (*Dhammapada* 15ab). This begins a series of four verses with the same structure and the same word 'in both places'. Similarly, 'Just as one welcomes the arrival of a beloved relative, his good deeds welcome the man who has done good when he passes from this world to the other' (*asmā lokā paraṃ gataṃ*) (*Dhammapada* 220). And again: 'The man who understands both worlds (*ubho loke*) is therefore called a sage' (*Dhammapada* 269cd). This is evidently so embedded in the idiom that no doctrinal shift can quite dislodge it.

Indeed, the same old model is found in prose discourse, for the Buddha characterizes as 'wrong view' (*micchā-diṭṭhi*) the denial that 'this world exists, the other world exists'; conversely, to accept this is 'right view' (*sammā-diṭṭhi*).[12] The context of this idiom always

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concerns karma: to accept that this world and the other exist is to accept that good and bad karma performed in this life will surely bring results sooner or later.

The main exception to the total ethicization of the Buddhist universe does not impinge on the moral teaching. There is a widespread belief that the gods in the heavens cannot or do not make merit, and similarly those suffering in a hell are not generally considered to be active as moral agents. This is clearly a relic of the archaic binary cosmology which I have expounded above, according to which it is only this earth which is the arena of moral action; the other parts of the universe are there for pay-off. Some Buddhists hold that the gods do not make merit because life in heaven is too comfortable, so they forget about the Noble Truth of suffering.

However, I know of no textual evidence (though there may be some) that the Buddha himself exempted denizens of heaven from moral agency. I think that the Buddha probably only concerned himself with the morals of those on earth and that the idea that gods too are moral agents only become operational once the so-called 'transfer of merit' had invaded Buddhist practice. (I think this began to happen around the time of the Buddha's death.) Transferring merit to the gods was then justified by the archaic theory that they could not make merit for themselves.

In the next chapter I shall present my hypothesis that the Buddha was deeply influenced by the Jain doctrine of karma and *saṃsāra*, but precisely reversed the original Jain view that karma consisted in action, not intention. First, however, we must revert to tracing the history of these ideas in the brahminical literature.

A detailed account of rebirth, and rudimentary references to karma, are found in the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (*BĀU*). One can trace a development within this rather long and varied text. One might say that the central concept of this text, and indeed of all the *Upaniṣads*, is that of the *ātman*, the 'self' or 'soul'; that will be further explained below.

I start with a passage which is still based on a clear binary cosmology. It begins by equating the self, *ātman*, with the 'person', *puruṣa*, who transmigrates.

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> [The self] is this person, the one that consists of perception among the vital functions (*prāṇa*), the one that is the inner light within the heart. He travels across both worlds, being common to both. Sometimes he reflects, sometimes he flutters, for when he falls asleep he transcends this world, these visible forms of death. When at birth this person takes on a body, he becomes united with bad things [*pāpman*], and when at death he leaves it behind, he gets rid of those bad things.
>
> Now, this person has just two places – this world and the other world. And there is a third, the place of dream where the two meet. Standing there in the place where the two meet, he sees both those places – this world and the other world. Now, that place serves as an entryway to the other world, and as he moves through that entryway he sees both the bad things and the joys.[13]

The text goes on to give an account of dreaming. This sounds much like the non-ethicized, *Ṛg Vedic* idea, because the other world, which is unitary, seems to be a happier place than this one. No mention of karma here.

The first mention of karma in the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka* is tantalizingly brief. The sage Yājñavalkya takes his questioner Ārtabhāga aside to tell him, 'A man turns into something good by good action and into something bad by bad action' (3.2.13). Here we cannot tell whether good/bad action (karma) refers to ritual or ethical goodness; it is possible that 'bad action' refers to incorrect performance of sacrifice. Possible, but I think rather unlikely; for in a second passage, 4.4.6, Yājñavalkya says (in verse),

> A man who's attached goes with his action
> to that very place to which
> his mind and character cling.
> Reaching the end of his action,
> of whatever he has done in this world –
> From that world he returns
> back to this world,
> back to action.

This looks like the old binary cosmology. But with a difference; for the passage continues:

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That is the course of a man who desires.

Now a man who does not desire – who is without desires, who is freed from desires, whose desires are fulfilled, whose only desire is his self – his vital functions do not depart. *Brahman* he is, and to *brahman* he goes. On this point there is the following verse:

> When they are all banished,
> those desires lurking in one's heart;
> Then a mortal becomes immortal,
> and attains *brahman* in this world.

Here then we have not only rebirth but the possibility of escape from it. Even if 'action' refers primarily to ritual action, we have here a very simple ethicized theory of rebirth, in which this world is the scene of action and the other the scene of reaping the results (see above), and when the results have been reaped one repeats the cycle. This idea that a good action is one performed without desire was to be of crucial importance in the history of Indian religion. But what about '*Brahman* he is, and to *brahman* he goes'?

Though it does not use the word 'karma', the 'five fire wisdom' found in the last book of the same *Upaniṣad* gives a much more elaborate ethicized account of rebirth. Almost the same text occurs in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, but my exposition will take the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka* version as primary, because I believe it to be the older. (The reasons for this will appear in due course.) This text describes people acting in this life and finding an appropriate destiny hereafter; it does not envisage any further good or evil action in the next world, merely either repetition of the cycle or escape from it. Escape comes through gnosis: that is, understanding and totally internalizing the realization, 'I am Brahman.'[14] This is the same as realizing that 'My self (*ātman*) is Brahman.' To understand the central message of the five fire wisdom, we therefore first need to understand the concepts of *ātman* and *brahman*.

MACROCOSM AND MICROCOSM

Brahmin speculative thought had for long been playing with the fundamental supposition that there was a systematic correspondence

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> they pass into the smoke, from the smoke into the night, from the night into the fortnight of the waning moon, from the fortnight of the waning moon into the six months when the sun moves south, from these months into the world of the fathers, and from the world of the fathers into the moon. Reaching the moon, they become food. There, the gods feed on them, as they tell King Soma, the moon: 'Increase! Decrease!' When that ends, they pass into this very sky, from the sky into the wind, from the wind into the rain, and from the rain into the earth. Reaching the earth, they become food. They are again offered in the fire of man and then take birth in the fire of woman. Rising up once again to the heavenly worlds, they circle around in the same way.[21]

The *Chāndogya* version of this path contains even clearer wording:

> ... [a cloud] rains down. On earth they spring up as rice and barley, plants and trees, sesame and beans, from which it is extremely difficult to get out. When someone eats that food and deposits the semen, from him one comes into being again.[22]

This group perfectly fits the pattern of rebirth found by Jurewicz in the *Ṛg Veda.* As in the *Ṛg Veda,* the version of heaven these people attain is the world of the fathers. We also recall particularly that the dead person returns in the rain and is sown as barley.

The *Chāndogya* then adds a short passage about this second group which has no parallel in the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka.* This says:

> People whose behaviour here is pleasant can expect to enter a pleasant womb, like that of a woman of the Brahmin, the Kṣatriya or the Vaiśya class.[23] But people of foul behaviour can expect to enter a foul womb, like that of a dog, a pig, or an outcaste woman.[24]

Both the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka* and the *Chāndogya* then briefly mention a third group. The *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka* says: 'Those who do not know these two paths, however, become worms, insects or snakes.'[25] The *Chāndogya* is a little more helpful: '... those proceeding on neither of these two paths – they become the tiny creatures revolving here

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ceaselessly. "Be born! Die!" – that is a third state. As a result that world up there is not filled up.'[26]

It strikes one that although so little is said about them, the third class of people must be far the largest, for it comprises those who neither have sacred knowledge, which is evidently confined to very few, nor perform brahminical sacrifices. So it must comprise nearly all those people who are not brahmins or, perhaps, *kṣatriyas*. One recalls Obeyesekere's remark that the basic requisite for rebirth in its widespread non-ethicized form is a proper funeral. Here perhaps a proper funeral would mean a cremation according to brahminical rites, and those who do not have that privilege are condemned to being worms or insects forever.

The *Chāndogya* version is a strange kind of hybrid. Those who make offerings at sacrifices – in other words, high-caste people who follow their ritual obligations – are then sub-divided into those whose behaviour is 'pleasant' (*ramaṇīya*) and those whose behaviour is 'stinking' (*kapūya*, a very rare word), and have better or worse rebirths accordingly. The vague term 'pleasant behaviour' obviously extends beyond ritual; if we take it as approximating to morally good action, then the pattern starts to look something like that of Buddhism: people have good or bad rebirths on earth, while an élite escape from the cycle of rebirth altogether. The third category, those who stay worms and insects forever, is clearly inherited from the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka* and therefore cannot be dropped, even though it now looks anomalous.

The word 'karma' does not occur in the five fire wisdom. But it is an account of how a man's destiny at death is determined by his karma, if we do not seek to differentiate the meaning of karma as ritual from that as morally charged action; my hypothesis about funeral rites would fit this interpretation well.

We have glimpsed in one passage in the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka* the idea that a good action is one done without desire, and this is a point that the Buddha would have agreed with. By and large, however, while there are considerable resemblances between his thought and that of the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka* in certain other respects, his making karma a matter of intention created a vast gulf between his thought world and that of brahminism.

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The primary purpose of brahmin ritual was to purify, and for brahmins *puṇya karma* meant 'purifying act', i.e., 'rite of purification'. This term the Buddha redefined as good or meritorious action – the sole criterion for which was morally good intention. Perhaps the commonest of all Buddhist words for vice, *kilesa,* literally means 'defilement', and we are dealing with the same metaphor: a bad person's mind is said to be dirty. Buddhist discourse is permeated by talk of purity and purification, but invariably that is a metaphor which refers to improving one's mind ethically and, in due course, intellectually – for the Buddha considered intelligence to be a virtue.

In ritual, acts are enjoined or prohibited according to the agent: what is right for a man may be wrong for a woman, and *vice versa*; what is right for a brahmin may be wrong for an outcaste; etc. Norms are thus particularized, not universal. If they are universal, the moral value of an act, whether positive or negative, lies only in the act itself, and is not affected by who the agent is. In my opening chapters I have shown that Buddhism both ethicized karma and universalized it. One could claim, however, that these steps had already been taken by Jainism. The next chapter shows how that may have happened.

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the original canon. Even the Śvetāmbaras, however, hold that some of the original canon has been lost.

At this early stage the Jains had a greater problem than the Buddhists in preserving their texts because they spent all the year except the rainy season as solitary itinerant mendicants. The Buddha's organization of his Saṅgha was, I would argue, in conscious reaction to this. After a while the Jains came to learn from the Buddhists, in this as in other matters. The Śvetāmbaras divided monks into two vocations:[7] *jina-kappa* ('the way of a Jina'[8]), solitary wandering ascetics striving for liberation in this lifetime, and *thera-kappa* ('the way of an elder'[9]), professional monks concerned to preserve the scriptures. The *jina-kappa* monks, they held, went naked like Mahāvīra, but that way of life was now obsolete.[10] The Theravada Buddhists introduced a very similar formal distinction in Sri Lanka, round the turn of the Christian era; from then on Theravada monks have had to choose to be either *vipassanā-dhura* (literally: 'yoked to insight meditation'), taking meditation as their primary duty, or *gantha-dhura* (literally: 'yoked to books'), whose main responsibility is to preserve the scriptures.

In fact much of our best evidence for early Jainism comes from texts in the Pali Canon.[11] Of course, it is the Jain texts themselves that have far the most information, but it is terribly difficult to know how to date that. Moreover, none of those texts is accepted as authoritative by both the Digambara and the Śvetāmbara traditions. The Buddhist texts, by contrast, tell us things about Jainism before that split occurred.

There is some excellent modern scholarly literature on what we can learn about Jainism from Pali Buddhist texts[12] (and indeed *vice versa*[13]), so I shall try not to repeat what can be found there. I believe, however, that I have significant things to add.

My main theme is karma and rebirth. The following teachings, relevant to this theme, are likely to have been as central to Jainism before Mahāvīra as they were to the Jainism attributed to him.

> *Saṃsāra*: all living beings are caught in a perpetual cycle of rebirth, which encompasses heavens and hells as well as many forms of life on earth.

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another side to the story of the antecedents of Buddhist karma, the Jain side.

There is a passage in the *Sūyagaḍaṅga Sutta*, perhaps (at least in part) one of the two oldest Jain texts preserved, which argues against the Buddhist view that there is no evil action without intention, which is thus represented:

> If his mind, speech, and body are free from evil, if he does not kill, if he is mindless (i.e. without an internal organ or organ of consciousness), and if he is unaware of the workings of his mind, speech, and body, and does not see even a dream, he does not perform evil actions. (2.4.2)[21]

The formulation is indeed very reminiscent of rules in the Buddhist monastic code, which regularly list conditions, such as madness, under which an act does not constitute an offence. The Jain text disagrees.

> Though these beings have neither mind nor speech, yet as they cause pain, grief, damage, harm, and injury, they must be regarded as not abstaining from causing pain, etc. (2.4.9) .... Thus even senseless beings are reckoned instrumental in bringing about slaughter of living beings ... (2.4.10).

In other words, injury is injury, whatever the motive or lack of motive which accompanies it.[22]

To me this suggests that the Buddha's insistence on calling action intention was not a wish to be paradoxical, but was a direct response to Jainism. Though the doctrine that everything that matters happens in the mind is of a piece with the rest of the Buddha's teachings, perhaps at the moment when he made that bald statement he did primarily have the Jains in mind.

Several texts in the *Sutta Piṭaka* show the Buddha interacting with Mahāvīra's followers. To begin with, even the Middle Way enunciated at the beginning of the First Sermon, in which the Buddha condemns mortification of the flesh as unprofitable, evidently alludes to Jains and other ascetics like them. Despite this, scholars seem (so far as I can see) to have treated Jainism only as a teaching contemporary with the Buddha's and not to have considered that it was something older which had an influence – whether positive or negative – upon him. I cannot fully account for

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