

Rationality and Early Buddhist Teachings

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Rational features in early Buddhist teachings has had great appeal to the European mind when Buddhism came to be studied by scholars. As a result its presentation to wider readership neglected or ignored its specifically religious elements, both on popular and higher spiritual level as irrational or anti-rational. It concerned particularly the doctrine of rebirth, belief in the existence of beings in invisible worlds and the notion of nirvāna/nibbāna, yet these tenets represent the very core of the Buddha's message. The article argues that rational approach to and even analysis of Buddhist teachings is important and even indispensable as illustrated by the conceptual analysis of the states of consciousness in the system of abhidhamma, but maintains that those elements of the teaching which cannot be verified in the western way for all to see should not be rejected as logical impossibility. Rather they should be viewed as supra-rational propositions, made by those who claim to have verified them for themselves by individual experience, and scrutinised as to their logical probability; this should proceed in the context of evaluating Buddhism as a practical philosophy of life and a global world view whose essential component is a spiritual discipline with an outlook of finding the final solution of the riddle of existence.

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Rationality is one feature of early Buddhist doctrine which is often rated highly by Western scholars, by many European followers of Buddhism and sympathetic readers of Buddhist scriptures and by books on Buddhism based on Pāli sources. Many of them have seen it as the most important quality or perhaps even the core of Buddhism as a religion or philosophy of life. This was the case particularly in the early years of the Western world's encounter with Buddhism - in the 19th century and in the early years of the 20th century, even up to the 1930's. Famous German academics, some of them accessible in English translations, like Hermann Oldenberg or Helmuth von Glasenapp, belonged to this category of scholars and so did some Buddhist monks of European origin such as Nyanatiloka, and lay followers writing on Buddhism like Paul Dahlke, a medical doctor who had a Buddhist *vihāra* built in Berlin - Frohnau in the 1920's.

As a result the public at large was presented with a doctrinal picture of Buddhism which was stripped of most of those specifically religious features which it shares with other religions around it. And so the result of an encounter of an educated European traveller, or a newly ordained Buddhist monk from Europe, with popular Buddhism in Buddhist countries was often one of disappointment if not shock, and frequently led to judgments in which the notion of 'superstition' played a part.

Some of those European intellectuals who were inclined to accept certain tenets from Buddhist thought on the grounds of their rational

soundness and even some members of Buddhist movements in the West adopted a selective attitude to Buddhist doctrines, eliminating those elements which seemed to them non-rational or even irrational. One such casualty has even been the teaching on rebirth in successive lives. This teaching is unacceptable to some Western minds, influenced as they are by centuries of domination of Christian thought, even when they lost their religious belief. Looking for a substitute, they found it in the rational core of Buddhism which represented to them a viable world view. Yet the doctrine of rebirth is essential to the message of Buddhism, which proclaims that the goal of life is ultimately the attainment of liberation from the vicissitudes of life by reaching the transcendental state of *nirvāṇa/nibbāna*. This can be only exceptionally accomplished in a single life; it is usually envisaged as a distant achievement after many lives of practice. Yet the inability to accept the teaching of rebirth can still occasionally be met with even in Buddhist circles.

Another casualty has been the belief in or the acceptance of the existence of beings in invisible worlds who can participate as observers, or even actively, in terrestrial events at the same time as humans, e.g. on the occasion of the Buddha's birth and death and by listening to and often taking part in his discourses; some of these invisible beings are reported to have achieved stages of sanctity, thus becoming spiritually advanced disciples of the Buddha and members of the community of the 'noble ones' (*ariya sāvaka saṅgha*).

Although, as has already been partly indicated, the excessively rationalistic tendency in interpreting Buddhism has not entirely disappeared, the knowledge and appreciation of Buddhism as a global and all-embracing system of religious and philosophical tenets as well as meditational, devotional and even ritual practices have now gained wide currency in all the circles concerned. This has come about by a

widening of academic research to cover the many schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the spread of Buddhist meditational practices in the West, the popularity of Zen Buddhism and the influence of the world-wide Tibetan Buddhist presence in the wake of the Chinese seizure of Tibet.

Nevertheless rationality has to be acknowledged as an important component of Buddhism, particularly of its early doctrinal message, even if it is clear that it does not reach or encompass the higher layers and the highest point of the edifice of the Buddhist system. But it would probably be agreed among sympathetic students and followers of Buddhism, if not among all academic scholars, that whatever is, in Buddhism, outside the range of rationality has to be regarded as supra-rational and not as anti-rational. Rationality can be regarded as a useful, if not absolutely indispensable, aid to accompany the practitioner of the Buddhist spiritual path as far as the threshold of the transcendent stages of experience. These stages, which are beyond the grasp of rationality, are presented by the teaching as the achievement of mental tranquillity (*samatha*) in deep meditational absorptions (*jhānas*) and as insights (*vipassanā*) into the nature of reality. The accompanying tool of rationality is represented in early Buddhism by the conceptual analysis of the states of consciousness as outlined in the system of *abhidhamma*. But even in the discourses of the Buddha the main method of practice is the twin procedure of *samatha-vipassanā*, absorption and discriminative insight. After emerging from a state of absorption, one should survey and assess its contents and nature (*Anguttara Nikāya* IX, 36). These procedures go, of course, already beyond the province of rationality and represent the plunge into the suprarational transcendent which can only be individual. But even that can be rationally motivated: to see for oneself that, or whether, the promise of a supramundane achievement can indeed be verified by personal experience even if not in the sense of the modern philosophical or scientific requirement of objective verification accessible to others.

A new academic enquiry into the aspect of rationality in early Buddhism is nevertheless an important undertaking which can correct misconceptions in the minds of Western and westernized Asian readers of books on Buddhism, since not only older studies referred to above, still read and influential, but even some recent research works perpetuate them. An example is the PhD thesis of an author who on the strength of it won a lectureship in philosophy of religion (Hoffman). With respect to rebirth he does see that it is a necessary part of the Buddhist teaching as a 'background' for other tenets which presuppose successive lives, but rejects it as a logical proposition, since it cannot be regarded as a verifiable theory. He failed to give it consideration from the point of view of logical probability. He similarly dismisses the possibility of enlightenment and even maintains that there are textual considerations which point to the conclusion that implicitly, even if it is never explicitly stated, the early Buddhist position on *parinibbāna* suggests the *tathāgata's* extinction rather than some mode of continued existence after death: nothing whatever remains of a *tathāgata* when *parinibbāna* occurs - an old view in a new formulation (Hwang; Welbon). He even speculates why the early texts did not explicitly state that *parinibbāna* is total extinction and gives two reasons: (1) to avoid putting forth views for argument and counterargument and (2) to avoid confusion with Cārvāka, the materialist, who believed in post-mortem extinction of everybody whereas early Buddhism suggests that 'extinction must be earned by adherence to a religious path.' This sounds a strange and, within the system of Buddhist thought, completely illogical interpretation. It would be a rather unrewarding prospect to work for over a period of many lives.

How, then, can we deal with suprarational features of Buddhist teachings while respecting the principles of rationality? As already indicated above, we can test them by applying to them the criterion of

logical probability. But we have to include in our evaluation the whole of the Buddhist doctrine as a philosophy of life and a ‘world view,’ without excluding the seemingly irrational features which used to be ignored or brushed aside by academics and inquisitive writers in the past. Some of the instances when Buddhism was dismissed as containing logical contradictions, being unintelligible in some of its statements and favouring undue and irrational pessimism in its view of life were due to inadequate understanding of the Pāli texts. This stems from the fact that Western thinkers usually cannot read original texts while textual experts in the past often lacked the philosophical sophistication to grasp in them the subtle issues of logic and meaning and presented them inadequately on the conceptual level. But nowadays discussion and understanding of crucial terms has advanced to such a degree that the language barrier is no longer an obstacle.

One of the often debated problems is whether there is a contradiction in the so-called fourfold logic of Buddhism. Its best known instance is the question occurring in texts several times whether the liberated one, the *tathāgata*, after death (1) is, (2) is not, (3) both is and is not or (4) neither is nor is not. Does this formula violate the law of contradiction? In fact, the law of contradiction was fully observed in the early texts and was used as a binding rule and an heuristic principle for debate, even though it was not expressly defined in a formal way. But it was an important methodological device without which no acceptable conclusion to debates could have been arrived at. But the fourfold pattern was not applied in polemical debates, it was used as a pointer to the suprarational state of *tathāgata* after reaching *parinibbāna* as being beyond conceptual grasp. But so is, in fact, any other notion of postmortem state, including total annihilation. Nevertheless, logical probability points towards some kind of continuation after physical death, if one takes into account the fact that all processes in nature are continuous, if not always readily observable,

and only change from time to time their mode of existence.

As to the accusation of undue and irrational pessimism, it is true that Buddhism preaches the universality of *dukkha* as a penetrating feature of life. Its translation as 'suffering' seems to justify the accusation of pessimism in face of pleasurable aspects of existence. But acute suffering as such is only one of the instances covered by the Pāli notion of *dukkha*. In other instances 'unsatisfactoriness' is more fitting. Hoffman suggested 'unease' and I.B. Horner preferred 'anguish.' What is clear is that *dukkha* has a wide meaning covering a range of experiences which may also include the feeling of deprivation or of mental and/or physical pain. It is rooted in craving (*tanhā*) and since everybody craves happiness and would recoil from pain, *dukkha* is not only a descriptive, but also an evaluative term. No one would claim that happiness is a lasting state, so it contains an admixture of anxiety in the prospect of losing it which makes *dukkha* ever present in life even when it is temporarily overshadowed by happiness or pleasure. Only the goal of Buddhism, *nibbāna*, is beyond impermanence (*anicca*) and therefore free of *dukkha*. But since *nibbāna* may be achieved during one's lifetime, *dukkha* itself is also, in the long run, impermanent. Therefore Buddhism cannot be logically regarded as pessimistic. It even admits that temporary respites from active *dukkha* can be worked for, and attained, for long periods of time, for example by being reborn in the worlds of bliss.

Returning to rebirth, confusion sometimes arises with respect to the Theravāda teaching of rebirth without anything being reborn - which does sound illogical. This tenet stems from the notion of *anatta* (unsubstantiality or lack of permanent inner core) in early texts and was formulated in post-canonical works such as *Milindapañha* and in commentaries and given its sharp formulation by Buddhaghosa in the 5th century A.D.¹ The matter is made worse by translating *atta* as 'soul.'

This is a Christian concept derived from Aristotle's notion of unchanging substance. Early Buddhism indeed taught that a person does not have an abiding and unchanging substance, let alone an eternal soul, for his inner (mental) characteristics as well as outer appearances constantly change. A person (*purisa*) is a process, a continuum, and there is nothing illogical in envisaging its 'processing' as proceeding from life to life. In between lives the person is sometimes referred to in early texts as *gandhabba*, a spiritual being. When a person spiritually advances so that his or her inner make-up becomes characterized by enlightened knowledge, he or she is called 'great person' (*mahāpurisa*) or 'great being' (*mahāsatta*), a term applied to the Buddha, *bodhisattas* and *arahats*.²

It is, of course, the case that these issues are not open to direct rational scrutiny prior to experiencing them and are objects of faith even for partially advanced meditators, but they do require elucidation from the angle of rationality. Every religion has such areas and it is philosophy of religion whose province it is to undertake their investigation. In the case of Buddhism, however, the faith (*saddhā*) is of a different order than in dogmatic religions requiring unquestioning acceptance of tenets believed to stem from divine revelation. To borrow an expression from Karl Jaspers, Buddhism requires 'philosophical faith' to be eventually substantiated by direct inner experience which does not shy away from scrutiny and analysis, on the contrary, it encourages it.

Even enlightenment is a subject of this philosophical faith and accompanying scrutiny, otherwise there would be no motivation to strive

1 Suffering is, but no sufferer [exists]; in doing no doer can be found; cessation is, but no man has ceased [to be]; path is, but no goer can be found [on it] (Buddhaghosa: 513).

2 I have dealt with the problem of personality and its continuation in the following papers which contain relevant textual references: (1978, 275-289; 1986, 24-33; 1988, 73-97; 1996, 93-107).

for it. When it is attained, the faith turns into knowledge, but only for the individual person who achieved it. The acquisition of the six higher knowledges (*abhiññā*) in the enlightenment experience may open for the enlightened person the ability of retrocognition of past lives (*pubbenivāsanussatiñāna*), clairvoyance (*dibbacakkhu*) which enables him to see the rebirth of others, and the certainty of the destruction of personal ‘cankers’ or defilements (*āsavas*), but he cannot convey these achievements to others and cannot make them verifiable for everybody else. It is his personal charisma which inspires faith or confidence in others to try for themselves. Even so, the requirement of scrutinising even the charismatic teacher for signs of his achievement remains, along with the disciple’s personal practice.

We have now to return to the problem of the nature of *nibbāna* said to be achieved on enlightenment. There is another word for it. Having reached enlightenment, and urged by Brahma Sahampati to reveal the method of reaching it, the Buddha agreed to spread the teaching and proclaimed: ‘The door of the deathless (*amatassa dvārā*) Is open to those who possess hearing’ (*Majjhima Nikāya* I, 26, PTS edition I, 169). Is there any difference between *nibbāna* and *amata*?

It would appear that since *nibbāna* can be attained during one’s lifetime which is inevitably terminated by death, *amata* (which is sometimes translated also as ‘deathlessness’) can be related only to *parinibbāna* or the state of the liberated one after physical death, for then he cannot die again because he will not be born again. Can therefore *amata* be interpreted as ‘immortality’ which has, in the Western thought, the overtones of ‘everlasting life’ or ‘life eternal’? Philologically *a-matta* (Sanskrit *amṛta*), ‘no-death,’ can be regarded as more definite in ruling out any lasting state than the Latin *im-mortalis*. So this again points to transcendence beyond concepts. Early Pāli texts after all emphatically deny that *tathāgata*, the enlightened person, wins

eternal existence or ceases to exist. We have already seen that the word 'exists' does not apply to him in any of the forms of the fourfold formula. One simply does not philosophise about the matter, because philosophising is just another source of attachment. The Buddha's injunction is 'come and see' (practice the path and experience the result). That is the basic Buddhist stance, which scholars and philosophers of religion of course do not abide by, because it is in the nature of their trade. If the early Buddhist stance of renouncing philosophising in favour of spiritual practice were consistently followed, the great Mahāyāna schools of thought such as Mādhyamaka and Vijñānavāda and some other minor ones would never have arisen.

So there is a precedence even for rational discussion of issues of Buddhist tenets of the earliest period. From the point of view of modern academic research it is not only possible, as I hope to have demonstrated, but even highly desirable as it can bring home to the modern mind that early Buddhism does not represent only a pre-logical stage in doctrinal system building in India, but also throws light on the claim of many Buddhist writers that Buddhism is an empirical doctrine, perhaps even on a par with science. There is an affinity between Buddhist methodical approaches to the search for ultimate truth and the scientific endeavour to formulate a unified theory explaining the working of the whole of reality. Both are possible only because their starting point is a kind of philosophical faith that ultimate knowledge is a logical possibility. Science aims at eventual objective verification of its theories which scientists would be able to make accessible to everyone. Early Buddhism is silent on this point, but maintains that its message is periodically brought to mankind by successive appearances of Buddhas. But Mahāyāna Buddhism went further: its aim proclaimed in the Bodhisattva Vow of bringing enlightenment to all beings can be regarded as a metaphysical equivalent of the aim of scientists, but as such its ambition is much higher.

What it amounts to is that Buddhism, besides being a religion in the conventional sense on one level and a rationally graspable teaching on another, is above all a spiritual discipline with an outlook of finding the final solution of the riddle of existence, which points to transcendence. Science sometimes does recognise its limitation in that sense and individual scientists turn to philosophy or even Eastern teachings (Dürr; Capra). Maybe if scientists in significant numbers adopted methods leading to heightened perception, e.g. in the way advocated by Fritz Staal for research into mysticism, or into Yoga and Buddhist meditation (Werner 1977; Sorokin), it might eventually push the frontiers of shared knowledge into the realm of transcendence. In the meantime, however, the plunge remains a matter of individual choice based on initial faith but motivated by the promise of individual verification by experience.

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