

THE ARISING OF SUFFERING AND THE ROLE OF MEDITATION IN THE REALIZING OF EMPTINESS (*SUNYATA*): TOWARD AN EXPOSITION AND EVALUATION OF ASPECTS OF BUDDHIST THOUGHT.

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The problem of suffering (its arising and cessation) may be said to be central to Buddhism. Peter Harvey avers that ‘the problem of suffering ... became the focus of Gotama’s teachings once he had found out what he saw as its solution’.¹ What, however, is ‘suffering’? What do Buddhists mean when they say, as the first of the ‘four noble laws’ affirms, ‘there is suffering’? If there is suffering, what is the nature of this suffering and what brings it about it? How can it be overcome and what place does meditation have in the realizing of the cessation of suffering? It is these questions that this essay attempts to answer. We begin by attempting to explicate on the Buddhist understanding of how suffering comes about and then go on to discuss the value or import that meditation holds for the realization of ‘*emptiness*’.

1.1. THE NATURE OF SUFFERING

It is important to bear in mind, even at the outset, that the word translated and used to describe the state of suffering – *Duhkha* (Pali: *dukkha*) – it has often been said, is such that a full translation or perfectly equivalent word in English is difficult. The tradition in English Buddhist writings (which we do not always follow here) seems to be to leave it in the original form.

The Buddha’s claim that ‘there is suffering’ – which is identified as the first of the four ‘Noble Laws’ of Buddhism – can only be made sense of after an understanding of what is meant by the claim. Everyday English usage of the word ‘suffering’ does not capture fully what is connoted in the Buddhist sense of the word. In the non-Buddhist employment of the word, suffering is often used to mean pain – physical and emotional. The former may be brought about through physical deprivation, harm, and injuries felt. Emotional suffering may be the result

¹ Peter Harvey, ed., *Buddhism*. London: Continuum, 2001., 65.

of loneliness, feeling rejected, betrayal, disappointments, etc. It seems to be the case too that when everyday reference to 'suffering' is made, it is often to allude to not merely a one-off feeling of pain (whether physical or emotional) but to pain that is *sustained*; enduring for some extended period of time. For example, we may speak of 'the woman is suffering from an illness', to refer to a present-continuous state of the woman enduring the physical and emotional pain of being in a state of ill-health.

The Buddhist conception of suffering – *Dukkha* – surely encapsulates these physical and emotional aspects of pain but goes beyond them by insisting, not merely that this suffering is something that *happens*; something that is an anomaly; a deviation from the norm of happiness, tranquility and everything else that we may conceive of as being the opposite of the word. For in Buddhism, *Dukkha* is ubiquitous; it is the inescapable reality of *normal* (or adapting a Buddhists term, pre-Enlightenment) state of affairs. The claim that 'there is suffering' does not mean that suffering exists in some distant place 'out there' or that suffering is merely one of the many things existing amongst others in the world. The claim means instead that suffering is embedded in all circumstances which man (in the generic unisexual form) finds himself – both in the evidently 'bad' times and also in the so-called 'pleasant times'. Here, the claim is that even when one thinks that he is not suffering, he still is. Indeed, this latter state – one's ignorance about one's suffering – may well be the very height of one's suffering. This general sense notwithstanding, we may still ask, what exactly is this *Dukkha*? In what sense is it not merely a superfluous Buddhist notion which lacks any clearly identifiable referent?

Rupert Gethin, following a tendency in Buddhist scholarship and drawing upon a number of original Buddhist texts, discusses the Buddhist conceptualization of *Dukkha* under three sub-kinds: 'suffering as pain'; 'suffering as change'; 'suffering as conditions'.² We have already alluded to the first kind in our reference to the everyday employment of the word. Physical and emotional

² Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, Oxford: University Press, 1998., 61. Cf. Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982., 191; Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha taught*. Grove Press, 1958., 35.

pain felt by humans and other sentient beings would be classed under the first type of pain in Gethin's categorization. Suffering as change, in Gethin's analysis, has to do with the inevitable impermanence of all things. We age, the things we enjoy today may come to bore us tomorrow and the most pleasant excitements that we feel are by their very nature transient in spite of our best efforts to hold on to them. This 'change' which is in the very nature of all things (according to Buddhism) results in suffering. As 'condition', suffering, Gethin says, 'seems inherent in the nature of existence itself'.³ Suffering in this latter sense, employing Heideggerian terms, may be said to be man's very existential state.

Because of the centrality that *dukkha* plays within the Buddhist worldview, some critical voices have felt the Buddhist account of reality as hopelessly mired in suffering to be perhaps too pessimistic a philosophy of life. Indeed, for many Westerners living in the 21st century, the Buddhist preoccupation with 'suffering' may seem odd; it may be felt to be nothing more than a religious joy-kill. The Buddhist response to this feeling has sometimes been to point to the fact that while indeed Buddhism takes suffering to be the unavoidable nature of human existence, the Buddha's teaching is also optimistic in so far as it offers a viable route to the cessation of this suffering. Walpola Rahula represents this form of response when he says 'although there suffering in life, a Buddhist should not be gloomy over it.....what is necessary is not anger or impatience, but the understanding of the question of suffering, how it comes about, how to get rid of it, and then to work accordingly with patience, intelligence, determination and energy'.⁴ The point here, then, it seems, is that suffering is not all that Buddhism is about but more than that Buddhism offers a solution to the overcoming of this suffering.

In spite of the possible validity of this response, it seems reasonable to point out some extent to which the Buddhist account of the ubiquity of suffering has certain similarities to the Christian notion of 'sin' which in Christian theology is seen as being *the* fundamental flaw in human nature (in the Augustinian understanding at least). Although comparisons of this sort may be problematic,

³ Gethin, *ibid*, 61

⁴ Walpola Rahula, *ibid*, 44.

not least in this case, due in large part to the fact that the Christian notion of sin seems bound up with other Christian theological doctrines about the nature of God and depends on a personalistic account of man's relationship with God. In so far as Buddhism (traditionally conceived at least⁵) does not have such a personalistic account and also lack a *Theos*, it may be difficult to draw many comparisons between both Faiths. Still, however, it does seem to be the case that even though the doctrinal structures of both sin and *dukkha* are different, they seem to share at least in this: they are seen as fundamental problems which the religions (Christianity and Buddhism respectively) offer a soteriology in response to.⁶ If in Christianity sin is the result of man's rebellion against God, Buddhism offers its own account of how *dukkha* arise; how suffering comes about. It is to this account that we now turn to.

1.2. The Cause of Suffering

What brings about Dukkha? What is the cause of suffering? How does suffering arise? These questions are the subject of what is referred to as the second Noble Law of Buddhism: there is a cause of suffering. The literature engaging with this theme is extensive (and we may add, somewhat complicated especially for the uninitiated) but it might be helpful, to begin with, the Buddha's own words. The *Samyutta-Nikaya*⁷ contains an extensive number of the Buddha's discourse on *dukkha* especially dealing with its origin and the pathway to its removal. Bhikkhu Bodhi summarizes the Buddhist understanding of the cause of suffering when he says, 'The main cause of suffering, according to the Buddha, is craving (*taṇhā*), also known as desire and lust (*Chanda-rāga*)' and the following passages from the *Samyutta-Nikaya* illustrate the point:

⁵ Although Buddhism is often regarded as a non-theistic religion, Peter Harvey makes the point that 'only certain versions of Western-influenced Buddhism are completely non-theistic, or free of belief in, and recourse to, gods' (Peter Harvey, ed. *Buddhism*, London: Continuum Press, 2001.,73.)

⁶ Steven Collins seems to echo this much when he says, in reference to Theravada Buddhism's understanding of suffering, that 'to see life as suffering represents not an empirically derived judgement on life but a goal-oriented soteriological project'. Steven Collins, *ibid*, 192.

⁷ Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of Samyutta-nikaya*. Translated from the Pali. Boston: Wisdom Publications, n.d. accessed online http://promienie.net/images/dharma/books/sutras_connected-discourses.pdf

“Misery is born of desire; suffering is born of desire. By the removal of desire, misery is removed; by the removal of misery, suffering is removed.”⁸

“One should discard anger, cast off conceit, Transcend all the fetters. No sufferings torment one who has nothing, who does not adhere to name-and-form.”⁹

“The world is shut in by death; The world is established on suffering; The world is ensnared by craving; It is enveloped by old age”¹⁰

“At Sāvattthī. Then King Pasenadi of Kosala approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, sat down to one side, and said to him:

“Venerable sir, how many things are there which, when they arise within a person, arise for his harm, suffering, and discomfort?”

“There are great kings, three things which, when they arise within a person, arise for his harm, suffering, and discomfort. What are the three? Greed, hatred, and delusion. These are the three things which, when they arise within a person, arise for his harm, suffering, and discomfort”¹¹

Drawing upon these words, attributed as they are to the Buddha, Buddhism holds that suffering results from ‘desire’ which is intimately linked to holding false ideas about the existence of self (*atman*) and the permanence of things. These false conceptions are ultimately lead to the holding on to things; clinging to things; being attached to things. This attachment to things results, it has already been mentioned, from subscribing to untenable illusions about the world. This illusion manifests itself in the display of attachment to material things like one’s possessions, and also attachment to immaterial/intangible things such as one’s views (*ditthi*), beliefs, perspectives, stance, etc.

The Buddhist understanding of the cause of suffering, though proximately linked to *taṇhā* is more fundamentally connected to what in the Buddhist literature is referred to as the doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). It is generally agreed that *pratītyasamutpād* is one of the

⁸ Bodhi, *ibid*, 34 (4) There Are No <47>

⁹ Bodhi, *ibid*, 68 (8) Shut In

¹⁰ Bodhi, *ibid*, 68 (8)

¹¹ Bodhi, *ibid*, 2 (2) A Person

subtler teachings of Buddhism. The Buddha himself is said to have only come to an understanding of it only after his coming to Enlightenment.¹² The *Samyutta Nikkaya* has the Buddha explain it as thus:

“conditioned by ignorance are formations, conditioned by formations is consciousness, conditioned by consciousness is mind-and-body, conditioned by mind-and-body are the six senses, conditioned by the six-senses is sense contact, conditioned by sense contact is feeling, conditioned by feeling is craving , conditioned by craving is attachment, conditioned by attachment is becoming, conditioned by becoming is birth, conditioned by birth is old age and death”¹³

As the quote above makes clear, there are twelve elements which make up the ‘wheel’ of the dependent arising. These are: ignorance (*Avijja*), volitional actions (*Samkhara*), consciousness (*Vinnana*), name and form/mind and body (*Nama-rupa*), the six sense organs (*Salayatana*),¹⁴ contact (*Phassa*), feeling (*Vedana*), craving (*Tanha*), grasping (*Upadana*), becoming (*Bhava*), birth (*Jati*) and old age and death (*Jaramarana*).¹⁵ It is beyond our present purposes to go into all the technical details of this Buddhist doctrine, but what we need to note is that, as Matthew Boisvert’s encyclopedia entry on the concept asserts ‘this complex chain of causation is always said to give rise to suffering’.¹⁶ Desire (*Tanha*), then, results in suffering and its existence is due ultimately to ignorance (*Avijja*). Ignorance of both impermanence (Pali: *anicca*) and non-self (Pali: *anatta*). We now consider these and observe how they inform the experience of suffering.

1.2.1. The Buddhist understanding of Impermanence (*Anicca*)

Standard historical accounts of the Buddha’s path to Enlightenment agree that the Buddha (who originally went by the name Siddhartha Gautama) had first come to an appreciation of suffering through his first-person encounter with sickness, old age and death. In an ironic turn from the sheltered life of nobility

¹² Beja Bhattacharya, The Dependent Origination in Buddhism, 5, (no publication details) available online: https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1810/242580/bot_1982_04_02.pdf?sequence=1

¹³ Cited in Rupert Gethin, Foundations of Buddhism, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 141-142

¹⁴ i.e. eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind.

¹⁵ Beja Bhattacharya, *ibid*, 6.

¹⁶ Matthew Boisvert, “PRATITYASAMUTPADA (DEPENDENT ORIGINATION)” in Encyclopedia of Buddhism., ed. Buswell, Robert, Jr. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004., 669

which his parents had tried to give him, these experiences impressed upon the Buddha's mind the very impermanence of all things, especially human life.¹⁷ The Buddha is quoted as rhetorically asking:

Material form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness, monks, are impermanent (*anicca*). Whatever causes and conditions there are for the arising of these aggregates, they, too, are impermanent. How monks, could aggregates arisen from what is impermanent, be permanent?¹⁸

The five aggregates referred to are form, sensation, mental formation/volition, perception, and consciousness. These together make up the possible referents to 'things' in both the mental and physical world. The Buddha's point in the quote above is to draw attention to the superfluity of each of these aggregates. Form which 'corresponds to what we would call material or physical factors. It includes our own bodies, and material objects as well'¹⁹ is impermanent. By this is meant that all physical objects which exist in time-space are transient – they do not remain as they are with the passage of time. Sensations or feelings refer to all forms of pleasant, neutral and unpleasant feelings experienced.²⁰ Perception refers to the mental awareness of events and experiences. Mental formation or volition encompasses all 'Reactive or purposive aspects of the mind that include intention as well as behaviour'²¹ which may take either somatic, physiological or verbal form.²² Consciousness is the knowledge of and an awareness of sensory and mental events.²³ All of these five elements – termed aggregates as they are believed to be the composite of what every person 'person' is – are constantly in a flux and are, drawing upon a common Buddhist imagery, are like waves of the sea which even though are constantly changing, sometimes give the illusion of being 'permanent'. We may also note that the Buddhist belief about the impermanence of all things appears to have resonance with Heraclitus, the pre-Socratic philosopher, whose often quoted remark that

¹⁷ Peter Harvey, *Buddhism*, 65.

¹⁸ SN 22.7

¹⁹ <http://www.buddhistdoor.com/OldWeb/bdoor/archive/nutshell/teach11.htm>

²⁰ Nandini D. Karunamuni, "The Five-Aggregate Model of the Mind" *SAGE Open*, (April 2015), 2

²¹ Karunamuni, *ibid*, 2

²² Karunamuni, *ibid*, 2

²³ Karunamuni, *ibid*, 2

‘No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man’ has often been taken as a philosophical articulation of change as ubiquitous.

It may be asked that given the Buddhist's belief that all things are impermanent, how might it be that the ‘truths’ of Buddhism themselves are not subject to this law of impermanence? It seems to be the case, at least, that the person who subscribes to this Buddhist teaching about ‘impermanence’ must hold it mentally (i.e. by ‘means of mental formation’) which, on the Buddhist account is always in a state of change. One way of responding to this qualm is to distinguish the Buddhist teaching *about* the nature of things from the *reality* of the nature of things themselves. Put another way, impermanence is the *qualitative* state of the world but the teaching of impermanence about impermanence is not. indeed, for the Buddhist, even subjectively held beliefs about impermanence are themselves not permanent. It is at least conceivable that a person, once subscribing to the idea that all things are impermanent, may for whatever reason come to rethink this teaching and even change his mind about it. So, while beliefs about impermanence are not permanent, impermanence as the nature of things in the world is just that: the way things are.

The impermanence of all things, it should be remembered, in the Buddhist understanding, extends beyond this present life and is connected to Buddhist notions of a cycle of birth, death and rebirth (*samsara*) which, for Buddhists, everyone undergoes. The ending of this cycle is, in one sense, what it means to have attained *nirvana*. As Carol S. Anderson puts it in her encyclopedia entry on impermanence (*anicca*), ‘*nirvana* is the only thing that lies beyond the reach of change, because it exists beyond the conceptual dualism of existence or nonexistence’.²⁴ Buddhism insists then that it is only when this state of Enlightenment is attained (Nirvana) that suffering would cease.

²⁴ “Impermanence (*Anicca*)” in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Buswell, Robert, Jr. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004., 23

1.2.2. The Idea of No-Self (Pali: *Anatman*) in Buddhism

If everything is impermanent (*annica*) then it follows logically that there can be no such thing as a perduring indestructible self. Buddhism therefore holds, against Cartesian dualistic notions sometimes associated with the 'great' Western monotheistic religions, that there is no eternal self; no soul which continues to go in in existence even after death. This notion of no-self (*anatman*), even during the time of the Buddha (c. 484-404 BCE), went against the trend of the thinking of his day. K.T.S. Sarao reminds us that in 5th century BCE India at the time, 'the idea of atman [self] was fully developed by the Upanisadic and Vedantic thinkers who suggested that there does exist in one's personality, a permanent, unchanging, immutable, omnipotent, and intelligent atman, which is free from sorrow and leaves the body at death'.²⁵

In the first place, and the earliest Buddhist sources give evidence of this, it seems the Buddhist conceptualization of 'no-self' was developed as a critique and corrective to this Upanishad notion of a permanent self.²⁶ But it would also come to be necessarily entailed by the Buddha's belief that clinging on to an illusion of the permanence of things (both physical and non-physical) is the cause of suffering (*dukkha*). The Buddha is quoted, by Assaji²⁷ for instance as saying,

"Monks, bodily form should be contemplated as being not-self, feeling ... perception ... formations ... consciousness should be contemplated as being not-self. Make an effort to contemplate the five aggregates of clinging as a disease, as a carbuncle, as a thorn, as a killer, as impermanent, as *dukkha*, as empty, as not-self".²⁸

The connection is here established between no-self (*anatman*) and impermanence (*anicca*). The reason why the self is not to be conceived as permanent is related to its nature as composed of the five aggregates which are themselves always in flux. The Buddhist, then, holds that the body is not the self;

²⁵ K. T. S. Sarao, "Anatman/Atman (No-Self/Self)" in Encyclopedia of Buddhism., ed. Buswell, Robert, Jr. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004., 18. Word in bracket mine.

²⁶ Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998., 133-135

²⁷ One of the earliest disciples of the Buddha

²⁸ Anālayo, *Samyukta-āgama Studies*, Taipei: Dharma Drum Publishing Corporation., 60.

mental acts are not the self; perceptions are not the self; sensations are not the self; volitions are not the self and consciousness is not the self. Our everyday employment of the word 'I' would then be conceived, on Buddhist terms, as merely a convenient descriptor which we use to refer to this composite or aspect of the five aggregates. The 'I' must however not to be taken as a reality which continues on indefinitely.

There appear to be some philosophical obstacles, some of which extend beyond present focus, which the Buddhist belief in no-self must contend with. The first, to this writer's mind, is the common-sense belief that even though a person is constantly undergoing changes in his bodily parts and his experiences are always in a process, we are only able to meaningfully and factually refer to these changes because there is a 'person' in whom both these changes take place and to whom we can refer to and 'measure' the said changes against. Putting it another way, even if we can categorically break-down what the 'I' is (into, say, each of the five aggregates [*skandhas*]), it does not seem to take away the 'I' as still a 'self' nonetheless who even though his composite parts are changing, continues to exist through time such a way that we can speak coherently of him at a period T2 as being causally related to a prior period T1 where T1 and T2 represent two different time periods.²⁹

Rupert Gethin is not convinced of this and he attempts a philosophical defence of the Buddhist notion of no-self against the just stated critique. For instance, he considers that 'it cannot be denied that there is a complex of experience going on; this can be conveniently analyzed by way of the five aggregates. But where precisely in all this is the constant, unchanging self which is having all these experiences?'.³⁰ His argument seems to be that in so far as we cannot point to any independent experiencing 'self' which is distinct from one of the five aggregates, then it is almost as good as superfluous to speak of any such

²⁹ The 'problem of personal identity over time' continues to receive attention by professional philosophers. The problematic seems to be that we our idea that things are always changing seems difficult to reconcile with the idea that they are still referred to as the same thing at a subsequent time. The Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy's entry on "Identity Over Time" (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-time/#5>) provides an overview of some of the different theories.

³⁰ Rupert Gethin, *ibid*, 138

‘self’ at all. But while the defence is understandable, it seems to rest on a confusion of the categories of permanence and ‘self’. This is because an acceptance that the ‘self’ (by its very nature) is always changing does not logically imply that there is no ‘self’ (not to be confused with the idea of a soul) which, even though the aggregates may fully explain, is still a ‘self’ nonetheless. The only way it seems the denial of ‘self’ can be sustained is to redefine self in such a way that it is employed as a synonym for an idea of a spiritual ‘soul’. But no such conflation is necessary. The Buddha’s critique of the Upanishad’s belief in a ‘self’ which continues indestructibly after death (which we can speak of as a ‘soul’) is but only one sense of ‘self’ and does not capture what many ordinary persons mean when they employ ‘self’ as a referent to ‘I’.³¹

The ancient *Milinda's Questions* which has a Buddhist monk by name Nagasena, respond to questions about the self of ‘the local Bactrian Greek King, Milinda’ is often referenced in connection to the nature of *anatman*. For Nagasena, proper nouns are merely ‘convenient descriptors’ but they do not have any independent existence of their own which legitimate a belief in ‘self’. But what seems clear, it appears, is not that proper nouns such as the ‘chariot’ (which Milinda asks about) do not exist but that the referents of those nouns are of such nature that they are always in a process of change and are made up of diverse parts. It would seem that if the Buddhist belief in no-self means that ‘there is no permanent unchanging element, X, which exist’ then that is merely a restatement or an application of the doctrine of impermanence to the realm of personal identity and not a substantially unique claim and surely does not entail that ‘there is no such thing, Y, which continues to exist through time’.

There are, beyond the philosophical obstacles, a number of other intra-Buddhist doctrinal issues which the doctrine of ‘no-self’ makes quite problematic. One such challenge relates to how to reconcile belief in no-self (*anatman*) with both beliefs in rebirth, *karma* and *nirvana*. With regards to ‘rebirth’, the Buddhist

³¹ Here, it would seem that perhaps the real challenge lies in the very definition of ‘self’. The Buddhist notion of ‘no-self’ seems to presuppose the idea of the self as unchanging. An identity monist, however, may still subscribe to the idea that there is no non-material soul but that argue that we speak coherently when in reference to a person we say, ‘Dr David bought a house in 1995 and sold it for a profit in 2009’.

belief differs from the Hindu belief in 'reincarnation' in that it does not hold that an identity of a self can be established between a person in this present life and his or her next life.³² The form that one takes in his or her next life is dependent in large part by the sort of karma (action) which one accrues while in this present life.³³ Indeed, some commentators on Buddhism consider that one of the unique things about the human form of existence is that it is the best for accumulating good karma and provides the most conducive state for the possibility of breaking free from the circle of samsara and eventually attaining Enlightenment.³⁴ Nirvana, which is the cessation of dukkha, is both '(1) ...in some sense, a particular even (what happens at the moment of awakening), (2) ...in some sense, the content of an experience (what the mind knows at the moment of awakening), and (3) ...in some sense, the state or condition enjoyed by the buddhas and arhats after death'.³⁵

But if karma is accumulated by a person which then informs his or her next form of rebirth and if a person, through meditation and following the Buddhist path to the cessation of suffering, might be able to escape *samsara* and *dukkha*, we may well ask how all of these can be meaningfully spoken of if there is 'no-self'. In what sense does one's present life as a human being inform his next existence (whatever form it may be) if it is such that he is so steeped in change that he has no perduring self? Walpola Rahula's comment in this regard when he says 'as there is no permanent, unchanging substance, nothing passes from one moment to the next. So quite obviously, nothing permanent or unchanging can pass or transmigrate from one life to the next. It is a series that continues unbroken but changes every moment'³⁶ does not fully resolve the issue. What is

³² Encyclopedia of Buddhism., ed. Buswell, Robert, Jr. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004., 19

³³ M.III.203. cf. Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, history and practices*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990., 39.

³⁴ Diagrammatic depictions of 'the six realms of Rebirth' (bhavacakra) have the 'humans' as closest to 'Gods'. Cf. Damien Kweon, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000., 31.

³⁵ Rupert Gethin, *ibid*, 75.

³⁶ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha taught*, 52

this 'series' which 'continues unbroken' if not the new self which is linked recognizably with the former self?³⁷

These critical comments notwithstanding, we can agree with Peter Harvey when he avers that 'the not-self teaching is ... primarily a practical teaching aimed at the overcoming of attachment'.³⁸ Seen this way, anatman, whether a coherent philosophical case can be made for it or not, is an insistence by Buddhism that suffering is the result of falsely attaching to things because of illusions about a 'self' which continues eternally.

1.3. Suffering and Its Arising: Concluding Remarks

It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that suffering (*dukkha*) is the dominant leitmotif of Buddhism. The Buddhist vision is that there is suffering and there is a path to its cessation. In a sense, part of the moral of the story of the Buddha's discovery of the impermanence of life in spite of all the efforts by his parents to the contrary is to highlight the inevitability of suffering in human life. Without necessarily de-historicizing the account, we can see in the life of Gautama (before his becoming a Buddha) something of a human archetype whose coming to realize the ubiquity of suffering reflects the human predicament which all men and women are embroiled in. For we all must, no matter how hard we try, eventually face the fact of our mortality, live with sickness and diseases and accept that we would inevitably grow frail.

The arising of suffering as we have tried to show, is, in Buddhism, the result of attachment to things which happens because of ignorance of no-self (anatman) and impermanence (*anicca*). There is a path to the cessation of suffering (which is the Fourth Noble Law of Buddhism). This path has often been summarized into eight factors: (1) right view or understanding, (2) right directed thought, (3) right speech, (4) right action, (5) right livelihood, (6) right effort, (7) right mindfulness,

³⁷ Sometimes the metaphor of the self being akin to waves which "pop up" and go back into the ocean, while helpful for understanding the Buddhist teaching about impermanence does not seem to provide much if used to explain 'no-self'. For at least, one thing seems clear: there is the ocean and there is the water which even in its different expressions continues to still perdure as *this* ocean.

³⁸ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 52-53

and (8) right concentration.’³⁹ We shall now turn to examine the place of meditation in helping to realize freedom from suffering and emptiness (*sunyata*).

2.1. The Meaning of ‘Emptiness’ in Buddhism

The concept of Emptiness⁴⁰ (Sanskrit: *Sunyata*; Pali: *suññatā*) has been noted as being perhaps the most central emphasis in the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism. Even though the doctrine does receive attention in non-Mahayana schools, Roger Jackson is correct in asserting that ‘the Mahayana brought emptiness to prominence in Buddhist wisdom discourse’.⁴¹ This is so, not only because its clearest and most sustained exposition comes from the Nagarjuna, great Mahayana philosopher, but largely because of the number of Mahayana *sutras* which discuss it. The *Heart Sutra* (Sanskrit: *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*), for instance, is entirely devoted to an articulation of *Sunyata*.

Emptiness, as conceived in the Mahayana tradition, seems somewhat similar to the doctrine of anatman (no-self). As anatman derives from the fundamental Buddhist belief in the impermanence of all things, so does sunyata appears to be a restatement (if we may put it that way) of this belief. Indeed, the realization of sunyata is indispensable if one wishes to both end one’s suffering and attain Nirvana. The Buddha is quoted as replying to Ananda’s queries about whether he had understood the Buddha’s earlier remarks about the ‘emptiness’ of all things, that:

"He discerns that 'Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of village are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of human being are not present. There is only this modicum of disturbance: the singleness based on the perception of wilderness.' He discerns that 'This mode of perception is empty of the perception of village. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of human being. There is only this non-emptiness: the singleness based on the perception of wilderness.' Thus, he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he

³⁹ Peter Harvey, *ibid*, 68

⁴⁰ It may also be translated as “voidness”. Cf. *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, 809

⁴¹ Roger Jackson, “Sunyata (Emptiness)” in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism.*, ed. Buswell, Robert, Jr. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004., 809

discerns as present: 'There is this.' And so, this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, & pure. (MN 121)

The sutra (*Cula-suññata*)⁴² ends with the Buddha saying to Ananda "Therefore, Ananda, you should train yourselves: 'We will enter & remain in the emptiness that is pure, superior, & unsurpassed.'" This makes clear the close relationship between the realization of *emptiness* and the attainment of *nirvana*. The *Heart Sutra* speaks of this Emptiness as being the very character of all things: 'Form is no other than emptiness, Emptiness no other than form. Form is only emptiness, Emptiness only form'. Everything is emptiness. It is by the realization of this that 'All Buddhas of past and present, Buddhas of future time, using this Prajna wisdom, Come to full and perfect vision'. The short *Suñña* Sutra makes even more explicit the doctrine of emptiness:

'Insofar as it is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self: Thus it is said, Ananda, that the world is empty. And what is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self? The eye is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self. Forms... Eye-consciousness... Eye-contact is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self.'

The *Madhyamaka* (Middle) school of the Mahayana tradition, which emerged in the early Middle Ages, devoted considerable attention to developing a philosophical articulation of this doctrine of Emptiness. A key challenge laid in how to reconcile the belief that all things are empty with the apparent 'non-emptiness' of the *dharma*s of the Buddha. For if all things are empty (i.e. they do not have any self-existence in and of themselves), it would appear that even such cardinal teachings of the Buddha as the 'four noble Laws'; 'the eightfold path' 'dependent origination' etc. either do not exist or are merely contingent 'truths' which have no universal relevance. Nagarjuna's middle way approach to resolving the tension of what appeared to be, even apart from concerns about the enduring validity of the *dharma*s, a reduction of all reality and existence into 'Nothing' or a subscription to seeing reality as really 'Something' was to take seriously the

⁴² *Cula-suññata: Sutta: The Lesser Discourse on Emptiness*. translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Buddha's teaching on 'dependent origination' and to distinguish, in the dharmas, between 'conventional truths' and 'ultimate truth'.⁴³

For Nagarjuna, it is not the case that the dharmas do not exist or that they have an underlying eternal 'self', but that their existence is always in relation to other things (say perception, experience, language, etc.). In other words, they are always 'conditioned'. They do not have 'Inherent existence (*svabhava*)':

"Without one there cannot be many and without many it is not possible to refer to one. Therefore, one and many arise dependently, and such phenomena do not have the sign of inherent existence".⁴⁴

So, in Nagarjuna's philosophy, everything, including the dharmas, is 'empty' but they nonetheless appear to have 'form' only because of their dependent origination. As Rupert Gethin puts it, 'it is not that nothing exists but that nothing exists as an individual essence possessed of its own inherent existence'.⁴⁵ Even emptiness itself is merely but a 'conventional' truth, not an account of ultimate reality.⁴⁶ Emptiness, we may say, is an adjective describing the character of things, not a proper noun pointing to some 'objective' referent. Emptiness and no-self are critical concepts the major traditions of Buddhism and the former is, as we have indicated, a key emphasis of the Mahayana stream of Buddhism. The realization of emptiness is predicated on meditation. We shall now turn to examine the place of meditation in relation to sunyata.

2.2. How Meditation enables the realization of Sunyata (emptiness).

Meditation is a fundamental practice within all schools and sub-traditions of Buddhism as it is one of the eight-fold path, which the Buddha taught, for the cessation of suffering. It is believed that the Buddha was himself engaged in meditation on the night of his Enlightenment at the Bodhi tree.⁴⁷ Buddhist meditation differs from forms of meditation practised in say, certain New Age religions, in that it is regarded, not merely as a means to attain 'self-fulfilment'

⁴³ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 97-99.

⁴⁴ Nagarjuna's Seventy Stanzas, verse 7.

⁴⁵ Rupert Gethin, *ibid*, 239.

⁴⁶ Rupert Gethin, *ibid*, 239.

⁴⁷ Mahathera Piyadassi, *The Spectrum of Buddhism*, 192.

but is geared toward aiding the realization of the truth of the *dharma*s and eventual attainment of Enlightenment. Meditation is important if the one intent on Enlightenment would move beyond a mere cognitive appreciation of the ‘truths’ of the Buddha to experiencing of them. In this sense, Buddhism is to be seen as fundamentally oriented toward praxis rather than orthodoxy simpliciter. This is not to say beliefs are not important within Buddhism but, in keeping with the Buddha’s didactic approach, grasping the dharma requires commitment not mere intellectual curiosity.

Before going on to outline some of what we may glean from the sources about the place of meditation in the attainment of emptiness, it is helpful to point out that Buddhist meditation is quite complex. Peter Harvey speaks of it as being a ‘skill’ quite similar to the learning of a musical instrument.⁴⁸ Although meditation can and ought to be practised by all, its successful performance requires the guidance of a teacher.⁴⁹ The process and the nature of training required to become a meditation teacher differ depending on the school of Buddhism, but the status is revered and is only granted after years of apprenticeship. It is important, then, to bear in mind that the sort of meditation spoken about in Buddhism is not some recreational past-time but one which is methodical.

As Analayo’s translation and commentary on the *Samyukta-āgama* makes clear, the Buddha was often in meditation⁵⁰ and the *Majjhimanikāya* makes clear that the Buddha instructed meditation even to the laity. Besides these, other *sūtras* exist which make explicit the relationship between meditation and the realization of emptiness. One such is the *Maha-suññata* sūtra. In this sūtra, the Buddha speaks of the different *Jhanas* (training of the mind) involved in the process of meditation. For instance, in discourse with Ananda, the Buddha says:

So, Ananda, if a monk should wish, ‘May I enter & remain in internal emptiness,’ then he should get the mind steadied right within, settled, unified, & concentrated. And how does the monk get the mind steadied right within,

⁴⁸ Peter Harvey, Introduction to Buddhism, 244.

⁴⁹ Peter Harvey, *ibid*, 244

⁵⁰ Analayo, *Samyukta-āgama* studies.

settled, unified, & concentrated? There is the case where a monk — quite withdrawn from sensual pleasures, withdrawn from unskillful qualities — enters & remains in the first jhana... the second jhana... the third jhana... the fourth jhana: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither-pleasure-nor-pain. That is how a monk gets the mind steadied right within, settled, unified, & concentrated.

The Buddha draws, here, a connection between ‘internal emptiness’ and mediation. Part of the goal of mediation is to help the mind to gain experience of its own emptiness. This much is made even clearer in *Cula-suññata* sutra (The Lesser Discourse on Emptiness). In this latter sutra, the Buddha, in dialogue with Ananda, establishes the connection between the meditative state and the right perception of the earth: ‘He [that is the one who is engaged in mediation] discerns that ‘Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of human being are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of wilderness are not present’. Other forms emptiness which are only discerned in the mediation are also discussed.

Broadly speaking, we may say meditation helps the mind to realize emptiness by helping the mind to come to a state where it is able to appreciate this ‘truth’. In the altered state of consciousness which meditation enables, the mind is able to transcend the illusions of attachment to things which often clog its ability to see the emptiness of all things. This is only attained through the disciplined effort of meditation under the guidance of the mediation teacher. Kathleen McDonald’s *How to Meditate*⁵¹ notes a number of strategies which is sometimes employed in the process of ‘mediation on emptiness’. Some of the meditative suggestions which she notes include as aiding the realization of emptiness include:

‘mentally disintegrate your body. Imagine all the atoms separating and floating apart. Billions and Billions of minute particles scatter throughout space. Imagine you can actually see this’

⁵¹ Kathleen was a Buddhist nun at the time of her writing the book.

‘Think ... about how your body exists conventionally: in dependence upon skin, blood, bones, legs arms, organs and so forth ... think about how your mind exists in dependence upon thoughts, feelings, perceptions, sensations’.⁵²

We may conclude, and words may be difficult to fully convey what is actually experienced, that meditation enables the realization of emptiness by enabling the mind to attain a state in which it is able to experience it. There are surely more to the nuances of meditation than we are able to touch at the moment, but it suffices to say that its place in the attainment of Enlightenment and *Sunyata*, within the Buddhist imaginary, is crucial.

Conclusion: Is Meditation alone sufficient for the realization of Emptiness?

Although we have earlier mentioned the fact that Buddhism is best conceived of as a practice than as a set of beliefs about ‘ultimate’ reality, it must still be said that the relationship between the dharmas and the realization of sunyata seems paradoxical. How so? For one thing, it would seem that one needs to at least set-out, through meditation, to realize emptiness. But this motivation for realizing emptiness depends, it would seem, on one’s prior subscription to the truths of the dharmas. So, if as Nargajuna insists, the dharma’s are only ‘conventional’ truths, we must ask how it can be that knowledge of is required for realizing the truth of the ultimate truth of emptiness. In other words, one’s realization of sunyata can only come about if one subscribes to the ultimacy (rather than mere conventionality) of the dharmas. It would appear that even though emptiness may be realized through meditation, the mechanics of the art of this meditation depend on a prior belief in the truth of the dharmas which, it would seem, are then confirmed after the realization of emptiness.

Summary

We have attempted to make sense of the Buddhist teaching about suffering and how it arises and also touched on the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness. It is hoped

⁵² How to Meditate, 61

that, while understandably, more technical issues have not be covered, some appreciation of Buddhism may be possible from what has been written.

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