

Research Article

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A Secular Buddhism

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Abstract

This essay explores the possibility of a complete secular redefinition of Buddhism. It argues that such a secular re-formation would go beyond modifying a traditional Buddhist school, practice or ideology to make it more compatible with modernity, but would involve rethinking the core ideas on which the very notion of "Buddhism" is based. Starting with a critical reading of the four noble truths, as presented in the Buddha's first discourse, the author proposes that instead of thinking of awakening in terms of "truths" to be understood one thinks of it in terms of "tasks" to be accomplished. Such a pragmatic approach may open up the possibility of going beyond the belief-based metaphysics of classical Indian soteriology (Buddhism 1.0) to a praxis-based, post-metaphysical vision of the dharma (Buddhism 2.0).

1.

I will be using the term "secular" in three overlapping senses: (1) in the popular way the word is used in contemporary media: that is "secular" is what stands in contrast or opposition to whatever is called "religious." When, during a panel discussion on some topic such as the existence of God, the moderator says: "And now I would like to invite X to offer a secular perspective on this question," we know what is meant without having to define with any precision either "secular" or "religious." (2) I will also be using the term in full consciousness of its etymological roots in the Latin *saeculum*, which means "this age," "this *siècle* (century)," "this generation." I thus take "secular" to refer to those concerns we have about *this* world, that is everything that has to do with the quality of our personal, social, and environmental experience of living on this planet. (3) I likewise understand the term in its Western, historical-political sense as referring to (in Don Cupitt's definition) "the transfer of authority over a certain area of life from the Church to the 'temporal power' of the State." Cupitt points out how over the past two to three hundred years "a large-scale and long-term process of secularisation is gradually transforming the whole of our culture, as the religious realm slowly contracts until eventually the majority of the population can and do live almost their entire lives without giving religion a thought" (Cupitt 2011, 100).

I intend show what might happen when "Buddhism" or "dharma" is rigorously qualified by these three senses of the term "secular." What, in other words, would a non-religious, this-worldly, secularised Buddhism look like? To what extent can we see this process of secularisation as being already underway? Can Buddhism—as it is traditionally understood—survive the process intact? Or are we witnessing the end of Buddhism, at least as we know it, and the beginning of something else?

2.

Birth is dukkha, ageing is dukkha, sickness is dukkha, death is dukkha, encountering what is not dear is dukkha, separation from what is dear is dukkha, not getting what one wants is dukkha. In brief, these five bundles of clinging are dukkha.

The First Discourse (Dhammacakkapavātana Sutta)¹

I was recently teaching a group of students on a Buddhist studies programme affiliated to a Vipassana meditation centre in England. Since it was the first module of the course, the students introduced themselves as a way of explaining how and why they had enrolled. One young woman, “Jane,” recounted how she had gone to her doctor to seek treatment for the pain produced by the scars left by severe burns. The doctor referred her to a pain clinic in London that offered her two choices: a series of steroid injections, or an eight-week course in mindfulness meditation. Jane opted for the mindfulness, and, having completed the course, found that it worked.

This did not mean that the pain miraculously vanished but that Jane was able to deal with it in a way that dramatically reduced the distress it caused, enabling her to lead a more fulfilled and active life. No doubt most patients would have left it at that, and simply employed the mindfulness as an effective technique of pain management. Others, like Jane, seem to realise that the skill they had been taught had implications beyond that of simple pain relief. Although doctors and therapists who employ mindfulness in a medical setting deliberately avoid any reference to Buddhism, you do not have to be a rocket scientist to figure out where it comes from. A Google search will tell you that mindfulness is a form of Buddhist meditation.

Jane is not the only person I have met whose practice of Buddhism started with exposure to mindfulness as a medical treatment. On every Buddhist meditation course I lead these days, there will usually be one or two participants who have been drawn to the retreat because they want to deepen their practice of “secular mindfulness” (as it is now being called) in a setting that provides a richer contemplative, philosophical and ethical context. For certain people, an unintended consequence of such mindfulness practice is the experience of a still, vivid and detached awareness that does more than just deal with a specific pain; it opens a new perspective on how to come to terms with the totality of one’s existence: that is birth, sickness, aging, death, and everything else that falls under the broad heading of what the Buddha called dukkha. The simple (though not necessarily easy) step of standing back and mindfully attending to one’s experience rather than being uncritically overwhelmed with the imperatives of habitual thoughts and emotions can allow a glimpse of an inner freedom *not* to react to what one’s mind is insisting that one do. The experience of such inner freedom, I would argue, is a taste of *nibbāna* (nirvana) itself.

This story illustrates well the three uses of the word “secular” outlined above. Here we

¹ This and all further quotations from the Buddha’s first discourse are in my own translation, which is available at <http://www.stephenbatchelor.org/index.php/en/stephen/study-tools>. The text is found in the *Mahāvagga* I. 6 (Horner, 1951), pp. 15-17, and at S. 56:11.

have (1) a practice of mindfulness that is presented and undertaken without any reference at all to religion; (2) that is concerned entirely with the quality of one's life in this world, this age, this *saeculum*; and (3) is an example of how the "State," in Jane's case the British National Health Service, has taken over a certain area of life that was traditionally the preserve of a "Church," that is Theravada Buddhism. However, as with Jane and others, their practice of secular mindfulness did not stop here, but opened unexpected doors into other areas of their life, some of which might be regarded as the traditional domains of religion. Perhaps the penetration of mindfulness into health care is like that of a Buddhist Trojan Horse. For once mindfulness has been implanted into the mind/brain of a sympathetic host; dharmic memes are able to spread virally, rapidly and unpredictably.

3.

The kind of Buddhism sought out by Jane and others on the basis of their practice of mindfulness may have little if anything to do with Buddhism as it is traditionally understood and presented. By "traditional Buddhism" I mean any school or doctrinal system that operates within the soteriological worldview of ancient India. Whether "Hinayana" or "Mahayana" in orientation, all such forms of Buddhism regard the ultimate goal of their practice to be the attainment of *nibbāna*, that is the complete cessation of the craving (*taṇhā*) that drives the relentless cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Such craving is at the root of greed, hatred, and bewilderment that prompt one to commit acts that cause one to be reborn after death in more or less favourable conditions in samsara. Although I have presented this formulation of the existential dilemma and its resolution in Buddhist terms, the same soteriological framework is shared by Hindus and Jains. In each of these Indian traditions, adepts achieve salvation or liberation by bringing to an end the mechanism that perpetuates the cycle of birth and death, whereby one achieves the "deathless" (Buddhism) or "immortality" (Hinduism)—though both terms are a translation of the same word in Pali/Sanskrit: *amata/amṛta*. Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism differ only in the doctrinal, meditative, and ethical strategies they employ to achieve the same goal.

So embedded is this Indian soteriological framework in Buddhism that Buddhists might find it unintelligible that one would even consider questioning it. For to dispense with such key doctrines as rebirth, the law of *kamma*, and liberation from the cycle of birth and death would surely undermine the entire edifice of Buddhism itself. Yet for those who have grown up outside of Indian culture, who feel at home in a modernity informed by the natural sciences, to then be told that one cannot "really" practise the dharma unless one adheres to the tenets of ancient Indian soteriology makes little sense. The reason people can no longer accept these beliefs need not be because they reject them as false, but because such views are too much at variance with everything else they know and believe about the nature of themselves and the world. They simply do not work anymore, and the intellectual gymnastics one needs to perform to make them work seem casuistic and, for many, unpersuasive. They are *metaphysical* beliefs, in that (like belief in God) they can neither be convincingly demonstrated nor refuted. One has to take them on trust, albeit with as much reason and empirical evidence that one can muster to back them up.

To use an analogy from the world of computing, the traditional forms of Buddhism are like software programs that run on the same operating system. Despite their apparent differences, Theravada, Zen, Shin, Nichiren, and Tibetan Buddhism share the same underlying soteriology, that of ancient India outlined above. These diverse forms of Buddhism are like “programs” (e.g. word processing, spreadsheets, Photoshop etc.) that run on an “operating system” (a soteriology), which I will call “Buddhism 1.0.” At first sight, it would seem that the challenge facing the dharma as it enters modernity would be to write another software program, e.g. “Vipassana,” “Soka Gakkai” or “Shambhala Buddhism,” that would modify a traditional form of Buddhism in order to address more adequately the needs of contemporary practitioners. However, the cultural divide that separates traditional Buddhism from modernity is so great that this may not be enough. It might well be necessary to rewrite the operating system itself, resulting in what we could call “Buddhism 2.0.”

4.

On what grounds would such a Buddhism 2.0 be able to claim that it is “Buddhism” rather something else altogether? Clearly, it would need to be founded upon canonical source texts, be able to offer a coherent interpretation of key practices, doctrines and ethical precepts, and provide a sufficiently rich and integrated theoretical model of the dharma to serve as the basis for a flourishing human existence. To design a Buddhism 2.0 is, admittedly, an ambitious project, and what follows will be no more than a tentative sketch. But without making such an effort, I believe the dharma might find itself condemned to an increasingly marginal existence in mainstream culture, catering only to those who are willing to embrace the worldview of ancient India. Whatever potential the teachings of the Buddha could have for making positive contributions to many of the pressing issues of our *saeculum* may thereby be minimised if not realised at all.

The history of Buddhism is the history of its own ongoing interpretation and representation of itself. Each Buddhist tradition maintains that it alone possesses the “true” interpretation of the dharma, whereas all the other schools either fall short of this truth or have succumbed to “wrong views.” Today, from a historical-critical perspective, these kinds of claims appear strident and hollow. For we recognise that every historical form of Buddhism is contingent upon the wide array of particular and unique circumstances out of which it arose. The idea that one such school has somehow succeeded in preserving intact what the Buddha taught whereas all the others have failed is no longer credible. Whether we like it or not, Buddhism has become irrevocably plural. There exists no independent Buddhist judiciary that can pass judgment as to whose views are right and whose wrong.

In terms of my own theory of Buddhism 2.0, I need to be alert to the tendency of falling into the very trap that I am critiquing. The more I am seduced by the force of my own arguments, the more I am tempted to imagine that my secular version of Buddhism is what the Buddha originally taught, which the traditional schools have either lost sight of or distorted. This would be a mistake; for it is impossible to read the historical Buddha’s mind in order to know what he “really” meant or intended. At the same time,

each generation has the right and duty to re-interpret the teachings that it has inherited. In doing so, we may discover meanings in these texts that speak lucidly to our own *saeculum* but of which the original authors and their successors may have been unaware. As the term itself suggests, “Buddhism 2.0” contains a touch of irony. I take what I am saying with utmost seriousness, but I recognise that it too is as contingent and imperfect as any other interpretation of the dharma.

5.

If any doctrine can be regarded as seminal to the Buddha’s dispensation it would be that of the four noble truths as enunciated in *The First Discourse*, believed to have been delivered in the Deer Park at Isipatana (Sarnath) not long after his awakening in Uruvelā (Bodh Gaya). Yet when we first read this text in the form it has come down to us (there are seventeen versions in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan), it would appear to be firmly rooted in the soteriology of Buddhism 1.0. The suffering of birth, sickness, aging, and death (the first noble truth) originates in craving (the second noble truth). Only by bringing this craving to a stop through the experience of *nibbāna* (the third noble truth) will the suffering that craving causes likewise come to an end. And the only way to realise this final deliverance from suffering is by practicing the noble eightfold path (the fourth noble truth). The end of suffering, therefore, is only attainable by ending the craving that drives the cycle of rebirth. Indeed, the Buddha declares towards the conclusion of the sermon that “this is the last birth.” As long as one remains in this world as an embodied creature, the most one can achieve is a certain mitigation of suffering. For suffering truly to cease one must stop the process of rebirth altogether.

Such a reading of the discourse would seem to leave little if any room for a secular interpretation of the text. For this world of birth, sickness, aging and death that constitutes our *saeculum* is precisely what needs to be brought to an end if we are ever to achieve a genuine salvation or liberation. Orthodox Buddhism shows itself here to be thoroughly committed to the Indian ascetic tradition, which regards life in this world as beyond salvation and to be renounced. The principal virtue of human existence is that in the course of the interminable round of rebirths it is the most favourable state in which to be born because it provides the best conditions for escaping rebirth altogether. And this is not just the view of “Hinayana” Buddhism. The Mahayana traditions say exactly the same, the only difference being that the compassionate bodhisattva renounces his or her final liberation from rebirth until all other sentient beings have achieved it first.

On a closer analysis of this discourse, however, certain incongruities appear in the fabric of the text. *The First Discourse* cannot be treated as a verbatim transcript of what the Buddha taught in the Deer Park, but as a document that has evolved over an unspecified period of time until it reached the form in which it is found today in the canons of the different Buddhist schools. At this point, modern historical-critical scholarship comes to our aid as a means of upsetting some of the time-honoured views of Buddhist orthodoxy.

6.

The British philologist K.R. Norman is one of the world's foremost experts on what are called "mid Indo-Āryan Prakrits," that is those spoken languages (Prakrits) derived from Sanskrit, which were used after the classical and before the modern period in India. Included among these is Pali, the language in which the discourses attributed to the Buddha in the Theravada school are preserved. In a 1992 paper entitled "The Four Noble Truths," Norman offers a detailed, philological analysis of *The First Discourse*, and arrives at the startling conclusion that "the earliest form of this *sutta* did not include the word *ariya-saccaṃ* (noble truth)" (Norman 2003: 223). On grammatical and syntactical grounds, he shows how the expression "noble truth" was inexpertly interpolated into the text at a later date than its original composition. But since no such original text has come down to us, we cannot know what it *did* say. All that can reasonably be deduced is that instead of talking of four noble truths, the text merely spoke of "four."

The term "noble truth" is so much taken for granted, that we fail to notice its polemical, sectarian and superior tone. All religions maintain that what they and they alone teach is both "noble" and "true." This is the kind of rhetoric used in the business of religion. It is easy to imagine how over the centuries after the Buddha's death his followers, as part of the inter-sectarian one-upmanship of ancient India, made increasingly elevated claims about the superiority of their teacher's doctrines, which resulted in the adoption of the expression "noble truth" to privilege and set apart the dharma from what their competitors taught.

One implication of Norman's discovery is that the Buddha may not have been concerned with questions of "truth" at all. His awakening may have had little to do with gaining a veridical cognition of "reality," a privileged understanding that corresponds to the way things actually *are*. Numerous passages in the canon attest to how the Buddha refused to address the big metaphysical questions: Is the world eternal, not eternal, finite, infinite? Are the body and mind the same or different? Does one exist after death or not, or neither or both?² Instead of getting bogged down in these arguments, he insisted on revealing a therapeutic and pragmatic path that addressed the core issue of human suffering. He recognised that one could endlessly debate the truth or falsity of metaphysical propositions without ever reaching a final conclusion and, meanwhile, fail to come to terms with the far more pressing matter of your own and others' birth and death.

As soon as the seductive notion of "truth" begins to permeate the discourse of the dharma, the pragmatic emphasis of the teaching risks being replaced by speculative metaphysics, and awakening comes to be seen as achieving an inner state of mind that somehow accords with an objective metaphysical "reality." This tendency becomes even more pronounced when "truth" is further qualified as being either an "ultimate" (*paramattha*) or a merely "conventional" (*samutti*) truth. Although this two-truth

² The texts literally say "Does the Tathāgata exist after death or not..." My reasons for replacing "Tathāgata" with "one" are given in Batchelor (2010), p. 263.

doctrine is central to the thinking of all Buddhist orthodoxies, the terms “ultimate truth” and “conventional truth” do not occur a single time in the Sutta or Vinaya *Pitakas* (baskets) of the Pali canon. Yet for most Buddhist schools today— including the Theravada— enlightenment is understood as gaining direct insight into the nature of some ultimate truth.

This privileging of “truth,” I would argue, is one of the key indicators of how the dharma was gradually transformed from a liberative praxis of awakening into the religious belief system called Buddhism.

7.

Open any introductory book on Buddhism and you will find, usually within the first few pages, an account of the four noble truths. Invariably, they will be presented in the form of four propositions, something like this:

1. Life is suffering.
2. The origin of suffering is craving.
3. The cessation of suffering is *nibbāna*.
4. The noble eightfold path is the way that leads to the cessation of suffering.

By the very way in which this information is presented, the reader is challenged to consider whether these propositions are true or false. From the very outset of one’s engagement with the dharma, one finds oneself playing the language game “In Search of Truth.” The unstated presumption is that if you believe these propositions to be true, then you qualify to be a Buddhist, whereas if you regard them as false, you do not. One is thus tacitly encouraged to take the further step of affirming a division between “believers” and “non-believers,” between those who have gained access to the truth, and those who have not. This establishes the kind of separation that ultimately can lead to cultish solidarity as well as hatred for others who fail to share one’s views. “[W]hen the word ‘truth’ is uttered,” remarked the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, “a shadow of violence is cast as well.”³ Yet, if Mr. Norman is correct, the Buddha may not have presented his ideas in terms of “truth” at all.

Each of these propositions is a metaphysical statement, no different in kind from “God is love,” “creation arose from the breath of the One,” “bliss is eternal union with Brahman,” or “you will only come to the Father through Me.” Perhaps because of Buddhism’s more psychological-sounding and non-theistic terminology (not to mention the widespread perception of Buddhism as “rational” and “scientific”), you may not notice the blatantly metaphysical nature of the claims of the four noble truths until you start trying either to prove or refute them.

³ Vattimo (2011), p. 77. Vattimo adds the qualification: “Not all metaphysicians have been violent, but I would say that almost all large-scale perpetrators of violence have been metaphysicians.”

“Craving is the origin of suffering.” How then is craving the origin of old-age? How is craving the origin of the pain of a baby born with cystic fibrosis? How is craving the origin of being accidentally run over by a truck? I have noticed how contemporary Buddhist teachers, uncomfortable perhaps with the metaphysics of *kamma* and rebirth, will often try to explain this psychologically. “Craving does not cause the physical pain of old-age or being squashed beneath the wheels of a 3.5 ton vehicle,” they will say. “But it is by craving for these things not to be happening, by failing to accept life as it presents itself to us, that we thereby cause ourselves unnecessary mental anguish in addition to the physical pain.” It is self-evident that we frequently cause ourselves unnecessary mental anguish in this way, and a number of passages in the Pali canon can be cited to support such a reading. However, when the Buddha defines what he means by *dukkha* in *The First Discourse* he does not describe it as “unnecessary mental anguish” but as birth, sickness, aging and death as well as the “five bundles of clinging” *themselves*. In other words: the totality of our existential condition in this world. If we take the text as it stands, the only reasonable interpretation of the proposition “craving is the origin of suffering” is the traditional one: craving is the origin of suffering because craving is what causes you to commit actions that lead to your being born, getting sick, growing old, and dying. But this, of course, is metaphysics: a truth claim that can be neither convincingly demonstrated nor refuted.

In my book *Buddhism Without Beliefs* (1997) I also made the mistake of interpreting *dukkha* in terms of the craving that is said to cause it. I reasoned that if *dukkha* originated from craving, then it must refer to the mental anguish that is produced when in the grip of craving. I therefore translated *dukkha* as “anguish.” Irrespective of whether or not craving gives rise to such anguish, this is not how *dukkha* is presented in *The First Discourse*. As a result of this kind of interpretation, *dukkha* comes to be seen as a purely subjective problem that can be “solved” by correct application of the techniques of mindfulness and meditation. For *dukkha* is just the suffering unnecessarily added on to the inevitable pains and frustrations of life. This psychological reading turns the practice of the dharma increasingly inwards, away from a concern with the pervasive *dukkha* of life and the world, towards an exclusive, even narcissistic, concern with subjective feelings of lack and anguish.

8.

The notion of “truth” is so entrenched in our discourse about religion, and further reinforced by Buddhism’s own account of its teaching, that you might find it hard, even threatening, to “unlearn” thinking and speaking about the dharma in this way. Yet this unlearning is precisely what needs to be done if we are to make the shift from a belief-based Buddhism (version 1.0) to a praxis-based Buddhism (version 2.0). We have to train ourselves to the point where on hearing or reading a text from the canon our initial response is no longer “is that true?” but “does this work?”

At the same time, we also need to undertake a critical analysis of the texts themselves in order to uncover, as best we can at this distance in time, the core terms and narrative strategies that inform a particular passage or discourse. If we subtract the words “noble truth” from the phrase “four noble truths,” we are simply left with

“four.” And the most economic formulation of the four, to be found throughout Buddhist traditions, is this:

Suffering (*dukkha*)
Arising (*samudaya*)
Ceasing (*nirodha*)
Path (*magga*)

Once deprived of the epithet “noble truth” and no longer phrased in propositional language, we arrive at the four keystones on which both Buddhism 1.0 and Buddhism 2.0 are erected. Just as there are four nucleobases (cytosine, guanine, adenine, and thymine) that make up DNA, the nucleic acid that contains the genetic instructions for all living organisms, one might say that “suffering,” “arising,” “ceasing” and “path” are the four nucleobases that make up the dharma, the body of instructive ideas, values and practices that give rise to all forms of Buddhism.

9.

Craving is repetitive; it wallows in attachment and greed, obsessively indulging in this and that: the craving of sensory desire, craving for being, craving for non-being.

The First Discourse

Following Carol S. Anderson (1999), I translate *samudaya* as “arising” rather than the more familiar “origin.” I also note that I. B. Horner (1951) renders it as “uprising” in her translation of *The First Discourse*. While it is undeniable that from an early period Buddhist orthodoxy has understood *samudaya* to mean “origin” or “cause” (of *dukkha*), on closer analysis this seems a rather forced interpretation. While the proposition: “craving is the origin of suffering” at least makes logical sense (whether or not you believe it), to say “craving is the *arising* of suffering” is clumsy and unclear. In *The First Discourse*, craving (*taṇhā*) is identified as *samudaya*: “arising.” Yet in ordinary speech to say something “arises” suggests that it *follows* from something else, as in “smoke arises from fire.” In the traditional formulation of the four noble truths, however, this common-sense understanding is inverted: craving, identified as *samudaya*, is not *what arises* from *dukkha*, but *that which gives rise* to *dukkha*.

That craving is *what arises*, however, is central to another classical Buddhist doctrine: that of the twelve links of conditioned arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). Craving, it is said, is what arises from feelings (*vedana*), which in turn arise from contact, the six senses, *nāmarūpa*, and consciousness. [cf. S. 12:1] Together, the chain of causes that culminates in the arising of craving describes in linear sequence the totality of the human existential condition, commonly summarised in Buddhism by the “five bundles of clinging” (materiality, feelings, perceptions, inclinations, and consciousness). Now since *The First Discourse* regards these five bundles as shorthand for what is meant by *dukkha*, then, according to the twelve links theory, it is clear that craving is what arises from *dukkha*, rather than the other way round. “Craving” describes all our habitual and instinctive reactions to the fleeting, tragic, unreliable, and impersonal conditions of life

that confront us. If something is pleasant, we crave to possess it; if something is unpleasant, we crave to be rid of it. The practice of mindfulness trains us to notice how this reactive pattern *arises from* our felt encounter with the world, in such a way that we cease to be in thrall to its imperatives, and are thereby liberated to think and act otherwise.

The twelve links, of course, do not stop here: craving is said to give rise to clinging (*upādāna*), which in turn gives rise to becoming (*bhava*), which leads to birth, and aging and death, thus completing the sequence. This theory thus validates the orthodox belief that craving is the origin of birth, sickness, aging, and death, i.e. *dukkha*. While it is not difficult to see how craving would lead to clinging, I have never understood how clinging gives rise to *becoming* which then gives rise to *birth*.⁴ How do emotions such as craving and clinging give rise to an existential state of becoming, which then somehow serves as the condition for finding oneself inside a fertilised ovum again? The empirical precision that characterises the links from “consciousness” and *nāmarūpa* to “craving” is replaced in the later links by what seems to be metaphysical speculation.

Why were the early Buddhists so concerned to insist that craving is the cause of birth, sickness, aging, and death? One answer would be: in order that Buddhist thought could provide a convincing account of creation that would fit with the worldview of ancient India and the consolatory schemes implicit within it.⁵ To say “craving is the cause of suffering” is simply a reiteration of the prevalent Indian understanding of the origin of the world found in the Vedas and Upaniṣads. In the Ṛg-Veda we find an account of creation that describes how “in the beginning there was desire (*kāma*)” (X.129—unpublished translation by Dr. John Peacock). The pre-Buddhist *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* expands on this to explain how a person’s desires (*kāma*) lead to actions (*karma*) that result in being reborn in the world, whereas “one who is freed from desire” becomes one with Brahman and after death “goes to Brahman” (IV. 4: 5–6). The Buddhist twelve link model provides a non-theistic account of the same process: craving leads to rebirth and the stopping of craving results in liberation from rebirth. Although Buddhists use the term *taṇhā* (craving) rather than *kāma* (desire), *kāma* is nonetheless one of the three kinds of *taṇhā* described in *The First Discourse*. *Kāmatāṇhā* refers to the cravings of sensual desire, while *bhavataṇhā* has to do with the narcissistic longing to persist, and *vibhavataṇhā*, the self-disgusted longing for oblivion.

Yet if we consider what is probably an earlier version of the link theory of conditioned arising, found in the *Sutta-Nipāta* (Sn. 862–74), we are presented not with twelve but six links. Rather than seeking to explain how aging and death arise, this version more modestly sets out to describe how “quarrels, disputes, lamentations, and grief, together with avarice, pride, arrogance, and slander” arise. It offers nothing more than an empirical analysis of human conflict. The Buddha notes that conflicts arise from what is held dear, that holding things dear arises from longing (*chanda*), that longing arises

⁴ Theravada orthodoxy falls back on the metaphysics of *kamma* and rebirth to explain this point: *bhava* is divided into *kammabhava* (acts that give rise to becoming) and *upapattibhava* (the re-becoming that results from those acts).

⁵ cf. Gombrich (2009), chapter 3.

from “what is pleasant and unpleasant in the world,” which arise from contact, which in turn arises from *nāmarūpa*, i.e. being-in-the-world. Given that religious doctrines tend to become longer rather than shorter over time, this six-link version is likely to be closer to what was originally taught. It provides a this-worldly examination of the origins of conflict with no appeal to any metaphysical notions like *bhava* or rebirth. It is also worth noting that instead of “craving” (*taṇhā*), the *Sutta-Nipāta* uses the more neutral term *chanda*— the simple “longing,” “wish,” or “desire” for something.

10.

Yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ. These are the final words of *The First Discourse*, uttered by Koṇḍañña, one of the five ascetics to whom the discourse was delivered, as an expression of his insight into what the Buddha said. It means literally: “whatever is an arising dhamma, that is a ceasing dhamma,” or, more succinctly and colloquially: “whatever arises ceases.” Sāriputta, who became the Buddha’s foremost disciple, is also said to have uttered this phrase as an expression of his insight on first hearing a summary of the dharma. [Horner (1951), p. 54]

You will notice that the phrase contains two terms of the four, namely the second and third elements: **arising** (*samudaya*) and **ceasing** (*nirodha*). In the context of the *sutta*, it is clear that Koṇḍañña is not uttering a banal generalisation along the lines of “Whatever goes up must come down.” He is describing the core shift, one might even say the “hinge” on which the four turn, which he has just experienced for himself (“the dispassionate, stainless dharma eye arose in Koṇḍañña”).

The First Discourse defines **ceasing** as:

the traceless fading away and ceasing of that craving, the letting go and abandoning of it, freedom and independence from it.

Since *what ceases* is explicitly stated to be craving, then it is clear that *what arises* must also be craving. Koṇḍañña’s utterance provides the strongest evidence that *samudaya* refers to the arising of craving, *not* to the arising of dukkha as is traditionally taught. Since craving is something that arises, craving is something that ceases—this is Koṇḍañña’s insight, the “opening” of his “dharma eye,” which is the first glimpse of the freedom of *nibbāna*: the ceasing, even momentarily, of craving.

In the *Discourse to Kaccānagotta* we again find the two terms *samudaya* and *nirodha*, now employed as part of the Buddha’s account of what constitutes “complete view” (*sammādiṭṭhi*):

This world, Kaccāna, for the most part depends on a duality—upon the notion of “it is” (*atthita*) and the notion of “it is not” (*natthita*). But for one who sees the **arising** (*samudaya*) of the world as it occurs with complete understanding (*sammāpañña*), there is no notion of “it is not” in regard to the world. And for one who sees the **ceasing** (*nirodha*) of the world as it occurs with complete understanding, there is no notion of “it is” in regard to the world. ... “Everything is,” Kaccāna, this is one dead-end. “Everything is not,” Kaccāna, this is another

dead-end. Without veering towards either of these dead-ends, the Tathāgata teaches the dharma by the middle... [S. 12:15]

This passage, which would later serve as the only explicit canonical basis for Nāgārjuna's philosophy of the middle way [MMK. 15: 6-7], expands the usage of *samudaya* and *nirodha* beyond the arising and ceasing of craving to include the arising and ceasing of the world. Such a vision liberates one from what lies at the root of craving, namely the reification, entrenched in language-users, of the notions "is" and "is not." For one who understands the contingent, fluid and processual nature of life realises that the categories of "is" and "is not" are incapable of adequately representing a world that is endlessly arising and ceasing, forever eluding one's conceptual grasp. This is what Nāgārjuna and his followers mean when they say that persons and things are "empty of own-being" (*svabhāvasūnya*).

To gain such insight is to arrive at a "complete view," also known as an "opening of the dharma eye," which is the first element of the eightfold path. And the eightfold path, or the middle way, is how *The First Discourse* defines the fourth term of the four: **path** (*magga*). We are now in a position to see how the four describe a trajectory: **suffering** (*dukkha*) is what leads to the **arising** (*samudaya*) of craving, upon the **ceasing** (*nirodha*) of which the possibility of a **path** (*magga*) arises.

11.

The narrative structure of the text of *The First Discourse* provides further support for this reading of the four as the outline of a trajectory of practice rather than the conceptual foundations for a system of belief. The text breaks down into four principal stages:

1. The declaration of a middle way that avoids dead-ends.
2. The definitions of the four.
3. The presentation of the four as tasks to be recognised, performed, and accomplished.
4. The declaration that peerless awakening is achieved by the recognition, performance, and accomplishment of these tasks.

The key to understanding *The First Discourse* lies in seeing how each stage of the text is the precondition for the next stage, and how the practice of each element of the four is the precondition for the practice of the next element of the four. This narrative strategy is a *demonstration* of the core principle of conditioned arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) itself, i.e. "when this is, that comes to be; when this is not, that does not come to be" [M. 79]. Seen in this light, the text is not explicating a theory of "four truths," but showing us how to perform "four tasks."

So how do the four become four tasks to be recognised, performed, and accomplished? This is what the (bare bone) text of *The First Discourse* says:

“Such is **dukkha**. It can be **fully known**. It has been fully known.

“Such is the **arising**. It can be **let go of**. It has been let go of.

“Such is the **ceasing**. It can be **experienced**. It has been experienced.

“Such is the **path**. It can be **cultivated**. It has been cultivated.”

Each element of the four is (a) to be recognised as such, then (b) acted on in a certain way, until (c) that action is accomplished. Thus each becomes a specific task to be performed in a certain way. While **dukkha** is to be fully known (*pariññā*), the **arising** (of craving) is to be let go of (*pahāna*), its **ceasing** is to be experienced, literally: “seen with one’s own eyes” (*sacchikāta*), and the **path** is to be cultivated, literally: “brought into being” (*bhāvanā*).

We need look no further than the text of *The First Discourse* itself to discover how the four constitute the core practices of the dharma: embracing dukkha, letting go of the craving that arises in reaction to it, experiencing the fading away and ceasing of that craving, which allows the eightfold path to be created and cultivated. According to this text, the Buddha’s awakening too is to be understood in terms of his having recognised, performed and accomplished these four tasks. Rather than describing his experience beneath the tree at Uruvelā as a transcendent insight into ultimate truth or the deathless, the Buddha says in *The First Discourse*:

As long as my knowledge and vision was not entirely clear about these twelve aspects of the four, I did not claim to have had a peerless awakening in this world...

Awakening is not a singular insight into the absolute, comparable to the transcendent experiences reported by mystics of theistic traditions, but a complex sequence of interrelated achievements gained through reconfiguring one’s core relationship with **dukkha, arising, ceasing** and the **path**.

This reading of *The First Discourse* also answers a question that has puzzled many: why are the four “noble truths” presented in the sequence we find them? Why does the text first present suffering (an effect), then go back to present its cause (craving)? And then why does it present the end of suffering (an effect), and then go back to present its cause (the eightfold path)? This sequence of “effect, cause, effect, cause” is commonly interpreted as an example of the Buddha’s “therapeutic” approach. First you need to recognise you are ill, then you go to a doctor who diagnoses the cause of the illness, then the doctor assures you that there is a cure for the illness, and finally proceeds to provide a remedy. This metaphor, however, is nowhere to be found in the discourses or monastic training texts of the Pali canon. It is a later— and, to my mind, strained—commentarial device with authoritarian undertones, introduced to justify the incongruous ordering of the propositional “truths.” But if one understands the four as tasks rather than truths, the puzzle is solved. The four are presented in that order *because that is the order in which they occur* as tasks to be performed: fully knowing suffering leads to the letting go of craving, which leads to experiencing its cessation,

which leads to the cultivation of the path.

12.

This gestalt switch (like “switching” an image of a vase into one of two faces in profile) that turns four truths into four tasks is the same perceptual switch that turns Buddhism 1.0 into Buddhism 2.0. It is a matter of reconfiguring the “nucleobases” of **dukkha**, **arising**, **ceasing**, and **path**. Instead of treating them as key elements of a metaphysical belief, one treats them as key elements of one’s practice of living in this world.

For Buddhism 2.0 it is quite irrelevant whether the propositions “life is suffering,” “craving is the origin of suffering,” “*nibbāna* is the end of suffering,” or “the noble eightfold path leads to the end of suffering” are true or not. The aim of one’s practice is not to confirm or refute such time-honoured dogmas but to respond in a radically different way to what presents itself at any given moment. Whenever suffering occurs in your life— whether that of coming down with flu or not getting the job you wanted— you seek to know it fully rather than resent or deny it. Instead of distracting yourself with fantasies or worries, you focus your attention calmly upon the felt sense of what is happening. As you perform this task you become acutely conscious of your reactive “arisings” and the potency of their force. They too are to be included within that same wide, still embrace. You do not free yourself from narcissistic or self-disgusted longings by suppressing them but by accepting them as the uprising of habitual inclinations, which may be psychologically, culturally, religiously, or instinctively conditioned.

Fully knowing suffering is not an end in itself, but a precondition for being able to let go of the craving that habitually arises in reaction to suffering. In Buddhism 2.0 the problem with craving is not that it causes suffering (although obviously sometimes it does) but that it prevents one from entering the eightfold path. In this sense, craving is a hindrance (*nīvaraṇa*), something that blocks unimpeded movement along a trajectory. As long as one consciously or unconsciously assents to the imperatives of the desires triggered by dukkha (“I want this!” “I don’t want that!”), one will remain trapped in the powerful cycles of repetitive thoughts and actions that undermine any attempt to embark on a way of life that is no longer determined by them. Paradoxically, the letting go of craving is achieved not by willfully renouncing it, but by deepening and extending one’s embrace of the “great matter of birth and death”—as the Chinese call dukkha—that constitutes one’s life.

In *fully* knowing birth, sickness, aging and death one comes to understand the inevitably transient, tragic, and impersonal nature of human existence. Over time this erodes the underlying rationale of craving: namely, that this world exists for my personal gratification and, if I play my cards right by getting everything I want and getting rid of everything I hate, then I will find the lasting happiness I long for. Such a world, unfortunately, is not the one we inhabit. Once this realisation begins to dawn, the absurdity and futility of craving’s ambitions are exposed. The longings, fears and animosities that habitually arise begin to fall away of their own accord (or if they do not actually fall away, they lose their hold over us, which comes to much the same thing), culminating in moments when they stop altogether, thereby opening up the possibility

of a way of life that is no longer driven by their demands, and freeing us to think, speak, act and work otherwise.

This process can be conveniently summarised under the acronym ELSA:

Embrace,
Let go,
Stop,
Act.

One **embraces** dukkha, that is whatever situation life presents, **lets go** of the grasping that arises in reaction to it, **stops** reacting, so that one can **act** unconditioned by reactivity. This procedure is a template that can be applied across the entire spectrum of human experience, from one's ethical vision of what constitutes a "good life" to one's day-to-day interactions with colleagues at work. Buddhism 2.0 has no interest in whether or not such a way of life leads to a final goal called "*nibbāna*." What matters is an ever deepening, ever broadening engagement with a process of practice in which each element of ELSA is a necessary and intrinsic part. "Ceasing" is no longer seen as the *goal* of the path, but as those moments when reactivity stops (or is suspended) in order that the possibility of a path can reveal itself and be "brought into being." Just as dukkha gives rise to craving (rather than the other way round), so the ceasing of craving gives rise to the eightfold path (rather than the other way round). Thus Buddhism 2.0 turns Buddhism 1.0 on its head.

13.

"Suppose, bhikkhus," said the Buddha, "a man wandering through a forest would see an ancient path travelled upon by people in the past. He would follow it and would come to an ancient city that had been inhabited by people in the past, with parks, groves, ponds and ramparts, a delightful place. Then the man would inform the king or a royal minister: 'Sir, know that while wandering through the forest I saw an ancient path. I followed it and saw an ancient city. Renovate that city, Sir!' Then the king or royal minister would renovate the city, and some time later that city would become successful and prosperous, well populated, attained to growth and expansion." [S. 12:65]

In explaining this story, the Buddha says that the "ancient path" refers to the "eightfold path" while the "ancient city" refers to the four and conditioned arising.⁶ He compares himself to the man who went wandering in the forest and discovered these things, then returned to the world and, with the help of kings and ministers, established the dharma and Sangha, which now flourish throughout the land.

The narrative structure of this strikingly secular parable closely mirrors the narrative

⁶ *The City* presents the four in conjunction with *ten* links of conditioned arising. This ten link model occurs only twice in the Canon (cf. the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, ii. 32). It is the same as the twelve link model except that the first two links of ignorance (*avijjā*) and inclinations (*sankhāra*) are omitted. It appears to be an intermediate version, which occurred during the evolution of the theory from six to twelve links.

structure of *The First Discourse*. It too has four principal stages that correspond to those of *The First Discourse* outlined above in section 11.

1. The discovery of the forest path (= the declaration of a middle way).
2. The discovery of the ancient city (= the declaration of the four).
3. Engaging in the task of restoring the city (= showing the four as tasks to be recognised, performed and accomplished)
4. Completing the task of restoring the city (= achieving peerless awakening as the result of accomplishing the tasks).

Whereas *The First Discourse* presents these four stages in terms of an individual's awakening, *The City* presents them in terms of a social project to be realised concretely in the world. As well as providing a template for leading one's own life, the four are now shown to provide a template for the communal endeavor to realise another kind of society. The practice of the dharma, therefore, is not reducible to attaining awakening for oneself. It is a practice that necessarily involves co-operative activity with others to achieve goals that may not be realised until long after one's death.

Both texts suggest that the eightfold path is not to be seen as a linear sequence of stages that results in a final goal, but as a positive feedback loop that is itself the goal. In *The City*, the eightfold path leads to the discovery of the four, but the fourth of the four is the eightfold path itself, which, according to the text, leads to the four *ad infinitum*. To spell this out: fully knowing dukkha leads to the letting go of what arises, which leads to moments in which what arises ceases, which opens up a "complete view," the first step of the eightfold path. Such a view then informs how we think and make choices (step 2), which lead to how we speak (step 3), act (step 4) and work (step 5), which provide an ethical framework for applying oneself (step 6) to cultivate mindfulness (step 7) and concentration (step 8). But what is one mindful of? What does one concentrate on? One is mindful of and concentrates on life as it presents itself in each moment, which is how one fully knows dukkha. Thus one returns, at a deeper pitch of understanding and empathetic awareness, to the first task of the four, which leads to the second task etc.

This loop I am describing, however, is not cyclical. If it were, one would keep finding oneself back where one started, which would be analogous to samsara, the cycle of repeated birth and death from which Buddhists traditionally seek liberation. I compare the process of ELSA to a positive feedback loop, similar to that of contractions in childbirth that release the hormone oxytocin, which in turn stimulates further contractions, finally resulting in the birth of a child.⁷

⁷ That the Buddha saw the practice he taught as similar to childbirth is suggested by a curious passage in the *Saccavibhanga Sutta* (*Exposition of the Truths*) [M. 141]. In this discourse, the Buddha returns to Isipatana, where he delivered *The First Discourse*, in the company of his two principal disciples Sāriputta and Moggallāna. He encourages his audience to cultivate the friendship of these two in their practice of the path with the words: "Sāriputta is like a pregnant woman

14.

And this is the path: the path with eight branches: complete view, complete thought, complete speech, complete action, complete livelihood, complete effort, complete mindfulness, complete concentration.

The First Discourse

“When, bhikkhus, a noble disciple has abandoned perplexity about the four,” declares the Buddha, “he is then called a stream enterer (*sotāpanna*)” [S. 24:1]. Elsewhere, Sāriputta explicitly defines the “stream” as the eightfold path, and a “stream enterer” as one who has made such a path his or her own [S. 55:5]. The unfolding process of ELSA is comparable to the flowing water of a stream. Such imagery implies that once one embarks on fully knowing dukkha, thereby triggering the positive feedback loop that is the path, one’s life no longer feels as if it were somehow “stuck” or “blocked” or “arrested.” It begins to flow. You realise that the frustration of being hindered in realizing your deepest aspirations is due to the instinctive cravings that arise unbidden, fixating you on the exclusive task of satisfying a desire or repelling a threat that has seized your attention. At times, of course, it pays to heed such instinctive reactions—after all, they are there because they have provided and still provide “survival advantages.” But these instincts are so ingrained that they now over-ride and subvert other concerns, which one has committed oneself to realise.

The fullest account of stream entry (*sotāpatti*) in the canon is found in the *Sotāpattisaṃyutta*— the penultimate chapter of the *Samyutta Nikāya*. A stream-enterer, says this text, is one who possesses “lucid confidence” (*aveccappasāda*) in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and embodies “the virtues cherished by the noble ones” [S. 55:2]. The first part of this refers to what are commonly called the Three Jewels.” Yet rather than presenting them as the objects of a ritual in which one affirms one’s identity as a follower of the Buddhist religion, here they are understood as the parameters of a conscious reorientation of one’s core ethical values. One who embraces dukkha, lets go of craving, experiences the ceasing of craving, and thereby enters the stream of the eightfold path is one who gains increasing lucidity and trust in a way of life that is founded on a set of values that are not driven by the imperatives of craving. “Buddha” refers to the awakening to which one aspires; “Dharma” to the body of instructions and practices that guide one’s realisation of awakening; and “Sangha” to those men and women who share such goals and through their friendship support your own realisation of them.

At the same time, three “fetters” are said to fall away on entering the stream of this path: narcissism (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*), rule-bound morality and observances (*śīlabbata*), and doubt (*vichikicchā*) [Sn. 231]. A careful examination of one’s human condition leaves one

(*janetā*); Moggallāna is like a midwife (*jātassa āpādetā*.)” Although this *sutta* is said to be an exposition of the four “noble truths,” when Sāriputta is invited by the Buddha to explain them, his presentation covers the definition of the four, but ignores the concluding sections of *The First Discourse*, which describe them as four tasks to be recognised, performed and accomplished.

with very little to be narcissistic about. The closer one peers into the transient, tragic, and impersonal conditions of one's existence, the more the reflection of one's beloved, fascinating self-image breaks up and dissolves. Puṇṇa Mantāniputta, the nephew of Koṇḍañña and preceptor of Ānanda, compares the clinging (*upādāna*) that arises from craving to the way "a young woman or man, fond of ornaments, would examine her own facial image in a mirror or in a bowl filled with pure, clean water" [S. 22:83]. By clinging to their form in this way, he explains, the conceit "I am" (*asmi*) arises. *Sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, which I have translated as "narcissism," literally means: "the view of one's existing body."

Moreover, to the extent that one understands the complexity and uniqueness of the peculiar dukkha of every moral dilemma, to that extent one recognises how the strict moral rules of religion can be no more than broad guidelines for action. Empathetic awareness of another's suffering calls for a response that is driven not by the conceit of knowing what is the right thing to do in general, but by the courageous humility to risk what may be the most wise and loving thing to do in that particular case. And since the process of ELSA is grounded in first-hand experience rather than belief, once this path has become "your own," it becomes difficult if not impossible to entertain doubts about its authenticity.

As a religious institution governed by a professional elite, Buddhism has tended over time to elevate stream entry to such a rarified spiritual height that it becomes all but inaccessible to any but the most dedicated practitioners of the dharma. Yet the *suttas* insist that numerous stream enterers at the Buddha's time were "men and women lay followers, clothed in white, enjoying sensual pleasures," who had "gone beyond doubt" and "become independent of others in the teaching" [M. 73]. Perhaps the most striking example of this is that of a drunkard called Sarakāni the Sakiyan, whom the Buddha affirmed to be a stream enterer in spite of the objections of the local people [S. 55:24].

15.

Just as Christianity has struggled to explain how an essentially good and loving God could have created a world with so much suffering, injustice and horror, so Buddhism has struggled to account for the presence of joy, delight and enchantment in a world that is supposedly nothing but a vale of tears. Both cases illustrate the limitations of belief-based systems of thought. Once you commit yourself to upholding the truth of metaphysical propositions such as "life is dukkha" or "God is good," you will be drawn into the interminable task of trying to justify them. In Christianity this is known as "theodicy," whereas the Buddhist equivalent might be termed "dukkhodicy." Praxis-based systems avoid the dead-end of such justification by founding themselves on injunctions to do something instead of on propositions to believe something. Thus rather than trying to justify your belief that "life is dukkha," you seek to "fully know dukkha." And rather than struggling to understand how "craving is the origin of dukkha," you seek to "let go of craving."

The *suttas* contain a number of passages that suggest this more pragmatic and nuanced approach. "I do not say that the breakthrough to the four is accompanied by suffering,"

declares the Buddha in the final chapter of the *Samyutta Nikāya*. “It is accompanied only by happiness and joy” [S. 56:35]. To fully embrace suffering does not increase suffering, but paradoxically enhances your sense of astonishment at being alive. By saying “yes” to birth, sickness, aging, and death, you open your heart and mind to the sheer mystery of being here at all: that in this moment you breathe, you hear the wind rustling the leaves in the trees, you look up at the night sky and are lost in wonder. In another passage, the Buddha corrects his friend the Licchavi nobleman Mahāli, who holds the mistaken belief that life is nothing but suffering: “If this life, Mahāli, were exclusively steeped in suffering,” he explains, “and if it were not also steeped in pleasure, then beings would not become enamored of it” [S. 22:60].

And in another text, also from the *Samyutta Nikāya*, we find the Buddha reflecting on his own motives for embarking on his quest. “When I was still a bodhisatta,” he recalls, “it occurred to me: ‘What is the delight (*assādo*) of life? What is the tragedy (*ādhinavo*) of life? What is the emancipation (*nissaraṇaṃ*) of life?’ Then, bhikkhus, it occurred to me: ‘the happiness and joy that arise conditioned by life, that is the delight of life; that life is impermanent, dukkha and changing, that is the tragedy of life; the removal and abandonment of grasping (*chandarāga*) for life, that is the emancipation of life’” [S. 35:13]. Only when he had understood all three of these things, he concludes, did he consider himself to have attained a peerless awakening in this world.

16.

Let us imagine a child who was born in the year of the Buddha’s death. Like the Buddha, that child also lived for eighty years, and in the year of his death another child was born. If we continue this sequence up to the present day, two and a half thousand years later, we will find that only thirty such human lives separate us from the time of the Buddha. From this perspective, we are not in fact so distant in time from a period we habitually, and sometimes reverentially, regard as the remote past. Buddhism’s “antiquity” serves as another trope to burnish its teachings with greater authority (which is further reinforced by the Indian belief in the “degeneration of time,” which maintains that, across the board, things have been getting steadily worse since the fifth century BCE). Yet what is remarkable about some of the *suttas* that originated in that “ancient” time is how directly and lucidly they speak to the condition of our life here and now in the twenty-first century. In a primary, existential sense, human experience today is no different from what it was at the Buddha’s time.

This adjustment in temporal perspective throws into question the idea that we live in a “dharma-ending age,” when it is no longer possible to realise the fruits of the path as was done by the great adepts of the past. One could just as well explain such thinking in Feuerbachian or Marxist terms as an instance of the progressive alienation that occurs when an established religious system, often serving as the moral arm of an authoritarian political power, claims to be the sole true possessor of those human values, such as wisdom and compassion, that the tradition upholds. By elevating “stream entry,” for example, into a rarified spiritual attainment, one places it out of reach of the ordinary practitioner, thereby confirming both the higher authority of the religious institution and its representatives and the powerlessness of the unenlightened

laity.

But could we not also imagine that instead of coming to an end, Buddhism might only just be beginning? The secularisation of the dharma that seems to be currently underway might not, as its critics bemoan, be a further indication of the terminal watering down and banalisation of the Buddha's teaching, but rather a sign of the waning power of the orthodoxies that have held sway for the past two thousand or so years. Secularisation might indeed mark the collapse of Buddhism 1.0, but it might also herald the birth of Buddhism 2.0.

For those, like Jane and others, who stumble across Buddhism through their practice of mindfulness in medical treatment (or, for that matter, through their appreciation of the philosophy of Nāgārjuna, their love of Zen haiku and brush painting, their admiration of the personality of Dalai Lama, or their longing for social justice as former untouchables in India), Buddhism 2.0 offers a secularised dharma that dispenses with the soteriology of ancient India yet is founded on a critical reading of key canonical texts such as *The First Discourse*. By reconfiguring the operating code of the four, Buddhism 2.0 offers a different perspective on understanding and practicing the dharma, one that is grounded in the positive feedback loop of ELSA. It remains to be seen whether this re-formation is capable of generating a consistent and coherent interpretation of Buddhist practice, philosophy, and ethics that could serve as the basis for a flourishing human existence in the kind of world in which we live today.

In the parable of the raft, the Buddha describes “a man in the course of a journey” who arrives at a body of water that he has to cross. Since there are no boats or bridges available, his only option is to assemble a raft out of the “grass, twigs, branches, leaves” and whatever other materials are to hand. Having bound them together, and “making an effort with his hands and feet” he manages to get across to the opposite shore. Despite its evident usefulness, he realises that there is no point in carrying the raft any further once it has accomplished its purpose. So he leaves it by the shore and continues on his way. Likewise, the Buddha concludes, “I have shown you how the dharma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping” [M. 22]. This story shows how the dharma is an expedient, a means to achieve an urgent task at hand, not an end in itself that is to be preserved at all cost. It emphasises how one needs to draw upon whatever resources are available at a given time in order to accomplish what you have to do. It does not matter whether these resources are “what the Buddha truly taught” or not. The only thing that matters is whether such a configuration of disparate elements is of any help in getting you across the river. So it is with Buddhism 2.0. In the light of this parable, it makes little sense to ask: “Is this really Buddhism?” The only relevant question is: “Does it float?”

Bibliography

Abbreviations:

M. Majjhima Nikāya (Tr. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 1995)

MMK. Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (Tr. Garfield, 1995)

S. Saṃyutta Nikāya (Tr. Bodhi, 2000)

Sn. Sutta-Nipāta (Tr. Norman, 2001)

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