

Reason as Employed by the Buddha: Its Originality and Mystical Foundations

By Slawomir Szkredka

ABSTRACT

This paper is organized as follows:

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THE MYSTICAL DIMENSION OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHIES

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It aims at explaining the rationality embodied in Buddhism. It will be shown that this rationality is scientific in its method and deeply existential in its outcome.

The ultimate goal of this essay is to explicate the rationality embodied in the Buddha's doctrine. The structure of our argument can be presented in the following way: Given the context of the Indian intellectual tradition at the time of the Buddha, we shall demonstrate that the Buddha's doctrine is an original philosophical system. Given the broad definitions of mysticism, we shall assume that the Buddha's awakening (entry into Nibbana) is a mystical state. With these two assumptions in mind, we shall produce the textual evidence from within the Pali Buddhist writings to prove that the Buddha's original philosophy (the middle path between eternalism and annihilationism) is grounded in the experience of awakening. As a result, we shall illustrate a historically and culturally significant form of rationality,¹ which is both scientific in its method and deeply existential in its outcome.

THE BUDDHA AS AN ORIGINAL THINKER

To understand the character of the Buddha's philosophical achievement, it is indispensable to set it in the context of Indian intellectual life. One way to describe the intellectual ambiance of India around 500 B.C.E. is to discuss all the main schools of philosophy together with their prominent figures and their major works while patiently sorting out the intricate web of their mutual influences. Such approach would yield a detailed and extensive account of the Indian philosophy. Dasgupta's five volumes of *History of Indian Philosophy*² are, in fact, an eloquent example of such approach. Similarly, Jayatilleke's analytically minded *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*³, in which he extensively analyzes

both the doctrines and the modes of argumentation extant at the time of the Buddha, brings to the fore analytic finesse of many an Indian thinker.

Our goal at this point is not to reproduce such a history of Indian thought but rather to simply identify the elemental questions beneath and the most common answers within Indian intellectual ambiance. In somewhat Lévi-Straussian spirit, we wish to grasp the structure of the Indian mind: its fundamental assumptions and its basic pursuits. This shall later allow us to assess the Buddha's originality on a similar level of his basic arguments and their fundamental justification.

THE INTELLECTUAL CULTURE OF INDIA

The basic division within Indian intellectual tradition runs between the Vedic and the śramaṇa cultures. The Vedas were brought to India by the Indo-Aryans who first entered and then came to dominate the Indian subcontinent sometime after 1600 B.C.E. The origin of the śramaṇas (literally, strivers) is less clear. They might be connected with a pre-Aryan religious movement indigenous to India, but they might also be seen as an anti-Vedic trend originating within the Aryan tradition. Or they might be a combination of both.⁴

The Vedic literature was considered holy. It was memorized and transmitted by a hereditary Aryan priestly caste called brahmins. Given the variety of subject matter, language, and age of particular treaties, the Vedic literatures could be classified into four types: Saṃhita or collection of verse, Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas ("forest treatises") and the Upaniṣads.⁵ The overall concern of the Vedic literature was the proper performance of the rituals. It was a common belief of the brahminic religion that the gods were bound to obey a ritual properly performed. Rituals then were at the center of brahminic religiosity. Nevertheless, in spite of the dominating concern with the rituals, the Vedic treaties gravitated at later stages towards philosophical speculations. This shift towards philosophical thinking achieved its completion in the Upaniṣads. Here the concern with orthopraxy, so central to the brahminic beliefs, gives way to the questioning about the origin and nature of the cosmos. Dasgupta calls it "probably the most remarkable event in the history of philosophic thought."⁶ There might have been some non-brahminic influence behind this radical shift within the Vedic tradition. Nevertheless, the Upaniṣads "achieved their culmination in the hands of the Brahmins."⁷ They are a part of brahminic tradition.

The central question of the Upaniṣads was about the underlying nature of everything that exists. To ask such a question is to move away from the interest in concrete and particular, that is, from the world as it appears to our senses, and to shift towards the necessary and the universal, that is to the more abstract apprehension of reality as performed by the emancipating faculty of reason. Among the early Greeks it was the quest for *arche* (*ἀρχή*), which manifested

similar shift towards abstract thinking. Given that the later Vedic hymns developed monotheistic position⁸ one would expect the Upaniṣads to search for the underlying principle of reality within the lines of thought unlocked by monotheistic ideal: within the scope of powers associated with the outside creator. That was not the case. The key to reality, according to the Upaniṣads, is not in some outside creator but within the self. *Brahman*, the substance underlying the whole cosmos is identical with the *ātman*, the true and universal self. This highly original turn towards the self will become a permanent mark of Indian philosophy.

Next to the Vedic tradition developed by the brahmins, the śramaṇa culture of wandering ascetics represents the second major element of the Indian intellectual milieu. Warder calls them philosophically “more interesting.”⁹ These wandering ascetics rejected the basic tenets of Brahmanism. They abandoned the family and its ritual life, the normal work and social status connected with it thus becoming completely free to dedicate themselves to a life of ascetic discipline and philosophical training. There have been a great number of them more or less loosely grouped into various schools propounding the teachings that ranged from extreme asceticism, through skepticism, fatalism, materialism, all the way to hedonism. These are highly sophisticated schools of thought for whom rational investigation becomes both the explanation and the justification of a particular way of ascetic life. Here reason takes the leading position in governing the life of the school’s followers. A variety of rationally supported conclusions are proclaimed. Let us briefly present the major ones.¹⁰

One of the major śramaṇa groups was that of the Jains. Founded by Vardhamāna the Mahāvīra it taught that all things are alive. Unlike the Upaniṣads, which proposed one universal principle underlying the whole nature, the Jains claimed that each thing was alive by the virtue of a separate *jīva*, or “life principle” it contained. These individually distinct principles enclosed in all things had to be liberated. The path to liberation led through austere ascetical practices combined with complete non-violence. Even the unintentional killing of an insect was said to generate karma. In a word, Jainism was characterized by extreme asceticism and a somewhat rigid and mechanical notion of karma.

The complete determinism to a point of negating the principle of karma was advocated by the school known as Ājīvakas. Their founder, Makkhali Gosāla, claimed that everything is strictly governed by the impersonal destiny called *niyati*. He believed in rebirth but not in karma as actions were not freely done but rather governed by *niyati*. The rebirth itself was seen as a fixed progression moving from lower animal to higher human forms of life culminating in the life of Ājīvaka ascetic. The Ājīvaka ascetic aimed to end his last rebirth by dying of self-starvation. It was again an extremely ascetical and fatalistic stance.

The school of materialists (the Cārvāka School) claimed that the only existing self was the self perceived by the senses, which comes to a complete annihilation at the moment of death. They denied then the idea of rebirth. They

also rejected the notions of karma and *niyati*. Their epistemological stance emphasized experience as the most reliable source of knowledge. Their approach to life can be characterized as a moderate hedonism aiming at a balanced enjoyment of life pleasures and human relationships.

Finally, with the skeptics all the doctrinal positions were not really denied but rather escaped. The skeptics claimed that no knowledge was possible and the only way to preserve the peace of mind was to avoid commitment to any point of view. They would not even assert that the other school's positions are wrong.

Entering the scene of Indian intellectual culture, the Buddha encountered a variety of explanations of reality, which, although never completely free from the mythical insertions, reflected a rational mode of thinking. Even as brief a presentation of the schools as the one we have just produced reveals that underneath the variety of positions there are just few questions that the Indian mind finds most captivating and thus most fundamental. These are the questions about the nature of the self, the nature of time, the nature of action, and the liberation. They are all interconnected.

The question about the nature of the self bogged the Indian mind in a very acute way. We have seen a surprising turn towards the self in the Upaniṣads. The śramaṇa schools continue to ask about the self. The range of the answers comes down to two disjointed positions: annihilationism and eternalism. The former one claims the true self to be eternal and unchanging, hidden underneath the ever-changing fluctuation of elements conventionally associated with the self. The former one, propounded by materialists, treats the ever-changing fluctuation as everything there is. The dissipation of these elements at the moment of death constitutes the complete annihilation of the self.

The identity of the self was understood against the cosmological background of the endless repetition of the cycles of time. In this vast temporal frame, the self¹¹ was believed to wander on through the cycle of repeated birth, death, and rebirth known as samsara. Initially, the Vedic tradition understood the order of the universe to be sustained by the sacrificial activity of the brahmins: a causal relationship was said to hold between the ritualistic action (karma) and the flow of cycles of time. At the time of the Buddha, the question of the nature of the human action had expanded beyond the realm of ritual. It became a question about the morality: inquiry into the relation between human action and its results. The answers being offered at that time ranged from complete determinism through the emphasis on the causal character of volitional activities to a complete denial of any karmic law whatsoever.

The combination of the theory of the self, theory of the endless repetition of rebirths, and the karmic effectiveness of human actions served to formulate the answers to another burning question: how to escape the ever-changing world of samsara. It was the question of liberation. The different schools gave different answers to this question, all in accordance with their basic understanding of the

nature of the self, the time, and the human action. The question of the real (real nature of the self, of time, and of human action) and the quest for salvation (to liberate oneself from the unreal) became one. The metaphysical and existential quest went hand in hand.

THE MYSTICAL DIMENSION OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHIES

The existential dimension of the Indian intellectual questioning brings us to so called mystical aspect of Indian philosophy. In the manner far greater than their counterparts in the West, the Indian thinkers combined their intellectual speculations with ascetical practices. These, in turn, produced the states of consciousness, which can be, in a broad sense, designated as mystical. This mystical dimension can be found in both the Vedic and the śramaṇa traditions.

Karel Werner in his “Mysticism and Indian Spirituality”¹² argues that, despite the purely ritualistic concern of many Vedic hymns, their original inspiration must have been mystical. According to him, “there is no reason why the beginnings of the Vedic religion should be looked upon in a different way and regarded as an outcome of poetic inspiration by natural forces with some primitive and sacrificial magic thrown in and nothing else.”¹³ Werner’s claim must be taken with a grain of salt. We simply lack the evidence to unambiguously explain the origin of the Vedic tradition. There is enough evidence, however, to suggest that even if the Vedic tradition originated with some mystical experiences, these mystical elements became quickly suppressed by the ritualistic emphasis dominating the subsequent development. The claim about the original mystical inspiration remains simply a well-reasoned speculation.

The status of mysticism changes with the emergence of the Upaniṣadic thinkers. Even though Jayatilleke considers the early Upaniṣadic thinkers as rationalist who “derived their knowledge from reasoning and speculation without any claims to extrasensory perception,”¹⁴ their metaphysical assertions betray some mystical awareness. As David Kalupahana observes, “comparing the basic teachings of the early Upaniṣads – the conception of the individual and universal selves – with the kind of awareness that the *yogin* is said to have in the highest state of meditation (for example, the individual thought process merging with or developing into a higher form of consciousness, an Ultimate Reality), it seems very probable that the latter kind of awareness was the basis of the former kind of speculation.”¹⁵ For Werner, the Upaniṣadic declaration of identity between the soul and the nature of the universe (*tat tvam asi*) is a “genuine expression of an experience of *unio mystica* if ever there was one.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind that what is asserted here, is the presence of the mystical phenomena, and not the presence of the systematic elaboration of their character.

In comparison with the well-documented Vedic tradition, the literary sources of the śramaṇa culture before the time of the Buddha are scarce. The *muni* of the śramaṇa movement was, in fact, a silent sage, as his name indicates: “the

one who has the vow of silence.”¹⁷ He would rarely speak about his experience, let alone commit it to writing. It is, then, outside the śramaṇa tradition that the earliest evidence of its mysticism can be found. Werner writes: “at the later Vedic time, before the final redaction of RV, there is good evidence about non-Vedic accomplished sages, conspicuous by their nakedness and long hair, roaming country and teaching their ‘path of the wind.’”¹⁸ Werner, then, goes on to interpret the Rgvedic hymn of the longhaired sage, an outsider who does not belong to the Vedic tradition, as a description of a truly mystical *muni*, not unlike the later masters of the Yoga¹⁹. What is postulated here is again the presence of genuine mystical experiences.

The antiquity of the śramaṇa mysticism notwithstanding, the systematic description of it is lacking. In fact, there is no methodological and systematic treatment of the mystical path antecedent to the doctrines of Jaina and the Buddha. This seriously limits our ability to assess the Buddha’s originality in this regard. We can, nevertheless, safely assume that by combining the intellectual and the mystical into one quest, the Buddha followed a longstanding Indian tradition.

Finally, an objection can be raised that the Buddha intended to produce a therapy and not a philosophy. One way to counter this objection is to point to the therapeutic character of the ancient Western philosophers.

Hours before his death, Socrates reminded his companions that his calm approach to passing away resulted from the life of philosophizing. He said: “The one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death.”²⁰ And he explained further: “No one may join the company of the gods who has not practiced philosophy and is not completely pure when he departs from life, no one but the lover of learning.”²¹ And then he put it even more concretely: “Those who practice philosophy in the right way keep away from all bodily passions, master them and do not surrender themselves to them.”²² The recent research, led by Pierre Hadot, into the regions of ancient philosophy confirms that, for the ancients, philosophy was not a theoretical discipline radically detached from daily life but rather the very way of living one’s daily life. Philosophical discourse and philosophical life were intrinsically connected. The learning of philosophical doctrine was accompanied by a number of spiritual exercises practiced with all seriousness and with the aim, as in the case of Socrates and Plato, of purifying one’s soul from all bodily inclinations in preparation for death.

Hadot’s study reveals that in every philosophical school of Western antiquity, including the Skeptics, there are found “voluntary, personal practices intended to cause a transformation of the self.”²³ They “are inherent to philosophical life,”²⁴ he adds. Among the various practices analyzed by Hadot are breathing techniques of the Pythagoreans; the Platonic exercise of attention to oneself; the very popular “exercise of death,” which is acting and speaking as if one were to depart from the world at any moment; the self’s expansion into the world, also Platonic, which is the contemplation of the whole of time and of being;

and the practice of logic by the stoics. As regards the latter, Hadot claims that logic “was not limited to an abstract theory of reasoning, nor even to school exercises in syllogistics; rather, there was a daily practice of logic applied to problems of everyday life. Logic was thus the mastery of inner discourse.”²⁵ Existential and intellectual quest went hand in hand both in ancient India and Greece. The purported disjunction between therapy and philosophy is a false dilemma.

INDIAN PSYCHE AND THE RISE OF RATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Indian philosophy at the time of the Buddha can be analyzed from the position of the history of consciousness: its rise from the mythically expressed and largely unconscious meanings to a conscious and rational governance of existence.

From the point of view of the history of consciousness, the passage from so-called primitive to axial man took a peculiar form in India. In the primitive man, individuality was located in the unconscious. The shift from the primitive to the axial man signifies that the seat of existence, to use John Cobb’s term,²⁶ shifts from the unconscious to the reflective consciousness, which at the same time becomes increasingly rationalized. When the center of existence is in the unconscious, the rationality of reflective consciousness is incorporated into the whole of psychic life only in terms of mythical meanings. Now, with the center of psychic life being located in the reflective consciousness, the power of mythical symbolization continues to influence the psychic life, but its influence is seen as something to be overcome by the growing autonomy of rational consciousness.

The shift from the primitive to the axial man coincides with the birth of individuality and freedom. “Primitive man understood himself as constituted by his participation in a larger whole, rather than conceiving of the whole as composed of individual men who are the final agents of action, decision, and real individuality.”²⁷ In India, the sense of individuality brought about by the rise of rational thinking was perceived as a burden, an estrangement and alienation from unity and wholeness. All Indian religion and philosophy can be seen as an attempt to overcome an estrangement associated with individual existence. Eternalism of Upaniṣads does it by pointing towards the unity underneath plurality of appearances. Individuality is relegated to the realm of appearance and thus overcome as unreal. Jainism achieves the same goal in a different way. By breaking down all of reality into a number of discrete monads (*jīvas*), it strips an individual of all distinguishable elements. An individual remains one of many but with no distinct characteristic other than its numeric distinctiveness it lacks the real individuality.²⁸ Fatalism of the Ājīvaka ascetics undermines individuality by denying its foundational characteristic, namely freedom. Finally, annihilationism of materialists negates the individuality by equating it with passing material elements. The individual identity established in the phenomenal and transitory world was discarded by positing an absolute reality beneath that: in one

underlying substance, in the plurality of undistinguishable monads, or in nothingness. The Buddha will reject “the beneath” as purely speculative. He will shun the resignation to blind fate or collapse into nothingness. He will choose instead the middle path: an original solution to the problems troubling the Indian mind.

THE ORIGINALITY OF THE BUDDHA’S PHILOSOPHY

Dasgupta concludes his analysis of pre-Buddhist Indian philosophy with a penetrating remark. According to him, philosophy had found itself in a deadlock. The Buddha was to lead reason out of it. Dasgupta states:

There were thus three currents of thought: firstly the sacrificial Karma by the force of the magical rites of which any person could attain anything he desired; secondly the Upanisad teaching that the Brahman, the self, is the ultimate reality and being, and all else but name and form which pass away but do not abide. That which permanently abides without change is the real and true, and this is self. Thirdly the nihilistic conceptions that there is no law, no abiding reality, that everything comes into being by a fortuitous concurrence of circumstances or by some unknown fate. In each of these schools philosophy had probably come to a deadlock. [...] If the Being of the Upanisads, the superlatively motionless, was the only real, how could it offer scope for further new speculations, as it had already discarded all other matters of interest? If everything was due to a reasonless fortuitous concurrence of circumstances, reason could not proceed further in the direction to create any philosophy of the unreason. The magical force of the hocus-pocus of sorcery or sacrifice had but little that was inviting for philosophy to proceed on.²⁹

The three entrenched positions can be said to either give up on reason (magic), or severely limit it (materialists), or overstretch its powers (Upaniṣadic thinkers). To unpack this statement let us use an analogy. At the time of Kant the reason was similarly either severely limited by empiricists or overstretch by dogmatists. The dogmatists overstretched the power of reason by proposing metaphysical assumptions without any support in experience. Empiricists drastically limited the power of reason by reducing all that can be known to the flux of sensual impressions experienced on the level of senses. To impose any rule on that flux, even the rule of causality, was for them usurpation on the part of the reason. Kant was an ingenious strategist who maneuvering between the entrenched positions of dogmatists and empiricists managed to unify them proving first that they both were incomplete.³⁰ He upheld the empiricist’s axiom that knowledge has to be derived from experience, but he also gave it an authority to pronounce necessary and universal rules in relation to that experience, which was what Newtonian physics had so successfully accomplished at that time.

The analogy here consists in overcoming an initial dilemma between those who limit and those who overstretch the power of reason. The Buddha’s solution, however, is ultimately different from Kant’s.³¹ The Buddha accepts the materialists’ claim that knowledge must be derived from experience and thus

rejects the empty speculations of the Upaniṣadic thinkers.³² At the same time, however, he does not limit that experience to the senses only.³³ As we shall see, the Buddha extends the realm of experience to the mind's experience of its own workings. Furthermore, that experience will be understood and expressed in the doctrine of dependent origination. One has to experience and understand it for oneself.³⁴ Let us take an in-depth look at the historical event during which the Buddha experienced and knew for himself the middle way, which led reason out of a deadlock.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT AS EMPIRICAL VALIDATION AND MYSTICAL GROUND OF REASON

At Bārāṇasī in Deer Park at Isipatana, during the first sermon following his enlightenment, the Buddha gave the following description of his spiritual breakthrough: "The Tathāgata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, and leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana."³⁵ (SN 56:11) At the conclusion of that very sermon, Koṇḍañña, one of the five ascetics forming the Buddha's original audience, entered the first stage of enlightenment becoming a stream-enterer. The Buddha exclaimed: "Koṇḍañña has indeed understood! Koṇḍañña has indeed understood!"³⁶ (SN 56:11) Both of these quotations confirm that the attainment of Nibbana involved a simultaneous attainment of a certain type of knowledge: something was understood; an insight was reached. But what exactly is known and on the basis of what cognitional process?³⁷

THE COGNITIONAL CONTENT OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Having attained Nibbana the Buddha ponders whether he should teach what he just discovered or not. Considering the current state of affairs he states: "This population delights in attachment, takes delight in attachment, rejoices in attachment. It is hard for such a population to see this truth, namely, specific conditionality, Dependent Origination. And it is hard to see this truth, namely, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbana."³⁸ (MN 26) These are the words spoken by the Buddha immediately after his enlightenment. As Bhikkhu Bohdhi accurately observes, since these reflections follow the Buddha's enlightenment, they are indicative of the content of that enlightenment.³⁹ Therefore, since the Buddha mentions dependent origination and Nibbana, we are justified in assuming that enlightenment involved the comprehension of the cycle of suffering in the form of dependent origination, and secondly, the understanding of Nibbana as the final cessation and liberation from the phenomena involved in the dependent origination of suffering. This, in brief, is what is known in enlightenment.

Other suttas provide more details as to what exactly occurred at the time of awakening. The *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (MN 36) speaks of various types of knowledge Gautama successively realized the night of his awakening. The so-called third knowledge is said to have obtained in his enlightenment. This third knowledge comes about when the Buddha directs his mind “to knowledge of the destruction of taints.”⁴⁰ He says:

I directly knew as it actually is: ‘This is suffering. This is the origin of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.’ I directly knew as it actually is: ‘These are the taints. This is the origin of the taints. This is the cessation of the taints. This is the way leading to the cessation of the taints.’ When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of existence, and from the taint of ignorance. When it was liberated, there came the knowledge: ‘It is liberated.’ I directly knew: ‘Birth is destroyed, the spiritual life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming back to any state of being.’ This was the third true knowledge attained by me in the last watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who dwells diligent, ardent, and resolute.⁴¹

In the third knowledge, the Buddha understood the cause and the cessation of suffering. Another account that refers to that understanding can be found in SN 12:65. There the Buddha states: “Then, monks, it occurred to me: ‘When what exists does aging-and-death come to be? By what is aging-and-death conditioned?’ Then, monks, through careful attention, there took place in me a breakthrough by wisdom: ‘When there is birth, aging-and-death comes to be; aging-and-death has birth as its condition.’”⁴² By continuing such an investigation of the conditions of particular phenomena the Buddha arrives at the formulation of his core philosophical doctrine, that of dependent origination.⁴³ To understand this doctrine is to understand that, on the one hand, there is no permanent entity beneath the flux of phenomena, (no real object of desire and consequently no cause for suffering), and on the other, that the dependently co-arising reality is the reality: it does not collapse into nothingness.⁴⁴ Dependent origination becomes the middle way between eternalism and annihilationism.⁴⁵

To summarize, cognition pertaining to enlightenment is the cognition of the origin and cessation of suffering (expressed either in the form of Four Noble Truths, as in MN 36, or in the form of the dependent origination, as in SN 12:65). The reason accepts the middle way between eternalism and annihilationism as an experientially verifiable assertion about the nature of reality. There remains, nevertheless, the question of *how*: how the knowledge of dependent origination (philosophical middle way) constitutes the content of enlightenment, or to put it differently, in virtue of what cognitional processes it is known to be the content of enlightenment. It is then a question of the mode of knowing that obtains in enlightenment.

THE MODE OF KNOWING IN ENLIGHTENMENT

To find out how the Buddha knows what he knows in his awakening, a preliminary question must be asked, namely: how did he arrive at that knowledge? In other words, to discuss the mode of knowing operative in Nibbana we have to investigate the way in which this mode obtained in the first place. We have to examine the steps on the path immediately preceding the attainment of Nibbana. To that end, we return now to the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta*'s account of these very events (MN 36).

The story begins when Gautama disenchanted with the radical mortification decides to take some solid food and thus strengthened enters the successive stages of concentration. At the level of meditative stillness and concentration known as the fourth *jhāna*, Gautama gains the "knowledge of the recollection of past lives"⁴⁶ He calls it the first true knowledge. The second true knowledge attained with the progression of the Buddha's meditation is the "knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings."⁴⁷ Here the Buddha gains a clear perception of how the rule of karma governs the transmigration of all the beings that inhabit the entire cosmos. The first and the second knowledge are a clear demonstration of the suffering inherent in the endless cycling of death and rebirth. They are also a demonstration of the Buddha's comprehension of the moral rule, the principle of karma, which governs the entire mundane reality. With the attainment of the third knowledge, which we have already discussed in the preceding section, the Buddha will comprehend how to be released from that mundane reality.

There is an interesting difference in the way the third knowledge or third cognition is formulated. As one commentator observes: "Unlike the autobiographical narrative form of the first cognition, which deals in terms of 'self' and 'others,' or the cosmological form of the second cognition, dealing in terms of 'living beings' and 'cosmos,' the transcendent right view of the third cognition deals in categories devoid of those concepts, simply in terms of direct experience of the present."⁴⁸ In other words, there is a direction discernible in the Buddha's progression of knowledge. His mind moves toward an analysis of itself: from the endless cycle of suffering to the law of karma, which governs it; from the law of karma to intention, which determines it; from intention to mind, which produces it. To analyze intention is to move away from autobiographical and cosmological mode of knowing proper to the first and second knowledge and to shift into the phenomenological mode of knowing proper to the realm of the mind: the mode of direct experience of the present. A word is due on the specificity of the mind's knowledge of itself.

Our typical experience of so-called outer world is always mediated by the senses and thus implicated in the imperfections of our sense organs. Within the realm of mind our experience is not anymore mediated by the senses; rather, it becomes the mind's direct experience of itself. But the mind not only can experience itself; it can also understand and affirm that experience: it can know it to be so and so. The realization of Nibbana seems to hinge on the transformation

in the way mind understands and affirms the experience it has of its own workings. In Nibbana the mind experiences, understands and finally affirms its own workings in a new way. The suttas tell us what exactly is new about that transformed way.

In *Mahāmālunkya Sutta*, the Buddha describes the path to liberation in following way: “Whatever exists therein of feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness, he sees those states as impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumor, as a bar, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien, as disintegrating, as void, as nonself. He turns his mind away from those states and directs it towards the deathless element thus: ‘This is the peaceful, this is the sublime, that is, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbana.’”⁴⁹ (MN 64) The Buddha speaks here of a very peculiar transformation. The unenlightened knowing, which typically involves activities of “feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness,” is transformed now into the object of knowledge. All these activities, which in the case of unenlightened subject constitute the self and the process of knowing performed by that self, are put, to use a spatial image, at a distance⁵⁰: they become an object of another, that is, enlightened kind of knowledge; they are now known to be impermanent, alien, void, and nonself. *What* is known is impermanence of minds’ workings; *how* it is known is in a direct, peaceful and dispassionate way. When the *how* of knowing becomes the *what* of knowing, that is, when the mind focuses on its new peaceful, sublime and dispassionate mode of knowing, it knows itself to be in Nibbana. There must obtain an absolute certainty in this knowledge as it is the mind’s direct knowing of its own knowing. The Buddha says: “When it was liberated, there came the knowledge: ‘It is liberated.’ I directly knew: ‘Birth is destroyed ...’”⁵¹ (MN 36) As can be expected, the distancing from “feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness” achieved in this state ultimately dismantles the chain of dependent origination. The two elements of the content of enlightenment come together: the chain of dependent origination and Nibbana as its dissolution.⁵²

The Buddha’s success in moving reason out of a deadlock comes down to two ingenious moves: execution of the scientific method,⁵³ and application of that method to itself, that is, to the mind’s own operations. By following the scientific method of attentiveness to data, formulation of hypothesis, and verification of it, the Buddha is able to state that the hypothesis of a permanent substance underneath the flux of phenomena cannot be experientially verified: eternalism is proved to be merely putative. Similarly, from the Buddha’s standpoint, annihilationists fail to attend to the entire range of data: by postulating the flux to be merely sensual and materialistic they truncate the experience and end up formulating an ultimately false hypothesis of nihilism.

By attentiveness to the entire range of data, that is, to the mind’s proper operations, the Buddha ultimately applies the scientific method to itself, that is, to the mind which experiences, formulates hypothesis, and verifies it, only to encounter a new set of data, a better hypothesis and a new need for verification.

The doctrine of dependent origination speaks exactly to that: the mind and the reality it comes to know are in constant flux.

The attentiveness of which we speak here is of the highest sort. Heightened by moral purification and meditational practices it operates on the level, which many commentators qualify as mystical. If C. A. Keller describes mystical writings as the texts “which discuss the path towards realization of the ultimate knowledge which each particular religion has to offer and which contains the statements about the nature of such knowledge”⁵⁴ and if F. J. Streng defines the meaning of mysticism as an “interior illumination of reality that results in ultimate freedom”⁵⁵ then the Buddha’s enlightenment falls within the realm of both of these definitions. Werner states directly: “If we agree that the goal of mysticism is the final and ultimate truth achieved by direct experience, then nirvana of Buddhism falls within that heading.”⁵⁶

To call this level of cognition mystical is not to dismiss it as irrational.⁵⁷ It is rather to point to the fact that it is beyond the ordinary mode of perception. It nevertheless, as we have shown, possesses a cognitional content, which can be described and discursively analyzed, though never exhausted by such analytical description. The multiplicity of the schools of Buddhism attests to the concomitant difficulty in describing what has been experienced and understood at the mystical mode of perception; it speaks to the possibility of multiple interpretations. In a sense, our presentation here constitutes yet another attempt at presenting in a discursive manner what ultimately transcends the discursive mode of knowing.⁵⁸

In conclusion, the Buddha is a highly original philosopher whose faithfulness to the method of experiential verification marked the way out of the entrenched Indian intellectual positions. The reason, as employed by the Buddha, finds its ground and final justification in the experience formed not just by rational but also by moral and meditational training of extreme intensity. In the past two decades, within the Western theory of knowledge there has emerged a branch called “virtue epistemology:”⁵⁹ a reflection on the fact that correct knowing is grounded not just in coherence of beliefs but also in the quality of the agent of knowing. From the Buddha’s standpoint, the virtue epistemology is a step in the right direction, in that it recognizes the fundamental unity of metaphysical and existential quest upheld by the Indian tradition and masterfully realized in the Buddha’s use of reason.

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Notes

¹ That rationality has its various forms and thus its own history has become increasingly clear with the twentieth century investigation into the nature of science. If science, the paradigm of rationality in the West, undergoes its revolutions, then the standards of reasonableness do vary with different scientific theories. As Richard H. Jones puts it, “rationality [...] comes to involve not merely coherence of beliefs or holding one’s beliefs open to criticism, but what is ‘plausible’ in light of underlying beliefs and values; metaphysical issues related to the nature of reality become intertwined with the standards of rationality. What is accepted as a ‘rational,’ ‘natural,’ or ‘logical’ explanation becomes tied to the cultural beliefs of a particular historical period about the nature of the world.” Richard H. Jones, *Mysticism Examined: Philosophical Inquiries into Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 68. For more information on the various styles of reasoning employed by the mystics, see his chapter 3, “Rationality and Mysticism,” 59-78.

² Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, 5 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

³ K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: George Allen and

Unwin, 1963).

⁴ Richard H. Robinson, Willard L. Johnson, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff), eds., *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction*, 5th ed. (Australia: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), 2.

⁵ Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1, 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹ A. K. Warder, *Outline of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971), 6.

¹⁰ Our selection follows Peter Harvey's succinct treatment of the subject in *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 11-15.

¹¹ We have to specify here that the Upaniṣadic *ātman* as eternal was not subject to rebirth; it was rather the *jīva* aspect of an individual, which would undergo death and new birth.

¹² Karel Werner, "Mysticism and Indian Spirituality," in *The Yogi and the Mystic: Studies in Indian and Comparative Mysticism*, ed. Karel Werner (London: Curzon Press 1989; reprint, London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 20-32. (page citations are to the reprint edition).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁴ Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 170.

¹⁵ David J. Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1976), 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁷ On the significance of silent spiritual masters in India, see: Alex Wayman, "Two Traditions in India – Truth and Silence," *Philosophy East and West* Vol. 24, No. 4 (Oct., 1974): 398-403.

¹⁸ Werner, "Mysticism and Indian Spirituality," 25.

¹⁹ Karel Werner, "The Longhaired Sage of Rg Veda 10, 136: A Shaman, A Mystic or A Yogi?" in *The Yogi and the Mystic*, 33-53.

²⁰ Phaedo (64), in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 55.

²¹ *Ibid.*, (82b-c), 72.

²² *Ibid.*, (82c), 72.

²³ Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Massachusetts/London England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, paperback edition 2004), 179-180.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 180.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁶ See especially the chapter "Axial Existence" in: John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Structure of Christian Existence* (New York: The Westminster Press, 1967; The Seabury Press, 1979), 52-59.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

²⁸ Cobb takes the Upaniṣadic and Jainist positions to be representative of two fundamental metaphysical assumptions, which he names monism and pluralism respectively. In our treatment of the Indian schools of thought, we go beyond Cobb in positioning Buddhism not just between monism and pluralism but also in its relation to nihilism and fatalism. See *The Structure of Christian Existence*, 62.

²⁹ Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1, 80-81.

³⁰ Lewis White Beck, "Kant's Strategy," in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol.28, No.2 (Apr. – Jun., 1967): 224-236.

³¹ As Michel Bitbol demonstrates, it is not Kant's but rather neo-Kantian philosophy,

which correlates with Buddhist claims about reality. See: Michel Bitbol, “A Cure for Metaphysical Illusions: Kant, Quantum Mechanics, and the Madhyamaka,” in *Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground*, ed. B. Alan Wallace (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 330-333.

³² In *Sangārava Sutta* (MN 100), the Buddha speaks of three approaches to knowledge discernible among his contemporaries: knowledge based on hearsay (Traditionalists); knowledge based on logic and discrimination (Reasoners and Metaphysicians); and knowledge based on experience (Experientialists). He rejects the first two and identifies himself with the latter.

³³ Jayatilleke concludes his lengthy study of the early Buddhist theory of knowledge by saying that Buddhism was a form of Empiricism. He immediately qualifies that categorization by saying that for the Buddha experience is not limited to a sensory perception. See *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 463.

³⁴ The Buddha says to Kālāmas: “Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of texts, by logic, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cogitation, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think, ‘The ascetic is our Teacher.’ But when you know for yourselves, ‘These things are unwholesome; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practiced, lead to harm and suffering,’ then you should abandon them.” (AN 3:65) All page references to Pali texts are to the page numbers of the Pali Text Society’s editions. All translations of Pali texts are taken from: Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed., *In the Buddha’s Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005). The translation referenced in this footnote comes from the page 89.

³⁵ Bodhi, *In the Buddha’s Words*, 75.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁷ Since Buddhism speaks of two kinds of Nibbana, one achieved in life (during enlightenment) and one achieved after death (final Nibbana), we have to specify that our questioning here is limited to the cognitional content of the Nibbana as achieved in life. As to the sharp distinction between the two, see the section “The distinction between enlightenment and final nirvana” in Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 147-151. Collins points to the apophatic character of final Nibbana on pp. 161-163.

By analyzing the cognitional aspect of enlightenment, we treat Nibbana less as a radically transcendent metaphysical state and more as a type of consciousness. In this way we align ourselves with the approach of Peter Harvey in his “Consciousness Mysticism in the Discourses of the Buddha,” in *The Yogi and the Mystic: Studies in Indian and Comparative Mysticism*, ed. Karel Werner (London: Routledge Curzon, 1994), 82-102.

³⁸ Bodhi, *In the Buddha’s Words*, 70.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 430.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴³ In its most typical rendition, dependent origination is expressed as a chain of causal relations between the following twelve mental and physical phenomena: “with *ignorance* as condition, *volitional activities* come to be; with *volitional activities* as condition, *consciousness* comes to be; with *consciousness* as condition, *name-and-form* comes to be; with *name-and-form* as condition the *six sense bases* comes to be; with *six sense bases* as condition, *contact* comes to be; with *contact* as condition, *feeling* comes to be; with *feeling* as condition, *craving* comes to be; with *craving* as condition, *grasping* comes to be; with *grasping* as condition, *being* comes to be; with *being* as condition, *birth* comes to be;

with *birth* as condition, *aging-and-death*, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair come to be. This is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.” [Udāna 1.1 *Pañhamabodhisuttam*, my own translation].

⁴⁴ Dependent origination is not to be understood in an atomistic sense: it is not meant to convey that reality ultimately consists of twelve elements. Rather, it is to mean, that whatever the constituent parts of reality are, they always remain mutually dependent. None of them can be said to exist in and of itself. They are all elements within a network of causal relations.

⁴⁵ Seen as a doctrine of causation, dependent origination is also the middle way between unconditional necessity and unconditional arbitrariness. For the Buddha, there obtains a certain regularity in the emergence of the phenomena: a certain set of conditions gives rise to a certain set of results and not to something completely different. This emergence is neither fully deterministic nor completely accidental. As David J. Kalupahana points out, the Buddha’s position was highly original at the time when the two dominant theories were the determinism of Makkhali Gosāla (the leader of the Ājīvaka sect) and indeterminism (*adhiccasamuppāda*). See Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy*, 28.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴⁸ Robinson, *Buddhist Religions*, 15.

⁴⁹ Bodhi, *In the Buddha’s Words*, 398.

⁵⁰ Rune E. A. Johansson describes it as a shift from surface to background consciousness. He states: “There are simply, according to the early Buddhist analysis, two layers of consciousness: what we called the momentary surface processes, and the background consciousness. The latter is an habitual state, developed through knowledge, through meditation, through the cessation of all the emotions and desires. This constant background is always there and can always be reverted to. It may be described as an *inner refuge*, and some of the metaphorical expression common about nibbana seem to describe it well.” Rune E. A. Johansson, *The Psychology of Nirvana* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1970), 106.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵² From the position argued for in this essay, a claim can be made that the knowledge of samsara coincides with the knowledge of Nibbana: samsara is completely known to be samsara only from the perspective afforded by the background consciousness of Nibbana. Our description of the cognitional aspect of Nibbana, then, allows us to consider Nāgārjuna’s identification of Nibbana and samsara more as an organic development of the doctrine of the Pali sources than a radical departure from early Buddhist thought. Abraham Vélez de Cea has recently contended precisely that. He argues that Nāgārjuna’s identification of Nibbana and samsara is not a revolutionary innovation but an orthodox move entailed by the teachings of early Buddhism. Abraham Vélez de Cea, “Emptiness in the Pali Suttas and the Question of Nagarjuna’s Orthodoxy,” *Philosophy East and West* Vol. 55, Iss. 4 (Oct 2005): 507-530.

⁵³ I am not claiming that the Buddha is actually doing science here, but only that he is using the scientific method of attentiveness to data, formulation of hypothesis, and verification of it. Whether this method could be a basis for a distinct kind of science, so called “contemplative science,” depends on what criteria one uses to define what science is. The dogma of scientific materialism, which continues to hold firm among many scientists, considers to be scientific only the third-person observation of the brain and not the first-person observation of mental processes. On the status of scientific materialism in relation to scientific elements within Buddhism, see B. Alan Wallace, “Introduction: Buddhism and Science – Breaking Down the Barriers,” in *Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground*, ed. B. Alan Wallace (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003),

1-29. On contemplative science as specifically Buddhist counterpart to modern cognitive sciences, see Matthieu Ricard, "On the Relevance of a Contemplative Science," in *ibid.*, 263-279.

⁵⁴ Carl A. Keller, "Mystical Literature," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. S. T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 77.

⁵⁵ Frederick J. Streng, "Language and Mystical Awareness," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, 142.

⁵⁶ Werner, "Mysticism and Indian Spirituality," 26.

⁵⁷ A popular claim that mysticism is basically irrational has been refuted by Frits Staal in his *Exploring Mysticism: A Methodological Essay* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975). Staal concludes that "irrationalist interpretation of Buddhist doctrines by modern scholars is readily explained by the prevailing Western prejudice that religion and oriental philosophy are basically irrational. If we approach Buddhist thought on its own terms, there appears to be little justification, if any, to speak of 'Buddhist irrationalism.'" *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁸ Donald Swearer classifies the ultimate knowledge of the Pali Suttas as "a nonrational, intuitive or a synthetic type of knowledge." From the point of view of our argument in this essay, the "nonrational" needs to be qualified as "trans-rational" and not as "irrational". The ultimate knowledge transcends the ordinary mode of rational operations but it does not contradict it in a strong sense. Donald K. Swearer, "Two Types of Saving Knowledge in the Pāli Suttas," *Philosophy East and West* Vol. 22, No. 4 (Oct., 1972): 12.

⁵⁹ See, for example: Guy Axtell, ed., *Knowledge, Belief and Character: Readings in Virtue Epistemology* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).