



# BUDDHIST TEACHING IN INDIA

JOHANNES BRONKHORST

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# BUDDHIST TEACHING IN INDIA

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STUDIES IN INDIAN AND TIBETAN BUDDHISM

BUDDHIST TEACHING  
IN INDIA

Johannes Bronkhorst



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# Contents

Preface	ix
1. The Teaching of the Buddha	1
<i>Preliminary Remarks on Methodology</i>	1
<i>Main Teachings</i>	9
<i>Self and Liberating Knowledge</i>	19
<i>Asceticism and Meditation</i>	44
<i>Recapitulation</i>	56
2. Arranging the Doctrine	61
<i>The Origin of the Dharma Theory</i>	61
<i>Systematizing the Dharma Theory</i>	81
<i>Concluding Observations</i>	109
3. Mahāyāna	115
<i>Early Mahāyāna</i>	115
<i>Madhyamaka</i>	135
<i>Further Developments in Mahāyāna</i>	152
<i>The Logico-Epistemological School</i>	168

4. Final Observations	175
<i>Hermeneutics</i>	176
<i>Influences outside Buddhism</i>	179
<i>Landmarks</i>	188
Abbreviations	193
Bibliography	201
Index	235

## Preface

THE AIM OF THIS BOOK is to give an overview of Buddhist teaching in India. There is a basic distinction between Buddhist teaching and Buddhist philosophy. These two are not to be taken as identical, even though they are closely related. *Philosophy* is a Western term<sup>1</sup> that might be applied to some, but by no means all, Buddhist teachings. The Buddha himself was clearly averse to any kind of speculation, and he positively avoided “philosophically” important questions. One might conclude from this that the Buddha, and some later Buddhists as well, did not teach philosophy as such. But teach he did, and therefore there is definitely a Buddhist *teaching*.

This is not to deny that important “philosophical” developments took place in Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it appears that the rise of philosophy in India was largely due to Buddhism, and as we will see below, certain Buddhist teachings were definitely of great philosophical importance. Nonetheless, anyone undertaking a description of *Buddhist philosophy* will primarily be interested in “philosophically interesting” teachings and in this way will apply an outside criterion.

This is further complicated by the fact that from a certain point onward, various Buddhist schools tried to systematize their teachings. For the philosopher a systematized teaching is more interesting than a jumble of non-systematic teachings. The philosophically inclined

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1 Halbfaß 1981: 296–97; 1988: 263–64.

2 Or should we in this context speak of “theological” developments, as Olivelle (1993: 711) suggests with regard to the Brahmanical tradition?

scholar might therefore turn his attention to these Buddhist attempts at systematization and ignore many of the other teachings.

A description of the *teachings* of Buddhism, on the other hand, aims at using inner criteria: a particular teaching is not described because it is of philosophical interest to us or because it is thought out systematically, but because Buddhists themselves considered it important. The importance of a teaching in Buddhism is primarily related to how essential a role it plays in the process of liberation. This book therefore is not an overview of Buddhist philosophy but a presentation of what Buddhists have historically considered to be central to the path.<sup>3</sup>

Insight or wisdom (often called *prajñā*), for instance, is one teaching that has played a central role in Buddhism. The Buddhist gains this wisdom while progressing on the path to liberation, most often at its end. Attainment of this wisdom is crucial for the attainment of liberation. It is hardly surprising that the highest wisdom, the key to the highest goal of the Buddhist religion, is frequently described in the texts. For those Buddhists who believe that the highest insight cannot be expressed in words, this description of the highest wisdom is only approximate and not precise. This does not alter the fact that a part of Buddhist teaching is, or claims to be, a description of the wisdom that leads to the ultimate liberation.

However, that is not all there is to Buddhist teaching. Highest wisdom may produce liberation for those Buddhists who are far advanced on the path, but one first has to know how to get to this advanced stage. Buddhist teaching has much to say about that, too. The ideal behavior of devout Buddhists, primarily monks and nuns, is prescribed in the so-called *Vinaya-piṭaka*. Then there are the concepts and notions of buddhas and bodhisattvas, who personify the ideal and serve as models for devout Buddhists. Buddhist teaching in a narrower sense contains

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3 Steinkellner (1978: 122) states: "Simplifying greatly, but in a manner that is yet supported by tradition, one can say that this [immense quantity of dogmatic and practical teachings, an overview of which hardly exists at present] is nothing but the interpretation of the insight acquired by the Buddha and of the road that leads to it."

numerous instructions in spiritual practice. These are mainly found in the discourses (*sūtra*)<sup>4</sup> collected in the *Sūtra-piṭaka*, or “basket of discourses.” In other words, Buddhist teaching is not solely concerned with the insight that leads to liberation; there are many additional things one needs to know in order to follow the path to liberation.

Moreover, Buddhist teaching includes those beliefs whose relevance to liberation is not immediately clear. For example, the cosmological ideas of the Indian Buddhists, which found widespread acceptance, do not at first seem to have much to do with liberation and the Buddhist religion in a narrow sense, and indeed, many were not exclusive to Buddhists in India. In this arena, it is not always obvious which ideas are religious and which are not. At first glance, ideas about astronomy, cosmology, geography, and the like can appear to have little if anything to do with religion generally, or with Buddhism in particular. As we will see later, however, certain cosmological concepts are closely related to specific Buddhist meditative states. Consequently they, too, deserve at least some attention in a presentation of Buddhist teaching.

In chapter 1, after a discussion of methodology, this book begins with an attempt to discern the teachings of the historical Buddha by subjecting the earliest texts to critical analysis. It shows how his goal of liberation grew out of the śramaṇa ascetic movements of his day while yet modifying it in some important respects. In chapter 2, we see how developments after the Buddha’s death led to greater systematization of his teachings in the catalogs of the various Abhidharma texts and a projection back on to the Buddha’s teachings of the so-called *dharma theory* division of reality into atomic units of mind, matter, and time. In chapter 3, we see how the doctrine of emptiness of all dharmas came to be associated with the ethic of the bodhisattva ideal, how seemingly non-empty conceptions of buddha nature emerged simultaneously, and how the introduction of logico-epistemological approaches

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4 The suggestion that *sūtra* is a wrong Sanskrit rendering for Middle Indic *sutta*, which should have been rendered as *sūta* (“well-spoken”), does not convince. Cf. Hinüber 1994c: 132 and note 28.

allowed Buddhists to prove their positions and engage in debate among Buddhist schools and with non-Buddhists. Finally, in chapter 4, we review the hermeneutical landmarks of Buddhism's early development and show how it was not only a product of its environment but helped shaped the other religious cultures of its time and place.

Given the scope of the present book, it would be impossible to exhaustively describe all the Buddhist teachings that ever existed in India. The selection here has been guided by the intention to illuminate the links between certain key teachings, with the aim of helping the reader understand these selected teachings in their historical, cultural, and intellectual context.

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Johannes Bronkhorst

# 1. The Teaching of the Buddha

## *Preliminary Remarks on Methodology*

IN THE CHAPTER on teaching in his groundbreaking 1881 work *Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, His Order* (published first in German as *Buddha, sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde*), Hermann Oldenberg curiously speaks throughout about “the teachings of Buddhism” rather than “the teaching(s) of the Buddha.” Helmuth von Glasenapp later emphasized this detail in his concluding note to the thirteenth edition of this book, which came out in 1959. Glasenapp points out that this choice of phrase reveals Oldenberg’s view that we do not know anything for certain about what the Buddha actually taught. Indeed, the material available to us is only sufficient to establish what the earliest community may have understood Buddhist teaching to be.

Glasenapp, while generally agreeing with Oldenberg’s view, thinks there is reason to believe that the most important ideas of the tradition can be traced back to the Blessed One himself. Glasenapp finds these ideas expressed in the so-called *dharma theory*, which finds its classic expression many centuries after the Buddha in the *Abhidharmakośa* of Vasubandhu (ca. fifth century CE). The dharma theory, which is taken up in more detail in the next chapter, is the view, presented in many Buddhist texts, that a number of metaphysical features, or dharmas, comprise reality; more recent forms of Buddhism ascribed this theory to the Buddha himself.<sup>5</sup> Previous scholars, in their enthusiasm

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<sup>5</sup> As we will discuss in more detail in chapter 2, the word *dharma* has several

about the discovery of the dharma theory, had gone so far as to believe that the teachings of the *Abhidharmakośa* corresponded largely, even though not in every detail, to the oldest teaching. Glasenapp names Theodor Stcherbatsky and Otto Rosenberg as holding this view, and he himself had followed in their footsteps in his article “Zur Geschichte der buddhistischen Dharma-Theorie” (“On the History of the Buddhist Dharma Theory”) published in 1938. Here Glasenapp had come to the conclusion that the philosophical basis developed in the *Abhidharmakośa* constitutes the basis of the whole of Buddhism:

However much the Buddhist schools differ from each other in many details, in the general principles of their teaching they all agree with each other. The oldest layer that we can get to of Buddhist tradition already contained the essential ideas that found refined expression in the *Abhidharmakośa*. There is reason to assume that already the teaching of Gotama Buddha corresponded in its essence to that what we find in the great Buddhist philosophers of the classical period, even though the latter have adapted it to the way of thinking of their own time and have further elaborated it and worked it out in detail.

Glasenapp criticizes other scholars for assuming that Buddhism was not grounded in any kind of metaphysical concept. He finds this assumption unlikely in view of the fact that all other religious and philosophical systems in India accept a larger or smaller number of ultimate realities. He argues that if Buddhism wanted to compete with these other systems, it could not restrict itself to being a practical doctrine of liberation only; it, too, had to provide answers to numerous metaphysical questions.

This editorial note by Glasenapp prompted an almost immediate response by the American scholar Franklin Edgerton. In his article,

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different meanings, and within the Buddhist tradition, that meaning evolved over time. *Dharma* in this case does not refer to the Buddha's doctrine.

published in 1959, the same year as Glasenapp's concluding note, Edgerton points out that the same ancient texts that Glasenapp studied also contain passages stating that the Buddha explicitly refuses to engage in philosophical speculations. Probably the best-known passage of this kind is found in the *Cūlamālunkya Sutta* of the Majjhima Nikāya of the Pāli *Sutta-piṭaka*.<sup>6</sup> Oldenberg paraphrases this passage as follows:

The venerable Mālunkyāputta comes to the Master and expresses his astonishment that the Master's discourse leaves a series of the very most important and deepest questions unanswered. Is the world eternal or is it limited by the bounds of time? Is the world infinite or does it have an end? Is the living being identical with the body or different from it? Does the Perfect One (*tathāgata*) live on beyond death? Does the Perfect One not live on beyond death? It pleases me not, says the monk, that all this should remain unanswered, and I do not think it right; therefore I am come to the Master to interrogate him about these doubts. May it please the Buddha to answer them if he can. "When anyone does not understand a thing and does not know it, then a straightforward man says: I do not understand that, I do not know that."

The Buddha answers: "What have I said to thee before now, Mālunkyāputta? Have I said: Come, Mālunkyāputta, and be my disciple; I shall teach thee, whether the world is everlasting or not everlasting, whether the world is finite or infinite, whether the vital faculty is identical with the body or separate from it, whether the Perfect One lives on after death or does not live on, or whether the Perfect One lives on and at the same time does not live on after death, or whether he neither lives on nor does not live on?"

"That thou hast not said, sire."

"Or hast thou," the Buddha goes on, "said to me: I shall

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6 MN I.426–32; sutta no. 63.

be thy disciple, declare unto me, whether the world is everlasting or not everlasting, and so on?”

This also Māluṅkyāputta must answer in the negative.

A man, the Buddha proceeds, was struck by a poisoned arrow, and his friends and relatives called in a skillful physician. What if the wounded man said: “I shall not allow my wound to be treated until I know who the man is by whom I have been wounded, whether he is a noble, a brahman, a vaiśya, or a śūdra”; or what if he said: “I shall not allow my wound to be treated until I know what they call the man who has wounded me, and of what family he is, whether he is tall, or small, or of middle stature, and how the weapon with which he struck me was made.” What would the end of the case be? The man would die of his wound.

Why has the Buddha not taught his disciples whether the world is finite or infinite, whether the accomplished one lives on beyond death or not? Because the knowledge of these things does not conduce to progress in holiness, because it does not contribute to peace and enlightenment. What contributes to peace and enlightenment the Buddha has taught his own: the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering.

“Therefore, Māluṅkyāputta, whatsoever has not been revealed by me, let that remain unrevealed, and what has been revealed, let it be revealed.”<sup>7</sup>

There are other passages that indicate that the Buddha did not answer the questions whether the world is everlasting or not everlasting, whether the world is finite or infinite, whether the living being is identical with the body or separate from it, whether the Perfect One lives on after death or does not live on, or whether the Perfect One lives

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<sup>7</sup> Oldenberg 1971: 274–75. For the original German, see Oldenberg 1961: 256–57.

on and at the same time does not live on after death, or whether he neither lives on nor does not live on.<sup>8</sup>

What can we conclude from the coexistence of passages in which metaphysical speculations are rejected and passages in which a kind of dharma theory is proclaimed or assumed? In his reply to Edgerton's critique, Glasenapp (1960) points out that the fact that specific questions remained unanswered does not allow the general conclusion that all metaphysical problems were regarded as unsolvable, or that occupying oneself with them was regarded as fruitless. However, in the centuries following the Buddha's demise, the dharma theory gained ever more importance in the eyes of those who were responsible for the collection and preservation of his words. This may suffice to explain its supposed presence in the oldest texts. The existence of passages like the one from the *Cūḷamāluṅkiya Sutta*, on the other hand, passages that are *not* in agreement with such later priorities, should for this reason be given greatest importance. Even though we cannot exclude the possibility that the seeds of what later became the dharma theory may have been present in the teaching of the Buddha, we must abandon the idea that these approached anything resembling a full-blown metaphysical framework.<sup>9</sup> Besides, the evidence for the existence of the dharma theory in the ancient sūtras is far less conclusive than Glasenapp assumed.

The controversy between Edgerton and Glasenapp allows us to draw some important methodological conclusions. First, it shows that not every word attributed to the Buddha in the ancient discourses should necessarily be taken as having been pronounced by him. If we want to learn about the teaching of the Buddha, we cannot avoid examining the ancient discourses with a critical eye.

Second, the discussion suggests a possible method by which—in some cases at least—older parts of the teaching can be distinguished from later additions and developments. What is involved is a layering

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8 Cf. Oetke 1994: 85–120.

9 Frauwallner (1973a: 369 = 1953: 464) calls this an “untenable anachronism.”

of teachings rather than a layering of texts.<sup>10</sup> Two types of passage were mentioned in the controversy between Edgerton and Glasenapp: on the one hand, those in which all metaphysical speculations are rejected, and on the other hand, those in which the dharma theory is expressed or at least assumed. These two types of passages contradict each other, at least according to Edgerton. If he is right, then only one of the positions represented in those passages can be original. The Buddha did not reject metaphysical teachings while at the same time teaching a metaphysical doctrine himself. One has to choose: *either* the Buddha rejected metaphysical teachings *or* he taught a metaphysical doctrine himself. The same choice is required wherever we encounter contradictions in the ancient canon.<sup>11</sup> The choice is relatively easy where one is able to identify the origin of a contradictory teaching in a later development of Buddhism or in non-Buddhist currents of the time. In the case of the dharma theory, for example, the origin is easy to identify: as we will see below, dharmas—here meaning the building blocks of reality—become a major preoccupation of later Buddhism. Nevertheless, it is not possible to reduce this method to a mechanical process. As we have seen above, where Edgerton saw a contradiction, Glasenapp saw none. Besides, even in relatively clear cases, where this method can be employed without problems, one could question the result. Can one

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10 Schmithausen (1992: 110–12; 1990: 1–3) discusses three methods of distinguishing between what is earlier and what is later. He mentions “layering of texts” as one of them but not “layering of teachings.”

11 This approach is, of course, not the only possible one. Especially in the context of the actual practice one could argue that the Buddha might have accepted a certain practice while at the same time rejecting its excessive exercise. Gombrich (1994: 1080) uses this argument when he seeks to justify certain practices described in the ancient discourses. However, the ancient texts never actually say that only the excessive exercise of a particular practice is rejected, or that it is rejected *only on the grounds of its excessive exercise*. This kind of justification seems therefore unlikely, even though not logically impossible. The same applies to the approach of Vetter (1996: 56), who judges that it is “not impossible” that the Buddha employed certain practices which he had originally classified as useless in a different context. Vetter is more or less forced into this approach by his decision to give much weight to the words ascribed to the Buddha himself, particularly to his so-called first sermon.

really attribute the teaching arrived at in this manner to the historical Buddha? Perhaps the Buddha did not reject *all* metaphysical theories even if he did not teach the dharma theory.

One might criticize Glasenapp and other scholars for projecting later Buddhist teachings onto the historical Buddha. However, they did search for the teaching of the Buddha in the corpus of discourses attributed to him. Other authors try to show that very little of the original teaching of the Buddha has been preserved in the Buddhist canon. They claim that, in order to qualify as remains of what they call “pre-canonical Buddhism,” passages and teachings have to be in contradiction with generally recognized canonical positions.<sup>12</sup>

Some other scholars are of the opinion that the true nature of earliest Buddhism is not found in the ancient discourses at all but only in the inscriptions of Aśoka (third century BCE).<sup>13</sup>

Closely related to this is another opinion that states that it is outright impossible to know anything definite about the teaching content of the discourses before the fourth century CE.<sup>14</sup>

These scholars might be accused of throwing out the baby with the bath water, as they do not even take into consideration passages that are *not* contradicted by other passages. It is indeed in the non-contradicted passages where we should expect to find information about earliest Buddhist teaching.

We, cautiously, opt for the general principle that the teaching that the ancient discourses ascribe to the Buddha can indeed be ascribed

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12 This point of view was taken by Stanislaw Schayer in particular. Cf., e.g., Schayer 1935 and 1937; also Regamey 1957 with references to further literature. See also Schneider 1967. Vetter (1996: 50) argues in a similar vein when he claims that the only chance to find a historical line with the help of external criteria are passages that are enclosed in and utilized by differently oriented but relatively old surrounding material; if the way they are utilized in their particular context is unconvincing, then this might be an indication that these passages cannot have been original to that context.

13 For a discussion of these views and further references, see Schmithausen 1992: 130.

14 Cf. for example Schopen 1984: 9–22.

to him.<sup>15</sup> Only where there are reasons to doubt the authenticity of a certain teaching—because it contradicts other canonical statements, for example—should we deviate from this principle.

Following this method to the extent possible, we now turn to the actual teaching of the Buddha. Our point of departure, as indicated, is the assumption that positions that are found in the early discourses and are not contradicted in these texts can be attributed to him. However, in cases where teachings are presented in the form of lists, the possibility of later scholastic influence has to be taken into account, given the later scholastic tendency to present all the teachings it ascribed to the Buddha in lists. Where two or more contradictory opinions are ascribed to the Buddha, we have to examine two possibilities. One is that one of the contradicting opinions is also found in another religious movement current at the time. Another possibility is that one of the contradicting opinions belongs to a later phase in the development of Buddhism.<sup>16</sup> In both cases the opinion in question can be left out of consideration in our attempt to reconstruct the teaching of the Buddha. We have already drawn attention to the weak sides of the method and need not repeat them here.

A danger accompanying the study of early Buddhism is the attempt, frequent in scholarly research, to reduce Buddhist terms to concepts current in the West. The large number of publications dealing with the

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15 In this respect one has to agree with Richard Gombrich. Gombrich (1988: 20–21; cf. 1990: 6ff.) is unfortunately of the opinion that the ancient texts must first of all be interpreted according to the tradition (although Gombrich 1992 seems to voice a different opinion). Snellgrove (1987: 31), too, is of the opinion that “[a]ll one can fairly do is to accept the whole tradition as presented in any particular sect of Buddhism at its face value.” Fortunately scholarship does have the possibility to penetrate into earlier times, even if with difficulty and not always with completely certain results.

16 It needs to be emphasized that simply finding a position mirrored in another religious movement at the time of the Buddha does not in itself disqualify it from being an authentic teaching of the Buddha, as Gombrich (1994: 1072) seems to think. Such a teaching must also be contradicted in the Buddhist texts themselves.

Buddhist *nirvāṇa* illustrates this.<sup>17</sup> Such studies obscure the fact that much in the ancient canonical texts leaves little to be desired in terms of clarity. We will therefore let the texts speak for themselves wherever possible. Comparative studies of different versions of a passage, often preserved in both Pāli and Chinese, will, where they exist, be mentioned. In cases, however, where the differences between versions are of little or no relevance for our presentation, we will only quote a translation from the Pāli. While relying on existing English translations for many scriptural quotations, these have been modified so as to achieve greater consistency in terminology and style.

### *Main Teachings*

Let us now examine the details of the teaching of the Buddha. The first question to ask is: if the Buddha did not teach a metaphysical system, what then did he teach? The passage from the *Cūḷamāluṅkiya Sutta* quoted above gives the following answer. The Buddha preached what is conducive to the holy life and to peace and enlightenment: the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering. This is repeated frequently in different ways. Some examples: “Monks, both formerly and now what I teach is suffering and the cessation of suffering.”<sup>18</sup> “[...] for it is praise of the Tathāgata [the ‘Perfect One’] to say of him: ‘When he teaches the Dharma to anyone, it leads him when he practices it to the complete destruction of suffering.’”<sup>19</sup> The teaching of the buddhas, according to other passages, is suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to cessation.<sup>20</sup>

17 Cf. Welbon 1968.

18 MN I.140 (tr. Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi 1995: 234); SN IV.384; see also AN I.176.

19 MN I.69, 72 (tr. Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi 1995: 164); cf. DN II.80, etc.

20 DN I.110, 148, II.41; MN I.380, II.41, 145; AN IV.186, 213; Vin I.16, 18, 19, 181, 225, II.156; Ud 49. It has often been assumed that this fourfold categorization has been adopted from the field of medicine. See for example Frauwallner 1953: 184. However, it has been shown by Wezler (1984: 312–13) that there are no grounds for such an assumption.

The four truths referred to are known as the *four noble truths*. Perhaps their most beautiful exposition is found in the following story of the ancient canon:

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Kosambī [Skt. Kauśāmbī] in a *śimsapā* [Skt. *śimśapā*] grove. Then the Blessed One took up a few *śimsapā* leaves in his hand and addressed the monks thus: “What do you think, monks, which is more numerous: these few leaves that I have taken up in my hand or those in the grove overhead?”

“Venerable sir, the leaves that the Blessed One has taken up in his hand are few, but those in the grove overhead are numerous.”

“So, too, monks, the things I have directly known but have not taught you are numerous, while the things I have taught you are few. And why, monks, have I not taught those many things? Because they are without benefit, irrelevant to the fundamentals of the spiritual life, and do not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna [Skt. *nirvāṇa*]. Therefore I have not taught them.

“And what, monks, have I taught? I have taught: ‘This is suffering’; I have taught: ‘This is the origin of suffering’; I have taught: ‘This is the cessation of suffering’; I have taught: ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.’”<sup>21</sup>

The topic of liberation from suffering is never contradicted in the Buddhist texts.<sup>22</sup> We conclude from this that it constituted a main

21 SN V.437–38 (tr. Bodhi 2005: 360).

22 This fact is sometimes overlooked by scholars. Zafropulo (1993: 184–85), for example, in the concluding part of his otherwise remarkable book, restricts the goal of the Buddha’s teaching to liberation from rebirth. Vetter (1995: 222; 1996: 67) is of the opinion that the four noble truths should be regarded as related to the this-worldly aspect of the “*amata*-experience”; according to him there is only an otherworldly aspect in the four noble truths. However, the this-worldly

theme of the teaching of the Buddha. It is often presented as part of a list, the four noble truths. This may be due to the influence of later scholastics. But this later influence concerned the form, not the content: the Buddha taught a method to put an end to suffering.

The so-called first sermon of the Blessed One contains the following explanation of these four noble truths:

This, O monks, is the noble truth of *suffering*: birth is suffering, old age is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, to be united with the unloved is suffering, to be separated from the loved is suffering, not to obtain what one desires is suffering; in short the fivefold clinging (to the earthly) is suffering.

This, O monks, is the noble truth of the *origin of suffering*: it is the thirst (for being), which leads from birth to birth, together with lust and desire, which finds gratification here and there: the thirst for pleasures, the thirst for being, the thirst for nonexistence.

This, O monks, is the noble truth of the *cessation of suffering*: the cessation of this thirst by the complete annihilation of desire, letting it go, expelling it, separating oneself from it, giving it no room.

This, O monks, is the noble truth of the *path that leads to the cessation of suffering*: it is this noble eightfold path, to wit: right views, right resolution, right speech, right action, right living, right exertion, right mindfulness, right concentration.<sup>23</sup>

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aspect of the liberation from suffering (or from that from which one suffers, as Vetter puts it) seems undeniable. The achievement of *amata*, the “deathless,” might relate to a part of the liberation from suffering, perhaps the liberation from the fear of death. The four noble truths could in this way be looked upon as an encompassing framework.

23 This explanation is found in the Vinaya of the Theravādins (Vin I.10), of the Mahīśāsakas (TI 1421, vol. 22, 104b23–104c7), and of the Dharmaguptakas (TI 1428, vol. 22, 788a9–20); these passages have all been translated into French by Bareau (1963: 172–76). The translation from the Pāli presented here has been taken from Oldenberg 1971: 211–12.

This explanation still lacks clarity. The noble eightfold path, in particular, provides no details of the method taught by the Buddha. The canonical texts fortunately contain a more detailed description of the path to liberation, which is repeated at several places:

Here a Buddha (*tathāgata*) appears in the world, accomplished (*arhat*, Pa. *araham*), perfectly enlightened (*samyak-sambuddha*, Pa. *sammāsambuddha*), perfect in true knowledge and conduct, fortunate (*sugata*), knower of worlds, unsurpassed leader of persons to be tamed, teacher of gods and humans, venerable (*bhagavat*), blessed. Having realized with his own direct knowledge this world with its gods (*sadevaka*), Māra (*samāraka*), and Brahmā (*sabrahmaka*), this population with its ascetics and brahmins, with its gods and humans, he makes it known to others. He preaches the teaching that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end, with the right meaning and expression; he reveals a holy life (*brahmacarya*, Pa. *brahmacariya*) that is perfectly complete and purified.

A householder or householder's son or one born in some other clan hears that teaching. On hearing the teaching he acquires faith (*śraddhā*, Pa. *saddhā*) in the Buddha. Possessing that faith, he considers thus: "Household life is crowded and dusty; life gone forth (*pravrajyā*, Pa. *pabbajjā*) is wide open. It is not easy, while living in a home, to lead the holy life utterly perfect and pure as a polished shell. Suppose I shave off my hair and beard, put on the ochre robe, and go forth from the household life into homelessness." On a later occasion, abandoning a small or a large fortune, abandoning a small or a large circle of relatives, he shaves off his hair and beard, puts on the ochre robe, and goes forth from the household life into homelessness.

Having thus gone forth and possessing the monk's training and way of life, abandoning the destruction of life (*prāṇātipāta*, Pa. *pāṇātipāta*), he abstains from the

destruction of life; with rod and weapon laid aside, conscientious, merciful, he dwells compassionate to all living beings. Abandoning the taking of what has not been given (*adattādāna*, Pa. *adinnādāna*), he abstains from taking what has not been given; taking only what has been given, expecting only what has been given, by not stealing he abides in purity. Abandoning sexual relations (*abrahmacarya*, Pa. *abrahmacariya*), he observes celibacy, living apart, abstaining from the coarse practice of sexual intercourse.

Abandoning false speech (*mṛṣāvāda*, Pa. *musāvāda*), he abstains from false speech; he speaks truth, adheres to truth, is trustworthy and reliable, one who is no deceiver of the world. Abandoning malicious speech (*piṣunā vāk*, Pa. *piṣunā vācā*), he abstains from malicious speech; he does not repeat elsewhere what he has heard here in order to divide [those people] from these, nor does he repeat to these people what he has heard elsewhere in order to divide [these people] from those; thus he is one who reunites those who are divided, a promoter of friendships, who enjoys concord, rejoices in concord, delights in concord, a speaker of words that promote concord. Abandoning harsh speech (*parusā vāk*, Pa. *pharusā vācā*), he abstains from harsh speech; he speaks such words as are gentle, pleasing to the ear, and loveable, as go to the heart, are courteous, desired by many and agreeable to many. Abandoning idle chatter (*sambhinnapralāpa*, Pa. *samphappalāpa*), he abstains from idle chatter; he speaks at the right time, speaks what is fact, speaks on what is good, speaks on the teaching (*dharmā*, Pa. *dhamma*) and the discipline; at the right time he speaks such words as are worth recording, reasonable, moderate, and beneficial.

He abstains from injuring seeds and plants. He eats only one meal a day, abstaining from eating at night and outside the proper time. He abstains from dancing, singing, music, and unsuitable shows. He abstains from wearing garlands, smartening himself with scent, and embellishing himself

with unguents. He abstains from high and large couches. He abstains from accepting gold and silver. He abstains from accepting raw grain. He abstains from accepting raw meat. He abstains from accepting women and girls. He abstains from accepting men and women slaves. He abstains from accepting goats and sheep. He abstains from accepting fowl and pigs. He abstains from accepting elephants, cattle, horses, and mares. He abstains from accepting fields and land. He abstains from going on errands and running messages. He abstains from buying and selling. He abstains from false weights, false metals, and false measures. He abstains from cheating, deceiving, defrauding, and trickery. He abstains from wounding, murdering, binding, brigandage, plunder, and violence.

He becomes content with robes to protect his body and with almsfood to maintain his stomach, and wherever he goes, he sets out taking only these with him. Just as a bird, wherever it goes, flies with its wings as its only burden, so too the monk becomes content with robes to protect his body and with almsfood to maintain his stomach, and wherever he goes, he sets out taking only these with him. Possessing this aggregate of noble moral discipline (*śīlaskandha*, Pa. *śīlakkhandha*), he experiences within himself a bliss of blamelessness.

On seeing a form (*rūpa*) with the eye, he does not grasp at its signs and features. Since, if he left the eye faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of longing (*abhidhyā*, Pa. *abhiññā*) and dejection (*daurmanasya*, Pa. *domanassa*) might invade him, he practices the way of its restraint, he guards the eye faculty, he undertakes the restraint of the eye faculty. On hearing a sound (*śabda*) with the ear [...] On smelling an odor (*gandha*) with the nose [...] On tasting a flavor (*rasa*) with the tongue [...] On feeling a tactile object (*spraṣṭavya*) with the body [...] On cognizing a

mental property<sup>24</sup> (*dharmā*, Pa. *dhamma*) with the mind (*manas*), he does not grasp at its signs and features. Since, if he left the mind faculty unguarded, evil (*pāpaka*) unwholesome (*akuśala*, Pa. *akusala*) states of longing and dejection might invade him, he practices the way of its restraint, he guards the mind faculty, he undertakes the restraint of the mind faculty. Possessing this noble restraint of the faculties, he experiences within himself an unsullied bliss.

He becomes one who acts with clear awareness when going forward and returning; who acts with clear awareness when looking ahead and looking away; who acts with clear awareness when flexing and extending his limbs; who acts with clear awareness when wearing his robes and carrying his outer robe and bowl; who acts with clear awareness when eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting; who acts with clear awareness when defecating and urinating; who acts with clear awareness when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent.

Possessing this aggregate of noble moral discipline, and this noble restraint of the faculties, and possessing this noble mindfulness and clear awareness, he resorts to a secluded resting place: the forest, the root of a tree, a mountain, a ravine, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a jungle thicket, an open space, a heap of straw. On returning from his alms-round, after his meal he sits down, folding his legs crosswise, setting his body erect, and establishing mindfulness (*smṛti*, Pa. *sati*) before him.

Abandoning longing (*abhidhyā*, Pa. *abhiññhā*) for the world, he dwells with a mind (*cetas*) free from longing; he purifies his mind (*citta*) from longing. Abandoning ill will (*vyāpāda*) and hatred (*pradveṣa*, Pa. *paḍosa*), he dwells with a mind free from ill will, compassionate for the welfare

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24 On this translation, see Schmithausen 1976: 246n14. See further the discussion in chapter 2.

of all living beings; he purifies his mind from ill will and hatred. Abandoning dullness (*styāna*, Pa. *thīna*) and drowsiness (*middha*), he dwells free from dullness and drowsiness, having clear consciousness (*ālokaṣaṃjñin*), mindful and clearly comprehending; he purifies his mind from dullness and drowsiness. Abandoning restlessness (*auddhatya*, Pa. *uddhacca*) and remorse (*kaukr̥tya*, Pa. *kukkucca*), he dwells free from agitation with a mind inwardly peaceful; he purifies his mind from restlessness and remorse. Abandoning doubt (*vicikitsā*, Pa. *vicikicchā*), he dwells having gone beyond doubt, unperplexed (*akathamkathin*) about wholesome mental properties (*kuśāla dharma*); he purifies his mind from doubt.

Having thus abandoned these five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) and the secondary defilements (*upakleśa*, Pa. *upakkileśa*), secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome mental properties (*akuśāla dharma*), he enters and dwells in the first stage of meditation (*dhyaṇa*, Pa. *jhāna*), which is accompanied by deliberation (*vitarka*) and reflection (*vicāra*), with pleasure (*prīti*) and joy (*sukha*) born of seclusion (*vivekaja*). [...]

Again, with the subsiding of deliberation and reflection, a monk enters and dwells in the second stage of meditation, which has internal quiet (*adhyātmasamprasāda*, Pa. *ajjhataṃ sampasādanam*) and unification of mind (*cetaso ekodibhāvo*, Pa. *cetaso ekodibhāvo*) without deliberation and reflection, with pleasure and joy born of concentration (*samādhija*). [...]

Again, with the fading away as well of pleasure, he dwells equanimous (*upekṣaka*, Pa. *upekkhaka*) and, mindful (*smṛtimat*, Pa. *sata*) and fully aware (*samprajānat*, Pa. *sampajāna*), he experiences joy with the body; he enters and dwells in the third stage of meditation, of which the noble ones (*ārya*, Pa. *ariya*) declare: “He is equanimous, mindful, one who dwells joyfully.” [...]

Again, with the abandoning of joy (*sukha*) and suffering (*duḥkha*, Pa. *dukkha*), and with the previous passing away of joy (*saumanasya*, Pa. *somanassa*) and dejection (*daurmanasya*, Pa. *domanassa*), he enters and dwells in the fourth stage of meditation, which is neither suffering nor joyful and includes the purification of mindfulness by equanimity (*upekṣāsmṛtipariśuddhi*, Pa. *upekkhāsatiṭṭhārasuddhi*).<sup>25</sup>

This part of the description of the path to liberation may coincide, in its contents, with what was taught by the historical Buddha. Its precise *form*, on the other hand, may owe its origin to the influence of later scholasticism, especially there where lists are involved, such as with the five hindrances and the four stages of meditation.<sup>26</sup> The description of the third stage of meditation, moreover, cannot in this form go back to the historical Buddha himself, as it contains the phrase: “on account of which the noble ones declare.” The noble ones can only be Buddhists, as there is no evidence that the path of the four stages of meditation existed before the historical Buddha. Since, then, this description quotes earlier Buddhists, we have to assume that it was given its final form by later Buddhists. Contentwise, however, we may look upon it as, by and large, original.

The concluding part of the description, presented below, requires more caution. It describes the insights that are acquired at the moment

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25 Tr. Bodhi 2005: 246–48. Meisig (1987) has compared the longer versions (Chinese, Sanskrit, Pāli) of this explanation as found in the *Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra* and identified a number of later insertions in the different versions. However, his analysis does not affect what is presented here. Manné (1995) interprets this presentation of the path to liberation as a “case history.”

26 Zafropulo (1993: 74ff.) doubts whether the four stages of meditation constitute part of the oldest Buddhist tradition. However, apart from their outer form, the criteria outlined above give us no reason to assume that the four stages of meditation are not authentic. The passages cited by Zafropulo that do not mention them can be explained by developments that will be discussed below. Other passages speak of *dhyāna* in general without any mention of *four* stages of meditation. These only suggest, if anything, that the grouping into four stages did not exist at the beginning of the tradition; but even this is in no way conclusive.

of liberation. These insights are the most important items of knowledge there are in Buddhism. They were soon regarded as the essence of the Buddhist teaching. Not surprisingly, whatever came to be looked upon at any time as most important in the Buddhist teaching was subsequently claimed to have been discovered by the Buddha at the time of his liberation. We will return to this issue in a following chapter. Here we shall present the concluding part of the above description, leaving out portions that comparison of different versions has identified as later additions:<sup>27</sup>

When his mind is thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints (*āsravaṣṣayaññāna*, Pa. *āsavakkayaññāna*). He understands as it really 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.” He understands as it really 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 he knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the taint of desire (*kāmāsrava*, Pa. *kāmāsava*), from the taint of existence (*bhavāsrava*, Pa. *bhavāsava*), and from the taint of ignorance (*avidyāsrava*, Pa. *avijjāsava*).<sup>28</sup> When

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27 Cf. Bareau 1963: 81–82; Schmithausen 1981: 221–221n75; Vetter 1988: xxiv n. 8; Bronkhorst 1993: 119–21; Zafropulo 1993: 95–96. The passages left out deal with the knowledge of previous births and knowledge of the death and rebirth of beings. Gombrich (1994: 1085) does not believe these passages to be later additions because, if they were, there would not be “three knowledges” (*tisso vijjā*). He argues that the Buddha needed three knowledges to mock the Brahmans who also have three knowledges, namely the three Vedas. One could turn this argument around and use it to show why the final version of the text had to have three knowledges.

28 Zafropulo (1993: 101–2) gives reasons to think that the division into three or four types of taints is of a later date; see also below. Zafropulo further comes up with an original interpretation of the difference between the part concerning the four noble truths and the part concerning the taints (p. 125).

[the mind] is liberated there comes the knowledge: “I am liberated.”<sup>29</sup> He understands: “Birth is destroyed, the spiritual life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, so that I will not again return here.”<sup>30</sup>

This passage shows that liberation takes place during the practitioner’s lifetime and not at the moment of death. Other passages confirm this. The goal of the religious life is repeatedly described as attainable in this life and even as “not connected with death.”<sup>31</sup> However, as we will see later, not all texts agree on this point.<sup>32</sup>

Various features of the ancient texts can be explained by the fact that at the beginning of its development, Buddhism was subject to strong influence from other movements. For instance, the most problematic part of the passage just presented deals with liberating knowledge; it is around this topic in particular that ideas originally alien to Buddhism found their way in. We now turn to this topic.

### *Self and Liberating Knowledge*

The ancient texts tell us that the Buddha went to various teachers before his enlightenment as part of his search for the end of suffering—Ārāḍa Kālāma and Udraka Rāmaputra are mentioned by name. On each occasion he rejected their teachings after examination.<sup>33</sup> After his

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29 Translation adjusted according to Schmithausen’s latest interpretation of the phrase; see Zafropulo 1993: 152. Cf. also Schmithausen 1981: 219–20n69.

30 Tr. Bodhi 2005: 249. Translation of the last phrase in accordance with Hinüber 1968: 182.

31 Bronkhorst 1993: 96–97; 1984: 187–90.

32 Norman (1994: 212 and 214) claims that nirvāṇa is indeed attained only at the time of death and that a person who has been liberated during his lifetime “has attained *nibbāna* (temporarily) but has relinquished it for as long as his life remains.” However, in support of this he adduces mainly philosophical rather than philological arguments.

33 Zafropulo (1993: 22ff.) is probably right in pointing out that there is no reason to assume that Ārāḍa Kālāma and Udraka Rāmaputra were not historical figures. See also Gombrich 1994: 1074–75.

enlightenment he was—again according to the ancient discourses—frequently involved in discussions with people who held other opinions. This suggests that the Buddha shared certain opinions with other teachers of his time. It is also likely that he proclaimed new teachings that went beyond these shared opinions. We will first delineate the common background and then discuss some important differences that the Buddhist texts themselves emphasize. In the process we will discover that some non-Buddhist teachings exerted an influence on the development of Buddhist teaching.

The belief in rebirth features in the explanation of the four noble truths and in the path to liberation. It cannot be regarded as something new taught by the Buddha because there are good reasons to think that he accepted it as a point of departure for his quest. It is an important presupposition of his teaching. This is not surprising. We know that in India this belief was not restricted to Buddhism. We find it in various non-Buddhist movements such as Jainism and the old Upaniṣads of the Veda. It also seems certain that Jainism existed already before the time of the historical Buddha.<sup>34</sup> He may also have been familiar with the contents of some Upaniṣads or of parts of them.<sup>35</sup> Our method, too, gives us no reason to doubt that the founder of Buddhism held this belief.<sup>36</sup> It follows that the belief in rebirth existed when the Buddha started his career as a teacher. We may assume that for him rebirth was not only a certainty but also an important facet of the problem to which he believed he had found a solution.

The doctrine of rebirth as it is presupposed in the Buddhist texts,

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34 A predecessor of Mahāvīra by the name of Pārśva (Pāsa) supposedly lived and died 250 years before Mahāvīra, the Jaina teacher who was a contemporary of the Buddha; see Schubring 1935: 24–25. Simson (1991) points out that compared to other religious movements of the time, Buddhism originated relatively late.

35 See below.

36 Hirakawa (1990: 6) does not believe that rebirth constitutes an indispensable part of the Buddha's teaching. For Vetter (1996: 54) it seems likely that the Buddha first realized and taught the deathless (*amṛta*, Pa. *amata*) and only later discovered the doctrine of rebirth—or he was aware of the doctrine but started to engage with it only afterward. See also below.

however, is not identical with what we find, for example, in the Jain texts. Both religions share the idea that the actions of a person determine how he or she will be reborn, but they differ in the way these actions are understood. In Jainism actions are understood as concrete, or physical; in Buddhism intention (*cetanā*) also plays a role: “Monks, I say that intention is action. It is with a certain intention that one acts, whether with body, speech, or mind.”<sup>37</sup> This is understandable. The second noble truth says of thirst, i.e. desire, that it leads from birth to birth. Desire and intention are closely related. Actions, on the other hand, may result from intention—and therefore desire—but they do not have to.

This may explain the apparent difference between the four noble truths and the account quoted above of the path to liberation. In the four noble truths, thirst, i.e. desire, is regarded as the cause of rebirth. According to the path to liberation, however, beings are reborn each in accordance with his or her actions (*karman*). This difference confirms that karma is not conceived of as concrete or physical in these texts, because it is thirst that drives humans to act. Nevertheless, on the basis of these and similar passages some scholars raise the question whether karma played any role at all in the teaching of rebirth in early Buddhism.<sup>38</sup> We will not dwell on this question, however, because our criterion is contradiction between passages, and there is none in this case, so that we have no grounds to exclude the belief in karma.<sup>39</sup>

Another point shared by Buddhism and some of the other teachings of the time is the search for liberation from the cycle of rebirths. Once again it has to be said that in this respect, too, the Buddha’s teaching was not original. Nor do the Buddhist texts make any such claim. The

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37 AN III.415. See also McDermott 1984: 26ff.; 1980: 165–92. Bareau (1951: Index-Glossaire, p. 31 s.v. *cetanā*) translates the term *cetanā* as “*entendement*.” This meaning may be suited to the *Dhammasaṅgani* but not to the passage at hand. Cf. Kapani 1992: I.184n36; Abhidh-k(VP) p. 2n3.

38 See Schmithausen 1986: 205ff.

39 For the same reason we will not discuss the theory that originally karma could only lead to rebirth in a heaven or a hell; cf. Vetter 1988: 77ff. Schmithausen (1992: 137ff.) discusses these theories in the light of Aśoka’s inscriptions.

novelty in the teaching of the Buddha is not the search for liberation or the belief in rebirth but rather the specific method taught.

Not all of ancient India's religions were based on the two premises of rebirth and search for liberation. The ancient and traditional religion of the brahmins in particular, the Vedic religion, had very different conceptions and goals. Rebirth and liberation belonged to a different, non-Vedic culture, which has not left us much in terms of scriptures<sup>40</sup> but which exerted much influence at the time. The Upaniṣads, even though they are associated with the Veda, were influenced by these non-Vedic ideas: they contain an amalgam of Vedic thinking combined with the belief in rebirth and the search for liberation.<sup>41</sup> Buddhism clearly belongs to that non-Vedic culture, even though its teachings differ considerably at times from other currents that belong to it.

The fact that Buddhism accepted the teaching of rebirth as a given shows that it did not originate in a historic vacuum. The Buddha shared this belief with his contemporaries; the same is probably true of a number of other beliefs, some of which may remain unidentifiable. In order to understand the ways in which the Buddha's method for achieving liberation differed from what came before, an understanding of certain non-Buddhist teachings and methods is necessary. The same is true when it comes to understanding passages in the Buddhist canon that criticize non-Buddhist methods, sometimes in ways that are not immediately obvious.

To illustrate this, let us turn to a problem that has played a central role both in the later history of Buddhism and in modern scholarship. It concerns the question of a self in ancient Buddhism. Most later Buddhists in India simply denied the existence of a self, a position we will take up later on. Here we have to ask whether the ancient discourses actually deny the existence of a self. Among modern scholars studying

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<sup>40</sup> Mainly it is the canons of the Jainas and Buddhists that remain.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Bronkhorst 1993a. Hinüber (1994: 6–7) speaks of a second, non-Vedic tradition of literature in ancient India whose early history goes back to the time of Vedic literature and which finds expression in the ancient texts of Buddhism and Jainism.

the passages in question, some believe that ancient Buddhism did not deny a self,<sup>42</sup> others believe that it did.<sup>43</sup> Instead of examining the controversy, let us take a look at some of the passages concerned and try to interpret them in the light of what we know of the time of the Buddha. The most important of these passages is supposed to preserve the words that the Buddha addressed to his first five disciples shortly after his enlightenment:

And the Exalted One spake to the five monks thus:

“Material form (*rūpa*), O monks, is not the self (*anātman*, Pa. *anattā*).<sup>44</sup> If material form were the self, O monks, material form could not be subject to sickness, and a man should be able to say regarding his material form: my body shall be so and so; my body shall not be so and so. But inasmuch, O monks, as material form is not the self, therefore material form is subject to sickness, and a man cannot say as regards his material form: my body shall be so and so; my body shall not be so and so.

“The sensations (*vedanā*), O monks, are not the self [...]”—and then the very same exposition which has been given regarding material form is repeated with regard to the sensations. Then comes the detailed explanation regarding the remaining three aggregates (*skandha*, Pa. *khandha*), [namely] the ideations (*saṃjñā*, Pa. *saññā*), the conditioned factors (*saṃskāra*, Pa. *saṃkhāra*), [and] consciousness (*vijñāna*, Pa. *viññāna*). Then the Buddha goes on to say:

“What think ye then, O monks, is material form permanent or impermanent?”

42 E.g., Frauwallner 1973a: 176–77 (1953: 222–23); Schmithausen 1969: 157–70; Bhattacharya 1973; Pérez-Remón 1980; Oetke 1988: 59–242.

43 E.g., Collins 1982: 250–71; 1982a; Gombrich 1988: 21 and 63.

44 Oldenberg translates *anattā* “not the self,” Bareau “dépourvu de soi,” that is “without self.” We will discuss these two possible interpretations below. Here it must suffice to say that the context in this passage supports Oldenberg’s interpretation.

“Impermanent, sire.”

“But is that which is impermanent, sorrow or joy?”

“Sorrow, sire.”

“But if a man duly considers that which is impermanent, full of sorrow, subject to change, can he say: that is mine, that is I, that is myself?”

“Sire, he cannot.”

Then follows the same exposition in similar terms regarding sensations, ideations, conditioned factors, and consciousness: after which the discourse proceeds:

“Therefore, O monks, whatever in the way of material form (sensations, ideations, etc.) has ever been, will be, or is, either in us or in the outer world, whether strong or weak, low or high, far or near, it is not the self: this he must in truth perceive, who possesses real knowledge. Whosoever regards things in this light, O monks, being a wise and noble hearer of the word, turns away from material form, turns away from sensation and ideation, from conditioned factors and consciousness. When he turns away from them, he becomes free from desire; by the cessation of desire he obtains deliverance; when [the mind] is liberated there comes the knowledge: ‘I am liberated.’ He understands: ‘Birth is destroyed, the spiritual life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, so that I will not again return here.’”<sup>45</sup>

We cannot tell with certainty, on the basis of this passage, whether the existence of a self is denied or not. It is not explicitly denied; there is no statement to the effect that “the self does not exist.” All that is said

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45 This passage is found in the Vinaya of the Theravādins (Vin I, pp. 13–14), in the Vinaya of the Mahīśāsakas (TI 1421, vol. 22, 105a15–24), and in the Vinaya of the Dharmaguptakas (TI 1428, vol. 22, 789a12–789b1), and elsewhere, for example SN III.67–68; see also SN III.48–49, etc. (for further references see Oetke 1988: 88–89 and 105; Pérez-Remón 1980: 158ff.). The various Vinaya versions have been translated into French by Bareau (1963: 191–92). We here follow Oldenberg’s (1971: 213ff.) paraphrase.

is that the five aggregates that constitute the physical and mental basis of a human being are not the self. However, we can learn something else from this passage. Regardless of its existence or nonexistence, a specific *concept* of the self presents itself: the self that is being talked about is permanent, joyful, and not subject to change. Furthermore, it is clear from this passage that knowledge of the self is not the path to liberation. On the contrary, liberation is achieved by turning away from what might erroneously be regarded as the self.

Among non-Buddhists in ancient India, knowledge of the self was often recognized as the principal means to achieving liberation. In those non-Buddhist circles, this self was described in the same terms we also meet in this Buddhist passage: it is permanent, not subject to change, and often joyful. This cannot be a coincidence. Most of these individuals and currents, like Buddhists, held in common the goal of escape from the cycle of rebirth and the belief that rebirth is determined by actions (*karman*) performed in a previous life. Unlike their Buddhist counterparts, however, they concluded from this that one must either suppress all actions or discover that the core of the human (or even nonhuman) being, its true self, has no part in these actions and is, therefore, permanent and not subject to change.<sup>46</sup>

We will deal later with the adherents of ascetic movements who tried to suppress, fully or in part, their bodily and mental activities. Here we are interested in those currents in which knowledge of the true self was looked upon as the primary condition for liberation, for these will enable us to correctly evaluate the passage from the Buddhist canon quoted above. They find expression, in the early period, primarily in the Upaniṣads and in the great epic, the *Mahābhārata*. It is not impossible, though far from certain, that the Buddha was familiar with the contents of some Upaniṣads or of some of their parts, and perhaps with other Vedic texts.<sup>47</sup> In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (4.4.20),

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46 Bronkhorst 1993: 31–67.

47 See Norman 1981: 19–29; Gombrich 1988: 77; 1990: 14ff. On the familiarity of the Pāli canon with the Veda and Vedic sacrifices, see Falk 1988: 225–54 (with references).

for example, it is said: “The self is unborn, great, and permanent.” The *Maitrāyaṇī Upaniṣad* (2.7) and the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (1.9) emphasize the inactivity of the self. (We have already indicated that it is likely that the Upaniṣads borrowed these ideas from other, non-Vedic movements.) The joyful nature of the self, too, is mentioned in the old Brahmanical texts. What defines the self is joy and bliss (*ānanda*), we read in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (2.5). The same is said about Brahman in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (3.9.28), and the identification of Brahman with the self is well attested.

All this shows that the passage quoted above criticizes first and foremost an alternative method of liberation. The fact that in the Buddhist texts this view of the self is sometimes explicitly attributed to others confirms this. We read, for example, of ascetics and brahmins who regard that which is pleasant in the world as permanent, joyful, the self, free of illness, and at ease.<sup>48</sup> These ascetics and brahmins commit a mistake, it is added, because in this way thirst, i.e., desire, becomes stronger. Another passage is worth quoting for its humorous comparison. It is put in the mouth of the Buddha:

There are some ascetics and brahmins who declare and believe that after death the self is entirely happy and free from disease. I approached them and asked if this was indeed what they declared and believed, and they replied: “Yes.” Then I said: “Do you, friends, living in the world, know and see it as an entirely happy place?” and they replied: “No.” I said: “Have you ever experienced a single night or day, or half a night or day, that was entirely happy?” and they replied “No.” [...] It is just as if a man were to say: “I am going to seek out and love the most beautiful girl in the country.” They might say to him: “Well, as to this most beautiful girl in the country, do you know whether she belongs to the khattiya [Skt. *kṣatriya*], the brahmin, the merchant, or the artisan class?”

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<sup>48</sup> SN II.109; cf. MN I.135–36; III.64, etc.; see also Oetke 1988: 157; Norman 1981.

and he would say: “No.” Then they might say: “Well, do you know her name, her clan, whether she is tall or short or of medium height, whether she is dark or light-complexioned or sallow-skinned, or what village or town or city she comes from?” and he would say: “No.” And they might say: “Well then, you don’t know or see the one you seek for and desire?” and he would say: “No.” Does not the talk of that man turn out to be stupid?<sup>49</sup>

The aim of the teaching of the Buddha is evidently not to discover the real self. On the contrary, the preoccupation with the true nature of the self has to be given up. Only then one is ready to follow the path shown by the Buddha.<sup>50</sup> Seen from this practical point of view, the question as to the existence of the self is of minor importance. The main thing is that knowledge of the self plays no useful role on the Buddha’s path to liberation. In view of the fact that certain non-Buddhist currents asserted a permanent self not subject to change because only knowledge of such a self could be useful to the attainment of liberation, it is probably justified to assume that the Buddha did not accept the existence of such a self.<sup>51</sup>

Note that the passage quoted above is not only negative. Acquiring the insight that the various components of the person are not the self causes a wise and noble listener to turn away from material form, and so on; as a result he becomes free from desire and attains liberation. In this

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49 DN I.192–93; tr. Walshe 1995: 166. Cf. also Glasenapp 1983: 65–66.

50 Schmithausen (1973a: 178) was probably right in stating that the Buddha’s negative attitude with regard to the self was purely spiritual-practical. Vetter (1991: 187), too, rightly observes that the fact that the existence of the *ātman* is not recognized in the ancient texts is not merely an expression of denial but should be seen as a case of avoidance of the *ātman* in the description of aim and result of the path. However, his reasoning does not convince when he claims that the *ātman* was too much surrounded by myths, which were perceived as inappropriate or even as a hindrance.

51 Nevertheless, Oetke (1988: 153) is no doubt right in thinking that the thesis according to which the Buddha explicitly rejected or denied a self is unfounded.

way the criticism of other, non-Buddhist paths serves a positive purpose. The rejection of the liberating knowledge of others becomes itself a liberating knowledge. This will be discussed in more detail below.

In the passage on not-self above, it is stated that the five aggregates (*skandha*, Pa. *khandha*)—that is material form (*rūpa*), sensations (*vedanā*), ideations (*saṃjñā*, Pa. *saññā*), conditioned factors (*saṃskāra*, Pa. *saṃkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāna*, Pa. *viññāṇa*)—are not the self. The aggregates are, in our text, components of the person, which should not be confused with the concept of the self, and it seems natural to assume that the five aggregates are all there is to a person. This, at any rate, is how the later Buddhists understood it. The person (*pudgala*, Pa. *puggala*), seen this way, is a conglomerate of these aggregates.<sup>52</sup>

It is impossible to determine whether the aggregates, and the analysis of the person based on, or inspired by, them, was part of the original teaching of the Buddha. One could conceive of the path to liberation described so far without the assumption of the aggregates, but they are, as far as I am aware, never criticized in the ancient texts.<sup>53</sup> One thing however is certain, namely, that the list of aggregates became extremely important for the later development of the teaching, as will be shown below. The same is true of other lists in the ancient discourses. Take another look at the following passage from the description of the path to liberation quoted above: “On seeing a form with the eye, he does not grasp at its signs and features. [...] On hearing a sound with the ear [...] On smelling an odor with the nose [...] On tasting a flavor with the tongue [...] On feeling a tactile object with the body [...] On cognizing a mental property with the mind, he does not grasp at its signs and features.” This passage describes how the monk must behave with regard to the objects of his sense organs. It also contains a list of the sense organs and sense objects. These are the eye (*caḥṣus*) and form (*rūpa*), the ear (*śrotra*) and sound (*śabda*), the nose (*ghrāṇa*) and odor (*gandha*), the

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52 The distinction between the person and the self is taken up in more detail in chapter 2.

53 Oetke (1988: 121) considers it possible that the relationship between person and *skandhas* was not very clearly defined in earlier times.

tongue (*jihvā*) and flavor (*rasa*), the body (*kāya*) and tactile objects (*spraṣṭavya*), the mind (*manas*) and the mental property (*dharma*). All together these are six pairs, or twelve realms (*āyatana*), which is the designation by which they are known in the Buddhist texts and gain in importance. An extension of this list is the one of eighteen elements (*dhātu*). It contains not only the above six sense organs and six sense objects but also the six corresponding classes of consciousness: eye consciousness (*caḥsurvijñāna*), ear consciousness (*śrotravijñāna*), nose consciousness (*ghrānavijñāna*), tongue consciousness (*jihvāvijñāna*), body consciousness (*kāyavijñāna*), and mind consciousness (*manovijñāna*).

We are now ready to deal with the problem of liberating knowledge. We have seen that, during the formation of Buddhism, knowledge of the self constituted a path to liberation that competed with Buddhism. This path to liberation was close to Buddhism in that it, too, had liberation from the cycle of rebirths as its aim. The early Buddhists were familiar with this other path, and they were inevitably confronted with the question as to what constituted the liberating knowledge of the Buddhist path. This question was all the more important because there was one further important religious tradition at the time that, even though it did not accept liberation from rebirth as a goal, nevertheless gave great importance to insight. This was Vedic religion. In Vedic literature, especially in the so-called Brāhmaṇas, mention is often made of the power of knowledge, particularly in the context of the magical identifications common there.<sup>54</sup>

A few examples must suffice to illustrate this. We read, for example, in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (1.5.1): “The one who desires energy or Brahmanic illustriousness should [...] use the two *gāyatrī* stanzas. The *gāyatrī* is energy and Brahmanic illustriousness. Energetic and illustrious does he become who *knowing thus* uses the two *gāyatrī* stanzas.”<sup>55</sup> The *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (1.122) contains the following passage: “Rūra [...], desiring cattle, performed austerities. He saw this melody (*sāman*). He praised with it. He used this (word) *ilā* (as finale). *Ilā* means cat-

54 See Smith 1989.

55 Tr. Gonda 1975: 372; cf. Oldenberg 1919: 5–6.

tle. Then he obtained cattle. Therefore this melody procures cattle. *He who knows this* obtains cattle and becomes rich in cattle. And because Rūra [...] saw it, therefore also it is called Raurava.”<sup>56</sup> From the same Brāhmaṇa (JB 1.11) we learn the following: “When now he offers these two morning oblations, [the sun] lifts him up by means of these two. As an elephant rises together with him who is sitting on the elephant seat, so this deity rises together with him who offers *knowing thus*. It makes him go to its own world, of which there is none supreme. Whatever is beyond the sun, that is immortality. That he wins.”<sup>57</sup> And again: “*He who knows* the ‘divine’ chariot comes into possession of a chariot. The ‘divine’ chariot is sacrifice.”<sup>58</sup> In the next example, this one from the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (3.11.8.7–8), a connection between persons and things is “etymologically” established: “Prajāpati (the creator god) did not know how to give the sacrificial fee (*dakṣiṇā*). He put it in his right hand (*dakṣiṇah*). He took it, speaking the ritual formula (*mantra*): ‘For fitness (*dakṣa*) I take you, the sacrificial fee (*dakṣiṇā*).’ Therefore he became fit (*adakṣata*). The one who *knowing thus* receives the sacrificial fee (*dakṣiṇā*) becomes fit (*dakṣate*).”<sup>59</sup> There are numerous examples of this kind in Vedic literature. They demonstrate that the Vedic religion also attributed great value to knowledge.

What was the liberating knowledge of the Buddhists? There are indications that the Buddhists themselves were divided over this question. This is already true of the authors of the ancient discourses, which provide different answers. In the description of the path to liberation quoted above, we find the knowledge of the destruction of the taints (*āsrava*); in several versions the knowledge of past lives and the knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings are added. In the passage on not-self quoted above, it is rather the knowledge that the five aggregates (*skandha*) are not mine, not I, and not my self that leads to liberation. Elsewhere it is the thought that the five aggregates

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<sup>56</sup> Tr. Bodewitz 1990: 69.

<sup>57</sup> Tr. Bodewitz 1973: 42.

<sup>58</sup> JB 1.129; tr. Bodewitz 1990: 73–74. Cf. Gonda 1960: 178.

<sup>59</sup> Tr. Witzel 1979: 13. Cf. Gonda 1991: 177.

appear and disappear, or the insight that the aggregates are empty, void, and without substance, that leads to this goal.<sup>60</sup> In some texts, doctrinal points that have meanwhile gained in importance become part of the liberating knowledge. Examples are the doctrines of conditioned origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and of the selflessness of the person ([*pudgala-*]nairātmya),<sup>61</sup> which are discussed below.

If we examine more closely the knowledge of the destruction of the taints, a number of irregularities become apparent.<sup>62</sup> In the passage quoted above this knowledge was described as follows: “He understands as it really 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.’ He understands as it really 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 he knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the taint of desire (*kāmāsrava*, Pa. *kāmāsava*), from the taint of existence (*bhavāsrava*, Pa. *bhavāsava*), and from the taint of ignorance (*avidyāsrava*, Pa. *avijjāsava*.” This knowledge includes the four noble truths, which are presented here as the liberating knowledge. But these same four noble truths are also the content of the first sermon delivered by the Buddha after his enlightenment, if we can trust the tradition on this point.<sup>63</sup> This means, no doubt, that it was considered that these truths could motivate a listener to enter the path to liberation. They cannot therefore constitute the liberating knowledge that manifests itself at the end of this path.

There is something else. In several versions of the first sermon the

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60 Schmithausen 1981: 219–21.

61 Schmithausen 1981: 211–12. Several of these knowledges have in common that one reaches liberation only when one has stopped identifying with the changing components of the person. In this respect these insights are not very different from the cognition of the unchanging nature of the self, criticized by the Buddha.

62 Vetter (1996: 66–67) attempts to prove that the *āsravas* cannot have been part of what constituted the oldest layer of the canon (“kein Buddhawort”). Schmithausen (1992: 123–24) discusses the multifaceted meaning of the word *āsrava* in Buddhist as well as non-Buddhist literature.

63 Cf. Bareau 1963: 172–73; Féer 1870; Waldschmidt 1951.

Buddha explains to the group of five disciples how, at his enlightenment, he had fully realized the four noble truths which comprise three “turnings” (*parivarta*)—i.e., of the wheel of the doctrine—and twelve aspects (*ākāra*), four for each turning:<sup>64</sup>

**The first turning:**

1. this is suffering;
2. this is the origin of suffering;
3. this is the cessation of suffering;
4. this is the path leading to the cessation of suffering

**The second turning:**

5. suffering must be fully known;
6. its origin must be destroyed;
7. its destruction must be accomplished;
8. the path leading to its destruction must be traveled.

**The third turning:**

9. suffering has been fully known;
10. its origin has been destroyed;
11. its destruction has been accomplished;
12. the path leading to its destruction has been traveled.

These explanations are probably later additions.<sup>65</sup> But it is in this form that the texts portray knowledge of the four noble truths as liberating knowledge, for they continue: “O monks, as soon as the [pure] eye that sees the four noble truths with its three turnings and twelve aspects arose, along with the certainty, the knowledge, and the insight, I was liberated, relieved, released from this world with its gods, its *māras*, and its *brahmās*, from its human beings with their ascetics and

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64 CPS pp. 146–48. I here follow Lamotte (1977: 289), who also provides references to parallel versions.

65 See Féer 1870: 429–35; Schmithausen 1981: 203; Zafropulo (1993: 118), while denying the possibility that these explanations themselves, along with the four noble truths, might have constituted the content of liberating knowledge, understands these explanations as a not very successful description of part of the process that leads to liberation.

their brahmins. I established myself firmly in the state of mind that is free from confusions, and from that moment, O monks, I knew that I had attained the highest and perfect enlightenment.” These elaborations show that there were Buddhists for whom the unaugmented four noble truths could not be the liberating knowledge. What led the Buddha to his enlightenment was rather the knowledge of the first truth, the destruction (of the content) of the second truth, the realization of the third truth, and the practice of the fourth truth.<sup>66</sup>

It has already been observed that the interest of the early Buddhists in some form of liberating knowledge can easily be explained with reference to the religious milieu of the time. The vacillating attitude of the texts with regard to the exact content of this knowledge gives rise to the suspicion that the early Buddhist tradition had little or nothing to offer in this respect. That would not be surprising. In the above-quoted description of the path to liberation, a number of meditative, one might say mystical, states are depicted that precede the liberating knowledge; this knowledge is therefore attained in such a state. It is however known that mystical states cannot always be accurately described in words. Perhaps the oldest tradition did not talk about a liberating knowledge at all, or if it did, it talked about a knowledge without specifying its content. This latter suspicion is supported by the fact that in some versions of the first sermon—probably the older ones—the four noble truths or other forms of liberating knowledge are not mentioned at all. The Buddha is here portrayed as someone who teaches his disciples in private. Liberating knowledges, or any other knowledges for that matter, are not formulated.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Rospatt (1996: 84) points out that the certainty of one’s liberation from suffering cannot possibly precede the experience of liberation itself.

<sup>67</sup> See Bronkhorst 1993: 102–11; Zafropulo 1993: 161, 183. Zafropulo (1993: 120) suspects that in the oldest texts it is the term *ājñā/aññā* rather than *prajñā* that points at this ineffable liberating knowledge. Cf. also Vetter 1988: 30. Even if we accept that originally the liberating knowledge was not, or could not be, put in words, we cannot conclude from this that the Buddha did not have a teaching that could be expressed in words, as Gombrich (1994: 1072) believes. Cf. also Zafropulo 1993: 111–12.

In most versions of the first sermon the listeners are five monks. In the versions belonging to the *Vinaya-pitaka*, these five monks attain the goal of the teaching, namely, liberation from the taints, during the second sermon of the Buddha.<sup>68</sup> That is to say, like the Buddha, the five monks become arhats. We have already come across this second sermon, which is so important for the five monks. It is the discourse on not-self, whose most important parts have been quoted above. In that connection we have also pointed out that the knowledge of not-self is regarded there as liberating knowledge. Now we see that this liberating knowledge enabled the five monks to become arhats while still listening to the sermon.

It is difficult to conceive of a starker contrast than the one between the path to liberation as discussed above and the process of liberation described here. In the preceding account liberation was attained in solitude, in a mystical state, and presumably without the help of knowledge formulated in words. In the present one it suffices to listen to the liberating knowledge, in the presence of others, in order to immediately become an arhat. This contrast shows that various ideas about the path to liberation found a place side by side in the ancient Buddhist texts.

The same contrast also appears elsewhere in the Buddhist discourses and plays a significant role in the further development of Buddhism. The famous Belgian scholar Louis de la Vallée Poussin emphasized this in 1937 in an important article that draws attention to two monks, Musīla and Nārada.<sup>69</sup> In a sūtra of the Saṃyutta Nikāya / Saṃyuktāgama,<sup>70</sup> first Musīla is questioned about his spiritual state. It becomes clear that he knows through his own knowledge and insight the causal relationships found in the chain of *conditioned origination* (*pratītyasamutpāda*, Pa. *paṭṭicasamuppāda*, to be discussed below). He knows from the same

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68 Pāli *imasmiñ ca pana veyyākaraṇasmim bhaññamāne* (Vin I.14) indicates simultaneity: “While the teaching was being spoken”; the same goes for the Chinese parallels (TI 1421, vol. 22, 105a24; TI 1428, vol. 22, 789b1; MĀ p. 778c6).

69 La Vallée Poussin 1937b: 189–222. Cf. Gombrich 1996: 96ff.

70 SN II.115–16; SĀ pp. 98c–99a.

source that the cessation of becoming is *nirvāṇa*. If this is true, the questioner concludes, the venerable *Musīla* is an arhat, one whose taints are destroyed. *Musīla*'s silence betrays his agreement with this. Next *Nārada* asks to be questioned in the same way. He answers the same questions in exactly the same words. He rejects, however, the conclusion that he is an arhat, one whose taints are destroyed. He explains this with the help of a simile. Just as when a man who is hot and thirsty finds a well in the wilderness, he sees the well and knows that it contains water, but alas, he cannot reach and touch the water. In the same way he, *Nārada*, even though he knows that the cessation of becoming is *nirvāṇa*, is no arhat, and his taints have not been destroyed.

As said before, the contrast between the two processes of liberation is too pronounced to go unnoticed. It makes a great deal of difference whether enlightenment is only to be found in the solitude of the forest, in a mystical state induced by meditation exercises, or alternatively, by means of the attainment of certain knowledges, possibly in the company of other people. It is even more telling that the Buddhists themselves do not know who is an arhat and who is not. In *Musīla*'s case the texts give the impression that he maintains in good faith that he is an arhat. The *sūtra* does not state that he was wrong. It does, however, state that, under the same circumstances, *Nārada* did not consider himself to be an arhat.

We have repeatedly pointed out that the presence in the Buddhist texts of a liberating knowledge that can be expressed in words can, without difficulty, be explained by the important role such items of knowledge played in several non-Buddhist religious movements of the time. This is particularly clear in the case of the liberating knowledge of not-self. This knowledge, as we have seen, is expressed in the following words:

Therefore, O monks, whatever in the way of material form (sensations, ideations, etc., respectively) has ever been, will be, or is, either in us or in the outer world, whether strong or weak, low or high, far or near, it is not the self: this he must in truth perceive, who possesses real knowledge. Whosoever

regards things in this light, O monks, being a wise and noble hearer of the word, turns away from material form, turns away from sensation and ideation, from conditioned factor and consciousness. When he turns away from them, he becomes free from desire; by the cessation of desire he obtains deliverance; when [the mind] is liberated there comes the knowledge: "I am liberated." He understands: "Birth is destroyed, the spiritual life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, so that I will not again return here."

The non-identity of the person with anything that is involved in actions is here emphasized. This hardly differs from the knowledge of the self of certain non-Buddhists. Their self was that part of the person which does not participate in actions. Seen this way, this liberating knowledge of the Buddhists is hardly more than a mirror image of the liberating knowledge of the self of those non-Buddhists. In this case the Buddhist texts have not just borrowed the concept of a liberating knowledge expressible in words, they have also borrowed its content from their opponents.<sup>71</sup>

It follows that the discrepancy mentioned above, which was noticed by the Buddhists themselves, need not be ascribed to the teaching of the historical Buddha. It is far more likely that, contrary to what happened later, no explicitly formulated liberating knowledge was part of the original teaching. This does not exclude that some kind of liberating knowledge may have played a role in Buddhism from the beginning. The texts frequently speak about *prajñā* (Pa. *paññā*), which may be translated as "wisdom." It is, for example, described as follows:

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71 See Bronkhorst 1995. I do not subscribe to the point of view of Schneider (1967: 253–54; 1980: 69–70), who in some publications ascribes to the Buddha the teaching that one has to abstain from accumulating karma in order to avoid rebirth. Schneider quotes in this context also the first sermon of the Buddha. This teaching is precisely *not* part of original Buddhism.

Right view (*samyagdṛṣṭi*, Pa. *sammāditṭhi*), I say, is two-fold: there is right view that is affected by taints, partaking of merit, ripening on the side of attachment; and there is right view that is noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path. [...] And what, monks, is the right view that is noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path? The wisdom (*prajñā*, Pa. *paññā*), the faculty of wisdom (*prajñendriya*, Pa. *paññindriya*), the power of wisdom (*prajñābala*, Pa. *paññābala*), the enlightenment factor of understanding the doctrine (*dharmavicayasambodhyaṅga*, Pa. *dharmavicayasambojjhaṅga*).<sup>72</sup>

It is not hard to imagine that the occurrence of this term in the oldest stratum of the tradition prompted attempts to define the precise content of this “wisdom.”<sup>73</sup>

For the modern scholar it is possible, as we have just demonstrated, to explain discrepancies in the canonical texts with the help of the assumption that non-Buddhist movements exercised an influence on Buddhist teaching. For a Buddhist, who takes the texts as the word of the Buddha, the situation is different. Discrepancies like the ones mentioned above require an explanation in his case too, but this explanation should not simply be a historical one. Only a systematic solution might be regarded as satisfactory by the tradition. It would have to show how the contradictory teachings are parts of a wider, more encompassing vision, in which they no longer contradict, but rather support and strengthen each other. It looks as if the doctrine of conditioned origination had a role to play here.

Let us examine the situation in more detail. If one believes that there is an item of knowledge that liberates human beings from the cycle of rebirths, or even from suffering itself, then clearly, the absence of this knowledge must be the reason why humanity finds itself in its sorry state. To phrase it differently: the absence of

<sup>72</sup> MN III.72; tr. Nāṇamoli & Bodhi 1995: 934–35. Cf. also Lamotte 1977: 293.

<sup>73</sup> Bronkhorst 1993: 107–8.

knowledge—ignorance—is the original cause of rebirth and suffering. This is of course different from what we encountered in the four noble truths. There it was thirst that was the root of all suffering and that had to be destroyed. How do thirst and ignorance relate to each other? The answer is found in the doctrine of conditioned origination, which is expounded and explained in discourses such as the following one:

The Blessed One said this: “And what, monks, is conditioned origination? With (1) ignorance as condition, (2) conditioned factors [come to be]; with conditioned factors as condition, (3) consciousness;<sup>74</sup> with consciousness as condition, (4) name-and-form; with name-and-form as condition, (5) the six realms of the senses; with the six realms of the senses as condition, (6) contact; with contact as condition, (7) sensation; with sensation as condition, (8) thirst, i.e. craving; with thirst as condition, (9) clinging; with clinging as condition, (10) existence; with existence as condition, (11) birth; with birth as condition, (12) aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, suffering, dejection, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. [...]

And what, monks, is aging-and-death (*jarāmaraṇa*)? The aging of the various beings in the various orders of beings, their growing old, brokenness of teeth, greyness of hair, wrinkling of skin, decline of vitality, degeneration of the faculties: this is called aging. The passing away of the various beings from the various orders of beings, their perishing, breakup, disappearance, mortality, death, completion of time, the breakup of the aggregates, the laying down

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74 Already in the ancient Buddhist texts *viññāna* has two meanings: “cognition” and “consciousness.” The choice of how to translate the term may sometimes be somewhat arbitrary, because the texts themselves do not always make a clear distinction between the two meanings. The ambiguity of the term led in later times to developments that will be discussed below. Cf. Waldron 1994.

of the carcass: this is called death. Thus this aging and this death are together called aging-and-death.

And what, monks, is birth (*jāti*)? The birth of the various beings into the various orders of beings, their being born, descent [into the womb], production, the manifestation of the aggregates, the obtaining of the realms of the senses. This is called birth.

And what, monks, is existence (*bhava*)? There are these three kinds of existence: existence in the sphere of desire (*kāma*), existence in the sphere of form (*rūpa*), existence in the sphere of non-form (*arūpa*). This is called existence.

And what, monks, is clinging (*upādāna*)? There are these four kinds of clinging: clinging to sensual pleasures, clinging to views, clinging to rules and vows, clinging to a doctrine of self. This is called clinging.

And what, monks, is thirst (*trṣṇā*, Pa. *taṇhā*)? There are these six classes of thirst: thirst for forms, thirst for sounds, thirst for odors, thirst for flavors, thirst for tangibles, thirst for mental properties. This is called thirst.

And what, monks, is sensation (*vedanā*)? There are six classes of sensation: sensation born of eye-contact, sensation born of ear-contact, sensation born of nose-contact, sensation born of tongue-contact, sensation born of body-contact, sensation born of mind-contact. This is called sensation.

And what, monks, is contact (*sparśa*, Pa. *phassa*)? There are six classes of contact: eye-contact, ear-contact, nose-contact, tongue-contact, body-contact, mind-contact. This is called contact.

And what, monks, are the six realms of the senses (*ṣaḍāyatana*, Pa. *saḷāyatana*)? The eye realm, ear realm, nose realm, tongue realm, body realm, mind realm. These are called the six realms of the senses.

And what, monks, is name-and-form (*nāmarūpa*)? Sensation, ideation, volition, contact, attention: this is called

name. The four great elements and the form derived from the four great elements: this is called form. Thus this name and this form are together called name-and-form.

And what, monks, is consciousness (*viññāna*, Pa. *viññāṇa*)? There are six classes of consciousness: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, mind consciousness. This is called consciousness.

And what, monks, are the conditioned factors (*samskāra*, Pa. *sāṅkhāra*)? There are these three kinds of conditioned factors: the bodily conditioned factor, the verbal conditioned factor, the mental conditioned factor. These are called the conditioned factors.

And what, monks, is ignorance (*avidyā*, Pa. *avijjā*)? Not knowing suffering, not knowing the origin of suffering, not knowing the cessation of suffering, not knowing the path leading to the cessation of suffering. This is called ignorance.

Thus, monks, with ignorance as condition, conditioned factors [come to be]; with conditioned factors as condition, consciousness [...] Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. But with the remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance comes cessation of conditioned factors; with the cessation of conditioned factors comes cessation of consciousness; with the cessation of consciousness comes cessation of name-and-form; with the cessation of name-and-form comes cessation of the six realms of the senses; with the cessation of the six realms of the senses comes cessation of contact; with the cessation of contact comes the cessation of sensation; with the cessation of sensation comes the cessation of thirst; with the cessation of thirst, comes the cessation of clinging; with the cessation of clinging comes the cessation of existence; with the cessation of existence come the cessation of birth; with the cessation of birth comes the cessation

of aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, suffering, dejection, and despair. Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.<sup>75</sup>

In this enumeration ignorance occurs at the beginning, thirst in the eighth position. This means that ignorance is a condition for all of the other elements in the enumeration, including thirst. And the destruction of thirst is only possible if ignorance is destroyed first. Therefore only subordinate importance can be assigned to the destruction of thirst, and the original path to liberation now becomes a relatively unimportant part of the new method, whose most important part is the liberating insight.<sup>76</sup>

Despite its usefulness for the coherence of the teaching, this enumeration of the causal links of conditioned origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*, Pa. *paṭiccasamuppāda*) poses great challenges to the understanding. Already in the ancient discourses it is described as very profound and difficult to comprehend.<sup>77</sup> And when the disciple Ānanda believes that he has grasped the causal sequence, the Buddha is reported to say to him:

Do not say that, Ānanda, do not say that! This conditioned origination is profound and appears profound. It is through not understanding, not penetrating this doctrine that this generation has become like a tangled ball of string, covered as with a blight, tangled like coarse grass, unable to pass

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75 SN II.2–4; tr. Bodhi, 2000: 534–36. Cf. Mylius 1985: 201–2. The doctrine of conditioned origination has many forms, especially in the Saṃyutta Nikāya; cf. Zafiropulo 1993: 104ff.; Mori 1991: (742)–(733) (= 39–48). Zafiropulo (1993: 108) points out that ignorance is often missing in the different versions and concludes that ignorance was not from the beginning regarded as the main cause of all suffering.

76 It is of course tempting to suspect that the distinction between the taint of desire (*kāmāsrava*, Pa. *kāmāsava*) and the taint of ignorance (*avidyāsrava*, Pa. *avijjāsava*), which we encountered in the description of the event of liberation, cited earlier, is not original either.

77 CPS § 8.2, p. 440; cf. Bernhard 1968: 53.

beyond states of woe, the ill destiny, ruin, and the round of birth-and-death.<sup>78</sup>

Probably the best modern attempt at explaining the chain of conditions is found in Erich Frauwallner's *History of Indian Philosophy*. After a detailed analysis of the different elements of the chain, Frauwallner sums up his explanation in the following manner:

The ultimate cause of entanglement in the cycle of existence is ignorance (*avidyā* [1]), i.e. the lack of acquaintance with the releasing knowledge, namely, the four noble truths. For in the person who does not possess this knowledge, conditioned factors (*samskāra* [2])<sup>79</sup> originate that are directed at the sense-objects and the earthly personality. Driven by these conditioned factors, consciousness (*viññāna* [3]), which is, like a fine body, the carrier of rebirth, enters after death into a new womb. Connected with this consciousness, the body and the psychical factors (name-and-form, *nāmarūpa* [4]) develop, and finally also the six realms of the senses (*ṣaḍāyatana* [5]) of the new being, which in this way comes into existence. When this new being is born, the fateful contact (*sparśa* [6]) of the sense organs with their objects ensues. Sensations (*vedanā* [7]) of different kinds arise and awaken the passions, above all thirst (*trṣṇā* [8]), which clings (*upādāna* [9]) to the sense-pleasures and the supposed “I” and leads, therethrough, to new bondage and a new existence (*bhava* [10]). Once again this leads to rebirth (*jāti* [11]) and entanglement in the sorrow of existence (*jarāmaraṇa*, etc. [12]), and this goes on in an endless chain, as long as the releasing knowledge and the destruction of thirst do not put an end to the cycle.<sup>80</sup>

78 DN II,55; tr. Walshe 1995: 223. Cf. also Bernhard 1968: 54; La Vallée Poussin 1913: vi.

79 For a detailed analysis of this term in Buddhism, see Kapani 1992: 169ff.

80 Frauwallner 1973a: 165 (1953: 208–9). Cf. also Glasenapp 1938: 63–64. For an overview of the various attempts at explanation, see La Vallée Poussin 1913: 34ff.

In this explanation—as in most others—the links of the chain are distributed over three lives. Two rebirths are depicted, but in very different ways. This somewhat strange state of affairs is best explained with the help of Frauwallner's assumption that the chain with twelve links is the result of a fusion of two different chains.<sup>81</sup> The second part, from thirst to old age, dying, and so on (8–12), is content-wise merely an elaboration of the basic idea of the first two noble truths: old age, dying, and so on (12)—i.e., suffering—are conditioned by birth (11) and new existence (10) and have as their cause thirst (8) on account of clinging (9).<sup>82</sup>

The first part of the chain, from ignorance to sensation (1–7), describes how a new being is born. In this process consciousness (*viññāna*) is the carrier that after death enters the next incarnation in the cycle of rebirths.<sup>83</sup> One can indeed imagine that consciousness, driven by conditioned factors (*saṃskāra*), enters into a new womb. Following this, a new body with mental factors (name-and-form, *nāmarūpa*) and realms of the senses (*śadāyatana*) develops, which, through contact (*sparśa*) with outer objects, has sensations (*vedanā*). The main problem with regard to understanding this first part is to explain the relationship between ignorance (*avidyā*) and the conditioned factors (*saṃskāra*). It is not at all obvious that conditioned factors are conditioned by ignorance, or that the knowledge of the four noble truths leads to the destruction of the conditioned factors. Indeed, in a passage from the Majjhima Nikāya, taints are put in the place of ignorance.<sup>84</sup> Without ignorance the two parts of the causal chain conflict less with each other and describe more or less the same thing, though in different terms. The conditioned factors (or perhaps the taints) are now the

81 Frauwallner 1973a: 166–67 (1953: 210–11); Bernhard 1968. In Frauwallner's opinion it was the Buddha himself who reshaped his teachings in order to take into account the importance of liberating insight in other religious movements.

82 See Bernhard 1968: 56. Zafiropulo (1993: 110–11) quotes some passages which do indeed contain the chain beginning with “thirst” and ending in “old age, dying, etc.,” without the preceding links.

83 Frauwallner 1973a: 162 (1953: 204–5).

84 MN I.54; cf. Bernhard 1968: 56.

original cause for rebirth in the first part, in the same way as thirst is in the second part.

These thoughts on the original form and meaning of the causal chain are necessarily speculative. The main conclusion to be drawn is that we are not likely to learn much about the teaching of the Buddha from the doctrine of conditioned origination. In its classical form it is not part of the original teaching of the Buddha. Although we cannot exclude the possibility that one, perhaps even both, of its parts do not contradict the original teaching of the Buddha, the chain as a whole belongs to a time when attempts were made to reconcile new ideas about liberating knowledge with the old teaching.<sup>85</sup>

In spite of this, the doctrine of conditioned origination became ever more important. The ancient discourses already contain the following statement: “One who sees conditioned origination, sees the teaching; one who sees the teaching, sees conditioned origination.”<sup>86</sup> We have also seen that some texts present conditioned origination as the content of liberating knowledge. We will come across this doctrine again while dealing with further developments of the teaching.

### *Asceticism and Meditation*

The first sermon describes the Buddha’s path to liberation as the Middle Path:

O monks, one who has gone forth from worldly life should not indulge in these two extremes. What are the two? There is indulgence in desirable sense objects, which is low, vulgar, worldly, ignoble, unworthy, and unprofitable, and there is devotion to self-mortification, which is painful, unworthy, and unprofitable. O monks, avoiding both these extremes, the Buddha (*tathāgata*) has realized the Middle Path. It

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85 The doctrine of conditioned origination in its classical form may well be inseparable from the dharma theory, as Hirakawa (1990: 54) observed.

86 MN I.191; tr. Nāṇamoli & Bodhi 1995: 284.

produces vision, it produces knowledge, it leads to calm, to higher knowledge, to enlightenment, to nirvāṇa. And what is that Middle Path, O monks, that the Buddha has realized? It is the noble eightfold path, namely: right views, right resolution, right speech, right action, right living, right exertion, right mindfulness, right concentration.<sup>87</sup>

It is reasonable to suppose that the expression “indulgence in desirable sense objects” does not characterize a specific religious movement that existed during the Buddha’s lifetime, but rather the common man, who does not “indulge in desirable sense objects” in order to reach a religious goal. However, the opposite extreme no doubt presupposes ascetics who used “devotion to self-mortification” as a method to reach a religious goal. It has been suggested that the doctrine of the Middle Path might reflect the legend of the life of the Buddha before his enlightenment: wasn’t he born a prince, who lived for a long time a life of pleasure before dedicating himself to asceticism, without getting anything useful out of either?<sup>88</sup> Since this book deals with the teachings of Buddhism, not the life of its founder, there is no need to go into the question whether this legend is as old as the doctrine of the Middle Path.

The Buddhist discourses contain many passages that show that the Buddha regularly came in contact with ascetics who dedicated themselves to self-mortification. In such passages, these ascetics are often Jainas—described in the sources as *nirgrantha* (Pa. *nigaṇṭha*) “free from all ties or hindrances”<sup>89</sup>—who followed the instructions of the teacher Jñātrputra (Pa. Nāt(h)aputta). These passages, along with what we know from the old texts of the Jainas and from other sources, convey a clear image of these ascetics’ motivations and practices. The main aim pursued by them was release from the cycle of rebirths. Since they held that rebirth is determined by the actions carried out in a previous life,

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87 Vin I.10; tr. Rewata Dhamma 1997: 17. Cf. Mimaki & May 1979: 456ff.

88 Mimaki & May 1979: 457.

89 MW p. 541 s.v. *nirgrantha*.

they believed that liberation could be reached by suppressing all activities. The following passage describes the Buddha's meeting with such ascetics:

Now, Mahānāma, on one occasion I was living at Rājagaha (Skt. Rājagṛha) on the mountain Vulture Peak. On that occasion a number of Nigaṇṭhas living on the Black Rock on the slopes of Isigili were practicing continuous standing, rejecting seats, and were experiencing painful, racking, piercing sensations due to exertion.

Then, when it was evening, I rose from meditation and went to the Nigaṇṭhas there. I asked them: "Friends, why do you practice continuous standing, rejecting seats, and experience painful, racking, piercing sensations due to exertion?"

When this was said, they replied: "Friend, the Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta is omniscient and all-seeing and claims to have complete knowledge and vision thus: 'Whether I am walking or standing or asleep or awake, knowledge and vision are continuously and uninterruptedly present to me.' He says thus: 'Nigaṇṭhas, you have done evil actions in the past; exhaust them with the performance of piercing austerities. And when you are here and now restrained in body, speech, and mind, that is doing no evil actions for the future. So by annihilating with asceticism past actions and by doing no fresh actions, there will be no consequence in the future. With no consequence in the future, there is the destruction of action. With the destruction of action, there is the destruction of suffering. With the destruction of suffering, there is the destruction of sensation. With the destruction of sensation, all suffering will be exhausted.' This is [the doctrine] we approve of and accept, and we are satisfied with it. [...]"

"Friend Gotama, pleasure is not to be gained through pleasure; pleasure is to be gained through pain. For were pleasure to be gained through pleasure, then King Seniya

Bimbisāra of Magadha would gain pleasure, since he abides in greater pleasure than the venerable Gotama.”<sup>90</sup>

During another meeting with Jainas, the Buddha expresses himself in the following ironic way: “If the pleasure and pain that beings feel are caused by what was done in the past, then the Nigaṇṭhas surely must have done bad actions in the past, since they now feel such painful, racking, piercing sensations.”<sup>91</sup>

In these passages, the Jainas’ practices are explicitly criticized. Elsewhere, in a passage that presumably describes the Buddha’s efforts before his enlightenment, when he was still a bodhisattva, they are criticized implicitly.<sup>92</sup> We are told that the bodhisattva, since his discipleship with two teachers had proved to be in vain, decided to practice asceticism alone. He found an appropriate place and started to practice the “meditation without breathing” (Pa. *appānaka jhāna*; Skt. *aprāṇaka dhyāna*). This meditation is described in all its horrifying particulars, and it leads to a situation where some gods believe that the bodhisattva is dead. After this meditation without breathing, the bodhisattva decides to fast, and in fasting, too, he goes to extremes. (Characteristically, the bodhisattva does not die of starvation, as some Jainas did, because the gods prevent this.) After all these trials, he reaches the following conclusion:

Whatever recluses and brahmins in the past have experienced painful, racking, piercing sensations due to exertion, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. And whatever recluses and brahmins in the future will experience painful, racking, piercing sensations due to exertion, this is the

90 MN I.92–93; tr. Nāṇamoli & Bodhi 1995: 187–88; cf. Bronkhorst 1993: 26–27, with references to Chinese parallels.

91 MN II.222; tr. Nāṇamoli & Bodhi 1995: 832.

92 MN I.242–46; II.93; 212 (in the last two passages the whole text is not repeated in the edition of the Pali Text Society; but it is repeated in the Nālandā Edition, NDPS II, pp. 326–31 and 490–94). This passage and its Chinese parallel (EĀ S. 670c18–671b4) are translated and discussed in Bronkhorst 1993: 1ff.

utmost, there is none beyond this. And whatever recluses and brahmins at present experience painful, racking, piercing sensations due to exertion, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. But by this racking practice of austerities I have not attained any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to enlightenment?<sup>93</sup>

The aim of this supposedly autobiographical description is clear: it shows that the Buddha knows from his own experience the ascetic path presumably leading to liberation, and that he has followed this path as far as, or even further than, the rival ascetics themselves. He therefore also knows from personal experience that this path is of no use and does not lead to the desired goal. It is of particular interest to note that this path, which was purportedly tried by the Buddha, is in all details identical to that of the Jainas. This is further emphasized by the fact that this autobiographical episode is once narrated during a conversation with a Jaina. This conclusion is furthermore justified by its contents, for it is the Jainas who sought liberation by means of fasting and suppressing breath. There are other details that support this position as well.<sup>94</sup>

It is clear from what precedes that the Buddha made a distinction between his teaching and the ascetic mode of life primarily followed by the Jainas. Surprisingly, elsewhere in the discourses the Buddha himself propounds this rejected mode of life, sometimes in exactly the same words.<sup>95</sup> In a passage from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, for example, the Bud-

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93 MN I.246; tr. Nāṇamoli & Bodhi 1995: 340.

94 For references to the old Jaina texts and a more detailed discussion, see Bronkhorst 1993: 31ff. One cannot rule out, as Gombrich (1994: 1073–74) remarks, that this autobiographical representation really originated with the historical Buddha himself; but this is neither certain, nor even likely.

95 It is not only in the discourses that this mode of life is shown in a positive light. Gombrich (1994: 1078–79) shows how Jaina influence is noticeable in many verses of the Buddhist canon. We should not forget that many of these verses originally came from collections belonging to groups of wandering ascetics, some of whom were non-Buddhists, as de Jong (1991: 7) astutely observes.

dha instructs the Jaina Vappa as follows: “As these taints come about as a result of bodily activities [...], as a result of activities of speech [...], as a result of activities of mind, in the case of one who abstains from bodily activities [...], from activities of speech and mind that cause vexation and distress, it follows that those taints causing pain do not exist in him. He carries out no fresh action; as to his former action, he wears it out by constant contact with it.”<sup>96</sup> From this we must conclude that such ascetic practices, although criticized by the Buddha, were nevertheless adopted by certain Buddhists.<sup>97</sup>

The aim of the ascetic practices described above was to subdue one’s actions, words, and thoughts. The efforts to suppress the sense organs are related to these. These practices, too, are mentioned in the Buddhist discourses, once again critically. Thus we hear about a teacher who taught a practice of cultivation of the sense organs that brought a result where the practitioner would neither see forms with the eye nor hear sounds with the ear. When the Buddha was informed about this, he commented that if this were cultivating the sense organs, then the blind and the deaf were cultivating their sense organs.<sup>98</sup> We have already noticed the same kind of irony in the story of the standing Jains. It is therefore all the more remarkable to observe that the Buddha himself is supposed to have undertaken such practices. The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, which describes the end of the Buddha’s life,<sup>99</sup> relates the following discussion between the Buddha and a certain Putkasa (Pa. Pukkusa). The latter is a disciple of the teacher Ārāḍa Kālāma (Pa. Ālāra Kālāma), and the sūtra tells the following story about him:<sup>100</sup>

96 AN II.197; tr. Woodward 1973: 208–9. Cf. AN I.221; MĀ p. 434b23–24.

97 The same opinion is voiced by Ruegg 1989: 142–43.

98 MN III.298–99; cf. SĀ p. 78a22–23.

99 The terms *nirvāṇa* and *parinirvāṇa* initially meant the same thing. Only later the term *parinirvāṇa* came to designate the Buddha’s death. Cf. Bronkhorst 1993: 97–98, with references to further literature; Kubo 1992: 3.

100 DN II.130–32; tr. Walshe 1995: 258–59; Bareau 1970: 282ff.; Waldschmidt 1950–51: 270ff.

Once, Lord, Āḷāra Kālāma was going along the main road and, turning aside, he went and sat down under a nearby tree [...]. And five hundred carts went rumbling by very close to him. A man who was walking along behind them came to Āḷāra Kālāma and said: “Lord, did you not see five hundred carts go by?” “No, friend, I did not.” “But didn’t you hear them, Lord?” “No, friend, I did not.” “Well, were you asleep, Lord?” “No, friend, I was not asleep.” “Then, Lord, were you conscious?” “Yes, friend.” “So, Lord, being conscious and awake you neither saw nor heard five hundred carts passing close by you, even though your outer robe was bespattered with dust?” “That is so, friend.”

And that man thought: “It is wonderful, it is marvelous! These wanderers are so calm that though conscious and awake, a man neither saw nor heard five hundred carts passing close by him!” And he went away praising Āḷāra Kālāma’s lofty powers.

We easily recognize here the “cultivation of the sense organs bringing it about that one can neither see forms with the eye nor hear sounds with the ear,” and we would expect the Buddha to reject it here too. But this does not happen, for he answers:

“Well, Pukkusa, what do you think? What do you consider is more difficult to do or attain to—while conscious and awake not to see or hear five hundred carts passing nearby or, while conscious and awake, not to see or hear anything when the rain god streams and splashes, when lightning flashes and thunder crashes?”

“Lord, how can one compare not seeing or hearing five hundred carts with that—or even six, seven, eight, nine, or ten hundred, or hundreds of thousands of carts to that? To see or hear nothing when such a storm rages is more difficult...”

“Once, Pukkusa, when I was staying at Ātuma, at the

threshing floor, the rain god streamed and splashed, lightning flashed, and thunder crashed, and two farmers, brothers, and four oxen were killed. And a lot of people went out of Ātuma to where the two brothers and the four oxen were killed.

“And, Pukkusa, I had at that time gone out of the door of the threshing floor and was walking up and down outside. And a man from the crowd came to me, saluted me, and stood to one side. And I said to him: ‘Friend, why are all these people gathered here?’ ‘Lord, there has been a great storm and two farmers, brothers, and four oxen have been killed. But you, Lord, where have you been?’ ‘I have been right here, friend.’ ‘But what did you see, Lord?’ ‘I saw nothing, friend.’ ‘Or what did you hear, Lord?’ ‘I heard nothing, friend.’ ‘Then, Lord, were you conscious?’ ‘Yes, friend.’ ‘So, Lord, being conscious and awake you neither saw nor heard the great rainfall and floods and the thunder and lightning?’ ‘That is so, friend.’

“And, Pukkusa, that man thought: ‘It is wonderful, it is marvelous! These wanderers are so calm that they neither see nor hear when the rain god streams and splashes, lightning flashes, and thunder crashes!’ Proclaiming my lofty powers, he saluted me, passed by to the right, and departed.”

Again we notice that practices that were explicitly rejected by the Buddha nevertheless found a way into Buddhism.<sup>101</sup> In this last case, it is also clear that rivalry between religious groups played a role, as it was obviously impossible for the Buddhists to admit that non-Buddhist teachers had skills the Buddha did not possess.

This last passage mentions the teacher Ārāḍa Kālāma, whose name is also known from another part of the Buddha legend. For Ārāḍa

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101 Gombrich (1994: 1077) thinks that the Buddha, who was weakened by illness and about to die, may here exceptionally have boasted about practices he otherwise did not agree with.

Kālāma was one of his two teachers at the time when he was still a bodhisattva and had not yet reached enlightenment. We have seen how a so-called autobiographical episode of the Buddha was used to prove the uselessness of the Jainas' self-torturing practices. We are therefore entitled to suppose that the description of the Buddha's study under Ārāḍa Kālāma and Udraka, the son of Rāma, may likewise contain elements of propaganda. And this is indeed the case. What the bodhisattva learns from Ārāḍa Kālāma and subsequently from Udraka, the son of Rāma, is the following: from Ārāḍa Kālāma he learns the *realm of nothingness* (*ākiñcanyāyatana*), and from Udraka, the son of Rāma, he learns the *realm of neither ideation nor non-ideation* (*naivasamjñānāsamjñāyatana*). His studies are so successful that Ārāḍa Kālāma suggests that they should, both of them, instruct his students together; Udraka, the son of Rāma, even offers him the sole leadership of his school. But in both cases the bodhisattva refuses, and he justifies this with the remark that these doctrines do not lead to renunciation, to lack of passion, to cessation, to peace, to knowledge, to enlightenment, and to nirvāṇa, but only to the realm of nothingness, or, respectively, to the realm of neither ideation nor non-ideation.<sup>102</sup>

On the basis of the mere names of these realms, it is impossible to get an exact idea of their particular nature and of the differences between them. But the names suggest that they are states in which thoughts and other mental activities are suppressed. This is confirmed by the circumstance that the same name Ārāḍa Kālāma is also mentioned in connection with the suppression of the sense organs described above. Furthermore, it is important to note that the same autobiographical passages that describe how the bodhisattva rejects the realm of nothingness and the realm of neither ideation nor non-ideation continue to narrate how he (re)discovers the first stage of meditation and immediately understands that this is the path to enlightenment. These two realms are thus contrasted with the stages of meditation; only the latter lead to nirvāṇa.

In spite of this, the realms taught by Ārāḍa Kālāma and by Udraka,

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102 Klimkeit 1990: 81.

the son of Rāma, managed to find a way into the Buddhist tradition. Consider the account of the Buddha's death:

These were the Buddha's last words.

Then the Lord entered the first stage of meditation (*dhyāna*, Pa. *jhāna*). And leaving that he entered the second, the third, the fourth stage of meditation. Then leaving the fourth stage of meditation, he entered the realm of infinity of space (*ākāśānantyāyatana*), then the realm of infinity of consciousness (*viññānānantyāyatana*), then the realm of nothingness (*ākīñcanyāyatana*), then the realm of neither ideation nor non-ideation (*naivasamjñānāsamjñāyatana*), and leaving that he attained the cessation of ideation and feeling (*samjñāvedayitanirodha*).

Then the venerable Ānanda said to the venerable Anuruddha: "Venerable Anuruddha, the Lord has passed away." "No, friend Ānanda, the Lord has not passed away, he has attained the cessation of ideation and feeling."

Then the Lord, leaving the attainment of the cessation of ideation and feeling, entered the realm of neither ideation nor non-ideation, from that he entered the realm of nothingness, the realm of infinity of consciousness, the realm of infinity of space. From the realm of infinity of space he entered the fourth stage of meditation, from there the third, the second, and the first stage of meditation. Leaving the first stage of meditation, he entered the second, the third, the fourth stage of meditation. And, leaving the fourth stage of meditation, the Lord finally passed away.<sup>103</sup>

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103 DN II. 156; tr. Walshe 1995: 270–71; Bareau 1971: 150–56; cf. Waldschmidt 1950–51: 394–97. Zafripulo (1993: 68–67) cites reasons that go against the supposition that there was already an organic relationship between the non-authentic realms before they were taken over by Buddhism. Gombrich (1994: 1077) concludes, on the basis of this death scene, that the sojourn in what we call the "non-authentic" realms was the least disagreeable way to bear physical pain; he does not believe that these realms were non-authentic, i.e., that they were not

These same mental states are also mentioned once (and once only) in connection with the Buddha's enlightenment. According to a passage from the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, the bodhisattva gradually entered into the nine stages mentioned above, up to the highest of them, namely, the cessation of ideation and feeling. Here his taints were destroyed, having been seen with wisdom. The Buddha concludes this autobiographical passage with the words:<sup>104</sup>

And so long, Ānanda, as I attained not to, emerged not from these nine attainments of gradual abidings (*samāpatti*), both forward and backward, I realized not completely, as one wholly awakened, the full perfect awakening, unsurpassed in the world with its gods, Māra, and Brahmā, on earth with its ascetics, brahmans, gods, and men; but when I attained to and emerged from these abidings suchwise, then, wholly awakened, I realized completely the full perfect awakening unsurpassed. [...] Then knowledge and vision rose up within me: Mind's release for me is unshakable, this birth is final, there is now no becoming again.

Since no mental processes take place in the cessation of ideation and feeling, the highest enlightenment cannot take place in that realm. The Buddha only realized that he had gained enlightenment after he emerged again from these realms. It is apparently also impossible to pass from the cessation of ideation and feeling into the *nirvāṇa* that takes place at death. These considerations support the claim, made above, that the aim of these realms—from the realm of infinity of space up to the cessation of ideation and feeling—was to suppress thoughts and other mental activities. Such realms, or the efforts made to reach

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taught by the historical Buddha, but admits that they may not have led to the goal directly.

104 AN IV.448; tr. Hare 1935: 295; cf. La Vallée Poussin 1937b: 219–20. Zafiropulo (1993: 32–33, 66–67n30) stresses the exceptional nature of this passage; there are, on the other hand, innumerable passages in which the four stages of meditation (*dhyāna*) are connected with the Buddha's enlightenment.

them, correspond quite accurately to the general idea of liberation of the Jains and other ascetics pursuing similar goals: for them, the main means to reach liberation is to put an end to all activities, even mental ones. Such realms of consciousness (if we may call them that) were rejected by the Buddha, but nevertheless soon found a place among the states Buddhists sought to attain in their mental practice.

In the above passages the cessation of ideation and feeling is the highest stage. Sometimes only the four stages that precede it are mentioned together, namely, from the realm of infinity of space to the realm of neither ideation nor non-ideation. These are the *four formless states* (*ārūpya*, Pa. *arūpa*), among which the realm of neither ideation nor non-ideation is the highest. The realm of nothingness is the highest stage in the so-called seven *stations of consciousness* (*vijñānasthiti*, Pa. *viññāṇaṭṭhiti*). None of these series can be taken to be authentic.<sup>105</sup>

What distinguishes the four original stages of meditation from the non-authentic realms? If the suppression of all mental activities characterizes the latter, we must assume that the same does not hold—or at least not to the same extent—for the former. In any case this kind of suppression should not be the main goal of the four stages of meditation. Their goal lies in another dimension, which we may call “the mystical dimension” for want of a better term. From this point of view, the four stages of meditation seek to attain an ever-deeper “mystical” state, whereas the four realms of attainment only aim at suppressing mental activities.

It is of course not ruled out that normal mental activities may become weaker in the deeper “mystical” states. This is indeed what the description of the four stages of meditation suggests. Thought and reflection disappear in the second stage of meditation; satisfaction disappears in the third; well-being, unease, pleasure, and displeasure disappear in the fourth. Equanimity and mindfulness, on the contrary—and apparently consciousness too—remain until the fourth stage. Conversely, there is no reason to suppose that the non-authentic realms of attainment have anything to do with the “mystical” dimension. This is not only

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105 Cf. Bronkhorst 1993: xiii, 83; 1985: 308.

suggested by the circumstance that concomitant phenomena, which appear in the stages of meditation under the names of “satisfaction,” “well-being,” and so on, are not mentioned here. It is more important that the “mystical” dimension has no role to play in practices whose main goal is to put an end to all mental and physical activities.<sup>106</sup>

A few things remain to be said about the non-authentic realms of attainment. We have seen that these originally belong to a set of ideas and practices in which the suppression of all activities is thought to bring about liberation in two different, mutually supporting ways: “by annihilating with asceticism past actions and by doing no new actions,” as the Jainas explained to the Buddha. Here liberation presupposes that all previous actions are destroyed and that no new actions take place; this happens only at death. It is therefore easy to understand that in the Buddhist texts, too, these realms of attainment were often associated with the idea of liberation at the time of death. Cessation of ideation and feeling (*saṃjñāvedayitanirodha*), also called *attainment of cessation* (*nirodhasamāpatti*), is therefore sometimes described as similar to nirvāṇa or as touching it.<sup>107</sup>

### Recapitulation

The method explained at the beginning of this chapter has allowed us to distinguish between doctrines we can confidently ascribe to the historical Buddha and others that we have good reasons to suppose were not part of his original teaching. It leads to the remarkable conclusion that a sizable part of what came to be ascribed to the Buddha had not been taught by the founder himself. It is worthwhile to recapitulate briefly the teachings in the ancient canon that, by applying this method, turn out to *not* derive from the Buddha.

These teachings are of two kinds. Some deal with the theme of

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106 The absence of sensual experiences and mental representations is not here considered to be the main characteristic of mysticism, as is argued, for instance, by Forman (1990: 7). Vetter (1994: 182–83) bases his work on a definition of mysticism that includes in a quasi-automatic way the meditation on the *infinity* of earth and so on. Cf. also Vetter 1984.

107 La Vallée Poussin 1937b: 213–14; Schmithausen 1981: 241, 219n67.

liberating knowledge. There are several of these, because there was no consensus in the Buddhist tradition as to the exact content of liberating knowledge. We have seen that the idea of an explicitly formulated liberating knowledge cannot be considered as original to Buddhism; it rather came about under the influence of non-Buddhist currents. Conversely, the contents of the liberating knowledge were not borrowed from non-Buddhist currents. We have no reason to doubt that the historical Buddha taught the four noble truths, for example. The same holds for the doctrine that there is no self in the five aggregates (*skandha*), although in this case, as we have seen, the assignment of this doctrine to the role of liberating knowledge appears to be indebted to non-Buddhist ideas.

There are many reasons to suppose that the doctrine of conditioned origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) was not taught by the Buddha in the form in which it is preserved in the canon. This does not alter the fact that this formulation is entirely Buddhist because, as far as we can tell, it has not been borrowed from other sources. The fact that this formulation—like the four noble truths and the doctrine of not-self—could become the content of the liberating knowledge, however, can be explained by the fact that the early Buddhists were looking for a content of their liberating knowledge, being influenced in this respect by certain non-Buddhist religious currents of their time. Furthermore, the doctrine of not-self could easily be reinterpreted so as to become similar to the non-Buddhist doctrines of the self, as we have seen.

Beside the teachings about liberating knowledge, others reveal a close relationship with the ascetic movements of those days. The main theme of these movements was to suppress all bodily and mental processes and bring them to a standstill. In the Buddhist texts, these ideas find expression in certain mental exercises that aim at suppressing mental activities and emotional states. They also find expression in forms of physical asceticism that found a place in the Buddhist tradition.

Louis de La Vallée Poussin pointed out as long ago as in 1937 that these two currents within the Buddhist texts—he calls them opposite theories—are the same as those respectively called Sāṃkhya and Yoga in the *Bhagavadgītā*: in the first, liberation is entirely or primarily obtained by means of knowledge, i.e., intellectual effort; in the

second, this goal is reached by means of ascetic practice.<sup>108</sup> This parallelism is not coincidental. As we have seen, the two currents within Buddhism developed under the influence of two currents that existed outside it. This does not mean that there is no difference between Buddhism and the other religious movements that existed at that time. On the contrary, Buddhism succeeded in integrating these outside influences in such a manner that its own specificity was not at risk. This does not alter the fact that the Buddhism that we know from the old texts already contains many elements that do not come from its founder.

The two currents discussed above, the intellectual and the ascetic, were not taught by the Buddha. This does not signify that the Buddha's message is no longer available in the ancient texts and that this pre-canonical doctrine can only be uncovered by means of deductions and speculative theories. As we have tried to show, the Buddha's original teaching has been transmitted by the Buddhist texts just as efficiently as the non-original material. It included criticism of other intellectual and ascetic movements that existed at its time, elements of which nevertheless managed to find their way into the Buddhist tradition.

It is not easy to get a clear picture of the Buddha's original teaching. Certainly, its aim was to stop suffering and rebirth. To achieve this, the Buddha taught a path in which consciousness played a major role. This is clear from the awareness practices and from the four stages of meditation. In the highest stage of meditation, it is somehow possible, with the help of wisdom (*prajñā*), to bring about a decisive transformation. Once this happens, the goal is attained.

The most astonishing thing about the teaching of the Buddha is that it is in some respects radically different from other teachings that were current in its time and region. The Buddhist texts themselves insist that the Buddha had discovered something new, and that he therefore taught something new. Scholars have often claimed that Buddhism is a special type of Yoga, assuming that a form of Yoga similar to Buddhism existed already at the time of the Buddha. This is incor-

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108 La Vallée Poussin 1937b: 189–90, with references to Edgerton 1924: 27.

rect.<sup>109</sup> It is true that classical Yoga has several points in common with Buddhism, but this is due to the influence of Buddhism on Yoga, as we shall see below. There are no indications that classical Yoga, or something like it, existed at the time of the Buddha. The aim of pre-classical Yoga, like that of the practice of the Jainas, was to suppress bodily and mental activities;<sup>110</sup> it has little in common with the practice taught by the Buddha, and it appears that the Buddha regularly tried to make this clear—to no avail.

The Buddha preached a quite new method, whose aim was to put an end to suffering and rebirth. This new method had to find its place alongside the established methods, of which there were several. Among them we can distinguish two in particular. Both share one common premise, namely, that rebirth is caused and conditioned by actions, and that as a result one must somehow get rid of one's actions. This happens either by suppressing all mental and bodily activities—this is the first method—or by realizing that the true self does not participate in any activities—this is the second method. These two methods each propose a solution that fits the problem in an obvious manner. In contrast, it was not at all obvious how and why the method taught by the Buddha could put an end to rebirth. In comparison with its two rivals, the Buddhist method seemed ill suited to the task.

This circumstance is responsible for the fact that, from the start, Buddhist tradition incorporated, in adjusted form, practices and ideas that belonged to the other two methods. The same circumstance also explains why the Buddhist textual corpus contains, side by side, a variety of different methods. The Buddhists had a problem, and this is the way they tried to solve it.

These attempts to solve the problem were only half-hearted, and they could not be otherwise. For the Buddhist tradition also preserved clear statements of the Buddha that rejected the alternative methods.

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109 This opinion is first found in Senart 1900; then in Beck 1916: 136–37; and in Frauwallner 1953: 173; further references in de Jong 1976: 34; finally King 1992; *contra* Kloppenborg 1990.

110 Cf. Bronkhorst 1993: 45ff.

Buddhism was therefore faced with a problem it could not solve. The doctrine of not-self, in particular, which was too solidly grounded in the tradition to be simply pushed aside, remained a major challenge. The inescapable conflict that resulted lent an internal dynamic to the further development of Buddhism—a topic we examine more closely below.