

A Brief Criticism of the ‘Two Paths to Liberation’ Theory

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Abstract

The present paper briefly points out problems with the assumption that the early Buddhist discourses are best read as reflecting a tension between two contrasting accounts of how liberating insight is gained, one of which involves a purely intellectual understanding of the four noble truths and the other relies on absorption attainment as productive of insight in and of itself.

Introduction

The present reflections are stimulated by an article by Grzegorz Polak published in the last issue of the *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*.¹ In what follows I try to clear the ground for further discussion by taking up a theory advocated by previous scholars who believe they have discerned an irreconcilable conflict between the advocates of two distinct paths to liberation in early Buddhist discourse. I first briefly look at this theory, then demonstrate

* I am indebted to *bhikkhunī* Dhammadinnā, Grzegorz Polak, and Daniel Stuart for commenting on a draft version of this article.

¹ Polak 2016. My original plan was to reply with a detailed criticism. However, personal contact with the author made me aware of his academically isolated situation, which explains what I perceived as a lack of acquaintance with relevant publications and a questionable methodology. Therefore in what follows I decided to focus more in general on problems that I see as being related to the main topics at issue.

problems with one of its main planks, the belief that the scheme of the four noble truths stands for an intellectual form of understanding only, and then argue that the consequent assumption that absorption attainment equals the gaining of liberating insight cannot be sustained in light of certain basic understandings of absorption in the early discourses.

The Two Paths Theory

The theory of two contrasting paths to liberation harkens back to an article published by de La Vallée Poussin in 1929, in which he argued that a discourse in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* (AN 6.46)² opposes meditators to those who reach liberation by mere reflection.³ By way of background to his taking up this position, it could be pertinent that 1929 falls within the period in which de La Vallée Poussin would have been working on his annotated translation of the *Abhidharmakośa*, published in six volumes from 1923 to 1931.⁴ This makes it fairly probable that his approach and thinking were influenced by Buddhist exegesis as expressed by scholars such as Vasubandhu.

A clear-cut division between tranquillity and insight of the type found regularly in Buddhist exegetical works — best known in this respect is probably the *Visuddhimagga* by Buddhaghosa — does not necessarily correspond to the situation in the early discourses. In such discourses *samatha* and *vipassanā* are rather interrelated qualities, instead of representing two separate meditation practices.⁵ Needless to say, this does not mean that there could not be discernible differences and even tensions between an emphasis on tranquillity or on insight. The point I intend to make is only that the assumption of two conflicting approaches to liberation, the one requiring a mode of intellectual reflection and the other being based solely on ecstatic absorption, does not accurately reflect what emerges from the early discourses. Nor does such a position accord particularly well with the bulk of later exegesis, but this is not what the present article is concerned with, as my concern is only to contrast the notion of two paths to liberation with the position taken in the early discourses.

² AN III 355,1.

³ Cf. de La Vallée Poussin 1929. In a subsequent paper, de La Vallée Poussin 1936/1937: 189f then argued that “on peut ... discerner dans les sources bouddhiques, anciennes ou scolastiques, deux théories opposées ... la théorie qui fait du salut une œuvre purement ou surtout intellectuelle; la théorie qui met le salut au bout des disciplines ascétiques et extatiques.”

⁴ Cf. de La Vallée Poussin 1923/1971, 1924/1971, 1926/1971, 1925/1980a, 1925/1980b, and 1931/1980.

⁵ Cf., e.g., Bergonzi 1980, Cousins 1984, Anālayo 2003: 88–91 and 2006, and Gangajot 2016.

Before moving on to that topic, however, it could briefly be mentioned that the mode of presentation in later tradition might be the result of an understandable attempt to standardize accounts of the path of practice, which the early discourses describe with some variations. Although such standardization yields neat theoretical presentations, a problem inevitably results from the fact that theoretical accounts can only describe one item at a time. There is therefore an inherent danger that cumulative and interrelated aspects of the path recede to the background, whereas its sequential aspects are foregrounded.⁶ This might explain the variations found in path accounts in the early discourses, which could be read to exemplify that a single mode of description fails to do full justice to the complexity of actual practice. With the adoption of a unified and standardized mode of description, the interrelation between tranquillity and insight appears to have to some degree faded out of sight in substantial parts of Buddhist exegetical activity. This development would in turn have fuelled interpretations of the two paths to liberation type, such as those proposed by de La Vallée Poussin and by other scholars who have been influenced by his presentation. However, the position taken by these scholars goes considerably further and results in losing sight of the interrelation between tranquillity and insight to a much stronger degree than do the exegetical traditions.

The theory of two paths to liberation has by now met with recurrent criticism. After referring to de La Vallée Poussin's take on AN 6.46, Eliade (1958: 176, originally published in French in 1954) clarified that in this discourse both of "the two methods ... are equally indispensable for obtaining arahantship", adding that "the 'experimental knowledge' given by the four *jhānas* and the *samāpattis* does not lead to *nirvāṇa* unless it is illuminated by 'wisdom'."

Swearer (1972: 369) noted that the position taken by La Vallée Poussin "that the 'intellectual' and the 'ecstatic' or 'rational' and 'mystical' are two opposing means to the ultimately real in Pāli Buddhism is severely challenged by an analysis of *viññāṇa* and *paññā*" (which he offers in his paper).

Cox (1992/1994: 66) highlighted the need to take into account the possibility that, instead of a tension between knowledge and meditative concentration, the "final goal ... subsumes knowledge and concentration as equally cooperative means rather than mutually exclusive ends." Keown (1992/2001: 82) concluded that two type of meditation "techniques exist precisely because final perfection can only be achieved when both dimensions of psychic functioning, the emotional and the intellectual, are purified."

⁶ Cf. in more detail Anālayo 2016a.

Other papers with criticism of the assumptions underlying the two paths theory and/or with clarifications regarding the discourses quoted in its support have in the meantime been published by, e.g., Gómez (1999), Bodhi (2003),⁷ and Cousins (2009).⁸ Gethin (1992/2001: xiv) sums up that, “contrary to what is sometimes suggested, there are not two radically different conceptions of the Buddhist path vying with each other: there is no great struggle going on between the advocates of the way of ‘calm’ (*samatha*) and ‘meditation’ (*jhāna*) on the one hand, and the advocates of the way of ‘insight’ (*vipassanā*) and understanding (*paññā*) on the other. In fact it turns out that the characteristically early Buddhist conception of the path leading to the cessation of suffering is that it consists precisely in the combining of calm and insight.” Again, Stuart (2013: 44) comments, in a discussion related to the attainment of cessation in particular, that “though there is a ‘fundamental difference’ between a mindless state of cessation and a mindful realization of the Four Noble Truths, the practice said to lead to these states may very well have originally been singular.”

As far as I can see, the two paths theory has by now been successfully refuted and might best be set aside as an erroneous projection of the Western contrast between the thinker and the mystic onto material that does not warrant such an interpretation. Of course, others will not necessarily agree with my assessment. Yet, those who wish to uphold this theory or one of its two main assumptions need to engage seriously with the criticism that has been voiced, rather than ignoring it. At the very least, the notion of two conflicting paths can no longer be taken as representing scholarly consensus, but needs first to be argued by addressing in detail the different objections that have been raised.

Without rehearsing most of what has already been said in those publications, I here simply take up a few selected discourse passages to illustrate the shortcomings of the two main assumptions that I see as underlying the theory of two separate paths to liberation. These are: 1) the notion that in the early discourses the comprehension of the four noble truths is a matter of intellectual reflection only, and 2) the conviction that the attainment of absorption was considered as liberating in and of itself.

⁷ Cf. also Bodhi 2007 and 2009.

⁸ Stuart 2015: 9 note 12 mentions also two unpublished papers by Rupert Gethin with criticism of the two paths theory. In Anālayo 2015: 12–15, I surveyed the main passages quoted in support of the two paths theory, arguing that none of these warrants such a reading.

In what follows, in addition to presenting material that in my view undermines such assumptions, I also hope to exemplify the type of methodological procedure that I deem to be required to establish a sound foundation for assessing early and later strata among the early discourses. This is the historical-critical procedure of comparative study of parallel versions. Such comparison reveals areas of agreement and variation between discourses transmitted by different reciter lineages and thereby offers a basis for assessing what forms the common ground among early Buddhist texts. In order to facilitate such study, I present translations of key passages from the Chinese *Āgamas*, so as to enable the reader to compare these with the Pāli parallels that are more readily available in English translation.

The Four Noble Truths

Polak (2016: 89f) notes that the four noble truths correspond to right view, which he rightly recognizes as forming a precondition for the cultivation of the noble eightfold path. He sees this precursory role as standing in contrast to passages that present the four noble truths as an expression of the attainment of the final goal of the path.

Here it needs to be kept in mind that a preliminary understanding of the four noble truths as a guiding principle for setting out on the practice of the noble eightfold path need not correspond to the level of insight into the four noble truths gained with awakening. The *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* and its Chinese parallels agree on presenting each of the four noble truths as a task that requires sustained practice, expressed in terms of three turnings applied to each truth. Here are excerpts from this exposition in the *Samyukta-āgama* parallel to the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*, which sets in after the first “turning” of a basic understanding of the four noble truths has already been described:⁹

The noble truth of *dukkha* should be further understood with knowledge ... having understood the noble truth of the arising of *dukkha*, it should be eradicated ... having understood this noble truth of the cessation of *dukkha*, it should be realized ... having understood this noble truth of the path to the cessation of *dukkha*, it should be cultivated ...

⁹ SĀ 379 at T II 103c17 to 104a1; for a survey of the parallels to this discourse cf. Anālayo 2012: 13–17.

Having understood this noble truth of *dukkha*, it has to be understood completely ... having understood this noble truth of the arising of *dukkha*, it has to be eradicated completely ... having understood the noble truth of the cessation of *dukkha*, it has to be realized completely ... having understood the noble truth of the path to the cessation of *dukkha*, it has to be cultivated completely ...

In the above extract, for the sake of readability I have employed ellipses to dispense with a repeated occurrence of the expression “when I gave proper attention to it, vision, knowledge, understanding, and realization arose.” This expression is found after each of the individual statements. The formulation reinforces what already emerges from the passage itself, namely the need to deepen one’s understanding of the four noble truths. This clearly implies that there are different levels of profundity in understanding the four noble truths, which can span from the initial appreciation of one who has just embarked on the path all the way to the profound insight of one who has reached full awakening. The *Samyukta-āgama* version then concludes this part of its exposition with the Buddha’s statement:¹⁰

[So long as] in regard to these four noble truths in three turnings and twelve modes I had not given rise to vision, knowledge, understanding, and realization, I had not yet attained ... deliverance, release, and liberation.

From a comparative perspective, a difference in the *Samyutta-nikāya* parallel is that, instead of applying one turning to all four truths and then moving on to the next turning, it rather applies all three turnings to one truth and then moves on to the next truth.¹¹ This is a recurrent difference among the parallel versions of the discourse with which, according to tradition, the Buddha set in motion the wheel of Dharma.¹² In fact one version found in the *Ekottarika-āgama* just mentions the three turnings and the resulting twelve modes, without working through them in detail.¹³

Alongside such variations, however, the basic notion of three turnings that

¹⁰ SĀ 379 at T II 104a2 to 104a4.

¹¹ SN 56.11 at SN V 422,3.

¹² For a survey of these different patterns cf. Anālayo 2013: 33.

¹³ EĀ 24.5 at T II 619b3.

need to be applied to each of the four truths is clearly common heritage of the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* and its parallels. This implies that, from the time of what tradition regards as the first sermon given by the recently awakened Buddha, engagement with the four noble truths was clearly *not* presented as an intellectual exercise in reasoned understanding only. Rather, it was considered to involve a prolonged task, expressed with the metaphor of “three turnings”. It is only with the completion of this prolonged task that according to the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* and its parallels the Buddha felt qualified to claim he had reached liberation.

Besides, judging from the above passage and its parallels, the four noble truths are not the actual content of the experience of awakening. That is, to describe the realization of awakening with the help of the scheme of the four noble truths does not necessarily imply that such realization takes place in a way that directly involves the formulations employed for describing these four noble truths.¹⁴ In other words, the presentation in the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* and its parallels does not require us to imagine the Buddha at the moment of awakening mentally saying to himself: “This is *dukkha*, this is the arising of *dukkha*...” etc.

Instead of describing intellectual reasoning at the moment of awakening, the formulation of the four noble truths appears to be rather a retrospective description of what happened, based on a scheme apparently taken over from ancient Indian medical diagnosis.¹⁵ The realization itself at the moment of awakening is the experience of Nirvāṇa. This finds expression in the circumstance that the three turnings described in the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* use the terminology of realization only in relation to the third truth. It is with the realization of Nirvāṇa that the cessation of *dukkha* is realized.

The terminology employed in the passage above clarifies also the relationship between the third noble truth and the other three. With the “realization” of the cessation of *dukkha*, *dukkha* is fully “understood” (by having once experienced its complete absence) = 1st truth; the arising of *dukkha* has been “eradicated” = 2nd truth; and the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha* has been “cultivated” to

¹⁴ This suggestion accords with the recognition by Polak 2016: 103 that the early Buddhist notion of liberating insight at the time of awakening needs to be understood as involving a “psychological mechanism which does not have to be deliberately and consciously practised” in the sense of intentional reflection, although such reflection can prepare the ground for the arrival at awakening by informing the cultivation of insight during the prior stages of the path.

¹⁵ Cf. Anālayo 2011.

its fulfilment = 4th truth. Thus, what the entire set of the four noble truths points to is a realization experience, which is described by analogy with a medical scheme of diagnosis. This four-fold scheme serves to explain the implications of the realization and at the same time enables others to follow up and reach the same realization.

Understood in this way, the four noble truths can fulfil their diagnostic function at the outset of the path, when an initial appreciation of the fact of *dukkha*, its cause, the possibility of its cessation, and the vision of a practical path to this end motivates someone to set out to cultivate the path. They can continue to encapsulate the motivation and deepening insight of the one who walks the path, and they can eventually function as an expression of the arrival at the goal. But they are not the goal itself, just as the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself.

The Absorptions and Insight

Polak (2016: 85) introduces his paper by stating that he attempts “to present a model of liberating insight as an intrinsic quality of the *jhāna* meditative state”.¹⁶ The assumption that absorption in itself is productive of insight is difficult to reconcile with several early discourses which clearly point to the potential drawbacks of absorption. In what follows I take up two such passages by way of exemplification.

The first passage is found in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* which, in agreement with its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, describes how a monk who is an attainer of absorption can subsequently get so overwhelmed by sensual desire that he disrobes. Here is the relevant passage from the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel:¹⁷

Venerable friends, suppose there is a person who attains the first absorption. Having attained the first absorption, he in turn remains at ease himself and does not strive further with a wish to attain what he has not yet attained, with a wish to obtain what he has not obtained, with a wish to realize what he has not realized. Later he in turn associates frequently with laypeople, makes fun, becomes conceited, and engages in various types of impetuous conversations. As he associates frequently with laypeople, makes

¹⁶ Another attempt to argue this position is Arbel 2015; for a critical reply cf. Anālayo 2016b.

¹⁷ MĀ 82 at T I 558b2 to 558b8, parallel to AN 6.60 at AN III 394,11.

fun, becomes conceited, and engages in various types of impetuous conversations, sensual desire in turn arises in his mind. Sensual desire having arisen in his mind, his body in turn becomes heated up [with passion] and his mind becomes heated up [with passion]. His body and mind having become heated up [with passion], he in turn gives up the precepts and quits the path.

Both discourses continue with the same assessment for the attainment of the higher absorptions. The two versions also agree in illustrating each such case with a simile, although they show some differences in the relationship they establish between a particular simile and the corresponding level of absorption. In the case of the first absorption, the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* discourse describes dust on a road that disappears after rain (a simile used in the *Madhyama-āgama* for the second absorption),¹⁸ whereas the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse describes no longer seeing pebbles (etc.) in a pond that has become full of water after rain (a simile used in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* for the second absorption).¹⁹ It seems that at some point during oral transmission the similes related to the first and second absorptions changed places in one of these two versions.

Alongside such variations, however, the two discourses clearly agree in their basic assessment that a monk who has attained absorption can subsequently become so overwhelmed with sensual desire that he will disrobe and give up the training. Such a presentation is hardly compatible with the idea that absorption is in itself productive of insight. Instead, it shows that absorption attainment needs to be combined with the cultivation of insight, that the temporary aloofness from sensuality gained during such absorbed experience does not suffice to ensure that sensual passion does not overwhelm the mind on a later occasion.

The other passage I like to take up stems from the *Brahmajāla-sutta*, of which besides the Pāli version several parallels are extant in Chinese and Tibetan translation. These show rather substantial differences in their presentation of the first part of the discourse, concerned with morality, and also have variations in their exposition of some of the different viewpoints.²⁰ Comparative study makes it fair to conclude that the long exposition on morality in the Pāli version, for example, is probably the outcome of a later expansion. Alongside such

¹⁸ AN 6.60 at AN III 394,15 and MĀ 82 at T I 558c2.

¹⁹ AN 6.60 at AN III 395,5 and MĀ 82 at T I 558b8 (which has a slightly longer list of things to be seen in the pond, compared to those mentioned in AN 6.60).

²⁰ Cf. Anālayo 2009 and 2014.

variations, the parallel versions agree closely in presenting the attainment of absorption as a source for the arising of mistaken views.²¹

The *Brahmajāla-sutta*’s exposition on views is one of the few instances where a discourse is quoted by name in another Pāli discourse, a clear token of the *Brahmajāla-sutta*’s antiquity.²² As far as textual evidence is concerned, the testimony of the exposition on views in this discourse has to be taken seriously as a representation of early Buddhist thought. The relevant passage in the *Dīrgha-āgama* version proceeds as follows:²³

When having left behind sensuality as well as evil and unwholesome states, with [directed] contemplation and [sustained] awareness, with joy and happiness born of seclusion, I attain the first absorption: this is reckoned *Nibbāna* here and now.

The *Brahmajāla-sutta* and its parallels continue in similar ways for the remaining three absorptions. As explained by Bodhi (1978/1992: 31f), this part of the discourse depicts “attainers of the four jhānas, who mistake the rapture, bliss and peacefulness of their attainments for the supreme good.” The Buddha’s assessment of such *jhāna*-attainers then takes the following form:²⁴

Recluses and brahmins who declare [of the first absorption] that: ‘this is reckoned *Nibbāna* here and now’, [do so] conditioned by feeling, which produces craving. Craving haven arisen, they do not realize by themselves that they are being defiled by attachment through craving and are under the power of craving.

This part of the discourse reflects what Katz (1982/1989: 150) has aptly called a “psychoanalysis of metaphysical claims”. Far from being informed by doxographical concerns, the issue at stake in the different versions of the *Brahmajāla* is to lay bare the psychological underpinnings of the tendency to view formation. The central intent is not to present a survey of views held

²¹ DN I at DN I 37,1 and its parallels DĀ 21 at T I 93b20, a Tibetan discourse parallel in Weller 1934: 58,3 (§191), and discourse quotations in the **Śāriputrābhidharma*, T 1548 at T XXVIII 660b24, and in the *Abhidharmakośopāyika-ṭīkā*, D 4094 *ju* 152a4 or Q 5595 *tu* 175a8

²² SN 41.3 at SN IV 287,12; the parallel SĀ 570 at T II 151a19 only mentions the different views, without giving the discourse’s title.

²³ DĀ 21 at T I 93b20 to 93b22.

²⁴ DĀ 21 at T I 93c20 to 93c22 (the passage is abbreviated in the original and only gives the full treatment for the first of the sixty-two viewpoints).

in ancient India or elsewhere, but to show how clinging to any view has its basis in craving. Bodhi (1978/1992: 9) comments that “the primary focus ... is not so much the content of the view as the underlying malady of which the addiction to speculative tenets is a symptom.” Fuller (2005: 115) argues that “the *Brahmajāla-sutta* proposes neither a sixty-third view ... nor the rejection of all views ... but knowledge of the cessation of craving. This is right view.”

Needless to say, such right view is not the automatic outcome of absorption attainment, as the above passage amply demonstrates. This brings me back to the four noble truths mentioned in the preceding section of this paper. It is precisely the understanding of the role of craving, as expressed in the second noble truth in particular, that is missing in the case of the absorption attainers described in the *Brahmajāla-sutta* and its parallels.

Conclusion

The assumption that the early Buddhist discourses are best read as reflecting a conflict between two competing visions of the path to liberation is, to my mind, the result of an unwarranted projection of the division between the thinker and the mystic as two mutually exclusive personas onto material that does not warrant being read in the light of this contrast. The few selected discourses taken up in this brief paper show that the four noble truths as a diagnostic scheme can encompass different levels of insight and that absorption attainment, in spite of its undeniable benefits for progress on the path, was not considered to be liberating in and of itself.

Abbreviations

AN	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
D	Derge edition
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
DN	<i>Dīrgha-nikāya</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i>
Q	Peking edition
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i>
T	Taishō edition

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