

Mindfulness Between Early Buddhism and Climate Change

Endorsement

International efforts to mitigate climate change vary in success across nations. While these efforts are crucial, they alone are insufficient. They must be complemented by individual and community-level actions tailored to local needs and circumstances. Bhikkhu Anālayo's work in promoting sustainability through mindfulness offers a significant contribution in this regard. In *Mindfully Facing Climate Change* he integrated individual responses within the framework of the Four Noble Truths. His present analysis in *Mindfulness Between Early Buddhism and Climate Change* explores how early Buddhist teachings on mindfulness meditation can guide responses to climate change at both individual and community levels.

Bhikkhu Anālayo's has been generous in sharing with mindfulness researchers and practitioners his vast textual and practice knowledge, particularly of the early Buddhist teachings. My role as the founding editor of *Mindfulness*, the premier academic journal in the field, highlighted the need for a deeper understanding of Buddhist teachings among mindfulness researchers. Thus, I invited Bhikkhu Anālayo to help our researchers through his scholarship. In response, he has published some 150 articles in *Mindfulness* and the *Encyclopedia of Mindfulness, Buddhism, and Other Contemplative Practices*.

Bhikkhu Anālayo's scholarship has also clarified misunderstandings within the mindfulness field. For instance, the first generation of mindfulness-based interventions were presented as secular programs, which enabled them to gain acceptance as an evidence-based clinical intervention in academic settings. While the acceptance issue was valid, one of the misconceptions

of secular programs was that the Buddha never intended his teachings to be used as a clinical intervention because his focus was on awakening. In an influential article published in *Mindfulness*, Bhikkhu Anālayo corrected this misunderstanding by documenting that the Buddha taught mindfulness for weight reduction, thereby providing a precedent for the contemporary employment of mindfulness for health benefits. This kind of textual scholarship was influential in the development of second-generation mindfulness-based interventions that openly incorporate Buddhist teachings.

Bhikkhu Anālayo helped the field to better understand that mindfulness is not a monolithic construct, as typically understood in the West, but varies even within Buddhist lineages. Thus, seeking to have a unitary research definition of mindfulness may be a fool's errand. He also debunked the concept of McMindfulness. In addition, he provided context and clarity on the purported dangers of mindfulness.

In the first part of *Mindfulness Between Early Buddhism and Climate Change*, Bhikkhu Anālayo presents such corrections to misinterpretations regarding the nature of early Buddhism; similarly, in the second part, he clarifies matters related to traditional mindfulness meditation and its modern clinical applications. The third part on climate change is a tour de force, which presents a comprehensive synthesis of scholarship from economics, politics, quantum physics, etc., on climate change, relating these to early Buddhist thought. It is both broad and deep, without being daunting or overly simplistic. It provides an overview of the core challenges of climate change and how early Buddhist teachings can be used to foster change at both the global and local level, with the promise of a mindfulness-based program called Global Awareness and Local Action (GALA).

Nirbhay N. Singh

Also by Bhikkhu Anālayo:

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Mindfulness
Between Early Buddhism
and Climate Change

Bhikkhu Anālayo

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As an act of *dhammadāna*, Bhikkhu Anālayo has waived royalty payments for this book.

Cover image taken by Bhikkhu Anālayo of sawfly larvae devouring the leaves of a young tree—which just managed to survive this—growing by the side of the walking path leading to his cottage at BCBS. The larvae are in a posture of defense, with raised abdomen ready to tap downward. The combination of being a threat and being threatened that emerges from the image seems to offer an apt illustration of humanity in the face of climate change.

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Considerable parts of my presentation are based on revised material from articles published earlier. Most of these articles appeared in the journal *Mindfulness*, some of which in open access, thanks to the DEAL agreement between German universities—in my case in particular the University of Hamburg—and Springer Nature. To comply with the copyright stipulations for articles in the same journal not covered in this way, I here give the required information in relation to the relevant part of my book.

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Introduction

The main proposal underpinning the present book is that the cultivation of mindfulness in combination with a perspective informed by central ideas of early Buddhist thought can provide a viable basis for facing climate change with mental balance and ethical integrity. My presentation in what follows builds on my earlier book publication on *Mindfully Facing Climate Change*, in which I explored relevant early Buddhist teachings in general and mindfulness in particular from the viewpoint of their potential contribution to facing climate change. The present book expands on this exploration in two ways. One of these two takes the form of an attempt to clarify aspects of early Buddhism and of mindfulness as the two central axes of the approach I developed in that publication. The other brings the perspective that emerged from my earlier study in dialogue with research from a variety of disciplines relevant to climate change.

The present book falls into three distinct parts. The first part takes up selected assessments by scholars of Buddhist studies regarding the nature of *early Buddhism* that I believe require some critical examination. The second part proceeds along a similar trajectory, but here in relation to traditional *mindfulness* meditation and its contemporary use in clinical settings. With the third part I shift gears, so to say, and turn to *climate change*, with the aim of exploring recent research on this topic in order to develop practical perspectives on how to face and live with it.

Each of these three parts—with their particular emphases on doctrinal, meditational, and social concerns respectively—can be read on its own. Readers mainly interested in climate change, for example, may prefer to proceed directly to the third part (p.

221). Conversely, readers mainly interested in a critical examination of assessments of early Buddhism or of mindfulness may instead opt for continuing to read the first part or shifting to the second part (p. 95). Considerable portions of the first two parts are based on revised versions of articles published earlier,¹ combined with new material; the latter dominates in the third part.

By way of concluding this introduction, I turn to a quote from Kabat-Zinn (2019: 59f) regarding the potential of facing the challenges of climate change with mindfulness:

How will we know when the world is close to not breathing and therefore it is already past time to act? Will it be when we can no longer go outside in our cities and breathe the air? ... What will it take to wake us up, and for us to take a different, more imaginative, and wiser path? To face the autoimmune disease we are suffering from as a species, and that we are equally the cause of, we will need, sooner or later, to realize the unique necessity for the cultivation of mindful awareness, with its capacity for clarifying what is most important and most human about us, and for removing the thick veil of unawareness from our senses and our thought processes.

¹ The extracts range from taking over nearly all of the respective material to just providing minor excerpts. The relevant articles are Anālayo 2019c, 2020c, 2020d, 2020f, 2020i, 2020k, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e, 2022d, 2022e, 2022f, 2022g, 2023b, 2023g, and Anālayo, Steffens-Dhaussy, Gallo, and Scott 2022. For details of credits to be given for some of these publications see above p. 9.

Early Buddhism

Introduction

Before providing a brief survey of the selected topics to be covered in this first part of my book, I need to present two disclaimers. One of these is that, even though my focus is on early Buddhist teachings as a background to approaching the challenges of climate change, this is not in any way meant to present the only viable way of doing so. The challenges of climate change are so complex and manifest with such local variations that a whole range of different perspectives and approaches are needed in combination.

The second disclaimer concerns the criticism of publications by a range of other scholars that I will be presenting here. The points I raise are not meant to imply a wholesale dismissal of the respective publications, let alone other works by the same scholars. Instead, my criticism is more specifically concerned with assessments of early Buddhist thought and practice that I believe require correction. Moreover, my presentation is not meant to provide a comprehensive survey of scholarship on a particular topic, instead of which I only take up selected assessments of which I happen to be aware, and which seem to call for a response within the framework of the present book.

My examination begins with the term “early Buddhism” and the appropriateness of its usage, together with the source material used for its reconstruction. I then turn to the attribution of omniscience to the Buddha, reports of his past lives, and the doctrine of karma in relation to rebirth.

Next, I examine in detail contentions related to the early Buddhist notion of awakening as such and to various levels of

realization. My final topics are the teaching on the absence of a self and its counterpart in conditionality.

Defining ‘Early Buddhism’

In what follows I use the expression “early Buddhism” as a chronological periodization to refer to the earliest period in the development of Buddhist thought and practice, spanning from its inception to about the time of the reign of King Aśoka in the third century BCE. The time of inception—in other words, the time when the Buddha himself would have lived—is difficult to determine with certainty.¹ Nevertheless, the period of early Buddhism can be taken to comprise, very roughly speaking, about two centuries.

Elsewhere, I have discussed the dating in more detail,² so that in what follows I can take up other aspects of the term that may appear problematic. One of these aspects relates to a type of reasoning described (and then convincingly criticized) by Nattier (1991: 7) in the following way:

The Buddhist religious tradition—indeed, Indian religious thought in general—is often described as lacking a true sense of history. Because the Indian view of time is cyclic rather than linear, so it is argued ... the Buddhists, like the Hindus, simply have no interest in history.

The indeed unconvincing nature of the assumption that there has been a lack of interest in a historical perspective in Indian religious thought finds confirmation in the evidence provided by the textual sources for the period of early Buddhism.

¹ See the different contributions in Bechert 1995 and for a recent discussion Skilling 2021: 469–480.

² See Anālayo 2023f: 1–6.

The term “early” or “earlier” as such has a Pāli and Sanskrit equivalent in *pubba/pūrva*, which can also convey such senses as “former” or “previous,” etc. An example illustrating the usage of the term would be a description of a servant who gets up “earlier” and goes to bed later than the master.³ Another example depicts a monastic going to beg alms in the “early” part of the day, that is, in the morning.⁴

These two instances demonstrate that the qualification “early” or “earlier” need not carry any implicit evaluation. Although the servant is perhaps worse off due to having to get up *early*, the master would be better off due to being able to go to bed *early*. Again, the morning is not somehow intrinsically better or worse than any other time of the day, instead of which it is simply the proper time for monastics to go begging, since they must partake of food before noon.

In other words, be it in Indic languages or in English, the qualification of being “early” as such appears to be value-neutral. Although at times what is earlier can be better, at other times it can be worse; the context determines whether it carries an evaluation. An example for “early” being of lower value would be a usage of the same term in a standard phrase with which the Buddha reportedly refers to the period of his life before his awakening.⁵ Clearly, in this case what is early or earlier is inferior, because at that time he had not yet awakened.

The importance of a chronological type of thinking in turn emerges in a Pāli discourse and its parallels, which depict a lineage of former Buddhas, clearly distinguishing between those

³ See, e.g., MN 84 at MN II 84,19 and SĀ 548 at T II 142b11.

⁴ See, e.g., MN 66 at MN I 447,12 and MĀ 192 at T I 740c18.

⁵ For a survey of occurrences see Anālayo 2010a: 15–19.

who lived earlier and those who lived later.⁶ A basic parameter in monastic legislation as evident in *Vinaya* texts relies on the same distinction between what happened earlier and what later, so as to differentiate between a rule and its amendments, which often come embedded in a narrative setting that purports to record what led to the respective legislations.

Such a perspective is of continuous relevance beyond the period of early Buddhism, evident in the notion of a first *saṅgīti*, a first “communal recitation” (rather than a “council”), that was followed by a second *saṅgīti*.⁷ The Pāli commentaries clearly distinguish between texts believed to have been included in the first *saṅgīti* and those held to have been added only with the second *saṅgīti*.⁸ This reflects recognition of a chronological perspective in relation to textual transmission.

In this way, a chronological type of thinking is already evident in “early Buddhist” thought and the subsequent period reflected in exegesis, and the designation “early” as such is not a foreign imposition.

Nevertheless, the exact term “early Buddhism” has no direct Pāli or Sanskrit equivalent among the early discourses. This is

⁶ The parallel versions of this discourse agree in reporting that the Buddha had been informed of various details regarding these previous Buddhas by their former disciples, whom he encountered when paying a visit to the Pure Abodes, the celestial realms in which they had been reborn; see DN 14 at DN II 50,18, Waldschmidt 1956: 162 (11.7) or Fukita 2003: 160, DĀ 1 at T I 10b14, and T 3 at T I 158b11. This implies that, from the emic viewpoint, various details related to former Buddhas should be read as historical reports of what was believed to have actually happened.

⁷ For the different accounts of these two *saṅgītis* see Anuruddha, Fung, and Siu 2008.

⁸ For an example see Anālayo 2022b: 218 note 102.

hardly surprising. Early generations of disciples of the Buddha could not have referred to themselves as “early” (or “pre-Aśo-kan” for that matter), simply because such a designation will only arise retrospectively from the viewpoint of later times.⁹

As long as the two individual terms “early” and “Buddhism” have antecedents,¹⁰ however, the absence of a usage that combines the two should not be a major problem. After all, it can hardly be expected that any concept in use must be just as old as the phenomenon it describes. If that were the case, we would be unable to say anything about the evolution of species on this planet, for example, because at that time no human language was in existence. This exemplifies that there is nothing inherently problematic in using concepts coined perhaps a century ago to refer to what took place even a billion years ago.

The term “early Buddhism” has in fact been used in scholarly writings for quite some time. This can be exemplified by surveying its employment in book and article titles by various scholars:

The term “early Buddhism” occurs in the titles of a book by T. W. Rhys Davids originally published in 1880 and another

⁹ Perhaps a relevant example in this respect would be when Th 1036 reports Ānanda referring to “ancients,” *purāṇā*, who according to the commentary Th-a III 120,8 were Sāriputta and other elders, set in contrast to the more recent generation of monks. This usage of course does not require that Sāriputta and the other elders, who in the meantime had passed away, previously considered themselves to be “ancients” in some way. It is adequate from the perspective of Ānanda, who was still alive when a “new” generation of monks took over with whom he did not feel in concord, *navehi na sameti me*, and therefore kept to himself.

¹⁰ On precedents for the term “Buddhism” see Anālayo 2021i: 108–115.

book by Bimala Churn Law published in 1932, followed by featuring in titles of articles by I. B. Horner, A. K. Warder, Jan Willem de Jong, and Lambert Schmithausen in 1945, 1956, 1964, and 1981 respectively.¹¹ Henry Cruise announces a discussion of “recent” misconceptions regarding early Buddhism in the title of an article published in 1983, and Tilmann Vetter uses the same term for the title of a book published in 1988. Further usage of the same term in titles involves Collett Cox in 1992, K. R. Norman in 1993, and Peter Harvey in 1995. The same continues with Rupert Gethin in 2004, Peter Skilling in 2011, and Jens Braarvig in 2014.

The above is just a random selection of publications that mention the term in their title; a more thorough search would probably unearth many more examples. For the present purposes, this much suffices to show that employment of the term “early Buddhism” has quite some history in Buddhist studies, and several leading scholars are among its users.

Needless to say, the implications of the term will of course vary from usage to usage. As far as a precedent for my usage of the term is concerned, an example for a scholar employing the corresponding adjectival form would be Gregory Schopen. In an article originally published in 1983 and republished in 2005, Gregory Schopen uses the expression “early Buddhist *sūtra* literature” or else just “early Buddhist literature” as an equivalent to the alternative phrase “*Nikāya/Āgama* literature.”¹² I am not aware of anyone problematizing his usage, which corresponds to the way I use the terms “early Buddhist” or “early Buddhism,”

¹¹ Throughout, the dates refer to the original publication rather than the reprint date.

¹² Schopen 1983/2005: 190 and 213; for a critical reply to the main thesis proposed in this article see Anālayo 2024.

namely as a reference to the type of thought that comparative study shows to be similar in the four main Pāli *Nikāyas* and their Chinese *Āgama* parallels (together with relevant Gāndhārī, Sanskrit, and Tibetan texts).

We differ on the dating of these texts, however, and in an article published in 2012 under the title “The Historical Value of the Pāli Discourses” I have criticized his arguments in this respect in detail. I am not aware of any reply to that, and the dating as such is also not a novelty, as early Buddhism has already been allocated to the pre-Aśokan time by Paul Griffiths in 1983.¹³ In the hope that the above suffices to establish the terminology, in what follows I turn to criticism of what this term designates.

The two centuries of development designated by “early Buddhism” are the common ground from which the different Buddhist traditions emerged and which they all took as their central inspiration. Theravāda is one of these traditions, which needs to be differentiated from early Buddhism. The term Theravāda can be used to describe the South and Southeast Asian Buddhist tradition(s) since the time of the transmission of Buddhism to Sri Lanka during the reign of King Aśoka (although at that time the term was not yet in use in this way), and from then onwards it can be applied to various manifestations of this tradition (or better, of these traditions) in South and Southeast Asia and more recently also in the West.¹⁴

For reconstructing the preceding period of early Buddhism, the primary source material is almost entirely textual. The relevant textual sources are mainly the four *Āgamas/Nikāyas*, to-

¹³ Griffiths 1983: 56: “By ‘early Buddhism’ we mean, broadly speaking, pre-Aśokan Indian Buddhism.”

¹⁴ See also Anālayo 2013b and 2023d.

gether with smaller collections (mainly of poetry) whose Pāli version is found in the fifth *Nikāya*, namely *Dhammapada*, *Udāna*, *Itivuttaka*, and *Suttanipāta*.

Writing was not employed in ancient India for the purpose of transmitting religious teachings, and the texts relevant to the reconstruction of early Buddhist thought are the final records of a long process of oral transmission. Now, an oral tradition is by its nature influenced by interactions with daily life experience on the ground. An oral text, resulting from an actual oral performance and then transmitted by relying on group recitation to diminish memory errors, is substantially different from the writing of the present book, for example, done by a single person and without direct interaction with the target audience.

The need to negotiate between a memorized text and the expectations and interests of the audience that forms the setting of an oral performance has impacted the early Buddhist oral tradition in various ways.¹⁵ A comparative study of the early discourses extant from different transmission lineages enables identifying such influences and discerning historical stages in the development of Buddhist thought and practice.

The potential of a comparative approach that relies on these early Buddhist texts has not always met with due recognition, and in what follows I reply to a recent articulation of relevant criticism. In the context of a monograph study of lives of the Buddha—which are only narrated in texts later than the early Buddhist discourses—Faure (2022: 48) notes that a “methodological principle, often invoked, is that the agreement between the Sanskrit *Āgamas* and the Pāli *Nikāyas* implies that we are in the presence of ancient data.” Yet, “any concordance could on

¹⁵ See in more detail Anālayo 2022b.

the contrary reflect a later development of tradition, an attempt at a posteriori reconciliation,” which he backs up by quoting Gregory Schopen in support.¹⁶

The tenet in question appears to be the assertion in Schopen (1985: 17) that “if all known versions of a text or passage agree, that text or passage is probably late, i.e. it probably represents the results of the conflation and gradual leveling and harmonization of earlier existing traditions.” I have presented a detailed refutation of this proposal in the article already mentioned above, *Anālayo* (2012c: 225–233). As of now, I am not aware of any critical response to my refutation, wherefore I take it that there is no need to go into this topic again.

Faure (2022: 17) also argues that “the first Pāli texts are also ‘apocryphal,’ in a way, since they date from several centuries after the parinirvāṇa.”¹⁷ The usage of “apocryphal” in this man-

¹⁶ Faure 2022: 256 note 19 refers to Schopen [1997/]2004 (see also his bibliography p. 295). The reference appears to be mistaken, as Schopen 1997/2004 rather discusses the topic of the unreliability of references to locations at which a text was reportedly spoken. This is indeed what he is quoted for in Faure 2022: 53f, which then leads the latter to reason that “supposedly ‘ancient’ texts reflect the application of editorial rules that are much later in date, perhaps even from the fourth and fifth centuries CE.” The circumstance that the discourses refer to named locations or persons does not imply that they must have been influenced by a rule found in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, which regulates the case when such a name has been forgotten, instructing to supplement it with the appellation of a well-known location or person. The rule in fact implies a recognition of already-existing names, rather than entailing that such names in principle result from the application of this rule.

¹⁷ The next sentence in Faure 2022: 17 reads as follows: “The first known manuscript dates from the fifth century CE.” The same position recurs in Faure 2022: 23: “the oldest known Pāli manuscript

ner risks depriving the term of meaning, since all of Buddhist literature dates from at least several centuries after the Buddha’s final Nirvana—as long as “dating” is understood to refer to written testimonies to which we still have access. The net result of this procedure would be a wholesale disqualification of oral literature as in principle “apocryphal.” This is inadequate for studying a cultural setting where orality was not only invested with central importance but also had acquired a high degree of precision in ensuring the transmission of Vedic sacred texts.

From matters related to the methodology of studying early Buddhist texts, I next turn to central doctrines found in them. Among these, what from the viewpoint of tradition features as the probably most central teaching by the Buddha, given in his first sermon after his awakening, concerns the four noble truths. The status of this teaching has been called into question by Faure (2022: 23), however, who argues that “the theory of the Four Truths, generally held to be the heart of the first sermon, does not appear in the early sources.”

The reference to early sources appears to intend his previous mention that “the oldest Sanskrit manuscripts, recently found in Gandhāra, date from the first two centuries.” Yet, among the early manuscripts from Gandhāra—which by the way are in Gāndhārī and not in Sanskrit—a clear reference to the four truths can be found.¹⁸ The four truths also occur in one of the

dates from the fifth century CE.” This appears to conflate the time of Buddhaghosa’s compilation of the Pāli commentaries with the substantially different dating of the oldest, extant Pāli manuscript; on the latter see von Hinüber 1991.

¹⁸ Baums 2009: 280 and 377 (scroll 9 line 79); the manuscript dates to between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE.

earliest extant Chinese translations of Buddhist texts.¹⁹ This decisively undermines the proposed questioning of the earliness of this key aspect of early Buddhist thought.

A closely related argument made by in Faure (2022: 85) in relation to the Buddha's first sermon takes the following form:

The *Nidānakathā*, for its part, gives us a very succinct account and does not even mention the Four Truths. This is surprising—all the more so since this sermon is not mentioned in early Chinese biographies either, which seems to indicate that it represents a late tradition. The possibility that the first sermon did not emphasize the dogma of the Four Truths sheds new light on the supposedly original doctrine of the Buddha, since it is in fact this dogma that most Western authors, and the neo-Buddhist adepts who have followed them, consider to be the foundation stone of the entire edifice of Buddhist doctrine.

In support of the absence of a mention of the four truths in “early Chinese biographies” (plural), Faure (2022: 259 note 59) refers to Karetzky (1992: 155f). However, Karetzky (1992: 156) refers just to a single text that does not mention the first sermon of the Buddha, qualified as being “the earliest of the Chinese scriptures that tell the life of the Buddha,” with the additional indication that this text “ends after the Enlightenment.”²⁰ The text indeed leads up to Śākyamuni's awakening, followed by

¹⁹ T 13 at T I 234a29, whose translator was active in the middle of the 2nd century CE; for confirmation of the attribution of T 13 to this translator (*Ān Shigāo*) see Nattier 2008: 49.

²⁰ The previous page in Karetzky 1992: 155 discusses representations in art and the reports of Chinese pilgrims rather than “Chinese biographies” of the Buddha.

referring to the prediction he had earlier received from the Buddha Dīpaṃkara, after which it ends with the usual report of the delight of the listeners.²¹ It is hardly surprising that the first sermon is not mentioned, simply because it falls outside the coverage of events given in this text.

In a monograph study of translatorship-attributions of texts rendered into Chinese in the second to third century, Nattier (2008: 103–109) has shown that the ranking of this text as the earliest biography of the Buddha extant in Chinese needs to be revised; it is later than has previously been assumed. Another text instead deserves this rank. This text reports the Buddha revealing to the five who were to become his first monastic disciples the “four truths,”²² explained to comprise the truth of *dukkha*, of its arising, of its cessation, and of the path (leading to its cessation), followed by providing detailed explanations of each of these four. This is clearly a version of what tradition reckons to have been the Buddha’s first sermon, and this version occurs in what according to our current knowledge is the earliest Chinese translation of a biography of the Buddha. The situation that emerges in this way is the same as above in relation to early Gandhāran manuscripts, in that the actual evidence points to the opposite of the proposed conclusions.

The *Nidānakathā* in turn forms the introduction to the Pāli *Jātaka* collection. In terms of textual type, it belongs to the category of Pāli commentaries. Among such commentaries it appears to be, according to the detailed survey of Pāli literature by von Hinüber (1996/1997: 152 and 149), later than the commentary on the first book of the Abhidharma collection, leading to an allocation of the whole text as subsequent to the composition

²¹ T 184 at T III 472b22.

²² T 196 at T IV 148b26.

of the commentaries on the *Vinaya* and on the four discourse collections.²³

The relevant passage in the *Nidānakathā* indicates that the Blessed One taught the *Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta* to the group of five.²⁴ This is indubitably a reference to the relevant Pāli discourse,²⁵ in line with a recurrent tendency in Pāli commentaries to reference various discourses. In fact, just a few lines of text later the same *Nidānakathā* refers by name to what according to tradition was the second sermon given by the Buddha, again without going into its contents.²⁶ In other words, the circumstance that the *Nidānakathā* “does not even mention the Four Truths” is simply because it references the well-known discourse that expounds these, obviating any need to give them in full.

The relative lateness of the *Jātakas* in general has also been questioned by Faure (2022: 41), who approvingly quotes Penner (2009) for having shown that “the *Jātakas*, or past lives of the Buddha, were included in the Buddhist legend from early on, as can be seen on the stūpas of Sanchi and Bharhut.”²⁷ Therefore,

²³ The reference is to As (commenting on Dhs), the other commentaries are Sp (on Vin), Sv (on DN), Ps (on MN), Spk (on SN), and Mp (on AN).

²⁴ Jā I 82,10.

²⁵ SN 56.11 at SN V 421,19 (= Vin I 10,26); for a comparative study of this discourse see Anālayo 2012a and 2013a.

²⁶ Jā I 82,18.

²⁷ Most directly relevant seem to be the following comments: Penner 2009: 2: “the *Jataka*, legends of his former births ... the memorial at Sanci portrays many of them.” Penner 2009: 135: “it is safe to assume that a long tradition existed before artists depicted scenes of the Buddha’s former lives on famous pilgrimage sites such as the gates of the memorial shrines at Sanci. It seems safe to assume,

rather than being seen as late, they should be considered “fundamental structural elements of Buddhism.”

Yet, as already pointed out by several scholars, the depictions found in Bhārhut and Sāñchī appear to be merely of tales and parables; the idea of identifying a protagonist in such tales as a former life of the Buddha is a later development not yet testified in these early sites.²⁸ Based on a range of case studies, in Anālayo (2010a: 55–71) I showed that there is clear textual evidence for a gradual evolution of various tales, taken from the ancient Indian narrative repertoire, by way of gradually morphing into becoming *jātakas*.²⁹

As evident from a closer study of the perhaps most famous *jātaka* of prince Vessantara, this gradual process has led to the inclusion of values that at times conflict with central ethical principles of early Buddhist thought.³⁰ In other words, rather

therefore, that legends of the Buddha’s former lives are not to be put aside as late developments.” Penner 2009: 136: “We can identify the great shrine at Sanci as an explicit representation of a well-developed system of beliefs and practices ... that includes the legends of the Buddha together with his former lives.” Based on this position, Faure 2022: 107 in turn affirms, in relation to the *jātakas*, that “[s]ome of these earlier existences [of the Buddha] appear in iconography as early as the second century BCE.”

²⁸ See, e.g., Gokuldas De 1951: 18, Cummings 1982: 20, and Sarkar 1990: 5.

²⁹ This pattern finds recognition in Faure 2022: 108 in the form of a comment on the *jātaka* genre that “it allowed Buddhism to assimilate an enormous amount of traditional Indian folklore. Any traditional tale could thus be transformed into a *Jātaka* simply by making one of its protagonists a past incarnation of the future Buddha.”

³⁰ See Anālayo 2016c. Faure 2022: 123 notes that “it is difficult to approve of Vessantara’s behavior” and comments on the tale that it gives “the impression ... of having been written by two authors who

than being “fundamental structural elements,” some *jātakas* actually are at variance with central doctrines of early Buddhism, precisely due to resulting from an incorporation of tales that originated outside of the Buddhist traditions.

This is one of many examples showing that comparative research can substantially contribute to a historical perspective that enables situating different (and at times dissonant) Buddhist teaching traditions along the trajectory of time, facilitating an understanding of the particular set of conditions that influenced the respective positions.

Needless to say, Buddhism has never been and will never be a static and solid entity existing in the abstract. Instead, it reflects a continuous process of responding to changing circumstances and various challenges. Early Buddhist thought does so from within the cultural and social context of its ancient Indian setting. Even though this particular response is close to the time of the Buddha, it is at the same time rather distant from contemporary times. This makes it challenging to interpret it correctly and to relate it meaningfully to this postmodern world.

Omniscience, Past Lives, and Karma

The worldview of early Buddhism reflects several aspects of ancient Indian cosmology. From the viewpoint of the potential of this worldview as a backdrop to facing climate change, a key question would be: Should the traditional religious setting of early Buddhist teachings be considered just irrelevant baggage, better to be dropped as extraneous to contemporary needs? Or could an appreciation of the framework it provides instead be relevant in some form for better understanding the challenges

were at odds with each other.” Comparative study can help to explain this state of affairs.

of climate change, and at times perhaps even help reorient attempts to confront it?

Among different dimensions of Indian cosmology, adopted by the Buddhist traditions, an example is Mount Meru, whose ancient Indian conception as the central axis of a flat world is incompatible with scientific knowledge of the planet Earth. After surveying how Buddhist traditionalists have tried to deal with this contrast, Lopez (2008: 72) reasons:

Yet once the process of demythologizing begins, once the process of deciding between the essential and the inessential is under way, it is often difficult to know where to stop. The question, then, is which Buddhist doctrines can be eliminated while allowing Buddhism to remain Buddhism. Can there be Buddhism without Mount Meru? Can you play chess without the queen?

In order to pursue this query, it can be useful to take a look at references to Mount Meru in Pāli discourses that have parallels with similar teachings.³¹ Two instances relevant to the present exploration refer to the eventual destruction of Mount Meru as an exemplification of impermanence.³² A third instance con-

³¹ Commenting on the role of Mount Meru in the Tibetan traditions, Sheehy 2020: 341f points out that “*in practice* the Mount Meru cosmology is not a literal model of the cosmos.” This model “exists on a different register that is not in practice explicitly correlated with a cosmos detectable via modern scientific instrumentation ... cosmology is a cultural practice in Tibetan Buddhism ... the Mount Meru cosmology is not a distinct domain of empirical knowledge that can be probed via controlled methodology and technology,” but rather concerns “ideas, narratives, beliefs, and practices that are predominantly oriented toward transforming individuals and communities.”

³² SN 22.99 at SN III 149,³² and its parallel SĀ 266 at T II 69b12; AN

veys basically the same teaching, based on describing a thousand world systems, each with their respective Mount Meru.³³

Such instances would fulfil their purpose just as well if they were to refer to Mount Himālaya instead of Mount Meru, as all that is required for the teaching to make its point is a large mountain known among the audience for its apparent stability. None of these instances requires a truth claim that the Earth is flat and has a particular mountain as its axis. In terms of a game of chess, acknowledging that Mount Meru is not the central axis of a flat world would not even be comparable to the loss of a pawn, let alone the queen.

In the third part of the present book, I will be drawing on some cosmological descriptions found in the early Buddhist discourses. Although it indeed would not make sense to take these literally, I believe they nevertheless can at times convey a significant perspective which can be lost if such descriptions are dismissed out of hand. In the present case, be it Mount Meru or Mount Himālaya, the main point of their employment is to drive home the lack of stability and impermanent nature of even solid, large mountains. The lesson as such, even if expressed in a way that at first sight seems just an outdated myth, is a significant one and deserves to be taken seriously.

Omniscience

In general terms, an incorporation of incontrovertible scientific knowledge into the Buddhist world view creates no substantial

7.62 at AN IV 103,1 and its parallels in Dietz 2007: 97 and 106 (Sanskrit fragments and Up 3008), MĀ 8 at T I 429a19, T 30 at T I 812b14, and EĀ 40.1 at T II 736c6.

³³ AN 10.29 at AN V 59,12 and its parallels MĀ 215 at T I 799c8 and Up 5011 at D 4094 *ju* 271b2 or P 5595 *thu* 15a1.

problem as long as the Buddha is not invested with a claim to omniscience. This, however, is clearly the position taken in later tradition. Hence, adopting a text-historical perspective on the attribution of omniscience to the Buddha is of considerable consequence. Closer study reveals the historical lateness of the idea that the Buddha claimed to be omniscient.³⁴ An explicit statement to this effect is attributed to the Buddha in a Pāli discourse, taking the following form:³⁵

Those who speak like this: “The recluse Gotama is omniscient and all-seeing, he claims to have complete knowledge and vision such that ‘knowledge and vision are continuously and without interruption present to me when walking or standing, sleeping or awake,’” they are not speaking what has been said by me; they are misrepresenting me with what is untrue and false.

The discourse continues with the Buddha clarifying that the realization he indeed claimed to have gained was the attainment of the three higher knowledges, which comprise recollection of past lives and the divine eye together with the key realization that made him a Buddha: the destruction of the influxes. The above statement combined with this additional explanation leaves hardly any room to attribute some form of omniscience to him.

The arising of such attribution in the ancient Indian setting is unsurprising given that Mahāvīra, the leader of the Jains, was believed to have been omniscient. In view of the competition for lay support between Buddhist and Jain monastics, a wish to equal such a claim must soon have had its impact on conceptions of the nature and knowledge of the Buddha.

³⁴ See Anālayo 2006b, 2014a: 117–127, and 2020m: 21–25.

³⁵ MN 71 at MN I 482,14; no parallel to this discourse is known.

The basic difference between the Buddha and Mahāvīra in respect to omniscience can be seen reflected also in their documented teachings, where Mahāvīra is on record for offering a range of precise details on the nature of the external world, revealing the comprehensiveness of his omniscient knowledge. From an early Buddhist perspective, in contrast, the emphasis is on “the world” as a construct of the senses.³⁶ This forms part of a general interest in the construction of experience and the potential of becoming aware of the impact of such construction and possibly stepping out of it.³⁷ In other words, at least in early Buddhist thought the main interest is not so much in knowing all and everything in its details, but rather in fostering a penetrative seeing through all and everything.

According to an attempt to expose the myth of Buddhist exceptionalism by Thompson (2020: 37), however, “the cognition of a buddha is traditionally considered to be omniscient and infallible, and hence his or her teaching is incontrovertible.” This premise then leads Thompson (2020: 39) to reason that, since “the Buddha is typically portrayed as omniscient and transcendent (‘supramundane’) ... [w]e need to place our faith in the Buddha (and a host of bodhisattvas) and not rely on our limited perspective and defective perception.”

As far as the early Buddhist position is concerned, the situation turns out to be different. Not only is the Buddha not yet considered omniscient, but the qualification of being supramundane is also not applied to him. Faith or confidence in the Buddha concerns in particular his claim to have reached awaken-

³⁶ SN 1.70 at SN I 41,4 and SĀ 1008 at T II 264a12; another parallel, SĀ² 235 at T II 459b1, conveys a different sense, perhaps the result of an error in transmission or translation.

³⁷ See Anālayo 2019d and 2023e.

ing,³⁸ an initial trust that serves as a natural requirement for being willing to follow his teachings in order to be able to reach awakening oneself.

Those who have not yet fully awakened are indeed considered to have a “limited perspective and defective perception,” as only arahants have eradicated the defilements that tend to distort perception and result in limited perspectives. Nevertheless, there is ample room for independent investigation even before deciding whether to become a disciple of the Buddha.

This can be illustrated with a Pāli discourse and its Chinese parallel.³⁹ The parallels report the Buddha openly inviting a prospective disciple to undertake the most searching scrutiny of him as a potential teacher, even to the extent of directly investigating the Buddha’s claim to have reached awakening. Explicitly encouraged modalities of investigation include close observation of the Buddha’s behavior to see if it matches his claim just as much as questioning him face to face as to whether he is indeed free from defilements.

This goes to show that in early Buddhist thought the scope of free inquiry was not limited even when this concerns the Buddha’s role as a teacher. It would not be easy to find an open encouragement of this type of free investigation, given by the founder of the tradition, in the canonical texts of other ancient Indian religious institutions.

A related attitude emerges from the report in another Pāli discourse and its parallels of a proposal made by the Buddha to a group of non-Buddhist wanderers, in which he is on record for offering them the option of putting his teachings into practice

³⁸ Anālayo 2017c: 227.

³⁹ MN 47 at MN I 317,24 and its parallel MĀ 186 at T I 731b3; see in more detail Anālayo 2010b.

and that, notably, even without needing to acknowledge him as their teacher:⁴⁰

Suppose you think like this: “The recluse Gotama teaches the Dharma because he wants to be the teacher!” Do not think like that; the [role of] the teacher remains yours while I am teaching the Dharma to you ... Suppose you think like this: “The recluse Gotama teaches the Dharma because he wants disciples!” Do not think like that. The disciples remain yours while I am teaching the Dharma to you.

The main parallel versions agree that the Buddha was willing to teach what he knew without expecting non-Buddhist wanderers to give up their teacher and instead place him in that position.

Another passage reports a comparable attitude in relation to a wealthy and influential householder—up to that point a staunch follower of the Jains—who has just told the Buddha that from now onward he considers himself a Buddhist lay disciple. The parallel versions of this encounter agree in reporting that

⁴⁰ MĀ 104 at T I 595b18. The parallel DN 25 at DN III 56,9 proceeds in this way: “Nigrodha, suppose it should then occur to you thus: ‘The recluse Gotama speaks like this desiring to get disciples.’ But, Nigrodha, this should not be seen in this way. Let whoever is your teacher remain your teacher.” Another parallel, DĀ 8 at T I 49b7, reads: “Do not say: ‘Is the Buddha teaching the Dharma for the sake of fame, for the sake of being respected, for the sake being the leader, for the sake of having followers, for the sake of having a great company?’ Do not give rise to this thought! Your followers now completely belong to you while being taught by me the Dharma for the sake of eradicating what is unwholesome and increasing wholesome states.” The relevant part in another parallel, extant as the individually translated discourse T 11, appears to have suffered from a corruption or misunderstanding during translation.

the Buddha immediately requests that this householder continue to support the Jains as he had done earlier when he still considered himself their disciple.⁴¹

The above episodes provide a remarkable contrast to the ancient Indian notion of submission and obedience owed to one's teacher, the guru, and the need to ensure that material support is directed to this guru and his followers. Pointing this out is not to take the position that the Buddha did not function as an authority or did not demand respect from his disciples, in particular when it comes to the need for monastics to follow his rules and regulations. It also does not imply certainty about what actually happened on the ground in ancient India, which at present can no longer be ascertained with certainty. The point is only that, when assuming the traditional role of a teacher in the ancient Indian setting, the Buddha is depicted as doing so in an open and flexible manner that left considerable room for personal freedom and uninhibited investigation.

The Buddha's Past Lives

Adopting a historical perspective also offers an important tool for contextualizing other Buddhist ideas and evaluating to what extent these indeed stood at the heart of the tradition from the outset. This requirement holds in relation to the assessment by Lopez (2008: 8), made by way of introducing his monograph study of Buddhism and science, that the Buddha has been portrayed “with a great consistency across the geographical and historical range of the tradition” as having cultivated the perfections “over the course of millions of lifetimes” and performed the twin miracle, a feat based on the ability “to rise into the air and simultaneously shoot forth fire and water from his body.”

⁴¹ MN 56 at MN I 379,16 and its parallel MĀ 133 at T I 630b8.

The idea that particular practices over several lifetimes lead to becoming a Buddha is a later element.⁴² The perfections, in the sense of a set of qualities to be developed by a Buddha-to-be, are not mentioned at all in the Pāli discourses and their parallels. The same holds for the twin miracle; in fact, some feats of physical levitation appear to be in themselves the outcome of literalism.⁴³

As mentioned above, comparative study shows that stories of past lifetimes of the Buddha are often the result of a literal interpretation of what originally was just a parable or folk tale. An example for the adoption of a parable from a Buddhist discourse—differing in this respect from the case of Vessantara—involves a quail and a hawk, used to illustrate an aspect of mindfulness practice.⁴⁴ As already noted by Rhys Davids (1903/1997: 194f) in his study of Buddhism in India, in the Pāli *Jātaka* collection the same story features as a past life of the Buddha.⁴⁵

A need to contextualize information also holds for the occurrence of at times staggering numbers with reference to time spans or audiences, etc., found already in early Buddhist texts. As a feature shared with oral tradition in general, such numbers often have a symbolic nature and for this reason should not be read too literally. An example in case is the description of the potential of mindfulness practice given in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and one of its two Chinese parallels.⁴⁶ The two versions agree

⁴² See Anālayo 2010a and 2017b.

⁴³ Anālayo 2016b; see also 2021h and 2022b: 237 note 376.

⁴⁴ SN 47.6 at SN V 146,18 and SĀ 617 at T II 172c25; see also T 212 at T IV 695a12.

⁴⁵ Jā 168 at Jā II 58,21.

⁴⁶ MN 10 at MN I 62,34 (= DN 22 at DN II 314,11) and MĀ 98 at T I 584b16.

that a practitioner can reach the higher two levels of awakening after a period of seven years, followed by alternatively stipulating a period of six, five, four, three, two years, or just one year. Continuing further, the two versions next mention seven months, followed by counting down one by one until reaching a single month.

This mode of presentation does not imply that these levels of awakening could not be reached after, say, eight months. Instead, the presentation revolves around the symbolic nature of seven as representative of “a totality.”⁴⁷ Hence, it is natural to count down from seven to one for years and then do the same for months. The idea is simply that the results of mindfulness practice can take quite some time to ripen but can also manifest sooner. The actual numbers given are only secondary to this meaning.

Seven times twelve, another symbolic number, and raised to the level of thousands, results in 84,000, a number that frequently occurs in Buddhist texts. One example is the depiction of a past life of the Buddha as the first in a series of 84,000 kings, each of which was endowed with a life span of many thousands of years.⁴⁸ It would not be doing justice to the oral nature of these texts and the symbolic significance of numbers in the ancient setting if one were to start computations based on a literalist reading, contrasting the time span required for this succession of kings with our knowledge of the evolution of species and the age of this planet.

In this way, by keeping in mind the oral nature of the tradition as well as acknowledging that early Buddhism flourished

⁴⁷ See Dumont 1962: 73.

⁴⁸ MN 83 at MN II 78,8, MĀ 67 at T I 514b5, EĀ 50.4 at T II 809a22, and D 1 *kha* 54b2 or P 1030 *ge* 50a6.

without any need for the idea that the Buddha had cultivated the perfections over many lives or that he was able to perform the twin miracle, it seems that, in terms of the game of chess, these ideas would probably also amount to pawns. The same holds for the exaggerated numbers employed in this type of oral literature, which do not call for a literal reading, at least as long as the idea is to *understand* what such texts from a distant past and a different culture were probably meant to convey.

Karma, Rebirth, and the Wheel-turning King

Unlike Mount Meru or the twin miracle, the notion of rebirth is a key element of early Buddhist thought, whose importance could reasonably be compared to the queen in a game of chess. This notion informs early Buddhist thought pervasively, including the affirmation that there are different realms of existence, some of which are inhabited by celestial beings. The principle of rebirth is also central in the conceptualization of different levels of spiritual progress until reaching full awakening, which precisely equals freedom from future rebirth, a topic to which I will return below.

The idea of rebirth conflicts with a basic paradigm adopted in much of scientific research conducted in psychology, which relies on equating the mind with the brain. Although research that is based on this premise naturally tends to give the impression of confirming the adopted paradigm, in actual fact the equation itself has never been decisively proven. Moreover, a body of empirical facts can be quoted in support of the notion of rebirth.⁴⁹ In short, as of now, rebirth has neither been decisively proven nor definitely disproven. Hence the question of rebirth is not a clash of religious superstition with scientifically

⁴⁹ See Anālayo 2018c: 65–236.

established truth, but much rather a matter of adopting different paradigms.

From an early Buddhist viewpoint, following the eightfold path of practice does not require accepting rebirth on blind faith.⁵⁰ There is sufficient scope for personally taking an agnostic position on the matter. At the same time, however, there is a need to acknowledge the ubiquity of rebirth in early Buddhist discourse for arriving at a proper understanding of the type of teachings reflected in these texts.

A central concept in the background of the notion of rebirth is karma, literally “action,” which in its early Buddhist setting stands for the doctrinal affirmation that the ethical quality of the intentions motivating one’s deeds will have repercussions to be experienced sooner or later, in the present or in future lives. Although this doctrine is decidedly not deterministic and does not function in a monocausal manner, Lopez (2008: 21) asserts that “[i]n classical Buddhist doctrine, all human experiences of pleasure and pain are the result of deeds done in the past, either in the present lifetime or in one of innumerable past lives.”⁵¹

Parallel versions of an early discourse directly address this topic, reporting the Buddha’s criticism of contemporary recluses and brahmins taking precisely the position that Donald Lopez has attributed to classical Buddhist doctrine:⁵²

⁵⁰ See Anālayo 2018c: 27–31 and 2019i.

⁵¹ In the context of a discussion of the second of the four noble truths, Lopez 2008: 148 reaffirms the position that “all feelings of physical and mental pain are the result of deeds performed in the past.”

⁵² SN 36.21 at SN IV 230,20, with a similar statement in the parallel SĀ 977 at T II 253a6: “When those recluses and brahmins proclaim that everything that is known and felt by a person has its origin entirely in formerly created conditions, they have relinquished what is a matter of truth in the world and follow their own views; they make

Those recluses and brahmins who hold such a doctrine and have such a view: “Whatever an individual person experiences—be it pleasant, or unpleasant, or neutral—all of it is due to former deeds,” they go beyond personal experience, and they go beyond what is acknowledged as true in the world. Therefore, I declare these recluses and brahmins to be in the wrong.

The *Milindapañha* quotes the above translated Pāli version,⁵³ which reflects a continuity of awareness of this position on the notion of karma. This goes to show that a correct reflection of the position taken in classical Buddhist doctrine is that a range of conditions combine in leading to “human experiences of pleasure and pain.” What has been done previously is an important one of these conditions but certainly not the only one. This corrective in turn puts into perspective the following reasoning by Lopez (2008: 148):

If the forms of life on earth, the animal and human species, are instead shown to be the result of evolution, of a process of natural selection, karma becomes superfluous and rebirth becomes impossible. Darwin’s theory of evolution thus presents particular problems for Buddhism because it obviates the law of karma.

The proposed reasoning appears to result from the idea that karma functions as the sole causal principle. Yet, the early Buddhist teachings on causation in general eschew mono-causality, envisaging whatever happens instead as the result of a network

false statements.” Another parallel, SĀ² 211 at T II 452b11, proceeds somewhat differently.

⁵³ Mil 137,23.

of causes and conditions. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution therefore does not obviate the law of karma. Instead, the law of karma can be visualized as operating within the framework provided by the evolution of species, in the sense that one's former deeds will influence one's rebirth among a particular one of the species extant at a particular time. Alternatively, one's former deeds may result in being reborn in another realm.

Another problem comes up in relation to the role of karma as moral responsibility, which also does not function in a unilateral manner in the sense of excluding the possibility of receiving help from others. However, in the context of a discussion of karma, as part of an attempt at "unmasking Buddhism" (as per the title of the monograph), Faure (2009: 45) reasons:

Early Buddhism focuses on the moral value of the action and rejects ritualism and the worshipping of gods. Each individual is responsible for his or her actions and no one can do anything to help anyone else. This austere notion underwent fundamental modifications with the emergence of the transfer of merits theory, which has become an important feature of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The affirmation of moral responsibility of an individual does not imply that one cannot help others, something that is possible in various ways and therefore not confined to the idea of transferring merit.

Of interest here is a Pāli discourse with a phrase that reads: "What can one do for another?"⁵⁴ This is an assertion made by a non-Buddhist brahmin, who held the view that someone who has gained some realization should not teach this to others. The Pāli discourse, in agreement with a Sanskrit fragment parallel

⁵⁴ DN 12 at DN I 224,12.

and another parallel extant in Chinese translation, considers this to be an “evil” view.⁵⁵ In other words, the idea that “no one can do anything to help anyone else” is, from an early Buddhist perspective, thoroughly mistaken.

The parallels also agree that the Buddha gave a long teaching to this brahmin to make him relinquish this erroneous view. During that teaching, the Buddha reportedly made the point that, due to following his instructions, others are reborn in heaven or attain the four levels of awakening. The point appears to be that the brahmin’s belief that one should not share one’s realization with others would obstruct such beneficial results of the Buddha’s teaching activities.

In fact, to assume that the Buddhist position was that one cannot help others in principle would be contrary to the very essence of Buddhism as a historical institution, which has its starting point in the compassionate decision of the Buddha to teach. Without that decision, based on the very notion that it is possible to help others (quite apart from any transferal of merit), there would be no Buddhism in the first place.

Even compassion is put into question by Faure (2009: 90), however. In the context of critically examining whether compassion is indeed a central value of Buddhism, he identifies “another paradox: compassion, in principle, is a passion, and the practice of Buddhism is supposed to eradicate passion of all kinds.”

The wordplay works only in English (or French) but not in Sanskrit or Pāli, as the term *karuṇā*, “compassion,” has no etymological relationship to the term *rāga*, “passion,” nor do the two terms share any assonance. A proper appreciation of the

⁵⁵ DN 12 at DN I 224,10, Choi 2015: 69 and 459 (*sūtra* 28 fragment 382r8), and DĀ 29 at T I 113a11.

situation requires taking into account the relevant Buddhist terminology, rather than just relying on translations.

As briefly mentioned above, the Buddha was indeed considered compassionate, while at the same time featuring as one who had eradicated all unwholesome states, including, of course, any sensual passion. In fact, from an early Buddhist perspective it is precisely such eradication of unwholesome tendencies in the mind that can lead to the full flourishing of compassion. In view of this, a better wordplay in English would perhaps be the following: The growth of *dis-passion* provides an important foundation for the flourishing of genuine *com-passion*.

Another aspect of the Buddha's role also does not appear to have met with full appreciation, evident when Faure (2009: 137) asserts, in the context of a discussion of Buddhist monasticism, that "Shākyamuni himself, by renouncing the world, not only became the Buddha but also achieved the status of universal monarch (*chakravartin* or literally 'king who turns the wheel')." The same idea recurs in the course of surveying accounts of the life of the Buddha, in the form of the following assertion by Faure (2022: 80) in relation to the Buddha's awakening: "By attaining awakening, the Bodhisattva, who has become the Buddha, establishes himself as the ruler of the world. The renouncer has become the ultimate conqueror."⁵⁶

The motif of the universal monarch, in the sense of a ruler over the whole "world" as known in ancient India, has a precedent in Vedic texts.⁵⁷ A relevant usage in early Buddhist discourse concerns a Brahminical lore of prognostication, based

⁵⁶ See also Faure 2022: 161: "By renouncing the world, Śākyamuni had in fact preserved (or rather realized) his attributes as universal monarch or *cakravartin* king."

⁵⁷ See Anālayo 2011b: 54f.

on discerning what at that time were apparently seen as rather subtle nuances of a human body, in order to identify an individual with superior abilities and potential.⁵⁸ Based on such identification, the following prediction can be made about such an individual:⁵⁹

There are certainly two possibilities [for him], which are true and not false: If he stays in the home life, he will certainly become a wheel-turning king ... If he shaves off his hair and beard, dons the ochre robes, leaves home out of faith, and goes forth to train in the path, he will certainly become a Tathāgata, free from attachment, a perfect Buddha.

The parallels agree in presenting the options of becoming a Buddha (alternatively referred to as Tathāgata) and of becoming a wheel-turning king as alternatives. In other words, these are mutually exclusive options; one does not become both at the same time. Given that the Buddha went forth, it follows that he had eschewed the possibility of becoming a wheel-turning king. Without intending to deny that at times some elements of the wheel-turning king motif were applied symbolically to the Buddha,⁶⁰ at least from the viewpoint of early Buddhism it is not the case that through realizing awakening Śākyamuni had become both a Buddha and a wheel-turning king.

⁵⁸ See in more detail Anālayo 2017b.

⁵⁹ MĀ 59 at T I 493a29, with a parallel in DN 30 at DN III 142,9: “He has two destinies, no other: If he lives the home life, he becomes a wheel-turning king ... but if he goes forth from the home life into homelessness, he becomes an arahant, a perfect Buddha.” The same is also found in yet another parallel, Up 3024 at D 4094 *ju* 120a3 or P 5595 *tu* 137b5.

⁶⁰ See, e.g., von Hinüber 2009 on the depiction of the Buddha’s funeral.

Awakening

The realization of awakening can safely be considered the most central concern of early Buddhist soteriology. In this section, I critically survey a range of assessments by other scholars related to the topic of awakening as such and to the four levels of awakening.

The realization of awakening comes up in the following statement by Faure (2009: 29), made in the context of a discussion of the belief that Buddhism is a philosophy and not a religion:

The epistemological status of knowledge in the most ancient of the texts is somewhat ambiguous. Numerous texts state that there are two kinds of obstacle to Awakening—passion and knowledge. All empirical knowledge, being conditioned, bears the stamp of illusion.

Early Buddhist epistemology does not consider knowledge acquired by empirical means to be in principle illusory. The central question with such knowledge is much rather whether it is being distorted through biased perceptual appraisal. This finds illustration in the *Mūlapariyāya-sutta* by distinguishing between how the same objects of experience, including what is seen, heard, sensed, and cognized, are processed by a worldling, by a disciple in higher training, and by an arahant.⁶¹

In the context of a detailed study of this discourse, Bodhi (1980/1992: 5 and 18) explains that, in the case of the worldling, the mind “has all along been re-modelling the raw materials of cognition to accord with its own propensities.” Once full awakening has been reached, however, the “cognitive apparatus con-

⁶¹ MN 1 at MN I 1,9 and EĀ 44.6 at T II 766a10; see also Pāsādika 2008.

tinues to function with full efficiency ... But now it simply registers the impinging phenomena as they appear, without distortion or falsification.” In other words, the empirical knowledge of an arahant or a Buddha is free from illusion.

In what has become the classic study of early Buddhist epistemology, Jayatilleke (1963/1980: 457) highlights the importance of empirical knowledge as the central means for vital doctrinal positions in early Buddhism, mentioning the assessment that all conditioned things are impermanent as an example for an inference drawn “based on the data of normal perception.” Another example is the final section of the standard exposition of dependent arising, according to which birth is the condition for aging and death. This, too, “is an empirical generalization based on the observation (by perception) that all those who are ‘known and seen’ to be born eventually grow old and die.”

The Buddha’s own growing insight into dependent arising reportedly started with the conditional dependence of aging and death on birth (I will return to this presentation below in more detail). Building on this foundation, he then explored the preceding links step by step.⁶² This implies that the starting point for this rather crucial doctrine lies in the observation of an evident empirical fact. Although such empirical knowledge is conditioned and has merely an instrumental function, it certainly does not bear the stamp of illusion. Instead, insight into impermanence and dependent arising are forms of knowledge whose very function is to lead onward to awakening.

⁶² SN 12.65 at SN II 104,12, with parallels in Chung and Fukita 2020: 95, Bongard-Levin, Boucher, Fukita, and Wille 1996: 76, Kudo and Shono 2015: 467 (Or.15009/670r6), SĀ 287 at T II 80b26, EĀ 38.4 at T II 718a17, T 713 at T XVI 826b13, T 714 at T XVI 827c6, and T 715 at T XVI 829a14.

Besides, it would be hard to find support among “the most ancient of the texts”—this being the expression used by Faure (2009: 29)—for the supposed positioning of knowledge as an obstacle to awakening on a par with passion, let alone such an idea being found in “numerous texts.” Although positions taken in later forms of Buddhism may differ, what the “ancient texts” posit as an obstacle to awakening is “not-knowledge,” *avijjā*, usually translated as “ignorance.” This is the first link in the standard exposition of the dependent arising of *dukkha*, and it is the eradication of ignorance (more literally of “not-knowledge”) which leads to awakening.

Another position on the nature of awakening that requires examination has been articulated by Thompson (2020: 145) in the course of studying “the rhetoric of enlightenment.” After stating that “there is no Buddhist consensus on what the content of the state or experience of awakening is,” he asserts that “already in the early Buddhist texts, we find different and irreconcilable conceptions of the content of the awakening experience that leads to liberation.”

It would probably be more accurate to indicate that the presumed irreconcilability is the view of several scholars studying the early Buddhist texts, whose conclusions have been contested by other scholars.⁶³ There is a need to distinguish between debated hypotheses and established facts. The characterization of early Buddhist conceptions of the content of the awakening experience as irreconcilable belongs to the former category; as of now, it is not an established fact.

⁶³ For example, from a text-historical perspective it seems quite possible that notions like the four truths used to convey the implications of awakening were in later times mistaken as descriptions of the content of awakening; see Anālayo 2021a.

In a recent monograph study (Anālayo 2023e), I have tried to provide a perspective that covers key passages on the nature of awakening in early Buddhism. It remains to be seen how this will be received by other scholars, wherefore at present not much more can be said in this respect.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ The same holds for Polak 2023a and 2023b, wherefore for now I just offer a few, selected remarks. Polak 2023a: 746 assumes that a reference in MN 1 to (trainees and) awakened ones, each of which directly knows, *abhijānāti*, “implies that they cognize without the medium of *saññākkhandha*.” The context shows that it only implies not arousing the type of perception that leads to misconceiving in the ways described in MN 1 at MN I 1,13. The problem of adopting a too literal reading holds as well for other passages he mentions as supposedly pointing to a recognition of the mind existing apart from the mental aggregates. Regarding the proposal by Polak 2023a: 754 that “during cessation the input provided by the senses could be the same as in the ordinary state,” the continuity of such input would prevent applying the term “cessation” to such a mental condition. The proposal by Polak 2023b: 3 that *sukha* must refer to a felt experience and “not to some general abstract form of happiness” is contradicted by MN 59 at MN I 400,19, which clearly articulates a conception of happiness, *sukha*, that goes beyond what is felt. Polak 2023b: 5 also sees a problem in the continuity of the aggregates of an awakened person, as according to him “their very presence seems to involve some form of cognitive delusion and be connected with maintaining a mistaken attitude.” This only holds as long as the aggregates are clung to; on this distinction see SN 22.48 at SN III 47,11 and Anālayo 2008: 405f. Finally, Polak 2023b: 17 takes up SN 22.55 without distinguishing between the third person singular formulation *no c’ assa* and the first person singular *no c’ assam*—which is the key to appreciating the Buddhist reformulation of an apparent annihilationist position—giving the English translation of the former and the Pāli of the latter; for a detailed discussion of SN 22.55 see Anālayo 2021g. For want of space, I need to leave a more detailed discussion for another occasion.

In a comment on the relationship between awakening and the path leading to it, Thompson (2020: 78 and 152) identifies the following “fundamental generative enigma”:

nirvana, in being the unconditioned, can't be the result of any cause and specifically can't be the result of any mental cause. But this implies that nirvana can't be the result of following the Buddhist path ... how is liberation possible if nirvana can't be the effect of any cause? ...

Whatever is unconditioned can't be the result of any cause, and nothing can affect it. Therefore, no activity, including meditation practice, can bring it about. So, how could awakening or nirvana be realizable in meditation or by following the Buddhist path?

At least as far as early Buddhist doctrine is concerned, the supposed enigma seems to rest on a misunderstanding. The panoramic view afforded by the top of a mountain is not the “result” of the path leading to the top; its existence is not caused by the path. Yet, this does not mean that following the path up the mountain cannot lead to enjoying that panoramic view. Similarly, awakening and the realization of Nirvana are not the “result” of the path; they are not caused by the path. Yet, following the path can lead to awakening and the realization of Nirvana.

There is a need for steps to be taken within the realm of what is conditioned in order to lead up to a deconditioning. This is why the discourses regularly offer detailed instructions, as a way of helping the individual practitioner in gradually removing those obstructions that prevent the breakthrough to Nirvana. The average practitioner needs such a raft to cross over. The degree to which such details are needed reflects the inner maturity of the individual practitioner: some need more, others

less.⁶⁵ At any rate, however, the raft has only an instrumental purpose; its function being fulfilled, it should be left behind.

A Pāli discourse reports the Buddha's chief disciple Sāriputta clarifying that making an end (of *dukkha*) does not happen just by means of knowledge or by means of conduct or by means of both in combination. Nevertheless, one who has no knowledge or is bereft of conduct will be completely unable to make an end.⁶⁶ The solution lies in understanding the merely instrumental function of knowledge and conduct. These are needed to lead up to the point where the breakthrough can take place. But holding on to them at that time would prevent the breakthrough from happening, as this requires completely letting go.

The Buddha himself is on record for offering a similar indication, according to which the final goal of purification is not reached through virtue, for example, but also not through the absence of virtue.⁶⁷ The same holds for other aspects of the path. The visitor hearing this explanation remained bewildered. This illustrates that for someone not well acquainted with Buddhist doctrine this can indeed seem puzzling. Yet, after further explanations that clarified the Buddha's position, according to the Pāli commentary the visitor and his wife decided to go forth and both became arahants,⁶⁸ thereby confirming to themselves what it takes for the breakthrough to happen.

⁶⁵ The famous story of Bāhiya features a non-Buddhist practitioner who becomes an arahant on the spot during his first meeting with the Buddha; see Ud 1.10 at Ud I 9,1. In this case, presumably involving someone of extraordinary inner maturity, a brief instruction in “bare awareness” was enough to lead to completely letting go; see in more detail Anālayo 2018a and 2019d.

⁶⁶ AN 4.175 at AN II 163,8.

⁶⁷ Sn 839 and T 198 at T IV 180b11.

⁶⁸ Pj II 548,7.

The same basic understanding of the relationship between the path and the goal finds reflection in the reply given in the Theravāda manual *Visuddhimagga* precisely to the question of how Nirvana can be unconditioned yet reachable by the path, a reply which shows the continuity of the above perspective in later Buddhist tradition:⁶⁹ “For it is indeed to be reached by the path, [although] it is not to be produced [by it].”

Regarding the awakening attained by others who follow the path taught by the Buddha, Lopez (2008: 140) reasons:

Others, however, must rely on the teachings of the Buddha to experience enlightenment, and even then, that experience is not said to be self-validating. The Buddha’s foremost disciples, Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana, who flank him in so many paintings and statues, had to be informed by the Buddha that they had reached the stage of arhat.

This assertion comes without a reference to a source, making it difficult to determine where the idea may have originated that these two chief disciples became arahants without knowing that they had reached the stage of arahant-ship (or that this exemplifies a general condition of disciples who reach the final goal).

The instruction by the Buddha which, according to the Pāli commentarial tradition,⁷⁰ led to Mahāmoggallāna’s realization of full awakening does not report his actual becoming an arahant.⁷¹ The implication of such absence of a direct reference would presumably be that his breakthrough should be understood to have happened after the Buddha left and for this reason was not reported in the versions of this discourse.

⁶⁹ Vism 508,33.

⁷⁰ Mp IV 44,23.

⁷¹ AN 7.58 at AN IV 88,11, MĀ 83 at T I 560b4, and T 47 at T I 837c6.

In the case of Sāriputta, however, his realization of the final goal is explicitly recorded, as it reportedly happened while he was present when the Buddha was giving a teaching to a wanderer. None of the three discourse versions reporting this encounter provide any indication that he needed the Buddha's help to know that he had become an arahant.⁷² The conversion and attainment of the final goal of these two chief disciples has been studied in detail by Migot (1954), based on a broad range of different sources, yet without any indication that they needed help to know that they had become arahants.

Regarding the attainment of the final goal by arahants in general, according to a recurrent description this involves not only liberation of the mind from defilements but also the direct personal knowledge of being liberated, described according to a standard formula in terms of having done what needed to be done and having gone beyond future rebirth. The phrase that introduces this formula quite explicitly indicates that "being liberated, one in turn knows being liberated."⁷³ Such descriptions make it clear that a genuine attainment of full awakening was seen as a self-validating experience, in the sense that one who has just become an arahant would be able to know that without any need to rely on someone else for this purpose.

In the context of a survey of the six supernormal knowledges, Faure (2009: 116) reasons that "only the knowledge of the destruction of all defilement is specifically Buddhist in that it be-

⁷² MN 74 at T I 501,4, SĀ 969 at T II 249c28, SĀ² 203 at T II 449b22, and Eimer 1983: 104,21.

⁷³ MĀ 146 at T I 658a16, with a parallel in MN 27 at MN I 184,2 that has the nearly identical formulation "in being liberated, there is the knowledge of being 'liberated'."

longs to the realms of formlessness.”⁷⁴ The proposed match does not work. One of the other five knowledges is recollection of one’s own past lives. Some such past life could in principle have been in a formless realm. The same holds for the divine eye, with which the rebirth of others is witnessed. Such rebirth could also take place in a formless realm. In contrast, the destruction of all defilements implies going beyond all three realms; it does not belong to the realm (or realms) of formlessness. The standard description of the realization of full awakening explicitly states that “birth has been ended.”⁷⁵ This leaves no basis for bringing in the formless realm(s).

In the context of discussing whether Buddhism is an atheistic religion, Faure (2009: 61) argues that “[a]ccording to orthodoxy, even if Buddhism does recognize the existence of native gods, they differ from the Buddha and the Buddhist saints in that they are subject to the law of cause and effect.”

In early Buddhist thought, the repercussions of awakening are such that the Buddha and his awakened disciples are still considered to be subject to the law of cause and effect. An example is the report of a brigand who went forth and eventually became an arahant but still had to suffer the karmic retribution for his former misdeeds.⁷⁶ His case illustrates that karmic retribution still has a scope to manifest. Due to the arahant having gone beyond rebirth, however, this is limited to the present life.

⁷⁴ Faure 2009: 116 continues by stating that “Buddhist cosmology distinguishes three levels: the realm of desire, the realm of subtle form, and the realm of formlessness. The first five powers still belong to the realm of form and are therefore considered to be impure states.”

⁷⁵ For example, MN 27 at MN I 184,2 and MĀ 146 at T I 658a16.

⁷⁶ MN 86 at MN II 104,3, EĀ 38.6 at T II 721a22, T 118 at T II 510a6, T 119 at T II 511c22, and T 212 at T IV 704a26.

The discourses show the Buddha still experiencing physical pain himself.⁷⁷ However, he is on record for being able to face the pain with equanimity and composure, due to having destroyed all defilements. In this way, the law of cause and effect still operates in the case of a fully awakened one. The consequence of having realized the final goal is only that an arahant (or a Buddha) no longer has the conditions in the mind that can result in unwholesome reactions.

The Four Levels of Awakening

In what follows I continue exploring the topic of awakening in relation to different levels of realization recognized in early Buddhist thought. These are stream-entry, once-return, non-return, and becoming an arahant, which correspond to a gradual liberation of the mind from defilements. With the successful attainment of stream-entry, the ingrained belief in a permanent self is left behind (together with two other fetters). Next lust and anger are attenuated and then completely eradicated with the ensuing two levels of realization. Any defilement is left behind for good on becoming an arahant.

Some of the publications to be covered below are by no means recent. Nevertheless, since lately some of the positions advocated in these publications have been reaffirmed,⁷⁸ it seems appropriate to include these in my examination.

In an article dedicated to studying the four levels of awakening, Horner (1934: 788) considers the idea of four such levels to be a later development, based on reasoning that the “omission of the four Ways from among the Fours of the *Saṅgīti Suttanta* ...

⁷⁷ SN 1.38 at SN I 27,15, SĀ 1289 at T II 355a20, and SĀ² 287 at T II 473c28.

⁷⁸ Nanda 2019.

suggests that at the time when this Suttanta was written down the Four Ways had not been established as a group.” This reasoning is unexpected, as Horner (1934: 787) correctly notes that the *Saṅgīti-sutta* covers the four *fruits* of recluship, which are stream-entry, once-return, non-return, and arahantship. The same holds for the parallels.⁷⁹ Since these four fruits are to be attained by the corresponding four ways (or paths), once these fruits are mentioned explicitly, there is hardly room left to problematize the absence of an additional reference to the corresponding four ways.

Moreover, inclusion of a particular doctrinal item in the *Saṅgīti-sutta* reflects decisions taken by the respective reciters, as evident in variations in this respect among parallel versions (of which I. B. Horner would not have been aware).⁸⁰ Lack of coverage of a particular item in one of these parallel versions, such as the Pāli discourse, is not in itself sufficient grounds for decisions on lateness.

It also needs to be kept in mind that the early discourses are records of individual oral teachings whose content and manner of exposition stands in close dialogue with the type of audience and setting within which a particular exposition was given. Each discourse is contextual and needs to be evaluated accordingly. This differs from later exegesis, which evinces a growing concern with comprehensive coverage of a particular topic. For this reason, the expectation that each discourse should treat a particular topic or issue in a thoroughly comprehensive manner, failing which there must be a substantial problem, is based on a category mistake.

⁷⁹ DN 33 at DN III 227,24, with parallels in Stache-Rosen 1968: 98, DĀ 9 at T I 51a15, and T 12 at T I 229b4.

⁸⁰ See the survey in Stache-Rosen 1968: 213–217.

Another argument based on the same expectation of finding a comprehensive coverage has been proposed in the course of a study of early Buddhism by Pande (1957: 539), who argues for the lateness of the four levels of awakening, given that, “had the theory of the Maggas [paths] and the corresponding Phalas [fruits] been early, we might have expected some reference to them in the *Sāmaññaphala*.”⁸¹

The *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* reports the Buddha providing an account of the gradual path to a king who had inquired about the fruits to be expected from going forth. A Chinese parallel from a numerically ordered discourse collection does not mention the gradual path at all.⁸² This leaves open the possibility that the gradual path account is an addition to the other versions.⁸³

In the Pāli collection of long discourses, the *Dīgha-nikāya*, an account of the gradual path is given in the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* in full and then abbreviated in subsequent discourses. A counterpart to the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* in a Chinese collection of long discourses, however, only presents the gradual path in abbreviation.⁸⁴ The order of discourses in this collection differs, wherefore the full account occurs in a previous discourse in this

⁸¹ An additional argument by Pande 1957: 539 refers to the entry for the term *anāgāmin* in the Pāli-English dictionary by Rhys Davids and Stede 1921/1993: 31, reasoning that this testifies to “an earlier non-technical use of the word ‘Anāgāmin.’” The argument appears to be based on a misunderstanding of this entry, which reports that some passages refer to the non-returner without explicitly mentioning the fetters. This is natural, as they instead describe other aspects of this level of awakening.

⁸² EĀ 43.7 at T II 764a2.

⁸³ This has already been proposed by Meisig 1987: 35–37; see also Anālayo 2022a: 65f.

⁸⁴ DĀ 27 at T I 109b8.

collection. In other words, the description of the gradual path in the collections of long discourses is not specific to the narrative setting of the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* (or its parallels). Instead, it is a formulaic passage used again and again to provide an overview of the Buddhist path of practice to various outsiders.

Moreover, a comparative study of gradual path descriptions in the early discourses shows that variations in coverage occur even among discourses of the same reciter tradition.⁸⁵ This implies that such descriptions were not invariably meant to provide exhaustive accounts of all practices and attainments.

Confirmation for this assessment can be found in the concluding section of the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* and its parallels, according to which the Buddha told his disciples that the king could have reached the stage of stream-entry on hearing this discourse, had he not been a patricide.⁸⁶ The parallels testify to knowledge of the first of the four stages of awakening, even though this has not been explicitly included in their respective versions of the gradual path account (if they provide such an account). This shows that the lack of reference to the lower three of the four stages of awakening in those gradual path ac-

⁸⁵ See Anālayo 2016a.

⁸⁶ Most of the parallel versions refer to this potential in terms of the arising of the Dharma eye; see DN 2 at DN I 86,4, DĀ 27 at T I 109b28, and T 22 at T I 276a15 (here this is not just a potential but something that actually happened, which according to MacQueen 1988: 186f may reflect an adjustment of the text to ensure a happy ending). Alternative formulations speak of penetrative insight into the four noble truths, Gnoli 1978: 252,24, or mention realizing the first fruit of recluse-ship and becoming one out of the four pairs and eight persons, a standard reference to those who are on the path to or have reached one of the four levels of awakening, EĀ 43.7 at T II 764b6.

counts is best understood as an intentional choice rather than as testifying to their supposedly late nature.

In an article that also takes up the four levels of awakening, Manné (1995: 112) reasons that a Pāli discourse serves to authenticate the four levels of awakening “by attributing the Buddha with the fruits of each of these stages, thus making them a part of his personal history.”⁸⁷ The relevant passage proceeds in this way:⁸⁸

It is with the manifestation of this one person, monastics, of the Tathāgata, the arahant, the Fully Awakened One, that there is the realization of the fruit of knowledge and liberation, the realization of the fruit of stream-entry, the realization of the fruit of once-return, the realization of the fruit of non-return, and the realization of the fruit of arahant-ship.

This passage does not attribute the attainment of the four levels of awakening to the Buddha. Instead, the point is that the emergence of a Buddha, here referred to as the Tathāgata, makes possible the attainment of these four levels by others. One needs a Buddha as one’s teacher to be able to realize these four fruits. This type of presentation is common in the early discourses, in that certain teachings only become available once a Buddha has manifested in the world. Another example of this type presents the factors of the eightfold path as something that only arises when a Buddha has arisen.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ A similar assessment of this discourse recurs in the proposal by Manné 1995: 88 that “the Buddha is attributed with each of these fruits.”

⁸⁸ AN 1.13.6 at AN I 23,4; the parallel EĀ 8.4 at T II 561b4 does not mention the four fruits.

⁸⁹ SN 45.16 at SN V 15,6, with a parallel in SĀ 766 at T II 200b16.

In a study arguing that salvation in early Buddhism depends upon the saving grace of the Buddha, Masefield (1986/1987: 141f) takes up the indication in a Pāli discourse that only a Buddha can arouse the unaroused path,⁹⁰ which leads him to reason that this is “no doubt, to be understood in the sense of causing the path to arise to a specific person at a given time.” According to his assessment, this then implies that, after the passing away of the Buddha, it is no longer possible to reach any of the four levels of awakening, since “the Buddha alone can establish persons on the supramundane path.”⁹¹

This reasoning also does not do justice to the import of Pāli passages like the one translated above. A continuity of the possibility of attaining a level of awakening does not need the Buddha to remain alive; it only requires his teachings to be still accessible.

Another argument proposed in an article on the four levels of awakening by Nanda (2019: 223) is that none of the records of the Buddha’s awakening “present any indication of the Buddha going through the four stages,” the same also being the case for reports of disciples who become arahants. However, the early Buddhist doctrine of four levels of awakening does not imply that everyone must attain these one after the other. Someone with a high degree of maturity of the five spiritual faculties—confidence, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom—can proceed straight through to full awakening. The discourses in fact explicitly indicate that the degree of maturation of the

⁹⁰ SN 22.58 at SN III 66,15, with parallels in SHT IV 30bR10, Sander and Waldschmidt 1980: 80, and SĀ 75 at T II 19c3.

⁹¹ In the same vein, Masefield 1986/1987: 142 reasons that “Subhadda was not merely the last sāvaka of the Buddha but also the last sāvaka of all.”

five spiritual faculties expresses itself in which of the four levels of awakening will be attained.⁹²

References to these four levels of awakening often take the form of an eightfold listing, which mentions those on the path to any of the four levels alongside those who have attained them. Sometimes the order of such eightfold listings appears to have suffered from transmission errors.⁹³ Alongside such variations, however, comparative study shows that different textual transmission lineages agree on this particular doctrine, wherefore this reflects “early Buddhist thought” to the extent to which we are still able to reconstruct it nowadays. In other words, from a comparative perspective the idea of four levels of awakening emerges as an integral dimension of early Buddhist thought.

Stream-entry

The central means identified in early Buddhist texts for leading to arrival at the different levels awakening is the noble eightfold path, which constitutes the ‘stream’ entered with the realization of the first of the four levels of awakening. However, Masefield (1986/1987: 134) argues that the term *sotāpanna* does not refer to a “stream-enterer,” this being the standard translation of the term *sotāpanna*, as according to his assessment it means “rather ‘one who has come into contact with (or undergone) the hearing.’” This suggestion is based on the ambiguity of the Pāli term *sota* (or of its Sanskrit equivalent *śrota*), which can mean “stream” but also the “ear” as the organ of hearing.

The proposed reasoning overlooks the fact that the Pāli term for receiving teachings by hearing is *sotānugata* rather than *so-*

⁹² SN 48.14 at SN V 201,5 and SĀ 652 at T II 183a26.

⁹³ See Anālayo 2012d: 77f.

tāpanna.⁹⁴ It also does not take into account that a Pāli discourse (in agreement with its parallel) offers a definition of *sota* in the context of a discussion of aspects of stream-entry as follows:⁹⁵ “The noble eightfold path is the *sota*.” This clearly shows that the relevant meaning of *sota* must be the “stream” rather than the “ear.”

Manné (1995: 66) sees a problem in the above definition of the stream as the noble eightfold path, however, as it implies that already the stream-enterer is endowed with the eightfold path. According to her assessment, this “is a problem because a classical aspect of the attainments of the Arahāt is that he has completely followed and fully achieved the path leading to the extinction of the *āsavās*, which is precisely this Noble Eightfold Path.”

This suggestion does not give due recognition to the fact that the cultivation of the eightfold path is relevant to various levels of awakening, and that each of its eight factors can be developed to differing degrees. Moreover, with the attainment of full awakening, the arahant is considered to be endowed with a tenfold path,⁹⁶ which comprises right knowledge and right liberation in addition to the eight factors of the eightfold path. Being endowed with the tenfold path is unique to the arahant. It follows that there is no problem with the notion that already the stream-enterer is endowed with the eightfold path.

⁹⁴ See, e.g., AN 4.191 at AN II 185,4.

⁹⁵ SN 55.5 at SN V 347,26, with a parallel in SĀ 843 at T II 215b17: “What has been spoken of by the Blessed One as ‘the stream,’ this is reckoned to be the noble eightfold path.”

⁹⁶ See, e.g., MN 117 at MN III 76,7 and its parallels SHT V 1125R3, Sander and Waldschmidt 1985: 120, SHT VIII 1919A1-2, Bechert and Wille 2000: 100, MĀ 189 at T I 736b20, and Up 6080 at D 4094 *nyu* 46b4 or P 5595 *thu* 86b1.

Manné (1995: 87) also argues that the phrase designating that someone is on the path to the realization of stream-entry is merely a qualification of a stream-enterer,⁹⁷ rather than referring to one who is on the path to stream-entry but has not yet realized it. This then leads her to the conclusion that it “makes sense that if one has attained something, one will, by definition, enjoy its fruit,” hence it follows that “the division into stage and fruit is spurious.”

Yet, to be on the path to a certain goal does not mean that one must have already reached the final destination of that path. As already pointed out by Harvey (2013: 10 note 23), this argument “fails to see that a *paṭipanna* [being on the path] person is one who is still practicing to attain the relevant fruit.” In other words, the distinction between being on a particular path and reaching its final destination is not spurious, and this holds for the path to a mundane goal just as much as for the path to a level of awakening.

The discourses regularly describe the “limbs of stream-entry” as qualities characteristic of a stream-enterer. These are experiential confidence in the Buddha, his teaching, and the community of disciples at various levels of awakening, often combined with the quality of having a firm commitment to moral conduct. Masefield (1986/1987: 131) proposes a distinction between the acquisition of the limbs of stream-entry and the actual attainment of stream-entry, supposedly evident in the example

⁹⁷ The reasoning presented by Manné 1995: 87 is that the phrase *sotāpanno*, *sotāpattiphalasacchikiriyāya paṭipanno* “can be translated, ‘the Stream-Enterer, who has entered upon,’ or ‘obtained,’ or ‘who regulates his life by, the experience of the fruit of stream-entry,’ in other words, the phrase *sotāpattiphalasacchikiriyāya paṭipanno*, may be construed to qualify the term *sotāpanno*.”

of Anāthapiṇḍika who, although endowed with the limbs of stream-entry, can be suspected to have only reached the actual attainment of stream-entry when on his deathbed.⁹⁸

However, none of the extant versions of the relevant discourse reports that Anāthapiṇḍika attained stream-entry at that time. Instead, a range of textual sources associate his attainment of stream-entry with his first encounter with the Buddha, long before he passed away.⁹⁹ This exemplifies that the relationship between the attainment and the limbs is the inverse of the above proposal, in that the full possession of these limbs is a result of the successful attainment of stream-entry.

The same relationship also helps to put into perspective the assumption by Nanda (2017: 24) that the four limbs of stream-entry are “necessary preconditions for establishing [someone in] the stage of stream-entry.” Instead, it is because of having already and personally experienced the first level of awakening with stream-entry that a stream-enterer will be endowed with experiential confidence that the Buddha has indeed reached awakening, that the Buddha’s teaching indeed leads to awakening, and that the community of the Buddha’s practicing disciples is indeed on the path to awakening (comprising as well those who have already reached it).

⁹⁸ The reference is to the instructions on insight he receives in MN 143 at MN III 259,12, with parallels in SĀ 1032 at T II 269c16 and EĀ 51.8 at T II 819c5; see also Anālayo 2010c.

⁹⁹ MĀ 28 at T I 460b29, SĀ 592 at T II 158b6, SĀ² 186 at T II 441a15, T 196 at T IV 156b16, T 202 at T IV 419b11, T 374 at T XII 541a8, T 375 at T XII 786b7, the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya*, T 1421 at T XXII 167a9, the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, T 1428 at T XXII 939a18, the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, Gnoli 1977: 170,1, the Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, T 1435 at T XXIII 244b13, and the Theravāda *Vinaya*, Vin II 157,2.

Understood in this way, the tendency in the early discourses to highlight such firm confidence, together with solid ethical conduct, reflects the importance accorded to the personal transformation to be expected from the gaining of stream-entry. Such personal transformation offers a way of self-evaluation more reliable than any subjective experience that one may have had, be this in formal meditation or apart from it. The early discourses clearly distinguish between the confidence that results from realizing stream-entry and manifestations of confidence in general, qualifying the former by using specific terminology, here rendered as “experiential confidence.”¹⁰⁰

The terminological distinction drawn in this way in the discourses has apparently been overlooked by Manné (1995: 57), who considers descriptions of the endowments of a stream-enterer to be simply “the qualities that any religion would require of its followers.” According to Manné (1995: 94), stream-entry “was originally the stage, or perhaps more accurately the *state* of convert. The *sotāpanna* [stream-enterer] was originally no more and no less that [sic] someone who had converted to Buddhism.”¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ The Pāli term is *aveccapasāda* (the Sanskrit counterpart is *avetya-prasāda*). Cone 2001: 259 explains that the Pāli term *avecca* conveys “understanding, having penetrated,” hence in her words the phrase *aveccappasāda* conveys the idea of a “trust founded in knowledge.” This differs from just having gained confidence or faith by way of conversion to the Buddhist tradition, for which the early discourses use a different term, which in Pāli is *saddhā* (the Sanskrit counterpart is *śraddhā*).

¹⁰¹ The same idea informs the identification by Manné 1995: 62 of a supposedly “general blithe tendency to open the stage of *sotāpanna* to all and sundry through simplifying the required attainment to that of faith alone.”

Besides failing to do justice to the above-mentioned terminological distinction, the proposed conclusion also conflicts with references in the early discourses to conversions that fall short of being instances of stream-entry. For example, at the end of what according to tradition was the first sermon given by the Buddha, only one out of the five who are present on this occasion is on record for attaining stream-entry.¹⁰² Yet, all five were clearly converted and became disciples of the Buddha at this time, even though, according to the narrative setting, they had at first been reluctant even to listen to him and to believe his claim to have reached awakening.

Another example would be the report of the conversion of King Ajātasattu at what appears to feature as his first personal encounter with the Buddha,¹⁰³ who then is on record for commenting that the king had *not* attained stream-entry.

It would hardly be a convincing procedure to set aside the indications that emerge from the above passages as reflecting later developments. With such a methodological approach, one could argue all kinds of conclusions, as conflicting evidence can conveniently be set aside by simply being considered late. Instead, as long as the above instances—and more could be mentioned—are reflected similarly in a range of parallel versions, they need to be recognized as evidence for the early Buddhist position on the nature of stream-entry.

¹⁰² SN 56.11 at SN V 423,13, with discourse parallels in Chung 2006: 94, SĀ 379 at T II 104a9, T 109 at T II 503c13, T 110 at T II 504b7, EĀ 24.5 at T II 619b6, as well as a range of *Vinayas* and references in other texts too numerous to be quoted in full here; for a comparative study see Anālayo 2012a and 2013a.

¹⁰³ DN 2 at DN I 85,7, DĀ 27 at T I 109b21, T 22 at T I 276a3, EĀ 43.7 at T II 764a15, and Gnoli 1978: 254,1; see also above p. 56 note 86.

Higher Levels of Awakening

The standard description of a once-returner, found similarly in discourses transmitted by different reciter lineages, indicates the following:¹⁰⁴

With the eradication of the three underlying fetters and the weakening of sensual lust, anger, and delusion they accomplish once-return; coming once to this world they will completely make an end of *dukkha*.

Since the three fetters mentioned here have already been eradicated by the stream-enterer, the distinct feature of progress to once-return is a weakening of the three root defilements.

Manné (1995: 48) reasons that “usually the disappearance of the three fetters is presented as the characteristic of the *so-tāpanna* [stream-enterer], and this attainment coupled with the reduction of *rāga*, *dosa* and *moha* [lust, anger, and delusion] is presented as the characteristic of the *sakadāgāmin* [once-returner],” which supposedly “points to a time when these two attainments were not yet clearly differentiated into separate and discrete stages of attainment.” In support of the above position taken by Joy Manné, Nanda (2019: 237) additionally argues that “stream-enterers also attenuate greed, hatred and delusion,” and “it is difficult to concede that any spiritual progress could be possible without attenuating the three.” In particular, the eradi-

¹⁰⁴ EĀ 43.6 at T II 761c13, with parallels in MN 34 at MN I 226,24: “with the destruction of the three fetters and the weakening of lust, anger, and delusion, they are once-returners; coming once to this world they will make an end of *dukkha*,” and in SĀ 1248 at T II 342b25: “with the eradication of the three fetters and the weakening of lust, ill will, and delusion they attain once-return; coming once to this world they will [gain] the final transcendence of *dukkha*.”

cation of the first fetter of identity belief “theoretically reduces a great extent of delusion, greed, and hatred.”

The indication that a once-returner has substantially diminished the three root poisons in the mind does not imply that a stream-enterer does not diminish these three root poisons at all. Rather than reflecting an attempt to be completely comprehensive, such standardized descriptions of different levels of awakening can more fruitfully be read as reflections of what was considered particularly outstanding and significant. The point then would simply be that the most salient characteristic of stream-entry is the disappearance of the three fetters, whereas the most salient characteristic of once-return is a substantial diminishing of the three root poisons.

Here as well as elsewhere, a basic methodological problem is that decisions on what is early and what later need to be based on more than just subjective evaluations. In a general comment not related to the present case, Nattier (2003: 49) notes that such a procedure often follows “a method that could be characterized (only somewhat facetiously) as ‘If I like it, it’s early; if I specialize in it, it’s *very* early; if I don’t like it at all, but it’s in my text, it’s an interpolation!’” A comparative study to identify agreement—or else the absence of such agreement—among different reciter traditions provides a better foundation for assessing relative earliness or lateness.¹⁰⁵

The third level of awakening involves ‘non-return’ in the sense that such a person will no longer return to be born in this world and only experience one more life in another world, the Pure Abodes. Horner (1934: 791) sees a problem with this characteristic of the third level of awakening, reasoning that it is

¹⁰⁵ See also Nattier 2003: 51.

not easy to reconcile to this concept [of full awakening] the concept of the Way of No-return as a stage on the way to this same arahant[ship]. For if, after a person has left this earth, he is not to return to it, if he is to pass utterly away in the realm where he is reborn after his bodily death here, how can he become an arahant as this is ordinarily conceived by the texts, with their insistence on *diṭṭhe va dhamme* (here and now, lit.: in these very seen conditions)? ... the gulf between the non-returner and the arahant is physically unbridgeable, and therefore the inclusion of the third Way is out of place if it is thought that the attainment of arahant[ship] here and now is the ideal of those on the Way of No-return.

The qualification of arahant-ship as being attained “here and now” applies to those who reach full awakening in the same lifetime in which they encounter the Buddha’s teaching. It does not follow that those who reach lower levels of awakening or even none could not progress to full awakening in a subsequent life. In the case of a non-returner, such progress can take place on being reborn in the Pure Abodes, which according to Buddhist cosmology are celestial realms in which only non-returners are reborn.

One of the possible solutions proposed by Horner (1934: 791) to resolve the perceived problem is in fact that, in the case of those progressing beyond lower levels of awakening in a subsequent life, “the arahant[ship] thus thought of did not fulfil the ‘here and now’ condition.” Although this suggestion indeed settles the issue, the same supposed problem has been pursued further by Manné (1995: 94f):

The stage *anāgāmin* [non-returner] contradicts the basic Buddhist teaching that Enlightenment is attainable in the present lifetime. This discrepancy shows that this stage was invented

later, and most likely after the time of the Buddha. The same must be said about the stage of *sakadāgāmin* [once-returner] which is so minimally developed in the texts. The close comparison between the etymological structure of these two terms suggests that they came into being together to serve the same purpose ... Originally, then, at the time of the Buddha, there were converts, and Arahats—practitioners who had attained Liberation. The invention of the stages of *anāgāmin*, and *sakadāgāmin*, however, necessitated the elaboration of the state of being a convert into the stage of *sotāpanna* [stream-enterer].

Once again, the attainability of full awakening in the present life does not imply that every single Buddhist disciple must reach the final goal in this way. Another occurrence of the phrase “here and now” concerns the fruition of karma, which can take place either in this life or else on a later occasion. The parallel versions of the relevant discourse agree in considering such ripening in the present life to be just an option rather than the sole possibility.¹⁰⁶

The same sense of the phrase “here and now” holds for full awakening, whose attainment in this life is just one possibility and not the only one. It can also be attained in the next life (namely by once-returners and non-returners) or at a later time (namely by most stream-enterers and worldlings). It is only by relying on an unwarranted literal reading of the phrase that this fairly straightforward situation becomes obscured.

¹⁰⁶ AN 10.208 at AN V 299,13, with parallels in MĀ 15 at T I 437b27 and Up 4081 at D 4094 *ju* 236b2 or P 5595 *tu* 270a5. A difference between them is that MĀ 15 just refers to a later life in general as a single alternative, whereas AN 10.208 and Up 4081 distinguish two alternatives, which are either the next life or a still later time.

Manné (1995: 85) also reasons that “at a certain point in the history of Buddhism there was a confusion between the stages of Arahat and *anāgāmin* [non-returner], and a problem in separating them.” This suggestion relates to the indication that one will become only a non-returner instead of an arahant if one still has a remainder of clinging. An example occurs in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, which describe the results to be expected from proper practice of the four establishments of mindfulness. The relevant part of the descriptions indicates that a practitioner can expect the following:¹⁰⁷

Either final knowledge here and now or, if there is a remainder [of clinging], the attainment of non-returning.

The problem, according to Manné (1995: 86), is that such passages give “no information regarding the condition under which a remainder would exist, and thus no explanation why one stage rather than another should be attained.” It is not clear what additional specifications and explanations should be required. The main point is simply to clarify that even a trace of clinging will prevent whole-hearted practice of the four establishments of mindfulness from issuing in the attainment of the final goal. This seems clear enough, and no further details would be required for this qualification to separate the two levels of awakening in question, and to clarify what reaching the higher of the two requires, namely the total removal of any form of clinging.

Needless to say, this presentation does not imply that the practices described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-*

¹⁰⁷ MĀ 98 at T I 584b17, with a parallel in MN 10 at MN I 62,36 (= DN 22 at DN II 314,13): “either final knowledge here and now or, if there is a trace of clinging left, non-returning.” This type of statement is absent from a third parallel, EĀ 12.1 at T II 569b9.

āgama parallel could not issue in stream-entry or once-return. These are best understood to be implied in the reference to non-return and full awakening, whose explicit mention seems to serve to highlight the potential of a cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness to result in a complete purification of the mind from the root defilements, which according to the early Buddhist analysis are the chief culprits for a broad range of afflictions and miseries.

The eventual attainment of the highest level of awakening by becoming an arahant features in the early discourses as a realization that leads completely beyond the prospect of further rebirth. However, Horner (1934: 796) proposes that “the arahant[t] was regarded as having some bourn beyond, when this life was over.”¹⁰⁸ In fact, according to Horner (1934: 789) the “ocean of *saṃsāra* (rebirths) had originally been regarded as a thing full of the promise of infinite opportunities for progress.”

The textual evidence points to the exact opposite of such a position, namely a consideration of *saṃsāra* as something to be transcended and of arahants as having achieved this through full awakening, as a result of which they have gone beyond any further rebirth. For example, the standard pericope describing the successful arrival at becoming an arahant begins with the proclamation that birth has been extinguished.¹⁰⁹ In other words,

¹⁰⁸ This proposal is based on the assumption by Horner 1934: 786, in relation to the Buddha, that “a great teacher would not have seen perfection as realisable under physical conditions: he would have thought of man growing up to perfection as he ran on and fared on, his thought, word and deed becoming finer and purer in each new rebirth.”

¹⁰⁹ E.g., MN 4 at MN I 23,24 and its parallel EĀ 31.1 at T II 666c18, where this standard pericope occurs even in relation to the Buddha’s own awakening.

freedom from the round of rebirth features quite prominently in the early Buddhist conception of full awakening. It follows that the above position does not reflect the actual textual evidence and involves, as already noted by Bond (1984: 236), “a misinterpretation stemming from false presuppositions imposed on the material.”

With this much I have concluded my survey of various positions on the nature of awakening in early Buddhism. My next topic is the doctrine on the absence of a self and its counterpart in the early Buddhist perspective on conditionality.

The Absence of a Self

The doctrine of *anattā* clarifies that a permanent entity or self cannot be found anywhere. A position taken in relation to this doctrine that still relates to the topic of awakening, explored above, occurs in the study of the lives of the Buddha by Faure (2022: 60),¹¹⁰ who comments on the Buddha’s awakening that it leads to

a realization that removes all reality from that experience (since it is revealed as an illusion, showing the emptiness of the self that lived it). As a result, it acquires an uncertain ontological status as a limit-experience, since in principle there is no longer a subject to undergo it ... In a sense, there can be no historical Buddha, because awakening, the anti-narrative, is supposed to abolish all personal history.

¹¹⁰ See also the reasoning in Faure 2022: 80, in relation to the night of the Buddha’s awakening, that he “understands the emptiness of his self (*anātman*). This should mark the end of the narrative, since there is no longer, strictly speaking, any active subjectivity.”

In the context of a discussion of karma and fatalism, Faure (2009: 46) presents a similar reasoning in general terms:¹¹¹

The Buddhist dogma relating to the absence of a soul or self makes transmigration something of a paradox: what is it that transmigrates if the self is simply an illusory series of states of consciousness which disappear into death? What is the point in practicing and accumulating merit if this self does not reap the rewards? Clearly this notion goes against the notion of karmic retribution.

A straightforward explanation of the basic principle underlying the teaching on the absence of a self has been offered by Gombrich (2009: 9), as part of a study of early Buddhist thought, in the following form:

all the fuss and misunderstanding can be avoided if one inserts the word “unchanging,” so that the two-word English phrases [no self and no soul] become “no unchanging self” and “no unchanging soul” ... for the Buddha’s audience *by definition* the word *ātman/attā* referred to something unchanging.

The close interrelationship between not self and impermanence can be explored further with the following explanation provided

¹¹¹ Faure 2009: 51 in turn draws the conclusion that “[n]o matter how often we hear that the self is empty, it remains no less real when it comes to beliefs and everyday practices. By emphasizing questions of ethical responsibility, early Buddhism tended to favor the individuality of its followers. The very notion of responsibility implies that an individual is responsible for his actions.” This supposedly contrasts with “the theory of *anātman* which, literally speaking, boils down to a denial of all individual responsibility or even a denial of all spiritual progress or deliverance.”

by Harvey (1990: 50) in an introduction to Buddhist teachings and practice:

Buddhism emphasizes that change and impermanence are fundamental features of *everything*, bar *Nibbāna* ... It is because of the fact that things are impermanent that they are also *dukkha*: potentially painful and frustrating. Because they are impermanent and unsatisfactory, moreover, they are to be seen as not-self: not a permanent, self-secure, happy, independent self or I. They are “empty” (*suñña*) of such a self.

In other words, the self in the sense of a continuous process that makes up the individual is not being denied, as the denial is much rather concerned with the self in the sense of a permanent entity.

In his history of Indian Buddhism, Warder (1970/1991: 123) summarizes the thinking underlying the early Buddhist position in general as follows:

No permanent, eternal soul can possibly be demonstrated to exist through the changing principles of the universe. Thus a soul as a substrate bearing changing principles is redundant; a soul having the same nature as these principles is not only redundant but cannot be eternal. Finally a soul not having any identifiable properties (as e.g. emotion) is as nothing, could not be the basis of the idea of a self, a subject, of the thought ‘I am.’

In the course of a study of Buddhist psychology, Kalupahana (1987/1992: 39) notes that in particular “the reluctance to make a distinction between ... individuality and ... a permanent and eternal self has been the cause of many a puzzle in the inter-

pretation of the Buddha's teachings."¹¹² The need to distinguish between "self" in a mere reflexive sense and "self" as a permanent entity can be illustrated with the injunction by the Buddha that his disciples should face his impending death by becoming self-reliant through cultivating the four establishments of mindfulness. The actual injunction speaks, literally translated, of having "self as refuge" or else of "relying on self."¹¹³

Without the distinction proposed above, one would have to conclude that here the Buddha is shown to recommend relying on and taking refuge in something non-existent. This is of course not the case, as the injunction given is just one of many instances where only the reflexive sense of self is intended.

A translation that appropriately capture this sense could rely on the reflexive pronoun to express that the instruction is about having "oneself as refuge" or about "relying on oneself." Insight into the teaching on the absence of a permanent self requires precisely such self-reliance. In short, the individual remains, and only its reification is to be left behind. This should hopefully suffice to put into perspective the following assessment by Faure (2009: 52), made in the course of a survey of the Buddhist denial of the existence of a self:

The emphasis the majority of scholars have placed on the orthodox dogma of the *anātman* again reflects an elitist or even ideological vision of Buddhism: in fact, it is clear that the majority of followers of mainstream Buddhism believe

¹¹² This type of reluctance appears to be particularly relevant here, as Faure 2009: 46 knows that the teaching on not-self targets a permanent entity: "The orthodox solution, however, consisted in stating that, while there are actions, there is no agent or subject, no permanent entity behind them."

¹¹³ SN 47.13 at SN V 163,10 and its parallel SĀ 638 at T II 177a6.

in the existence of a self and that their observance of the religion is based on this very belief.

An emphasis on the doctrine of not self is not a product of an elitist predilection among scholars; its centrality is quite evident in the early texts. The belief that this centrality is somehow contradicted by the obvious fact that lived forms of Buddhism rely on the notion of an individual subject results from a misunderstanding. This can easily be solved by adopting the above-suggested distinction between the impermanent self (= the individual as a continuing process) and the permanent self (= the soul as a reified entity). A denial of the existence of the latter does no harm to the functionality of the former.

The basic problem here appears to be the need to recognize that the denial of a self is not a denial of conditionality. Instead, at least in early Buddhist thought, a denial of the former involves an affirmation of the latter. Once the self leaves the stage, conditionality takes over. This is precisely why teachings on karma and rebirth are fully compatible with the absence of a self.

In view of the importance of conditionality in this respect, I will come back to this topic toward the end of the present section, in order to survey the main aspects of this teaching. Before that, however, I need to cover several other positions taken by scholars on the doctrine of *anattā* that require a critical reevaluation.

Buddhism and Brahmanism

The assertion of the absence of a (permanent) self is generally considered to be a distinct characteristic of early Buddhism in the ancient Indian setting. However, a different perspective has been proposed by Thompson (2020: 92) in the context of a study of the Buddhist teaching on the absence of a self:

Many of the Vedic-Brahminical thinkers would agree that what the Buddha calls the “five aggregates” are indeed not-self. They would say that the true self (*ātman*) transcends the aggregates. The true self isn’t the body, feeling, sense perception, volition, or sensory or mental consciousness, and it lies beyond them.

This then supposedly raises the question of whether “the Buddha’s teaching is compatible with there being a self,” or whether the Buddha’s reasoning was that, “if there were a self, it would have to exist among the aggregates,” or whether the Buddha just did not provide a positive or negative answer to the question about the existence of a self.

Without going into the question how far the above quote adequately reflects many of the “Vedic-Brahminical thinkers,” the proposed reasoning appears to be based on a misunderstanding of the compass and implications of a realization of the absence of a self in Buddhist thought. Such insight includes self-notions in addition to the identification of an aggregate as a self. This can be seen in the following passage, which describes the level of understanding reached by a stream-enterer in relation to the first aggregate.¹¹⁴

One does not see form as the self, does not see the self as possessing form, does not see form as contained within the self, does not see the self as contained within form.

¹¹⁴ MĀ 210 at T I 788b6, with parallels in MN 44 at MN I 300,21: “One does not regard form as the self, nor the self as possessed of form, nor form as in the self, nor the self as in form,” and in Up 1005 at D 4094 *ju* 7a4 or P 5595 *tu* 8a2: “One does not regard form as the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as being in the self, or the self as abiding in form.”

The same four alternative possibilities apply to the other aggregates of feeling tone, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. This goes to show that the teaching on the absence of a self is not confined to the idea of identifying one of the aggregates as the self, as it also covers other modes of relating the self to the aggregates and thereby comprises the notion of a true self as something that exists outside of the aggregates. For such a true self to be of any relevance to the individual at all, for it to provide a basis for the sense of self, it has to relate to at least one of the aggregates in some way. If it is not considered to be identical with an aggregate, such a relation could take place either by way of owning it, or by being inside of it, or by positioning the aggregate inside of such a self.

All of these modalities are covered in the above passages. This leaves little room to posit either a compatibility with belief in a self or a restriction of self-notions to identification with the aggregates. Moreover, instructions on the absence of a self are such a recurrent feature of the early discourses that the idea that the Buddha just did not provide a positive or negative answer to this question is not particularly compelling.

Just to provide one example, the explicit and comprehensive applicability of the teaching of the absence of a self can be seen in the following statement, preserved in a range of sources from different reciter lineages: “All phenomena are without a self.”¹¹⁵ The formulation adopted here makes it quite clear that the teaching on not self is meant to apply to all and everything, without any exception.

¹¹⁵ Uv 12.8, Bernhard 1965: 194, with parallels in Dhṃ 279, GDhṃ 108, Brough 1962/2001: 134, PDhṃ 374, Cone 1989: 203, and T 213 at T IV 783b3. The same statement recurs elsewhere, e.g., in SN 22.90 at SN III 132,26 and its parallel SĀ 262 at T II 66b14.

In an article dedicated to questioning whether the early Buddhist tradition indeed differed from the brahminical traditions in teaching that there is no eternal self, Walser (2018: 109) presents the results of a digital search of Pāli discourses that feature the doctrine of *anattā* as follows:

at 7.4% we can hardly say that the teaching of *anatta* [sic] is more prominent than other doctrines conducive to liberation (such as concentration). If 7.4% discuss *anatta*, then 92.6% of discourses in the sample never mention it at all. What this means is that potentially someone could listen to a great many Buddhist *suttas* and never hear a discussion about *anatta*. Furthermore, the doctrine of *anatta* could theoretically be a representative Buddhist doctrine even at 7.4% if a community of Buddhists had access to the whole *Tiṭṭaka*. But this was assuredly not the case during the generations in which the canonical texts themselves were being composed.

The precise criterion determining the result of 7.4% of this digital search is not clearly spelled out and thus requires some probing. A starting point would be the reference provided by Walser (2018: 111 note 23) to what he considers to be seven discourses addressed to “named non-brahmin lay interlocutors” that contain teachings related to *anattā*.¹¹⁶ Judging from these cases, the search criterion appears to be an explicit reference to the self, *attā*, and its denial.

Yet, this much does not suffice to capture all teachings related to the absence of a self. This doctrine stands in the background to teachings on impermanence and conditionality, just

¹¹⁶ One of the seven is SN 53.3, which must be an error, as this is the third discourse in the *Jhāna-samyutta* and just an instance of an abbreviated repetition series not related to *anattā*; see SN V 308,15.

as to many a teaching on the five aggregates and the six sense-spheres. The same holds for the Buddha's reported refusal to take any of the four positions envisaged by his contemporaries for predicating the after-death state of a fully realized one, referred to as a Tathāgata in such contexts. This refusal appears to be an expression of the insight that a Tathāgata is not some sort of substantial entity. As a result, all four possibilities have to be rejected, because they all involve an unwarranted reification;¹¹⁷ they all stand in conflict with the doctrine of *anattā*.

In other words, even if “potentially someone could listen to a great many Buddhist suttas and never hear a discussion” that involves an explicit use of the term *anattā*, such a hypothetical listener would still stand a good chance of coming across a teaching that reflects this doctrine.

In fact, a Pāli discourse and its parallels report that, on being asked by a non-Buddhist debater, a monastic disciple gave a succinct presentation of the Buddha's teaching that includes the qualification of the five aggregates being without self.¹¹⁸ That is, from the viewpoint of the reciters this teaching was seen as fairly commonplace.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ See, e.g., Anālayo 2018c: 41–44. It follows that, for example, the teaching Pasenadi receives on this topic at SN 44.1 at SN IV 375,9 would also need to be counted as an instance of instructions related to *anattā* that are being addressed to “named non-brahmin lay interlocutors,” even though the term itself does not occur in it.

¹¹⁸ MN 35 at MN I 228,12, with parallels in SĀ 100 at T II 35b4 and EĀ 37.10 at T II 715b4.

¹¹⁹ This in a way illustrates a basic problem identified by Nance 2010/2011: 97 (in a different context not related to the present topic): “For all of the benefits provided by e-texts—and they are considerable—they cannot substitute for the hard work of reading through, and thinking with, these texts.”

Besides, another Pāli discourse and its parallels convey the impression that a form of peer review was in use among disciples, in the sense that, if anyone should be holding some type of self-view, other disciples would step in to clarify that such a view is not in accordance with what the Buddha taught.¹²⁰ In sum, the situation that emerges from these texts would be one where, even without “access to the whole *Tipiṭaka*,” the doctrine on the absence of a self can reasonably be expected to have been well known among the Buddha’s disciples.

For the sake of illustration of the overall situation, I briefly turn to teachings on karma. These are clearly based on giving priority to intention; in fact, such priority plays out in monastic law when the motivation behind a particular action serves as the decisive criterion for deciding whether a breach of a rule has occurred.¹²¹ Yet, the actual principle of identifying mental volition or intention as karma is only expressed once among Pāli discourses.¹²² This example goes to show that frequency of explicit mention is not necessarily a safe guide to assessing overall importance.

Now, the majority of relevant teachings have a more practical orientation and for this reason employ formulations conveying what should be done rather than asserting what exists and does not exist. But this practical orientation is grounded in the assessment that the belief in a self is mistaken, hence the need to view the five aggregates, etc., as devoid of a self so as to train the mind to let go of a deeply ingrained pattern. Such practical injunctions do not reflect some sort of sophistry behind which

¹²⁰ MN 38 at MN I 256,15 and MĀ 201 at T I 766c4.

¹²¹ For an example see Anālayo 2019e: 99f.

¹²² AN 6.63 at AN III 415,7; see also MĀ 111 at T I 600a23 and Up 4001 at D 4094 *ju* 200a1 or P 5595 *tu* 228a4.

stands a tacit acknowledgement that a self exists apart from the five aggregates, along the lines of one of the options envisaged by Evan Thompson.

In fact, unlike the case of identifying mental volition or intention as karma, the dictum that “all phenomena are without a self” is not the only one of this type among the early discourses. Another relevant example can be identified in a Pāli discourse and its Chinese and Tibetan parallels.¹²³ The teaching found similarly in the three versions indicates that each of the six senses, as well as their respective objects, fails to qualify for being a self. The argument goes that each of these is impermanent, wherefore none of these can be reckoned a self.

Besides confirming the above-quoted clarification offered by Richard Gombrich that a central issue at stake is permanency, this type of presentation is clearly meant to be comprehensive, given that elsewhere the discourses indicate that the senses and their objects together make up “all.”¹²⁴ As if to make absolutely sure that such comprehensiveness cannot be missed in this case, the present Pāli discourse and its Chinese and Tibetan parallels proceed even further, by way of applying the same treatment also to consciousness, contact, and the feeling tones that arise in dependence on contact.

With this type of presentation, it should be sufficiently clear that there is no place left for a self to exist somewhere in some form.¹²⁵ For example, the statement that no living sphinx can be

¹²³ MN 148 at MN III 282,14, SĀ 304 at T II 87a8, and Up 3059 at D 4094 *ju* 159b4 or P 5595 *tu* 184b1.

¹²⁴ SN 35.23 at SN IV 15,13, SĀ 319 at T II 91a27, and Up 9011 at D 4094 *nyu* 81b5 or P 5595 *thu* 127b6.

¹²⁵ The one instance where the Buddha reportedly refused to take the position of categorically denying the existence of a self comes in

found anywhere implies an assertion that a living sphinx does not exist. In the same way, the statement that no self can be found anywhere implies the assertion that a self does not exist.¹²⁶ In view of the above evidence, it is simply unconvincing to profess that the early Buddhist discourses fail to present a rejection of the existence of a (permanent) self.¹²⁷ The agreement among the parallels in the above cases is conclusive evidence for “early Buddhism” in this respect. An attempt to go beyond that and identify some sort of pre-canonical Buddhism that differs substantially from such agreement remains similarly unconvincing.¹²⁸

the parallel versions together with explicit indications that this refusal was motivated by the wish to avoid increasing the interlocutor’s confusion; see in more detail Anālayo 2023c: 70–74.

¹²⁶ Bodhi 2000: 1457 note 385 reasons that the avoidance of a formulation of the type ‘there is no self’ may have been motivated by the wish to prevent the Buddhist position being more easily mistaken for annihilationism; at any rate, the statement that ‘all phenomena are without a self’ clearly “means that if one seeks a self anywhere one will not find one. Since ‘all phenomena’ includes both the conditioned and the unconditioned, this precludes an utterly transcendent, ineffable self.”

¹²⁷ The earliest instance of taking this position that I am aware of—without having been able to invest time in trying to identify all relevant cases—would be Frauwallner 1953: 224: “in den Texten des buddhistischen Kanons [wird] nie davon gesprochen, daß ein Ich nicht vorhanden, sondern höchstens, daß es nicht fassbar ist.” The most recent one among these is Wynne 2010/2011: 140, who identifies a “general failure of the early texts to assert the non-existence of the self.”

¹²⁸ See Anālayo 2022b: 166–175, and on the methodology of identifying some Pāli discourses, or parts of these, as earlier and others as later, without taking into account whether such assessments are supported by parallel versions, Anālayo 2019g.

Without going so far as to provide a comprehensive coverage of all the various publications on the topic, it seems to me that the above should suffice for the time being to provide a basic clarification. This concerns what needs to be taken into account by those who wish to counter the common assessment that early Buddhist teachings are distinct in the ancient Indian setting for rejecting the existence of a self: There are clear-cut textual instances that amount to a denial of the existence of a self, and these are supported by their parallels. It follows that such denial indeed deserves to be reckoned an integral dimension of early Buddhist doctrine.

The passages quoted above also put into perspective another and closely related idea, according to which teachings on the absence of a self in phenomena only emerge with the Mahāyāna traditions, as early Buddhist teachings supposedly only apply this doctrine to persons.¹²⁹ That this type of assessment is incorrect can be seen in the passage already quoted (p. 77 note 115), which asserts the absence of a self in all *phenomena* (= dharmas).

Conditionality

As the doctrinal counterpart to the teaching on the absence of a self, conditionality in early Buddhist thought has a similarly comprehensive range of applicability. This has been questioned by Shulman (2008: 299), however, who proposes that “depend-

¹²⁹ An articulation of this idea, being the most recent one among instances of which I am aware, is Salomon 2018: 337, who argues that Mahāyāna teachings on emptiness “can be understood in historical terms as a radical extension of the traditional Buddhist concept of ‘nonself’ (*anātman*), applied not only to the illusory sense of individual personality that is a fundamental principle of conservative Buddhism, but to the entire conceptual universe.”

ent-origination addresses the workings of the mind alone,” in the sense that the principle of dependent arising does not apply to phenomena in general.¹³⁰

The idea that dependent arising is confined to matters of the mind does not reflect the position of early Buddhist thought accurately. An example in case would be a description of the construction of a house, which “depends” on building material like timber, clay, and grass.¹³¹ The description in the Pāli version of the relevant discourse employs the word *paṭicca*, which is the first term in the expression “dependent arising.” Its usage in the present context implies that the description lists specific condi-

¹³⁰ Shulman 2008: 299 explicitly contrasts his position to “[v]iewing *pratītya-samutpāda* as a description of the nature of reality in general.” Shulman 2008: 307 then argues that “[w]hen the Buddha says ‘When this is, that is, etc.,’ he is speaking *only* of mental conditioning, and is saying absolutely nothing about existence per se. The most significant evidence for this fact is that the phrase ‘*imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti ...*’ never occurs detached from the articulation of the 12 links, save one occurrence,” this being MN 79 at MN II 32,6. The argument is unconvincing, as the twelve links include items like aging-and-death, which go beyond just matters of subjective mental conditioning; see also Jones 2022: 138 and Anālayo 2023a: 7. Moreover, it is also not fully correct to assert that there is only one occurrence apart from the twelve links in Pāli discourses. SN 12.62 at SN II 96,22 depicts how a noble disciple properly pays penetrative attention to dependent arising. This takes the form of the basic principle of specific conditionality. The ensuing exemplification of this principle then turns to the relationship between contact and feeling tones, which are only two out of the twelve links, without mentioning the other links. This is thus an instance of a Pāli discourse where the basic statement of specific conditionality does *not* lead over to the full set of twelve links, which thus would need to be added to the case of MN 79.

¹³¹ MN 28 at MN I 190,15 and MĀ 30 at T I 466c29.

tions for the construction of a house, namely the material employed for such purposes in ancient India; it “depends” on them.

In its context, this passage serves as an illustration of the nature of the first aggregate of bodily form, which similarly depends on bodily parts like bones, flesh, and skin. The aggregate of bodily form clearly pertains to the material dimension of experience. Such an application of conditionality does not concern only the workings of the mind or mental conditioning.

Another example of a similar type involves the sound made by a musical instrument, whose sound manifests “in dependence” on the sounding board, belly, arm, head, strings, etc., as well as, of course, the effort made by the musician.¹³²

Yet another example, which is of a different type, would be a verse that occurs in the context of a discussion of what makes one a true brahmin. The verse explicitly speaks of those who have a vision of “dependent arising.”¹³³ The expression in ques-

¹³² SN 35.205 at SN IV 197,¹³ and SĀ 1169 at T II 312c12.

¹³³ Sn 653. The verse continues with a reference to *kammavipāka*. According to Krishan 1986: 80f, “as a rule, [this] means that the karmas of previous lives mature or ripen and bear fruit in subsequent life or lives,” hence the indication that one becomes a brahmin through one’s deeds, *kamma*, rather than by birth should be understood to imply that the “Buddhists recognised caste distinctions in the present life as the product of a man’s past karmas.” One of the rare occurrences of term *kammavipāka* among Pāli discourses is MN 86 at MN II 105,¹⁶ where it stands for experiencing in the present life the results of karma done in that same life (see also above p. 52 note 76). This shows that the term is not confined to results in future lives, in line with a basic distinction of types of karma, some of which ripen in the present life; see Anālayo 2011a: 779 note 118. This is the meaning required by the context here, as the preceding Sn 652 begins with the indication *coro pi kammanā hoti*. This does of course not mean that becoming a thief is merely due to karma

tion stands for the understanding that the specific condition for being reckoned a brahmin is one's deeds and not just one's birth. The notion of being a brahmin by birth, a central target of the whole discourse, and the proposal that one becomes a brahmin rather through one's deeds, is another instance that can hardly be confined to mental conditioning.

Even though deeds of course originate in the mind in the form of intentions, their verbal or bodily actualization goes beyond what is purely mental, and such actual deeds form the condition—to be discerned by those who have a vision of “dependent arising”—for becoming a brahmin, instead of birth.

Elsewhere the physical body is also qualified as being “dependently arisen,” which thus constitutes another instance of the full Pāli term being applied to what is more than just a matter of the mind.¹³⁴

In sum, it seems fair to conclude that the principle of specific conditionality that informs presentations of dependent arising is of general relevance. This is not to deny that the overarching concern of this early Buddhist teaching is indeed the human predicament and its root causes in the mind. The point is only that its application cannot be confined to the workings of the mind alone. As pointed out by Olendzki (2010: 110) in a monograph study of Buddhist psychology, the succinct formula of dependent arising “can be applied to almost any field of inquiry including natural systems, social interactions, political dynamics, and historical events. The matter of most immediate concern for the

done in past lives. Instead, the vision of “dependent arising” in this particular case is simply that the specific condition for becoming a thief is committing theft (in the present life).

¹³⁴ SN 36.7 at SN IV 211,24; however, the corresponding passage in the parallel SĀ 1028 at T II 268c13 adopts a different formulation.

Buddha, however, was the field of human experiential phenomenology.”¹³⁵

The teaching of dependent arising as a correlate to the doctrine on the absence of a self can be explored based on an account of the Buddha’s own pre-awakening investigation of conditionality. By way of background to that investigation, the early discourses present the chief motivation for the future Buddha’s quest for awakening to be freedom from the human predicament of being subject to the *dukkha* of aging, disease, and death.¹³⁶

The same motivation receives a more detailed coverage in a Pāli discourse, with parallels in Sanskrit fragments and in Chinese translation, already mentioned in brief at an earlier point of my discussion. These relate the Buddha’s quest to the theme of dependent arising. The parallel versions report that his pre-awakening investigation of the human predicament started out with the fact of aging and death (one version adds to these also the problem of disease), inquiring into the specific condition for their manifestation. This turned out to be birth.¹³⁷ The same line of reasoning then led via several intervening links up to ignorance as the initial cause in the conditional links that result in the human predicament. These links form specific conditions in the sense that their cessation leads to the cessation of the link that depends on them.

¹³⁵ Similarly, in a discussion of *paṭicca samuppāda* Tilakaratne 2020b: 100 reasons that, “for example, suffering according to Buddhism has psychological, social and economic causes. Buddhism addresses the question from each perspective. The psychological aspect of the problem has been given more prominence because it was the Buddha’s ‘expertise’ so to speak. Nevertheless, other aspects too have been dealt with.”

¹³⁶ MN 26 at MN I 163,9 and MĀ 204 at T I 776a26.

¹³⁷ See above p. 45 note 62.

The fact that aging and death are to be expected for one who has been born may, at first sight, not seem to warrant the qualification of being a penetrative understanding. However, this qualification applies similarly to each ensuing step in the entire investigation, which eventually leads up to ignorance as the condition whose cessation leads, via the cessation of the other links, to transcending aging and death. In other words, the net result of such penetrative understanding is the realization that the human predicament can be transcended by eradicating ignorance.

The obvious relationship that obtains between birth and death can serve as a convenient exemplification of what specific conditionality implies. It involves identifying what is indispensable for the existence of something else such that, in its absence, the other item is unable to persist or even come into existence.

The key aspect here is the cessation of the specific condition that has been identified. In the case of the dependent arising of death, for example, this is birth as the specific condition for its arising, and pursuing the same further then leads to the specific condition of ignorance, whose cessation provides the needed directive for transcending the human predicament.

The basic principle enshrined in this way is hardly a novel discovery. Even animals must be able to recognize certain specific conditions required for their own survival, such as where food can be found or how predators can be avoided. The significantly Buddhist perspective on the matter lies in applying this basic principle to the human predicament in the understanding that the entire gamut of subjective experience is merely the result of conditional relationships, with no permanent entity found anywhere in addition to or apart from these.

This perspective is based on the following principle:¹³⁸

In dependence on this, that exists; with the arising of this, then [that] arises ... with the ceasing of this, then [that] ceases; this not being, then [that] does not exist.

This stands behind the conditioned arising and ceasing of the twelve links of ignorance, volitional formations, consciousness, name-and-form, six sense spheres, contact, feeling tone, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, aging and death.

Although there is an overall pattern in this series of twelve links, with the preceding link forming a condition for the ensuing one, the underlying conception is not confined to a linear sequence in time.¹³⁹ A particularly intriguing aspect is that the first part of the list of twelve links appears to stand in dialogue with a Vedic creation myth depicting the genesis of the world.¹⁴⁰

The procedure that emerges in this way would be well in line with a general pattern in the early discourses, which tend to adopt and decisively reinterpret Vedic and Brahminical notions apparently prevalent in ancient India. The decisive reinterpreta-

¹³⁸ EĀ 46.3 at T II 776a23, with a parallel in SN 12.21 at SN II 28,7: “This being, that exists; with the arising of this, that arises. This not being, that does not exist; with the ceasing of this, that ceases.” As paraphrased by Jones 2011: 17, the implications of this statement are that what “exists has come into being dependent on particular causes and conditions; and when those causes and conditions cease, the things that depend on them will also cease” (italics in the original have been removed).

¹³⁹ See Anālayo 2023e: 149f.

¹⁴⁰ Jurewicz 2000. Jones 2009: 253 comments that “[i]n parodying Vedic cosmogony in the twelve *nidānas*, the Buddha might have been giving expression to his own teaching of *dukkha* and its ending in terms that would have had startling significance to his hearers.”

tion in the present case would be that, rather than celebrating the creation of the world, the series culminates in the human predicament of being subject to aging and death. The cessation mode of the same teaching then shows how this whole “creation” can be undone.

Reliance on a notion presumably well known in the ancient setting in order to create an initial impression of familiarity would explain why the application of dependent arising by way of twelve links occurs so frequently in the early discourses, namely because of its probable appeal to the ancient Indian audience. At the same time, however, the same early discourses show various alternative applications of the basic principle that do not involve the whole set of twelve. In fact, even just the conditional dependence of aging and death on birth, discussed above, is already in itself a statement of dependent arising (and, perhaps even more importantly, of the possibility of dependent ceasing).

Another example, notably an explanation given by a lay disciple to monastics, presents the matter in the following way:¹⁴¹

The eye is not a fetter for visible forms nor are visible forms a fetter for the eye ... but whatever lustful desire exists between them, that is accordingly the fetter there.

The two parallel versions of this discourse agree in applying this description to the other senses, illustrating the situation with the example of two oxen that are bound together by a yoke. Neither

¹⁴¹ SĀ 572 at T II 152a13, with a parallel in SN 41.1 at SN IV 283,8: “The eye is not a fetter for visible forms nor are visible forms a fetter for the eye, but the lustful desire that arises there in dependence on both, that is the fetter there.”

of the two oxen is the fetter of the other. Instead, it is the yoke by which they are bound together that constitutes the fetter.

From this perspective, the specific conditions required for visual experience, for example, to result in the state of being fettered are the ability to see, the presence of something visible, and the existence within the mind of a tendency to lustful desires. Identifying such specific conditions is not about some form of interconnectedness or interdependence.¹⁴² Visual experience, to stay with this example, does not require the next sense door of the ear or its corresponding objects of sounds. Even the deaf can in principle still see, and vision is not obstructed by total silence. Conversely, hearing is still possible for someone in complete

¹⁴² This idea that interdependence is an early Buddhist teaching seems to be fairly widespread, a recent example being McMahan 2023: 202 and 214, who refers to “dependent origination or interdependence (*pratītya-samutpāda*),” and then states that “[i]n early Buddhism, the interdependent world of *samsāra* was not a wondrous web of life but a binding chain,” presumably implying that mainly the evaluation of this interdependent world changed with later traditions. Yet, it is only as part of the onset of later developments that the notion of interdependence emerged; the early Buddhist teaching on dependent arising is about specific conditionality rather than interdependence. Poceski 2004: 346f explains, regarding “Huayan’s system of religious philosophy and practice,” that it involves “a holistic vision of the universe as a dynamic web of causal interrelationships, in which each and every thing and event is related to everything else as they interpenetrate without any obstruction. The Huayan depiction of reality is an ingenious reworking of the central Buddhist doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination) ... each phenomenon is determining every other phenomenon, while it is also in turn being determined by each and every other phenomenon. All phenomena are thus interdependent ... every phenomenon conditions the existence of every other phenomenon and vice versa.”

darkness, and thus deprived of visual objects, or for someone blind, and thus lacking the ability to see. Thus, even though the eyes and the ears are related by being found in the same person, neither seeing nor hearing requires the other sense organ (or its objects) in order to be able to function.

In terms of the simile of the two oxen bound together by a yoke, their predicament does not stand in a specific causal relationship to any other animal that may be grazing in the same area or to birds that may be singing on a tree nearby. This holds even though the presence of all these animals in the same place would certainly suffice to consider them as closely interconnected. Yet, whether there are other grazing animals or not, whether there are singing birds or not, the specific condition for each oxen's state of bondage is the yoke that binds it to the other oxen. Complete freedom from this yoke is a central concern of early Buddhist meditation, to which I turn in more detail in the next chapter.

Summary

The term “early Buddhism” has been in use in scholarly writing for over a century, and the basic idea of a chronological perspective resonates with the relevant textual sources for reconstructing this period of approximately the first two centuries in the history of Buddhism. Comparison between such textual sources transmitted by different reciter lineages offers a window on stages in the development of Buddhist thought, enabling ascertaining, for example, that the four noble truths indeed belong to the earliest strata of reported teachings, or that many of the tales of past lives of the Buddha reflect a comparatively later stratum.

The influence of ancient Indian cosmology is plainly evident in these textual sources, which are often best read from the view-

point of what the relevant teaching appears to be trying to communicate rather than as factual statements. This is of direct relevance to my exploration of climate change in the third part of this book.

Ascertaining early Buddhist thought can benefit from making an effort to distinguish its positions from later developments in different Buddhist traditions. An example in case is the attribution of omniscience to the Buddha, which comparative study shows to have gained traction after the period of early Buddhism. In contrast, rebirth and karma are indubitably integral aspects of early Buddhist thought, and the latter is certainly not deterministic or monocausal.

The realization of the unconditioned can rely on conditioned means just as the vision from the top of a mountain can be reached by a path that leads up to it, and such realization is self-validating. The four levels of awakening are mentioned similarly in discourses transmitted by different reciter traditions, wherefore they need to be considered an integral part of “early Buddhism.”

The doctrine on the absence of a self concerns a permanent entity and does not deny the operation of conditions and the continuity of impermanent processes. This doctrine is meant to be comprehensive and thus differs from ancient Indian beliefs in some form of a permanent entity existing apart from the five aggregates. The principle it enshrines stands in the background of a range of discourses even when these do not explicitly mention the term *anattā*.

Conditionality is applicable to mental and physical phenomena; the common presentation by way of twelve links can best be understood as an exemplification of the basic principle of specific conditionality, and this exemplification appears to stand in critical dialogue with a Vedic creation myth.

From the viewpoint of my overall concern with providing a viable perspective on the challenges of climate change, it appears to be indeed meaningful to ground such a perspective in the notion of “early Buddhism” and to consider the four noble truths to be a key teaching of this particular stage in the development of Buddhist thought and practice. Another relevant key teaching is the absence of a self, a distinct Buddhist contribution in the ancient Indian setting, and its correlate in dependent arising (with its ramifications in relation to karma and rebirth). Together these provide the background for formulating an early Buddhist approach to facing climate change, which can combine progress toward awakening and the realization of the unconditioned with mindfully taking care of the conditions in the world necessary to enable ourselves and others now and in the future to embark on the path for such progress.

Mindfulness

Introduction

Out of the range of different constructs of mindfulness in existence, my main concern here is with the early Buddhist articulation of this quality and its contemporary employment for health purposes.¹

My discussion begins with the topic of meditation in general—as a way of providing a background to my ensuing examination of aspects of mindfulness meditation—which I explore by surveying a range of references presenting meditation practice as a key concern in early Buddhist texts and as an activity of considerable relevance to lay disciples. Next, I turn to the more specific topics of mindfulness of breathing and *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation, followed by an examination of the body scan and its antecedents. Then I take up the dangers of mindfulness as well as the problematization of its secular employment.

Meditation

The first topic to be taken up in this second part of my book is the practice of meditation in general, before turning to more specific topics related to mindfulness meditation. As will become evident in the ensuing exploration, both are of central importance in early Buddhist thought.

This central role has been called into question in recent times. For example, Thompson (2020: 2) argues, in the context of ex-

¹ For a detailed study see Anālayo 2020j, and on the need to distinguish this from, for example, its Theravāda counterpart also Anālayo 2018b.

aming what he refers to as “Buddhist exceptionalism,” that this manifests, among other things, in

the belief that Buddhism is ... inherently rational and empirical ... or [a] way of life based on meditation. These beliefs, as well as the assumptions about religion and science on which they rest, are mistaken. They need to be discarded.

With all room granted to the necessity of putting into perspective some strands of Buddhist modernism for overstating those aspects of Buddhism that are particularly palatable to the West, the above formulation risks becoming as lopsided as the target of its criticism. The selected points explored in the first part of this book have already brought to light dimensions of rationality and utilization of empirical epistemological means that are nothing short of remarkable. These features are quite unique in the ancient Indian religious setting and beyond.

Moreover, as far as its textual records allow us to judge, early Buddhism was indeed prominently a way of life based on meditation. The early discourses show the Buddha himself to have been a dedicated meditator, and his chief teachings can be seen to spring from his meditative practice and realizations.²

Below, I will survey textual sources that present meditation and meditational attainments as a central concern among his disciples, both monastic and lay. The evidence that emerges in this way is not confined to prescriptive material but also covers the descriptive, in the sense of conveying the impression of reflecting actual practice, at times in quite an incidental manner.

Needless to say, with only textual evidence available for this early period there is no way of establishing what happened on the ground with absolute certainty. Nevertheless, these textual

² See Anālayo 2017c and 2022c.

records are testimonies to the emic perception within tradition and for this reason need to be taken seriously. Without going so far as to reduce early Buddhism to meditation only, it is nevertheless the case that it accords a central value to a way of life based on meditation. The same may well hold for a considerable number of later traditions. The problem here is a lack of additional evidence one way or another.

Those who dedicate themselves to a life of meditation will avoid living in monasteries, since they naturally prefer hermitages or caves as being more conducive to a meditative lifestyle. Hermitages are usually constructed from material that, particularly in a tropical climate, will not endure for long. Hence, meditators tend not to leave an easily discernible archeological imprint. Yet, many of the developments of Buddhist doctrine in later times can be understood to stand in dialogue with meditation practices and experiences. This is not to deny other agendas, but only to take the position that meditation has indeed been central for the Buddhist way of life at its outset and may well have continued to be so for quite some time.

Although Thompson (2020: 25) portrays as a wrong idea that “Buddhism at its core is really a psychology based on meditation,” this appears to be actually correct for early Buddhism—especially if we qualify such psychology to have a “soteriological orientation,” so as to distinguish it from psychology in general—rather than being merely an idea created and promoted by nineteenth century Orientalism.

By way of providing an example for the sake of illustration, it would hardly be convincing to claim that there is a need to discard the idea that “charity” or “love” (*caritas*, *agapē*) is a central Christian value, citing a few instances from the inquisition, the crusades, and the persecution of Jews. Instead, such instances need to be contextualized by considering the evidence

for the central value accorded to charity or love in the reported teachings of Jesus and many of his later followers. In the same vein, the absence of an interest in meditation in some later Buddhist traditions needs to be contextualized by considering the evidence for the central value accorded to meditation in the reported teachings of the Buddha and many of his followers.

In an article dedicated to the importance of recognizing the difference between Buddhist thought and contemporary science, Samuel (2014: 570) notes that the actual practice of meditation in the different Buddhist traditions “may not be anything like as central to Buddhist practice as Westerners typically assume, but it does take place, and it has played a significant historical role in the development of Buddhist philosophy and practice.”

Another relevant consideration concerns what is actually referred to with the term “meditation.” The Pāli discourses employ a remarkable range of different terms to refer to meditative activities.³ The most relevant of these may well be *bhāvanā*, which conveys a sense of a (usually mental) form of cultivation. Formal sitting meditation exemplifies such cultivation, which at the same time is not confined to a particular posture or meditative activity. For example, recollection of the Buddha, a practice that has been of central importance in various Buddhist traditions from ancient to modern times, also needs to be recognized as a form of *bhāvanā*.

A division of wisdom into three types distinguishes between wisdom produced by hearing (= learning), by reflection, and by meditative cultivation, *bhāvanā*. Yet, all three types of wisdom involve mindfulness.⁴ Thus, for example, even the centuries of oral transmission of the teachings given by the Buddha and his

³ For a survey see Anālayo 2017a: 228.

⁴ See in more detail Anālayo 2021f.

disciples are a testimony to the continuity of a particular type of mindfulness-related practice.⁵ When viewed from this perspective, the cultivation of mindfulness is indeed crucial to a broad range of dimensions of the Buddhist traditions.

References to Meditation and Meditational Attainments

Above I asserted that the relevant textual sources show meditation practices and attainments to have been a central concern in early Buddhism. Since the belief that this is not the case appears to be fairly widespread, a detailed examination seems to be called for in order to put this idea into perspective. For that purpose, my presentation will begin by surveying relevant textual evidence. Since reading through all the details may become tedious, readers mainly interested in the conclusion to be drawn may prefer to skip what follows and continue reading from the concluding statement on p. 112 onwards.

As a survey of all extant discourse collections would go beyond the confines of what is possible here and become even more tedious for the reader, an expedient option would be to survey the first five chapters in the collection of medium-length discourses, the *Majjhima-nikāya*, together with their respective parallels.

⁵ Cousins 2022: 178 explains that “it is essential to attempt to ask questions in terms that are actually meaningful to the meditation tradition,” noting that the term for meditative cultivation, *bhāvanā*, covers activities such as “chanting *suttas* or repetition of songs, chants, and verses ... [t]his is certainly the position of the commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*) and was probably that of traditional Theravāda Buddhism. Many Asian meditators today would still have some such understanding. In this view of the matter, *bhāvanā* is very widely practiced indeed, both by virtually all monks and by most of the more committed laity.”

According to the Pāli commentarial tradition,⁶ if someone in the ancient setting wanted to be a reciter of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, such a person needed to memorize at least its first five chapters, which contain altogether fifty discourses and correspond to about one third of the entire collection. This makes it fair to assume that the discourses allocated to these first five chapters were seen by the ancient reciters as fairly representative of the main teachings found in this collection.

The first discourse in the *Majjhima-nikāya* offers an analysis of the perceptual process of different types of people in regard to a range of possible objects. In all versions of this discourse, the objects listed include the four immaterial spheres,⁷ whose meditative cultivation requires mastery of the four absorptions.⁸

The next discourse presents seven methods conducive to abandoning unwholesome influxes in the mind. The parallel versions agree that one of the methods for achieving this goal is meditative “cultivation” (*bhāvanā*), which concerns the seven factors of awakening.⁹ Mindfulness is the first and foundational one among these seven.

The third discourse takes the form of an exhortation by the Buddha, followed by an explanation of its implications by his chief disciple Sāriputta. In all versions of the discourse, this explanation throws into relief the importance of seclusion in order to overcome unwholesome conditions in the mind and to culti-

⁶ Sp IV 789,14.

⁷ MN 1 at MN I 2,31 and EĀ 44.6 at T II 766a20; see also the partial parallels MĀ 106 at T I 596b17 and T 56 at T I 851b2.

⁸ See Anālayo 2020b: 574f.

⁹ MN 2 at MN I 11,22 (= AN 6.58 at AN III 390,16), MĀ 10 at T I 432c17, T 31 at T I 814a20, EĀ 40.6 at T II 741b1, and Up 2069 at D 4094 *ju* 94a5 or P 5595 *tu* 107b1.

vate the eightfold path, of which right mindfulness and right concentration are the seventh and eighth members.¹⁰

The fourth discourse and its parallel report the Buddha's own meditative practice in seclusion leading up to his gaining of the four absorptions and awakening.¹¹ The next discourse and its parallels take the form of an exhortation by Sāriputta, followed by an illustration of its import provided by his companion Mahāmoggallāna. The illustration highlights how the exhortation given will be received by different practitioners, contrasting those who lack concentration and mindfulness to those who possess these qualities.¹²

The sixth discourse and its parallels recommend the cultivation of tranquility and insight in order for a range of different wishes to be fulfilled.¹³ The ensuing discourse and three of its four parallels describe how the removal of mental defilements can lead over to the meditative cultivation of the divine abodes, the *brahmavihāras*.¹⁴

The eighth discourse and one of its two parallels list the four absorptions and the four immaterial spheres in the context of a

¹⁰ MN 3 at MN I 15,36, MĀ 88 at T I 571b9, and EĀ 18.3 at T II 589a5.

¹¹ MN 4 at MN I 21,34, SHT IV 165 folio 15V4, Sander and Waldschmidt 1980: 190, and EĀ 31.1 at T II 666b12.

¹² MN 5 at MN I 32,13, MĀ 87 at T I 569b27, T 49 at T I 842a9, and EĀ 25.6 at T II 633c29.

¹³ MN 6 at MN I 33,10 (= AN 10.71 at AN V 131,12), MĀ 105 at T I 595c22, EĀ 37.5 at T II 712a14, and Up 2019 at D 4094 *ju* 57a4 or P 5595 *tu* 62b5.

¹⁴ MN 7 at MN I 38,20, MĀ 93 at T I 575c10, T 51 at T I 844a15, and EĀ 13.5 at T II 574a6. The fourth parallel, T 582 at T XIV 966c1, refers only to the cultivation of *mettā*, the first of the four *brahmavihāras*.

discussion of what constitutes real effacement.¹⁵ Although another parallel does not list these attainments, this could be the result of a textual corruption, as this discourse shows internal inconsistencies elsewhere.¹⁶ Moreover, this version nevertheless draws attention to the need to develop concentration in its survey of what constitutes real effacement,¹⁷ so that it also testifies to the importance granted to meditation.

The ninth discourse expounds various ways of arriving at the right view of stream-entry. According to all versions of this discourse, one means of doing so is by way of the four noble truths, the last of which concerns cultivating the noble eightfold path with right mindfulness and right concentration as its seventh and eighth members.¹⁸ Although this falls short of being a direct reference to meditation, the cultivation of mindfulness and concentration is at least implicitly included. The final discourse in the first chapter of the collection of medium-length discourses is the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, all three versions of which are entirely dedicated to the topic of mindfulness practice.¹⁹

In this way, most of the ten discourses in the first chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, together with their parallels, relate in one way or another to the topic of meditation, covering the cultivation of mindfulness, the awakening factors, the absorptions, the *brahmavihāras*, and the immaterial spheres.

The first discourse in the second chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya* begins with the premise that reaching the final goal re-

¹⁵ MN 8 at MN I 40,27 and MĀ 91 at T I 573b26.

¹⁶ See Anālayo 2011a: 60.

¹⁷ EĀ 47.9 at T II 784c8.

¹⁸ MN 9 at MN I 48,24, Chung and Fukita 2020: 190, MĀ 29 at T I 462a26, and SĀ 344 at T II 94c29.

¹⁹ For a comparative study see Anālayo 2013c.

quires overcoming the three mental roots of unwholesomeness: lust, hatred, and delusion.²⁰ Awareness of the presence and absence of these three is a task of the third establishment of mindfulness,²¹ whose cultivation could be considered an implicit dimension of the discourse's presentation, although it needs to be kept in mind that this much is not explicitly mentioned.

The next Pāli discourse and its parallel report the Buddha listing his own meditative attainments.²² The second chapter of the collection continues with an analysis of sensuality, material form, and feeling tones, in regard to which the Pāli discourse and three of its four parallels present the four absorptions as exemplifying the gratification of feeling tones.²³ The next Pāli discourse and two of its Chinese parallels report the Buddha highlighting the superiority of his experience of happiness by way of absorption attainment, compared to the pleasures even the king of the country can experience.²⁴

The fifth discourse in the second chapter, together with its parallels, recommends regularly examining oneself for the presence of a series of unwholesome conditions, comparable to ex-

²⁰ MN 11 at MN I 64,31, MĀ 103 at T I 590c6, and EĀ 27.2 at T II 643c23.

²¹ See Anālayo 2013c: 142–148.

²² Whereas T 757 at T XVII 592b1 begins with absorption attainment, MN 12 at MN I 69,10 sets in right away with supernormal powers.

²³ MN 13 at MN I 89,32, MĀ 99 at T I 586a18, T 53 at T I 848a17, and T 737 at T XVII 540c15. The fourth parallel, EĀ 21.9 at T II 606a24, instead speaks of contemplation of feeling tones—corresponding to the description of such practice as the second *satipaṭṭhāna* in EĀ 12.1 at T II 568b28—and thus also brings in a meditation practice.

²⁴ MN 14 at MN I 94,29, MĀ 100 at T I 587c15, and T 55 at T I 851a3. The other parallel, T 54 at T I 849a28, has a reference that could be a remnant of a similar presentation; on T 54 see also Nattier 2008: 128f.

aming one's face in a mirror.²⁵ This illustration occurs elsewhere among the discourses to illustrate contemplation of the mind, corresponding to the third establishment of mindfulness.²⁶ Such correspondence makes it fair to assume that the recommendation given in this discourse and its parallels would require cultivating mindfulness.

The collection continues with a Pāli discourse describing, in agreement with its parallels, the types of mental bondage that need to be overcome to be able to reach awakening. This ability finds illustration in the example of a hen's brooding, which will lead to the hatching of the chicks.²⁷ Elsewhere this simile illustrates the practice of the qualities pertinent to awakening (*bodhipakkhiya*), among which the four establishments of mindfulness occur as the first set.²⁸ Here, too, it seems fair to assume that the envisaged overcoming of mental bondage involves a form of meditative cultivation.

The ensuing discourse and its parallel recommend that one should continue to stay in a place where accommodation and food are difficult to obtain as long as one's cultivation of mindfulness and concentration improves.²⁹ If this is not the case, however, one should leave, even if accommodation and food are easily obtained. The emphasis given in this way on the overarching importance of meditation is noteworthy.

²⁵ MN 15 at MN I 100,13, MĀ 89 at T I 572b3, and T 50 at T I 843a10.

²⁶ Anālayo 2019j: 1928.

²⁷ MN 16 at MN I 104,3, MĀ 206 at T I 781b11, and EĀ 51.4 at T II 817b17; notably, the otherwise closely related AN 10.14 at AN V 19,8 has a different simile.

²⁸ See Anālayo 2013c: 249.

²⁹ MN 17 at MN I 105,32 and MĀ 107 at T I 597a21. The next discourse in the *Madhyama-āgama*, MĀ 108, has an overall similar presentation but does not explicitly mention mindfulness and concentration.

The final three discourses in this second chapter relate in one way or another to the topic of thoughts. The perspectives covered in this way are the potential proliferation of thoughts in relation to each of the senses, the Buddha's pre-awakening division of thoughts into unwholesome and wholesome types, and five methods for emerging from unwholesome thoughts.

The last two discourses explicitly refer to meditation. In the former case this happens by way of mentioning the attainment of the four absorptions and three higher knowledges;³⁰ in the latter case by way of outlining five methods that can lead to concentration.³¹ Although the first of these three discourses does not have such an explicit reference, its presentation is of considerable relevance to mindfulness practice in relation to the sense doors.³²

Looking back on the ten discourses in the second chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, although meditation practice is no longer as ubiquitous as it was in the first chapter, nevertheless the majority of discourses explicitly refer to this topic.

The third chapter of the collection begins with the discourse that presents the famous simile of the saw, to which I will return in the third part of this book (see below p. 318). In both versions of this discourse, this simile encourages balance of mind even when faced by bandits who brutally cut one apart with a saw. The simile serves to illustrate an unshakeable attitude that is based on the meditative cultivation of *mettā* in the form of a boundless meditative radiation.³³

³⁰ MN 19 at MN I 117,6 and MĀ 102 at T I 589c9.

³¹ MN 20 at MN I 119,13 and MĀ 101 at T I 588a13.

³² MN 18 at MN I 111,35, MĀ 115 at T I 604b2, and EĀ 40.10 at T II 743b18.

³³ MN 21 at MN I 127,6 and MĀ 193 at T I 745b5; the latter mentions all four *brahmavihāras*.

Next in the collection comes an exposition of the insight contemplation on not-self.³⁴ The ensuing two discourses, together with their parallels, describe progress to awakening with the help of similes that involve digging into an anthill and travelling via a relay of chariots. The second of these two similes illustrates seven stages of purification that have served as the scaffolding for the *Visuddhimagga*, an important Theravāda path manual. The introductory part of the same discourse and its parallels eulogizes the monastic who delivers the simile of the relay of chariots by listing his praiseworthy qualities, one of which is his endowment with concentration.³⁵

Although the preceding discourse does not explicitly mention meditation practice in a comparable manner, two of the four parallels to the Pāli discourse agree in concluding the delivery of the simile central to the discourse with an injunction to retire into seclusion and meditate.³⁶ Another Chinese parallel reports that the monastic to whom the discourse was addressed did retire into seclusion for intensive practice and in turn became an arahant.³⁷ The Pāli commentary reports the same outcome, adding that the teaching on digging into an anthill served as the object of his meditation practice.³⁸

A simile found in both versions of the next discourse illustrates how some practitioners may fall into the hands of Māra, the tempter in early Buddhist imagery. Going beyond Māra

³⁴ MN 22 at MN I 138,10, MĀ 200 at T I 765c6, and Up 9039 at D 4094 *nyu* 94b5 or P 5595 *thu* 143b1.

³⁵ MN 24 at MN I 145,25, MĀ 9 at T I 430a17, and EĀ 39.10 at T II 734a15.

³⁶ SĀ 1079 at T II 282c5 and T 95 at T I 919a12.

³⁷ EĀ 39.9 at T II 733c26.

³⁸ Ps II 134,15 explains that this *sutta* served as his *kammaṭṭhāna*.

can be achieved by way of attaining the four absorptions, the four immaterial spheres, and awakening.³⁹ The Buddha's own gaining of the higher two of the four immaterial spheres and his awakening forms the theme of the next discourse and its parallel. The final part of the two versions of this discourse also covers the four absorptions.⁴⁰ The same four absorptions feature as part of an account of the gradual path of practice leading up to full awakening in the subsequent discourse and its parallel.⁴¹

The next discourse and its parallel present contemplation of the impermanent nature of the five aggregates in the context of an examination of the four material elements.⁴² The final two discourses in this chapter, together with their single parallel, highlight the need to proceed all the way to full awakening instead of settling for some lesser attainment. Their description includes the gaining of concentration as something that should lead on to awakening rather than being mistaken for the final goal.⁴³

In this way, the majority of discourses in the third chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya* cover, in one way or another, the topic of meditation.

The first discourse in the fourth chapter of the collection of medium-length discourses depicts, in agreement with its parallels, a group of monastics living together in harmony and having reached different levels of absorption and the four immaterial

³⁹ MN 25 at MN I 159,11 and MĀ 178 at T I 720a9.

⁴⁰ MN 26 at MN I 174,12 and MĀ 204 at T I 778b14.

⁴¹ MN 27 at MN I 181,26 and MĀ 146 at T I 657c22.

⁴² MN 28 at MN I 186,1 and MĀ 30 at T I 464c19.

⁴³ MN 29 at MN I 194,17, MN 30 at MN I 201,24, and their shared parallel EĀ 43.4 at T II 759b23.

spheres.⁴⁴ The ensuing discourse and its parallels extoll several eminent monastics for their respective qualities, such as, for example, meditative mastery of the mind.⁴⁵

The next two discourses, together with their parallels, employ the simile of herding cows to illustrate what it takes to reach awakening. A requirement mentioned in all versions of the first of these two discourses is the cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness.⁴⁶ Even though the second discourse only covers levels of awakening and does not go into the details of the meditative practices required for this purpose, the same can safely be considered implicit in view of the description provided in the preceding discourse.

The ensuing two Pāli discourses, together with their respective parallels, describe two encounters between the Buddha and a Jain debater. The three versions of the first of these two discourses refer to the Buddha's instructions on contemplation of not self.⁴⁷ The report of the second encounter between this debater and the Buddha contains an autobiographical account of the Buddha's progress to awakening, which covers his pre-

⁴⁴ MN 31 at MN I 207,30, Silverlock 2015: 498, MĀ 185 at T I 730a29, and EĀ 24.8 at T II 629b20.

⁴⁵ MN 32 at MN I 214,36, MĀ 184 at T I 727c29, EĀ 37.3 at T II 711a28, and T 154.16 at T III 81c14.

⁴⁶ MN 33 at MN I 221,36, SĀ 1249 at T II 343a16, T 123 at T II 546b24, and EĀ 49.1 at T II 794b10; see also AN 11.18 at AN V 350,1 (since some versions abbreviate the exposition of the case when someone has the needed qualities, my references are to the preceding exposition of someone who lacks these qualities).

⁴⁷ MN 35 at MN I 230,5, SĀ 110 at T II 35c21, and EĀ 37.10 at T II 715c12. MN 35 at MN I 234,33 and SĀ 110 at T II 36c15 indicate that such contemplation leads beyond doubt, which in this context appears to be an implicit reference to stream-entry.

awakening meditation practices, such as his attainment of the four absorptions, and, based on that, his meditative cultivation in the night of his awakening.⁴⁸

In the next Pāli discourse and one of its two parallels, contemplation of impermanence features as the path to the destruction of craving.⁴⁹ The other parallel sets in only at a point in narrative time after this instruction and for this reason does not have an explicit reference to insight meditation.⁵⁰

The exposition in the ensuing Pāli discourse and its parallel leads up to a description of how the cultivation of mindfulness of the body can result in a boundless mental condition that enables remaining balanced with whatever may happen at any of the sense doors.⁵¹

The final two discourses in this chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya* describe what makes one become a true recluse. According to the first of these two discourses and one of its two parallels, this requires, among other things, the practice of mindful sense-restraint, clear comprehension, removal of the hindrances, attainment of the four absorptions, and the destruction of the influxes.⁵² The other parallel version only mentions the first and last of these.⁵³ Although this much already involves the topic of meditation, it could still be noted that this discourse appears to have suffered from textual loss.⁵⁴ The final discourse in this chapter and its parallels agree in describing the meditative radi-

⁴⁸ MN 36 at MN I 247,18 and fragment 337r6, Liu 2010: 118.

⁴⁹ MN 37 at MN I 251,26 and EĀ 19.3 at T I 593c20.

⁵⁰ SĀ 505 at T II 133b26.

⁵¹ MN 38 at MN I 270,10 and MĀ 201 at T I 769c16.

⁵² MN 39 at MN I 273,3 and MĀ 182 at T I 725a26.

⁵³ EĀ 49.8 at T II 802a3.

⁵⁴ Anālayo 2011a: 258.

ation of the immeasurable or boundless states as a practice conducive to becoming a true recluse.⁵⁵

In line with what emerged in the survey of previous chapters, meditation continues to be a prominent theme in the discourses assembled in the fourth chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya*.

The first two discourses in the fifth chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya* are nearly identical to each other. Their main teaching concerns what leads to rebirth in heaven or hell. The two Chinese parallels indicate that the type of conduct that will lead to rebirth in heaven can also serve as the foundation for the meditative cultivation of the absorptions, immaterial spheres, etc.⁵⁶ The corresponding realms are indeed mentioned in the two Pāli discourses,⁵⁷ and the commentary relates these to the cultivation of the required levels of absorption.⁵⁸

The next two Pāli discourses and their parallels report discussions on a variety of topics. These include several themes related to meditation, such as, for example, the nature of concentration and of the fourth absorption.⁵⁹

The next two discourses, together with their parallels, distinguish between ways of undertaking things according to whether these are pleasant or painful when doing them or else when experiencing their results. In the case of the first of these two discourses, the Pāli version refers to the four absorptions when describing what is pleasant now and in the future, whereas its par-

⁵⁵ MN 40 at MN I 283,25 and MĀ 183 at T I 726b22.

⁵⁶ SĀ 1042 at T II 273a16 and SĀ 1043 at T II 273b6 (abbreviated).

⁵⁷ MN 41 at MN I 289,17 and MN 42 at MN I 291,26 (abbreviated).

⁵⁸ Ps II 333,6.

⁵⁹ MN 44 at MN I 301,13, MĀ 210 at T I 788c24, and Up 1005 at D 4094 *ju* 8a2 or P 5595 *tu* 9a1; MN 43 at MN I 296,25 and MĀ 211 at T I 792a29.

allel rather takes up progress to the third level of awakening.⁶⁰ The other of the two Pāli discourses and its parallels do not exhibit a relation to meditation practice.⁶¹

The seventh discourse in this chapter and its parallel describe how someone can investigate the mental condition of another, in this case of the Buddha himself.⁶² This would appear to be a mode of applying the third establishment of mindfulness in an external manner. The ensuing Pāli discourse, of which no parallel is known, mentions *mettā* cultivated by body, speech, and mind; it also refers to the five hindrances and the training in the higher mind and higher wisdom, which clearly intend a meditative form of training.⁶³

Next comes a Pāli discourse depicting, in agreement with its parallel, a meeting between the Buddha and the ancient Indian god Brahmā.⁶⁴ This discourse does not evince a relation to meditation practice. The last discourse in this chapter reports an encounter between Mahāmoggallāna, an eminent disciple of the Buddha, and Māra. This leads on to a tale of the past which covers the meditative attainment of cessation, the cultivation of the immeasurables, and contemplation of impermanence.⁶⁵

The discourses in the fifth chapter as a whole accord less room to meditation practices, compared to the preceding chapters. Nevertheless, they do cover topics that came up regularly

⁶⁰ MN 45 at MN I 309,2 and MĀ 174 at T I 712b27.

⁶¹ MN 46 at MN I 309,21, MĀ 175 at T I 712c5, and T 83 at T I 902b7.

⁶² MN 47 at MN I 317,24 and MĀ 186 at T I 731b3.

⁶³ MN 48 at MN I 322,8, 323,8, and 324,28.

⁶⁴ MN 49 at MN I 326,1 and MĀ 78 at T I 547a11.

⁶⁵ MN 50 at MN I 333,20, MĀ 131 at T I 620c22, T 66 at T I 864c19, T 67 at T I 867a28, and Up 2049 at D 4094 *ju* 75b7 or P 5595 *tu* 85b4; see also the otherwise unrelated EĀ 48.6 at T II 793b22.

in previous chapters. Overall, what emerges from the above detailed survey is that the first five chapters of the *Majjhima-nikāya* reflect a prominent concern with meditation practices in various forms.

Actual Meditation Practice

The above survey was limited to textual sources. For the early period of Buddhist thought and practice, such limitations can hardly be overcome, as archeological records, in the form of inscriptions, art, and the remains of monastic settlements, tend to testify only to ensuing periods in the development of Indian Buddhism. Moreover, several of the texts surveyed above are prescriptive, depicting what ought to be done, rather than descriptive, in the sense of reflecting actual practice. An example for a prescriptive type of text is the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, which depicts how mindfulness ought to be practiced in order to lead to awakening. The discourse does not take the form of reporting actual practice.

Other instances surveyed above take on a more descriptive nuance, however, when reporting the meditation practices undertaken by the Buddha or his disciples. The same can be seen in a discourse from a later chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya* and its parallels, which relate that a local king had gone for a pleasure outing. Seeing secluded spots reminds him of the Buddha:⁶⁶

⁶⁶ MĀ 213 at T I 795b24, with parallels in MN 89 at MN I 118,20: “These tree roots are indeed lovely and inspiring, with little sound and little noise, with an atmosphere free from people and remote from humans, being suitable for solitary retreat, just like [the type of places where] I used to visit the Blessed One,” and EĀ 38.10 at T II 724c7: “‘This grove with fruit trees is all without sound and also without people; it is a quiet and empty place.’ Having seen it, he in turn remembered the Tathāgata’s former giving of teachings.”

These tree roots are quiet and without noise, secluded, without disturbance, without people, being suitable for sitting in meditation. In such places, I have frequently met the Buddha.

The three parallel versions agree that the king felt so inspired that he decided to pay a visit to the Buddha right away. On arrival at the monastery, the king encountered monastics who informed him how best to approach the Buddha, as the latter was sitting in meditative seclusion. The monastics themselves were at that time engaged in walking meditation:⁶⁷

Numerous monastics were practicing walking meditation in the open.

This indication is just a minor feature in a narration whose purpose is to introduce the ensuing encounter between the king and the Buddha. In other words, here the reference to meditation does not contribute directly to what the discourse is trying to achieve but rather features as an incidental detail.

A comparable instance involves another king who, on a moonlit night, has decided to approach the Buddha. Knowing that the Buddha was accompanied by a large group of disciples, the king becomes suspicious that he is being led into a trap, as he does not hear any sound even though he is coming close to where the Buddha and a substantial congregation of disciples were staying.⁶⁸ Needless to say, the reason for this silence was their meditative composure. Another discourse describes an un-

⁶⁷ MĀ 213 at T I 795c6, with parallels in MN 89 at MN II 119,18: “At that time numerous monastics were doing walking meditation in the open,” and EĀ 38.10 at T II 724c16: “At that time, many monastics were practicing walking meditation in the open.”

⁶⁸ DN 2 at DN I 50,5, DĀ 27 at T I 107c26, T 22 at T I 271a25, EĀ 43.7 at T II 763a4, and Gnoli 1978: 218,34.

successful attempt by a celestial king to visit the Buddha, which was thwarted because the latter had retired to dwell in meditative seclusion.⁶⁹

Whereas these descriptions are to some degree laudatory, another episode reflects a preoccupation with meditation in a way that casts the person in question in a negative light. The narrative concerns a monastic who at that time was serving as the Buddha's attendant (prior to Ānanda taking this role). This monastic has become so keen on withdrawing into seclusion to meditate that he refuses to do his duty or even to wait until another monastic has arrived who could have assumed his duty in his stead. His reasoning is that, whereas the Buddha had nothing further to do, he still needs to make progress:⁷⁰

The Blessed One has nothing to be done, nothing to do, and also nothing to be contemplated. Blessed One, I have something to be done, something to do, and also something to be contemplated.

In agreement with a Gāndhārī fragment that has preserved the ensuing part of the discourse,⁷¹ the Pāli and Chinese versions report that the monastic in question was overwhelmed by unwholesome states during his meditation. Clearly, from the viewpoint of these textual sources, his behavior was quite inappropriate. It follows that the keen interest in meditation evinced in

⁶⁹ DN 21 at DN II 270,22, DĀ 14 at T I 63b23, T 15 at T I 247b9, MĀ 134 at T I 634a18, and T 203.73 at T IV 476c11.

⁷⁰ MĀ 56 at T I 491b13, with a parallel in AN 9.3 at AN IV 355,24: "Venerable sir, there is nothing further to be done for the Blessed One and no improving of what has been done. But, venerable sir, for me there is indeed something further to be done and there is [a need] for improving what has been done."

⁷¹ Jantrasrisalai, Lenz, Qian, and Salomon 2016: 28.

this episode could not be motivated by an attempt to depict exemplary conduct.

Another passage depicts the leader of a group of non-Buddhist practitioners mocking the Buddha for his secluded and meditative lifestyle.⁷² The same discourse precedes this episode with a standard pericope employed regularly elsewhere in the discourses, according to which even lay disciples of the Buddha were well known among non-Buddhist practitioners for being fond of silence and quietude.

In sum, these passages show that, within the limits of what can reasonably be expected from textual sources, indications can be found supporting the impression that in the early Buddhist setting meditation practice was indeed considered a matter of central importance. A related topic to be explored next, which already came up in the last example, is the degree to which the same textual sources reflect the involvement of lay practitioners in meditation practices.⁷³

Lay Meditators

One of the traditional meditation practices that involve the cultivation of mindfulness is recollection.⁷⁴ Instructions on altogether six such recollections can be found in several discourses. One such instance begins with a female lay disciple approaching the Buddha and reporting that she has just kept the bi-monthly observance day (*uposatha*), an ancient Indian kind of Sabbath. The Buddha responds by recommending that the best

⁷² DN 25 at DN III 38,9, DĀ 8 at T I 47b12, T 11 at T I 222b22, and MĀ 104 at T I 591c28.

⁷³ For a survey of teachings in general that are addressed to laity see Kelly 2011.

⁷⁴ Anālayo 2020j: 17–20.

way to spend an observance day is by cleaning the mind of defilements, comparable to cleaning one's body or clothing. In the realm of the mind, such cleansing can be achieved through cultivating one of the recollections.⁷⁵

Particularly noteworthy is how this instruction redirects a traditional ritual observance so that it is employed for the overall purpose of meditation practice, which is precisely to purify the mind. This comes with various illustrations of how one would clean parts of one's body or one's clothes, evidently presented in an attempt to express the idea of the mind requiring regular cleaning in an easily intelligible and practical manner that a lay woman in the ancient Indian setting can easily relate to.

Another aspect calling for comment is a dexterous way of relating the following of special precepts to recollection of arahants. The recommended inspirational reflection is that arahants practice such moral conduct for their whole life, hence a lay disciple adopting a similar conduct on the observance day is following their example. This type of instruction appears to have been a popular one, as it recurs in two other Pāli discourses, taught to different lay disciples.⁷⁶

These passages are again prescriptive, as they indicate what ought to be done. Such instances need to be complemented by descriptive instances, in the sense of reflecting actual practice. A circumstantial report apparently involving recollection of the Buddha occurs in a Pāli discourse, which describes a brahmin lay woman who stumbles and thereon expresses the traditional form of homage to the Buddha.⁷⁷ The implication appears to be

⁷⁵ AN 3.70 at AN I 207,5, with parallels in MĀ 202 at T I 771a26 and T 87 at T I 911b14.

⁷⁶ AN 8.44 at AN IV 258,25 (abbreviated) and AN 8.45 at AN IV 260,4.

⁷⁷ MN 100 at MN II 209,22.

that she had been mentally recollecting the Buddha during her household activities, and the sudden event of stumbling then caused her to express this audibly. Hearing her expression of recollecting the Buddha irritates a young brahmin, who feels that her devotion is not directed toward a worthy object. According to a parallel extant in a Sanskrit fragment, which similarly reports his irritation, this accident happened while she was serving him.⁷⁸ In fact, in the Sanskrit version the irritated brahmin is her husband.

Another such episode in a different Pāli discourse involves a closely similar situation, as a brahmin lay woman stumbles on bringing a meal to her husband and thereon expresses homage to the Buddha.⁷⁹ This instance, too, results in irritating her husband. Two parallels extant in Chinese report the same, with the additional indication that she was a stream-enterer.⁸⁰ This instance and the previous one, which are supported in their presentations by parallels, point to the actual practice of recollecting the Buddha undertaken by female lay disciples.

These instances have a complement in another Pāli discourse and its two Chinese parallels, in which a male lay disciple reports to the Buddha how, on journeying through the congested roads in town, he loses his practice of recollection due to the distraction caused by encountering elephants, horses, chariots, carts, and pedestrians.⁸¹ The description given by him can easily be related to the contemporary situation, where encountering

⁷⁸ Fragment 344v8, Zhang 2004: 9.

⁷⁹ SN 7.1 at SN I 160,10.

⁸⁰ SĀ 1158 at T II 308b23 and SĀ² 81 at T II 401c23. The Pāli commentary, Spk I 226,10, offers a similar indication.

⁸¹ SN 55.21 at SN V 369,13(= SN 55.22 at SN V 371,6), SĀ 930 at T II 237b25, SĀ² 155 at T II 432b17, and EĀ 41.1 at T II 744a8.

dangerous behavior by other drivers on the road can be rather distracting and stressful.

The present descriptive episode is of further interest, as it can be linked to prescriptive passages, which report instructions given by the Buddha to the same lay disciple on cultivating the recollections.⁸² One of these spells out explicitly what would be implicit in the others, in that such practice of recollection should be done at any time, and thus presumably also when having to pass through traffic in town:⁸³

You should cultivate recollection of the Buddha while walking, you should also cultivate it while standing, you should also cultivate it while sitting, you should also cultivate it while lying down, you should also cultivate it while engaged in work, and you should also cultivate it while dwelling in your home, crowded with children.

In this case, the descriptive episode of the challenges the lay disciple experienced in relation to recollection conveys the impression that prescriptive teachings on meditation were indeed put into practice.

Instructions on recollection are also given to a different male lay disciple,⁸⁴ suggesting that the above case is not exceptional in this respect. This lay disciple comes up in another Pāli discourse which, in agreement with its Chinese parallel, reports the Buddha clarifying that a noble disciple who does not withdraw

⁸² AN 11.12 at AN V 329,11, AN 11.13 at AN V 333,18, SĀ 932 at T II 238b25, SĀ 933 at T II 238c22, and SĀ² 157 at T II 433b28.

⁸³ AN 11.13 at AN V 333,29; the same instruction applies to the other recollections.

⁸⁴ AN 11.14 at AN V 335,31 and its parallels SĀ 858 at T II 218b26 and T 113 at T II 505c12.

into meditative seclusion during the day or at night is actually being negligent.⁸⁵

The famous donor Anāthapiṇḍika receives a comparable injunction, indicating that he should not just be satisfied with making offerings to the Buddhist monastic community, as he should also try to gain the inner joy of a secluded mind.⁸⁶ The reference here appears to be to the type of seclusion that results from concentration.

The presentation in this discourse is of additional significance, as it shows the Buddha recommending meditation to Anāthapiṇḍika. A perusal of other relevant instances gives the impression that it was only on his deathbed that Anāthapiṇḍika became receptive to the importance of meditative cultivation of the mind, as earlier he was apparently too preoccupied with his various munificent activities.⁸⁷ The overall pattern appears to be that, although lay disciples were in principle expected to meditate, some of them were simply not interested in it. In addition, the present instance also implies that teaching meditation to laity was not just motivated by the wish to ensure offerings to the monastic community, as Anāthapiṇḍika was to all appearances quite willing to make major donations without having an interest in meditation instructions.

Another discourse, extant in Pāli, Chinese, and Tibetan, reports a lay disciple inquiring about various aspects of concentra-

⁸⁵ SN 55.40 at SN V 398,7 and SĀ 855 at T II 217c25; see also SHT IV 162aR9, Sander and Waldschmidt 1980: 100, which has preserved the preceding portion of this statement.

⁸⁶ AN 5.176 at AN III 207,1, SĀ 482 at T II 123a6, and Up 8020 at D 4094 *nyu* 73b2 or P 5595 *thu* 118a7.

⁸⁷ See Anālayo 2010c.

tion.⁸⁸ The inquiries posed by this lay disciple, who according to the Pāli commentary was a non-returner,⁸⁹ are not only about essential aspects of concentration but also about the attainment of cessation. This attainment requires combining superb skills in concentration with a high level of maturity in insight. Besides the apparent interest of a lay disciple in such recondite matters, it is also worthy of note that the clarifying instructions he receives are in this case given by a nun.

A range of relevant passages concern the divine abodes or *brahmavihāras* (also known as “immeasurables”). One instance reports the Buddha giving advice to a group of lay people who had expressed their bewilderment at the different views held by wandering teachers they had encountered. Part of the instruction reportedly given by the Buddha takes the form of describing the meditative cultivation of the four *brahmavihāras* as a way of arriving at an inner certainty that is beyond becoming bewildered by various views held by others.⁹⁰ This does seem to be a meditation instruction aimed specifically at solving their perplexity.

Another discourse reports a Buddhist lay disciple inviting a group of monastics for a meal, using the opportunity to ask them a question that had apparently been much on his mind. The question concerns a rather subtle distinction between the cultivation of the *brahmavihāras* and other concentrative practices.⁹¹ According to both versions of this discourse, the lay disciple had been told by others to engage in meditative cultivation. The

⁸⁸ MN 44 at MN I 301,11, MĀ 210 at T I 788c23, and Up 1005 at D 4094 *ju* 8a2 or P 5595 *tu* 9a1.

⁸⁹ Ps II 356,8.

⁹⁰ AN 3.65 at AN I 192,3 and MĀ 16 at T I 439b2.

⁹¹ MN 127 at MN III 145,29 and MĀ 79 at T I 549c29.

episode implies that the lay disciple is a meditator himself, who now asks the monastics for further clarifications relevant to his personal practice.

Another episode involves two young brahmins who inquire from the Buddha about the path to Brahmā, in reply to which he expounds the meditative cultivation of the *brahmavihāras*.⁹² The same instructions, addressed to a different brahmin, recur in another discourse.⁹³

Yet another instance of such teachings on *brahmavihāra* meditation to a brahmin shows its successful implementation. In this case, the brahmin was reportedly on his deathbed and passed away soon after receiving instructions from Sāriputta regarding the cultivation of the *brahmavihāras*, apparently for the first time. The parallels agree that, although he had earlier undertaken immoral conduct, this brahmin was reborn in the Brahmā world.⁹⁴ From the viewpoint of early Buddhist soteriology and cosmology, this implies that he had put the instructions received from Sāriputta successfully into practice. This episode thereby provides another instance where prescriptive passages are complemented by a descriptive element.

The passages surveyed above put into perspective the following assessment by Lopez (2008: 208):

Instruction in meditation is rarely offered to the laity as a means to happiness in this life; it is offered to those seeking the goal of enlightenment, however that might be defined. Indeed, it is useful to recall that the vast majority of Bud-

⁹² DN 13 at DN I 250,31, fragment 450r8 to v1, Olalde Rico 2022: 86, and DĀ 26 at T I 106c13.

⁹³ MN 99 at MN II 207,15 and MĀ 152 at T I 669c5.

⁹⁴ MN 97 at MN II 195,22 and MĀ 27 at T I 458b13.

dhists over the course of Asian history have not practiced meditation. It has traditionally been regarded as something that monks do, indeed, that only some monks do.

Although in the last case Sāriputta could in principle have led the brahmin to something higher than rebirth in the Brahmā world, instructions on the *brahmavihāras* are a means to happiness in this life (and the next), as are the recollections. This type of practice is not concerned only with progress to awakening. Moreover, the above instances give the impression that the practice of meditation was traditionally regarded as something that lay followers should engage in, rather than being meant only for monastics. This is particularly evident in the indication addressed to a lay follower that, by failing to withdraw into meditative seclusion during the day or at night, a noble disciple is reckoned to be negligent.

This much is not yet the end of passages relevant to lay meditation. A Pāli discourse reports the Buddha responding to a brahmin who wants to know why sometimes he can remember his mantras after little effort in memorization and at other times forgets them despite having repeatedly rehearsed them. The Buddha explains that this happens due to the absence or presence of the five hindrances, followed by contrasting these to the seven awakening factors.⁹⁵ The context makes it safe to assume that the brahmin would have had good reason to put the explanation on the impact of the five hindrances into practice in order to improve his mantra recitation. This would then be a mindfulness practice.⁹⁶ A prince receives a somewhat similar instruction on the hindrances and the awakening factors, which in this

⁹⁵ SN 46.55 at SN V 121,18 and AN 5.193 at AN III 230,28.

⁹⁶ See Anālayo 2013c: 177–194.

instance forms the reply to his question regarding what causes knowledge.⁹⁷

The lay disciple mentioned above for having problems maintaining the practice of recollection in heavy traffic comes up in another discourse, extant in Pāli and Chinese, in which he wants to know why greed, anger, and delusion are still able to overpower him.⁹⁸ The description of his inquiry conveys the impression that he would have been practicing some form of mindful observation of his mental condition; in fact, according to the commentary by the time of this discourse he had already become a once-returned.⁹⁹

On yet another occasion, the same person wants to know how a lay disciple should take care of another lay disciple who is seriously ill.¹⁰⁰ In reply, the Buddha provides detailed instructions for how the sick person should be gradually guided in relinquishing attachments until eventually being able to incline the mind toward Nirvana. Besides offering helpful details on a Buddhist form of palliative care, the Pāli discourse and its parallel also stand out for their concluding parts. Both state that a lay disciple, who has been led to completely letting go of attachments, is not different from a monastic who has reached the final goal.

The actual cultivation of the establishments of mindfulness by lay disciples comes up explicitly in another Pāli discourse,

⁹⁷ For the instruction on the awakening factors see SN 46.56 at SN V 128,1 and SĀ 711 at T II 190c12.

⁹⁸ MN 14 at MN I 91,13, MĀ 100 at T I 586b9, T 54 at T I 848b12, and T 55 at T I 849c4.

⁹⁹ Ps II 61,23.

¹⁰⁰ SN 55.54 at SN V 409,4; the parallel SĀ 1122 at T II 298a18 has another lay disciple as its protagonist.

which reports the Buddha explaining to a non-Buddhist wanderer about the mindfulness practice undertaken by monastics. A lay disciple present on this occasion adds a clarification, as if to make sure that the wanderer does not get the wrong impression that such practice is only meant for monastics. Although the comment is addressed to the Buddha, this appears to be simply a way of expressing respect, as in the narrative setting the latter would of course have been aware of such lay practice. This makes it safe to assume that the intended target of the clarification is the non-Buddhist wanderer:¹⁰¹

Venerable sir, we householders clothed in white indeed also dwell from time to time with the mind well established in these four establishments of mindfulness.

Other lay disciples also proclaim their proficiency in the four establishments of mindfulness.¹⁰² In the case of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, the circumstance that the instructions are explicitly addressed to fully-ordained male monastics, *bhikkhus*, can at first sight convey the impression that the practice described in the discourse was only meant for them. This may explain why Wilson (2014: 21) comments on the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* that “[i]n this classic presentation mindfulness is taught to the monks, not the general Buddhist community.” However, closer inspection of such modes of address brings to light that these reflect ancient Indian protocols of conversation. The address chosen serves as an umbrella term that includes nuns as well as lay disciples.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ MN 51 at MN I 340,13.

¹⁰² SN 47.29 at SN V 177,18, SN 47.30 at SN V 178,7, and SĀ 1038 at T II 271a17.

¹⁰³ See Collett and Anālayo 2014.

In fact, elsewhere the early discourses explicitly mention female monastics who are accomplished in the cultivation of the establishments of mindfulness.¹⁰⁴ Another relevant passage presents an encouragement that even newly ordained monastics should immediately be instructed in these four establishments, showing that mindfulness practice was not seen as the sole reserve of specialists.¹⁰⁵

The same broad relevance continues in later times, evident in a Theravāda commentary depicting the dedication to mindfulness practice among lay people of the ancient Indian Kuru country in the following manner:¹⁰⁶

If some woman were to ask [another]: “Ma, to the cultivation of which establishment of mindfulness do you attend?” and she were to reply: “None,” they would reproach her: “Your life is a disgrace; even though you are alive, you are as if dead.” And then, having admonished her: “Do not act like that again!,” they would make her learn a certain establishment of mindfulness.

However, if she were to say: “I attend to such-and-such establishment of mindfulness indeed,” having given her praise: “It is well, it is well,” they would commend her: “Your life is lived well; you have indeed gained being a [true] human. For your sake the Fully Awakened One has arisen,” and so on.

That teachings addressed to monks were also meant to be heard by lay people can also be seen in a discourse which reports the Buddha giving an exposition of progress to Nirvana. Although

¹⁰⁴ SN 47.10 at SN V 154,29 and SĀ 615 at T II 172b2.

¹⁰⁵ SN 47.4 at SN V 144,16 and SĀ 621 at T II 173c16.

¹⁰⁶ Ps I 228,12.

explicitly addressed to a monastic audience, a cowherd was apparently also present, as he hears the teaching and is so inspired that he wants to go forth on the spot. His inspiration is so strong that the Buddha has to insist that he should first return the cows to their owner and only after that go forth. Unsurprisingly, in view of his strong inspiration, the former cowherd is on record for eventually becoming an arahant.¹⁰⁷

The entertaining description of him being so strongly inspired that he did not even want to waste the time needed to return the cows he was herding to their owners is probably responsible for the fact that this whole episode has been considered worth recording. In other words, with instances of meditation instructions addressed to an audience comprised not only of monastics but also lay people, only the presence of the former will usually be explicitly acknowledged in the formulaic descriptions of the setting of such teaching.

These examples counter the assertion by Lopez (2012: 81) that “[o]ver the course of its long history across Asia, Buddhist laypeople have not been expected to practice meditation, nor have they done so. Meditation has traditionally been a practice confined to monks and nuns.”

In fact, teachings on meditation were reportedly even given to celestials. A discourse reports a sprite discussing with the Buddha the potential of mindfulness for overcoming anger.¹⁰⁸ Another relevant passage shows Sakka, the ruler of the Heaven of the Thirty-three, receiving instructions on contemplating

¹⁰⁷ SN 35.200 at SN IV 181,23, SĀ 1174 at T II 315b6, and EĀ 43.3 at T II 759a26.

¹⁰⁸ SN 10.4 at SN I 208,12, SĀ 1319 at T II 362a17, and SĀ² 318 at T II 480b11.

feeling tones as impermanent.¹⁰⁹ Yet another discourse reports his attainment of stream-entry, based on a teaching given to him by the Buddha.¹¹⁰

Reports of such attainments already show that even teachings on insight must have been available to laity in some form. This impression can be corroborated with the help of several passages. One example takes the form of a reply to a brahmin's query about the reasons for being entangled within and without (in craving, etc.), with the Buddha offering a succinct description of essentials of the path, highlighting the need to cultivate the mind.¹¹¹ The Pāli version of this exchange has served as the epigraph for Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*,¹¹² showing the high regard it acquired in later tradition as a summary of essential dimensions of the meditative path of purification.

In another Pāli discourse, the Buddha provides a detailed reply to the query by two householders about how to cross the flood, a metaphorical expression for the achievement of liberation. After clarifying what does not lead to crossing the flood, the Buddha is on record for offering meditation instructions on viewing each of the five aggregates as devoid of self, leading on to personal insight into the four noble truths.¹¹³ Since this constitutes a reply to their question, it seems to be an actual instruction aimed at these householders and not merely a generic doc-

¹⁰⁹ MN 37 at MN I 251,20 and EĀ 19.3 at T II 593c18.

¹¹⁰ DN 21 at DN II 288,20 and its parallels Waldschmidt 1932: 111,6, DĀ 14 at T I 66a1, T 15 at T I 250b21, MĀ 134 at T I 638a26, and T 203.73 at T IV 477c16.

¹¹¹ SN 7.6 at SN I 165,21 (= SN 1.23 at SN I 13,20) and its parallels SĀ 1186 at T II 321b29 and SĀ² 100 at T II 409c20.

¹¹² Vism 1,5.

¹¹³ AN 4.196 at AN II 202,11.

trinal exposition or a clarification of a practice meant to be undertaken only by monastics.

A different householder receives a detailed catechism on the five aggregates being impermanent, *dukkha*, and not self, reported in a Pāli discourse and its Chinese and Sanskrit parallels.¹¹⁴ Elsewhere in the discourses this type of catechism functions as a form of guided meditation in insight, making it fair to assume that the same applies in this instance as well.

The householder who already came up earlier for his difficulties with traffic in town features in yet another Pāli discourse, where he visits the Buddha to inquire whether concentration or knowledge comes first; the Chinese parallels express the same question in terms of whether concentration or liberation comes first.¹¹⁵ The query concerns an intricate aspect of meditative progress to awakening.

Another discourse reports a householder inquiring from the Buddha why some attain final Nirvana but others fail to do so.¹¹⁶ The Pāli and Chinese versions of this discourse agree that, in reply, the Buddha provides a straightforward exposition about attachment to sensory experience that could easily be put into practice. The same type of question recurs in other Pāli discourses, posed by various householders, the celestial king Sakka, and a celestial musician.¹¹⁷ Clearly, this type of question was

¹¹⁴ SN 22.49 at SN III 49,9, de La Vallée Poussin 1907: 376,14, and SĀ 30 at T II 6b8.

¹¹⁵ AN 3.73 at AN I 219,25, SĀ 934 at T II 239a3, and SĀ² 158 at T II 433c5.

¹¹⁶ SN 35.124 at SN IV 109,8 and SĀ 237 at T II 57c1.

¹¹⁷ SN 35.125 at SN IV 109,26, SN 35.126 at SN IV 110,9, SN 35.128 at SN IV 113,19, and SN 35.131 at SN IV 116,18; for Sakka and the musician see SN 35.118 at SN IV 101,34 and SN 35.119 at SN IV 103,8 respectively.

seen as directly relevant to those disciples who did not belong to the circle of monastic followers.

A different instance reports a householder inquiring about the path to becoming an arahant. In response, he is being shown a range of different approaches to reach this goal.¹¹⁸ The parallels report that the householder was thoroughly delighted by the reply, which makes it fair to assume that the indications on progress to Nirvana were deeply meaningful to him.

Another male householder informs the Buddha of the feeble condition of his aged body, in reply to which he receives the instruction that he should train himself in such a way that the mind will not be afflicted even when the body is sick.¹¹⁹ Sāriputta then provides further explanation of this succinct instruction, clarifying that it implies insight into the true nature of the five aggregates. Once again, it does seem fair to assume that this is an instance of insight instruction given by the Buddha to a lay disciple, with further details provided by Sāriputta.

The above survey is not meant to imply that teachings given to householders on insight-related dimensions of the path must invariably be read as actual meditation instructions. Expositions of the gradual path of training often seem to be given to those whom one would not expect to be particularly interested in engaging in the actual practices.¹²⁰ For this reason, such cases have not been taken up here. But the instances surveyed above

¹¹⁸ MN 52 at MN I 350,10 (= AN 11.17 at AN V 343,19), MĀ 217 at T I 802b7, and T 92 at T I 916b17.

¹¹⁹ SN 22.1 at SN III 1,23, SĀ 107 at T II 33a15, and EĀ 13.4 at T II 573a9.

¹²⁰ An example would be a statement or inquiry by a prince about gaining unification of the mind; see MN 125 at MN III 128,16 and MĀ 198 at T I 757a11.

do give the impression of a sincere interest, sufficient to allow the assumption that the instructions were meant to be put into practice.

That this must at least sometimes have been the case can be seen from several other passages. One of these features a brahmin taking part in a question-and-answer exchange with the Buddha that leads from the topic of mindfulness to Nirvana.¹²¹ After the brahmin has left, according to the Pāli version the Buddha explained to his monastic disciples that this brahmin was free from the fetters leading to rebirth in the sensual world. This implies that he must have been a meditator, as it would hardly be possible to reach such lofty attainment without meditative practice.

The need for meditation practice in order to achieve the transcendence of fetters related to the sensual world and thus to become a non-returner can be deduced from a distinction drawn in the discourses between the once-returner and the non-returner in relation to the three trainings in moral conduct, concentration, and wisdom. Unlike the once-returner, the non-returner has fulfilled the training in concentration.¹²² Such fulfillment requires meditative practice.

The gaining of non-return by a lay disciple comes up in another discourse, which showcases in particular the cultivation of insight into the three characteristics of impermanence, *dukkha*, and not self.¹²³ Another lay disciple is also on record for

¹²¹ SN 48.42 at SN V 218,18 and Up 9005 at D 4094 *nyu* 79a4 or P 5595 *thu* 124b7.

¹²² AN 3.85 at AN I 232,12 and AN 3.86 at AN I 233,22, with their parallels SĀ 820 at T II 210c1 and SĀ 821 at T II 210c27.

¹²³ SN 55.3 at SN V 346,17 and SĀ 1034 at T II 270b10.

having reached non-return.¹²⁴ In the case of two other lay disciples, one female and one male, the parallels differ, as according to the Pāli account they had reached stream-entry and once-return, whereas the parallel versions present them as non-returners.¹²⁵ Another discourse, in agreement with its parallels, names various members of a whole group of lay disciples who had reached non-return.¹²⁶ Yet another discourse reports the Buddha having declared that high numbers of lay disciples from a particular location had reached the lower three levels of awakening.¹²⁷

A Pāli discourse reports a laywoman proclaiming that she has gained mastery of the four absorptions and attained non-return.¹²⁸ Due to her superb meditative accomplishments, she has become one of two role models for Buddhist lay women.¹²⁹ The other lay woman serving also as a role model was, according to tradition, responsible for the transmission of the *Itivuttaka*,

¹²⁴ AN 8.21 at AN IV 211,22 (see also AN 8.22 at AN IV 216,3) and its parallel MĀ 38 at T I 481a27.

¹²⁵ SN 55.8 at SN V 357,2, SĀ 852 at T II 217b5, and Up 9035 at D 4094 *nyu* 93a2 or P 5595 *thu* 141a6.

¹²⁶ SN 55.10 at SN V 358,26 and SĀ 854 at T II 217b24.

¹²⁷ DN 18 at DN II 200,8, SHT IV 165.17, Sander and Waldschmidt 1980: 192, SHT VIII 1872, Bechert und Wille 2000: 63, SHT X 3301, Wille 2008: 34, DĀ 4 at T I 34b8, and T 9 at T I 214a4.

¹²⁸ AN 7.50 at AN IV 66,20. Here and elsewhere, my referencing of discourses by number follows the standard procedure of adopting the numbering given in the Pali Text Society edition (with a simplification in the case of the *Sagātha-vagga*). Some English translators have adopted their own style of numbering, which unfortunately can make it difficult to identify the discourse in question. For example, Bodhi 2012: 1043 counts the present discourse as AN 7.53.

¹²⁹ SN 17.24 at SN II 236,9 (see also AN 2.12.2 at AN I 88,27 and AN 4.176 at AN II 164,17) and EĀ 9.2 at T II 562b16.

a collection of short discourses reportedly given by the Buddha at her hometown.¹³⁰ In the ancient setting, such transmission involved memorization, which in turn relies on mindfulness. The report implies that, without her memorization practice, this discourse collection would no longer be extant.

The early discourses also present two role models for male lay disciples. Notably, none of these two is the munificent donor Anāthapiṇḍika, already mentioned above. This gives the impression that, from the viewpoint of early Buddhist evaluation of lay practice, qualities related to mindfulness and meditation outshine the much-needed contribution a lay disciple can make through offerings to the monastic community.

The householder Citta, one of the two role models for male lay disciples, features as a non-returner.¹³¹ According to the relevant Pāli discourse, he also had mastery of the four absorptions. His absorption abilities come up in another narrative context, more specifically related to the second absorption, in which case the Pāli and Chinese versions agree in highlighting his meditative ability.¹³²

The early discourses even report instances in which the lay disciple Citta clarifies some aspect of the Buddha's teachings to a monastic audience.¹³³ This puts into perspective an assessment by Faure (2009: 135) that “[i]n early Buddhism ... laypeople simply hope for a better rebirth, whereas the monks strive for *nirvāna*. In the Mahāyāna school, however, the lay ideal comes to challenge that of the monks,” evident in the description of

¹³⁰ It-a 32,15.

¹³¹ SN 41.9 at SN IV 301,22 and SĀ 573 at T II 152b11.

¹³² SN 41.8 at SN IV 298,29 and SĀ 574 at T II 152c15.

¹³³ SN 41.1 at SN IV 282,28 and its parallel SĀ 572 at T II 152a12; SN 41.5 at SN IV 292,1 and its parallel SĀ 566 at T II 149b14.

how the layman Vimalakīrti bests some eminent monks. Yet, as noted by Silk (2014: 182) in the context of a study of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, the role of Citta in the early discourses may well have “inspired the author of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* to create the character Vimalakīrti, a wealthy layman whose wisdom nevertheless surpasses that of monks.”¹³⁴ In other words, the depiction of a lay disciple besting monks is not an innovation, as it already occurs among the early discourses.

The impression that meditation was rather popular among the Buddha’s lay disciples finds further support in a discourse recording the high levels of attainment reached by a large number of householders, both male and female. The relevant statement for female lay disciples takes the following form:¹³⁵

Not only one, two, or three female lay disciples, or up to five hundred, [but] there are indeed many [more] female lay disciples who in this teaching and discipline have abandoned the five lower fetters and attained non-return, who will be of spontaneous rebirth there, no longer returning to be reborn here.

¹³⁴ See also Felbur 2015: 276.

¹³⁵ SĀ 964 at T II 246c23, with a parallel in MN 73 at MN I 491,18: “There are not only one hundred, not two hundred, not three hundred, not four hundred, not five hundred, but there are more female lay disciples who are my followers, living in celibacy in the household and being clothed in white, and who, with the eradication of the five lower fetters, will be of spontaneous appearance and attain final Nirvana there, not being subject to returning from that world”; similar statements are found in the parallels SĀ² 198 at T II 446b20 and T 1482 at T XXIV 963b26. The reference to spontaneous rebirth “there” refers to the Pure Abodes, celestial realms in which non-returners are reborn; the contrasting “here” refers to the sensual realms (including the human world).

The parallel versions continue by offering similar indications for the high numbers of female lay disciples who had reached once-return or stream-entry, and that without having adopted a life of celibacy. The case of male lay disciples receives a similar treatment.

Although such textual sources fall short of providing definite historical facts regarding the situation on the ground in ancient India, they do convey important information on the early Buddhist attitude toward lay meditation. Taken in conjunction, they show that meditation was certainly not considered confined to monastic practitioners in early Buddhism or even just exclusively meant for them. The textual evidence surveyed above makes it reasonable to consider the contemporary spread of lay meditation in Asia and elsewhere to be a revival of an ancient Indian antecedent, rather than an innovation.

Mindfulness of Breathing

A meditation practice apparently of continuous appeal from ancient to modern times is mindfulness of breathing. The standard instructions on its cultivation describe a series of sixteen steps of practice, which combine keeping in mind the breath with a progression through the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, resulting in a rather sophisticated and profound form of practice.¹³⁶

At the same time, however, just being mindful of breathing in and out already deserves to be considered “mindfulness of breathing,” as evident from a discourse that involves a monk whose Pāli name is Ariṭṭha. The relevant Pāli discourse and its Chinese parallel report that, in reply to an inquiry by the Buddha, Ariṭṭha describes his way of being mindful of breathing in

¹³⁶ For a detailed study see Anālayo 2019f.

and out (to be examined in more detail below), and the Buddha acknowledges that Ariṭṭha’s way is a form of mindfulness of breathing.¹³⁷ The Buddha then presents the sixteen steps as an approach to fulfill the same practice in detail (Pāli version) or as a more excellent way of practice that is superior and goes beyond what Ariṭṭha has described (Chinese version).

In what follows, I critically examine assessments of the case of Ariṭṭha and of other mindfulness practices offered by McMahan (2023) in the course of an attempt to highlight the distinct cultural settings of traditional Buddhist mindfulness practice in ancient India and of its contemporary counterparts. Similar to the case of several scholars taken up thus far, here, too, my criticism is not meant as a wholesale dismissal of his book. Parts of McMahan (2023) relate to an earlier publication of his, *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism*,¹³⁸ which I found eminently helpful and illuminating. But when it comes to mindfulness meditation described in Pāli discourses (and their parallels), there are several aspects in his present publication that I believe call for correction.

McMahan (2023: 68) comments on the Pāli version of Ariṭṭha’s description of his approach that “[t]his might be the closest thing in the suttas to the standard forms of mindfulness we find today—at least it includes something like their present-moment focus.” Now, in the Pāli discourse Ariṭṭha reports that he has abandoned sensual desire for what is past and future as well as dispelled perceptions of aversion toward what is internal or external, and his actual practice of mindfulness of breathing takes

¹³⁷ SN 54.6 at SN V 315,8 and SĀ 805 at T II 206c6; for a translation of SĀ 805 together with comparative observations see Anālayo 2019f: 187–189.

¹³⁸ McMahan 2002.

the following form: “mindfully I breathe in, mindfully I breathe out.”

The same formulation occurs in other Pāli discourses before the actual scheme of sixteen steps, the only difference being a shift from the first person singular to the third person singular: “mindfully one breathes in, mindfully one breathes out.” This does not leave much room for considering the case of Aritṭha to be somehow exceptional in providing “the closest thing in the suttas” to the present-moment focus of mindfulness in the way usually practiced today. The same modality of relating mindfulness to inhalations and exhalations is clearly present as an integral part of the standard instructions on mindfulness of breathing in other Pāli discourses, found similarly in their parallels.¹³⁹

The commentary understands the reference to abandoning sensual desire and aversion to imply that Aritṭha was declaring his achievement of non-return.¹⁴⁰ This may be a too literal reading of this reference, which could alternatively be interpreted to intend a temporary abandoning of these two defilements, in the sense of overcoming at the very least the first two of the five hindrances.

According to McMahan (2023: 69), Aritṭha “is presented as a relatively inexperienced meditator,” who “is presumably not

¹³⁹ The PTS edition of SN 54.6 abbreviates the sixteen steps. The relevant reference in the full treatment given in the first discourse in the collection of discourses (*samyutta*) on mindfulness of breathing can be found in SN 54.1 at SN V 311,14; for the Chinese parallel see SĀ 803 at T II 206a27. McMahan 2023: 69 in fact acknowledges that the full instructions on mindfulness of breathing “certainly include attention to one’s present experience.”

¹⁴⁰ Spk III 264,2. A literal interpretation may have been encouraged by the circumstance that the Pāli term for aversion used in SN 54.6 differs from the standard term for the second of the five hindrances.

yet able simply to ‘observe’ in his own direct experience ... ‘liberation of the mind’ or complete ‘relinquishment’ of destructive states of mind—states that are essentially synonymous with awakening itself.”

The Pāli discourse gives no indication that Ariṭṭha should be considered inexperienced, and the commentary would hardly have adopted the above-mentioned literal interpretation had the discourse in some way conveyed that Ariṭṭha was an inexperienced meditator.

It is also not particularly convincing to interpret individual steps in the scheme of sixteen steps as intending mental “states that are essentially synonymous with awakening itself,” because it would follow that only those who are on the brink of reaching awakening, or who have already reached it, could put into practice the sixteen-step scheme. This is clearly not the role of the sixteen steps, which feature as a path to awakening, a topic to which I return below. The detailed exposition on the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing in the *Visuddhimagga* takes the reference to liberating the mind, for example, to refer to temporary liberation by way of overcoming obstacles to absorption attainment.¹⁴¹ At least in early Buddhist thought, such attainment would not be essentially synonymous with the realization of awakening.

It follows that the step of liberating the mind, to stay with this example, does not necessarily call for “doctrines to be contemplated,” as assumed by McMahan (2023: 69), since it can rather refer to the experience of the mind being temporarily liberated from obstructive states. The idea thus does not appear to

¹⁴¹ *Vism* 289,24. This explanation concords with the broad scope in meaning of the corresponding term in Pāli discourses; see in more detail Anālayo 2009a.

be that “meditating on the various terms the Buddha presents opens up a cluster of ideas and categories to be contemplated during meditation,” and it is probably not the case that the instruction “on following the breath presumes a dense web of doctrine, which the Buddha suggests is necessary not only as a context for practice but as an essential part of the practice itself.”

The mode of reading proposed in this way seems to assume that instructions for meditation require meditating on the instructions. Although a practitioner of course needs to be able to understand the terms used in the instructions, their main purpose can more fruitfully be understood as directives that with increasing proficiency will become sufficiently well ingrained and no longer require conscious effort; they certainly do not call for contemplating the concept of, for example, liberating the mind and then relating this to other doctrinal categories. Doing that would stimulate the thinking mind and run counter to the overall thrust of mindfulness of breathing in leading to mental stillness.

The situation could be compared to the case of learning to drive a car, where at first one needs to identify the different street signs, execute the various operations to keep the car going or stop it, observe the traffic, keep in mind one’s destination, etc. With more proficiency, such initially rather demanding tasks will come to be done with ease, to the extent that one may have a relaxed conversation with someone else in the car.¹⁴²

¹⁴² As indeed pointed out by McMahan 2023: 73, “in our ordinary physical activities, we can walk, eat, and use the bathroom without explicitly thematizing what we are doing. Only when we are doing something in a new way—say, learning to use chopsticks if we are accustomed to using a fork—do we need to explicitly cognize our eating.”

The case of meditation is comparable, in that even detailed instructions can with increasing familiarity merely serve a supportive role, rather than requiring “vigorous contemplative engagement with a particular concept,” as assumed by McMahan (2023: 69). His impression that the detailed instructions involve “actually a rather complicated cognitive task” holds mainly for beginners but not for those proficient in mindfulness of breathing. Even though the first days of driving a car do involve executing rather complicated cognitive tasks, which may well result in feeling exhausted after even just half an hour of driving, the situation changes substantially with familiarity and practice.

A Pāli discourse of which no parallel is known describes a practitioner who engages in conceptual reflection on the teachings rather than withdrawing into seclusion to cultivate stillness of the mind. Such a practitioner should be reckoned one who thinks instead of being one who abides in the Dharma.¹⁴³ The contrast made in this way confirms that putting into practice meditation instructions was considered the key, rather than contemplating the concepts and doctrines used in them.

The purpose of the scheme of sixteen steps can be appreciated with the help of indications provided in another Pāli discourse and its Chinese parallel. These agree in specifying that practicing the sixteen steps is a way of cultivating all four *sati-paṭṭhānas*, which in turn can lead to cultivating the seven awakening factors and to gaining knowledge and liberation.¹⁴⁴ This confirms the point made above that the sixteen steps feature as a path to awakening, rather than requiring its prior attainment.

Progress from an establishment of mindfulness to the actual gaining of liberating knowledge then takes place through the in-

¹⁴³ AN 5.73 at AN III 87,11.

¹⁴⁴ SN 54.13 at SN V 329,13 and SĀ 810 at T II 208a19.

termediary of the additional cultivation of the awakening factors. Such cultivation can be understood to facilitate awakening, in the sense of a stepping out of the craving-based constructed nature of the subjective experience of the world.¹⁴⁵ For achieving such deconstruction, the awakening factors need to be cultivated in the following manner, illustrated with the example of the first factor of mindfulness.¹⁴⁶

One cultivates the awakening factor of mindfulness supported by seclusion, supported by dispassion, and supported by cessation, leading to letting go.

The parallels depict a cultivation of mindfulness—and of each of the other six awakening factors—with the ultimate purpose of issuing in “letting go.” This is what mindfulness of breathing is in the final count meant to lead up to, namely a comprehensive letting go that enables stepping out of the construction of experience and realizing awakening.

The detailed instructions on mindfulness of breathing (or else on the four *satipaṭṭhānas*) serve the purpose of enabling such stepping out. In other words, these instructions are not just for the sake of inculcating doctrinal categories, which have only an instrumental purpose. The situation could be compared to the need to rely on soap to clean dirty clothes. The soap has an important instrumental function, but the idea is not to walk around with clothes that are still full of soap. The soap also needs to be washed out, once it has fulfilled its purpose.

¹⁴⁵ On the construction of experience see Anālayo 2023e.

¹⁴⁶ SĀ 810 at T II 208c2, with a parallel in SN 54.13 at SN V 333,18: “One cultivates the awakening factor of mindfulness in dependence on seclusion, in dependence on dispassion, and in dependence on cessation, culminating in letting go.”

The same situation finds illustration in a simile given in the early Buddhist discourses. According to this simile, the role of the Dharma—and thus by implication of the various categories of the doctrine employed in teaching it—is comparable to a raft to be used for crossing over a strong river that one would otherwise not be able to traverse.¹⁴⁷ It is indeed meaningful to rely on such a raft for the purpose of crossing over. Once that has been achieved, however, the raft should be left behind. It would be meaningless to continue one's journey by carrying along the raft. In the same way, according to the reported instruction given by the Buddha, his disciples should be ready to let go even of his teachings, once these have fulfilled their liberating purpose.

At least in early Buddhist thought—as distinct from some later meditation traditions informed by Abhidharma thought—the task appears not to be one of internalizing doctrinal categories in the belief that this much may already suffice for arriving at a vision that is in accordance with reality. Since the ordinary mind is seen as strongly influenced by ingrained biases and mistaken perceptual appraisals—the “dirt” in my example of washing clothes—some kind of soap is needed to counter these. But with that much achieved, the next task is to let go of the soap of the teachings, following the explicit recommendation given in the parable of the raft.

When evaluated within its ancient Indian context, it is quite remarkable to find an encouragement—attributed to the founder of a religious tradition—to let go even of his teachings, which are reportedly considered by him to be merely a raft to provide support in crossing over.

¹⁴⁷ MN 22 at MN I 134,30, MĀ 200 at T I 764b19, EĀ 43.5 at T II 760a13, and Up 8029 at D 4094 *nyu* 74b6 or P 5595 *thu* 119b7.

Notably, mindfulness, *sati*, does not occur anywhere at all in the instructions for the sixteen steps. Instead, it features in the preliminary practice in the form of a reference to establishing mindfulness “to the fore” or “in front,”¹⁴⁸ based on which one then cultivates being mindful of inhalations and mindful of exhalations, this being the type of “mindfulness of breathing” cultivated by Ariṭṭha. It follows that there is a need to distinguish between being just *mindful* of the breath and the cultivation of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* in relation to the breath.

In the scheme of sixteen steps, the instructions take just being mindful of the breath—which in itself is a bodily phenomenon—as their starting point in order to proceed to all four *satipaṭṭhānas*. This in turn can lead to a cultivation of the awakening factors, and these can then issue in letting go and gaining knowledge and liberation. This whole trajectory would stand in the background to what the Buddha reportedly presented to Ariṭṭha as a more detailed or superior way of practice. Such a background relationship to the four *satipaṭṭhānas* and to pro-

¹⁴⁸ Cousins 2022: 112 notes that such a reference to *parimukha sati* “seems to occur only before the sixteen stages, or before the overcoming of the five hindrances, or before the formulas for the four *jhānas*. That would seem to imply that the normal method envisaged for developing the *jhānas* is breathing mindfulness.” A survey of occurrences of this Pāli phrase can be found in Anālayo 2003: 128 note 47, which shows that these are not confined to those noted above. This in turn undermines the proposed conclusion. Cousins 2022: 121–123 also interprets the second tetrad to imply *jhāna* attainment and the third tetrad to attainment of the immaterial spheres. This proposal does not seem to do justice to the actual instructions, which throughout the sixteen steps involve being aware of inhalations and exhalations. Such awareness would hardly be compatible with the attainment of an immaterial sphere, for example.

gress to awakening leads me over to my next topic, namely a rethinking of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* in general proposed by McMahan (2023).

Satipaṭṭhāna

The third *satipaṭṭhāna* of contemplating mental states is generally taken to require an observation of the present condition of the mind as it manifests. However, McMahan (2023: 89) argues that this contemplation pertains to those exercises in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* that come “with injunctions on how one should behave, what states of mind should be fostered, which struggled against.” From his perspective, “[t]his exercise is not a free-form observation of whatever states of mind emerge but an evocation of particular ones to be observed and analyzed.”

Yet, the actual Pāli instructions just call for recognizing the present condition of the mind, without any injunction regarding what to foster, what to struggle against, etc. This can be illustrated with the example of the first state of mind taken up in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*: “One knows a mind with lust to be ‘a mind with lust,’ and a mind without lust to be ‘a mind without lust.’”¹⁴⁹ This is as far as the instruction on the topic of lust goes, and the same instruction is next applied to other mental states.

Even the sequence of listing the mind with lust and then without lust does not imply an evaluation. Subsequent instructions mention first a mind that has become concentrated and then one that is not concentrated. That is, in this case the desirable option (of being concentrated) stands in the place where earlier the undesirable condition (of having lust) occurs. The underlying pattern in listing pairs of opposite mental states is simply that the

¹⁴⁹ MN 10 at MN I 59,30 (= DN 22 at DN II 299,9).

one formulated with the help of a negation occurs in second place (such as, for example, being *without* lust or being *without* concentration). This order is maintained independent of whether this negation then designates a commendable mental condition (such as being without lust) or rather one to be overcome (such as being without concentration).

In short, the actual Pāli instructions do not provide any evident basis for the idea that more than mere observation is required. The idea that this instruction calls for an evocation of particular states of mind appears to be mistaking the finger for the moon. Just for the record, and without intending to imply that this underlies the proposed interpretation, the implication of the full instructions on contemplation of mental states is not that one should meditate on all the items listed. Such a reading would require the practitioner to arouse lust and anger, for example, to do justice to the instructions even when lust or anger are not present. Intentional stimulation of defilements is not part of the early Buddhist approach to meditation.

The mental states listed in the instructions are rather examples, designated as such through the use of “or” (*vā*) that connects the different members in the list. Just recognizing the presence of a single mental state—such as, for example, a mind without lust—would already do justice to the instructions; albeit it would be a rather short instance of cultivating the third *sati-paṭṭhāna*.

As far as the actual instructions are concerned, this third *sati-paṭṭhāna* indeed appears to call for a non-reactive “observation of whatever states of mind emerge.” The challenge here is to see through a particular train of thoughts and associations in order to be able to recognize the underlying mental condition. This requires a non-reactive stance of just being present with what is currently happening, without becoming involved in the

thoughts and associations. The fostering of such non-reactive, receptive presence is precisely the task of mindfulness.

However, according to McMahan (2023: 72) the mindfulness practices in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* do “not amount to passive and nonjudgmental acceptance of whatever thoughts and feelings emerge,” instead of which these should be understood to call for “the explicit attempt to direct the mind in particular ways rather than others.”

In support of this assessment, he refers to a statement by Bhikkhu Bodhi (2011: 26), the most directly relevant part of which indicates that “to fulfill its role as an *integral* member of the eightfold path mindfulness has to work in unison with right view and right effort.” The point of this clarification does not seem to have been fully appreciated. It is the task of right view to give directions on “how one should behave, what states of mind should be fostered, which struggled against,” and it is the role of right effort to engage in such fostering or struggling against and to make an “explicit attempt to direct the mind in particular ways rather than others.” Mindfulness supports both path factors, collaborates with them, but its own function is one of non-reactive supervision, of just knowing. Attributing these other tasks to mindfulness conflates the functions of three distinct factors of the eightfold path.¹⁵⁰

As noted by Schmithausen (1976: 246 and 250) in a groundbreaking comparative study of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, the same type of simple observation—just requiring that one “knows”—holds for contemplating feeling tones, *vedanā*, and for the second among the contemplations of the body, concerned with bodily postures (walking, standing, sitting, and lying down).

¹⁵⁰ On the collaboration among these three path factors, as depicted in MN 117 and its parallels, see also Anālayo 2019j: 1933.

However, according to McMahan (2023: 78) “mindfulness of the basic movements of the body, ‘knowing one is walking,’ etc., ... suggests not just attention to walking itself but also how one *should* walk.” According to his assessment, this practice involves “the possibility of reconfiguring this activity, of reinterpreting its significance, of giving it a new meaning and performing it differently.”

As with the case of contemplation of mental states, the proposed interpretation does not fit the actual instructions in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, which just read: “When walking one knows: ‘I am walking’,”¹⁵¹ followed by next turning to the case of standing, etc. The formulation calls for mere recognition of what one is already doing, rather than being about performing it differently, in accordance with how one should be walking, etc.¹⁵²

An explanation of the proposed interpretation could be that mindfulness of bodily postures has been conflated with the next exercise in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, which is indeed about how to

¹⁵¹ MN 10 at MN I 56,36 (= DN 22 at DN II 292,11).

¹⁵² Just to be clear, the instruction does not appear to require mentally repeating to oneself “I am walking, I am walking, I am walking” throughout the period of practice. Even just a single conceptual input of this type—as a literal implementation of the single instance of such an instruction in the discourse—can in principle suffice to bring proprioceptive awareness more to the forefront of the field of attention, following which a practitioner may just remain aware of the process of walking without engaging in further mental elaboration—unless one becomes distracted, when a renewal of the mental comment “I am walking” would be opportune. At any rate, it would not be in keeping with the actual instructions for the case of walking if one were to engage in “reinterpreting its significance” or else try “giving it a new meaning.” In line with the indication quoted above p. 139 note 143 from AN 5.73, that would amount to thinking about walking rather than abiding in walking meditation.

perform certain activities at the bodily level.¹⁵³ Since this exercise refers to monastic items, it would be a better fit for the references by McMahan (2023: 76f and 92) to mindfulness practice in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* as “part of a larger process of extracting the monastics from their identities as laypeople,” thereby “helping redefine their identities not as householders with family and caste lineages but as monastics.”

In contrast, the instructions for mindfulness of bodily postures would apply similarly to lay practitioners. As mentioned earlier, the recurrent referencing of *bhikkhu(s)* in the discourses does not imply a restriction of the practice to only male monastics or even just to those who have received full ordination (see above p. 124).

The contemplations of the body mentioned subsequently to such postural awareness no longer involve just knowing but employ different terminology to describe the respective meditative activities—I will come back later to one of these, related to the

¹⁵³ The impression of some degree of conflation finds support in the survey of the *satipaṭṭhāna* meditations in McMahan 2023: 70, as he presents the first and second body contemplations, mindfulness of breathing and mindfulness of postures, as if they were a single exercise; the Pāli text clearly presents these as two distinct practices. Moreover, in relation to contemplation of feeling tones and of mental states, he adds contemplating the respective arising and dissipating. This belongs to a pericope that applies to all exercises, however, which should either be mentioned for all of these when providing a survey of the instructions or else not at all. The circumstance of listing such contemplation of impermanence only in relation to these two *satipaṭṭhānas*, together with the incorrect subsumption of mindfulness of bodily postures under mindfulness of breathing, supports the impression that something may have gone wrong in the course of studying the three practices where non-reactive mindfulness is particularly prominent.

body's anatomical constitution. The usage of such different terminology reflects the circumstance that *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation is not just about mindfulness. The *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* indicates this quite explicitly when introducing the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, using a formulation found repeatedly in other discourses as the definition of what this meditation practice is about. This definition lists being mindful alongside other qualities required for each of the four contemplations of the body, feeling tones, mental states, and dharmas.¹⁵⁴

One of those other qualities is “clear knowing.” The corresponding Pāli term *sampajāna* is closely related to *pañānāti*, which in the actual instruction is the verb indicating that one should “know.” In other words, the knowing that one has a mind without lust or that one is presently walking appears to involve an input offered by clear knowing.¹⁵⁵

It is also worthy of note that the actual instructions for the three exercises discussed above do not mention mindfulness, which only occurs in a pericope applied throughout the discourse to all exercises. Leaving aside the case of mindfulness of breathing, discussed above, the same absence of a direct referencing of mindfulness holds for all individual practice instructions in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, with the sole exception of the list of seven awakening factors, the first of which is, of course, mindfulness.

¹⁵⁴ MN 10 at MN I 56,5 (= DN 22 at DN II 290,13).

¹⁵⁵ See Anālayo 2003: 39–41. McMahan 2023: 224 note 12 refers to my work for a comprehensive discussion of the terminology used in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, wherefore I take it that he has no objections to my assessments in this respect. For a discussion of clear knowing or clear comprehension in relation to mindfulness see also Anālayo 2020e.

The lack of a direct mention of mindfulness in the individual meditation instructions in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* shows that this quality as such needs to be distinguished from *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation.¹⁵⁶ The latter involves mindfulness, no doubt, but it also involves other qualities, and these can come more to the fore-front with the type of exercise that requires a stronger element of evaluation or a directive as to how something should be done.

However, in the three exercises discussed above—mindfulness of postures, feeling tones, and mental states—mindfulness seems to take a more prominent position, and the role of clear knowing would merely be to offer support to this through judicious use of conceptual input.

The need to distinguish between different mental qualities comes up again when McMahan (2023: 71) explains that “‘orienting’ (*manasikāra*) denotes the simple, automatic, intentional function of the mind, the spontaneous noticing of an object or state of events ... the SP [= *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*] instructs the monk to magnify this ordinary awareness, using the term *pajānāti* (he knows, he understands).” McMahan (2023: 224 note 11) then clarifies that the translation he has adopted and his understanding of this term are based on Dreyfus (2011: 49). Now, Dreyfus (2011: 48f) quite explicitly introduces his discussion as being about Abhidharma and then quotes from the translation and study of the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* by Bhikkhu Bodhi (1993: 81).¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ For a survey of what the Pāli discourses and their parallels have to offer about mindfulness apart from *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation see Anālayo 2020j.

¹⁵⁷ To be precise, he refers to the 2000 reprint. The composition of this Pāli text has generally been allocated to the eleventh or twelfth century; see, e.g., Malalasekera 1928/1994: 168f and Norman 1983: 151. Based on surveying relevant indications, however, Gethin 2002: xiv

The translation “orienting” may work for the understanding of *manasikāra* reflected in this work, but this differs from the role and function of the same Pāli term in the discourses, where “attention” seems a more appropriate choice.¹⁵⁸ An understanding of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* from the viewpoint of its historical and cultural setting—a chief aim of McMahan (2023)—needs to distinguish between different historical layers in the evolution of Buddhist thought.¹⁵⁹

The Body Scan

In what follows, I turn from descriptions of mindfulness practices in early Buddhist texts to the body scan in the form taught

argues that “[t]here would seem to be no *a priori* reason why the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha could not have been composed in the late sixth or early seventh century”; see also Bechert 1979: 26.

¹⁵⁸ On *manasikāra* in early Buddhism see Anālayo 2020a. Some uncertainty in this respect is also evident in the comment by Ditrich 2016: 19 on the notion of a non-judgmental cultivation of mindfulness that “the closest correlative concept for this new interpretation of mindfulness would be the term *manasikāra*.” The notion of a non-judgmental cultivation of mindfulness can more fruitfully be related to the standard reference in descriptions of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation to the absence of reactivity by way of desire and discontent; see Anālayo 2019a: 12 or 2020h: 64f. In other words, although the English term “non-judgmental” is of course an innovation, the non-reactive stance it describes can be considered present already in early descriptions of Buddhist mindfulness practice; see also below p. 209.

¹⁵⁹ Another instance that may reflect the same problem is the reference in McMahan 2023: 90 to dharmas as “momentary events, whose patterns create the appearance of stable entities when they are conceptualized.” If this intends momentariness, then it would involve another late doctrine; for its evolution in the Theravāda traditions see Kim 1999/2023.

in MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction). In an attempt to trace aspects of its gradual evolution, I begin by surveying the MBSR body scan and explore possible antecedents in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, followed by taking up different interpretations of the third step of mindfulness of breathing. Based on what has emerged in this way, I turn to insight meditation as taught by U Ba Khin and the role in this respect taken by Ledi Sayādaw.

The MBSR Body Scan

The standard curriculum in MBSR begins with a body scan. As noted by Dreeben, Marnberg, and Salomon (2013: 395) in an article dedicated to this practice,

The body scan, in effect, provides the pedagogical basis of all the practices introduced later within both the MBSR and MBCT [= Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy] programs ... it provides a thorough introduction to mindfulness in practice.

Undertaking the MBSR body scan meditation involves systematically “sweeping” through the body, starting with the toes of the left foot and moving up to the leg and hip, then shifting to the other foot and the corresponding leg and hip, followed by covering the torso. From the shoulders, attention shifts to the tips of both hands and then moves up both arms and proceeds to the neck and finally to the head. Throughout, the emphasis is on being aware without reactivity.

Regarding the origins of this approach, in the context of a discussion of the body scan Kabat-Zinn (1990/2013: 91) reports:

One of the people who influenced my developing the MBSR version of the body scan had been an aerospace engineer before he became a meditation teacher.

As pointed out in a study of insight and mindfulness meditation by Stuart (2017: 173 note 26), this meditation teacher was Robert Hover (1920–2008), who taught in the tradition of U Ba Khin (1899–1971).¹⁶⁰

The starting point for Jon Kabat-Zinn’s eventual development of MBSR was, according to his own description, the experience gained when cultivating the U Ba Khin meditation practice.¹⁶¹

We were taking vows not to make any voluntary movements for several hours at a time, and for me that was really stretching my envelope of experience, and put me face to face with levels of pain intensity I had never experienced before, and an experience of spaciousness and no suffering in moments within all the screaming intensity of sensation in the body.

Part of what I realized on that retreat was that people whose pain would not go away just by getting up and stopping meditating might benefit from such a discovery, and the realization that one could actually turn toward and “befriend” intensive and unwanted sensation.

The actual envisioning of how this could be put into practice occurred in the setting of another *vipassanā* meditation retreat. In the course of reflections on the origins of MBSR, Kabat-Zinn (2011: 287f) reports the following:

On a two-week *vipassanā* retreat at the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts, in the Spring of 1979,

¹⁶⁰ According to Gilpin 2008: 238, Jon Kabat-Zinn’s “initial training” under Robert Hover took place in the year of 1973.

¹⁶¹ Personal email communication, 24 August 2019.

while sitting in my room one afternoon about Day 10 of the retreat, I had a “vision” that lasted maybe 10 seconds ... I saw in a flash not only a model that could be put in place, but also the long-term implications of what might happen if the basic idea was sound and could be implemented ... [i]t was so compelling that I decided to take it on wholeheartedly as best I could ... [a] flood of thoughts following the extended moment filled in the picture.

Why not try to make meditation so commonsensical that anyone would be drawn to it? ... And, why not do it in the hospital of the medical centre where I happened to be working at that time? After all, hospitals do function as “*dukkha magnets*” in our society.

As part of the practice of MBSR that emerged from this vision, the body scan is usually cultivated in the prone posture, whereas traditionally *vipassanā* meditation mostly involves the sitting and walking postures. In an attempt to reach out to those who are in pain and make the potential benefit of mindfulness practice accessible to them, the adoption of the prone posture appears to have functioned as a skillful means. The degree of relaxation that comes naturally when adopting the prone posture seems to have been a substantial asset.

This does not mean, however, that the body scan is merely about relaxation. Physiological changes during the practice of the body scan meditation differ from mere relaxation.¹⁶² Preferences regarding posture can in fact vary; in research on the body scan, Ussher et al. (2014: 131) found that a substantial majority of participants of the body scan meditation “chose to sit, rather than lay down.”

¹⁶² See Ditto, Eclache, and Goldman 2006.

The Body Scan and the Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta

In principle, an antecedent for the body scan could be expected to be found among mindfulness practices described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*.¹⁶³ A possible option would be contemplation of feeling tones (*vedanānupassanā*), the second of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. In an article on mindfulness of bodily sensations, Drummond (2006: 68) argues that “it is reasonable to assume that the field of the body scan is the second category of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, *vedanānupassanā*, and not, as might possibly be assumed, the mindful observation of the body.”

Yet, in the early discourses the compass of feeling tone, *vedanā*, is not confined to bodily sensations. This is particularly evident in a distinction between the bodily feeling tones of pain and the mental feeling tones due to reacting to that pain.¹⁶⁴ Much of the success of MBSR lies precisely in tapping the potential of mindful observation to decouple the bodily dimension of pain from the mental feeling tones caused by reactivity to that bodily pain. This involves monitoring the type of feeling tones that result from mentally reacting to physical sensations.

Moreover, the emphasis in the canonical instructions on contemplation of *vedanā* is on a clear distinction between their affective tones as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Based on such recognition, each of these three types can be further distinguished into worldly and unworldly occurrences.¹⁶⁵ The analytical distinction that is central to the instruction is not evident in the standard form of the body scan.

¹⁶³ As already pointed out by van Oosterwijk 2012: 67, in the canonical sources it is not possible to “trace sweeping through the body” in the way taught by U Ba Khin and his students.

¹⁶⁴ SN 36.6 at SN IV 208,7 and SĀ 470 at T II 120a9.

¹⁶⁵ See Anālayo 2013c: 117–123.

Given that such a scan is concerned with the *body*, it could be expected that an antecedent of some type may be found among *satipaṭṭhāna* practices that are concerned with the whole body. An example in case would be the contemplation of bodily postures. In fact, Kabat-Zinn (2018b: 87) explains that “[w]hen we practice the body scan, our awareness includes that very sense of proprioception.” Such proprioception seems to be indeed relevant to mindfully knowing the posture of the body as either walking, or standing, or sitting, or lying down. At the same time, however, the instructions for this exercise call for becoming aware of the posture as a whole; they are not about scanning the body part by part.

Another possible meditation practice of relevance would be contemplation of the body from the viewpoint of the four elements, which is not just about the body as a whole but rather about its constitution as made up of four distinct elements (earth, water, fire, and wind). According to the simile that accompanies the relevant instructions in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels,¹⁶⁶ the purpose of this exercise is to bring about an effect comparable to seeing a cow cut up into its various parts. That is, the idea appears to be that what earlier appeared as a single cow will now be seen as different chunks of meat. In the same way, practitioners should cut up their own bodies, so to say, in accordance with the scheme of four elements. Arriving at such a partition into four distinct material dimensions would require an element of differentiation that is not evident in the usual instructions for the body scan.

Yet another option would be contemplation of the anatomical parts of the body. In fact, McMahan (2023: 82) reasons that

¹⁶⁶ See Anālayo 2013c: 81–87.

“[m]any contemporary mindfulness teachers today are likely unaware that the source of this practice” is precisely the contemplation of the anatomical parts in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*.¹⁶⁷ Based on this identification, he then concludes that “[a] glance at the *original* body scan reveals that its content, significance, and meaning could hardly be more different from its contemporary iteration” (emphasis added).

Next, he turns to the relevant part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, reporting that the relevant part “begins, much like the contemporary practice, with the instruction to ‘scan the body from head to feet.’” The proposed identification calls for a more detailed examination.

The translation given by him unfortunately does not do full justice to the Pāli original. Instead of just “head” and “feet,” the original speaks more specifically of the *hair* on top of the head and of the *soles* of the feet; I will come back to the significance of this in itself minor distinction below. Moreover, the Pāli verb translated as “scan” is *paccavekkhati*, for which the Pāli dictionary by Rhys Davids and Stede (1921/1993: 384) gives “to look upon, consider, review, realise, contemplate”; the Pāli dictionary by Cone (2020: 35) lists “looks down on; examines, reviews; considers.” Although the verb “to scan” can convey the sense of a mental or visual examination, the above nuances of the Pāli term do not fit the idea of passing attention through the body in a systematic manner to feel its different parts.

The same verb, besides being used to describe contemplation of the anatomical parts, occurs also in a simile that forms part

¹⁶⁷ The remainder of the quoted part in McMahan 2023: 82 actually speaks of the “third set of contemplations of the body.” This relates to the conflation mentioned above p. 147 note 153, which has led him to refer to the fourth contemplation of the body as the third.

of the same instructions. Similar to the case of the contemplation of the four elements, here, too, the purpose of the simile is to illustrate what this particular type of mindfulness meditation is about. In the present case, the simile describes a person endowed with eyes who would undertake the activity designated by *paccavekkhati* in relation to an opened bag that contains different types of grains, recognizing each of these for what it is.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ MN 10 at MN I 57,23 (= DN 22 at DN II 293,21). McMahan 2023: 83f refers to “the earlier *Vijāya Sutta* (S 1.11) [sic], on which this part of the SP [= *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*] is likely based.” It is not clear to me on what this assessment is based, as the allegedly “earlier” status of the *Vijaya-sutta* is not self-evident and would require presenting supportive evidence. The proposed scenario seems in fact unlikely. Two of the verses in the *Vijaya-sutta*, Sn 197 and Sn 198, refer to the liquids flowing from the bodily orifices. Had the *Vijaya-sutta* served as an inspiration for the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, it would be difficult to understand why a practice of this type was not taken over, even though it would fit the context well, as evident from its inclusion in the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, EĀ 12.1 at T II 568b1 (see also AN 9.15 at AN IV 386,24 for a similar idea in an otherwise unrelated Pāli discourse). Such inclusion would have been natural, given that the three previous verses in the *Vijaya-sutta*, Sn 194 to Sn 196, list various anatomical parts and thus bear a resemblance to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*’s instructions on contemplation of the anatomical parts. Regarding matters of dating, it is worth noting that the ensuing verse Sn 199 mentions the brain, which is not included in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*’s instructions but does occur in the exposition of the anatomical parts in the *Visuddhimagga*, Vism 359,9. This gives the impression that the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*’s listing may be earlier in this respect than the *Vijaya-sutta*. All these verses from the *Vijaya-sutta* also occur in *Jātaka* tale no. 12, Jā I 146,15. At least in this case the respective dating is self-evident, as this *Jātaka* tale can with confidence be considered later than the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*.

The simile of the grains in the bag points to a visual type of examination; it would not be meaningful to attempt to distinguish the grains based on some form of body scan or by way of touch sensations. Yet, a practitioner should examine the anatomical constitution of the body in the same way as exemplified by an examination of these grains.

The impression conveyed in this way by the simile concords with the actual listing of anatomical parts. This starts off with the hair on top of the head, the hair on the rest of the body, and the nails. These are indeed easily visible. In contrast, it would be considerably less straightforward to attempt to sense these parts from within one's own body through the faculty of bodily touch, comparable to how its physical parts are felt during a body scan. The listing continues with teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, and bone marrow. The last of these could hardly be sensed directly by an average practitioner.

Moreover, the parts mentioned thus far do not follow an order that would be amenable to proceeding from feet to head or from head to feet. The same problem continues with the ensuing anatomical parts, which cover various inner organs and then different bodily liquids. The listing is quite clearly not designed for the type of systematic progression from feet to head or head to feet that is typical for a body scan. This makes it fair to conclude that the original intent of this exercise, as reflected in the instructions in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, was not to encourage such a body scan.

The proposed conclusion finds support on examining the reference to the soles of the feet and the hair of the head, with which the discourse introduces the list of anatomical parts. This appears to be meant to delineate the area of investigation that should be covered in its entirety—as a way of saying that it should be done thoroughly, from beginning to end—rather than

implying that one should start by feeling one of these two and proceed from there step by step toward sensing the other. The discourse next qualifies the body to be examined as “delimited by the skin.” This confirms that delimitation is at stake here, and the soles of the feet as well as the hair of the head are mentioned as the lower and upper points of such delimitation.

The soles of the feet, which for the average ancient Indian practitioner would have been hardened due to walking barefoot, do not seem to offer a particularly convenient way of starting to sense the body, for which the fleshy parts of the feet would be more appropriate. The same problem holds even more so for the hair of the head, as already mentioned above, which is not amenable to being felt from within one’s own body and can only be sensed by being touched externally. In sum, even though the reference to the soles of the feet and the hair on the head may at first sight suggest some similarity to the body scan, closer inspection shows the situation to be otherwise.

In this way, neither contemplation of feeling tones nor the exercises concerned with the body’s postures, its elements, or its anatomical constitution seem to offer an obvious precedent for the body scan.¹⁶⁹

McMahan (2023: 82) notes that, in the context of discussing the body scan, Kabat-Zinn (1990/2013: 76) speaks of “*experiencing* our body” in contrast to “*thinking about* it.” The terminology used here happens to point in the right direction, as an instruction to “experience” the whole body may indeed have

¹⁶⁹ Needless to say, a body scan can of course be employed to cultivate these *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplations. The point is only that such an employment does not appear to reflect the original intention of the relevant instructions and for this reason needs to be recognized as an innovation; see also Anālayo 2018d: 198.

provided the starting point for an evolution that gradually would have led to the practice of the body scan. However, this instruction does not occur in relation to the anatomical parts but rather appears in the third step of mindfulness of breathing.

Before turning to exploring this evolution, however, I would like to put on record that I am not objecting to the attempt by McMahan (2023) to draw attention to the cultural context of meditation practices, with which I am very much in agreement. I share with McMahan (2023: 9 and 15) an interest in wanting “to explore the issue of how culture informs and interacts with meditation practices,” and I also find it problematic when meditation becomes “adapted to the post-Enlightenment view of the autonomous individual,” being “reframed as the ultimate individualistic practice of the singular mind gazing at itself.”¹⁷⁰ In the remainder of my exploration in this second part of my book, I will have occasion to rely on other parts of McMahan (2023) to provide helpful background to what I am exploring.

My point is thus only that his case studies, surveyed above, do not accurately reflect the relevant textual evidence. This calls for correction, precisely to facilitate a proper appreciation of the cultural setting and implications of these meditation practices.

¹⁷⁰ McMahan 2023: 164 aptly frames this as the “inner citadel model,” which stands in contrast to the “situated autonomy model” of meditation practice, noting in the course of his subsequent discussion that the latter has gradually become more prominent. It would have been helpful to relate these two models to the topic of internal and external mindfulness practice, where a recovery of the meaning and significance of the latter has, according to Gleig 2019: 124, “made a strong impact on the Insight community.” For the recovery itself see Anālayo 2003: 94–102 and in more detail 2020g and 2020l. Bringing in this aspect could have provided a cultural and historical background to these two models.

Formulations of the Third Step of Mindfulness of Breathing

The instruction in Pāli discourses for the third step of mindfulness of breathing proceeds in this way:¹⁷¹

One trains: “I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body”;
one trains: “I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body.”

The same sense of experiencing the whole body during inbreaths and outbreaths also finds reflection in a translation of this third step in a parallel extant in Chinese:¹⁷²

Experiencing the whole body when breathing in, one trains well [to experience] the whole body when breathing in; experiencing the whole body when breathing out, one trains well [to experience] the whole body when breathing out.

These instructions suggest that executing the third step of mindfulness of breathing requires being aware of the whole body alongside noticing the movement of the breath going in and out.

This is not the position taken by Theravāda exegesis, however, which understands the instruction for this third step to refer to paying attention to the breath in its entirety. This understanding is based on interpreting the reference to the “whole body” in the instructions to intend the “entire body of the breath”.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ SN 54.1 at SN V 311,19.

¹⁷² SĀ 803 at T II 206a28; see also Anālayo 2020c: 199.

¹⁷³ Vism 273,23; see also Paṭiṣ I 184,4, which in relation to the third step similarly states that the inbreaths and outbreaths are the “body” here, preceded by a general distinction of the notion of a body into mental and material types, the latter comprising the four elements and derived materiality together with, among others, the inbreaths and outbreaths—these appear to be the most directly relevant dimension in the case of the present step. The commentary, Paṭiṣ-a II 515,30, then distinguishes between tranquility and insight modali-

One trains: “I shall breathe in” and “I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body”: [This means that] one trains: “I shall breathe in making known, making evident the beginning, middle, and end of the entire body of the inbreath”; one trains: “I shall breathe out making known, making evident the beginning, middle, and end of the entire body of the outbreath.”

This interpretation has as its point of departure an indication provided in the Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing, given in the context of correlating the sixteen steps with the four establishments of mindfulness. The relevant Pāli passage reports the Buddha making the following statement:¹⁷⁴

I say that this is a certain body among bodies, namely, breathing in and breathing out.

From a practical perspective, however, to apply this statement to the third step of mindfulness of breathing and then take it to imply a focus on only the breath is unconvincing. The preceding two steps require ascertaining whether the breaths are short or long. This would not be possible without making known at least to some extent their beginning, middle, and end. As the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing introduce a new theme with each step, it seems more probable that the instruction in the third step to experience the whole body refers to the whole physical body rather than the whole length of the breath.

An emphasis on the whole physical body becomes more prominent with formulations of the same third step that speak

ties of practice, envisaging for the latter to yield a penetration of materiality in general.

¹⁷⁴ MN 118 at MN III 83,31.

of *pervading* the body (rather than of *experiencing* it). References to such pervasion can be found in expositions of this third step in three different texts on monastic discipline, extant in Chinese translation.¹⁷⁵

However, the instruction for the third step does not appear to imply a pervading of the body with the breath. This becomes evident when taking into account ensuing steps in the scheme on mindfulness of breathing. The relevant steps require experiencing joy (5), experiencing happiness (6), experiencing mental activity (7), and experiencing the mind (9). On adopting the interpretation that experiencing the whole body (3) is to experience the breath pervading the whole body, the meditative practices described in these other steps would have to be interpreted similarly, given that they employ the same formulation. This would result in the idea that one should experience the breath pervading joy and happiness, or else how it pervades mental activity or the mind. From a practical perspective, such an interpretation fails to make sense.

In fact, the instructions for these steps are not about experiencing the breath in a special way, be it as pervading the whole

¹⁷⁵ The Mahāsāṅghika *Vinaya*, T 1425 at T XXII 254c17: “At the time of breathing in pervading the body, one knows one is breathing in pervading the body; at the time of breathing out pervading the body, one knows one is breathing out pervading the body.” The Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, T 1435 at T XXIII 8a25: “When breathing in pervading the body, one should know single-mindedly that one is breathing in from the whole of the body; when breathing out pervading the body, one should know single-mindedly that one is breathing out from the whole of the body.” The Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, T 1448 at T XXIV 32c13: “Pervading the body when breathing out, one understands it completely; pervading the body when breathing in, one also understands it completely.”

body or in any other way. Instead, they require that the practitioner experiences joy, happiness, mental activity, and the mind *alongside* remaining mindful of the process of breathing in and breathing out. Similarly, the instruction to experience the whole body is not about experiencing the breath in the whole body. Instead, it requires being aware of the whole body alongside remaining mindful of the process of breathing in and breathing out.

A related point is that the instruction for being mindful of the process of breathing refers to the inhalations and exhalations; it is not about experiencing the processes that distribute oxygen throughout the whole body. Inhalations and exhalations are only one specific manifestation of the wind element, which stands for motion in general. A relevant canonical passage provides the following list of occurrences of the wind element inside of the human body:¹⁷⁶

Up-going winds, down-going winds, winds in the bowels, circulating winds, pulling and contracting winds, stabbing winds, pushing winds, irregular winds, winds circulating in the limbs, exhalations and inhalations.

This description presents the process of breathing together with other bodily motions and processes, all of which come under the heading of the wind element. The context shows that inhalations and exhalations are seen as distinct from up-going and down-going winds, for example, otherwise they would not have been listed separately.

¹⁷⁶ MĀ 30 at T I 466b9, with a parallel in MN 28 at MN I 188,29: “Up-going winds, down-going winds, winds in the belly, winds in the bowels, winds that course through the limbs, inhalations and exhalations.”

Pervading the Body

Although the idea of understanding the third step of mindfulness of the body to imply some form of pervasion of the physical body seems to be as unconvincing as the proposal in Theravāda exegesis to take it to refer just to the ‘body’ of the breath, the former mode of understanding appears to have exerted an influence on actual practice traditions. This can be seen in an ancient meditation manual extant in Chinese. In the introduction to their translation, Yamabe and Sueki (2009: xiii) explain that the text is a “meditation manual compiled by Kumārajīva based largely on Indian sources.”

The relevant part in this meditation manual occurs in the context of an exposition of the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing. The explanation of the third step of mindfulness of breathing in the meditation manual by Kumārajīva, who lived from the mid fourth to the early fifth century, takes the following form:¹⁷⁷

One is mindful of the breaths pervading the body, being as well mindful of breathing out and in. Completely contemplating the out-breaths and the in-breaths within the body, awareness pervades and reaches inside the body up to the toes and the fingers and pervades all the pores, just like water entering sand.

This description clearly calls for an actual *pervasion* of the whole body. Note that this is part of an instruction on “contemplation of the body,” since the first four steps of mindfulness of breathing correspond to the first *satipaṭṭhāna*. In other words,

¹⁷⁷ T 614 at T XV 275b25; see also Anālayo 2006a.

the above-mentioned assumption that the *body* scan could somehow be related to contemplation of the *body* seems correct.

A somewhat similar practice has been taught by the Thai monk and meditation teacher Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo (1907–1961). The relevant instructions in Dhammadharo (1979/1990: 32f) begin with awareness of the process of breathing:

As soon as you find that your breathing feels comfortable, let this comfortable breath sensation spread to the different parts of the body.

To begin with, inhale the breath sensation at the base of the skull, and let it flow all the way down the spine. Then, if you are male, let it spread down your right leg to the sole of your foot, to the ends of your toes, and out into the air. Inhale the breath sensation at the base of the skull again and let it spread down your spine, down your left leg to the ends of your toes, and out into the air. (If you are female, begin with the left side first, because the male and female nervous systems are different).

Then let the breath from the base of the skull spread down over both shoulders, past your elbows and wrists, to the tips of your fingers, and out into the air. Let the breath at the base of the throat spread down the central nerve at the front of the body, past the lungs and liver, all the way down to the bladder and colon. Inhale the breath right at the middle of the chest and let it go all the way down to your intestines. Let all these breath sensations spread so that they connect and flow together.

This way of undertaking the body scan comes closely intertwined with paying attention to the breath. Another meditative approach that also combines the breath with awareness of the body has been taught by the Vietnamese monk and activist

Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022). This takes the following form in the instructions offered in Nhat Hanh (1988: 46):

[Y]ou begin by breathing out and you observe, ‘I am breathing out and am aware of the hair on my head.’ ‘I am breathing in and am aware of the contents of my skull.’ You can continue like this until you reach the tips of your toes.

All of these meditative approaches point to some relationship between the body scan and mindfulness of breathing. Notably, such a connection, although in a less prominent form, can also be seen in instructions given by Kabat-Zinn (2018a: 80):

The body scan can be undertaken and practiced with great precision and detail ... [t]hat might include sensing how the breath is moving in and through each region (which of course it does, because the breath energy reaches and bathes each and every region through the vehicle of the oxygenated blood) ... inhabit each region and cultivate a deep intimacy with it as it is in that moment through your breath and through the direct, moment-to-moment attending to the raw sensations emanating from it.

What emerges from the above quotations can also be related to an explanation of the third step of mindfulness of breathing provided by the perhaps most well-known student of U Ba Khin, S. N. Goenka (1924–2013). In the context of an examination of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, Goenka (1999: 29) explains:

You learn to reach the important station of feeling sensations in the whole body in one breath: from top to bottom as you breathe out, from bottom to top as you breathe in ...

Goenka (1999: 31) adds that “with the help of the breath the whole body is felt inside.” The approach depicted in Kumāra-

jīva's meditation manual concords with the explanation offered by S. N. Goenka that sensations are felt throughout the whole body with each breath. Such an idea also resonates with the meditative approaches presented by Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo and Thich Nhat Hanh. Kumārajīva's meditation manual reflects in particular the notion that mindfulness of breathing involves experiencing the breath throughout or alongside the whole body, up to the toes.

In relation to such descriptions, it is of interest that, as noted by Kerr et al. (2013: 10) in a study of mindfulness of the body, “[d]uring the body-scan and breath-focused awareness ... mindfulness-trained subjects frequently report perceptual feedback from the fingers, toes, abdomen, etc.” This suggests that it is perhaps natural for the subjective experience of mindfulness of breathing to be related to the perceptual experience of body parts like the toes, even though at first sight one might not associate these with meditation on the breath. Some employments of the body scan in current Mindfulness-Based Interventions indeed start off by directing mindfulness to the breath.¹⁷⁸

In a detailed study of the body scan, Dreeben, Mamberg, and Salomon (2013: 398) report:

One of the most consistent findings in the MBSR literature is a preference for the body scan, as measured by practice time, compared to other core practices.

When compared to mindfulness of breathing and *mettā*, the body scan appears to be more effective in improving life satisfaction.¹⁷⁹ The practice of the body scan can lead to a reduction

¹⁷⁸ See, e.g., Cropley, Ussher, and Charitou 2007: 990 and Ussher et al. 2009: 1252.

¹⁷⁹ Kropp and Sedlmeier 2019.

of biological markers of chronic stress.¹⁸⁰ Significant improvements in participants' level of depression can occur due to body scan meditation.¹⁸¹ Moreover, there appears to be a distinct tendency for the body scan meditation to elicit the experience of happiness in practitioners and to bring about a lessening of anxiety.¹⁸²

These results acquire additional significance when correlated to the subsequent steps of mindfulness of breathing.¹⁸³ Following the third step of experiencing the whole body, the fourth step involves “calming bodily activity.” This points to an experience of relaxation at the bodily level that would indeed counter anxiety. The next two steps are about “experiencing joy” and “experiencing happiness.” Such experiences fit with the eliciting of happiness noted above.

These similarities give the impression that perhaps at least distantly comparable mechanisms might be at work in the body scan meditation and in the progression of meditation practice that sets in with the third step of mindfulness of breathing.

Insight Meditation Taught by U Ba Khin

By way of further exploring what has emerged so far, I next turn to the insight meditation taught by U Ba Khin, given that this in turn appears to have influenced the adoption of the body scan in MBSR and other mindfulness-related programs.

In a study of Theravāda insight meditation, Solé-Leris (1986/1992: 137) reports that “U Ba Khin started *vipassanā* meditation in 1937” under the guidance of the lay teacher Saya Thet Gyi

¹⁸⁰ Schultchen et al. 2019.

¹⁸¹ Corbett, Egan, and Pilch 2019.

¹⁸² Dambrun 2016 and Dambrun et al. 2019.

¹⁸³ SN 54.1 at SN V 311,20 and SĀ 803 at T II 206b1.

(1873–1945), who had been a follower of the famous scholar monk Ledi Sayādaw (1846–1923).¹⁸⁴

Ledi Sayādaw played a central role in the spread of insight meditation among laity.¹⁸⁵ This spread appears to have taken its initial momentum from the wish to strengthen lay Buddhists in Myanmar against the destabilizing influences of the British colonial regime and Christian missionary activity.

According to a prediction found in later Theravāda texts, the disappearance of Buddhism will be heralded by the disappearance of the Abhidharma teachings.¹⁸⁶ These more scholastically-oriented teachings, which gradually developed during the first few centuries after the time of the Buddha, are found in a body of texts considered by Theravāda tradition to be canonical.

Given such a prediction, an attempt to ensure the longevity of Buddhism will naturally focus on protecting this particular collection of teachings. For this purpose, Ledi Sayādaw taught Abhidharma widely to lay Buddhists, mainly based on a post-canonical compendium reflecting a later stage in Abhidharma thought, the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*.¹⁸⁷ As part of such teaching activity, he also encouraged meditation practices aimed at making Abhidharma teachings a matter of personal realization.

Two central notions of mature Abhidharma thought, in the way it had developed by that time, appear to have been particularly influential for such meditation practice. One of these is the doctrine of momentariness, according to which everything, with-

¹⁸⁴ Stuart 2020: 47 notes that, according to the report given by one of his close disciples, it seems that U Ba Khin’s “method of meditation, though drawn from his training with his teacher, was really his own.”

¹⁸⁵ See in more detail Braun 2013.

¹⁸⁶ See in more detail Endo 2004.

¹⁸⁷ On the dating of this text see above p. 149 note 157.

out exception, passes away as soon as it has arisen.¹⁸⁸ The other is the belief that matter is made up of subatomic particles, referred to by the term *kalāpa*.¹⁸⁹ The relevance of these two notions can be seen in the following explanation given by U Ba Khin (1991/1998: 32 and 35) of the type of *vipassanā* meditation he taught:

The Buddha taught his disciples that everything that exists at the material level is composed of *kalāpas*. *Kalāpas* are material units very much smaller than atoms, which die out almost immediately after they come into being ...

In Vipassana the object of meditation is *anicca* [impermanence], and therefore in the case of those used to focusing their attention on bodily feelings, they can feel *anicca* directly. In experiencing *anicca* in relation to the body, it should first be in the area where one can easily get his attention engrossed, changing the area of attention from place to place, from head to feet and from feet to head, at times probing into the interior. At this stage it must clearly be understood that no attention is to be paid to the anatomy of the body, but to the formations of matter—the *kalāpas*—and the nature of their constant change.

Practiced in this way, the body scan serves to corroborate the Abhidharma map of reality, confirming through personal meditative experience that the body is made up of subatomic particles that arise and pass away with great rapidity.

This way of employing the body scan seems to have evolved at some juncture in the trajectory from Ledi Sayādaw via Saya Thet Gyi to U Ba Khin. In one of his essays, Goenka (1991/1998c:

¹⁸⁸ See in more detail Kim 1999/2023.

¹⁸⁹ See the discussion in Karunadasa 1967/1989: 142–165.

118) refers to “this wonderful technique ... kept in its pristine purity from generation to generation through a chain of Teachers culminating in Sayagyi U Ba Khin.” In another essay, Goenka (1991/1998a: 151f) then refers to this “entire chain of teachers from [the] Buddha, the Enlightened One, to Sayagyi U Ba Khin, who maintained this wonderful technique in its original form.”

In a study of the historical evolution of *vipassanā* meditation in Myanmar, Braun (2013: 159) comments on this claim that “[s]o far as I know, Ledi never made such a claim, nor did Thetgyi or U Ba Khin put so much stress on a perfectly preserved technique.” As the survey in the preceding passages would have shown (see above p. 154), in the early discourses there is no evidence for the existence of “this wonderful technique.”

Now, in view of the position taken in Theravāda exegesis on the significance of the third step of mindfulness of breathing as a reference to the whole ‘body’ of the breath, the idea of pervading the physical body as an interpretation of this step could hardly have arisen in a traditional Theravāda context. In his manual of mindfulness of breathing, Ledi Sayādaw (1999: 15) in fact adopts the interpretation of the third step of mindfulness of breathing proposed in Theravāda exegesis. Hence, if he indeed taught some form of a body scan to Saya Thet Gyi, such practice would not have been conceived by him as an actual implementation of the third step of mindfulness of breathing.¹⁹⁰

In his manual of insight, Ledi Sayādaw (1961/1986: 76f) emphasizes that “the knowledge of impermanence must first and

¹⁹⁰ However, in line with the position taken in the commentary on the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, quoted above p. 161 note 173, the third step could be viewed as a steppingstone for embarking on insight meditation aimed at a penetration of the nature of materiality in general.

foremost be acquired,” wherefore the task is to “discern the changes of every part of the body, small and great, of head, of legs, of hands and so forth.” For the cultivation of insight, he commends in particular contemplating the four elements (1961/1986: 72), whose existence he then relates in his other manual to the breath, explaining that “if one can penetrate and perceive their existence in out-breath[s] and in-breath[s], then one can also penetrate and perceive them in the whole body,” and eventually “[o]ne perceives that there exist only the four primary elements” (1999: 41f).¹⁹¹

It is noteworthy that this presentation conforms to the basic progression from the breath to the whole body that formed a common theme in the various approaches surveyed above. It differs from these in so far as it relates such practice to the four elements. This thereby naturally brings the insight potential of this way of meditation to the forefront. The proposed meditative progression is telling, since from a practical perspective the reverse procedure would have been more straightforward. It is considerably less challenging to perceive and penetrate all four elements first in the physical body rather than in the breath.

¹⁹¹ The idea here would be to perceive the four elements in the breath itself, rather than in bodily sensations related to the breath. Ledi Sayādaw 1999: 40f explains that, even when the earth element is not directly felt as hardness, its existence “can be logically realized. For example, how can the water element bind if there is nothing solid to bind ... How can the wind element produce motion if there is nothing solid to push? In the corporeal groups of the out-breath and in-breath, the binding function that causes the grouping is that of the water element. The heat and cold in the groups are caused by the fire element. Motion is caused by the wind element ... In ultimate reality, there exist in the out-breath and the in-breath only these four primary elements of earth, water, fire, and wind.”

In the survey of the four elements given in a Pāli discourse and its parallel, already quoted above (p. 164) for their listing of manifestations of the wind element in the human body, the inhalations and exhalations feature only as an exemplification of this fourth element,¹⁹² whereas other aspects of the physical body exemplify the remaining three elements. In other words, the way of practice described by Ledi Sayādaw does appear to be influenced by some already existing form of practice, otherwise it would hardly have evolved in this peculiar way.

If an already existing practice of proceeding from the breath to the whole body should indeed have been adopted by Ledi Sayādaw, then it would have been natural for it to be adjusted to Theravāda doctrine by conceptualizing it as a contemplation of the four elements.

Contemplation of the four elements has indeed a central role in fostering insight into the nature of materiality in the Pāli discourses and in later exegesis, but this comes with some changes in perspective. As already mentioned at the outset of the present discussion (p. 155), in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* contemplation of the four elements serves to divide the body comparable to cutting a cow into different parts. The same type of approach also informs the above-quoted survey of the four elements in the human body given in a Pāli discourse and its parallel.

In the same discourse, insight into the impermanence of each element in turn relies on drawing an inference based on the impermanence of the external element. This then leads to the conclusion that what holds for the external element must also apply to the internal element found in one's own body.

¹⁹² MN 28 at MN I 188,30 and MĀ 30 at T I 466b11. An identification of the breath as representative of the wind element occurs also in Kumārajīva's manual, T 614 at T XV 275a23.

Once the four elements evolve from general qualities of matter to constituents of *kalāpas*, however, the element of division into these four turns into a more fine-grained dissolution of matter. In terms of the simile of the slaughtered cow, instead of chunks of meat the net result is more like ground meat. Another difference is that, rather than being inferred based on observing manifestations of the four elements found outside of the body, impermanence is now to be felt directly within the body.

This distinct perspective on impermanence can be illustrated with an explanation by U Ba Khin in Kornfield (1977/1993: 241 and 250), where he grounds the direct experience of impermanence in the “feeling of the radiation, vibration, and friction of the atomic units within,” so as to come to “know that our very body is composed of tiny kalapas all in a state of change.”

In this way, it seems possible to envisage a gradual development in the course of which this mode of practice would have evolved based on an antecedent of the type evident in Kumārajīva’s manual. In order to avoid possible misunderstandings, I would like to emphasize that the idea is decidedly not to propose some form of direct relationship between Kumārajīva’s manual and Ledi Sayādaw. The significance of the former is only that, to the best of my knowledge, it provides the earliest extant instance of an explicit description of such a type of practice.

Conceiving of such a practice as a contemplation of the four elements—seen as closely interrelated with the notion of *kalāpas*—stays in line with the commentarial understanding of the third step of mindfulness of breathing on experiencing the whole body (Pāli: *sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī*) as a reference to the whole breath rather than the physical body. In addition, it opens up the vista toward the potential of this type of practice of proceeding from the breath to the cultivation of insight into the impermanent nature of material reality, above all of one’s own body.

Goenka (1999: 29) comments on the resultant practice, in the way taught by him, that “after a day or two’s work with the breath, you have experienced sensation in this area,” that is, the area related to the nostrils. Based on that, “you reach the stage of feeling sensations throughout the body—*sabba-kāya*.” Notably, this is part of his explanation of the significance of the third step of mindfulness of breathing. It reflects a practical understanding of this step that concords with the proposed development of the body scan from an antecedent related to an understanding of the third step of mindfulness of breathing as calling for experiencing the whole physical body.

Needless to say, suggesting the above historical perspective should not be taken as implying some kind of devaluation or as dismissing other contributory factors. Throughout its history, Buddhism has been in continuous development in response to various causes and conditions, whose convergence can never be reduced to monocausal explanations. It is only natural that some development is also evident in relation to meditation practices, and discerning this need not carry any implicit value accorded to what is earlier over what is later. In fact, as already mentioned above, cultivating the body scan can offer several benefits that go far beyond the potential of the third step of mindfulness of breathing in the way envisaged in early Buddhist texts.

In sum, the thread of development studied here appears to begin with a shift in understanding of the third step of mindfulness of breathing from a more static “experiencing” of the whole body to a more dynamic “pervading” of the same body. This would have fostered the idea of moving attention through the body in a more or less systematic manner, an interpretation which eventually spread from India to China and other parts of Asia. In the course of this trajectory, the somatic experience of the body seems to have become a more prominent object of meditation.

In Myanmar such body scanning or sweeping through the body came to serve as a tool to enable a direct experience of the teachings of the Abhidharma. By this time, the body scan appears to have become an independent practice in its own right, and mindfulness of breathing has come to serve as a preliminary to such practice. Moreover, the attention directed to the body in this way has become more detailed, as the purpose of the body scan is to foster an apperception of subtle sensations as a corroboration of the continuous arising and passing away of subatomic particles in the body (and by implication in any other manifestation of matter).

More recently, the body scan has come to serve as an entry point to secular mindfulness practices aimed at reducing the stressful dimensions of pain and disease. At this stage, mindfulness of breathing has receded still further into the background, being no longer required as a preliminary and only serving as an optional supplement. The body has in turn become still more prominent. Moreover, the potential of the body-scan meditation to alleviate pain, or at least to diminish mental reactivity to pain, has also become considerably more prominent.

The Body Scan and Energy

Before concluding my examination of the body scan, there is another dimension of this practice that calls for comment, which is the stimulation of energy through the practice of such a scan.

Ancient Indian medicine, as reflected in early Buddhist texts, conceives of certain diseases in terms of “affliction by wind,” “wind in the limbs,” and “wind in the joints.”¹⁹³ Nevertheless, the early Buddhist texts do not seem to reflect any attempt at harnessing the type of energy, encompassed by the notion of the

¹⁹³ See Zysk 1991: 92–96.

wind element, as an active aid in meditation. The possibly closest instance of such a type of practice appears to be the reported undertaking of breath control by the Buddha-to-be during the time when he was still in quest for awakening.¹⁹⁴ He is on record for having abandoned such breath control in the realization that it was not conducive to progress to liberation, on a par with other ascetic practices he had tried.

Proceeding from ancient India to the contemporary setting, the above exploration of the body scan provides a background for appreciating an energy-related aspect to the meditation tradition taught by S. N. Goenka, which is to some extent also relevant to the approach to the cultivation of insight taught by Mahāsi Sayādaw (1904–1982).

Beginning with the latter, in his *Manual of Insight* originally written in 1945 (in Burmese), Mahāsi Sayādaw (2016: 264) presents the primary object of his approach to insight meditation as requiring that one “should focus his or her mind on the abdomen. You will feel it rising and falling ... you should concurrently and continuously note the movements of the abdomen as ‘rising’ and ‘falling’ from moment to moment.” Mahāsi Sayādaw (2016: 265) then explains that “[t]he rise and fall of the abdomen is a manifestation of the air element,” alternatively also referred to as the wind element.

The explicit reference to the air or wind element can be explored further from the viewpoint of what traditional Chinese medicine understands as *qì*. From that perspective, an important energy center, referred to as the *dāntián*, is precisely located in the lower abdomen area. Moreover, according to a basic principle in *qìgōng* and *tàijíquán* practices, the mind can influence the

¹⁹⁴ See Anālayo 2017c: 60–67 and 2021b: 1893f.

flow of such energy, such *qì*. It follows that, if considered from the viewpoint of traditional Chinese medicine, once the practice of focusing on the rise and fall of the abdomen is undertaken continuously for many hours during consecutive days in an intensive retreat, this can stimulate energy in the *dāntián* and hence result in the type of effects that can be expected from such *qì* stimulation. This assumption is borne out by the description of some “odd experiences” given by Mahāsi Sayādaw (2016: 268f), which indeed appear to reflect the effects of what is to all appearances an unintentional stimulation of energy:

You may feel strong pressure, as if an airbag were being inflated inside your chest, a sharp pain, as if being stabbed with a dagger, a stinging pain, as if being pricked with many small needles, or an overall irritation, as if insects were crawling all over your body. You may feel fierce heat, severe itchiness, unbearable aching, extreme cold, or a variety of other unpleasant sensations ...

If a meditator finds him- or herself swaying unintentionally, he or she should not be afraid of it, nor should he or she encourage it ... If the swaying becomes very strong, you can practice while sitting against a wall or other firm support ... Follow the same procedure if you experience trembling in the body. Sometimes you may get goose bumps or a chill may run up your back or through your whole body.

The effects described correspond to what one would expect from a stimulation of the *qì* caused by attention being focused on the *dāntián*. However, given the apparent lack of a framework for understanding the energy dimensions of meditation practices in Theravāda Buddhism, it is hardly surprising that such effects are simply seen as odd experiences that are best endured with mental balance.

Energy-related bodily experiences resulting from stimulating the flow of *qi* also appear to result from the approach to *vipassanā* taught by S. N. Goenka, in particular the body scan that forms the main topic of my present exploration. The basic instruction given by Goenka (1987/1997: 17), as part of the standard teaching of a ten-day course, is “to fix your attention in a certain area [of the body], and as soon as you feel a sensation, to move ahead.”

Such a procedure can indeed be expected to stimulate the flow of *qi* in those parts of the body that are being attended to, if this is done in a continuous form for many hours during consecutive days of an intensive retreat. Goenka (1987/1997: 35) further explains that, on doing this repeatedly in the form of a body scan, it can be expected that “gross, solidified, unpleasant sensations begin to dissolve into subtle vibrations. One starts to experience a very pleasant flow of energy throughout the body.” Note that here the concept of “energy” comes up explicitly, although this seems to be simply a way of expressing the meditative experience in a way attuned to a contemporary audience, without being further pursued as an actual effect of the meditation practice related to the *qi*.

With ongoing practice of the body scans, then, according to Goenka (1987/1997: 38) eventually “throughout the body there is nothing but subtle vibrations.” Goenka (1987/1997: 59) explains that “gross, consolidated sensations have dissolved into subtle vibrations, arising and falling with great rapidity, and the solidity of the mental-physical structure disappears.” Here, the results of a quite probably unintentional stimulation of the energy-dimension of the body are not just odd effects but constitute a central element in the cultivation of insight into impermanence, conceptualized as a direct experience of the body being made up of *kalāpas* of momentary duration.

The repercussions of the energy dimension of the type of meditation taught by U Ba Khin appear to have played a role, at least to some extent, in attracting S. N. Goenka to this form of practice in the first place. In one of his essays, Goenka (1991/1998b: 141) reports that

a severe physical disease—migraine headaches—provided the impetus for me to go to Sayagyi U Ba Khin and to undertake a ten-day course of Vipassana meditation ... after learning Dhamma from Sayagyi, I realized that the migraine had been a blessing in disguise. Certainly, the disease was now cured; but this benefit was only a very minor, trivial aspect of the help my teacher gave me. Immeasurably more valuable is the jewel of Dhamma received from him which has changed my life.

In this way, practicing according to the instructions given by U Ba Khin led S. N. Goenka to being cured of the debilitating pains of migraine, which convinced him of the efficacy of the meditation practice he had learned. The effect achieved in this way could well be a byproduct of an improved circulation of *qi* achieved through repeatedly undertaking the body scan.

At any rate, it seems fair to propose that the approaches taught by Mahāsi Sayādaw and S. N. Goenka for intensive *vipassanā* meditation in a retreat setting can stimulate the *qi*, although both teachers do not appear to be fully aware this. Such unintended side-effects can clearly be beneficial—such as when to all appearances resulting in the cure of a headache—but this is not invariably the case (see below p. 198 and note 215), a situation that is aggravated when repercussions of intensive and repeated stimulation of the *qi* are not accurately understood for what they are. This problem provides a lead over into my next topic: potential drawbacks of mindfulness and meditation practices in general.

The Dangers of Mindfulness

In addition to the possibility of leading to unintended side-effects related to a stimulation of energy, *qi*, another potentially problematic dimension of *vipassanā* meditation relates to the scheme of insight knowledges through which progress to awakening is expected to take place. Unlike the case of energy stimulation, however, which to the best of my knowledge has thus far not received the attention it deserves, potential problems related to intensive *vipassanā* meditation have been noted since the time of its introduction in the Western setting, being the subject of several academic studies in the latter part of the 20th century.

Studies of insight meditation by Kornfield (1979) and Brown and Engler (1980) have offered surveys of meditative experiences related to these “insight knowledges,” which function as a central framework for Theravāda *vipassanā* meditation. The scheme of these insight knowledges describes stages, some of which can be rather challenging, that practitioners of intensive meditation following Theravāda doctrinal directives can expect to go through in their progress to stream-entry.

In a study of possible psychiatric complications of meditation practice, Epstein and Lieff (1981) highlight the importance of taking these insight knowledges into account. In addition, Disayavanish and Disayavanish (1984) report instances of meditation-induced psychosis,¹⁹⁵ Shapiro (1992) examines adverse effects of *vipassanā* meditation, and Miller (1993) the unearthing of traumatic memories and emotions through mindfulness and concentration meditation.

¹⁹⁵ In the case of an earlier study by Walshe and Roche 1979, it is not clear what type of meditation the reported cases had been practicing, although the description would fit *vipassanā*. Another relevant study is Chan-Ob and Boonyanaruthee 1999.

In the context of an examination of extreme mental states in Western meditators in relation to the insight knowledges, VanderKooi (1997: 32f) points out that, from a traditional perspective, “the process of realizing *nirvana* is fraught with troubling and sometimes excruciating states,” even “extreme fear.” Fear is indeed one of the insight knowledges (see below no. 6).

By way of providing a reference point for the present discussion, it may be useful to list the whole scheme of insight knowledges once. For ease of presentation, in what follows I only give the name of the respective knowledge as such, without repeating the English word “knowledge” each time:

delimitating mind and matter
 discerning causality
 comprehension
 rise and fall
 dissolution
 fear
 disadvantage
 disenchantment
 wishing for deliverance
 reflection
 equanimity toward formations
 conformity
 change of lineage
 path
 fruit
 reviewing

The insight progression schematized in this way can be summarized as involving the following dynamics: Based on an initial differentiation between the bodily and mental aspects of the meditative experience and an experiential appreciation of their

causal interrelation, discernment of their impermanent nature in terms of their arising and passing away as well as their eventual dissolution can lead to the arising of fear, which stimulates disenchantment and the wish for liberation. Practicing further then leads to a state of equanimity, based on which the breakthrough to the path and fruit of stream-entry can take place, followed by reviewing what has just happened.

A Reinterpretation of the Insight Knowledges

A substantial reinterpretation of the practical significance of the insight knowledges have been presented by Daniel Ingram in the context of “an unusually hardcore Dharma book” (so the subtitle). For example, the first insight knowledge of delimitating mind and matter calls for a separation of these two dimensions of subjective experience. However, Ingram (2008/2018: 198) considers it to be a “unitive-feeling state,” rather than rather the being characterized by a sense of separation. Due to experiencing this first insight knowledge, according to him “[w]e may feel more alive and connected to the world. For some it may hit with unusual force, filling them with a great sense of unity or universal consciousness.”

According to the standard Theravāda path manual, the *Vissuddhimagga*, this first insight knowledge is about deconstructing the sense of compactness rather than establishing it. A simile in the same work illustrates this insight knowledge with the example of cutting through something with a knife and thereby splitting it apart.¹⁹⁶ This illustrates that the insight knowledge under discussion concerns a splitting up of experience, by way of setting apart its mental and physical dimensions. This is the very opposite of experiencing a great sense of unity.

¹⁹⁶ Vism 593,8.

Another example is the insight knowledge of rise and fall, which stands for a thorough insight into impermanence. According to Ingram (2008/2018: 208), “[h]ypersexual ways of looking at the world and people are common in this territory ... Heightened libido and increases in sexual ability may be noticed during this stage.” In fact, “[a]ffairs with other meditators, teachers, and other types of people become more likely.”

In other words, the idea is not only an increase in sexual energy but also its indulgence, another dimension of which can be “wanting to go out and party.” However, already the early discourses present such insight as resulting in a thorough removal of sensual lust or cravings.¹⁹⁷ In other words, what from a normative perspective leads to dispassion and disenchantment as a consequence of seeing with insight that everything is just made up of changing processes has been turned into its very opposite.

The same holds for the insight knowledge of dissolution. In the *Visuddhimagga*, this insight knowledge features as a stage of undistracted meditation, evident from the indication that “knowledge proceeds, having become keen,” such that “formations quickly become apparent.”¹⁹⁸ According to Ingram (2008/2018: 221), however, “[a] hallmark of Dissolution is that it is suddenly hard to avoid getting lost in thought and fantasy when meditating.” The description turns this insight knowledge on its head.

The insight knowledge of equanimity toward formations forms the culmination in the cultivation of insight as conceived in the Theravāda model, bordering on the breakthrough to the

¹⁹⁷ SN 22.102 at SN III 155,15: “cultivating and making much of the perception of impermanence removes all sensual lust,” with a parallel in SĀ 270 at T II 70c9: “cultivating the perception of impermanence, cultivating it much, enables removing all sensual craving.”

¹⁹⁸ Vism 640,30.

realization of path and fruit. Yet, Ingram (2008/2018: 245) claims that this insight knowledge “can happen in many unexpected situations, such as ... just doing ordinary things like watching TV” or “daydreaming.”

This suggestion exemplifies a tendency to conflate deep meditative insight with daily life situations. The proposed interpretations differ substantially from the traditional understanding of the insight knowledges, which are considered products of deep meditation and not something that happens when watching TV or daydreaming.

Ingram (2008/2018: 472) then offers the following account of what he considers to be his own attainment of stream-entry:

[T]here was this little, vivid, fantasy-like daydream that showed up as I just sat there doing basically nothing. In it, I was imagining that there was this gerbil on a gerbil wheel, and that this gerbil was both a meditator trying to get somewhere and yet also God, and yet God was watching the gerbil that was God. Suddenly, the gerbil-God and the Big God who just happened to be what seemed to be subject looked at each other, they recognized in this instant they were the same thing, or that their awareness was the same, and in that moment the “observing” side collapsed totally into the eyes of the little God-gerbil (specifically, the no-self door, which you probably already guessed), everything vanished, everything reappeared, and then the aftershocks following stream entry started coming.

This banalizes the realization of the path and fruit of stream-entry, by replacing a profound realization with a daydream about a gerbil. The described experience is a world apart from a genuine realization of stream-entry, and the same holds for the

reported repercussions of the above experience.¹⁹⁹ Ingram (2008/2018: 478) refers to a meditation teacher whom he apparently considers a central authority for the particular approach to insight meditation he practices, reporting that this teacher refused to accept his claim to have reached the first level of awakening, as he “believed that I was completely delusional.”

It is against this background that the above reinterpretation of the insight knowledges seems to fall into place, namely as an authentication strategy by identifying experiences preceding the gerbil episode as corresponding to the insight knowledges required for arrival at stream-entry. Thus, Ingram (2008/2018: 444) identifies a nightmare he had as a child as corresponding to the insight knowledge of rise and fall. The nightmare involved a “huge witch dressed in black” riding on a black horse and pointing a wand at him (in this dream, he “was about three feet tall, wearing a silver space suit with a glass-globe helmet”).

Other insight knowledges receive a similar treatment. The second knowledge of discerning causality, for example, supposedly arose when having jerky steps while hiking as a boy scout, and the insight knowledge of comprehension allegedly manifested with tense shoulders due to the strain of the long hike.

With the above trajectory in place, it is perhaps not surprising that, according to his own evaluation, he eventually also be-

¹⁹⁹ Ingram 2008/2018: 273, 277, and 475 reports that “the most barking crazy I ever felt during my whole practice history was during the three or so hours ... after my first Fruition [i.e. experience of stream-entry], though luckily from the outset I just looked pissed off.” Not only that, but “after stream entry I was a totally arrogant and possibly insufferable brat for a few months.” In this way, “for the next few weeks, I, the great stream enterer, managed to alienate almost every individual who had the misfortune to speak with me for any length of time.”

lieved to have reached the higher levels of awakening. His self-confidence in this respect is such that he openly claims to be an arahant and advertises this on the cover of his book.

According to the early Buddhist position, being an arahant equals having completely eradicated sensual lust, anger, and delusion without any remainder of these left in the mind.²⁰⁰ Since Daniel Ingram does not fulfill this condition, he opts for the strategy of dismissing this position as being a falsehood.²⁰¹ Thus, Ingram (2008/2018: 413) argues that “[m]odels of realization that involve high ideals of human perfection have caused so much dejection, despair, and misguided efforts throughout the ages that I have no qualms about doing my best to try to smash them to pieces on the sharp rocks of reality.”

Yet, the true rocks of reality are rather to be found in awareness of the presence of defilements in one’s own mind. Such awareness can serve to demolish unfounded claims to having become an arahant. It is the decoupling of the final goal from freedom from defilements that is harmful, as this can indeed cause much dejection and despair.

²⁰⁰ For example, SN 38.2 at SN IV 252,15: “Friend, the eradication of lust, the eradication of anger, and the eradication of delusion: this is called the state of being an arahant,” with a parallel in SĀ 490 at T II 126b22: “Sensual lust having been removed without remainder, anger and delusion having been removed without remainder: this is called being an arahant.”

²⁰¹ Ingram 2008/2018: 356 reasons as follows: “The traditional Theravada models contain numerous statements that are simply wrong about what an awakened being cannot do or will do. My favorite examples of this include statements that arahants cannot break the precepts (including killing, lying, stealing, having sex, doing drugs, or drinking), cannot become sexually aroused ... Needless to say, all are simply absurd lies.”

The Success of the Reinterpretation

Before the advent of the digital age, the above reinterpretation of the insight knowledges and stages of awakening would probably not have had much of an effect. In the contemporary setting, however, through effective promotion strategies Daniel Ingram has been able to gather a substantial following of meditation practitioners.²⁰² In addition, the same reinterpretation appears to have influenced some scholars from the field of psychology.

In a study of the supposed relevance of the insight knowledges for mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) in general, Grabovac (2015: 590) reasons that “some MBI participants may practice in a manner that is very close to traditional vipassana practice.” In the context of examining adverse meditation experiences, Compson (2018:1366) then proposes that the scheme of the insight knowledges is actually “a description of a psychological process accompanying meditative activities, whether or not they are undertaken in the context of a ‘Buddhist’ training or retreat.”

Both authors consider it problematic when MBI practitioners are encouraged to keep practicing on their own, as home practice might lead to patients having to face the potentially distressing experiences of the advanced insight knowledges when alone and without support. This would be in contrast to the ethical standards of modern psychology and medicine, which require proper monitoring of a therapeutic intervention and obtaining the patient’s informed consent prior to initiating a treatment with potentially serious side-effects.

In a study of the supposed risk of severe negative psychological effects of mindfulness, Barford (2018: 37) reasons that, in

²⁰² See Gleig 2019: 131–133.

view of this apparent danger, it needs to be ensured that mindfulness practitioners “do not inadvertently become meditators.” This assessment comes together with a reference, found on the same page, to Daniel Ingram’s warnings in this respect, which confirms the influence of the latter’s ideas on this type of problematization.

In an article dedicated to developing a framework for the empirical investigation of mindfulness meditative development, co-authored by Daniel Ingram, Galante et al. (2023: 1060) argue for the supposed impact of the insight knowledges on average mindfulness practice based on adducing the influence of Theravāda Buddhist traditions on mindfulness-based practices in general. This proposal appears to be based on the belief that standard expositions on mindfulness in the Pāli discourses, such as the Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing or the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, are related to the insight knowledges.²⁰³ This is not correct, however, as the scheme of the insight knowledges is the result of centuries of developments after the finalization of the above two Pāli discourses,²⁰⁴ which do not exhibit any direct relationship to this scheme.

²⁰³ Galante et al. 2023: 1060 reason that “the fact remains that many mindfulness practices (e.g. most of those in MBPs) draw heavily from Theravada Buddhist traditions that make use of the SoI (*Anapanasati Sutta* [*Mindfulness of Breathing*] *Majjhima Nikāya* 118 ... *Satipaṭṭhana Sutta* [*Frames of Reference*] *Majjhima Nikāya* 10 ...). Therefore, experiences arising from these different but related practices may be similar to each other to at least some extent.” In this quote, “MBPs” stands for mindfulness-based programs and “SoI” for the stages of insight, i.e., the insight knowledges; square brackets are found in the original.

²⁰⁴ For a study of the gradual evolution of the scheme of the insight knowledges see Anālayo 2012b.

Moreover, two highly influential Theravāda publications on mindfulness, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* and *The Power of Mindfulness* by Ñāṇaponika Thera (1962/1992) and (1968), do not even mention the scheme of insight knowledges. Notably, this is the case even though the former covers in detail the different practices described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and the latter explores the insight dimensions of mindfulness. Clearly, an influence of Theravāda Buddhist traditions on conceptions of mindfulness can take place quite independent of the scheme of insight knowledges.

Galante et al. (2023: 1060) also reference a study of the spiritual path by Kornfield (1993) among publications by “meditation experts” who supposedly have proposed that the insight knowledges “can be experienced by regular practitioners within various meditation traditions including secular ones, not just in retreat but also in everyday lay practice, and even as a result of practices or experiences other than meditation.” This would be significant, since Kornfield (1993) is the only one of the publications mentioned in support of this statement that came out before the first appearance of Ingram (2008/2018) and thus would provide a precedent for the proposed reasoning.²⁰⁵

Closer inspection of Kornfield (1993) shows that, even though the insight knowledges are covered, this coverage fails to take the position attributed to this publication by Galante et al. (2023: 1060). After acknowledging the possibility of spiritual experiences in daily life in general,²⁰⁶ Kornfield (1993: 137)

²⁰⁵ One of the other three publications is Cayon 2014/2015, an exposition of mindfulness-integrated cognitive behavior therapy that does not seem to be relevant to the topic. The other two are Compton 2018, discussed above, and of course Ingram 2008/2018.

²⁰⁶ Kornfield 1993: 136: “New realms of consciousness can also open

stipulates access concentration as the needed “gateway” to the insight knowledges. This clearly refers to formal, mature meditation practice, as evident also from the remainder of his exposition.²⁰⁷ If someone has undertaken formal insight meditation and in the course of that progressed through the insight knowledges, repercussions of such practice can of course also manifest in daily life situations.²⁰⁸ But it is not reasonable to expect the challenging experiences described in the scheme of insight

spontaneously through what is called grace, or they may occur under the press of a circumstance such as a near-death experience. They can be stimulated by sacred power spots, by the presence of powerful teachers, and by psychedelic substances.” He then presents systematic spiritual practice as an alternative, and his ensuing exposition of Theravāda meditation clearly pertains to this second category. Another relevant reference in Kornfield 1993: 153 indicates that “[f]or some people it happens in the midst of daily life, the discovery of that perfect balance and greatness that is possible for the human heart.” This is also not about the insight knowledges.

²⁰⁷ Kornfield 1993: 145 introduces his exposition of the insight knowledges—to which he refers as the path of dissolution—as follows: “For the path of dissolution, what is important is that the calm and concentration that produce a great steadiness of mind now be combined with an equal energy of inquiry and investigation. When we use the power of concentration to begin to investigate the self ... wherever we turn our bright attention, the body and mind begin to show their changing nature. Because our attention is combined with strong concentration, whatever we sense in the body will no longer be felt solidly.” This then leads on to the insight knowledge of delimitating mind and matter, the first in the scheme.

²⁰⁸ Kornfield 1993: 150f mentions the possibility that quitting insight meditation at the time of being in the stages of dissolution and fear can result in negative repercussions in daily life, which he compares to interrupting a deep therapy midway. In each such case, it is important to complete the process that is under way.

knowledges to be applicable to the general situation of a practitioner of a mindfulness practice like MBSR.

In other words, the supposed ubiquity of the insight knowledges needs to be recognized as a distinct notion promoted by Daniel Ingram, being a natural result of a tendency to banalize profound meditation experiences to become dreams with gerbils and black witches, etc.

The authentication strategy apparently standing in the background to the above developments has taken a new turn through the employment of EEG (electroencephalography) analysis to measure meditational attainments. Before taking a closer look at the actual study, an assessment offered by McMahan (2023: 43) on such a procedure in general can provide a background:

[A]ttempts through imaging and biomeasuring technology to arrive at some species of objective truth about subjective states of mind involve a certain circularity. The certainty and objectivity that seem to be conveyed by brain-imaging are, in fact, laden with ideological assumptions, culture-bound categories, and epistemic premises at the outset, as are the interpretations of such imagery ... The suggestion that the machine can determine truths of the mind from outside the mind, beyond ordinary human judgment, reasoning, observation, and argument, masks the fact that the design of the machine, what it measures, and the significance of the measurements are all constructed based on—human judgment, reasoning, observation, and argument. Their authority resides in the assumptions and categories ... that are themselves culture-bound and contestable, and indeed under considerable debate today.

The deference to the machine as the nonhuman (transhuman?) revealer of the neutral, unbiased truth, beyond cul-

tural conditioning is itself conditioned by a culturally contingent epistemology. And this epistemology, wrapped up in an implicit picture of the human being as essentially the brain, engenders faith—indeed, an almost religious faith—that the machine will transcend our limitations and reveal the real; that its iconic pictures will assure us in times of doubt what we are, what we are *really* experiencing; that it will tell us whether or not we are enlightened.

The actual research on measuring meditational attainments involves two co-authors of the article by Galante et al. (2023)—Daniel Ingram and Matthew Sacchet—and it takes the form of two subsequently published articles researching cessation experiences based on combining EEG with a neurophenomenological approach.²⁰⁹ Both contributions concern the fruition experience that marks the successful completion of progress through the insight knowledges,²¹⁰ that is, the event of awakening. Both articles are based entirely on data collected from a single meditator: co-author Daniel Ingram.

²⁰⁹ Galante et al. 2023 was published online on 13 April 2023; the final version of Chowdhury et al. 2023 was submitted on 20 September and accepted for publication on 22 September 2023, and the final version of van Lutterveld, Chowdhury, Ingram, and Sacchet 2024 was accepted for publication on 12 April 2024. Clearly, the latter two articles were still in work when Galante et al. 2023 came out.

²¹⁰ See Chowdhury et al. 2023: 2: “From a Theravada Buddhist perspective, cessations occur during prolonged meditation as a culmination of the stages of insight ... Cessations are specifically associated with the final stage, sometimes called “fruition” or *phala* in Pali,” and van Lutterveld, Chowdhury, Ingram, and Sacchet 2024: 2: “Cessations, or *nirodha* in Pali (the liturgical language of *Theravada* Buddhism [sic]), are considered the culmination of the Stages of Insight and are described as the *phala* or fruit of meditation.”

The previously published Galante et al. (2023) references my two detailed criticisms of the claims by Daniel Ingram, Anālayo (2020i) and (2021c), in which I argue that his attainment claims are unreliable. Nevertheless, the two articles examining his cessation experiences present him as a highly skilled adept, without even a passing reference to criticism of his claims published in a peer-reviewed academic journal, even though Daniel Ingram and Matthew Sacchet as co-authors of Galante et al. (2023) could be expected to have been aware of these. Of course, they may well disagree with my assessments. But academic procedure would require at least mentioning criticism that has been raised and, up to the time of my present writing, has not been responded to in an academic publication, to ensure that their readers are aware of uncertainties regarding the credentials of the sole person whose meditation experiences are being researched.

Following a standard procedure for publications of this type, authors need to present a statement on potential conflicts of interest. According to the relevant statements in both articles, Matthew Sacchet has received research funding from a charity for which Daniel Ingram is the acting CEO (chief executive officer), and whose fundraising and public relations campaigns are expected to benefit from the publication of these two articles investigating his cessation experiences.

In this way, Daniel Ingram's unreliable descriptions of the insight knowledges and their culmination in the realization of awakening have not only been taken so seriously by scholars as to lead to warning the public about the supposedly inherent dangers of basic mindfulness practices, but they are even being used as the basis for research on cessation experiences believed to provide a foundation for future studies on advanced stages of meditation. Needless to say, both trends at the same time serve to validate his claims.

A central problem here appears to be that scholars in the field of psychology are not necessarily sufficiently equipped with knowledge of Buddhist doctrine and meditation to be able to avoid being misled by unfounded claims and authentication strategies. In principle, it would be preferable for researchers to be circumspect and avoid too easily lending credence to such claims, which risks jeopardizing their own credentials in turn.

A Balanced Perspective

The above exploration of authentication strategies adopted by Daniel Ingram and their remarkable success is decidedly not meant to divert attention from potential drawbacks of mindfulness or meditation practices. In a comment on Mahāsi Sayādaw, Kornfield (1993: 245f) reports that, “[w]hen first teaching in America, he exclaimed on how many students seemed to be suffering from a range of problems unfamiliar to him in Asia.” The “Dalai Lama, too, in dialogue with Western psychologists, expressed shock at the amount of low self-esteem, wounding, and family conflict that arise in the practice of Westerners.”

The problem of well-intended meditation instructions taking on a dynamic of their own, due to the socio-cultural setting, can be illustrated with a case reported already in early Buddhist discourse and *Vinaya* literature, thereby showing that this much was already an issue in ancient India. According to this report, the Buddha gave a brief recommendation of the meditative cultivation of perceiving the human body as being bereft of beauty.²¹¹ Left to themselves, several monks developed disgust with their own bodies to the extent of committing suicide, apparently influenced by a prevalent negative attitude toward the body in the ancient Indian setting. On finding out what had hap-

²¹¹ For a detailed study see Anālayo 2014b.

pened, the Buddha is on record for giving instructions on the cultivation of mindfulness of breathing instead.

The *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* in its received form offers instructions for both practices, mindfulness of breathing (only the first four steps of the full scheme of sixteen steps of practice) and contemplation of the anatomical constitution of the body as unattractive. In other words, both feature as mindfulness practices. In a setting of potential negativity and aversion toward one's own body, however, the former of these two practices is clearly preferable over the latter one.

The same principle can fruitfully be applied to the challenges identified by Mahāsi Sayādaw and the Dalai Lama in the Western setting. In particular, facing such challenges can benefit from teachers cultivating sensitivity to possible traumatization of practitioners, for the development of which Treleaven (2018) provides helpful guidance. Increasing awareness of potential drawbacks of intensive mindfulness meditation has by now led to a range of different studies, which also provide an important orientation.²¹² At the same time, however, although adversities clearly emerge, these do not fit the idea that the practice of MBSR, for example, can on its own lead to the onset of the challenging experiences to be expected from progressing through the insight knowledges.

²¹² In addition to the publications already mentioned, examples are Dyga and Stupak 2015, Lomas, Cartwright, Edginton, and Ridge 2015, Cebolla et al. 2017, Lindahl et al. 2017, Anderson, Suresh, and Farb 2019, Baer, Crane, Miller, and Kuyken 2019, Britton 2019, Schlosser et al. 2019, Farias, Maraldi, Wallenkampf, and Lucchetti 2020, Lindahl et al. 2020, Baer et al. 2021, Britton et al. 2021, Goldberg, Lam, Britton, and Davidson 2022, Hirshberg, Goldberg, Rosenkranz, and Davidson 2022 (but see Van Dam and Galante 2023), Kotherová et al. 2024, and Van Dam et al. 2024.

Adverse results can also occur, for example, with Transcendental Meditation,²¹³ *yoga*,²¹⁴ *qìgōng*,²¹⁵ Arica meditation,²¹⁶ or Jewish mysticism.²¹⁷ The potential for adverse effects is thus not necessarily due to specific features of the cultivation of mindfulness, but rather is a problem relevant to meditation practices in general as well as to other health-related practices. As noted by Baer, Crane, Miller, and Kuyken (2019: 11):

In well-established approaches to health and wellbeing, including psychotherapy, pharmacotherapy, and physical exercise, some participants suffer serious harm or get meaningfully worse. The same appears to be true for meditation in contemplative traditions.

If used with the required circumspection, mindfulness practices can have an advantage over other forms of meditation that also can have adverse effects, as the very cultivation of mindfulness can provide a means, or at least an additional support, to facing mental difficulties that have arisen. In other words, when evaluating the possibility of mindfulness practices to lead to psychosis, their potential for treating psychosis also needs to be taken into account, as evident from a meta-analysis of relevant studies.²¹⁸ Thus, although mindfulness is definitely not a panacea, at the same time learning to face the unpleasant and skillfully working with it are integral dimensions of its potential.

²¹³ See, e.g., Castillo 1990, French, Schmid, and Ingalls 1975, Lazarus 1976, and Otis 1984/2017.

²¹⁴ See, e.g., Yorston 2010.

²¹⁵ See, e.g., Ng 1999 and Shan 2000.

²¹⁶ See, e.g., Kennedy 1976.

²¹⁷ See, e.g., Greenberg, Witztum, and Buchbinder 1992.

²¹⁸ Potes et al. 2018.

Taking advantage of this potential needs to be coupled with a clear recognition that specific problems related to trauma or mental illness require enlisting professional help. At times, this entails setting aside the practice of mindfulness in order to handle a problem that has surfaced, until it becomes possible to resume mindfulness practice again.

In fact, the above discussion is decidedly not meant to pretend that mindfulness or any other meditation practice are entirely unproblematic. The point is only that there has been a tendency to overstate the case, based on borrowing an apparent authentication strategy employed by Daniel Ingram to argue the unconvincing case that simple mindfulness practice runs the same risks as intensive insight meditation. This is definitely not the case and such overstatement, because it lacks a foundation in reality, in the long run risks doing more harm than benefit the justified concern to alert to potential drawbacks of mindfulness.

The problem of *qi* stimulation, discussed above (p. 177), can illustrate the situation. For such stimulation to lead to clearly discernible effects, a single body scan or focusing on the abdomen for a single daily meditation session will hardly suffice. Curing a headache, for example, requires more than that, and it is the intensive setting of a *vipassanā* retreat with many hours of practice day after day that furnishes the required conditions. Such a setting needs to be distinguished from, for example, MBSR practice, in order to provide accurate assessments of the potential repercussions of the respective mindfulness practices.

Secular Employment of Mindfulness

Besides perceptions of an inherent danger in the cultivation of mindfulness, another recurrent critique relates to its secular employment. The development of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) has been the starting point for a global spread

of mindfulness-related practices into various areas of modern society.²¹⁹ This has resulted in a mindfulness-hype,²²⁰ with often disconcerting consequences. Mindfulness has become a commercialized product and as such has been taught, for example, to improve the combat skills of soldiers, a development that is problematic from a Buddhist ethical perspective.

The various employments of mindfulness in contemporary society span a broad and diverse spectrum. The fact that they have MBSR as their common starting point does of course not mean that those involved with MBSR are directly responsible for all these varied applications. For this reason, legitimate criticism of particular employments of mindfulness does not apply wholesale to all mindfulness-based programs.

This raises the question of whether MBSR and similar mindfulness programs in the field of healthcare indeed deserve the catchy moniker “McMindfulness,” a term employed by Purser and Loy (2013) to highlight entrepreneurial strategies similar to those of the fast-food chain McDonald’s that result in “decontextualizing mindfulness from its original liberative and transformative purpose.” Before examining this criticism in more detail, however, some background to the debate on secular mindfulness may be of help. Based on noting that “[i]t is often said—by some with a derisive snort and others with a satisfied smile—that Buddhist and Buddhist-derived meditation practices have become secularized,” McMahan (2023: 18f) provides the following perspective on this matter:

When people refer to the secularization of meditation, the implication often is that the Buddhist bits have been stripped

²¹⁹ See the detailed study by Wilson 2014.

²²⁰ See Van Dam et al. 2018.

away, leaving the meditation in the realm of the secular, which is conceived as what is left when “religion” is set aside. Yet, a great deal of research on secularism shows that it is not adequately conceived as simply what is left over when religion is segregated ...

The religious-secular binary is a historically specific way, not just of *classifying* knowledge, subjectivity, meaning, practice, and power—but also of *constituting* it. The discourse of secularism determines what counts as secular, what counts as religious, what is marginalized as superstition or cult, what qualifies as a legitimate exercise of religion and what doesn’t. It instills particular disciplines of subjectivity, curates particular beliefs, cultivates sensibilities, and authorizes normative models of behavior, practice, and, indeed, religion. In this sense, ironically, *secularism is not secular*—that is, it is not what it purports to be: a neutral space of rational discourse and practice free from the irrational subjective passions of religion.

Rather, it is a discursive tradition, with values, normative practices, attitudes, prohibitions, and metaphysics—much of it still retaining the underlying ideological apparatus of Protestant Christianity. In this sense, secularism—at least in the West—is a kind of post-Protestantism.

With this general background in mind, the time has come to turn to a book study of McMindfulness as a particular dimension of the secularization of mindfulness practice, in the course of which Purser (2019: 21) poses the following query:

Should we celebrate the fact that this perversion is helping people to “auto-exploit” themselves? This is the core of the problem. The internalization of focus for mindfulness practice also leads to other things being internalized, from cor-

porate requirements to structures of dominance in society ... while paying no attention to civic responsibility.

Regarding the original purpose of Buddhist mindfulness, Purser (2019: 249) argues that

[T]he goal includes seeing all things as being connected: the insight of interdependence known as *pratitya-samutpada*. So while some of our delusion is in our heads, tuning out of the conditions that cause us to suffer is also delusional from a political point of view.

The idea appears to be that the main goal of diligent practice, as conceived by the Buddha, should be a political awareness of societal conditions that cause suffering. Such an awareness was presumably lost in the transition from early Buddhist mindfulness to its employment in MBSR and related practices.

The goal set according to the early Buddhist discourses by the Buddha for mindfulness practice is not insight into interdependence. The goal is rather to bring to cessation the specific conditions delineated in the teaching on dependent arising. The notion of a general interconnectedness of phenomena needs to be recognized as a later development (see above p. 91).

Although the idea of such interconnectedness has become popular in contemporary Buddhist circles, the teachings of early Buddhism are rather concerned with the specific conditions for progress to awakening. The early discourses often expound dependent arising by way of a chain of twelve conditions, none of which refers explicitly to political or societal causes of suffering. Instead, the emphasis is removing from one's own mind the root cause of ignorance and its outgrowth in the form of craving and clinging. Although such removal certainly has significant repercussions well beyond the individual, the focus for achieving such removal is first of all on one's own mind.

The same emphasis can be seen in the report that the Buddha eschewed the possibility of becoming a world ruler, whereby he could have ensured peace and safety for the whole world (as known to ancient Indian cosmology). By going forth, he instead opted to follow the alternative career open to someone possessing a particular set of auspicious bodily features, namely becoming a Buddha (see above p. 42). This recurrent trope shows that the very vocation of being a Buddha is based on placing spiritual above political concerns.

Another relevant passage in the Discourse on the World Monarch involves a depiction of bad rulership, which results in poverty among the populace. Poverty then leads to theft, whose prosecution stimulates those engaged in robbery to commit murder so as to cover up their deeds.²²¹ Commenting on this depiction of moral decline in the context of a study of Theravāda Buddhism, Gombrich (1988: 84) reasons that

[t]his text states that stealing and violence originate in poverty and that poverty is the king's responsibility; punishment becomes necessary only because of the king's earlier failure to prevent poverty. This humane theory, which ascribes the origin of crime to economic conditions ... is not typical of Indian thinking on such matters ... this idea is so bold and original that it is probably the Buddha's.

Despite such political acumen, according to this discourse the Buddha delivered this depiction of moral decline to encourage his disciples to take refuge in themselves and the Dharma, and such taking refuge requires cultivating the four establishments of mindfulness. In this way, throughout the overarching priority is clearly granted to the cultivation of mindfulness. I will come

²²¹ DN 26 at DN III 67,31, DĀ 6 at T I 40c19, and MĀ 70 at T I 522b27.

back to the political potential of mindfulness in the third part of my exploration (see below p. 312).

Mindfulness of the Present Moment

Another topic to be explored concerns the idea of remaining anchored in the present moment through mindfulness, which features as a central dimension of mindfulness practice in early and later forms of Buddhist practice. The question to be pursued here is not just whether the phrase “present moment” has an exact equivalent in the ancient texts, but rather if the corresponding idea is found in them.

In the course of a discussion of the notion of being in the present moment, however, Purser (2015: 684) argues that a “[v]alorization of the present moment is also curiously absent from the Pali Canon, the early corpus of Buddhist teachings.” Yet, a closer inspection of the instructions given in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels for the systematic cultivation of mindfulness brings to light that these are indeed predominantly concerned with what happens in the present moment.²²² This discourse, which has been and still is a central reference point for actual meditation practice, shows that an emphasis on the present moment in mindfulness practices is not merely a later innovation.

The memory connotation of mindfulness does not stand in contrast to such concerns. The term we nowadays translate as “mindfulness” was from the outset of its Buddhist usage not confined to recall of the past.²²³ This much even holds for its pre-Buddhist antecedents, as already in the most ancient of Indian sacred scriptures, the *Rgveda*, a verbal form related to

²²² See in more detail Anālayo 2019b.

²²³ See the various contributions in Gyatso 1992/1993.

the same term conveys a meaning related to paying attention to what happens in the present moment.²²⁴

However, Purser (2019: 23) argues that “[t]he true meaning of mindfulness is an act of re-remembering, not only in terms of recalling and being attentively present to our situation, but also of putting our lives back together, collectively.” This does not seem to be an accurate reflection of the significance of mindfulness in the early texts, where the notion of a collective putting together of our lives is also not evident. Purser (2015: 683) also presents the following assessment:

the instruction to pay attention to the present moment, and a conception of mindfulness that aims for the subject to “be in the present,” can in actuality lead to a freezing effect by an attempt to shut down experiential time and the passage of ordinary time. The direction of attention to one momentary object ... does not lead to any fundamental or significant change in the way the temporal order is viewed and experienced.

Purser (2015: 682) concludes that “a mindfulness practice that aims to attend to the ‘present moment’ is problematic, if not experientially impossible.” The reference to paying “attention to one momentary object” suggests that the reasoning could be based on the notion of momentariness. According to this theory, which arose during a later phase of Buddhist history, all phenomena without exception disappear as soon as they have arisen. On adopting this perspective, it would perhaps be understandable if attending to a single momentary object is perceived as involving a shutting down of experiential time and can appear to be “problematic, if not experientially impossible.” In a detailed

²²⁴ See Klaus 1993.

study of the early phases of the doctrine of momentariness, von Rospatt (1995: 80) explains the following:

By reducing the duration of momentary entities to such an extreme that it entails the denial of any duration including the time taken for coming into being and vanishing, the[ir] entire existence may be effaced. In other words, the reduction of the moment to a point-instant may be carried so far that the point itself becomes erased, too.

In contrast, early Buddhist thought recognizes that phenomena can last for quite some time as changing processes, between the time of their arising and the occasion of their eventual passing away.²²⁵ From this viewpoint, the present moment can have considerable breadth, comprising in its purview both the recent past and the impending future.

Such breadth is evident in the canonical instructions for mindfulness of breathing.²²⁶ The same temporal breadth can also be seen in instructions on the four establishments of mindfulness. For example, mindful contemplation of the hindrances or the awakening factors requires a clear recognition of their presence and absence in the present moment. Building on that, the task of mindfulness also comprises exploring conditions that have led to their arising (in the past) and that will lead to their overcoming or strengthening (in the future).

Inasmuch as early Buddhist thought does not subscribe to the doctrine of momentariness, it presents a precedent for a conception of the present moment that does not preclude experiential time and is certainly experientially possible, indeed advisable. This goes to show that mindfulness of the present moment as

²²⁵ AN 3.47 at AN I 152,7 and EĀ 22.5 at T II 607c15.

²²⁶ See Anālayo 2019f: 44.

such need not be considered problematic at all and can serve as a central point of reference for its practice.

By way of further clarification, from an early Buddhist perspective the notion of “time” can be considered as a conceptualization of the fact of change.²²⁷ The continuum of the flow of impermanent phenomena can be distinguished into three dimensions: what has changed (past), what is changing now (present), and what will change (future). The three periods of time that emerge in this way are entirely compatible with the notion of mindfully attending to what is changing now, in the present moment. Such an emphasis on the here and now can come in conjunction with an openness to past and future.²²⁸

Mindfulness and Thinking

In order to remain in the present moment, instructions on mindfulness naturally emphasize the need to avoid being carried away by thinking. Now, the tendency to problematize the present moment apparently led Purser (2019: 111) to the conclusion that “[m]indfully fixating on the present moment means tuning out of thoughts about the past and the future. Thinking is considered a distraction, detrimental to ‘being’ in the here-and-now.” Purser (2019: 40) sums up his impression by stating that “[c]ritical thinking is pathologized in mindfulness. It is seen as a diversion from the practice.”

An explanation of the relationship of mindfulness to thinking by Kabat-Zinn (1990/2013: 66) provides the following information relevant to the viewpoint of MBSR in this respect:

²²⁷ See Anālayo 2019h.

²²⁸ This much is also reflected in research on the temporal dimensions of mindfulness-based practices by Rönnlund et al. 2019 and Samani and Busseri 2019.

It's important to reiterate that letting go of our thoughts does not mean suppressing them. Many people hear it this way and make the mistake of thinking that meditation requires them to shut off their thinking or their feelings. They somehow hear the instructions as meaning that if they are thinking, that is "bad," and that a "good meditation" is one in which there is little or no thinking ... [m]indfulness does not involve pushing thoughts away or walling yourself off from them to quiet your mind. We are not trying to stop our thoughts.

The above quote shows that mindfulness cultivated in MBSR does not involve considering thoughts to be detrimental as such, which appears to be rather a reflection of popular notions about what meditation in general implies. The clarification offered by Jon Kabat-Zinn implies that a cultivation of mindfulness of the present moment is not meant to prevent critical thinking in principle. The point is only that, during basic stages in mindfulness training, there is a need to make an effort not to be carried away by the habitual proliferation of thoughts. Once that has been achieved at least to some degree, however, mindfulness of the present moment can coexist with thinking activity.

In other words, the main concern of directing mindfulness to the present moment is neither to discourage nor to encourage critical thinking but to train in continuity of mindfulness. Such continuity in turn enables the freedom to decide whether or not to engage in reflection, rather than just being overwhelmed by thinking. The monitoring function of mindfulness can steer critical reflection, thereby enhancing its potential, just as it can alert to a situation in which the mind is getting carried away by irrelevant thoughts. To fulfil this purpose, however, mindfulness needs to be anchored in the present moment and remain a quality of uninvolved observation.

Remaining uninvolved relates to another important dimension of learning to attend mindfully to the present moment, which can be related to the qualification of being “non-judgmental.” In the context of reflections on the origins of MBSR, Kabat-Zinn (2011: 291f), explains:

Non-judgmental does not mean to imply to the novice practitioner that there is some ideal state in which judgments no longer arise. Rather, it points out that ... we do not have to judge or evaluate or react to any of what arises ... This can lead naturally to the directly experienced discovery that the liberative choice in any moment either to cling and self-identify or not is always available, always an option.

What emerges from this explanation can be related to a key element in early Buddhist descriptions of the formal cultivation of mindfulness, according to which each of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* requires staying free of greedy desires and discontent.²²⁹ This indeed requires avoiding judgmental reactivity to whatever arises.

Additional information on the problematization of mindfulness and thinking can be garnered from the report by Purser (2019: 104f) of his own participation in an MBSR course, during which he reacted to the arising of a memory in the following manner: “[d]isregarding the instructions to be in the present moment, I decide to indulge the memory, at least a little,” followed by noting that “[b]eing a bad MBSR student, I began ruminating further ... That was a little too much thinking; I brought myself back to the present moment.” Purser (2019: 107f) reports: “I tried to stay in the present moment—really, I did—but this ‘mind-wandering’ seemed to be leading somewhere, connecting dots, yielding ‘ah-ha’ moments.”

²²⁹ See Anālayo 2013c: 13–15 and 2019a: 12 or 2020h: 64f.

Needless to say, Ronald Purser is of course entirely free to indulge his memories, ruminate, and mentally connect dot after dot while in an MBSR class. But the decision to indulge his memories and disregard the instructions has consequences, as it can prevent learning what an MBSR course is trying to foster: mindful presence.

Regarding his experience during the same MBSR course, Purser (2019: 114) also reports that at a certain point “I realized that I had drifted off into a pleasant nap. But nobody around me was judgmental, or seemed to care.” This almost gives the impression that the alternative to indulging in memories and ruminations was for him to fall asleep. That would indeed be contrary to the development of critical thinking.

Of interest here is also a report by Purser (2019: 153) of his participation in a mindfulness workshop. During a talk by the teacher, the following happened: “I decided to accompany his homily on mindless addiction to devices by checking my iPhone. I got a few dirty looks from the people across from me.” Such a defiant attitude makes it simply more difficult to benefit from a workshop on mindfulness.

Apparently based on his personal experiences, Purser (2019: 8 and 190) then asserts that, in the way it is currently taught, “[m]indfulness is nothing more than basic concentration training”; moreover, “the general emphasis is on awareness of the present moment, which means tuning out of feelings and thoughts.” This gives the impression that his apparently defiant attitude and seeming unwillingness to follow the instructions has indeed prevented him from appreciating key aspects in the cultivation of mindfulness as taught in MBSR courses.

The MBSR curriculum also comprises the exercise of mindfully eating a raisin, a skillful means employed to help patients realize the potential of being fully present during the act of ac-

tually and really tasting what they have eaten many times before. Purser (2019: 103) notes that this was “an exercise I was honestly not looking forward to doing,” followed by reporting that “the ritual of eating slowly was not new, but it’s hard to be sure I was eating *mindfully*.” The final assessment by Purser (2019: 220) then takes the following form: “[n]ever mind how the raisin looks, feels, smells and tastes,” instead of which one should rather reflect on

the farm where the raisin was grown by Hispanic immigrants doing back-breaking work ... earning a cent for every two-hundred grapes harvested. Reflection on the raisin could call to mind units from US Immigration and Customs Enforcement rounding up workers like cattle and deporting them ... What about the grocery store staff that unloaded, unpacked and stocked raisins on the shelf?

This seems to exemplify a general pattern in Ronald Purser’s criticism, which appears to be based on turning his personal decision to ruminate into a normative stance, in the sense of expecting that others should follow his example. The recommendation appears to be that practitioners of MBSR and similar mindfulness-based practices stop their attempts to be mindful of the present moment and instead engage in reflections and associations, especially of the political type. In this way, they would be able to avoid what Purser (2019: 23) considers succumbing to “social amnesia that leads to mindful servants of neoliberalism.”

Yet, the function of the raisin exercise is to facilitate a different way of experiencing, distinct from the habitual tendency of the mind to run an auto-commentary on anything that happens. Such a commentary can at times provide rather interesting perspectives, no doubt, but it is necessary to learn to step out of it at will in order not to be dominated by it. Without developing

this ability, one can easily remain at the mercy of unending mental chatter and an endless proliferation of thoughts that keep confirming and reinforcing personal biases and prejudices.

Worthy of note are also comments made by Purser (2019: 10, 27, and 241) on Jon Kabat-Zinn, relating his presumed political philosophy to the “compassionate conservatism” of George Bush, his supposed subservience to “the requirements of neoliberalism” of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, and his alleged invitation for others to abandon ethical discernment to Donald Trump’s “flinging morality to the winds.” Drawing relationships in this way goes beyond the bounds of reasonable criticism and shades into personal attack.

Now, fair criticism in the form of critical feedback by peers and others, critical thinking, and self-criticism are indispensable for progress in our understanding of mindfulness. But criticism that lacks balance can undermine the credibility of whatever reasonable critique there may have been.

There is indeed a need to beware of the current hype around mindfulness and of its commercialization, and even more so of its employment in ways that run counter to basic Buddhist ethics. However, drawing attention to such issues would be more effective if it could embody the quality that it wishes to foster: mindful presence. This requires paying attention to the complexity of the processes involved, rather than opting for a simplistic black-and-white view and consequent othering of all those who do not subscribe to one’s personal agenda and view. It will hardly do justice to the cultivation of mindfulness if the world is divided dualistically into the good ones, who oppose the destructive forces of neoliberalism, and the bad ones, a category arrived at by lumping together everyone else, from those who do not actively resist these forces to the main protagonists of capitalist exploitation.

A Buddhist Precedent for Mindfulness in Health Care

A rather significant precedent for mindfulness-based practices in health care can be found in early Buddhism. According to the relevant discourse, the Buddha taught mindfulness in a form and context that is explicitly aimed at mere health benefits. The episode in question involves a local king by the name of Pasenadi with a habit of overeating. Noticing this motivates the Buddha to give the king a brief instruction on the cultivation of mindfulness in order to know the proper measure when partaking of food. The significance of this episode is such that it warrants presenting a complete translation of the relevant Pāli discourse:²³⁰

[The Buddha] was dwelling at Sāvathī. At that time King Pasenadi of Kosala [often] ate a potful of rice.

Then King Pasenadi of Kosala, replete and panting, approached the Blessed One. Having approached and paid respect to the Blessed One, he sat to one side. Then the Blessed One, realizing that King Pasenadi of Kosala was replete and panting, one that occasion spoke this verse:

“People who are constantly mindful
 Know their measure with the food they got.
 Their feeling tones become attenuated;
 They age slowly and guard their longevity.”

Now at that time the brahmin youth Sudassana was standing behind King Pasenadi of Kosala. Then King Pasenadi of Kosala said to the brahmin youth Sudassana: “Come, my dear Sudassana, memorize this verse in the presence of the Blessed One and recite it to me when my meal is served. I

²³⁰ SN 3.13 a SN I 81,22.

will arrange for a hundred coins as a perpetual daily grant to be given to you.”

The brahmin youth Sudassana said “Yes, your majesty” in assent to King Pasenadi Kosala, memorized this verse in the presence of the Blessed One, and recited it when a meal was served to King Pasenadi of Kosala:

“People who are constantly mindful
Know their measure with the food they got.
Their feeling tones become attenuated;
They age slowly and guard their longevity.”

Then King Pasenadi of Kosala gradually established himself in taking no more than a normal measure of rice. Then, at another time, when his body had become slim, King Pasenadi of Kosala stroked his limbs with his hands and on that occasion uttered this inspired utterance: “For both purposes the Blessed One has had compassion for me: for the purpose of the present and the future.”

Two Chinese parallels to this discourse proceed similarly in terms of both the overall narrative and the actual instruction. One of the two parallel versions of this instruction on mindfully countering a tendency of overeating reads as follows:²³¹

People should collect themselves with mindfulness,
Knowing their measure with any food.
This then decreases their feeling tones;
They digest easily and guard their longevity.”

The other instruction proceeds in this way:

²³¹ SĀ 1150 at T II 306c8 and SĀ² 73 at T II 400a7; see also Enomoto 1994: 34.

People should constantly recollect by themselves with mindfulness,
 That on getting food and drink they should know their measure.
 Their body will be at ease, their painful feeling tones few;
 They digest properly and guard their longevity.

Judging from a perusal of other discourses involving King Pasenadi, this episode may be the only recorded instance of him receiving some form of meditation instructions.²³² Moreover, the overall impression conveyed by the relevant textual sources is that King Pasenadi also did not feature as a paragon of Buddhist lay virtue, as he appears to have pursued the activities typical of a petty king in ancient India, including engaging in warfare. The last involves intentional killing and thereby runs counter to the first of five precepts to be observed by a Buddhist disciple. The early texts are in fact quite outspoken on the dire repercussions a soldier can expect from engaging in battle,²³³ which in turn leaves little scope to excuse killing even if it is done at the command of others.

The mindfulness practice taught by the Buddha to King Pasenadi specifically calls for noting one's measure with food; it is not presented as part of a meditative program aimed at progress to awakening. Moreover, it is taught to someone who does not appear to have had the kind of firm ethical foundation required of disciples who dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to progress on the path to liberation. Finally, the actual implementation of this mindfulness practice involves payment. The fact of such payment is mentioned explicitly in the presence of the Buddha, who in the narrative setting features implicitly as will-

²³² Anālayo 2020j: 175f.

²³³ Anālayo 2009b.

ing to collaborate by teaching the verse on mindful eating to the young brahmin, otherwise the latter would not have been able to act successfully in a way that to all appearances moves intriguingly close to the role of a mindfulness-instructor.

What emerges from this episode puts into perspective the assessment by Wilson (2014: 112) that “[t]he teachings set forth in the new Western literature on mindful eating represent a radically new application of Buddhism (though it is usually presented as if it were traditional).”

An evaluation of MBSR or other mindfulness practices in contemporary health care against mindfulness practices in early Indian Buddhism would need to take into account the precedent set by this episode. It clearly shows that, already at the time of the Buddha, the employment of mindfulness was not confined to a cultivation of all four establishments as an implementation of right mindfulness in the context of progress to awakening. Given that the instructions given by the Buddha do not, of course, fall into the opposite category of wrong mindfulness, it becomes clear that since the beginnings of Buddhism there has been a place for employments of mindfulness that are not explicitly aimed at progress to awakening. Moreover, according to an episode taken up in my first chapter (see above p. 33), the Buddha explicitly made his teachings available to those who were not yet ready to acknowledge him as their teacher, which implies opening the doors to those who have not taken the step of formal conversion by taking refuge in him.

In sum, the premises of the “McMindfulness” critique taken up for examination here appear to reflect a lack of acquaintance with relevant ancient Buddhist antecedents. Judging from the textual sources, already at the time of the Buddha mindfulness was intentionally employed for health benefits. The relevant narrative even involves regular payments for the delivery of in-

structions in this Mindfulness-Based Intervention, and all of that without the Buddha being on record for voicing any objection. This provides a significant precedent for the secular employment of mindfulness for the purpose of health benefits.

Summary

The early Buddhist texts reflect a pervasive interest in, and importance granted to, the practice of meditation, as evident from a case study of the first fifty discourses in the collection of medium-length discourses. Such interest comprises lay practitioners, who are on record for engaging in a variety of meditative practices and for having reached a range of attainments in the realms of both tranquility and insight.

Being just aware in the present moment of the breath going in and out is an integral part of the standard instructions on mindfulness of breathing. Based on such practice as a starting point, the same instructions describe sixteen distinct steps of meditative cultivation. These do not call for a contemplation of doctrinal topics nor do they appear to require that the practitioner has already realized stages of awakening. Instead, they can more fruitfully be understood to function in a way comparable to instructions for any task, like driving a car or a similar activity, which with increasing familiarity becomes internalized to such an extent that it no longer requires intentional deliberation. The overall purpose of the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing is to lead up to a profound letting go with which the realization of awakening becomes possible. The steps themselves are merely a raft, to be left behind once they have fulfilled this purpose.

A related perspective applies to instructions on *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation in general. The listing of different states of mind to be contemplated in the third *satipaṭṭhāna* is not about fostering an

intentional arousal of each such state but much rather about an open observation of whatever states of mind emerge in the present moment. The same holds for being mindful of one's bodily posture, which is about mere observation rather than calling for an intentional reconfiguration of the respective activity.

Overall, *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation involves combining mindfulness with other mental qualities, one of which is clear knowing, a quality that can become more prominent with evaluative exercises. But such evaluation needs to be distinguished from the task of mindfulness, which collaborates with, but at the same time differs from, these other qualities (or else from the path factors of right view and right effort).

The practice of the body scan appears to have evolved gradually from a literal interpretation of the third step of mindfulness of breathing, which calls for experiencing the whole body. In the course of this evolution, the body has become more prominent and the breath has receded into the background. The fully evolved body scan can serve to corroborate the evolved Abhidharma view of the human body consisting of subatomic particles that arise and pass away with high speed, or else it can provide an entrance point for secular mindfulness practices aimed at reducing the stressful dimensions of pain and disease. When evaluated from the viewpoint of traditional Chinese medicine, the body scan can lead to a stimulation of the bodily energy of *qi*, which may explain some of the effects that can occur with intensive *vipassanā* meditation.

Other effects of intensive *vipassanā* meditation can take the form of experiencing fear and dread, a potential recognized in the traditional scheme of insight knowledges. Progress through these insight knowledges needs to be differentiated from the mere employment of mindfulness for health purposes in a clinical setting, which on its own does not stand a reasonable chance

of resulting in the challenges associated with the cultivation of insight in an intensive retreat setting.

Nevertheless, mindfulness is clearly not a panacea. Similar to other meditation practices and therapies, the cultivation of mindfulness can bring about adverse effects, a potential that fortunately has been recognized for quite some time and continues to receive the attention it deserves.

Despite reflecting clear awareness of political and societal problems, the early texts grant priority to inner cultivation of the mind, for which mindfulness provides an indispensable foundation. Since ancient times, such mindfulness cultivation comes with a clear emphasis on the present moment, which can have some degree of temporal breadth rather than being necessarily confined to a single instant of time.

Although mindfulness of the present moment benefits from the ability not to be carried away by daydreams and associations into the past and future, this does not amount to a call for the suppression of thought and reasoning. Instead, the task is to emerge from compulsive patterns of thinking activity. The element of inner balance that emerges in this way finds expression in the ancient instructions in a commendation of staying free of greedy desires and discontent, an element of mindfulness practice that can alternatively be conceptualized as a non-judgmental form of observation. Again, the point here is not to promote the deconstruction of the ability to evaluate but much rather to avoid being carried away by reactivity.

A broad scope for employments of mindfulness, including practices that are not explicitly aimed at progress to awakening, appears to have been in existence since the beginnings of Buddhism. Already at the time of the Buddha, mindfulness was reportedly employed for health benefits, in particular to control a tendency toward overeating. This employment even involves a

paid instructor, thereby setting an intriguing precedent for contemporary mindfulness practices in the clinical field.

From the viewpoint of my main aim of providing a viable approach to facing the challenges of climate change, to be explored in detail in the ensuing chapter, it is significant that the practice of meditation, in particular of mindfulness, has from the time of its early Buddhist beginnings been undertaken not only by monastics but also by lay meditators.

Moreover, several of the topics covered in the present chapter are relevant to the specific meditative approach I presented in my earlier book on *Mindfully Facing Climate Change*. This has as its starting point a body scan to come into direct contact with the earth element within and without, combined with being mindful of the breath going in and out. The present chapter has provided some background to both of these practices. Another important tool in the same meditative approach is contemplation of the present condition of the mind, which indeed calls for uninvolved observation of whatever mental condition manifests without being carried away by reactivity.

Given the precedent of employing mindfulness for health benefits, and given that its cultivation has no necessary relationship to the type of challenges that can arise with intensive insight meditation, there is no reason why the same quality could not be related to environmental concerns and activism. This potential will be a central theme in the background of the next chapter of the present book.

Climate Change

Introduction

This third part of my present book takes as its point of departure my earlier book publication on *Mindfully Facing Climate Change*, which is best consulted alongside what follows for more details on relevant early Buddhist positions. My exploration of climate change—a term I use to refer to global warming as a result of human-made emissions—is meant to provide a reference point for members of different Buddhist traditions, as the seriousness of the challenge we face calls for collaboration. Since early Buddhism is the common starting point of the Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions, my hope is that a converging point can be found, to which members of any of these traditions can add articulations of their individual perspectives, in line with their respective viewpoint(s) and cultural history.

A key concern of my earlier publication had been to ground a concern with climate change in early Buddhist thought, leading me to the perhaps bold claim that “through mindfulness practice the challenge of climate change can become a path to awakening,” and “every step taken along this path can serve to diminish pollution both without and within” (Anālayo 2019e: 157).

A central purpose of the first two parts of my present book has been to substantiate the position taken in my earlier book, which mainly covered textual evidence for early Buddhist thought, based on now presenting a critical survey of a range of positions taken by other scholars. In the preceding pages, I have examined the nature of awakening and its various stages in considerable detail, together with the key insight regarding the absence of a self and its correlate in dependent arising. Regarding

the latter topic, the general applicability of this teaching, beyond just matters of mental conditioning, is of considerable relevance to facing climate change.

In addition, I have taken up the very notion of “early Buddhism” and its sources, and also dedicated some room to its cosmological dimensions, suggesting that a literal reading of such descriptions may miss out on important parts of the intended message (a point to which I return below).

Other topics covered are that the early Buddhist texts indeed accord a prominent role to meditation practice, and clearly reflect the participation of lay practitioners of various types. The instructions on mindfulness of breathing in turn do not call for a contemplation of doctrinal topics, and the same holds for *sati-paṭṭhāna* meditation. The body scan, which forms part of my meditative approach to facing climate change,¹ is the outcome of a gradual evolution that appears to have its starting point in the third step of the full scheme of instructions for mindfulness of breathing.

Relevant to my meditative approach is furthermore that the cultivation of mindfulness as such is not fraught with the danger of unintentionally triggering the challenges to be expected of intensive *vipassanā* meditation and that its secular employment has a precedent in instructions reportedly given by the Buddha for countering a tendency to overeat.

Based on the themes covered in the first two parts of this book, the present third part mainly takes up selected information from a range of different areas connected to climate change (see below p. 254). Before embarking on this main theme, however, I explore the potential of mindfulness in facing racism,

¹ See Anālayo 2019e: 162–164.

which has much in common with its potential in relation to climate change.

My subsequent exploration of the topic of climate change begins with the notion of time, applied to the extinction of species and the collapse of human civilization. Then I turn to global politics related to climate change as well as the developments that have fostered its denial. The problem surrounding the reception of scientific information in this digital age can be appreciated better in the light of a tendency for truth to have lost much of its appeal, to the extent of ceasing to be a central reference point not only in politics but also in other areas of society.

At the same time, there are also promising approaches in the field of economics that have emerged in the form of attempts to revise and reorient inherited attitudes in order to be able to face the challenges of the twenty-first century. The perspectives that emerge in this way find further corroboration on examining the actual data concerning a range of environmental problems. These are no doubt serious, but the overall situation is not hopeless, and it is not the case that already now humanity is doomed.

After this coverage of central dimensions of the challenges of climate change, two possible reactions to this challenge require examination: anxiety and anger. The conclusion to the book as a whole rounds off the previous explorations by presenting an approach to climate change that is based on early Buddhist thought and gives priority to mindfulness under the acronym GALA, which stands for Global Awareness and Local Action.

Before getting into my actual topics, I need to put a disclaimer into place. In the course of this third part of my book, I will be taking up a range of publications from other academic disciplines. Although I have done my best to ascertain their reliability and to represent them correctly, it needs to be kept in mind that I am moving well beyond my own sphere of special-

ization into areas like politics and economics, etc., where I have little expertise. For this reason, my presentation of such matters needs to be taken with a grain of salt.

Mindfulness and Racism

Although the overall aim of this book is to relate mindfulness and early Buddhist thought to climate change, the same approach is of considerable relevance to other pressing problems, such as, for example, racism. In fact, racism and other forms of discrimination intersect with climate change, a topic to which I will return below (p. 308). For this reason, by way of preparing for my exploration of climate change, I will first take up in detail the potential of mindfulness in relation to racism, so as to ensure that this other major challenge receives attention as well.

My exploration begins with a brief historical perspective on racism and then turns to the ancient Indian situation and the position taken, according to the early Buddhist discourses, by the Buddha and his disciples in this respect. Then I examine how mindfulness can contribute to facing and overcoming racism.

The staggering amount of harm caused by racial oppression, which impacts health care, education, employment, daily life, and criminal justice processes, acts as a chronic stressor that manifests in a broad range of ways. Addressing this challenge calls for widespread and sustained systemic change. A contribution to the much-needed change could be the potential role mindfulness may play in this respect. Before exploring these topics further, however, a survey of antecedents to racism in European history is required in order to evaluate how far contemporary manifestations of racism can be meaningfully approached from the perspective of the early Buddhist opposition to caste-related prejudices in ancient India. In doing so, what follows is not in any way intended as presenting some sort of

universally valid definition of racism and its history in the world. Instead, the ensuing survey is only meant to enable building a bridge to the teachings of early Buddhism and show how these can help to counter internalized superiority and the way racial hierarchy impacts many dimensions of daily life in contemporary society.

A succinct statement offered by Magee (2019: 20) in a book on mindfulness and racism could serve as a central point of reference for the following exploration, in that “racial justice ... is just one form of an ethically grounded, mindful response to suffering in our lives.”

Antecedents in European History

A better understanding of the dynamics of racial discrimination can be developed by exploring its precedents in the history of Europe in particular. Commenting on ancient Greek and Roman literature, Isaac (2010: 35) notes that a “characteristic feature of Graeco-Roman (proto-)racism is the deployment of presumed evidence and reasoning in defence of irrational ideas of superiority and inferiority.” Notably, several such pseudo-scientific argumentations continue to exert their influence in medieval times.²

Commenting on the situation in ancient Rome, Goldenberg (2010: 94) notes that “there are three reports of the Roman soldiers under Brutus killing an Ethiopian whom they met on the way to the battle of Philippi [42 BCE], believing that the encounter portended a disaster” due to the supposed inauspiciousness of the Ethiopian’s dark skin color. Goldenberg (2010: 104) then traces the line of development from ancient to later times in the following manner:

² See Biller 2010.

The very dark skin color of the African was interpreted negatively in the classical world (as a color of ill omen and death), in Philo (as evil), and in Rabbinic literature (as sin). Christian interpretation then adopted this symbolism, greatly expanding its application for its own exegetical and theological purposes. From here, it influenced the West's developing racism against black Africans.

In a study of racism in the Middle Ages, Heng (2011a: 258) argues for the manifestation of “racial thinking, racial law, racial formation, and racialized behaviors and phenomena in medieval Europe before the emergence of a recognizable vocabulary of race.” By way of illustration, Heng (2011a: 259) provides the following example:

[T]he 13th century encyclopedia of Bartholomeus Anglicus, *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, offers a theory of climate in which cold lands produce white folk, and hot lands produce black: white being, we are told, a visual marker of inner courage, while the men of Africa, possessing black faces, short bodies, and crisp hair are “cowards of heart” and “guileful.”

In this way, physical aspects as the outcome of climatic conditions were mistaken to be reflective of mental qualities. Heng (2011b: 278f) also reports that, throughout medieval Europe,

Jews were systematically defined and set apart via biomarkers such as the possession of horns, a male menstrual flux or the generationally inherited New Testament curse of visceral-hemorrhoidal bleeding, an identifying stink (the infamous *foetor judaicus*), facial and somatic phenotypes (the *facies judaica*, “Jewish face”), and charges of bestiality, blasphemy, diabolism, deicide, vampirism, and cannibalism laid at their door through a hermeneutics of theology exercised by reli-

gious and laity alike across a wide range of learned and popular contexts.

According to Nirenberg (2010: 248), the term *raza*, the Spanish counterpart to the English word “race,” had during the early fifteenth century (and thus still before the birth of Columbus) developed from designating the pedigree of horses to being applied to human beings. Nirenberg (2010: 242) comments that

the ideological underpinning of these new discriminations claimed explicitly to be rooted in natural realities, as is most evident in what came to be called the doctrine of “limpieza de sangre” [purity of blood]. According to this doctrine, Jewish and Muslim blood was inferior to Christian; the possession of any amount of such blood made one liable to heresy and moral corruption; and therefore any descendent of Jews and Muslims, no matter how distant, should be barred from church and secular office, from any number of guilds and professions, and especially from marrying Old Christians.

Defining the Compass of Racism

In current usage in the West, the notion of “racism” tends to be applied in particular to the type of racial oppression that emerged in the modern period as a product of the colonial enterprises of European powers, where the slave trade motivated a tendency to dehumanize Africans to justify treating them as a commodity. Another aspect of the same tendency was the dehumanization of indigenous people in the Americas to vindicate their systematic genocide. What stands out prominently in this period of racism is the development of pseudo-scientific arguments that attempt to ground oppression in biology.

In view of the devastating effects of racial oppression on a large part of the population in the modern world, it is only nat-

ural that the term racism tends to be used in ways that are particularly tailored to this situation. At the same time, however, for the overall purpose of confronting racism in all its manifestations, it can be helpful if historical antecedents are kept in view. Adopting a broader view of the problem in question would also be relevant to recent events related to racial or ethnic prejudices that do not exhibit an obvious relationship to skin color. In a study of racism, Hahn (2001: 9) argues that racism cannot be confined to acts of oppression based on skin color:

Especially in the years leading up to the killings [in Rwanda] in 1994, racial discrimination between the minority Tutsi groupings (Hamites) and the majority Hutus (Bantus) depended on the revival and institutionalization of long-standing antagonisms among peoples not estranged by obvious divergence in physiognomy or color ...

Though color seems never to have been a prime term of abuse among Croats, Bosnians, Serbs, Gypsies (Romany), and Jews, these diverse groups clearly thought of themselves as enmeshed in racial conflicts, and race remains an essential tool in exploring the warfare and the identity politics that lay behind the hostilities.

Hahn (2001: 9) notes that research related to the conflicts in the 1990ies in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Rwanda tends to “retain race as an appropriate category of analysis for cultural conflict where color does not function as the fundamental marker of difference.”

Another relevant perspective emerges in an exploration of research on racism, when Stoler (1997: 196f) refers to

a basic assumption of much anti-racist discourse of the post-war period: namely, that if we can disprove the credibility of race as a scientific concept, we can dismantle the power of

racism itself—that racisms rise and fall on the scientific credibility of the concept of race. Not only can racisms thrive without such certainty, racial discourses proliferate and produce new relations of power and knowledge in the contest over which of these linkages are “true” or “false.” Thus, for example, the fact that phrenology—the theory that a person’s character and intelligence could be deduced from the shape of the skull—was quickly discredited in the nineteenth century as an accurate measure of racial endowment did nothing to undermine the discussion of, and attention riveted on, the relationship between physical measurements and mental aptitude.

As noted by Ziegler (2010: 198) in a discussion of the relationship between racism and the medieval period, the historical perspective suggests that “racism can emerge in a purely religious context without any scientific or biological input.” For this reason, broadening the concept of racism beyond differences of skin color can help to develop a comprehensive approach to countering racial oppression in all its possible forms.

Magee (2019: 239) explains that “[t]he core idea of racism is that differentially racialized groups have essential characteristics that make them more or less suited for respect, full political inclusion, leadership, wealth, and ultimately humanity.” This can involve “hierarchies based on shades of color, height, religion, and other social identifications.”

Without thereby intending to dismiss the employment of a more stringent definition of racism in other contexts, at least for the present study the above considerations will hopefully make it acceptable to adopt a definition of racism sufficiently broad so as to keep in view various historical antecedents as well as related forms of discrimination and oppression. Hence, an at-

tempt at providing a working definition for a broader conception of racism relevant to the context of the present investigation could be somewhat along the following lines:

Abusive, oppressive, and discriminative behavior by a particular human population whose membership is acquired by birth and not otherwise accessible, involving notions of ancestral purity that would be lost by intermarriage and often are related to physical marks (such as skin color), where a pervasive sense of intrinsic superiority and hence entitlement to privileges tends to be grounded in religious and pseudo-scientific arguments as being divinely ordained or inherent in nature.

Caste and Racism

Proceeding beyond European and American history, other manifestations of discrimination can be discerned in relation to the Indian caste system. According to Pinto (2001), even constitutional provisions in modern India implicitly link discrimination based on caste to racial discrimination (although the official stance of the Indian government denies that caste can be equivalent to race). Conversely, studies of racism in the US have at times employed the term “caste.”

For example, in a discussion of the social organization in the South, Warner (1936: 234) distinguishes between the “Negro caste” and the “white caste,” based on the following premise:

Caste as used here describes a theoretical arrangement of the people of the given group in an order in which the privileges, duties, obligations, opportunities, etc., are unequally distributed between the groups which are considered to be higher and lower ... where marriage between two or more groups is not sanctioned and where there is no opportunity for members of the lower groups to rise into the upper groups or of the members of the upper to fall into the lower ones.

In a more recent discussion of the Fourteenth Amendment to the US constitution, Newman (2008: 447) speaks of the creation of a “constitutionally mandated racial caste system within the United States.” In the context of a study of the continuity of racial prejudice in the US, Alexander (2011: 7) argues that the “mass incarceration of poor people of color in the United States amounts to a new caste system.”

Based on a study of race, caste, and gender, Béteille (1990: 494) reasons that, “[w]hen we compare caste and race at a deeper level, we find in both systems a prevalence of values and symbols relating to blood and natural substance, and beliefs regarding the strong constraints imposed by them on human character and conduct.”

Presenting the above quotations is not meant to encourage a wholesale identification of the Indian caste system as a form of racism. In fact, caste does not seem to be directly applicable to modern day racial oppression in the US and Europe. The point is thus only that it does seem reasonable to propose that both share sufficient similarities to make it meaningful to turn to the situation in ancient India as a way of providing an additional perspective on the problem of racial oppression in contemporary society.

Of particular relevance to my attempt to explore the potential of mindfulness as a way of countering racial oppression are instances among the early discourses that reflect the early Buddhist attitude toward caste-related prejudice and discrimination. The Pāli term usually rendered as “caste” or “class” is *vaṇṇa*, corresponding to Sanskrit *varṇa*, which literally means “color.”

In his Sanskrit dictionary, Monier-Williams (1899/1999: 924) comments that the nuance of designating a caste probably derives “from [the] contrast of colour between the dark aboriginal tribes” and the fair-skinned Aryans. In an encyclopedia entry on

the topic of caste, Kariyawasam (1977: 691) reasons that “the origin of caste in India could be traced to the racial superiority which the ... Aryans claimed ... mainly on grounds of colour of the skin.” In a study of South Asian anthropology, Kennedy (1995: 33) notes that in Vedic texts, non-Aryans

are described in unflattering terms regarding their physical appearance. Not only did they sport anasal faces, dark skins and short statures but they practiced revolting religious rites, mumbled a barbarous tongue and engaged in unacceptable behaviour. If these things offended the chanters of the Vedic hymns, perhaps it was because they themselves possessed elongated and prominent noses, fair complexions and tall statures.

In an examination of a Pāli discourse that addresses the problem of caste superiority, Gombrich (1992: 163) comments that apparently

the typical brahmin was fairer than the typical *śūdra* [worker] or at least perceived to be so. Thus the brahmins are said to claim that their *vaṇṇa* is white and the other is black. We may assume that the brahmins considered those who had joined the [Buddhist] Sangha to have *śūdra* status because the Sangha kept no caste rules of purity, had people from all castes live together and accept food from anyone.

The impression of a disdain for those of dark color that emerges from the above comments needs to be counterbalanced by noting that ancient Indian texts at times feature heroes, sages, and beautiful women of dark skin.³ Moreover, at the time of the Buddha the caste system was still in the process of developing

³ See, e.g., Mishra 2015.

into the form it eventually came to acquire. In fact, several early discourses reflect the struggle of the brahmins to assert their superiority over other classes by dint of their birth.

Brahminical Claims Reported in Buddhist Discourses

The relevance of notions of purity and superiority acquired by birth can be seen in descriptions of what ancient Indian brahmins reportedly considered to be their distinctive qualities. An example occurs in a discourse reporting how a brahmin affirmed, in front of the Buddha, why he deserved respect.⁴

I have been raised by parents of pure descent for up to seven generations; on my father's and mother's sides there has been uninterrupted clan continuity of births without blemish.

In the two parallel versions of this discourse, the brahmin continues by describing his learning as another one of his endowments. Both versions report that the Buddha replied by distinguishing types of brahmins who, although being well born in the way described above, differ in their respective ethical conduct, concluding that the most inferior of these types is actually an outcast. This reply implies a dismissal of the idea of purity by birth, to the extent of proposing that a brahmin who is of so-called pure birth for seven generations can be regarded as an outcast by dint of unethical behavior. The reevaluation proposed in this way enshrines a central aspect of the early Buddhist attitude toward claims of superiority through birth, in that what really matters is one's conduct.

⁴ MĀ 158 at T I 680c1, with a parallel in AN 5.192 at AN III 223,21: "Gotama, I am indeed a brahmin well born on both sides, mother and father, of pure descent up to the seventh paternal generation, unchallenged and unapproached in regard to reputation about birth."

The theme of color comes up in a derogatory phrase that features regularly in the early Buddhist discourses as a way of how some brahmins denigrate Buddhist monastics. One such instance involves a group of young brahmins who happen to pass by a hut in which a Buddhist monastic is meditating, which reportedly motivates them to give vent to the following remark:⁵

A shaven-headed recluse stays in here; this is a dark person and not a superior person in the world.

The parallel versions agree in associating the attribution of an inferior state to recluses—a term that comprises Buddhist monastics and other religious practitioners that in the ancient Indian setting were distinct from brahmins—with being of dark color.

Another relevant description features superiority claims made by brahmins, reported in comparable ways in parallel versions. An example in case is the following claim:⁶

We [brahmins] are foremost; other persons are inferior. We are fair; other persons are dark. Brahmins are purified, unlike non-brahmins. The brahmins are the children born from [Brahmā's] mouth, by him brahmins have been created, and the brahmins are his property.

⁵ SĀ 255 at T II 63b26, with a parallel in SN 35.132 at SN IV 117,6: “These shaven-headed petty recluses are menials, the dark offspring of our Kinsman’s feet.”

⁶ SĀ 548 at T II 142a22, with a parallel in MN 84 at MN II 84,5: “Brahmins are the foremost class; other classes are inferior. Brahmins are the fair class; other classes are dark. Brahmins are purified, unlike non-brahmins. Brahmins are the legitimate children of Brahmā, born from his mouth; they are born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, and are the heirs of Brahmā.”

The proper attitude toward such claims, as expressed by a Buddhist monastic who had been asked his view on this matter, is to dismiss them as mere propaganda that the brahmins have been circulating in the world.

Rejection of Substantial Differences Among Human Beings

A rebuttal of the idea that human beings differ from each other in substantial ways can be found in a Pāli discourse of which no parallel is extant. According to this discourse, the Buddha first surveys in detail distinctions evident among different plants, insects, and animals, followed by arguing that no such distinctions can be found among humans:⁷

Whilst among these species there are distinct individual features determined by birth, among human beings there are no such distinct individual features determined by birth.

The Pāli discourse continues by providing a survey of the human body from top to bottom, noting that no substantial differences can be found. This leads to the following conclusion:⁸

Among individual human beings' bodies, no [distinct features] are found; speaking of distinctions among human beings is [merely] a matter of convention.

In an article on caste as reflected in another discourse, Chalmers (1894: 346) notes that this position “was the more remarkable inasmuch as the accident of colour did not mislead Gotama” into assuming a substantial difference between human beings.

Although the above discourse is only extant in Pāli and thus lacks the support of a known parallel, another Pāli discourse and

⁷ Sn 607 (= MN 98, given in the PTS edition in abbreviation).

⁸ Sn 611 (= MN 98).

its Chinese counterpart illustrate the irrelevance of class distinctions among human beings in matters of spiritual progress with the example of the irrelevance of skin color in the case of an ox employed to carry a burden. What really matters is whether an ox is strong and capable of carrying a burden:⁹

It will be selected for its capability and not be rejected due its color. It is the same with these human beings, whatever their place of birth.

The reasoning proposed here applies to the skin color of human beings, which is similarly of no further significance. What really matters is an individual's capability, not the degree to which the skin is dark.

The same basic stance can also be seen in another passage, which takes up the question of children from parents of different classes.¹⁰ The passage illustrates the untenability of innate superiority claims made by brahmins with the example of a horse mating with a donkey, where the resultant foal is a mule. Perhaps this relates to the tendency for mules to be infertile, something that does not hold for children from parents of different classes. On this interpretation, the illustration would highlight that differences between human parents are fewer than the distinctions that obtain between a horse and a donkey.

A related position emerges in the indication that among human beings there are no substantial differences in respect to their genitals, unlike the case of various animals.¹¹ In other words,

⁹ MĀ 128 at T I 617b5, with a parallel in AN 5.179 at AN III 214,5: “They will just yoke a burden to it, without concern for its color. It is the same among human beings, whatever their birth.”

¹⁰ MN 93 at MN II 153,28, MĀ 151 at T I 665b18, and T 71 at T I 877c2.

¹¹ Sn 609 (= MN 98).

whereas different species of animals usually cannot even mate with each other and fail to produce fertile offspring, such differences do not obtain among human beings.

In an encyclopedia entry on the topic of Brahmanism, Nanayakkara (1972: 329) reports that “the Buddha stressed the fact that, biologically, man is of one species, and on this ground” rejected claims to class superiority acquired by birth. As noted in a study of Theravāda Buddhism by Gombrich (1988: 77), in various ways “the Buddha was able to show that what brahmins believed to be ingrained in nature was nothing but a convention.”

The same reasoning would be applicable to attempts to ground racial oppression in pseudo-scientific arguments that attempt to establish racial hierarchies as ingrained in nature.

Criticism of Superiority by Birth

An emphasis on the individual’s capability over qualities supposedly inherited by being born in a particular class or caste features in the early discourses as characteristic of the Buddha’s attitude. Judging from their report, the position taken by him in this respect appears to have been considered by ancient Indian brahmins as a distinct feature of the Buddha’s teaching, to the extent that they tried time and again to refute him on this topic. Expressed in modern terms, it seems fair to propose that the texts present the Buddha as standing up for diversity and confronting discrimination and oppression based on skin color.

A Pāli discourse and its parallel report an instance where the reputation the Buddha had apparently earned himself for opposing brahmin prejudice comes up explicitly, voiced by a group of brahmins who wish to defeat him in debate on this issue:¹²

¹² MĀ 151 at T I 663c18, with parallels in MN 93 at MN II 147,6: “This recluse Gotama proclaims purification of the four classes. Who

“The recluse Gotama asserts that all the four classes are purified; he declares it and proclaims it.” They thought: “Friends, who is there with the ability to approach the recluse Gotama and in relation to this matter defeat him in debate, in accordance with the Dharma?”

It is worthy of note that the Buddha, born into a warrior class and thus in a high position in the class system, was not merely concerned with defending his own class against the prerogatives of the brahmins. Instead, his proclamation of purification for *all four* classes implies that he was challenging the presumptions underlying the entire system.

During the ensuing debate, the Buddha counters the brahminical claims to superiority with several arguments. Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, he notes that members of all four classes are capable of washing themselves. This argument is based on adopting a literal reading of the term *suddhi*, which can mean “clean” in a physical sense just as “pure” in a wider sense. In other words, the claim by brahmins to be uniquely able to achieve such *suddhi*—meant by them in the sense of spiritual purification—is placed in contrast to the evident fact that others are also able to wash themselves.

In the ancient Indian setting, washing would often take place at rivers and hence in public. For this reason, the argument that anyone can wash themselves can be expected to have had an immediate appeal among the audience, who must have frequently witnessed that non-brahmins can indeed wash themselves.

would be able to debate this assertion with the recluse Gotama?”, and T 71 at T I 876c8: “‘The Buddha opposes us, holding that our class is similar to [that of] ordinary persons.’ They discussed with each other: ‘Who is able to debate this with the Buddha, to differentiate these classes?’”

A comparable argument involves making a fire. No matter what class a person belongs to or what type of wood may be used, they will be able to make a fire and use it for the purposes for which a fire can be employed.

This argument takes up another item of daily life experience readily accessible to the members of the audience. At the same time, fire has a range of deeper connotations in the ancient Indian religious milieu, where in particular the kindling of the Vedic fire was seen as a prerogative of brahmins. The Buddha's position was rather that, just as anyone can make a fire with any type of wood, in the same way anyone can kindle the inner fire of purification and religious progress.

The basic Buddhist position of granting overarching importance to ethical conduct over birth comes to the fore in yet another argument, according to which brahmins themselves would give preference to a brahmin student who observed ethical conduct over one who is immoral, even if the latter was more learned. The basic idea behind this argument occurs repeatedly elsewhere in the early discourses, in that one truly becomes a brahmin through ethical conduct rather than by birth. The same stance can be captured with this stanza:¹³

¹³ Sn 650 (= MN 98). Similarly formulated statements occur in Sn 136 and 142, which apply the same reasoning also to outcastes, in that one becomes an outcaste through one's deeds and not by birth. Silk 2020: 140 comments on these two verses that "we must not forget the basic doctrinal lynch-pin of Buddhist thought, namely that everything about one's status is a result of nothing other than one's karma, that is, one's actions. In this light, the *Suttanipāta*'s claim appears not at all revolutionary or egalitarian as a social philosophy. Rather, in the process of asserting the centrality of actions, it actually affirms the strict social hierarchy it might, at first blush, seem to deny." The proposed reasoning is not applicable to the similar for-

One does not become a brahmin by one's birth; one does not become a non-brahmin by one's birth. One becomes a brahmin by one's deeds; one becomes a non-brahmin by one's deeds.

In line with the ethical reevaluation proposed in this way, the Buddhist monastic order was opened by its founder to members of any class: Just as the great rivers of India merge into the ocean and thereby lose their individual identity, in the same way, by going forth members of any class lose their previous names and social class status and come to be simply reckoned as Buddhist monastics.¹⁴

Another discourse argues that the results of evil and good deeds will not differ for members of the four classes.¹⁵ Moreover, the same discourse points out, members of each of the four classes could become wealthy or even rule the country, a position that will enable them to employ in their service members of other classes. In this way, a brahmin may end up in the service of someone from a class considered by brahmins to be substantially inferior to them.

mulation in Sn 650, whose context shows that the idea is not to affirm existing social hierarchies; the same holds for related formulations in SN 7.7 and 7.8 at SN I 166,7+32 and Dhp 393. In the case of Sn 136 and 142, the affirmation that one becomes an outcaste by one's action, *kammanā vasalo hoti*, also does not seem to endorse existing social hierarchies; it could hardly be intending to convey that being born as an outcaste is due to one's karma, as that would not fit the preceding statement that one does *not* become an outcaste by birth, *na jaccā vasalo hoti*, which of course covers birth resulting from one's karma. See also above p. 85 note 133.

¹⁴ AN 8.19 at AN IV 202,13 (= Ud 5.5 at Ud 55,25), with parallels in MĀ 35 at T I 477a25 and EĀ 42.4 at T II 753a24.

¹⁵ MN 84 at MN II 86,6 and its parallel SĀ 548 at T II 142c4.

The topic of who should serve whom comes up in another discourse, which begins with a brahmin proclaiming that all classes should serve brahmins, who in turn should never serve members of other classes.¹⁶ The Buddha's reply to this proposal clarifies that doing service to another should be guided by ethical principles, in the sense that one should do service if that leads to one's betterment rather than one's decline.

Another discourse begins with a brahmin proposing five qualities required to be reckoned a brahmin,¹⁷ one of which is purity of birth (for up to seven generations). In the course of the ensuing discussion, the Buddha convinces this brahmin to reduce this list gradually to the minimal requirement for being considered a brahmin, which turns out to be the two qualities of virtue and wisdom. In this way, the discourse portrays the Buddha convincing an eminent brahmin to agree to the Buddha's own position that pure birth does not make one a brahmin.

The above surveyed passages show the Buddha's clear-cut opposition to superiority claims by dint of one's birth. This opposition is based on the recognition of the basic similarity of human beings, which outweighs whatever individual differences may be found. According to the relevant passages, the Buddha had no qualms about openly expressing his opinion in this matter, to the extent that he acquired fame in the ancient Indian setting for dismissing claims made about the supposed preeminence of brahmins.

In actual debate, he is on record for combining different strategies. One of these is the employment of examples taken from the daily life experience of the audience to show the absurdity

¹⁶ MN 96 at MN II 177,21 and MĀ 150 at T I 661a6.

¹⁷ DN 4 at DN I 120,10, SHT V 1251, Sander and Waldschmidt 1985: 199, SHT XII 6549, Wille 2017: 149, and DĀ 22 at T I 96a1.

of the brahminical conceit of superiority. At times humor has its place; at other times the actual economic conditions are taken up, to show that the theoretical model of class prerogatives did not really determine what happened on the ground.

All these strategies could be applied to confronting racism in the contemporary setting, grounded in the knowledge that human beings belong to a single species. The above passages can be read as an invitation to be willing to defend this position in public, even by way of pointing out behaviors that do not conform to this principle. Modelled on the example set by the Buddha, claims made in support of racial superiority could be countered appropriately and be dismantled as strategies that serve to justify exploitation. One who thus confronts racial oppression would thereby be following in the footsteps of the Buddha.

Noticing Discrimination

Another dimension of the Buddha's reported approach to confronting discrimination comes up in a passage that involves two brahmins who had recently joined the Buddhist monastic order. In the ancient setting, such a decision involved a complete loss of their earlier status and privileges as brahmins. The discourse sets in with the two approaching the Buddha, who was practicing walking meditation out in the open:¹⁸

They together approached the Blessed One, paid respect with their heads at his feet and followed the Buddha in his walking meditation. Then the Blessed One said to Vāsetṭha [and his companion]: “Have the two of you, going forth from a brahmin class, gone forth out of firm faith in my teaching to

¹⁸ DĀ 5 at T I 36c8 (adopting a variant reading), with parallels in DN 27 at DN III 80,18, MĀ 154 at T I 673b23, and T 10 at T I 216c18.

cultivate the path?” They replied: “Indeed.” The Buddha said: “Now that you have gone forth in my teaching for the sake of the path, do the brahmins not detest and reproach you?”

The two reply that this is indeed the case, as they are being strongly rebuked by other brahmins for having given up their superior status as members of the brahmin class and become recluses by going forth under the Buddha. The report of the actual rebuke involves an affirmation by those other brahmins of the superiority of their class, similar to the proclamation surveyed above (p. 234), according to which brahmins are the foremost and from a fair-skinned class, in contrast to those who are inferior and from a dark-skinned class.

The report given by these two then motivates the Buddha to deliver a long discourse, given right on the spot while the three of them walk up and down together. The exposition begins by countering some claims of the brahmins, for example, by pointing out that brahmin women are seen to become pregnant and give birth, hence how could the brahmins claim to be born from the mouth of Brahmā? This is in line with arguments surveyed above regarding the ability to wash oneself or to make a fire, given as daily life examples to argue the absurdity of the brahminical claims.

After stressing the importance of ethics over birth, the discourse continues by depicting the evolution of life on the Earth and the gradual emergence of human classes, which shows that the class of brahmins came into being as a product of social evolution, with the implication that this leaves no basis for their claim to innate superiority.¹⁹

¹⁹ For discussions of this discourse see also Ariyasena 1981, Collins 1984/1993, Gombrich 1992, and Schmithausen 2005.

What is of further significance here, besides the actual arguments, is the description in the passage quoted above that the Buddha intuitively perceives that the two former brahmins experience discrimination. Once they confirm that this is indeed the case, the Buddha gives them a detailed exposition, now found in the collection of long discourses, thereby offering his full support for countering such discrimination. The depiction of this teaching contrasts with the standard way of delivering discourses, where the Buddha will sit down rather than keep walking. In other words, this rather long discourse has as its starting point the Buddha's sensing that the two were suffering from discrimination, followed by immediately doing what he could to help them—in this case reportedly not even taking the time to sit down.

Racial Oppression in the West and Mindfulness

Turning from the situation in ancient India to contemporary society and the challenges of racial oppression in the West in particular, meditation teacher King (2018: 5) presents the matter in this way: “The best tool I know of to transform our relationship to racial suffering is mindfulness meditation.”

The potential of mindfulness in this respect can be presented by surveying a range of studies of, and commentaries on, this topic. Zapolski, Faidley, and Beutlich (2019: 168) found “support for the buffering effect of mindfulness on mood symptoms as a consequence [of] discrimination.” Feligh and Debb (2019: 2308) emphasize in particular the “importance of *nonreactivity*” as a central aspect of mindfulness leading to resilience in the face of racial oppression. Beshai, Desjarlais, and Green (2023: 539) note that “the concept and practice of mindfulness appear particularly consistent with Indigenous cultural worldviews,” in that “[c]omponents of mindfulness are in harmony with Indigenous cultural practices and ways of being, as they share com-

mon themes of balance, bringing awareness to the present moment ... and being virtuous.”

Martinez et al. (2022: 1118) comment that “mindfulness may help expand one’s coping repertoire and flexibility in the service of decreasing the negative psychological impact of racism-related stress.” Brown-Iannuzzi et al. (2014: 204) reason that “mindful individuals may be better able to reduce the emotional intensity and duration of the discriminatory experience, allowing for improved coping following an experience of discrimination.” Graham, West, and Roemer (2013: 334) explain that “[t]hrough gaining a more accepting relationship with one’s internal experiences, mindfulness might help individuals ... approach the anxiety they experience in the face of racism and gain a sense of agency over their life experiences,” something of particular importance in view of the confounding dynamics of structural racism.

Hidalgo, Layland, Kubicek, and Kipke (2020: 458) comment that a “protective potential of mindfulness was suggested by its attenuating impact on the main effects of sexual racism on psychological symptoms.” Watson-Singleton, Hill, and Case (2019: 1775) reason that “higher levels of mindfulness can be protective in the face of discrimination and race-related vigilance.” Chesin and Jeglic (2016) found mindfulness leading to an increased ability to observe experience and to reduce the severity of suicidal ideation among those experiencing racial oppression. According to Shallcross and Spruill (2018: 1102), “mindfulness may promote the capacity to separate the experience of discrimination from conceptualizations of self-worth, thus mitigating the likelihood of developing depressive symptoms.”

Apparently in awareness of the trend in current research to focus on those who are affected by racial oppression, Brown-Iannuzzi et al. (2014: 204) note that their research “is not meant

to suggest that the burden is on the targets of discrimination to learn how better to cope with these experiences.” In the same vein, Shallcross and Spruill (2018: 1105) make a point of highlighting that their results are not intended “to suggest that individuals who have been harmed by discrimination should bear responsibility for reducing discrimination itself.” Instead, the idea is to offer “strategies that individuals can employ to mitigate the deleterious effects of discrimination until structural and systemic changes that minimize or eliminate discrimination are realized.” Woods-Giscombé and Black (2010:122) explain:

It has been argued that system-wide health policy changes are needed to solve the social determinants of health and that focusing on person-centered interventions places unfair burden on individuals to change despite obvious structural odds ...

[Yet,] both types of interventions, policy and person-centered, are needed ... without person-centered approaches, individuals could be left floundering and without adequate support or resources to manage multiple sources of stress while waiting for system-wide social and structural changes to be executed.

As pointed out by Aguilar (2019: 66) in relation to the potential of mindfulness in facing racism, “personal growth *can* spark change.” In order to foster the needed change, the potential of mindfulness to reduce racial bias is of particular relevance.²⁰ Polinska (2018: 332 and 327) explains that “mindfulness offers a possibility of opening a conscious space that allows for reduction in automatic racist associations.” This can serve to counter a general tendency where “the white social lens distorts reality

²⁰ See also Lueke and Gibson 2015 and 2016.

by refusing to acknowledge systemic discrimination, conveniently maintaining amnesia about the racial injustice in the past and present.”²¹ The research by Fuochi, Boin, Lucarini, and Voci (2023: 2894) points to “the possibility to build prejudice reduction interventions grounded on mindfulness, to increase awareness of negative stereotypes and openness to differences among people.” Burgess, Beach, and Saha (2017: 374) note that cultivating mindfulness can provide “a portal into the visceral experience of prejudice.”

An important point here is that mindfulness need not be confined to what one is experiencing internally.²² It can, and in fact it should, also be applied to the external dimension of experience.²³ Although research on mindfulness as yet has not fully engaged with this perspective, the potential for such external

²¹ On Buddhist approaches to facilitate awareness of whiteness and its repercussions see Brennan and Gleig 2023; on a backlash against diversity work among Buddhists see Gleig and Artinger 2021.

²² This puts into perspective the assessment by Womack and Sloan 2017: 414f, in the context of comparing racial socialization with mindfulness as two coping strategies when faced with racial oppression: “While racial socialization messages teach thoughtful awareness of the views of others, mindfulness strategies encourage individuals to focus on their own current thinking, not about the thoughts of others ... While mindfulness says ‘pay attention to everything you are experiencing internally,’ racial socialization says pay attention to or be aware of what is happening externally’.” The proposed contrast does not adequately capture the potential of mindfulness to facilitate and empower being aware of what is happening externally.

²³ See Anālayo 2020g and 2020l. Yet, as noted by Magee 2019: 330, “[f]or the most part, mindfulness in the West has been presented as a personal improvement practice. We have not been taught to view mindfulness as a pathway to active social engagement for the benefit of others.”

mindfulness emerges naturally when teaching mindfulness to confront racial oppression.

For example, Woods-Giscombé and Gaylord (2014) and Watson, Black, and Hunter (2016) draw attention to the importance of adapting the teaching of mindfulness to the needs of Black Americans. Such adaptation requires being mindful of the external repercussions of one's way of teaching. Highlighting the same need for American communities suffering from racial oppression in general, Proulx et al. (2018: 362f) note that "biases often go unrecognized even as they are put into action ... how participants are addressed, attitude, language, metaphors, stories, or other means instructors may employ" can become counterproductive. Moreover, "[m]icroaggressions are commonplace, and intentional and unintentional daily derogatory comments and behaviors ... can lead to stress reactivity that may not be as apparent to other Americans."

The potential of mindfulness directed toward others has also become apparent in research on its potential for strengthening multi-cultural competence in counselling. Lenés et al. (2020: 154) comment that "mindful nonjudging and nonreacting may be useful multicultural skills relevant to intercultural encounters between individuals who are socialized differently." When working with Native Americans, for example, according to Napoli and Bonifas (2013: 206) there is a need "to pay attention to nonverbal language by observing the client's responses to what is happening in the session." Campbell, Vance, and Dong (2018: 84) note that "counselors that excel in observation may be better equipped to accurately interpret nonverbal communication of multicultural clients, as well as understand contextual messages better." Ivers et al. (2016: 78) reason that "mindfulness may be a deeper, more internalized form of empathy that allows counselors to understand the phenomenological reality of a client."

Although not explicitly mentioned, these aspects of counseling involve external mindfulness. In this way, adapting the teachings to the needs of the audience, paying attention to potential repercussions of unrecognized biases, and increasing multicultural counselling competence could all be considered modalities of cultivating externally directed mindfulness. Magee (2019: 222) notes the need to

deepen our social intelligence—the capacity to sense the emotional state of others and to see the world through their eyes. This relational skill often flows from sustained mindfulness practice. We are mindful not only of our own experiences, but of those of the people around us as well.”

This in turn relates to a clear need for those not directly suffering from racial oppression to broaden perspective through mindfulness and become fully aware of the larger context. In a study of racial trauma, Menakem (2017: 205) clarifies:

Even if you’re the most fair-minded person on Earth, at times certain privileges will be conferred upon you because of the color of your skin. Your whiteness is considered the norm, and the standard against which all skin colors—and all other human beings—are compared. That alone provides you with a big advantage. I’m not blaming you for this, or asking you to feel guilty or ashamed about it. But you *do* need to be aware of what those privileges are and how they function.

As a simple practice suggestion, he proposes making it a habit to counter such privileges by giving precedence to a person of color when serving or being served, making it a practice to sit close to people of color rather than to whites, and keeping an eye out for opportunities to assist people of color that may be in

distress. Menakem (2017: 207) reasons that white privilege can be confronted through “small, everyday courageous actions.” This can rely on mindfulness of privilege and its impacts.

Although from a Buddhist perspective the aspiration for non-harm—as one of the manifestations of right intention, corresponding to the quality of compassion—would already suffice for arousing a sincere concern about directing mindfulness to the consequences of racial bias, it can additionally be helpful to keep in mind the broader impacts of racial oppression. In a study of the repercussions of racism, Smedley (2012: 935) offers the following observation:

White Americans are harmed by racism against people of color in multiple ways. Racism damages social trust and cohesion, limits the potential societal contributions of marginalized groups, and drains social resources. The health consequences of racial inequality present a significant economic burden for the nation ... racism imposes a human, social, and economic cost to all in the United States.

All of this converges on a clear need to take responsibility and become active. As pointed out by Choudhury (2015: xi), given that “in a society where racism exists, it is not enough to be non-racist. For real transformation to occur, one has to actively challenge discrimination in all its forms.” For this to happen, as noted by Devine, Forscher, Austin, and Cox (2012: 1268) in a study of race bias, “[f]irst, people must be *aware* of their biases and, second, they must be *concerned* about the consequences of their biases before they will be motivated to exert effort to eliminate them.”

In the context of relating mindfulness to awareness of race and diversity, Magee (2016: 234) offers the following explanation:

[M]indfulness practice provides limitless opportunities for enhancing awareness not merely of racial difference, which alone may mean nothing, but of the many, various, and mostly subtle ways in which we relate to these differences. Over time and with practice, mindfulness brought to bear on this field of experience in our everyday lives can lead to insights about how these perceptions shape our own actions and those of others.

The above considerations point to the need for mindfulness practice by those who may, often unintentionally, inflict pain on those who are racially oppressed through a lack of awareness of how systemic racism can manifest daily in various forms of micro-aggression. The task would be in particular to relate the practice of training in mindfulness more explicitly to its external dimension, to noting how others are affected by what is done by oneself (or by someone else).

Training in externally directed mindfulness in this way could become a resource for diversity training and open up a significant perspective on the potential of mindfulness in relation to racial oppression. Simply said, the suggestion is that, in addition to the already-studied potential of mindfulness to help people of color suffering from discrimination and to help white people become aware of their unconscious biases, another avenue would be for mindfulness cultivation to help white people to become aware of how their actual behavior can impact people of color and thereby come to notice their own biases at work.

In line with the attitude evident in the early Buddhist discourses toward the superiority conceit of brahmins, such mindful monitoring can help to identify the impact of internalized superiority conceit (and related anxieties) on law enforcement, employment, housing, and healthcare. In this way, externally

directed mindfulness could become an integral part of diversity training and lead to the implementation of modes of behavior that are more race-conscious and minimize harm. At the same time, such externally directed mindfulness would provide feedback to internal mindfulness of one's own unconscious biases and prejudices. Due to being for the most part unconscious, such biases and prejudices can more easily be identified if awareness is broadened to notice their impact on others.

In this way, bringing mindfulness to bear on what happens within and without can be mutually reinforcing and thereby have a substantially greater impact than mindfulness cultivated only internally. External mindfulness training could in this way become an integral part of bringing about the much-needed systemic change.

Diversity and Awakening

Besides potentially broadening the perspective adopted in current research in cognitive psychology to include also the possibility of externally directed mindfulness, relevant passages in the early discourses can also help situate efforts at diversity within the overarching orientation of early Buddhist thought toward awakening. A passage of relevance occurs in a survey of various types of conceit as obstacles for progress on the path to liberation. One such type of conceit concerns coming from a family considered to be of high standing in the ancient setting:²⁴

²⁴ MĀ 85 at T I 561a25, with a Pāli parallel in MN 113 at MN III 37,14: “Monastics, here an unworthy person has gone forth from a high-ranking family and thinks: ‘I am one who has gone forth from a high-ranking family, but these other monastics have not gone forth from a high-ranking family.’ Thus, in relation to being from a high-ranking family, [such a person] praises oneself and disparages others.

Suppose that a certain person has gone forth from a high-ranking family to practice the path. Others are not like that. Because of being from a high-ranking family, they praise themselves and despise others. This is reckoned to be of the nature of unworthy people.

The parallels agree in showing that worthy people act in the opposite way. According to three of the four parallel versions, worthy people reflect that unwholesome mental states do not just disappear because of being from a high-ranking family.²⁵ What really matters is whether one practices in the right way. According to the fourth version, worthy people understand that their own body is not really different from those of others.²⁶

The whole purpose of this exposition is to highlight forms of conceit that are an obstacle for progress on the path to awakening. The ancient Indian idea of coming from a high family reflects a general sense of superiority because of one's ancestry. In this way, a sense of racial supremacy could be identified as an instance of the same type of conceit, which needs to be overcome to enable progress to liberation.

In early Buddhist thought, such progress requires cultivating the noble eightfold path. Out of the eight factors of this path, three are of central relevance for cultivating the entire path. These are right view, right effort, and right mindfulness.²⁷ Right view provides the overall orientation. For the present purpose, of particular relevance would be a clear identification of mani-

Monastics, this is the nature of an unworthy person"; see also T 48 at T I 837c29 and EĀ 17.9 at T II 585a23.

²⁵ MN 113 at MN III 37,20, MĀ 85 at T I 561a28, and T 48 at T I 838a3.

²⁶ EĀ 17.9 at T II 585b11.

²⁷ MN 117 at MN III 71,24, MĀ 189 at T I 735c13, and Up 6080 at D 4094 *nyu* 44b4 or P 5595 *thu* 84a5.

festations of *dukkha* and, in exploring the causes responsible for such manifestations, recognizing the need to take responsibility for one's own potential contribution to these.

Based on taking responsibility, right mindfulness continuously monitors to detect the impact of superiority conceit and the activation of racial bias. Such monitoring has right effort as its support, ensuring that action is taken on the spot to counter superiority conceit and biases.

Equipped in this way, the right intention for the absence of harm (= compassion) can come to percolate all aspects of daily life in the form of communications, general activities, and being at work—corresponding to right speech, action, and livelihood—ensuring that none of these situations results in what others may experience as harmful or disrespectful.

In this way, diversity work, rather than being seen as an annoying duty to which white Buddhists have to assent in order to be politically correct, can come to be right at the heart of their path of practice. The chief tool to work against the grain of superiority conceit in this way is none other than mindfulness, in its internal and external dimensions. It is the same internal and external mindfulness that can serve as an important tool in facing the challenges of climate change, to which I turn in the remainder of this chapter.

Cycles of Decline and Renewal

A helpful shift of perspective for facing the challenges of climate change can be developed by exploring the early Buddhist outlook on the evolution of human civilization and the conception of time that underlies this outlook. By way of getting started, I first turn to three contemporary perspectives on time. The first is part of a sustained criticism of modernity, the second features in the course of philosophical reflections on the problem of cli-

mate change, and the third serves to introduce the viewpoint of quantum physics on time.

The first of these three perspectives has been articulated by Machado de Oliveira (2021: 65), who points out that “our ways of imagining are bound by collective referents of reality and these referents restrict what is possible for us to imagine. Modernity’s single story of ‘forward’ is one of these referents.”

The second quote is from Latour (2017: 13), who commends “rethinking the idea of progress ... discovering a different way of experiencing the passage of time.”

My third quote is from Rovelli (2018: 1f), who offers the following introduction to his discussion of the perspective of quantum physics:

This is time, familiar and intimate. We are taken by it. The rush of seconds, hours, years that hurls us toward life ... We inhabit time as fish live in water. Our being is being in time ... The universe unfolds into the future, dragged by time, and exists according to the order of time ... What could be more universal and obvious than this *flowing*?

And yet things are somewhat more complicated than this. Reality is often very different from what it seems. The Earth appears to be flat but is in fact spherical. The sun seems to revolve in the sky when it is really we who are spinning. Neither is the structure of time what it seems to be: it is different from this uniform, universal flowing ... time works quite differently from the way it seems to.

The above questioning of ingrained perceptions of time may suffice to allow for a shift in how we position ourselves in relation to time. What emerges from the combination of these three quotes is that the linear notion of time underlying the expectation of infinite progress is not necessarily as straightfor-

ward as it may seem at first sight. Given that time is anyway quite different from what we imagine it to be,²⁸ there is no reason in principle why this linear notion could not be revised or adjusted in some way.

A simple approach from an early Buddhist viewpoint could be developed based on the notion, already mentioned earlier (p. 207) that time is our conceptualization of change.²⁹ What has changed is past, what will change is future, and what changes right now is the present. Alongside this linear conception of change from past via present to future, however, early Buddhist (and ancient Indian) thought also involves a cyclic conception of time. There is indeed some basis for this conception, as day is followed by night, and by day, and by night, and so on. The change of seasons is another example. Each year—as long as we are in the same location—follows the cyclic trajectory of the seasons, such as spring, summer, fall, winter, spring, summer, fall, winter, and so on. This much does not deny the linear conception of one day after the other, or one year after the other, but it broadens it by taking into account the cyclic dimension as well.

This cyclic perspective comes to the fore in some early Buddhist discourses that offer significant indications relevant to climate change, which I had explored in my book *Mindfully Facing Climate Change*. One of these, the Discourse on Seven Suns, describes the complete destruction of the Earth at some time in the future, due to an increase in solar heat that finds representation in the text in the form of a depiction of the consecutive arising of seven suns.³⁰ Although this depiction is of course couched

²⁸ Rovelli 2018: 2 notes that “we still don’t know how time actually works. The nature of time is perhaps the greatest remaining mystery.”

²⁹ See in more detail Anālayo 2019h: 15f.

³⁰ Anālayo 2019e: 120–130; AN 7.62 at AN IV 100,5 and its parallels

in terms of the worldview of ancient India, natural science presents a somewhat comparable scenario, in that at a distant time in the future the sun will expand and burn up the Earth.³¹ In the ancient Indian and early Buddhist imagination, this type of event is cyclic, in that from time to time the world will be burnt up and after that evolve again.

A cyclic perspective would also be relevant to occurrences of a mass extinction of species. In the preface to his detailed study of mass extinctions of species in the history of life on this planet, paleontologist Benton (2023: 11f, 13f, and 16) offers the following reflections:

[M]ass extinctions also have a creative aspect. Life has always bounced back ... New species emerge, the food webs build back and eventually a new ecosystem has become established. What is often also seen in these times of recovery from devastation is something completely new ... Something special can happen during the rebuilding of ecosystems when the removal of the dominant plants and animals gives others their opportunity to take over ...

[Apparently,] mammals had been held back by the incumbent dinosaurs and could only freely diversify after the

Dietz 2007 (Sanskrit fragments and Up 3008), MĀ 8 at T I 428c9, T 30 at T I 811c24, and EĀ 40.1 at T II 736b1.

³¹ Schröder and Smith 2008: 155 comment that “[c]limate change and global warming may have drastic effects on the human race in the near future, over human time-scales of decades or centuries. However, it is also of interest, and of relevance to the far future of all living species, to consider the much longer term effects of the gradual heating of the Earth by a more luminous Sun as it evolves towards its final stage as a white dwarf star.” See also, e.g., Rybicki and Denis 2001 and Lanza, Lebreton, and Sallard 2023.

dinosaurs had been removed from the scene. The mass extinction gave them their great opportunity, and here we are today. The removal of dinosaurs and their continual trampling of plants probably also gave the flowering plants a chance ... the first of the modern-type tropical rainforests with their enormous biodiversity also date back to that post-extinction time of renewal. So, we can see that mass extinctions can be creative ...

But that does not exculpate humans: whether we kill them and eat them, kill them and don't eat them, or simply perturb their ecosystems by our disruptive behaviours ... We have caused the extinction of countless documented species, like the dodo; we have doubtless also killed off many other species we never knew about ... my case is certainly not in favour of humans causing the extinction of any species.

The same holds for my motivation to present this extract, which is decidedly not to support in any way, or even turn a blind eye to, the extinction of species caused by humans. My point is rather to try to bring in additional perspectives, based on a cyclic perception of time applied to the actual reality of nature.

Briefly departing from my main topic of time to explore the related topic of nature, early Buddhist thought shows repeated appreciation of the beauty of nature.³² However, this comes alongside equal recognition granted to other aspects of nature, such as natural catastrophes (volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, etc.) and the food chain: the incessant and pervasive preying on each other that dominates much of the life of animals in the wild, together with fights for territorial dominion and competition

³² See Anālayo 2019e: 45–48 and on the role of forest monastics in Sri Lanka as guardians of fragile ecosystems Sirisena 2024: 16.

among males for females.³³ This makes it perhaps understandable why the textual sources of early Buddhism do not accord an intrinsic value to nature,³⁴ and why from the same perspective a call to return to nature is not entirely straightforward.

In the context of discussing environmental arguments that have the opposite of the intended effect, Marshall (2014/2015: 130) notes that some “[e]nvironmentalists are drawn to an anti-human rhetoric ... talking about humans as a plague or virus that eats up the natural world.” Marshall (2014/2015: 134) concludes that, when environmental messaging around the challenges of climate change “is not interested in reflecting other people’s values, it keeps taking bricks out of the bridge that unites people around a common interest in their future.”

Needless to say, this does not excuse exploitation and destruction of nature. It is eminently meaningful, indeed necessary, to boycott goods or food items produced in ways that imprison, maltreat, and slaughter animals. The overarching concern here

³³ Ohnuma 2017: 23 offers the following assessment: “While Buddhism’s *ethical* stance toward nonhuman animals may well be more generous than those predominant in the West,” its overall perspective is nevertheless that “[t]o be an animal is ‘a state of suffering, an unfortunate destiny’ ... It is to live a short and brutish lifetime replete with suffering; constantly oppressed by ‘hunger, thirst, heat, and cold’; continually devouring and being devoured by others.” Tilakaratne 2020a: 111 sums up the Buddhist position as follows: “A life on earth without any pain to oneself or the others appears an impossibility. What could be expected according to Buddhism is a life with minimum pain to oneself and the others.”

³⁴ Schmithausen 1997: 33 explains: “Early Buddhism ... was, on the whole, impressed not so much by the—undeniable—beauty of nature as by its—equally undeniable—sombre aspects: the struggle for life, killing and being killed, devouring and being devoured ... Thus, Early Buddhism does not, on the whole, romanticize nature.”

is to minimize harm as much as possible, doing justice to our moral obligation as human beings toward other sentient beings. But this does not go so far as to reject the need to take care of human beings as well.³⁵

The recurrence of mass extinctions of species, besides providing a perspective on the reality of nature, also relates to the notion of time, with which I return to my main topic after the above brief excursion into the topic of nature.

The suggested integration of a cyclic perspective of periodic decline followed by similarly periodic renewal into the way we perceive time can lead to a broadening of perspective. This can help moving beyond the assumption that time is a sort of one-directional tunnel in which we keep moving forward with the expectation of either making uninterrupted progress or else being forever doomed.

A cyclic perspective of decline and renewal applied more specifically to human civilization emerges in the Discourse on the World Monarch.³⁶ The discourse depicts how a gradual de-

³⁵ See in more detail Anālayo 2019e: 36–39. This perhaps puts into perspective the assessment by Capper 2022: 7f that “Buddhism ethically values humans and animals but does not substantially value other entities in the natural world similarly. This limited biocentric attitude lacks what a viable environmental ethic demands, which is some sense of an ecocentric orientation, this being an orientation that places substantial ethical value on plants, minerals, and water ... Buddhism needs a more ecocentric orientation to support a viable environmental ethic.” Capper 2022: 10 then calls for granting an ethical value also to gases like carbon dioxide. Although a case can be made for the sentience of plants, as shown by Meyers 2024, it is unreasonable to stipulate the above ecocentric orientation as a must for grounding a viable environmental ethic in Buddhist thought.

³⁶ See Anālayo 2019e: 50–72.

cline in ethical standards leads to worsening living conditions as well as environmental degradation, until eventually an all-time low is reached in all these respects, with human beings indiscriminately killing each other. Some, however, decide to abstain from killing, and through gradually increasing commitment to ethical conduct an improvement in living conditions and the environment takes place.

In a study of Theravāda Buddhism, Gombrich (1988: 83f) comments on this discourse that its “long and colourful myth tells how the world goes through vast cycles in which it gets alternately worse and better,” followed by discounting a literal reading of the details of the description. A related perspective had already been articulated by the Pāli translators Rhys Davids and Rhys Davids (1921: 53), in that “a modern writer, telling a story to emphasize a moral, would always ... endeavour to give probability, vraisemblance, to the characters and events of this tale. Here the very opposite would seem to be the case.” In his study of “utopias of the Pali imaginaire” (so the subtitle of his monograph), Collins (1998: 495) in turn concludes that this discourse “tells a witty story, by turns pleasantly farcical and fear-somely imaginative, with some familiar doctrinal motifs in unexpected narrative settings.”

Without in any way intending to encourage a literal reading, it seems to me that some aspects of this story have considerable potential. What I have in mind is comparable to the case of the motif of seven suns. Based on leaving aside an overly literal reading and keeping in mind the ancient Indian setting, an interpretation can emerge that concords with our contemporary knowledge that the planet Earth will indeed be completely burnt up by the sun. Such an interpretation would strike a middle ground between a naïve acceptance of the story wholesale and seeing it as merely a fairy tale that is of no further relevance.

One of the significant points that could be taken away in the present case concerns again the cyclic perspective, in that even when an all-time low point in living conditions and ethical behavior is reached, this does not spell complete collapse. Instead, it can become a point of reversal that leads to a new flourishing.

This basic idea can be supported with the help of a collection of academic research papers questioning narratives of a total collapse of a range of civilizations, such as the cases of Easter Island, the Maya Lowlands, Mesopotamia, and Norse Greenland. The editors and contributors McAnany and Yoffee (2010: 5f and 10f) introduce this collection of research articles with the following reflections:

When closely examined, the overriding human story is one of survival and regeneration. Certainly crises existed, political forms changed, and landscapes were altered, but rarely did societies collapse in an absolute and apocalyptic sense ...

[O]n close inspection of archaeological evidence, documentary records, or both, it becomes clear that human resilience is the rule rather than the exception ... Although ... living through some kind of change is difficult, painful, or even catastrophic, “collapse”—in the sense of the *end* of a social order and its people—is a rare occurrence. Resilience is a more accurate term to describe the human response to extreme problems.

McAnany and Yoffee (2010: 15) relate what emerges from different research contributions on the topic of civilizational collapse to the present situation, where “[w]e have inherited daunting environmental and social challenges and added more of our own making.” Such challenges “require inspired problem solving and human resilience. Fortunately, these are attributes that human societies have long displayed.”

Another point that can also be taken away from the Discourse on the World Monarch is the emphasis on identifying specific causes related to decline and renewal, and in particular the importance of ethical conduct in this respect.

In appreciating this point, it is helpful to keep in mind that, as mentioned above (p. 83), the early Buddhist perspective on dependent arising or conditionality is neither limited to matters of the mind nor does it posit some form of general interdependence of all that exists, but much rather attempts to identify specific conditions responsible for specific outcomes.³⁷

One particular application of this basic principle in another discourse, the Discourse on the Elephant's Footprint, explicitly highlights the dependency of the human body on living conditions provided by the Earth, such as food, water, oxygen, etc. Recognition of this dependency, shared with other sentient beings, would be sufficient reason from an early Buddhist viewpoint for taking steps to protect living conditions when these are threatened—which is indeed the case with climate change.³⁸

A specific condition of particular importance in the description offered in the Discourse on the World Monarch is ethical conduct. According to the depiction in this discourse, an important condition in causing environmental decline is a lack of ethical commitments and corresponding conduct. Conversely, strengthening ethical conduct builds the foundation for a recovery and improvement of living conditions and the ecosystem.

I will come back to this perspective in the course of my exploration of some central conditions causing the actual environmental decline and the loss of ethical principles that appears to stand in the background of this decline.

³⁷ See also Anālayo 2019e: 42–45.

³⁸ See the discussion in Anālayo 2019e: 27–32.

Global Politics and Local Initiatives

In the context of a detailed and informative study of political dimensions of climate change, Sabel and Victor (2022: 18–46) provide a close analysis of why global efforts to deal with the problems posed by the thinning ozone layer and by climate change have had substantially different outcomes. In what follows, I present key aspects of their discussion, in the hope that this will help develop a perspective on the causal network influencing global politics on climate change.

Recognition of the thinning of the atmospheric ozone layer eventually led to the Montreal Protocol in 1987 to deal with this problem on a global political level. This has been largely successful, and the ozone layer is now healing itself.

The challenges of climate change are considerably more complex in comparison, as these basically implicate all of industry and agriculture. The main steps in attempting to face climate change at an international level were the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) established in 1992, followed by the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 and the Paris Agreement in 2015. Despite ambitious aims, there has been far too little success in actually reducing the emission of warming gases.

Sabel and Victor (2022: 18) report that many of the same diplomats were involved in the Montreal Protocol and the UNFCCC, and the former was to some extent a model for the attempts to deal with climate change, “[b]ut despite these connections, the institutional machinery created to implement these two agreements differed almost from the beginning.” According to their analysis, such differences are a key to understanding the different outcomes.

Sabel and Victor (2022: 19) report that the Montreal Protocol “led to an experimentalist regime that drew firms and gov-

ernments into collaboration in solving concrete pollution problems.” This “led almost immediately to an explosion of innovations that made it possible to set and implement ever-tighter limits on pollution.”

In contrast, the “UNFCCC regime ... was not designed for collaborative, concrete problem-solving. Rather, it was designed to set unambiguous limits on allowable pollution, and then leave matters of implementation to national governments and firms.”

Sabel and Victor (2022: 3) explain that “climate diplomats took it for granted that no nation would cooperate unless all are bound by the same commitments ... [t]he result is global action no more ambitious than what the least ambitious party will allow.” Yet, as shown by the success of efforts following the Montreal Protocol, “the best way to build effective consensus is not to ask who will commit to certain predetermined outcomes no matter what but instead to begin by systematically encouraging solving problems at many scales and piecing the results together into ever-stronger solutions.”

Regarding the future of global collaboration based on the Paris Agreement of 2015, Sabel and Victor (2022: 157) reason that “Paris’s consensus procedures will not give coherent direction to deep cooperation needed to manage climate change ... [t]o make the most of Paris means relying on the agreement as a source of authority ... while performing nearly all the work of experimentalism on the outside.” In other words, the task is “to sustain the legitimacy of Paris while not becoming mired in the machinery.”

As a general pattern, Sabel and Victor (2022: 106) reason that with “climate change and decarbonization ... the problems are general, but the solutions are often local. What works in one place doesn’t work the same way or at all in another.” Thus, “be-

cause place-specific conditions are constantly changing, local adaptation rarely comes to an end.”

The required local initiative appears to be in fact already under way in a range of cases. Sabel and Victor (2022: 2f) report that, “[a]longside the string of disappointing global agreements ... models of effective problem-solving have already emerged and continue to make progress.” Thus, “[i]n sector after sector, from steel to automobile transport to electric power, real progress in the elimination of emissions is gaining momentum.” The different instances of such progress point the way forward:

They encourage ground-level initiative by creating incentives for actors with detailed knowledge of mitigation problems to innovate and then converting the solutions into standards for all ... They solve global problems not principally with diplomacy but instead by creating new facts on the ground—new industries and interest groups that benefit from effective problem-solving, and that push for further policy effort.

In what follows, I attempt to relate these assessments to the viewpoint of early Buddhism. What seems to stand out prominently here is the potential of looking at specific conditions to help clarify the situation. Rather than thinking in terms of entities—be these individuals in leadership positions or organizations—to which blame can and should be assigned, closer investigating provides a more fine-grained reflection of the complexity of the situation: Because the UN had to follow democratic procedures to ensure consensus, and because the task of individual diplomats at the UN in turn is to protect the interests of their country, as a net result, what needed to be done has not been done.

What emerges in this way can broaden the vista, showing in turn what can be done. Central here would be stepping out of the viewpoint of mono-causality, which is deeply ingrained in societies influenced by the notion of a creator god, such as Judeo-Christian cultures. Even without personal adherence to this belief, the impact of mono-causal thinking enshrined in this way is pervasive and can influence modes of perception and resultant appraisals in a range of ways. When faced with the challenges of climate change, this can lead to the impression that, because we are unable to solve this problem on our own, someone else must be responsible for it, and this absolves us from the need to become active ourselves.³⁹

Environmentalists Macy and Brown (2014: 28) reason that “[t]he predominant model of self in Western culture—‘I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul’—discourages us from confronting issues for which we have no immediate solutions.” The resultant problem is that, when “we tend to shrink the sphere of our attention to those areas that we believe we can directly control,” then “[t]his becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: the smaller our sphere of attention, the smaller our sphere of influence.”

³⁹ Gardiner 2011: 403 offers the following assessment of individual responsibility in view of the failure of world’s leaders and institution to deal with climate change: “According to a traditional view in political thought, social and political institutions are legitimate because, and to the extent that, citizens delegate their own responsibilities and powers to them. On this account, if the attempt to delegate effectively has failed, then the responsibility falls back on the citizens again, either to solve the problems themselves, or else, if this is not possible, to create new institutions to do the job. If they fail to do so, then they are subject to moral criticism for having failed to discharge their original responsibilities.”

From the viewpoint of the early Buddhist teaching of conditionality, mono-causality is flawed. Instead, there is a network of conditions standing in the background of any situation. Visualizing ourselves as belonging to a constellation of many different actors in this web of causes and conditions changes substantially how we position ourselves in relation to climate change. It is not the case that we are going to solve it on our own, but it is also not the case that someone else is going to solve it for us. The challenge is indeed “systemic,” a term that in discussions on climate change seems at times to be used with the connotation that nothing can really be done about it on the individual level.⁴⁰ Yet, there is a place for each of us in that wider picture. There is something each of us can contribute, as long as we are willing to take that step and leave behind the comfortable assumption that others will take care of it on our behalf.

In other words, applying the early Buddhist perspective on conditionality to climate change can lead to a call for taking action on the individual level. This is not meant to imply bearing a burden of guilt (or assigning that burden to someone else), nor does it involve attempting to solve things single-handedly or expecting that others will solve it on their own. Instead, we acknowledge that we are an integral part of this planet and its climate, and we keep in mind the fact that, however small our contribution may be, we can contribute individually on the local

⁴⁰ This type of perspective could be exemplified with a problem related to deliberative democracy, noted by Ebeling and Wolkenstein 2018: 636, where “the systemic approach to deliberative democracy ... risks losing sight of the important connection between deliberative agency and autonomy” and may result in “a vision of deliberative democracy in which the deliberative engagement of citizens is no longer a central concern.”

level. In fact, judging from the above analysis the local level is indeed the place where action should take place.⁴¹

A practical example of how that could look like would be the organization Mothers Out Front.⁴² Here, mothers get together to exchange ideas, have fun, and take action to ensure a livable future for their children. For example, gas leaks in Massachusetts are responsible for 10% of Massachusetts' greenhouse gas emissions and result in a loss of \$90 million per year.⁴³ Mothers Out Front has been successful in pushing for legislation to address the problem.

This is a good illustration of a form of direct action that benefits the environment and future generations, and which could hardly raise any objections even among the staunchest climate-change deniers. Unlike some other actions taken at times to promote environmental awareness, the present case does not risk triggering negative reactions and has immediate, direct results. I believe there is much that can be done at the local level in line with the basic principles that emerge from this example, if, and only if, there is a willingness to take the first step, and this is done with mindfulness and ethical integrity.

I close this section with a report of a conversation that neatly exemplifies what I believe is a central point to bear in mind. The speaker is a CEO (chief executive officer) who reports to two of the company's largest investors:⁴⁴

⁴¹ Carr 2023: 28 comments on finding pathways to a climate-resilient future that “working on these challenges at the local level produces solutions tailored to specific opportunities and needs that can aggregate up to global impacts.”

⁴² See <https://www.mothersoutfront.org/>.

⁴³ See Henderson 2020b: 262.

⁴⁴ Taken from Henderson 2020a: 123.

I gave them the usual spiel about how our operating margins were up and how the investments we'd been making for growth were paying off, and they asked me the usual questions. Then I asked them if they thought climate change was real and, if it was, if the world's governments were going to fix it. Yes, they said—and no, governments weren't going to fix it. There was a pause. I asked them if they had children. They did. So I said, "If government isn't going to fix it, who will?" There was another pause. Then we started a real conversation.

Scientific Research and the Loss of Truth

In line with my earlier emphasis on the need to step out of mono-causal modes of thinking, the purpose of my exploration in the previous section was decidedly not to posit administrative procedures in the UN as the sole cause for the failure to take the needed action in relation to climate change.

Another significant factor influencing the same problem relates to the dissemination and reception of scientific research. In the case of the problem posed by the thinning ozone layer, Sabel and Victor (2022: 21) report that the "political and technological solutions to the problem were not obvious to the eventual parties to the ozone treaty. The science of ozone depletion likewise progressed ... by fits and starts." Sabel and Victor (2022: 24) depict the reaction to such science as follows:

Firms responded with a mixture of damage control and defense of the status quo ... large producers of ODS [= ozone-depleting substances], meanwhile, challenged the new claims directly, arguing that the science was inconclusive, alternatives ... were unsafe, and brash policy would result in "direct economic, health and safety" harms.

In 1985 a depletion in the ozone layer—in general parlance referred to as an ozone hole—was detected over Antarctica.⁴⁵ This discovery took scientists by surprise, but follow-up research confirmed that this was indeed the result of human manufactured ozone-depleting substances. Sabel and Victor (2022: 26) report:

For firms ... the discovery of the ozone hole, in combination with the resumption of growth in the market for CFCs [= chlorofluorocarbon] ... tipped the scales from temporizing to active cooperation with regulators. Often the first to break rank were the users of ODS [= ozone-depleting substances], which unlike the established producers of ODS, had no reason to prefer any particular substitute process over others. As they began cooperating ... in the search for alternatives, they also gave shape to the nascent institutions of the Montreal Protocol, extending this government-industry cooperation globally.

According to Sabel and Victor (2022: 19), “the process of joint problem-solving and the results it produced led to deep changes in the interests of actors. Major industrial firms previously opposed to pollution controls became enthusiastic supporters.”

The case of climate change, however, evolved rather differently. Based on a review of a broad range of book publications promoting climate change denial, Jacques, Dunlap, and Freeman (2008: 352 and 362) report that, when “environmentalism evolved into a strong global movement in the 1990s, highlighted by the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio” (which saw the establishment of the UNFCCC), this led to the perception among conservatives in the US that “the spread of global capitalism via market

⁴⁵ Farman, Gardiner, and Shanklin 1985.

economies, the privatisation of common property and free trade was jeopardised by this global movement.”

Another significant factor was “the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The decline of the USSR made anti-Communism—foundational to US conservatism—increasingly irrelevant ... just as environmentalism was emerging as a global force.” This then resulted in a shift of “conservative attention from the ‘Red Scare’ to the emerging ‘Green Scare’.”

In combination, these factors resulted in “the growth of a fully-fledged anti-environmental counter-movement supported by the conservative movement.” Based on their research, Jacques, Dunlap, and Freeman (2008: 364) report the following:

Over 92 per cent of environmentally sceptical books are linked to conservative think tanks ... Environmental scepticism began in the US, is strongest in the US, and exploded after the end of the Cold War and the emergence of global environmental concern stimulated by the 1992 Earth Summit.

Environmental scepticism is an elite-driven reaction to global environmentalism, organised by core actors within the conservative movement. Promoting scepticism is a key tactic of the anti-environmental counter-movement coordinated by CTTs [= conservative think tanks], designed specifically to undermine the environmental movement’s efforts to legitimise its claims via science.

The emergence of this rather successful tactic was, according to Jacques, Dunlap, and Freeman (2008: 353), the result of witnessing that “the Reagan administration’s efforts to weaken environmental regulations in the early 1980s provoked a significant backlash from the general public and environmental organisations.” This made it clear “that it was safer to question the seriousness of environmental problems and portray environ-

mentalists as ‘radicals’ who distort evidence and exaggerate problems.’⁴⁶

Moreover, “[s]ince environmentalism is unique among social movements in its heavy reliance on scientific evidence to support its claims,” it was only natural that opposition to that, sponsored by fossil-fuel industry, “would launch a direct assault on environmental science by promoting environmental scepticism in their efforts to oppose the environmental movement.”

It is perhaps remarkable that an intention to protect individual freedom—personal freedom of movement and political freedom were indeed a problem in the Soviet Union—can in turn lead to the intentional adoption of strategies of disinformation.⁴⁷ When evaluated from an early Buddhist perspective, this exemplifies that the end does not automatically justify the means, instead of which both means and end need to be in line with basic ethical principles.

In any response to the challenges of climate change and of its denial, this remains a key dimension: operating under the overarching framework of the four noble truths, which requires adherence to right speech, action, and livelihood in combination with the right intention to diminish harm and affliction.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ A relevant factor here is public perception of the way scientists in general and those working on climate change in particular tend to present their results. Marshall 2014/2015: 73 explains that, for scientists, “full certainty is unattainable,” yet, “[w]hen scientists say *uncertain*, the public hears *unsure*.”

⁴⁷ The strong motivation provided by the perception of defending personal freedom can then foster a self-serving justification for the adoption of unethical behavior, thereby enabling one to do wrong while feeling moral; on this principle in general see Shalvi, Gino, Barkan, and Ayal 2015: 125.

⁴⁸ See in more detail Anālayo 2019e: 134–150.

The importance of giving priority to ethics comes to the fore in a Pāli discourse and one of its Chinese parallels on how one should cultivate effacement. According to the two parallel versions, it does not suffice if one attains the four absorptions or even the four immaterial spheres. This indication needs to be read in the light of the repeated emphasis on these deep states of concentrative tranquility elsewhere in early Buddhist thought, showing that they were highly valued. Yet, in the present case they fall short of being true effacement. Instead, what this requires is maintaining ethical principles when faced with those who act unethically.⁴⁹

One should train in effacement: Others may cultivate what is contrary to the Dharma, evil conduct; I shall cultivate the Dharma, sublime conduct.

In all three versions of this discourse, the same basic injunction applies to killing and theft, as it does to falsehood and speaking harshly.⁵⁰ This neatly exemplifies the overarching importance that from an early Buddhist perspective should be placed on a firm commitment to maintaining ethical integrity.

The Loss of Truth

The situation that emerges with the previous exploration invites a closer look at general patterns in contemporary society regarding the value accorded to truth. In the context of a discussion of science denial among conservatives, Mooney (2012: 47) comments on the “intense partisan divide in the U.S. over the reality of global warming,” noting that this “has shown a tendency to

⁴⁹ MĀ 91 at T I 573c17.

⁵⁰ MN 8 at MN I 42,5+9, MĀ 91 at T I 573c9+19, and EĀ 47.9 at T II 784a16–18.

widen even as the basic facts about global warming have become more firmly established.”

Exploring the psychological background to this situation, Mooney (2012: 29) explains that “not only do we feel before we think—but most of the time, we don’t even reach the second step.” In other words, “[o]ur prior emotional commitments—operating in a way we’re not even aware of—often cause us to misread all kinds of evidence, or selectively interpret it to favor what we already believe.” In this way, according to Mooney (2012: 32), often enough “when we think we’re reasoning we may instead be rationalizing.”

This tendency relates to what O’Connor and Weatherall (2019: 14), in their study of misinformation, refer to as the “pervasive idea in Western culture that humans are essentially rational ... and make decisions about the world that are perfectly informed by all available information.” This idea, however, “is dangerously distorted.” In fact, as climate scientist Hayhoe (2021: 53) points out, “being better able to handle quantitative information and understand science in general ... just makes you better able to cherry-pick the information you need to validate what you already believe.” In other words, the basic principle is simply that “the smarter we are, the harder we’ll try to out-argue the devil if he disagrees with us.”

Particularly telling is the observation by Marshall (2014/2015: 124) that, “[i]ronically, one of the best proofs that information does not change people’s attitudes is that science communicators continue to ignore the extensive research evidence that shows that information does not change people’s attitudes.”

In line with the above assessments, early Buddhist psychology clearly recognizes the basically biased nature of our perceptual appraisal of the world and the pervasive impact of feeling tones—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—in triggering emo-

tional reactivity in a way that is usually not consciously noticed yet substantially influences evaluations and reactions. In short, what we nowadays refer to as cognitive bias and motivated reasoning were already a problem and recognized as such, albeit expressed in different terminology, in ancient India.

In addition to these general patterns, however, there are some specific conditions relevant to the contemporary setting. One of these emerges in a study of the secular age by Taylor (2007: 475) who identifies a spread, after the Second World War, of a “culture of authenticity,” according to which “each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity,” which above all needs to be actualized rather than “surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside.” There is a “growing sense of the right, even duty, to resist ... established codes and standards.” Taylor (2007: 484) describes a typical attitude as follows: “let each person do their own thing ... [o]ne shouldn’t criticize the others’ values, because they have a right to live their own life as you do. The sin which is not tolerated is intolerance.”

The resultant cult of subjectivity combines with an undermining of the notion of truth. This has distant roots in skepticism regarding the concept of truth and the means for arriving at it found similarly in ancient Greece and ancient India. In addition to these, however, a more recent influence has been identified in a study of the threat posed to democracy by autocrats by Naím (2022: 182), who comments on the philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) presenting knowledge as an elite construct that this “was in for a turbulent second life. Let out into the wild, it would switch sides, becoming weaponized by the most retrograde forces in society intent on cementing their hold on power.” In this way, “the social construction of truth trans-

formed into the era of ‘alternative facts’ and ‘fake news’.⁵¹ An example was when the “poststructuralist mindset that dismisses truth as nothing more than a social construct was, in fact, one of the central organizing principles of the Trump administration.”

In a discussion of this shift in perspective on truth and the notion of alternative facts, as these relate to post-modernism, Wight (2018: 25) comments that the idea is of course not that “Trump and others in his administration have read the likes of Kuhn, Foucault and Wittgenstein.” Instead, “access to education has suffused these ideas throughout the social field,” and “[t]he incipient relativism that is the logical endpoint of these ideas is now deeply ingrained in western societies.”⁵²

A term used to capture this general trend is “post-truth,” which the Oxford dictionaries chose as the word of the year for 2016, defined (in its adjectival use) as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”⁵³ Note that, as highlighted by Wight (2018: 22), “[p]ost-

⁵¹ Newman 2023: 23f notes that “[t]o say that truth is historically or culturally constructed, and that it is bound up with power, does not mean that truth does not exist.” Yet, “[t]he idea that, as Foucault put it, ‘knowledge is made for cutting’ contains within it the potential for a dangerous ideological promiscuity,” although his later writings reflect a different, “more productive, understanding of truth, one that still has political significance, but which is at the same time governed by an ethical sensibility that resists its incorporation into the game of power politics.”

⁵² Wight 2018: 27 comments that, “if academics cannot ground their truth claims on something other than opinions, perspectives or identity, then how can we expect anyone else to do so?”

⁵³ See <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/> ; accessed on 26 April 2024.

truth resides not in the realm of production, but in the realm of reception.” That is, the issue is not so much the telling of lies and false propaganda, but how people respond to that.

In a study of the emergence of the post-truth situation, Vacura (2020: 13) reasons that, even though “[p]ostmodernism was originally understood as an emancipatory philosophy,” however, “by declaring all narratives equal and explicitly rejecting rationality and reason in favor of emotion, it opened the door to a post-truth era in which emotional compliance with claims is more important than the truth.” According to Vacura (2020: 9), “post-truth communication is merely a form of signaling in which the speaker shows certain moral signs and affinities shared with the target audience, and this signaling itself is more important than its factual content of communication and its formal truthfulness.”

Vacura (2020: 12) points out that “[t]he current state of media and politics is the consequence of adopting the principle that there are no facts, only their interpretation.” In this way, “[w]hat was presented as a means of intellectual emancipation has become, in fact, a justification for the perceived right to say anything the author believes, whether or not it is supported by facts.” Vacura (2020: 14) in turn concludes that “the post-truth situation affects and encompasses the whole of society. Thus, it is not possible to speak of a post-truth era in relationship only to the political sphere.”⁵⁴

⁵⁴ The same trend has also been impacting Buddhist studies. Gombrich 1992: 159 points out that “[r]elativism is all the rage these days. In some university departments, especially in the United States, and in many other places as well, the view prevails that the meaning of a text is that ascribed to it by each reader or each generation of readers; that it has no objective or inherent meaning, and the grounds for pre-

In relation to the impact of post-truth on European politics, Hálfðanarson and Conrad (2023: 248f) highlight the role of digital communications and social media:

In the beginning, new digital platforms, social media in particular, were greeted as potential tools of democratising authoritarian societies, because they opened countless possibilities for individuals to express their opinions, to gather information, and to organise political action, without government interference or suppression. ... Increasingly, however, observers regard social media as an obstacle to, rather than a facilitator of, critical debate ... Daily, people are bombarded with news and opinions from all directions, and the sheer abundance of information makes it difficult for most citizens to distinguish between fact and fiction, or valid information and deliberate or unintentional misinformation.

The emergence of post-truth politics was, however, not merely an automatic consequence of a transformation in communication technologies as it has also been consciously endorsed by populist political actors, both through extensive dissemination of disinformation on social media platforms and the systematic discrediting of various epistemic authorities, including critical journalism.

Naím (2022: 159) observes that “[i]t is this strategic use of confusion that makes post-truth much darker than the run-of-the-mill mendaciousness of the powerful. It is not about the spread of this lie or that lie but about destroying the possibility of truth in public life.” In a study of post-truth, Braun (2019: 435) points out that “[i]t is the hallmark of autocratic governance not just to

ferring one interpretation to another, if any, are thus political or matters of personal preference.”

manipulate facts but to destroy the conditions for ascertaining validity altogether.”

A related problem is an increasing trend toward polarization. Vacura (2020: 7) notes that “the information that reaches people from social networks is primarily shared or upvoted by people from their own social environment, resulting in phenomena known as the ‘social bubble’ or social ‘echo chamber’.”

The idea of a social bubble refers to being “in an environment (real or virtual) comprised of people with similar or identical views,” as a result of which “the idea arises that certain attitudes are ‘normal’ because ‘almost everyone’ has such views, so these attitudes are certain, unquestionable and correct.” The notion of an echo chamber refers to “a situation in which a certain group of people mutually reinforces their shared beliefs. Shared views are repeated, resonated in a shared virtual space, thereby being reinforced.”⁵⁵

From the viewpoint of the psychological underpinnings of post-truth beliefs, McDermott (2019: 219) explains that in general we usually “rely on basic and universal psychological biases that serve to reduce cognitive load. Everyone must process too much information every day.” However, “[i]n an effort to negotiate the tasks that we all must accomplish every day, we rely on those intuitive psychological shortcuts that prove effective and efficient most of the time.” The problem with this procedure is that “we may not notice the ways that these biases render us prone to systematic error or susceptible to systematic manipulation by others.”

⁵⁵ Marshall 2014/2015: 28 notes that “[i]n our dispersed and media-driven society, people are able to immerse themselves in a self-constructed social network where the norm is entirely consistent with their own views.”

McDermott (2019: 220) adds that “it takes much extra effort for most people to resist rather than believe a lie. Believing simple lies is simply much easier than evaluating complex facts.” Naím (2022: 168) adds that peoples’ interest is biased “in favor of the unexpected, shocking, and new. Of course, false news is much more often unexpected, shocking, and surprising than real news.” In this way, according to Naím (2022: 170) “journalism that hews to traditional standards for accuracy and verification can never match disinformation along one critical axis: novelty.” The result of this is “a sort of journalistic dysfunction that makes bad information systematically drive out the good.”

Naím (2022: 181) sums up that “post-truth is about the rejection of complexity, nuance, and reason.” In this way, “[i]t is premised on the uncomfortable reality that an emotionally fulfilling lie is much more likely to be believed than an emotionally unfulfilling truth.”

In a sociologically oriented study of the notion of a post-truth society, Malcolm (2021: 1064) notes that “politicians can apparently contradict their prior assertions without incurring reputational damage,” and there is a “decline of shame when one is exposed for being factually wrong or suspected of deception.”⁵⁶ Malcolm (2021: 1076) furthermore explains that “a relaxation of feelings of shame is enabled by the ‘excess’ of truth to which

⁵⁶ A relevant factor here may also be a tendency, noted by Kouchaki and Gino 2016: 1, where “engaging in unethical behavior produces changes in memory so that memories of unethical actions gradually become less clear and vivid than memories of ethical actions or other types of actions that are either positive or negative in valence. We term this memory obfuscation of one’s unethical acts over time ‘unethical amnesia.’ Because of unethical amnesia, people are more likely to act dishonestly repeatedly over time.”

we are now witness,” as “ease of access means contradictory evidence is more frequently presented, which in turn is enabled by the internet and social media’s impact on the social fund of knowledge.”

In a study of post-truth and knowledge construction in relation to the topic of climate change, Fischer (2019: 142) points out:

From a closer examination of the arguments of climate deniers, we learn that, despite appearances to the contrary, the basic concern is not about facts per se; rather, it is about the meanings attached to them ... climate deniers simply reject the studies of climate scientists based on what they believe to be the motives behind their work. That is, what they reject more than the data are the sociopolitical dynamics that have generated it ... they largely take the expert communities and the universities that train them to be bastions of left-leaning liberalism—or socialism—promoting big government and its regulatory truth regime.

So intense is this worry that they feel an urgent and justified need to oppose and block this political effort at every turn. In fact, this stance is often so extreme that it can best be described in terms of dread and outrage.

When it comes to relying on biased reasoning, Fischer (2019: 147) notes: “The reality is, both sides do it, but try to hide behind conventional understandings of science when they do it.”

In the context of an analysis of attitudes leading to climate change denial, Marshall (2014/2015: 44) similarly reports that both sides in the debate share a tendency to succumb to confirmation bias. Such bias “leads us to seek out further information to confirm ... [our] existing views, or to reject information that challenges them.” In this way, according to his findings, “campaigners for and against action on climate change were equally

bound by this mechanism, and even used the same language and metaphors when describing the other side.”

The gradual erosion of the notion of truth that emerges in this way can also be related to the Discourse on the World Monarch, already mentioned earlier. The parallel versions agree in reporting that, once the decline of ethical conduct has reached its nadir, even the notion of wholesomeness disappears.⁵⁷ As the three parallels of this discourse point out, this decisively erodes the very possibility of acting in wholesome ways.

Economics

From the political dimension, and in particular the impact of post-truth, in what follows I turn to the economic dimension relevant to the problem of climate change. In the context of an in-depth exploration of shortcomings of current economic thinking in the face of the challenges of the twenty-first century, Raworth (2017/2023: 5f) sums up the importance of economics in the following way: “Economics is the mother tongue of public policy, the language of public life and the mindset that shapes society.” She notes that economics has affected public life to the extent that even healthcare is recast in terms of patients as customers and doctors as service-providers.

The influence of economics on various domains of contemporary society can result in the main orientation becoming financial growth rather than a focus on human benefit and well-

⁵⁷ DN 26 at DN III 71,27: “among humans there will not be even the notion of ‘wholesomeness’”; DĀ 6 at T I 41a20: “at that time, there will actually not be the notion of wholesome states”; and MĀ 70 at T I 523a22: “then, the notion of wholesomeness will be completely nonexistent.”

being.⁵⁸ Raworth (2017/2023: 30) reports that this is the outcome of a development that took place in the course of the twentieth century, as a result of which “economics had become a value-free zone, shaking off any normative claims of what ought to be and emerging at last as a ‘positive’ science focused on describing simply what is.”⁵⁹

Addressing the lack of values and goals beyond mere economic growth calls for a shift in perspective, which Raworth (2017/2023: 26) presents as follows: “Today we have econo-

⁵⁸ According to Tallgauer and Schank 2023: 1f and 3, “the prevailing economics education promotes a decontextualized and hyperrational perspective on economic phenomena and human behavior, which impedes sustainable development goals by pushing pressing socio-ecological challenges to the periphery.” Thus, “the positivist and neoliberal foundations of economics education promote a narrow and hyper-individualized understanding of the economy, which entails harmful attitudes and behaviors and fails to reflect the complex socio-material realities of the world,” as a result of which “[e]nvironmental and social discourses are either excluded from the realm of economics or rejected because of value judgments that contradict a positivist approach prioritizing economic efficiency over wellbeing.”

⁵⁹ A background to this development can be found in the following reflections by Taylor 2007: 501: “We are in a different universe from that of, say, Aristotelian ethics, where a concept like ‘*phronesis*’ doesn’t allow us to separate a knowledge component from the practice of virtue. This becomes possible with modern science, construed as knowledge of an objectified domain ... Even more striking, this recourse to objectified knowledge begins in modern culture to take over ethics. On the utilitarian viewpoint, for example, the knowledge/expertise necessary to make the calculus which will reveal the right action is quite unconnected from one’s own motivation in relation to the good.” In sum, the net result is an “emphasis on objectified expertise over moral insight.”

mies that need to grow, whether or not they make us thrive; what we need are economies that make us thrive, whether or not they grow.”

In another stimulating book for rethinking economics, Henderson (2020b: 9) points out that “we have created a system in which many of the world’s companies believe that it is their moral duty to do nothing for the public good.”⁶⁰ Yet, in the words of Henderson (2020b: 36), “while firms must be profitable if they are to thrive, their purpose must be not only to make money but also to build prosperity and freedom in the context of a livable planet and a healthy society.”

From an early Buddhist perspective, what appears to be lacking in the overall picture is a firm ethical orientation toward avoiding and minimizing harm, that is, compassion. I will come back to this topic below.

Raworth (2017/2023: 10) notes that “[h]umanity faces some formidable challenges, and it is in no small part thanks to the

⁶⁰ Henderson 2020b: 16f explains the reasoning behind the emergence of this perspective in economics in the course of the twentieth century to have been that “truly competitive markets allocate resources much more effectively and much more efficiently,” wherefore “free competition, the absence of collusion and of private information, and the appropriate pricing of externalities” will ensure that “maximizing shareholder returns maximizes public welfare.” This combines with the “normative primacy of individual freedoms,” and the idea that “[a]cting as a trustworthy agent is a moral commitment in its own right,” wherefore managers “have a duty to manage the firm as their investors would wish,” which is to maximize profits. These ideas are “the product of a specific time and place, and of a particular set of institutional conditions. Given the realities of today’s world, they are dangerously mistaken.” On the different forces that prevent market-based competition from leading to general public welfare see also Jaeger 2021: 205–208.

blind spots and mistaken metaphors of outdated economic thinking that we have ended up here.” Just to provide one out of many examples for blind spots, taken from Raworth (2017/2023: 68f):

[M]ainstream economic theory is obsessed with the productivity of waged labour while skipping right over the unpaid work that makes it all possible ... Millions of women and girls spend hours walking miles each day, carrying their body weight in water, food or firewood on their heads, often with a baby strapped to their back—and all for no pay ... this gendered division of paid and unpaid work is prevalent in every society, albeit sometimes less visibly so ... Without all that cooking, washing, nursing and sweeping, there would be no workers—today or in the future—who were healthy, well-fed and ready for work each morning.

Raworth (2017/2023: 69f) adds that this blind spot matters considerably, “because when—in the name of austerity and public sector savings—governments cut budgets for children’s day-care centres, community services, parental leave and youth clubs, the need for care-giving doesn’t just disappear: it just gets pushed back into the home.”

In general, Raworth (2017/2023: 137) points out, “[e]thics are at the core of other professions, such as medicine,” as exemplified in the Hippocratic Oath, whereas “[e]conomics is more than two thousand years behind medicine in honing the ethics of its own profession.” As noted by Henderson (2020b: 37) “directors can—and should—sometimes make decisions that do not maximize shareholder value in the short term to pursue long-term success,” and such decisions can often benefit from some form of ethical orientation. Yet, such orientation is often lacking, and for good reasons, as pointed out by Henderson (2020b: 27):

When we told the leaders of firms that their sole duty was to focus on shareholder value ... We told them that so long as they increased profit, it was their moral duty to pull down the institutions that constrained them—to lobby against consumer protection, to distort climate science, to break unions, and to pour money into efforts to roll back taxes and regulations.

In the context of researching the extent to which education in economics stimulates greed, Wang, Malhotra, and Murnighan (2011: 644) note that “the assumption of self-interest, embodied in the desire to maximize gains and minimize losses, is central to most economic models.” Yet, an “inherent problem in an economic approach to greed is that the push to maximize gains does not include a stopping rule: The accumulation of gain need see no end other than *externally* imposed constraints.” This problem appears to be rooted in the way economics are taught.⁶¹ Wang, Malhotra, and Murnighan (2011: 655) report that, according to the results of their research, “economics education is consistently associated with positive attitudes toward greed.”⁶²

In an exploration of the possibility of reorienting firms toward embracing moral values as part of their mission, Henderson (2023: 198f) explains that “the widespread acceptance of the idea that untrammelled greed should be the only motive for economic activity is a relatively recent phenomenon.” In fact,

⁶¹ Of interest here is also the following research finding by Frank and Schulze 2000: 110, based on a survey conducted among university students from different faculties to test their degree of corruptibility: “Our results support the notion that economists tend to pursue their own interest more consequentially than other people.”

⁶² According to research by Gino and Mogilner 2014: 419, “simply thinking about money can make people behave more dishonestly.”

since the time of its medieval antecedents, “[t]he idea that business had to be constrained by ethical precepts and a sense of responsibility to the broader society survived well into the twentieth century.” In short, in the words of Henderson (2023: 199), “making money should be viewed as a means to an end, not an end in itself.”

The needed reorientation away from the recent domination of economics by the principle of greed and toward long-term sustainability is not necessarily alien to standard ways of economic thinking. Henderson (2020b: 222) notes that “[d]ecarbonization will be expensive. But unchecked climate change will cost billions of dollars more.” Said differently, according to Henderson (2020b: 255) “[m]eeting the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals is a \$12 trillion opportunity.”

A promising way to go about that resonates with what already emerged in the discussion of politics, namely an emphasis on starting off with local initiatives. In a compelling vision of the potential contribution by twenty-first-century economists, Raworth (2017/2023: 173) reasons that “[r]ather than wait for top-down reform, they will work with bottom-up networks that are already driving a revolution in redistribution” and “in regenerative economic design.” Raworth (2017/2023: 243) adds the following overall perspective:

Humanity’s glass easily looks half empty. Follow those fears through and ... like all powerful frames, [that] could help to make those very outcomes self-fulfilling. But there are enough people who still see the alternative, the glass-half-full future, and are intent on bringing it about ... Ours is the first generation to deeply understand the damage we have been doing to our planetary household, and probably the last generation with the chance to do something transformative about it.

Taking this chance is crucial, and the following reflections by Henderson (2020b: 11) can help to inspire the required courage:

We have the technology and the resources to build a just and sustainable world, and doing so is squarely in the private sector's interest. It is going to be hard to make money if the major coastal cities are underwater, half the population is underemployed or working at jobs that pay less than a living wage, and democratic government has been replaced by populist oligarchs who run the world for their own benefit. Moreover, embracing a pro-social purpose beyond profit maximization and taking responsibility for the health of the natural and social systems on which we all rely not only makes good business sense but is also morally required by the same commitments to freedom and prosperity that drove our original embrace of shareholder value ... business has not only the power and the duty to play a huge role in transforming the world but also strong economic incentives to do so. The world is changing. The firms that change with it will reap rich returns.

Henderson (2020b: 21) points out that “[f]ossil fuel energy looks cheap—but only because we’re not counting the costs we are imposing on our neighbors and the future. Every coal-fired plant on the planet is actively destroying value.” Due to that, “[e]very time you use fossil fuels—whether it’s to drive a car or to take a flight—you are creating lasting damage that you are not paying for.”

Raworth (2017/2023: 48f) reasons that “[o]urs is the era of the planetary household—and the art of household management is needed more than ever for our common home,” wherefore she recommends, on the individual level, “asking ourselves: how does the way that I shop, eat, travel, earn a living, bank, vote,

and volunteer affect my personal impact on social and planetary boundaries?”⁶³

Alongside change at the individual level, there is of course also a need for change at the political level. In the context of a survey of economic factors impacting the challenges of climate change, Jaeger (2021: 209 and 215) puts the matter succinctly as follows: “If climate change is to be halted, it is not business that must determine policy, but politics that must set limits for business.” The problem is simply that “[t]he market does not punish ethical misconduct. Politics must do that.”

Henderson (2020b: 12f) provides examples for such a need:

In September 2015, Turing ... announced that it was raising the price of the generic drug Daraprim from \$13.50 to \$750 a tablet—an approximately 5,000 percent increase. Daraprim was widely used to treat complications from AIDS. It cost approximately \$1 per pill and had no competition. Anyone wanting to buy Daraprim had to buy it from Turing. The move unleashed a media storm.

Martin Shkreli, Turing’s CEO, was vilified in the press and accosted in public. But he was unrepentant. Asked if he

⁶³ Marshall 2014/2015: 201 points out that “the self-serving narratives we experts mobilize to justify our personal flying are so uncannily similar to those that people raise around addictions: I need to do this, I’m not hurting anyone, everyone else does it, I’ve worked for it, I can stop anytime, other people are far worse.” Jaeger 2021: 242 reports that some “argue that voluntary restrictions and the consequent loss of quality of life are too much to ask for in a free society. After all, renunciation does not directly benefit oneself; it benefits everyone equally, including those who do not restrict themselves. Most people do not want to give up air travel when their neighbours take a long-distance trip twice a year.”

would do anything differently, he replied: “I probably would have raised prices higher ... I could have raised it higher and made more profits for our shareholders. Which is my primary duty ... my investors expect me to maximize profits, not to minimize them, or go half, or go 70 percent, but to go to 100 percent of the profit curve we’re all taught in MBA [= Master of Business Administration] class.”

It’s tempting to believe that Shkreli is an outlier ... But he expressed in the starkest terms the implications of the imperative to make as much money as you can, and Daraprim is not the only generic drug to have its price hiked. In 2014, Lannett, another generic pharmaceutical producer, raised the price of Fluphenazine—a drug that is used to treat schizophrenia and is on the World Health Organization’s list of most essential medicines—from \$43.50 to \$870—a 2,000 percent increase. Valeant increased the prices of Nitropress and Isuprel—two leading heart drugs—by more than 500 percent, reportedly leaving the firm with a gross margin of more than 99 percent.

Surely this can’t be right. Do managers really have a moral duty to exploit desperately sick people?

These examples vividly illustrate what anyway emerges as a key aspect of the situation, namely the need for an ethical orientation that is grounded in compassion—in the sense of dedication to the minimization of harm—and such an orientation could preferably inform politics, economics, and even society at large.

The need for an ethical orientation grounded in compassion is part of the message of the Discourse on the World Monarch, already mentioned earlier. Complementing the indication that an improvement of ethical conduct can have positive repercussions on the environment, the same discourse presents govern-

mental failure to take proper care of the needy as what originally triggered a gradual ethical and then environmental decline.⁶⁴ Due to such lack of compassionate concern on the political level, poverty increased, which resulted in acts of theft, and from there a continuous trajectory of ethical decline set in. This happened despite attempts by the government to address the problem, which were focused on the symptoms rather than trying to address the underlying problem.

Reassessing the Situation

For the purpose of developing a reassessment of the actual situation, in what follows I will rely in particular on indications and clarifications offered by Ritchie (2024), based on recent data related to central global problems, in particular the challenges of climate change.⁶⁵ Based on her research work, Ritchie (2024) presents a wealth of significant information that puts into perspective the impression that humanity is doomed. Now, an attempt at correcting a biased opinion can easily run the risk of at times overstating the case. But even allowing for the possibility of occasional evaluations that may be too optimistic,⁶⁶ I find the

⁶⁴ See Anālayo 2019e: 55–61.

⁶⁵ At the time of my writing, Ritchie 2024 had just come out, wherefore it was not possible for me to consult reviews, as these were yet to appear. In the course of revising this book, however, I became aware of one review, which has been published in the *Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/jan/04/not-the-end-of-the-world-by-hannah-ritchie-review-an-optimists-guide-to-the-climate-crisis>.

⁶⁶ A reservation I have regarding the degree of threat posed by climate change concerns tipping points, when the thawing of permafrost and ice sheets results in an accelerated and irreversible release of methane that increases global warming. Ritchie 2024: 8 briefly refers

overall perspective she presents as a data scientist eminently helpful and needed.

Here is how Ritchie (2024: 257) characterizes a prevalent attitude, which takes the form of a

doomsday mentality that we've locked ourselves into. We extrapolate exploding population numbers and panic that they will never stop growing. At least, until they crash. We see rising CO₂ emissions and assume that they'll just keep rising. Fertilizers, coal, pesticides, air pollution: we'll just produce more and more. If you're skeptical that things can change, then this is a natural position to fall into. But there's no scientific basis for this assumption. In fact, for most of our environmental problems, there are clear signs that it *isn't* that way any more. We can, and are, course-correcting.

A central aspect relevant to assessing the situation concerns the very notion of sustainability, which according to the United Nations definition of this term calls for “meeting present needs without compromising the chances of future generations to meet their needs.”⁶⁷ Ritchie (2024: 19) reasons:⁶⁸

to tipping points in passing, but I wonder if, since this is at present not easily measurable in data, it may not have been at the forefront of her data-oriented presentation.

⁶⁷ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2023/08/what-is-sustainable-development/>; accessed on 22 April 2024.

⁶⁸ Ritchie 2024: 19 adds that, “[h]aving thought I was living through humanity’s most tragic period, I now believe I’m living through its best.” See also Marshall 2014/2015: 93 who notes “that climate change is occurring ... at a time when we have the combination of technology, wealth, education, and international cooperation that might be able to respond to it. This is not perfect timing, but it is just about as good as it could be.” A to some extent comparable shift in

We need to make sure that everyone in the world can live a good life *and* we need to reduce our environmental impacts so that future generations can flourish too. That puts us in uncharted territory.

No previous generation had the knowledge, technology, political systems, or international cooperation to do both at the same time. We have the opportunity to be the first generation that achieves sustainability.

Ritchie (2024: 34) notes that “new technologies are allowing us to decouple a good and comfortable life from an environmentally destructive one.”⁶⁹

According to Ritchie (2024: 75), since 2012 “per capita emissions have been slowly falling. Nowhere near fast enough, but falling nonetheless.” Ritchie (2024: 81) explains that “massive strides in technology mean that we use much less energy than we did in the past, despite *appearing* to lead much more ... energy-intensive lifestyles.” Ritchie (2024: 86 and 84) reports:

perspective—here in relation to racism in particular—has been articulated by Magee 2019: 51 in the following way: “What if this difficult time ... signifies not the beginning of an end but a profound opportunity for a new beginning? What if, through the pain of seeing the way things are, we now have a new chance to get it right?”

⁶⁹ Jaeger 2021: 150f envisions a future where 3D printing in combination with nanotechnology will “move industrial manufacturing processes right into consumers’ living rooms. Then food, clothing, furniture, and other everyday items will be printed right at home. The mobile machines that do this need not be larger than a laptop.” Should this tantalizing vision come true, then “the previous rules on how much material, manpower, and time it takes to supply a person with desired goods and products will no longer apply.” This “will above all save energy” and thereby substantially reduce impacts on the environment, in particular on the climate.

In just a decade, solar photovoltaic and wind energy have gone from the most to the least expensive ... [t]hey are now cheaper than coal ... [t]he low-carbon choice has suddenly become the economic one ...

This is a narrative that rarely makes it into the headlines. Economic growth and emissions reductions are often framed as being incompatible.”

Yet, this situation has by now changed.⁷⁰ Getting into the practicalities of how emissions reductions can be combined with lifestyle choices, of considerable importance at the individual level are decisions on what type of food to consume. According to Ritchie (2024: 101), this is “one of the most effective things you can do to cut your carbon footprint.”⁷¹ She explains that the food

⁷⁰ Based on a detailed survey of various modalities for renewable energy, Jaeger 2021: 139 concludes that “climate-neutral energies can completely replace fossil fuels in the medium term.” Jaeger 2021: 168 and 161 also notes that the “energy market reflects the dynamics of the transition towards renewable energy: private and institutional investors are withdrawing from *black-energy companies* and are focusing more and more on alternative energies,” in addition to which “G20 countries committed themselves to eliminating subsidies for *black energy* by 2025” (although efforts in this respect seem to be lagging behind; see Jaeger 2021: 216).

⁷¹ Jaeger 2021: 239f provides the following information on flying and food: “[A]ccording to the IPCC, if climate change is to be halted, the per capita emissions of each citizen of the earth must not exceed 2 tonnes of CO₂ per year. This figure and the lifestyle we have become accustomed to do not go together: A single flight from Europe to California or the Far East costs around 3–4 tonnes of CO₂ per passenger, and in business class it is almost twice as much ... Meat-based diets with a lot of frozen food cost about 2.5 tonnes of CO₂ per year, while vegan diets with regionally produced food are responsible for less than half of this amount of CO₂.” According to

with the highest impact is beef, followed by lamb, then dairy, then pork, and then chicken. Thus, “if we want to reduce our carbon footprint, we should eat a more plant-based diet.”

Beef consumption also has a substantial impact on deforestation.⁷² Ritchie (2024: 131) reports that “[f]orest clearance to make room for cows to graze on is responsible for more than 40% of global deforestation.” Another and related problem is the use of cereals to raise cows and other livestock. Ritchie (2024: 156f) argues that, in principle, it would be “possible to feed 8, 9, 10 billion people a nutritious diet without wrecking the planet.” However, we “lose *half* of the food we produce before it even reaches our plates” because a large part of it is fed to livestock: “The world produces 3 billion tonnes of cereals every year. Less than half of this goes towards human food; 41% is fed to livestock, and 11% is used for industrial uses.” Ritchie (2024: 147) concludes:

The fact that hundreds of millions still go hungry while we produce enough food to feed a population twice our size is truly shocking ... Hunger and famine still exist today, but they’re political and social in nature. The limits to us feeding everyone are entirely self-imposed. This is a unique position in human history: until the last century our ability to feed large numbers of people well was constrained by our ability

Ritchie 2024: 178, “[a]ll of the plant-based alternatives have lower environmental impact than cow’s milk. Cow’s milk generates around three times as much greenhouse gas emissions, uses around 10 times as much land, up to 20 times as much fresh water, and creates much higher levels of eutrophication (the pollution of waters with excess nutrients).”

⁷² A simple step to support reforestation would be to use the Ecosia web browser; see <https://www.ecosia.org/>.

to hunt down animals, then our ability to grow more food from the limited land we had. Now it is only constrained by our choices of what to do with the food we produce.

In addition to the needed political change, decisions taken at the individual level on what type of food to buy and eat can be part of a gradually increasing momentum toward making better choices with our resources and contribute in a meaningful way to counter climate change, deforestation, and global hunger at the same time.

Another helpful perspective still related to food concerns the use of palm oil, whose problematization as a driver in deforestation and related environmental impacts apparently needs to be reconsidered. Ritchie (2024: 134) explains that “if we were to replace palm oil with another oil, we would need to use much more land and potentially risk even more deforestation.”⁷³ In other words, rather than opting for a complete boycott of palm oil, the “recommendation from experts is to make sure that we’re buying palm oil that is certified as sustainable.”⁷⁴

Yet another topic to consider is the potential impact of buying food that is produced locally or else imported from far away. Ritchie (2024: 185) clarifies that “[t]he transport part of the food chain only contributes around 5% to all of the greenhouse gas emissions from food. Most of our food’s emissions come from land-use change and emissions *on the farm*.” Moreover, “[n]early all of the 5% of food emissions that come from transport is from the roads—the regional or local-level delivery of

⁷³ The reason, Ritchie 2024: 130 notes, is simply that “[o]ne hectare of palm currently gives us 2.8 tonnes of oil in return. Olives give us 0.3 tonnes. Coconuts give us 0.26 tonnes—that’s 10 times less. Groundnut, just 0.18 tonnes.”

⁷⁴ See the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil: <https://rspo.org/>.

foods. Shipping of foods is just 0.2%, and aviation even less, at 0.02%.” According to Ritchie (2024: 184), the conclusion that emerges in this way is that “*what* we eat matters much more for our carbon footprint than how far it has travelled to reach us.”

Regarding transportation, Ritchie (2024: 96) reports that in “2022, 14% of cars sold globally were electric,” which is a substantial increase from just 4% two years earlier. A problem that remains is long-distance travel; as of now, the solutions already in place for cars are not yet adaptable to planes. However, as Ritchie (2024: 99) notes, “[w]e don’t *have* to fly across the world to connect with others ... If the coronavirus pandemic taught us anything, it’s that most of these meetings can be done just as well online. It’s perfectly sensible that those who do fly should cut back.”

Another vital concern is clean air. Notably, this is not just a recent challenge, as air pollution was already a problem in ancient Greece and Rome.⁷⁵ Ritchie (2024: 55) succinctly explains the situation: “The solution to air pollution ... follows just one basic principle: stop burning stuff.” She adds that “[n]ot everything we burn creates the same amount of pollution. Wood is worse than coal; coal is worse than kerosene; kerosene is worse than gas.”

Thanks to growing global awareness and efforts to improve air quality, it appears as if the peak of emission of several major

⁷⁵ Fowler et al. 2020: 5 report that “[e]vidence from Greece shows that the problems of polluted air outdoors were being documented at least 2400 years ago. The book *Airs, waters and places* attributed to Hippocrates (*ca* 400 BC) suggested all sorts of illness as being related to the quality of air ... Writers a little later from Imperial Rome understood the probable health impacts of smoke with Seneca (*ca* AD 63–65) referring to the problem.”

pollutants has already passed.⁷⁶ Contrary to a common belief, the Amazon rainforest does not function as the lungs of the Earth. Ritchie (2024: 116) points out that, even though the Amazon indeed produces large amounts of oxygen, it also has a rather high consumption of the same: “The amount of oxygen the Amazon *consumes* is almost exactly the same as the amount it produces. These cancel each other out, so it provides almost none of the oxygen in the atmosphere.”

Instead of resulting from presently existing forests, “[t]he oxygen in our atmosphere came from phytoplankton in the oceans, millions of years ago.” This remains accessible independent of wildfires in the Amazon or elsewhere,⁷⁷ and it would “take millions of years to deplete the globe’s oxygen supply by any notable amount.”

Another problem to be put into perspective is the repercussions to be expected from the ongoing extinction of insects. Ritchie (2024: 208) explains:

Around three-quarters of our crops depend on pollinators to some extent, but only one-third of the total food we produce does. This is because many of our largest producing crops—staples such as wheat, maize and rice—are not dependent on them at all. These staple crops are pollinated by the wind. Very few crops are completely dependent on pollinators. Most would see a drop in their yields if the bees disappeared,

⁷⁶ See Fowler et al. 2020: 20, who add that “[c]limate change policies directed towards reduced use of coal and oil are expected to contribute further reductions in emissions of SO₂ and NO₂ over coming decades.” Just to be clear, the data for their main conclusion stems from the period before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁷⁷ On the future of the oxygen in the Earth’s atmosphere see also Ozaki and Reinhard 2021.

but they wouldn't collapse completely. Taking all this into account, studies suggest that crop production would decline by about 5% in higher income countries and 8% in low to middle incomes if pollinator insects vanished.

I don't say that to undermine the importance of insects. They are crucial ... We should be concerned, but things are not *quite* as bad as many believe.

Reassessing the situation with all these different dimensions in mind, perhaps the best way to conclude the present section is by reproducing key passages from the conclusion of the study by Ritchie (2024: 288–290):

Our ancestors were never sustainable because they never achieved the first half—meeting the needs of the current generation. Half of all children died, preventable disease was common and nutrition was often poor. Over the last century the world has made unprecedented progress in improving living standards across the world. In some places progress has been slower, but *every* country has improved in health, education, nutrition and other important indicators of well-being. Of course, we're not done. The world is still terrible in many ways: children and mothers die from preventable diseases, nearly one in ten go hungry, and not every child gets the opportunity to go to school. We've got serious work to do. But many of the solutions are at our fingertips—we know what to do, and many countries have done it already. It's possible to achieve this everywhere over the next few decades if we commit to it ...

Moving forward, we need to make sure that everyone can move through this pathway to prosperity, but on a low-carbon energy source. This option was never there for our ancestors. It was wood, fossil fuels or nothing. That's not the

case today. The price of renewable energy has plummeted, and the same goes for batteries and electric vehicles. Soon the low-carbon pathway will be the cheap one. There used to be a trade-off: burn fossil fuels or stay poor. We'll be the first generations that don't have to face this dilemma ...

The trade-off for energy was also true for forests. First, for firewood and building materials, then to clear land for agriculture. You either cut down the forest or run out of land to grow food. Crop yields have increased three-, four-, five-fold in the last century, breaking this deadlock. We can grow more food without using more land ... In the next few decades, deforestation will hit zero if we continue to invest in productive crops and make better decisions on what food to eat ...

We won't solve climate change, stop deforestation or protect biodiversity without changes to how we eat. Hunger rates have fallen quickly over the last 50 years, but one in 10 people still don't get enough food to eat ... We can produce products just like meat, without the environmental impact and the animal slaughter. That would save an incredible amount of resources and help alleviate global malnutrition at the same time ... Everyone in the world can be well fed on a planet that isn't eating itself alive.

A Middle Path

With the present section my exploration shifts from surveying various dimensions of climate change based on research by other scholars to a more psychologically oriented perspective grounded in the early Buddhist notion of a middle path. Before turning to that notion, however, as a way of at least shortly paying respect to Native American traditions and the potential of indigenous wisdom when faced with serious challenges, I like

to take up briefly the case of Plenty Coups (c. 1848–1932), a visionary leader of the Crow Tribe. In his youth, he had a vision predicting that white people will take control of the Crow territory and that the buffaloes will disappear, two disastrous events from the viewpoint of the traditional lifestyle of the Crow as well as of Native Americans in general.⁷⁸

The first is perhaps self-evident; the second can be appreciated in the light of the retrospective comment made by Plenty Coups when both aspects of his vision had become reality, in that “when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this ... [t]here was little singing anywhere.”⁷⁹ Nevertheless, guided by his vision of what at that time was still in the future, Plenty Coups was able to ensure that the Crow survived the impact of these two rather serious challenges much better than they would have otherwise.

When Plenty Coups was young, the challenges that lay ahead for his people, and possible solutions to them, were not easily discernible. In the case of climate change, however, the abundance of scientific information available outlines the basic nature of the challenges ahead, even though the details of how

⁷⁸ Regarding the large-scale killing of the American bison in the 19th century, Marners 2020: 129 reports that “a conservative estimate of 30 million bison at the beginning of the century had been radically reduced to only a few thousand animals,” adding that “American frontier militias also adopted bison slaughter as a tactic to weaken Indigenous tribes through starvation.” Hubbard 2014: 294 reports that the resultant disappearance of the American bison became “the second major wave of trauma for Plains Indigenous peoples (epidemic disease is the first). Many people starved to death after the herds were extinguished.”

⁷⁹ Lear 2006: 2.

these will unfold remain uncertain. Moreover, a range of possible solutions have been and are continuously emerging, in particular in the form of local initiatives alongside global political action and changing approaches in economics, as well as adjustments in personal lifestyle in matters of food consumption, etc.

Of central relevance for the specific approach that I am trying to present here is a basic concept of early Buddhist thought known as the middle path. This notion is part of what according to tradition was the first teaching given by the recently awakened Buddha, in which he presented the noble eightfold path (= the 4th of the four noble truths) as steering a middle path between the two extremes of self-mortification and sensual indulgence.⁸⁰ Applied to the case of climate change, the proposed way forward can be found in a middle path between anxiety and giving up on the one side and reactivity by anger and hatred on the other, in order to be able to do what is needed with an attitude of inner balance and ethical integrity.

Anxiety and Giving Up

In what follows, I relate my proposal of a middle path to two examples that illustrate the problems with each of the two extremes mentioned above. The first of these two examples involves a philosopher of science I already quoted earlier when discussing perspectives on time (p. 255). Latour (2017: 9) imagines a scenario in which over thirty years ago the needed action was taken and the climate problem solved, leading him to pose the question: “How can we not feel rather ashamed that we have made a situation irreversible because we moved along like sleepwalkers when the alarms sounded?”

⁸⁰ For a comparative study of this first teaching see Anālayo 2012a and 2013a.

Latour (2017: 11–13) then surveys different reactions to the challenges of climate change. One of these he characterizes as the “climate quietists,” on whom he comments that “these people are crazy by dint of staying calm.”

Others “have heard the warning sirens but have reacted with such panic that they are plunged into a different frenzy” by advocating domination strategies like geo-engineering. He comments that “[i]f the members of the first group of climate skeptics have to be shaken up to keep them from sleeping, those in this second group need to be strait-jacketed to keep them from doing too many foolish things.”

The third group in his portrayal are those that succumb to depression, who have “lost their nerve” and are “stirred from their lethargy only by their rage at seeing others even crazier than they are.”

He then describes the fourth group, the “craziest of all,” which “are those who appear to believe that they can do something despite the odds, that it isn’t too late.”

With this survey of different types of what he deems to be manifestations of craziness in place, he then refers to those who “are like me, and manage to shed their anguish only because they have found clever ways to induce it in others!”

In what follows, I will comment on this assessment from the viewpoint of its underlying attitude and relate this to the need to take responsibility for dimensions of climate change related to racism and discrimination.

In appreciation of the honest admission in the last sentence quoted above, the problem remains that, despite realizing what he is doing, Bruno Latour still does it.⁸¹ It is also not clear to me

⁸¹ A contrastive example is Weintrobe 2021/2022: 4, who realizes that she is about to act in such a way and decides not to do it: “I started

if dealing with anxiety in this way is really a viable way, be it clever or not, in contrast to the other approaches that for him all rank as exhibiting different degrees of craziness.

Each of these reactions can more fruitfully be understood as the result of a particular set of conditions. This reflects a key dimension of the type of approach, based on early Buddhist thought, that I am trying to present. Seeing conditionality can be freeing, as it complements the sense that something should not have happened with an understanding why it nevertheless happened. This is more productive than reacting with anxiety and grief or else with anger and hatred, as it undermines the foundation on which such reactions thrive while at the same time pointing in the direction where something can be done: working with those very conditions and changing them, without taking things too personally.

This is of course not meant to encourage ignoring anxiety, grief, anger, and hatred when they manifest. To the contrary, when reactivity arises, it needs to be fully acknowledged with mindfulness. But once sufficient time has been dedicated to that, in line with a pattern evident in contemplation of the hindrances in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, recognition can be followed by exploring conditionality:⁸² how did this mental condition arise?

listing the colossal damage the neoliberal economy has done. I then took a step back and realized I have become Chicken Little running around wanting to tell the reader the sky is falling in. I believe I felt uncontained and my ‘thought action’ was to imagine I could pass my uncontained state on to the reader and so rid myself of it. Realizing that, I highlighted the passage and pressed delete.” As pointed out by Weintrobe 2013: 45, with anxieties related to climate change “we are in danger of projecting our anxieties onto the people we want to engage, ‘passing them on,’ as it were.”

⁸² See Anālayo 2013c: 177–194.

And, how to emerge from it? In this way, both on the external and the internal level, seeing conditionality can be immensely freeing. At the same time, it substantially increases our efficacy in adequately dealing with the challenges of the present situation, whatever these may be.⁸³

In view of various misinformation campaigns regarding climate change, it is perhaps understandable if some decide to wait and see. This is not to endorse such a reaction, but just to understand it. Nor does it need to be considered crazy if some look to solutions like geoengineering. Even though I do have reservations about this option, after all, an unprecedented challenge calls for innovation, wherefore it seems best not to dismiss anything beforehand. Again, depression is also not surprising, in particular in view of the prevalent doomsday outlook constantly reinforced by headlines and latest news.

Finally, as the survey of various publications in this chapter would have amply shown—keeping in mind that most of the relevant information would not have been available at the time Bruno Latour wrote his above assessment of different reactions—the group of those who “believe that they can do something despite the odds, that it isn’t too late” are indeed having a major, significant impact. They are quite certainly the very opposite of being crazy.

⁸³ Marom 2023: 109 comments on reacting to the challenges of climate change with despair that this “is an act of allowing our very real sadness and fear to limit our sense of what is possible ... Despair is the easy way out. Despair is also, quite simply, bad politics ... Despair is a self-fulfilling prophecy; it blocks us from taking agency, which makes it all the more likely that our worst fears will come to pass.” As expressed succinctly by Solnit 2023: 6, “accept despair as an emotion but not as an analysis.”

A problem in the background of the above assessments could be, among other things, a Judeo-Christian sense of collective guilt, together perhaps with the motif of paradise having been irrevocably lost. This may explain the idea that we should “feel rather ashamed that we have made a situation irreversible,” which is far from straightforward.⁸⁴ Although space needs of course be granted to a healthy sense of regret for instances of individual misconduct, some may not even have been aware of the situation thirty years ago, myself included. Moreover, at that time we did not have the technical tools we have nowadays to deal with it as efficiently as we can now.

This is not to excuse or ignore that action has been far too slow and still fails to be adequate, but just to understand rather than dismiss as crazy. At any rate, in order to take the needed action at least now, the most important requirement would be to dismiss the evaluation of those who take action as the “craziest of all” and realize that each of us can make a contribution to moving forward.

Henderson (2020b: 5) highlights that “the interests that pushed climate denialism for many years are now pushing the idea that there’s nothing we can do.”⁸⁵ In other words, succumb-

⁸⁴ Marshall 2014/2015: 224 points out that “[t]he climate change narrative contains no language of forgiveness. It requires people to accept their entire guilt and responsibility with no option for a new beginning. Not surprisingly, what happens is that people either reject the entire moralistic package or generate their own self-forgiveness through ingenious moral licensing.”

⁸⁵ Fischer 2019: 147 observes that “[s]ome deniers have come to more or less accept the high level of agreement about the human contribution to warming—or at least given up struggling on this front—and have shifted to arguing that the problem is too big to be able to do anything that would significantly mitigate or adapt to the conse-

ing to the belief that nothing can be done may well deserve the epithet “crazy” much more than taking action.

Ritchie (2024: 7) brings out another important aspect, in that, “[w]hen it comes down to it, doomsday attitudes are often no better than denial. This option of ‘giving up’ is only possible from a place of privilege,” but not for those living in conditions where access to the bare necessities of life is a daily struggle. Thus, “[a]ccepting defeat on climate change is an indefensibly selfish position to take.”

This pertinent assessment can be related to my exploration of racism (see above p. 224). Racism and other forms of discrimination intersect with climate change. For this reason, in preparation for my exploration of climate change, I had taken up the potential of mindfulness in relation to racism, which has much in common with its potential for facing the challenges posed by global warming.

As pointed out in a scoping review of relevant research by Deivanayagam et al. (2023: 64), “racism and climate change interact and have disproportionate effects on the lives of minoritised people both within countries and between the Global North and the Global South.”⁸⁶ According to Deivanayagam et al. (2023: 71), “of the estimated 400 000 deaths caused by climate change globally in 2010, 98% occurred within the Global South.”

quences and, moreover, whatever might be done would have a drastic impact on the economy.”

⁸⁶ Deivanayagam et al. 2023: 64 explain that “[t]he most affected peoples and areas living in the Global South are often least responsible for climate change and yet bear its burden; but this also includes minoritised communities everywhere, such as Indigenous Peoples in the settler-colonial countries of the Global North (eg, the USA, Canada, and Australia).”

Gonzalez (2020: 109) introduces her study on climate change, race, and migration by noting that “[c]limate change imposes disproportionate burdens on racialized communities all over the world, many of whom will be expelled from their homes in record numbers as the climate emergency intensifies.”

In a study of the legal dimensions of migration due to climate change, Atapattu (2020: 89) notes that a “common myth concerning forcible displacement is that these displaced people will flock to countries in the Global North in search of a better life.” This is incorrect, however, as “in reality, the countries that host the greatest number of refugees and displaced persons are, in fact, in the Global South.” For example, “Turkey, Pakistan and Lebanon were the top three hosts of refugees in 2015.”

Atapattu (2020: 91) then describes the interaction of climate change with migration and conflicts as follows:

[W]ith increased scarcity of food and water and reduced agricultural yield due to climate change, conflicts over these resources are expected to increase. Such scarcity and conflict will, in turn, drive people into other areas in search of food and water, which is likely, in turn, to create or exacerbate conflicts in the new area. Such resource conflicts can give rise, therefore, to a vicious cycle of migration, conflicts and poverty ... compounded by the adverse consequences of climate change.

As noted by Sealey-Huggins (2018: 100) in a study of the close interrelationship between racism and climate change, “we can only properly understand the harm being wrought by weather events and climate change by directly connecting it to broader social and political processes of which structural racism is a central part.” Thus, to overlook those in the Global South who are suffering, and will increasingly suffer due to the disproport-

tionate impact of climate change in those parts of the world that have least contributed to it, and to give up on trying to do what we can to ameliorate the situation, is indeed an indefensibly selfish position. Instead, the situation calls for compassion as a motivator for becoming active and doing whatever is possible to minimize the harm caused by climate change.

Anger

The second of the two examples to be taken up here is part of a book review,⁸⁷ in the course of which Calobrisi (2023: 56) also expresses criticism of my publications on climate change (Anālayo 2019e and 2019j) in the following way:

I find his stance lamentably counterproductive, as he lays responsibility for combating capitalism's systemic role in the climate crisis on the individual. He adds insult to injury by claiming we should not be angry at those responsible for this crisis. Anālayo claims the crisis and denial of it by politicians and business executives originates from defilements of the mind, yet he does not seem to realize that those people would not be in a position to confuse, disempower, and frustrate the public into apathy if the production of energy were socialized and decisions about shifting to renewable energies were democratized. The conditions driving us toward climate crisis are not defilements of the mind, but the privatized production of energy for profit.

In examining the above criticism, I will first take up the political perspective and then turn to the early Buddhist analysis of the

⁸⁷ The review as such is of a different book of mine in which I briefly mention the problem of climate change in the conclusion; see Anālayo 2021i: 140, and for a reply to the review 2023g.

mind. The hope voiced in the above passage for a socialization of the production of energy appears to reflect a political vision that, as far as I am able to see, in the world as it is at present does not stand much of a chance of becoming a global solution sufficiently soon to have a decisive impact on climate change. It would perhaps be more pragmatic to try to identify what can be done even when the production of energy has not yet been socialized worldwide.

The present instance perhaps exemplifies what seems to be a larger pattern, in that the repercussions of climate change can lead to expectations that the threat of societal collapse will serve as the opportunity for ushering in one's personally preferred vision of political administration, economic system, implementation of social rights, etc. Such expectations can then lead to irritation when an approach to dealing with climate change does not conform to the envisaged scenario.

Instead of opting for an exclusive vision based on personal preferences, however, it seems to me that a more promising avenue to take would be to visualize a combination of different approaches in collaboration—rather than being in competition with each other—guided by the overarching intention of ensuring a better future for all. This is precisely the idea motivating the present book, namely providing just one approach out of a variety of different ways of facing climate change, each with its unique contribution to an overall collaboration for the sake of a sustainable future.

Within the framework provided by such a collaborative outlook, the idea of individually taking responsibility does appear to have its place, and the publications surveyed in this third part of my book seem to confirm the utility of such an approach. This is of course not to pretend that individual activism is suffi-

cient in itself; it clearly needs to lead on to systemic change.⁸⁸ But it is a good place to start.⁸⁹

Moreover, with the growing shift of attention from attempts at mitigation to the need of taking care of adaptation, caused by the accelerating impacts of climate change, the individual or local level plays a rather important role. Appropriately addressing the diverse challenges as they manifest calls for a participatory approach to co-develop adaptation strategies with those who are directly affected by the repercussions of climate change in the way these impact their particular locality, in order to help them to protect themselves from its direct and indirect effects. In short, the situation increasingly calls for citizen-led and locally oriented adaptation planning.⁹⁰

A promising component of such adaptation strategies could in principle be found in the individual cultivation of mindfulness. In an article on the relationship of therapeutic practices to political engagement that takes issue with the dominant interpretation of the therapeutic (including mindfulness) as a depoliticizing force, Salmenniemi (2019: 410) offers the following summary of a prevalent type of criticism:

⁸⁸ Fisher 2024: 58f points out that, “although individual behavioral change can be an important tool in efforts to reduce carbon emissions, changes to the political and economic systems are needed to stop the climate crisis ... The inherent fallacy of focusing our efforts exclusively on changing our individual behavior is that much of the carbon consumption of an industrialized society is inextricably locked into the system.”

⁸⁹ As Wynes and Nicholas 2017: 1 note, “[n]ational policies and major energy transformations often take decades to change locked-in infrastructure and institutions, but behavioural shifts have the potential to be more rapid and widespread.”

⁹⁰ See, e.g., Oliver et al. 2023.

In interpreting all sorts of issues through the language of psychology and emotions, the therapeutic operates as an insidious form of power that turns structural issues into individual psycho-pathologies to be remedied by commodified regimes of self-management. It provides individual consolation as a substitute for political and economic compensation, replaces collective mobilization with quests for self-fulfilment, and legitimizes deep-seated social inequalities.

Yet, according to Salmenniemi (2019: 409 and 411), “the therapeutic field may also serve as a site of political contestation and critique.” In fact, from this perspective, “rather than merely defusing political aspirations, therapeutic practices can also potentially animate political engagement.” Salmenniemi (2019: 416) then reports the following relevant findings from her field research:⁹¹

While there was a strong sense of political disenfranchisement among the research participants, there was also an equally strong will to engage politically and make a difference. As traditional channels of participation seemed ineffective and corrupt, therapeutic practices as a form of personalized lifestyle politics offered a feasible and meaningful form of political engagement and social change.

A number of practitioners explicitly framed therapeutic engagements as “societal work,” having profound political consequences ... Therapeutic engagements offered them a meaningful way to ... embody values important to them, with an understanding that they could ultimately contribute

⁹¹ The research was conducted in Finland between 2014 and 2017 and involved practitioners of mindfulness as well as of reiki, yoga, and a range of other therapeutic knowledges and practices.

to social change ... Practising and embodying particular ethical and moral values in daily life was thus understood in itself as an important political act ... giving a sense of agency amidst political disillusionment.

Notably, according to Salmenniemi (2019: 417) “[t]herapeutic engagements were also mobilized as a form of resistance to the logic of neoliberal capitalism,” in rejection of the subjection of human wellbeing to the calculus of economic utility.

As a result, according to Salmenniemi (2019: 418), “[i]ndividual and social change were understood not as mutually exclusive but rather as intimately enmeshed and mutually reinforcing.”⁹²

Salmenniemi (2019: 421) concludes that, in this way

therapeutic practices are seen as cultivating subaltern and subversive subjects engaging in collective action to change society. In this way, such practices are assigned a similar role to that traditionally afforded social movements, as agents challenging the structures of power and questioning forms of domination ...

[In fact,] widespread disenchantment with formal politics and traditional social movements does not mean that people cease to engage with politics; rather, political engagements may find novel forms and arenas. The therapeutic field is one example of this, calling into question the traditional antino-

⁹² Salmenniemi 2019: 418 adds that, “[a]lthough structural forces and solutions were acknowledged, many nevertheless sought change via ethical work on the self and personalized lifestyle politics. This was not because they did not believe that structural changes were needed, but rather because they felt politically powerless and saw few meaningful channels for involvement in formal politics.”

mies between individual and collective and therapeutic and political.

In an analysis of the political significance of mindfulness in particular, Leggett (2022: 272) explains that, “[w]ithout the distorting noise of ego and the chatter of immediate thoughts and emotions, agents are better able to appraise their context and assess if, when and how to submit or intervene accordingly.” Leggett (2022: 273) adds that “it should also be clear that the conflict and contestation foregrounded in radical democracy is not simply wished away by Mindfulness. Rather, Mindfulness offers a way for conflict to be held more clearly and strategically in view, so that it might be *responded to not reacted to.*”

These perspectives feature among several potential contributions of the practice of mindfulness, which according to Leggett (2022: 274) can be understood “to potentially cultivate democratic dispositions” and “to offer a novel, multi-perspectival means of rethinking interests and representation.” In fact, mindfulness can offer “a platform for strategically understanding individual action in structural context: a basis for effective engagement with a conflict-ridden political field.”⁹³ Its cultivation can thus provide “emotional, practical and critical resources for citizens and activists.”

The cultivation of mindfulness can indeed have a considerable transformative potential not only on the internal but also on

⁹³ On the potential of mindfulness in politics and public policy see also Bristow 2019. Regarding meditation in general, McMahan 2023: 16f highlights that the presence of constructive and deconstructive aspects in Buddhist meditation practices “allows for multifarious adaptation in the use of meditation, from practices that simply reinforce dominant habits of thinking and feeling to the radical critical interrogation of personal and cultural assumptions.”

the external level. Wholehearted dedication to its cultivation on the internal level through individual practice forms the indispensable foundation. Yet, the same cultivation requires being willing to proceed further to an implementation of the external dimension of mindfulness as a resource for facing the various challenges of the 21st century, such as that of climate change.

Analyzing the present challenge with a view to the involvement of mental defilements is in turn part of the specific approach I attempt to develop based on early Buddhist thought,⁹⁴ which is of course, as already mentioned, just one out of a range of different possible approaches. Without in any way intending to present this perspective as the only viable one, it does seem to offer a meaningful and fitting perspective.

As discussed above, the pervasiveness of greed, one of the three root defilements in early Buddhist psychology, is clearly central in the orientation of economics since the 1960s, so that, at least in this respect, the early Buddhist analysis does seem to concur with what we know from the history of economics. In fact, the very term “greed” is used in some of the relevant studies quoted above (see above p. 287). The second of the three unwholesome roots according to early Buddhist psychology, anger or even hatred, does appear to manifest when scientists and activists are threatened and abused, and it becomes ever more prominent as the devastating effects of climate change lead to increased competition for dwindling resources that can easily escalate into armed conflicts. The notion of delusion, the last of the three unwholesome roots, also seems to be an appro-

⁹⁴ Tilakaratne 2020b: 101 articulates the basic perspective as follows: “Buddhism would analyse a problem like the ecological crisis basically (but not exclusively) in terms of human attitudes or human defilements.”

ropriate fit for a situation where a challenge as serious as climate change leads to the intentional promotion of denial.

An important dimension of an early Buddhist perspective is that the presence of defilements matters not only when these manifest externally but also when the same happens internally.⁹⁵ In the context of a discussion related to “interbeing,” Nhat Hanh (1987: 12) reasons that “[i]n the past, we may have made the primary mistake of distinguishing between the inner world of our mind and the world outside. These are not two separate worlds.” He adds that, “[i]f we are able to see deeply into our mind, we can simultaneously see deeply into the world. If we truly understand the world, we also will understand our mind.” This much can be applied directly to the challenges of climate change.

The three root defilements, just as anxiety and grief, already mentioned above, need to be recognized as hindrances if action on climate change is taken based on an early Buddhist orientation. They impair the full functionality of the mind in apprehending the situation and evaluating different perspectives and possibilities by narrowing one’s perceptual appraisal down to those features that align with one’s condition of anger, anxiety, etc.⁹⁶ For

⁹⁵ See Anālayo 2019e: 72–77.

⁹⁶ Marshall 2014/2015: 233 and 227 notes that identifying “enemies with the intention to do harm engages our moral brain and energizes our outrage. However, climate change lacks clear enemies: We all contribute to this problem and all stand to suffer its impacts. This is an incomplete and unconvincing narrative, and activists on all sides seek enemies that can fill these missing roles of good against evil, David against Goliath, might against right.” In this way, climate change “tends to be fitted around existing enemies and their perceived intentions: a rival superpower, big government, intellectual elites, liberal environmentalists, fossil fuel corporations, lobbyists,

this reason, it is of crucial importance to deal with defilements first in order to then be able to take the appropriate action.

Adopting the proposed early Buddhist psychological perspective on the challenges of climate change need not be seen as a way of obfuscating current power relationships but can fruitfully be employed in an attempt to understand what motivates certain politicians and business executives to do what they do. Giving priority to attempts to understand offers a promising approach, instead of being a counterproductive stance, since it is only when we fully understand what is taking place that we can take appropriate action.

An excellent example for the early Buddhist attitude regarding anger is the famous simile of the saw.⁹⁷ The situation this simile depicts could hardly be more extreme: having one's body being cut up limb by limb by bandits using a sharp saw. Although this is certainly an absolutely cruel and extremely painful infliction of harm on an innocent person, the discourse reports the Buddha calling for a refraining from any negative reaction by way of speech and even in the mind. In both versions of the relevant discourse, the simile explicitly functions as an example for what one should in principle be willing to bear in order to remain balanced with whatever one actually has to face. In other words, this rather stark image may well be so extreme on purpose to ensure that whatever may confront us is met without leaving any scope for anger.

It seems to me that, without any need to go further into the details of the early Buddhist analysis of the mind and the detrimental repercussions of succumbing to defilements, the simile

right-wing think tanks, or social failures such as overconsumption, overpopulation, or selfishness.”

⁹⁷ See Anālayo 2019e: 91f.

of the saw is sufficiently powerful to clarify the basic parameters of the situation, if, and of course only if, the idea is to approach climate change and other challenges from an early Buddhist viewpoint: there is simply no justification for indulging in anger or hatred. Becoming angry is counterproductive. Once a central problem appears to be a lack of compassion, attempting to remedy that needs to avoid falling into the same trap.

This does of course not mean turning a blind eye to injustice and becoming passive. But it does mean that, whenever anger arises, there is a need to stop right there and address the fire within, before being able to address the fires outside. I believe it is important to see the interrelationship between the internal and the external, and ground whatever action we take to confront injustice in the recognition of that interrelationship. As pointed out by Magee (2019: 111) in a comment related to racism, “[a]s we bring mindfulness more completely into the difficult moments of our engagements ... we grow in our capacity to accept that we, too, are a part of the problems we seek to solve.” Regarding climate change, Marshall (2014/2015: 234) warns against enemy narratives that “agitate deep-rooted and distracting animosities at a time when we need to be finding common purpose.”

The perspective that emerges in this way is not confined to early Indian Buddhism. The non-violent approach promoted under the name of Mahātmā Gandhi (1869–1948) is an example still from within the wider Indian cultural world. A telling incident relates to the “salt march,” an act of civil disobedience against the British salt tax.⁹⁸ The imposition of this tax, which disproportionately affected the poor on an item of daily consumption, made it illegal for Indians to produce salt for them-

⁹⁸ See, e.g., Sellars and Oltvai 2016: 44f.

selves. The “salt march” was undertaken to reclaim the rights of Indians to recover access to their own salt. The incident to be taken up below provides an example for enduring even strong physical aggression without retaliating in any way, thereby exemplifying that it is possible to implement the type of attitude enshrined in the simile of the saw.

Mahātmā Gandhi himself had been arrested and was unable to participate in what, according to the report by an American journalist, took place in May 1930, when protesters attempted to raid the Dharasana Salt Works in Gujarat in order to claim their right to free access to salt (quoted in Martin 2007: 38f):

In complete silence the Gandhi men drew up and halted a hundred yards from the stockade. A picked column advanced from the crowd, waded the ditches and approached the barbed wire stockade ... at a word of command, scores of native policemen rushed upon the advancing marchers and rained blows on their heads ... Not one of the marchers even raised an arm to fend off blows. They went down like ninepins. From where I stood, I heard the sickening whack of the clubs on unprotected skulls ... Those struck down fell sprawling, unconscious or writhing with fractured skulls or broken shoulders. In two or three minutes the ground was quilted with bodies. Great patches of blood widened on their white clothes. The survivors without breaking ranks silently and doggedly marched on until struck down ...⁹⁹

⁹⁹ In an analysis of this event, Weber 1993: 271, 281f, and 284 points out that “[t]o touch the heart of the opponent, it appears that some form of feeling of identification with the victim is necessary; the social distance must not be too great. However, in situations of self-suffering in the face of violence, especially direct violence, by definition, the social distance is so great that there is a lack of identi-

At times the spectacle of unresisting men being methodically bashed into bloody pulp sickened me so much that I had to turn away. The Western mind finds it difficult to grasp the idea of non-resistance.

Although the idea of non-violent resistance may indeed be challenging for a Western mind to grasp—and relating the above episode is not meant to encourage its emulation by climate change activists—the non-violent approach adopted for the salt march has served as a source of inspiration for Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968). In his autobiography, King (1998: 121 and 23) indicates that “India’s Gandhi was the guiding light of our technique of nonviolent social change” and that he personally “was particularly moved by his Salt March to the Sea.”

Following this example inevitably comes with considerable challenges. King (1998: 70) reports that

on two or three occasions I had allowed myself to become angry and indignant. I had spoken hastily and resentfully. Yet I knew that this was no way to solve a problem. “You

fication.” In the present case, in fact, the policemen “were not converted by the unresisting suffering of those whom they were beating,” instead of which “they became infuriated at the lack of resistance from their victims and increased their savagery.” However, even “[w]hen self-suffering does not touch the heart of the opponent immediately, it may still do so through the agencies of third parties. The opponent may be converted indirectly if the endured suffering moves public opinion or the opinion of those closer to the perpetrator of the suffering.” Thus, “those ultimately responsible for the beating of the raiders at Dharasana were not converted by the suffering they were causing but because they had to examine their behavior when it became increasingly out of step with the moral standards of other international actors whose opinions mattered to them.”

must not harbor anger,” I admonished myself. “You must be willing to suffer the anger of the opponent, and yet not return anger. You must not become bitter. No matter how emotional your opponents are, you must be calm.”

In the same spirit, he addressed others when his life was being threatened (King 1998: 76f): “If one day you find me sprawled out dead, I do not want you to retaliate with a single act of violence. I urge you to continue protesting with the same dignity and discipline you have shown so far.” After a bomb attack on his house, King (1998: 82) decided against the employment of arms to provide protection for himself and his family, reasoning that, “[h]ad we become distracted by the question of my safety we would have lost the moral offensive and sunk to the level of our oppressors.”

An inspiring example for successfully implementing this non-violent approach was the Montgomery bus boycott,¹⁰⁰ which had a significant impact on the Civil Rights Movement in the US.¹⁰¹ The boycott started in December 1955 when Rosa Parks (1913–2005) refused to obey the instructions of the driver of the bus in which she was seated to relinquish her seat to a white passenger who had just boarded the bus. The driver then had her arrested for this act of civil disobedience by the police.

¹⁰⁰ According to King 1998: 99, “the social tool of nonviolent resistance ... was a weapon first applied on the American scene and in a collective way in Montgomery. In that city too, it was honed well for future use. It was effective in that it had a way of disarming the opponent. It exposed his moral defenses. It weakened his morale, and at the same time it worked on his conscience.”

¹⁰¹ Heyer 1994: 15 explains that “the idea of a boycott was not new, but Montgomery was the first completely successful attempt, and the influence this victory had on the movement was unparalleled.”

The boycott was in protest of racial segregation on public transport, due to which black passengers were forced to ride in the back of the buses, being required to pay at the front, get off, and then reenter the bus from the back. They were not allowed to sit in the front part reserved for whites, even if the seats were empty, and if they were seated in the middle portion of the bus, they had to be ready to relinquish their seats to accommodate newly arriving white passengers.¹⁰²

The actual boycott, which lasted slightly over a year, took the form of simply refusing to use the buses and instead finding other means or even walk in order to commute to work, etc. This procedure directly and effectively targeted those responsible for the discrimination; in fact, the economic losses incurred by the bus company were a crucial component of the eventual success of the boycott.¹⁰³

In the case of climate change, at least from an early Buddhist perspective the problem itself is an ethical one, wherefore attempts to solve it need to be firmly informed by ethics. In other words, as already mentioned above (see p. 273) the end does not justify the means, instead of which the means and the end need to be in alignment with the ethical principles enshrined in the noble eightfold path. Here, the Montgomery bus boycott provides a good example for a type of activism that would be fully in line with early Buddhist ethical principles.

This is not to deny or underrate the amount of frustration and despair felt by those who have been struggling for decades to direct public attention to the necessity for timely action in rela-

¹⁰² On the discriminatory procedures adopted in Montgomery buses see in more detail Shultziner 2013: 122–124.

¹⁰³ Another important factor for the success were the legal steps taken, on which see Kennedy 1989.

tion to the climate. But this does not justify climate activism of a type that involves intentionally inflicting harm on innocent people or engaging in acts of vandalism to garner public attention. It is at any rate doubtful how far such activism is really effective in promoting environmental concerns. Attacks directed at art in a museum,¹⁰⁴ for example, risks confirming suspicions about the green scare among those who are not sympathetic, and among those who are sympathetic it can lead to feeling appalled rather than inspired. In other words, the situation here appears to be similar to the case of anxiety, discussed above (see p. 304), in that trying to deal with the personal experience of suffering by inflicting suffering on others (and oneself) is not a particularly promising avenue to take.

By now the topic of climate change as such is known in the general public, but many tend to avoid it due to fear and anxiety. Actions that involve an attack of some type, in order to shock and garner public attention, risk exacerbating the prevalent anxiety.

Some of the principles formulated by King (1958: 102f) as central for his nonviolent approach can provide an orientation for mindfully facing the challenges of climate change based on the ethical framework provided by the early Buddhist teachings. One of these is that one “does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent,” in fact, “the attack is directed against forces of evil rather than against persons who happen to be doing the evil.” Moreover, one “avoids not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit,” in that one “not only refuses to shoot” one’s opponents but “also refuses to hate” them.

Martin Luther King in turn nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967, which he had himself received

¹⁰⁴ See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/05/08/climate-protest-degas-national-gallery/>.

in 1964. This provides me a lead over to concluding this survey of outstanding voices with the probably most well-known advocate in the Buddhist field for the importance of cultivating mindfulness and non-harm in support of an engaged form of Buddhism. In a statement made in the context of presenting a Buddhist approach to peace and ecology, Nhat Hanh (2008: 77) offers the following assessment:

Social work and relief work done without mindfulness practice cannot be described as engaged Buddhism. People who do this work can lose themselves in despair, anger, or disappointment. If you're really practicing engaged Buddhism, then you know how to preserve yourself as a practitioner while you do things to help the people in the world. Truly engaged Buddhism is first of all practicing mindfulness in all that we do.

Summary

In the course of its long history since ancient times, racial discrimination has taken on a variety of forms not confined to differences in skin color. A relevant notion from the Indian setting is the caste system, which at the time of the Buddha appears to have been gaining traction. This is evident in repeated references in the early Buddhist discourses to brahmins asserting their superiority by dint of birth over non-brahmins, which among other things involve claims to being of fairer color and possessed of inherent purity. The same texts present a range of critical replies to such assertions, converging on the central theme of replacing superiority by birth with superiority by deed. What counts, from an early Buddhist perspective, is what one does, a position that apparently triggered strong reactions by brahmins intent on promoting their intrinsic superiority.

In addition to confronting such claims, the texts also show the Buddha noting when someone has experienced racial discrimination and acting on the spot to provide his support. This sets a precedent for mindfully noticing racial oppression and taking action to counter it, which emerges as one of several benefits that the cultivation of external mindfulness may offer in this respect. Such external mindfulness can then collaborate with inner mindfulness of biases and forms of conceit, under the overarching aim of not only diminishing harm but also furthering progress to liberation of the mind from biases and conceit.

Our linear notion of time can be related to the idea, derived from early Buddhist thought, that time is basically our conceptualization of change, in that past is what has changed, present is what is changing, and future is what will change. Since change not only has a linear but also a cyclic dimension, such as the cycles of day and night or the yearly seasons, this idea can help to broaden the perspective on time as being both linear and cyclic. From this viewpoint, the challenges we face in the 21st century can be visualized as part of recurring cycles of decline followed by renewal, rather than seeing ourselves in a one-directional tunnel leading either to uninterrupted progress or else to eternal doom. From an early Buddhist viewpoint, a central causal factor related to either decline or renewal is ethical conduct, and this much appears to find confirmation in analyses of the conditions responsible for climate change.

A comparison of global efforts to respond to the problems of the thinning ozone layer and of climate change gives the impression that greater success in the former case has to some extent been due to adopting an experimentalist approach with an emphasis on finding solutions at the local level.

From an early Buddhist position, this invites individual agency in relation to climate change, in the understanding that

the complexity of the situation calls for a range of different, contributory initiatives. Such agency involves leaving behind the perhaps ingrained assumption of mono-causality, in the sense that either we on our own or else someone else must be responsible for finding *the* solution.

Denial of climate change appears to have become prominent due to a shift in perspective among conservatives in the US from the red scare posed by the Soviet Union to the green scare, both of which being opposed out of a felt need to protect individual freedom. Such denial comes combines with a general trend toward post-truth attitudes and strategies in contemporary societies, undermining the reception of scientific information crucial to ensuring the survival of humans on this planet.

Economics, which has become a determining factor in much of contemporary thinking and society, has lost an ethical perspective through subscribing to economic growth as the sole relevant value. Fortunately, the much-needed reorientation is already emerging as an indispensable step to be taken in order to ensure a viable future, including for economists themselves.

Current technological developments have turned low-carbon energy sources into the more economic choice as well. Besides switching sources of energy, another arena for individual action is food consumption, in particular by opting for plant-based alternatives to meat, especially to beef, and if possible also to dairy products. Notably, palm oil is less problematic than often thought, as long as it comes from a sustainable source. The contrast between food produced locally or abroad also appears to be less consequential, as overall the type of food that is consumed has a greater impact than how far it has been transported.

Steering the Buddhist middle path through the climate crisis calls for avoiding the pitfalls of anxiety and anger. Anxiety needs first of all to be acknowledged, for which mindfulness can

provide an important support, rather than being passed on to others. In view of the intersection of climate change with various forms of discrimination and the unequal burden its places on those who are in one way or another disadvantaged, giving up on climate change in a gesture of despair is an indefensibly selfish position to take; it lacks compassion. It is only really possible from a place of privilege that ignores the needs of those in the Global South struggling to survive the devastating impacts of climate change, being at the same time those who have least contributed to it.

Anger, in turn, is part of the root of the problem, inasmuch as climate change can be analyzed from the viewpoint of early Buddhist psychology in terms of the three unwholesome roots, greed, anger/hatred, and delusion. Countering these on the external level needs to be closely tied to countering these on the internal level. Keeping in mind the simile of the saw can offer inspiration, to be combined with the cultivation of mindfulness internally and externally, in order to offer, in a spirit of balance and integrity, a compassionate contribution to a viable future for all human beings on this planet.

All the above aspects in combination set the background to my proposed approach to facing the challenges of climate change based on the cultivation of mindfulness situated within the orientational framework of the teaching on the four noble truths.

Conclusion

The three parts of my exploration come with summaries of the main points covered in each, wherefore the present conclusion can serve a different purpose. It affords me an occasion for coming back to my proposal in the introduction to my book (see above p. 11) that the cultivation of mindfulness in combination with a perspective informed by central ideas of early Buddhist thought can provide a viable basis for facing climate change with mental balance and ethical integrity. In what follows, I proceed from the different strands of research covered in the preceding pages to a practical implementation. This conclusion to my book thereby takes on a more explicitly normative orientation.

Although the preceding pages build up to the present juncture, I hope their quality has not suffered from the fact that my aim is to arrive at a practical solution to the challenge posed by climate change. Throughout, I have tried my best to provide a balanced and nuanced presentation. Authorial intent is inevitably part of the social construction of knowledge, hence explicitly articulating my motivation perhaps serves to introduce an element of transparency, facilitating the reader's evaluation of the cogency of my individual arguments.

Combining the early Buddhist perspective I already presented in my earlier book publication on *Mindfully Facing Climate Change* (Anālayo 2019e) with what has emerged in the course of this third part of my present book, I propose to formulate a way of facing climate challenge with the help of the acronym GALA. Behind this acronym stand the following terms:

Global Awareness Local Action

This motto intends to point to a way to face climate change that is in line with the four noble truths, and that relies on mindfulness by combining *local action* with an orientation provided through *awareness* of the *global* challenge.

The term GALA as such has the advantage of being both an English and a Pāli word, thereby exemplifying in a way a convergence of the ancient Indian wisdom available in texts preserved in Pāli with the present situation worldwide, where English is the most widely spoken language. In the Pāli language, *gala* stands for the throat or the neck. For example, *galaggaha* means being seized by the neck or the throat, and *galappamāṇa* describes being immersed up to the neck or throat.¹ These nuances seem quite apt for the situation, as with the repercussions of climate change we are indeed in trouble up to our necks; we are as if seized by our throats by its challenges.

The sense of urgency and predicament evoked in this way then can have a counterbalance, in line with the emphasis on a more positive perspective that emerged in the third part of my explorations, in the English term “gala” as denoting a special public occasion that usually involves various performances. Although certainly not a festive event, climate change is a public occasion that calls for a broad range of responses, initiatives, and improvisations. In this way, a combination of the two senses that emerge from the connotations of the acronym gala in Pāli and English can perhaps help to express the main thrust behind my call for combining global awareness—where awareness is intended as an equivalent to mindfulness—with local action,

¹ The first phrase occurs in DN 5 at DN I 144,21 in a description of an ancient Indian sacrifice as involving beatings and seizing the throat or neck; the second features in Vism 302,14 in a depiction of someone buried in the earth up to the neck or throat.

that is, engaging right here and now in ethically oriented activism that stays firmly within the framework set by the noble eightfold path and is motivated by compassion.

The main idea is thus to embody the teachings as best we can in the here and now, taking things one step at a time.² The key point of reference throughout are the four noble truths, which form the basic scaffolding and underlying current of my previous book on climate change: *dukkha* and the specific condition responsible for its arising, together with freedom from *dukkha* and the specific condition responsible for such freedom, the cultivation of the noble eightfold path.

This articulation of the basic principle of specific conditionality, in particular its emphasis on identifying and removing the causes of harm and affliction, provides a crucially important perspective. The way to address unnecessary harm and affliction then takes the form of an eightfold path, which calls for combining a firm commitment to ethical principles with cultivation of the mind, under the overarching directive provided by the four noble truths. This teaching, recognized by a range of different Buddhist traditions as the first teaching given by the recently awakened Buddha, forms the central frame of reference for the GALA approach.

² As pointed out by Loy 2018: 12: “our task is to do the very best we can, not knowing what the consequences will be—in fact, not knowing if our efforts will make any difference whatsoever. We don’t know if what we do is important, but we do know that it’s important for us to do it.” Magee 2019: 151 offers the following advice, more specifically in relation to the challenges of racism: “At the end of each day, we lay down our efforts and rest . . . And we begin again on the next new day, grounding ourselves and then moving out in mindful engagement in the struggle. In this way, we make justice our life’s work, one day, one action, one moment at a time.”

Out of the different dimensions covered by the noble eight-fold path, mindfulness can function as a key element in becoming self-reliant and maintaining balance.³ A passage that conveniently illustrates such self-reliance is an instruction given by the Buddha when informed by his attendant Ānanda that his chief disciple Sāriputta had passed away. Ānanda is distraught to the extent of feeling confused and overwhelmed. The Buddha first puts things into perspective, pointing out that the loss of Sāriputta does not imply that all the key teachings and practices have been lost.⁴ With this much clarified, he then encourages Ānanda to become self-reliant, evidently as a means to enable him to face challenges like the loss of a close and dear one with inner balance. The instruction then takes the following form:⁵

³ For research findings regarding the potential of mindfulness in sustainability science, practice, and teaching see Wamsler et al. 2018.

⁴ Both versions refer to the aggregates of morality, concentration, wisdom, liberation, and knowledge and vision of liberation.

⁵ SĀ 638 at T II 177a6, with a parallel in SN 47.13 at SN V 163,10: “Therefore, Ānanda, you should dwell as an island to yourself, with yourself as a refuge, with no other refuge, with the Dharma as your island, with the Dharma as your refuge, with no other refuge. Ānanda, and how do monastics dwell as an island to themselves, with themselves as a refuge, with no other refuge, with the Dharma as their island, with the Dharma as their refuge, with no other refuge? Here, Ānanda, monastics dwell contemplating the body in regard to the body, diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from greed and sadness with regard to the world ... feeling tones ... mind ... dwell contemplating dhammas in regard to dhammas, diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from greed and sadness with regard to the world” (the translation employs plural forms for what in the original is singular, in order to be gender-inclusive). The absence of an explicit reference to internal and external modes of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation in SN 47.13 does not appear to involve a difference in princi-

“Therefore, Ānanda, you should make yourself an island by relying on yourself, you should make the Dharma your island by relying on the Dharma; you should make yourself no other island, no other reliance.”

Ānanda said to the Buddha: “Blessed One, how does one have oneself as an island by relying on oneself? How does one have the Dharma as an island by relying on the Dharma? How does one have no other island, no other reliance?”

The Buddha said to Ānanda: “[This takes place] if monastics establish mindfulness by contemplating the body [in regard to] the body, with diligent effort, right knowing, and right mindfulness, overcoming greed and sadness in the world, and in the same way the body externally and the body internally and externally ... feeling tones ... the mind ... and establish mindfulness by contemplating dharmas [in regard to] dharmas.

Alongside some minor differences, the parallel versions of this passage agree on the main instruction to encourage self-reliance. The key tool for putting this into practice can be found in the formal cultivation of mindfulness. The above type of instruction is a recurrent one in the early discourses,⁶ given reportedly by the Buddha also in relation to his own impending passing. This is particularly noteworthy, as the Buddha is on record for not appointing anyone as his successor.⁷ Instead, the teachings were

ple, as the same modes are found elsewhere in the same *Saṃyutta* in SN 47.3 at SN V 143,14; see also Anālayo 2013c: 15–19. The present difference thus seems to be mainly a reflection of varied applications of the relevant pericope in diverse reciter traditions of the early Buddhist discourses.

⁶ See Anālayo 2019e: 50–54.

⁷ MN 108 at MN III 9,9 and MĀ 145 at T I 654a23.

to take the place left vacant once he had passed away, and this in particular through reliance on mindfulness.

This instruction highlights the importance of turning to mindfulness as the main “refuge,” a term with considerable ramifications in early and later Buddhist thought. The standard form of refuge has the Buddha, his teaching, and his community as its objects, and the act of taking refuge functions as a formal declaration of considering oneself to be a Buddhist. In the present case, this notion of taking refuge takes the form of cultivating mindfulness as a direct and practical approach for building up self-reliance.

The purpose of GALA is to inspire, encourage, and foster such self-reliance—by taking mindfulness as the refuge—in the face of the challenges posed by climate change (and related problems). The main idea is to offer a contribution to the range of initiatives and forms of activism that are already in place through mindful engagement based on the ethical orientation provided by the four noble truths, and to facilitate community building locally and via digital means.

I am fortunate to have found three colleagues and friends to collaborate with me in this attempt: Rhonda Magee, Rebecca Henderson, and Jon Kabat-Zinn. The four of us share in having been or still being professors in our respective disciplines (my colleagues in law, economics, and medicine respectively), and we also are practitioners dedicated to the cultivation of mindfulness under an overarching framework of growth in the Dharma. The GALA initiative will be part of the environmental efforts undertaken at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.⁸

⁸ The environmental policies and practices taking place at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies have been covered in an article published in 2024 in the online journal *Buddhistdoor Global*, see

Based on her long-standing experience in activism related to climate change, Rebecca Henderson offers the following practical advice for action on the individual level (2020b: 259):

Do something now. Decide to fly or drive less, or make the effort to buy only from companies that treat their employees well. Insulate your house and, if you can, put solar panels on the roof or buy your power from a green energy provider. Calculate your carbon footprint, estimate the amount of damage you're doing, and if you can afford it, commit to offsetting that damage. Taking a first step will lead to more. Doing something that's even a little bit outside your comfort zone will change the way you think about yourself. Making even a small sacrifice will help you persuade yourself that you can make some difference and that your voice counts.

The above is a starting point rather than an exhaustive account of what can be done, and in one way or another individual action needs to lead over to structural work. Henderson (2020b: 260 and 263) reasons, in relation to whatever setting affords us the possibility to gain our livelihood, that “[y]ou don’t have to be the CEO to drive change ... you can be a values-driven ‘intrapreneur’—someone who sees the opportunity for change and builds a team around it.” Another important aspect mentioned by her is taking political action: “Find a group that is politically active in a way that makes sense to you, and join them.”

Information on how to take steps in these directions can be found in *An Environmental Leader's Tool Kit* by Hughes (2023), which provides practical advice on effective environmental ef-

<https://www.buddhistdoor.net/features/the-barre-center-for-buddhist-studies-ecodharma-beacon/> ; for a survey of the same that will include updates on GALA see www.buddhisticquiry.org/environment/ .

forts. This could be combined with consulting Goddall (2024) for a detailed survey of the transitions possible and needed to meet the goal of reaching net zero emissions by 2050. These are, of course, just two examples to get started.⁹

Perhaps the best way to conclude at this point is with the advice offered by the historian and activist Howard Zinn (1922–2010) in his memoir (1994: 208):

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.

What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live *now* as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

⁹ Information relevant to promoting climate change concerns at one's working place can be found, e.g., at <https://hurd.world/home> or <https://kiteinsights.com/climate-literacy-corporate-transformation> ; for a survey of information regarding possible solutions see, e.g., <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-working-group-3/> or <https://drawdown.org/> .

Abbreviations

AN	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
As	<i>Atthasālinī</i>
CBETA	Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association
D	Derge edition
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
Dhs	<i>Dhammasaṅgaṇī</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
GDhp	Gāndhārī <i>Dharmapada</i>
It-a	<i>Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Jā	<i>Jātaka</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
Mil	<i>Milindapañha</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Mp	<i>Manorathapūraṇī</i>
P	Peking edition
Paṭis	<i>Paṭisambhidāmagga</i>
Paṭis-a	<i>Paṭisambhidāmagga-aṭṭhakathā</i>
PDhp	Patna <i>Dharmapada</i>
Pj	<i>Paramatthajotikā</i>
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
PTS	Pali Text Society
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ ²	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 100)
SHT	Sanskriithandschriften aus den Turfanfunden
Spk	<i>Sāratthappakāsini</i>
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>

Sn	<i>Sutta-nipāta</i>
Sp	<i>Samantapāsādikā</i>
Sv	<i>Sumaṅgalavilāsinī</i>
T	Taishō edition (CBETA)
Th	<i>Theragāthā</i>
Th-a	<i>Theragāthā-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>
Up	<i>Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā</i>
Uv	<i>Udānavarga</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

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