

Gotama Buddha and Religious Pluralism

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1991*

1 Introductory remarks

Buddhism currently enjoys the reputation of being one of the leading voices in a chorus that sings the praises of religious tolerance and perhaps even of pluralism. It is open to question, however, whether this reputation is deserved. The purpose of the present article is to examine whether the teachings of classical Buddhism have a contribution to make to the jubilation over religious pluralism that has become fashionable in some quarters in recent years. It is hoped that this examination might shed some light both on some of the implications of religious pluralism and on the spirit of the teachings of classical Buddhism.

A task preliminary to dealing with this question is to clarify what is meant by religious pluralism. For the purpose of this discussion, let us take “pluralism” to signify not the mere acknowledgment that there is variety but the celebration of this variety. Whereas tolerance might be described as the attitude of being resigned to the fact that a variety exists, pluralism will be taken to mean the attitude that variety is healthy and therefore something to be desired. And religious pluralism, of course, will be taken as the attitude that it is salubrious to have a variety of religions. Such an attitude might be founded, for example, on an analogy with biology. The health of each living organism, it could be argued, is enhanced by the general health of the organism’s wider environment, and the health of this wider environment is in turn enhanced by the rich variety of species of organisms living therein.

The value of variety, if one follows this biological analogy, is not merely aesthetic, not merely a pleasant respite from the monotony of too much uniformity; rather, variety is what makes life of any kind possible. Similarly, it could be argued by a devoted religious pluralist, the variety of religious beliefs and practices and experiences and modes of expression is vital to human survival and self-understanding. And just as the health of an individual organism, such as a cow, might actually be enhanced by the presence of other apparently annoying organisms, such as gadflies and mosquitoes, the health and perhaps even the very survival of any one religious tradition might actually be enhanced by the presence of other apparently antagonistic traditions, or by the presence of heresies within the same tradition. The robust religious pluralist would take the

*Originally published in *Journal of Religious Pluralism* 1:65–96. (1991)

view that her general well-being is somehow increased by the presence of religious traditions other than her own, including those religious traditions that she may personally regard as distasteful or even threatening.

A second preliminary task is to explain what is meant by classical Buddhism. In the discussions that follow, the principal Buddhist sources to be examined will be the texts of the Pali canon. As will be outlined below in section 5, the position taken in this paper is that the position on religious pluralism that is presented in the Pali canon sets the tone for what is found in the Buddhist literature preserved in Sanskrit, and that on this question at least there are very few innovations in Sanskrit Buddhism. This being said, what this paper intends to address is the question of whether Gotama, the Buddha as portrayed in the Pali canon, promoted the attitude that it is healthy to have a variety of religions.

2 Murti's description of Buddhism as pluralistic Absolutism

As was stated at the outset of this essay, Buddhism currently enjoys the reputation of being a champion of religious tolerance at the least and perhaps even of religious pluralism. One modern author who has contributed to the portrayal of the Buddha's teachings in this light has been T.R.V. Murti. In the conclusion of his celebrated study of the philosophy of Mādhyamika Buddhism, which in his opinion best captures the spirit of the teachings of the historical Buddha, Murti outlines his own Utopian vision of a world free from conflicts among individuals and nations, which conflict he sees as being rooted in insupportable dogmas. This peaceful world, he argues, in which both internal and external conflicts have all disappeared

is possible *only* in advaita, for that alone abolishes private standpoints and interests, which make for the ego-centric outlook. In the last analysis, the ego is the root of the unspiritual; the universal is the spiritual. Śūnyatā, as the negation of all particular views and standpoints, is the universal *par excellence*. (Murti, 1960, p. 333)

For Murti, the Buddhist term *śūnyatā* signifies an Absolute. Unfortunately, Murti's fondness for using the term "Absolute" at every opportunity leads to an embarrassment of Absolutes that must somehow be distinguished from one another, since not all the things he labels as Absolutes in Indian philosophy are equivalent to one another. But he does attempt to show how the schools of classical Indian philosophy that he regards as forms of absolutism—Advaita Vedānta, Vijñānavāda and Mādhyamika—differed from one another and from the Absolutist philosophies of nineteenth century Europe. Murti also offers a summary of the points that he feels all the systems that he labels as Absolutist have in common. In all systems, he says,

1. The Absolute is transcendent, that is, totally devoid of empirical determinations. In other words, the ultimate reality cannot be an object of any of the senses, including the intellect.

2. The Absolute is immanent, that is, it is the reality underlying all appearances.
3. The Absolute is a single undivided reality: it is *advaya* (without duality) and *nirdharmaka* (without characteristics or features).
4. Since the Absolute cannot be known either by the senses or by reason, knowledge of it can be gained only by a special Intuition, that is an immediate, direct knowledge. In Buddhism, this special Intuition is called *praj*.
5. Since the nature of the Absolute is that it is single and undivided, knowledge of it cannot be communicated through language, since language is based upon the making of distinctions.
6. Absolutism makes it necessary to distinguish between Reality and Appearances. It also makes it necessary to distinguish between scriptures that are discussing Reality and those that discuss only Appearances. Thus in every Absolutism a distinction is made between two levels of truth or two levels of language.
7. In all forms of Absolutism, the ultimate goal of religious practice is “complete Identity with the Absolute,” that is, losing the individual self in the greater singleness of Being. So for the Buddha and for those Buddhists who were attuned to what he was saying, Nirvana should be understood as loss of individual identity and consequent absorption into the oneness of the Absolute. (Murti, 1960, p. 321)

Murti’s version of Mādhyamika, in which the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is described as a kind of Absolutism in which the oppositions of all particular points of view are reconciled as the individual ego yields to the Unity of Being, ends up being rather like a reformed and modernized version of the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta. The antidualistic philosophical standpoint of Advaita is preserved in Murti’s Mādhyamika, but the dogmatic insistence on the authority of revealed scripture—so central to classical Vedānta—has been removed. Also removed from Murti’s neo-advaitan Mādhyamika is the entire institutional structure of both Advaita Vedānta and Mahāyāna Buddhism. This point is important for Murti, who asserts that in Mdhymika philosophy

Denominational religions with their dogmas and organisational sanctions deservedly stand discredited. There is something inherently secular and unspiritual in any organisation. It tends to create vested interests and to breed corruption. In stifling freedom of expression and setting up a norm of dogmas to which the votaries are required to conform, organised religion (the church) succeeds only in antagonising other religious groups and creating schisms and heresies within its own fold. What we need is the realisation of the spiritual which is the bed-rock of all our endeavour. Only mystical religion, which eminently combines the unity of Ultimate Being with the freedom of different paths for realising it, can hope to unite the world. (Murti, 1960, p. 341)

The implication of Murti's view is that only Absolutism fosters religious pluralism, because only Absolutism is free from exclusivist claims to truth, and the Absolutist's ability to assent to what would otherwise be competing truth claims, is manifested in life as a pluralism whereby one not only condones but actually encourages varieties of religious practice, and presumably even varieties of religious experience as well. This non-denominational, anti-dogmatic, intensely personal and therefore individualistic approach to Ultimate Being that Murti endorses was characteristic, in his opinion, of not only Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamika but the teaching style of the Buddha himself. Murti argues for the conclusion that the Buddha thought of Nirvana as a kind of Absolute Reality that could be known only by means of a special form of Intuition (*prajñā*) that follows the realization of the unreality of all distinctions (*vikalpa*).

How Murti arrives at his interpretation of Buddhism as a form of Absolutism is a matter that deserves some attention. If one were to take the statements about nirvana attributed to the Buddha in the Pali canon at face value, Murti's conclusion would appear to be quite insupportable, for there is hardly any term or phrase in Buddhist technical terminology that even approximates the concept of an Absolute as outlined by Murti. Perhaps because he could wring no Absolute out of the Buddha's words, Murti did his best to wring one out of the Buddha's silence. The Buddha's silence, argues Murti, was a product of his Dialectic. What Murti means by Dialectic, which is said to be a key feature of early Buddhism, may be clarified somewhat by the following passage:

Dialectic is a self-conscious spiritual movement; it is necessarily a critique of Reason. This is not possible without the consciousness of the opposition of the thesis and the antithesis. There must be at least two view-points or patterns of interpretation diametrically opposed to each other. A dilemma is not a dialectic, for that is a temporary predicament having reference to a particular situation. The Dialectic is a universal conflict affecting every sphere of things. (Murti, 1960, p. 124)

It was Murti's contention that the Buddha himself was the first philosopher in India to discover the Dialectic. His evidence for this was that the Buddha refused to answer certain questions, such as whether or not the world has a beginning or an end in time, and whether or not a knower of truth (*tathāgata*) exists after death. Rejecting the Buddha's own explanation (which we shall see below) for why he did not answer these questions, Murti argues that the Buddha did not answer these questions because he recognized that they could not be answered at all. The Buddha's silence was his expression of his radical critique of Reason. Reason trades always in opposites; the Dialectic trades in the unification of such opposites. According to Murti, the Buddha's refusal to answer certain questions was grounded in his realization that the categories of Reason, which deal with polar opposites such as identity versus difference, and existence versus non-existence, are incapable of capturing the nature of the Absolute. Thus he says

Reason involves itself in deep and interminable conflict when it tries to go beyond phenomena to seek their ultimate ground. Speculative metaphysics provokes not only difference but also opposition; if one theorist says 'yes' to a question, the other says 'no' to the same....[The Buddha] is

conscious of the interminable nature of the conflict, and resolves it by rising to the higher standpoint of criticism. Dialectic was born. To Buddha, then, belongs the honour of having discovered the dialectic long before anything approximating to it was formulated in the West. (Murti, 1960, pp. 40–41)

Murti's position has been set out in some detail, because his view is representative of one common approach to what looks, on the surface at least, as if it could be a form of religious pluralism. The reason why this view appears pluralistic is that it does recognize that different people have different personalities and therefore require different "paths" or types of spiritual practice. And so, the argument would go, it is healthy for humanity as a whole to have a variety of religious practices, and perhaps even a variety of religious experiences and beliefs, to accommodate the individual needs of individual people. Indeed, it could even be argued under this view that over the course of a lifetime a single individual may need access to a variety of beliefs and practices in order to reach full spiritual maturity.

It must be must asked, however, whether the view under discussion really is pluralistic. The very sentence in Murti's book that shows the most promise as a statement for a kind of pluralism also raises the most doubt about whether it really is pluralism he is talking about here: "*Only* mystical religion, which eminently combines the unity of Ultimate Being with the freedom of different paths for realising it, can hope *to unite the world*" (Murti, 1960, p. 341, emphasis added) The plurality of paths are, it turns out, supposed to be leading to the same goal: the unity of Ultimate Being. Moreover, according to Murti, only one type of religion has room for this plurality of paths: mystical religion.

One should expect of a true pluralism the celebration of not only a variety of methods but also a variety of ultimate goals. A genuinely pluralistic attitude towards religion would be one in which it is recognized as good not that different people have different methods of arriving at the same goal, but rather that different people have radically different ultimate goals. A genuine pluralist would, for example, see it as desirable that some seek war while other seeks peace, that some seek harmony while others seek strife, and that some strive for maximum individual freedoms and self-differentiation while others seek to lose their self-identity in a real or imagined unification with the ultimate ground of all being. A true pluralist, unlike Murti, would never speak of uniting the world as a thing to be hoped for. And so Murti's Utopian vision based on his version of the Buddha's message is not really a religious pluralism at all, no matter how it may so appear on the surface. Indeed, it is hard to see how any form of advaita could be truly pluralistic.

3 The case against the Buddha as a religious pluralist

It may seem as though no separate case now need be made for the view that the Buddha was not a pluralist. For if Murti has been shown not to be a true pluralist, and if his portrayal of the Buddha's views are accurate, then it follows that the Buddha was also not a true pluralist. Unfortunately, the task is not quite so simple, because, as will now

be shown, Murti's portrayal of the Buddha's teaching is not really very accurate. And so the next task will be to set out a more accurate account of the Buddha's teachings than that given by Murti, and then to ask whether or not a kind of religious pluralism can be found in what the Buddha is reported to have said.

3.1 The Buddha's Silence: some interpretations

As we saw above, T.R.V. Murti cites the Buddha's silence on certain questions as part of his evidence for his conclusion that the Buddha's teaching was a kind of Absolutism. The Canonical tradition of Buddhism does indeed record that the Buddha refused to answer fourteen questions. These questions are called the undetermined or unexplained issues (Pali *avyākatavatthūni*, Sanskrit *avyākṛtavastūni*). According to numerous texts, the Buddha said "I have not determined whether

1. The world is eternal (*sassato loko*),
2. the world is non-eternal (*asassato loko*),
3. the world has boundaries (*antavā loko*),
4. the world is unbounded (*anantavā loko*),
5. life is the physical body (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*),
6. life is one thing and the physical body is another (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*),
7. one who knows the truth exists after death (*hoti tathāgato paraṃ maraṇā*),
8. one who knows the truth does not exist after death (*na hoti tathāgato paraṃ maraṇā*),
9. one who knows the truth both exists and does not exist after death (*hoti ca na ca hoti tathāgato paraṃ maraṇā*),
10. one who knows the truth neither exists nor does not exist after death (*neva hoti na na hoti tathāgato paraṃ maraṇā*),
11. discontent is caused by oneself (*sayam kataṃ dukkhaṃ*),
12. discontent is caused by another (*paraṃ kataṃ dukkhaṃ*)
13. discontent is caused by both oneself and another (*sayam katañ ca paraṃ katañ ca hoti*),
14. discontent, being caused neither by oneself nor by another, arises spontaneously (*asayaṃkāraṃ aparaṃkāraṃ adhiccasaṃmuppannaṃ dukkhaṃ*).

Different scholars have offered different explanations for why the Buddha chose not to indicate whether he agreed or disagreed with those fourteen statements. We have already examined T.R.V. Murti's explanation, which was that the Buddha knew better than to ascribe limiting predicates to the Absolute in which all distinctions are reconciled.

3.1.1 The Positivist interpretation of the Buddha's silence

An alternative explanation of the Buddha's silence is offered by David J. Kalupahana, who argues that the Buddha remained silent on these issues because he accepted only what could be experienced through the senses, whereas the fourteen propositions mentioned above dealt with matters that could not be decided by sensual experience.

Since no answer based on experience is possible, the Buddha remained silent when pressed for an answer and maintained that the questions as to whether the *tathāgata* exists (*hoti*) or arises (*uppajjati*), does not exist or does not arise, both or neither, do not fit the case (*na upeti*). (Kalupahana, 1976, p. 157)

Kalupahana rejects Murti's notion that the Buddha's silence stemmed from his unwillingness to attribute categories to the Absolute. There is, Kalupahana rightly observes, no textual justification in the Pali Canon for Murti's contention that the Buddha was concerned with questions of the Absolute or with anything Transcendental. Rather, says Kalupahana, the Buddha realized that our only source of knowledge is our own perfectly ordinary experience of the everyday world, and we have no means of going beyond the limitations of that experience. Kalupahana then goes on to outline three objections that the Buddha has to what Kalupahana calls "metaphysical" knowledge. These three objections are:

1. Metaphysical theories have no basis in our ordinary experience, and they cannot be verified by empirical investigation.
2. Metaphysicians attempt to determine in advance what must be true and ignore what their senses tell them is true.
3. Metaphysical propositions are strings of words that may appear meaningful because they conform to rules of grammar, but they turn out to be meaningless when examined more closely.

The third objection, says Kalupahana, "is the Logical Positivist criticism of metaphysics and is found in the early Buddhist texts. . . . As the Logical Positivists themselves maintain, these metaphysical statements are meaningless because they are not verified in experience." (Kalupahana, 1976, p. 158)

Kalupahana's proof text for this anti-metaphysical Positivist stance is the *Sabbasutta* of the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*:

Monks, I will teach you 'everything'. Listen to it. What, monks, is 'everything'? Eye and material form, ear and sound, nose and odor, tongue and taste, body and tangible objects, mind and mental objects. These are called 'everything'. Monks, he who would say: "I will reject this *everything* and proclaim another *everything*," he may certainly have a theory. But when questioned, he would not be able to answer and would, moreover, be subject to vexation. Why? Because it would not be within the range of experience (*avisaya*). (Kalupahana, 1976, p. 158)

What militates most against Kalupahana's portrayal of the Buddha as a Positivist, that is, as one with a cultivated disdain for all propositions that cannot be verified or falsified by methodical empiricism, is that the Buddha's reported words do not show any hint of discomfort with a wide range of propositions that a Positivist would reject as non-empirical and therefore metaphysical. On the contrary, the Buddha's discourses are filled with references to such metaphysical notions as causal relations. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what the Four Noble Truths could possibly mean in the absence of a theory of cause and effect. Perhaps even more contrary to the spirit of Positivism, the Buddha repeatedly offers judgements of value as to what is competent and what incompetent (*kusala-akusala*), what is beautiful and what ugly (*sobha-asobha*), and what is right and what wrong (*sammā-micchā*). Incompetent or wrongful actions (*pāpa*) are explained as those that are unbeneficial to oneself and to others, whereas what is competent is that which is beneficial to oneself and others. Wisdom consists in the ability to discriminate those actions of the body, speech and thought that are competent from those that are not. But such discrimination is a matter of judgement, and judgement necessarily goes beyond any knowledge that can be acquired immediately through the senses. All this would suggest that the most important aspect of Buddha's teaching, the emphasis placed on the cultivation of moral discrimination, gives his system of philosophy an altogether different mentality from that in Logical Positivism. Given this, it must be concluded that although Kalupahana offers a valuable criticism of Murti's views of the Buddha, he equally fails to offer an accurate characterization of the reasons behind the Buddha's silence.

3.1.2 The Buddha's own explanation of his silence

Fortunately, it is not necessary to be completely at the mercy of modern interpreters of the Buddha's silence, since ample evidence exists in the Pali Canon itself. The Buddha's own explanation for why he had not determined the answers to the fourteen aforementioned questions is given in the Poṭṭhapāda-sutta of the *Dīgha-nikāya*:

“Why, venerable sir, has the Lord not determined [the answers to these questions]?”

“Because, Poṭṭhapāda, this is not connected to a purpose, nor is it connected to virtue, nor is it connected with the life of purity, nor does it lead to humility, nor to dispassion, nor to cessation, nor to tranquility, nor to superior understanding, nor to supreme awakening, nor to nirvana. Therefore, I have not determined.”

“What then, venerable sir, has the Lord determined?”

“I have determined that this is discontent, this is the cause of discontent, this is the cessation of discontent, and this is the path leading to the cessation of discontent.” (Dīgha-nikāya ix.28. Translation mine.)

In this last statement the Buddha claims that all he has determined is four matters, which were eventually to be called collectively the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha then goes on to say that he has taught the Four Noble Truths because these truths

are connected to a purpose, are connected to virtue, are connected with the life of purity, do lead to humility, and dispassion, and cessation, and tranquility, and superior understanding, and supreme awakening, and nirvana.

The Buddha's answer to the question of why he has not determined the answers to the fourteen questions is found not only in the Poṭṭhapāda-sutta of the *Dīgha-nikāya* but in at least one sutta in each of the four *nikāyas*. In the Cuḷa-Māluṅkyā-sutta of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, for example, the Buddha gives an answer very much like the one he gave to Poṭṭhapāda. But in this sutta he adds:

Living the life of purity does not depend on the view that the world is eternal, nor does it depend on the view that the world is not eternal. Whether or not the world is eternal or not eternal, there is surely birth, growing old, dying, grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation and despair. And I have explained how to bring those things to an end here and now [that is, in this very life]. (Majjhima-nikāya I.430. Translation mine.)

The Buddha then applies exactly this same formula to the questions concerning whether or not the world has physical boundaries, whether or the body is identical with life (or the soul), and whether or not one who knows the truth exists after death. And in the *Samyuttanikāya*, the Buddha is reported as saying that he has no answers to these fourteen questions. When asked why he does not determine the answer, he replies in words to this effect:

Let me ask you what is the reason why the wandering ascetics with other views try to answer these questions, whereas Gotama the recluse does not try to answer them. The reason is that other wandering ascetics think that the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind either belong to them, or are their selves, or are part of their selves. But the Tathāgata, being a fully enlightend Arahant, does not think of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind as belonging to him, nor does he think of them "These are my self." The Tathāgata, unlike other wandering ascetics, also does not regard feelings, perception, mentality or awareness as things that belong to him or as being himself or as being part of himself. There is nothing about which the Tathāgata says "This is mine. This is I. This is my self." (Paraphrase of *Samyuttanikāya* 4.391.)

The reasoning behind this passage is clear enough. Someone who thinks of either the living body or the mind (or soul) as the self or as belonging to the self must still recognize that the body and mind are both impermanent. Realizing that everything is impermanent, those who identify themselves with impermanent things become filled with fear that they will cease to exist. Because they are filled with a desire to live (*jīvitumkāma*) and a desire not to die (*amaritukāma*), they believe what they want to believe: that there is life after death. Some people, on the other hand, are attached to pleasures and wish to pursue pleasures without regard to what consequences their actions will have in the future. These people, who choose not to be responsible in their actions, also believe exactly what they want to believe: that there is no life after death. The Tathāgata, on the other hand, is understood in Buddhist texts as one who realizes

that all discontent arises from ignorance, which takes the form of identifying the body and the mind as the self. When this false identification comes to an end, so does all discontent as well as all need to discover answers to cosmological, psychological and thanatological questions.

4 Are the Buddha's teachings pluralistic?

Having arrived at what is hoped to be a more accurate appraisal of both the Buddha's reason for not answering certain questions and what he offered as the central aim of his teaching, namely, to teach people not to identify with their bodies and minds, we can now turn to the question of whether the Buddha's teachings are pluralistic in spirit. This question can be broken down into a set of closely related considerations, which will now be examined tandem.

4.1 Recognition of a plurality of ultimate goals?

It is clear from the emphasis that Gotama the Buddha placed on what came to be known as the Four Noble Truths that the matter of central concern to him was the presence of discontent (*dukkha*) and the question of how discontent can be eradicated. The monk Nāgasena is reported to have answered, when asked by King Milinda what the ultimate purpose of becoming a monk is, that "The purpose of our renunciation is that this discontent may perish, and that no further discontent may arise; completely passing away, without attachment to the world, is our ultimate aim." (Milinda-pañha II.1.5) Thus it is clear that Nāgasena, like the Buddha himself, understands that the religious life has only one ultimate goal.

The question remains, however, as to what attitude the classical Buddhists had concerning goals that were less than ultimate, aside from the obvious point that such goals were by definition less important than the ultimate. An indication to the answer to this question appears in the Ariya-pariyesana-sutta (Discourse on the noble quest) of the Majjhima-nikāya, where Gotama the Buddha is portrayed as explaining that there are two kinds of quest, the noble and the ignoble. The ignoble quest, he explains, is the search for things that are liable to birth, ageing, decay, death, discontent and contamination; it is, for example, the quest for such things as family, servants, livestock and gold and silver. All these things are liable to birth and ageing and contamination, and all except gold and silver are liable to disease, death, and discontent. Despite this fact, says Gotama, people of the world, who are enslaved by their addictions to possessions and who are liable to birth because of their belief in a self, seek out what is likewise liable to birth, and to decaying with age, and to death and discontent. The noble quest, on the other hand, is the quest for that which is without birth, ageing, decay, death, discontent and contamination. This noble quest is for nibbāna, "the ultimate security against bondage." Compared to this goal, other goals are regarded not only less than ultimate, but also as ultimately ignoble and unworthy.

In this "Discourse on the noble quest" Gotama relates how he grew dissatisfied with the created things of the world, since whatever was created also perished, and went out in search of that which is not created and therefore not perishable. Studying

under one teacher after another, Gotama found no teaching satisfactory, because each teaching that he encountered did “not conduce to disregard nor to dispassion, nor to stopping nor to tranquillity, nor to nibbāna.” (p. 165) Finally Gotama abandoned all his teachers and set out by himself, and having done so he finally won nibbāna, described as the unborn, the unageing, undecaying, undying, unsorrowing, stainless. And when he attained nibbāna, the Buddha claims that he knew: “The freedom of my mind can never be lost. This is my last birth. I shall never be reborn again.”

This well-known narrative, which occurs in several parts of the Pali Canon, depicts Gotama’s renunciation of the domestic life and his eventual attainment of nibbāna. It also emphasizes the point that there is only one ultimate goal for those who follow the Buddha, namely, nibbāna, which is characterized as an unending freedom from discontent. This freedom is said to be due to the eradication of the root cause of discontent, which is the thought “I am” (*asmi-māna*). And so it is no surprise to hear Sāriputta proclaim in the Dasuttara Sutta of the Dīgha-nikāya that there is only one thing to be realized (*sacchikātabba*), namely, imperturbable mental freedom (*akuppā ceto-vimutti*). This imperturbable mental freedom, otherwise known as nibbāna, is also described as the ultimate happiness (*param sukhaṃ*), as for example in the passage from the Vinaya (Mahāvagga I.1.3) that reads: “Happy is freedom from desire in this world, getting beyond all desires, and the putting away of that pride that comes from the thought ‘I am’. This truly is the ultimate happiness.”

Although it is abundantly clear in the Pali canon that nibbāna is free from decaying and perishing only because it is an absence and not a positively existing thing, there came to be much confusion concerning the exact nature of this ultimately desirable goal. And so we find that by the time of the *Milinda-pañha*, the text referred to above that creatively narrates a dialogue between a Hellenistic king and a Buddhist monk named Nāgasena, a good deal of attention is devoted to explaining just what kind of thing nibbāna is. In that text it is explained, for example, that nibbāna is the same as cessation. Foolish people, it is explained, take pleasure in the senses and in the objects of the senses. Taking delight in such things, they cling to them. Clinging to them, they are carried along by them as if by a great flood. They cannot escape birth, old age, and death, nor can they escape grief, lamentation, pain, sorrow and despair. But the wise take no pleasure in the senses or in the objects of the senses. So for them, clinging comes to an end. Consequently, the longing for existence comes to an end. And when the longing for existence comes to an end, so does rebirth. When rebirth comes to an end, there is a complete cessation of all forms of sorrow. That cessation is called nibbāna. Not all people attain nibbāna, says Nāgasena, but all people who learn which causes and conditions to eliminate and which causes and conditions to cultivate do attain nibbāna. (*Milinda-pañha* Book 3, chapter 4.)

King Milinda asks Nāgasena to explain what it means to say that nibbāna is never produced. The monk replies that there is a sense in which nibbāna is like a skill that an apprentice learns to master. It is the skill of being free from distress, aloof from danger, confident, peaceful, calm, cheerful, happy, pure and at ease. In this sense, one can say that nibbāna exists and is something that a person achieves. But there is another sense in which nibbāna is nothing but an absence. Suppose, says Nāgasena, that a man were in a pit of burning coals. If by making a great exertion he were to get free of the pit, he would experience great joy. The joy is very real, but it arises owing to the mere

absence of the torment of the burning coals. Similarly, when one comes to an end of the torments of lust, desire and delusion, there is a great sense of relief brought about by a mere absence. When a person looks at the course of life, all one sees is that one is born, one grows old and one dies. There is no joy or satisfaction in being born. There is no joy in growing old. There is no satisfaction in dying. When one reflects that life after death would only be another birth, followed by old age and death, one loses all interest in being reborn at all. Existence itself becomes a source of great pain and torment. For such a person there is great joy in knowing that one has come to the end of existence at the end of the present life. This is the joy of nibbāna. (Milinda-pañha, Book 4, chapter 8.)

4.2 Recognition of a plurality of methods?

As was seen above, classical Buddhism recognized only one ultimate goal. But it does not follow that there is only one method of arriving at that goal. And so, even if classical Buddhism is not pluralistic in the sense of recognizing a variety of equally worthwhile goals, it could still be pluralistic in the sense of acknowledging that there are many equally effective methods of arriving at the one ultimate goal. We now turn, therefore, to the question of whether classical Buddhism did in fact endorse a pragmatic pluralism.

One finds, in fact, that throughout the Pali canon the point is repeatedly made that the methods capable of leading to the attainment of the highest good are rather few. Indeed, there appears to be only one method, although that method has a variety of stages. The uniquely effective method limned in the Pali canon consists of renouncing the domestic life and thereby freeing oneself of the encumbrances of family ties and possessions so that one can achieve simplicity in livelihood, then cultivating the habit of acting according to rather strict guidelines of conduct, and finally overcoming the acquired tendency to identify oneself with the body and mind. The only variety available in this whole programme is that one has an option of overcoming self-identification either by means of *jhāna*, the method of concentrating the awareness on a single subject and drawing attention away from all other objects of sense, or by means of *vipassanā*, the method of paying close attention to physical phenomena and to mental processes towards the end of seeing that all physical and mental states are impermanent and therefore neither one's self nor part of oneself nor within one's possession.

One text that is quite representative of the Buddha's attitude towards the bootlessness of all methods but one is the Tevijja Sutta of the Dīgha-nikāya. This sutta relates the story of a time when the Buddha is passing through Manasākaṭa, where it happens that a number of Brahman teachers are also present. Two young Brahmans get into an argument over which Brahman teacher teaches the only straight path (*ayaṃ eva uju-maggo*) that takes those who follow it to union with Brahmā (*brahma-sahavyatā*). Neither of the young Brahmans can convince the other of which teacher teaches the straight and direct path to union with Brahmā. So they decide to go ask the ascetic Gotama about this matter. Gotama asks the young Brahmans what their dispute is really all about. The young Brahmans reply that it is about what are and what are not paths (*magga-amaggā*). There are so many different paths taught by the different Brahman teachers that the young Brahmans do not know which ones really lead to union

with Brahmā and which do not. They wonder whether perhaps all paths lead to this same goal in the same way that may different roads may all lead to the same village.

Gotama then asks the young Brahmans whether among all the Brahman teachers there is even one by whom Brahm has ever been experienced directly (*sakki-dīṭṭho*). The young Brahmans admit that not only has no living Brahman teacher experienced Brahmā directly, but neither has any Brahman within the past seven generations. Prodded by Gotama's questions, they even admit that none of the Vedic seers claimed to have experienced Brahmā directly. Given these replies to his questions, Gotama concludes that what is said by the Vedic Brahmans is unfounded (*appāṭihīrakataṃ*). Gotama goes on to say that the Vedic Brahmans are comparable to a file of blind men, each holding on to the one before him, being lead by a man who is also blind. What is said by these Vedic Brahmans, who talk about a goal that no one has ever achieved, is risible (*hassaka*), empty (*rittaka*) and vain (*tucchaka*). The sun and moon are visible and there for everyone to see, says Gotama, and the Brahman teachers cannot find a way to achieve union even with these visible things, and yet they claim to be able to achieve union with something that no one has ever actually experienced.

The Vedic Brahmans who speak of union with Brahmā are compared in this sutta to a young man who sets forth to seek the most beautiful woman in the country, even though he has no idea what caste she belongs to, what her name is, what she looks like or where she lives. The Vedic Brahmans are then compared to a man who plans to build a staircase for a palace at the crossroads and yet has no idea which direction the staircase will face, what it will look like or where the palace is located to which this staircase will be built. These Vedic Brahmans are further compared to a man standing at a flooded river who tries to get to the other shore by calling across the water and inviting the other shore to come to him. The Brahmans call on the Vedic gods to come to their service, not knowing that the gods will never come to the service of those who are attached to pleasures of the senses. Then they are compared to a man standing at a flooded river who tries to get to the other shore despite the fact that he is bound by chains. The Brahmans call on the Vedic gods to come to their service, says Gotama, not knowing that the gods will never come to the service of those who are bound by the chains of sensuality, ill-will, laziness, anxiety and doubt, who are encumbered with family and possessions, and who are impotent (*avassavatti*) owing to their lack of discipline. It is impossible that Brahmans such as this will see Brahm face to face either during the present life or after the breakup of the body. Therefore the knowledge contained in the Vedas is like a desert (*īriṇa*), a wilderness (*vipina*) or a wasteland (*vyasana*).

After listening to the Buddha's derision of the Vedic Brahmans, the young Brahmans then ask Gotama whether he has experienced Brahmā directly and can tell others how to experience him directly. He replies "I know Brahmā and the world of Brahmā, and the way to the world of Brahmā, and the path of practice whereby the world of Brahmā may be gained." So the young Brahmans ask Gotama to tell them the path that leads to the experience of union with Brahmā. The Buddha then takes this opportunity to explain that the path to unity with Brahmā consists in renouncing the domestic life; it then consists in avoiding such conduct as killing, stealing, having sexual relations, lying, speaking maliciously, speaking divisively, speaking harshly, and speaking without a clear purpose. Moreover, one who aspires to know Brahmā avoids harming plants

or seeds, eats only once a day, avoids entertainments and ornamented clothing, avoids luxury, accepts no precious metals, accepts no raw grains or meats, accepts no women or slaves as gifts, accepts no domesticated animals or fowl, accepts no farmland, avoids commercial transactions, refrains from bribery and commits no violence. And such a person also practices meditation (jhāna). One who experiences Brahmā is one who cultivates friendship, compassion, sympathetic joy and impartiality towards every living thing, never favouring any person or group of persons or beings over any other. Gotama concludes in this sutta that it is only those who renounce family and possessions and devote themselves to the kind of conduct he has outlined who are capable of union with Brahmā.

That renunciation of the sensual life and the subsequent pursuit of ethical purity is the only method that is effective in arriving at almost any desired goal is a point that is made in numerous passages of the Pali canon. In the Ambaṭṭha sutta of the Dīgha-nikāya, for example, the topic is what it that makes a person highly respected by the gods and by fellow human beings. Here the Buddha is portrayed as explaining to the Brahman Ambaṭṭha that it is wisdom and righteousness that makes one the best among gods and human beings. Being highly ranked in divine and human society, it is explained, has nothing at all to do with birth or lineage or with the sort of pride that causes one to compare oneself with others. Talking of such things may be suitable when one is in the ordinary world looking for a suitable marriage partner, but talking of such things when one is looking for wisdom and proper conduct is wholly out of place. In fact, it is only by releasing oneself of such concerns, says the Buddha, that one can be in a position to seek wisdom. The Buddha then outlines his guidelines for good conduct almost exactly as in the Tevijja Sutta.

After outlining these guidelines, he points out that a servant of the king might overhear the king and then repeat the king's words to others, but simply repeating what the king says would not make the servant himself a king; similarly, a wise man might repeat what wise men say, but just repeating it does not make them wise. But many teachers do just that: repeat what genuinely wise people have taught. This is, for example, what Brahmans do in their repetition of the words of the great seers such as Aṭṭhaka, Vāmaka, Vāmadeva, Vessāmitta, Yamataggi, Angirasa, Bhāradvaja, Vāsetṭha, Kassapa, and Bhagu. Knowing the words of these great seers by heart hardly makes one a seer. These great seers did not parade around in white cloth with garlands on their bodies and perfume in their hair chanting memorized verses, nor did they live on the very finest of rice and beans and sauces, nor were they waited upon by the most beautiful of women clad in the finest of clothes, nor did they drive the finest of chariots and dwell in heavily guarded palaces full of riches as Brahmans do. Brahmans who simply recite the words of these poets and fail to live a life in imitation of them are not in any sense wise or righteous as the seers themselves were. As if to underline the point that memorizing the words of wise and pure people is not sufficient to make one wise and pure, the sutta narrates that when Ambaṭṭha returns to his teacher Pokkharasādi and tells him all that Gotama has told him, the teacher upbraids his disciple for being a simpleton and a dullard and assures him that he will be reborn in hell or in some animal state. The Brahman teacher then kicks his unworthy disciple to the ground.

It is noteworthy that in the Tevijja sutta there is no denial of the possibility of the Brahmans' stated goal of having direct experience with Brahmā; on the contrary, the

Buddha himself claims to have had this experience. Rather, there is a denial that this experience can be had by those who do not seek it by the correct method. Moreover, there is nothing to suggest that this experience is on a par with what the Buddhists regard as the ultimate goal, which is nibbāna, the attainment of which is usually proclaimed by the formula “Rebirth has been destroyed. The higher life has been fulfilled. What had to be done has been accomplished. After this present life there will be no beyond!” (Walshe, 1987, p. 93) Having direct experience of Brahmā amounts only to being reborn in the realm of Brahmā after the breakup of the present body, whereas when nibbāna is achieved there is no more rebirth into any realm. Nevertheless, even though the experience of Brahmā is not considered ultimate, it is still said to be available only to those who follow the same method as that which eventually leads to ultimate nibbāna. Similarly, in the Ambaṭṭha Sutta it is said that while being highly regarded by gods and human beings is not an ultimate concern, it is nevertheless a goal that happens to be attained by those who follow the path that does lead ultimately to nibbāna.

The emphasis on the importance of renouncing the domestic life that one finds in the suttas, incidentally, is no longer to be found by the time of the *Milinda-pañha*. In that text Nāgasena makes it clear that it is possible for a person to attain nibbāna while still living at home, having a family, holding on to precious possessions, and using perfumes and adornments. Not only is it possible for a lay person to achieve the highest good, says Nāgasena, but millions upon millions of people have achieved nibbāna without renouncing family, pleasures of the senses and possessions. In fact, he says, among those who have attained nibbāna, the vast majority have been lay persons who renounced nothing.

If it is possible for someone to attain nibbāna without being a monk and renouncing family and possessions, one might very well wonder what the point of becoming a monk is. As King Milinda asks, “If one can be cured without taking medicine, why take the medicine?” Nāgasena’s reply to this sensible question is that by taking the vow to lead a life of utmost simplicity, one has the best possible chance of living a life that brings no harm to others and no death to others, even indirectly. One who lives a life of utmost simplicity can live without being a burden on others. Such a person can also live a life in which the causes of pride and all other forms of downfall are far removed. Since monks own nothing, they have no fear of losing anything. Theirs is a life without complications and distractions in which it is very easy to live in moderation and to have time for reflection and meditation. Since they have nothing to protect, there is no temptation to be deceitful. And by living a life of utmost purity and simplicity they serve as a source of great inspiration to others. Therefore, not only do those who live a simple life make it easier for themselves to attain nibbāna, but they also encourage others to do the same. (*Milinda-pañha*, Book 6)

What these suttas lead one to conclude is that the Buddha takes the position that there is only one ultimate goal, nibbāna, and only one method of attaining it, the path of renunciation and good conduct. But while there is only one ultimate goal to which this path uniquely leads, the path does lead to a variety of other good in addition to the highest good.

4.3 Recognition of a plurality of systems of belief?

It has been argued that classical Buddhism acknowledged only one ultimate goal, although on the way to this ultimate good one might attain a number of worldly goods, such as good reputation, that while seen as good by foolish people would be seen by the wise as having no ultimate value in contrast to the good of nibbana. It has also been argued that there is really only one way to achieve that ultimate good, and that is to abandon the thoughts “I am” and “I have” (*ahaṅkāra-mamakāra*). Giving up all thoughts of self-identity and possession can in turn be achieved only by leading a morally responsible life, and such a life is easier for monks to achieve than it is for people with families. But from all this it still does not follow that only one system of beliefs can support the kind of behaviour necessary to attain the highest good. It might still be possible, in other words, for Buddhism to be doctrinally pluralistic, even if it is teleologically and orthopractically uniform. So what must be looked at now is how the plurality of cosmological views is regarded in classical Buddhist texts.

We have already discussed at some length in the passages above why the Buddha declined to give answers to a number of speculative questions about the origin and the size of the world and about life after death. The answers to such questions would have no bearing on the reasons for human discontent nor on the steps that must be taken to remove that discontent. So the best that can be said is that, according to the teachings of classical Buddhism, doctrines concerning questions of cosmology, psychology and thanatology do no good in a person’s search for imperturbable mental freedom. But can the worst be said, namely, that according to classical Buddhism speculative doctrines actually do harm? If so, then it can also be said with confidence that classical Buddhism was no more pluralistic doctrinally than it was in other matters.

It has already been pointed out that answers to the question concerning life after death are seen in Buddhism as being rooted in wishful thinking. The person who fears death is naturally inclined to want to believe that there is life after death, whereas the person who fears the painful consequences of harmful actions is inclined to want to believe that there is no life after death. But the person who comes to realize that neither the body nor the mind is the self loses all such fears and hence loses the need to answer the question of whether or not there is life after death. Now the conclusion that can be drawn from this is that certain kinds of belief are said to be based on fears, and that fears are in turn based on identifying the body and mind as the self. But can the conclusion also be drawn that certain kinds of belief are said to reinforce and perpetuate the very fears upon which they are based? If this can be said, then it can be said that these beliefs are not at all regarded in Buddhism as harmless and therefore are certainly not at all regarded as healthy.

In several places in the Pali canon there are reports of dialogues in which people ask the Buddha why it is that people believe that performing sacrifices and performing other kinds of religious ritual will lead to a better life in a world beyond the present one. When asked about this matter, the Buddha gives two kinds of answer. The first kind of answer has to do with why people adopt certain beliefs. It is suggested, for example, that people do religious rituals because as they grow older, they cling to things as they were in the past and they begin to fear death; rituals are seen as a way of preserving the present order of things, even in a life beyond the death of the present body. Sutta-

nipāta 1043–1048, for example, outlines such an answer to the question of why people do rituals, and it also warns that people who believe in rituals for this reason can never get beyond the realm of birth and death. The belief in the efficacy of rituals, in other words, impedes the attainment of nibbana and so must be seen as harmful and not at all healthy.

The second kind of answer has to do with why people encourage their fellow human beings to adopt certain beliefs. It is suggested, for example, that Brahman males invented the belief in rituals for the purpose of making enough money to keep themselves surrounded by beautiful women, livestock, fine chariots and horses, and luxurious living quarters. In order to make money from these rituals, the Brahmins wrote hymns of praise to the gods and books of ritual performance, and they then convinced the wealthy and the powerful that they should sponsor the performance of sacrifices. When people came to believe in these sacrifices, then many hundreds of thousands of animals, who had never intentionally harmed anyone in any way, were mercilessly put to death under the sword, all for the sake of the Brahmins' greed for money. This answer, which is outlined in Sutta-nipāta 299–315, shows that, according to the Buddha, the belief in the efficacy of rituals not only leads to the unnecessary suffering and destruction of innocent beings but also reinforces the greed for sensual pleasure that impedes the attainment of nibbāna. So once again it can only be concluded that religious beliefs of this kind are regarded as harmful and not at all healthy.

It can be said in general that according to classical Buddhism, most religious doctrines arise either out of ignorance, or fear, or vested interests, or an unwillingness to face unpleasant realities. Religious doctrines, in other words, are seen as arising out of superficial thinking (*yoniso manasikāra*) of the sort that accompanies the habit of identifying oneself with the body and mind. And having thus arisen, most religious doctrines are said to have the effect of supporting the survival of the very kind of dysfunctional thinking that gave rise to them in the first place. Such an attitude towards religious doctrines and their accompanied practices can hardly be called a form of religious pluralism, at least not in the sense that pluralism has been defined at the outset of this essay.

5 The situation in Sanskrit Buddhism

On the question of Buddhist attitudes towards doctrinal or orthopractic pluralism, there is no significant change in the Sanskrit literature of Indian Buddhism from what we have seen in the Pali literature. Vasubandhu, for example, declares in his *Abhidharma-kośa* that *nirvāṇa* is the ultimate good and therefore ultimately the only worthy goal, and he also declares that this ultimate freedom (*mokṣa*) is nowhere to be found outside of Buddhism, indeed, outside of the abhidharma tradition of Buddhism. The reason that this is so is that all traditions aside from Buddhism are undermined by their belief that one has a self (*ātman*). So we see here a confirmation of the convictions found in Pali Buddhism that 1) there is only one ultimate goal, namely, *nirvāṇa*, 2) there is only one outlook that is conducive to reaching that goal, namely, the belief that there is no self (*anātmavāda*), and 3) there is only one method of arriving at that view, namely, critical reflection (*yoniso manasikāra*), which may optionally be preceded by the prac-

tice of *dhyāna*, which consists in concentrating the attention on a single sensible object in order to abstract the attention from all other sensible objects.

Even in the Sanskrit literature that belongs to the movement that came to be called the Mahāyāna, there is no hint of a more pluralistic attitude. The ultimate goal in Mahāyāna literature is still *nirvāṇa*, and in the final analysis there is still no way to achieve that goal other than breaking the habit of identifying oneself with the body and the mind. There is to be sure a new emphasis in Mahāyāna literature on the ideal of the bodhisattva, who is portrayed as a heroic figure who is prepared to postpone his own *nirvāṇa* until all other beings have been shown the way, but this new ideal only underlines the old Buddhist conviction that ultimately there is only one legitimate goal for all beings. There is in some Mahāyāna literature an apparently new goal in the form of rebirth in a land of contentment (*sukhavatī bhūmi*), but on close examination it turns out that this land of contentment is merely a place in which the environment is more conducive to the ultimate purpose of achieving *nirvāṇa* by the traditionally accepted method of overcoming all habits of identifying the self with the body or mind. There is no redefinition of the ultimate goal in Mahāyāna literature, nor is there any change in the notion of what must finally be done to achieve that goal.

Perhaps the only new feature of Mahāyāna literature is the development of a new target for ridicule. In the Pali literature the principal object of ridicule is the Brahman, who is often caricatured as a self-serving, undisciplined, unprincipled bungler, who somehow manages, despite his many obvious shortcomings, to think of himself as superior to all other people. In the Sanskrit literature, the caricature remains about the same, the main difference being that the principal targets of the new ridicule are the heroes of earlier Buddhism. Such figures as Śāriputra, Subhuti and Maudgalyāyana, who are depicted as perfected beings in earlier Buddhist literature come to be portrayed as fatuous incompetents in the Mahāyāna literature. While the victims of the stereotyping and mockery change, the mockery itself remains a constant in Buddhist literature. Also constant is a uniform lack of a spirit of religious pluralism.

6 Conclusions

In this essay an attempt has been made to provide textual evidence that indicates that the kind of pluralism outlined at the outset of this paper is not one of the values promoted in the literature of classical Indian Buddhism. This conclusion, while it may be disappointing to a modern Buddhist hoping to find pluralistic overtones in classical scriptures, is hardly surprising. Indeed, what would have been surprising would be to find truly pluralistic sentiments in a literature as ancient as that of Buddhism, for pluralism is a distinctly modern ideology that, like all ideologies, has evolved to help people deal with the problems of a particular age in history.

We live in a time in which people shrink back in horror from certain ideologies that were commonly acceptable only a generation ago. The generation of Westerners that was able to approve participation in the Second World War, the Korean conflict, and the wars in Southeast Asia was also still capable of countenancing the sorts of ideologies that justify the building and maintenance of territorial and economic empires. The ideologies of colonization and empire-building typically include principles by which one

group of people can be seen as less civilized, or less morally principled, than another group. Accepting such principles allows one group to attempt to dominate another without feeling any conflict with moral principles that they otherwise accept as universally applicable, such as principles calling for restraint against killing and theft and other types of incompetent behaviour. Fairly recently a significant number of people have come to find the old ideologies of domination repugnant and have sought alternative ways of seeing human society. One manifestation of this search for new ideologies, in which the principles of domination are replaced by principles of harmonious cooperation, is the recent concern for religious pluralism.

The relatively new ideology of religious pluralism has posed some problems for those who would also like to adhere to unreformed traditional religions, for the simple reason that very few of the major religious traditions have espoused the notion that more than one claim to ultimacy can be valid. On the contrary, most of the historical religions are based in some way either on an explicit rejection or denigration of another religious tradition or traditions or on aristocratic claims of ethnic or racial supremacy. Examples of religions based on the denigration of other religions are original Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam; examples of essentially racist or ethnocentric religions are the religion of ancient Israel and the Brahmanism of Vedic India. That all these religions are traditionally triumphalist and not pluralistic is simply something that must be acknowledged; it would be ideologically anachronistic and intellectually dishonest to try to find anticipations of a now fashionable way of thinking in traditions that evolved in a social and political setting entirely different from that of the present world.

It is to be hoped that the recently evolved ideology of religious pluralism will provide a useful challenge to the ideologies found in classical Buddhism and other traditions coming into the modern world from the remote past. It is equally to be hoped that the classical traditions will themselves provide a stimulating challenge to the uncritical acceptance of any new ideologies, including that of religious pluralism.

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