

What can we learn from Musīla and Nārada? ‡

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Abstract

The puzzle presented by Musīla and Nārada (both have attained the same knowledge/insight, but one is an Arhat, the other one is not) has raised questions regarding the Buddhist path to liberation from the time of La Vallée Poussin onward. The present paper argues that the final stages of this path had become obscure to at least certain members of the Buddhist community from an early date onward. It then raises the question of whether modern psychological understanding may shed light on this issue. It concludes with the observation that we may need some theoretical scaffolding, to be provided by modern scholarship, to understand what the early Buddhist texts are talking about.

Keywords: Musīla, Nārada, Arhat, intellectual understanding, psychological transformation

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Musīla and Nārada are the names of two monks who figure in the *Kosambī-sutta* of the *Samyutta-nikāya*.¹ In this dialogue, first Musīla is questioned about his spiritual state. We learn that he knows through his own knowledge the causal relationships found in the chain of ‘Conditioned Origination’ (Skt: *pratīyasamutpāda*; P: *paṭiccasamuppāda*). The Pāli, in the translation of Bhikkhu Bodhi, has: "Friend Musīla, apart from faith, apart from personal preference, apart from oral tradition, apart from reasoned reflection, apart from acceptance of a view after pondering it, does the Venerable Musīla have personal knowledge thus: ‘With birth as condition, aging-and-death comes to be’?"² He also knows that the cessation of becoming is Nirvāṇa. The questioner concludes from this that the venerable Musīla is an Arhat, one whose influxes (*āsrava*) are destroyed. Musīla’s silence betrays his agreement with this. Next Nārada asks to be questioned in the same way. He answers the same questions in exactly the same words. However, he rejects the conclusion that he is an Arhat, one whose influxes are destroyed. He explains this with the help of a simile. Just as when a man who is hot and thirsty finds a well in the wilderness, he sees the well and knows that it contains water, but alas, he cannot reach and touch the water. In the same way he, Nārada, even though he knows that the cessation of becoming is Nirvāṇa, is no Arhat, and his influxes have not been destroyed.

Louis de La Vallée Poussin has drawn attention to this story in a well-known article (1937). He identified the two positions here represented with the two positions that are called Sāṃkhya and Yoga in the *Bhagavadgītā*: in Sāṃkhya, liberation is entirely or primarily obtained by means of knowledge, i.e., intellectual effort; in Yoga, this goal is reached by means of ascetic practice.³ In my book, *Buddhist Teaching in India*, I accepted La Vallée Poussin's identification (Bronkhorst 2009: 57-58). I no longer think that it is fully correct. I now think that Musīla illustrates the view that came to predominate in Buddhism, according to which Nirvāṇa is a largely

¹ For the Pāli, see Feer 1884-1898, vol. 2, 115ff. The discourse has a parallel in the Chinese *Samyuktāgama* (Taishō 99: 98c - 99a).

² Bodhi 2000: 610. In the Pāli (Feer 1884-1898, vol. 2, 115), the passage reads: *aññatreva āvuso musīla saddhāya aññatra ruciya aññatra anussava aññatra ākāraparivitakkā aññatra ditthiniijjhānakkhantiyā atthāyasmato musīlassa paccattam eva ñāṇaṃ jātipaccayā jarāmaraṇanti?*

³ La Vallée Poussin 1937: 189-90, with references to Edgerton 1924: 27.

if not entirely cognitive matter: if one has the right knowledge or insight, liberation is attained. Nārada, on the other hand, gives expression to the alternative belief that Buddhist liberation is not primarily cognitive in nature.⁴

I accept that the story of Musīla and Nārada distinguishes two positions, even though I do not wish to suggest that there was a dispute or conflict between the upholders of these two positions; nor do I claim that they were thought of as two paths to liberation.⁵ To make sense of these positions, I propose to distinguish between the following three alternatives that might be held to take the practitioner to the highest goal: (1) ordinary knowledge of Buddhist doctrine; (2) the special insight that may arise in certain meditative states; (3) the internal modifications that a practitioner may bring about in him- or herself in certain meditative states. I will try to explore the differences between these alternatives with the help of the notion of *absorption* (See also Bronkhorst 2017).

Ordinary awareness is interpreted awareness. It is interpreted in the light of our memories of earlier experiences and other mental contents, through a network of mainly unconscious mental associations.

Absorption is a form of deep concentration that plays a role in profound meditation; the term in the early Buddhist texts that comes closest to it is *samādhi*. Being a form of deep concentration, it reduces the number and/or strength of mental associations. If the absorption is deep enough, this will have a cognitive effect: awareness will be less interpreted.⁶ Those who have had it

⁴ More recent publications that deal with this episode and with two contrasting positions in Buddhism in general include Griffiths 1981, which is criticized in Kaur 2016; Bodhi 2003; Fuller 2005, 101; Gombrich 2006, 110 ff.; Arbel 2016, 81 n. 117; Anālayo 2016 and 2017, 90-101. See also Polak 2011, 167-168, and 2016; and Cousins 2009.

⁵ Bodhi 2003, Arbel 2016, Anālayo 2016 and 2017: 90-101, and Kaur 2016 do not think that two positions are contrasted.

⁶ Certain authors feel critical about the very notion of less interpreted (or even totally uninterpreted) awareness. Robert Sharf, who is one of them, yet writes (2015: 476): “I suspect that when medieval meditation masters used terms such as ‘falling into emptiness’ and ‘meditation sickness’ they were targeting techniques that resulted in an intense immersion in the moment, in the now, such that the practitioner loses touch with the socially, culturally, and historically constructed world in which he or she lives.” In a more recent article (2018), Sharf expresses himself less categorically.

commonly describe this changed awareness as a deeper insight; we may call it mystical insight, not to be confused with intellectual understanding.

Experiencing less interpreted awareness can be a shattering and memorable event, and many who have had it will try to repeat it or convince others of the deeper insight they believe to have gained. But the experience will leave the person essentially as she was before. It may provide an insight, but cannot be claimed to destroy attachments and put an end to suffering. For this, more than mystical insight is required.

The three alternatives I mentioned earlier now look as follows:

- (1) Ordinary knowledge of Buddhist doctrine (“intellectual understanding”).
- (2) Mystical insight resulting from absorption.
- (3) A permanently transformed psychological state that is the outcome of certain modifications that have been brought about in the mind while in a state of absorption: the destruction of the influxes (*āsrava*).

The story of Musīla and Nārada is not fully clear on some points. It tells us that Musīla knows certain things through personal knowledge (*paccattam eva ñāṇam*). It does not tell us whether this personal knowledge is intellectual understanding or rather mystical insight obtained in deep meditation, even though the list of qualifications ("apart from faith, apart from personal preference, apart from oral tradition, apart from reasoned reflection, apart from acceptance of a view after pondering it") may suggest the latter of these two. It is however also possible that the author of this passage did not know the difference between intellectual understanding and mystical insight. Or he did not have the vocabulary to clearly distinguish between the two and tried to convey that Musīla had had mystical insight. We will see that the two forms of awareness are often confused in Buddhist literature. Our analysis should make clear that Musīla's position did not necessarily concern only intellectual understanding. What is more, the opposition embodied in Musīla and Nārada is *not* an opposition between intellectual reasoning — corresponding to (1) — and absorption —

corresponding to (2).⁷ Rather, their opposition is either between (1) intellectual understanding and (3) psychological transformation; *or* between (2) insight resulting from absorption and (3) psychological transformation.

Nārada's position is clearer than Musīla's in this respect. He states in so many words that the third alternative is missing, that he has not reached the permanently transformed psychological state that is brought about by the destruction of the influxes. And the fact that this (presumably) diligent and committed Buddhist admits that he has not reached that state strongly suggests that he does not know how to get there.

Not all those who practice meditation can bring about a state of absorption that is deep enough to have cognitive effects; perhaps most meditators cannot. They may yet know from others that successful meditation can lead to mystical insight. They may be tempted to concentrate on the supposed contents of this mystical insight, hoping to reach in this way the mystical state, not being aware that that knowledge by itself is not enough. Acquiring some profound knowledge may in their mind replace meditative practice. Understanding "Conditioned Origination" (*pratītyasamutpāda*, *Paṭiccasamuppāda*), and knowing that the cessation of becoming is Nirvāṇa may in this way come to be looked upon as methods to gain the highest goal. This is what we see in much of the Buddhist scriptural tradition: much emphasis on the insights that a Buddhist practitioner is expected to attain. I merely mention the Prajñāpāramitā literature, i.e., the literature on the perfection of wisdom. Attaining this highest wisdom becomes an intellectual task rather than something that accompanies deep absorption.

Nārada's remarks show that there were at least some in the Buddhist tradition who held on to the view that attaining Nirvāṇa was not exclusively, or even primarily, a cognitive affair. In fact, Richard Gombrich (2006: 114-115) reminds us that four different views find expression in the early texts:

(1) meditation is a training essential for understanding;

⁷ This is the opposition to which also Anālayo 2017 objects, stating: "the idea that insight into the four noble truths is a matter of intellectual reasoning is unconvincing. ... the same holds also for ... the belief that absorption is in itself the path to liberation (106)."

- (2) both methods must to some extent be employed, but either may be given priority;
- (3) the two methods are alternatives;
- (4) understanding is so superior to meditation that it may be used alone, whereas meditation on its own can never achieve enlightenment.

This last view illustrates that the Buddhist tradition came to emphasize the cognitive side of the path, often at the expense of the transformational side (even though paying lip service to it). And yet, there are good reasons to believe that Nārada's position was closer to the teaching of the historical Buddha. And as I pointed out earlier, it also seems likely that many practitioners, like Nārada, did not know how to bring this transformation about.

The notion of absorption, which I introduced earlier, allowed us to distinguish two kinds of knowledge: ordinary knowledge, i.e. intellectual understanding, and what I called mystical knowledge. Deep absorption has cognitive effects, and gives in this way rise to an awareness that is different from ordinary awareness. Those who strive to attain deep states of meditation may mistakenly think that they can get there by mastering what mystical knowledge is expected to be like. This is a mistake, because mystical knowledge cannot be attained through intellectual effort. Significantly, the one word that pops up again and again in studies of mysticism, at least since the days of William James, is *ineffable*. Mystical knowledge is not normally of the kind that can be expressed in words.

Does the notion of absorption explain the third alternative which we distinguished? Does it explain what is meant by the "destruction of the influxes" (*āsrava*)? I raised the question whether perhaps Nārada had difficulties understanding what this was all about. Can we do any better?

Many texts mention a liberating insight in connection with this crucial phase of the Buddhist path to liberation. Interestingly, different texts describe this liberating insight differently. In some it is knowledge of the Four Noble Truths, in others the knowledge of the destruction of the influxes (*āsrava*), or the knowledge of past lives and the knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings; sometimes it is the knowledge that the Five Aggregates (*skandha*) are not mine, not I and not my self; or the thought that

the Five Aggregates appear and disappear; or the insight that the aggregates are empty, void and without substance. In some texts, doctrinal points that have gained in importance become part of the liberating knowledge. Examples are the doctrines of Conditioned Origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and of the selflessness of the person (*[pudgala-]nairātmya*) (see Bronkhorst 2009: 30-31). One can only conclude, with Wynne (2007: 108), that the content of liberating insight in the earliest teaching is unclear. Indeed, I have suggested long ago that originally no specific content was attributed to this insight at all (Bronkhorst 1993: 99-100, 108).

Perhaps I can do better today. The detailed description of the path to liberation that is repeated so many times in so many *Sūtras*, culminates in the following:⁸

When his concentrated mind is thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs it to knowledge of the destruction of the influxes. He understands as it actually is: ‘This is suffering’; [...] ‘This is the origin of suffering’; [...] ‘This is the cessation of suffering’; [...] ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering’; [...] ‘These are the influxes’; [...] ‘This is the origin of the influxes’; [...] ‘This is the cessation of the influxes’; [...] ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of the influxes’.

If we keep in mind that the one characteristic that all mystical experiences appear to share is *ineffability*, these words may come as close as they possibly could to the realization that the path to the cessation of the influxes can be known, and can only be known, in that particular state.

But let us return to the Buddhist tradition. The variety of liberating insights in the ancient texts confirms our earlier observation that the Buddhist tradition had come to look upon knowledge as a crucial element on the path to liberation. Indeed, discovering this or that knowledge had come to be thought of as leading to liberation, with the sometimes added requirement that this knowledge had to be attained in a state of deep meditation.

A detailed study of a number of passages from the Pali canon leads Richard Gombrich (2006: 131), to quote him once again, to the following claims:

⁸ For further details about the path to liberation, see Bronkhorst 2009: 12-19.

1. that Enlightenment without meditation was probably never envisaged by the Buddha or in the earliest texts ...
2. that *paññā-vimutti* came to refer to Enlightenment without meditation (or at least without certain specific meditational attainments) ...
3. that in the end ... there were ... groups of monks in the Pali tradition who left meditation to others, without renouncing the quest for Enlightenment.

I think Gombrich is right, and that this claimed development agrees with our reflections.

Whether or not we accept that Nārada is “simply a literary conceit, a pre-text” (Gómez 1999: 700), we can confidently state that he was not pleased with this development. From his point of view, the destruction of the influxes was misinterpreted as being a cognitive affair, an event in which the discovery of some kind of knowledge (ordinary or mystical) was responsible for the crucial transformation aimed at.

The fact that our early texts give so many different contents to this liberating knowledge shows that there was no unanimity in this respect. And according to Nārada, this exclusive emphasis on knowledge or insight was quite simply mistaken. Liberation is not the result of acquiring a certain kind of knowledge, whether in deep meditation or otherwise. Liberation is the result of destroying the influxes.

What does that mean: “destroying the influxes”? Once again, it appears that the early Buddhist tradition had no clue. And once again, we need appropriate theoretical notions if we wish to reach any form of understanding. For this reason, I beg your indulgence once again for presenting some theoretical notions that may help us to move ahead. These notions are tentative and necessarily speculative, but I do think that we must have the courage to enter uncharted territory if we wish to gain any kind of understanding.

Before introducing these theoretical notions, I wish to illustrate the way in which the part of the Buddhist path in which Nārada was especially interested, the destruction of the influxes, is misunderstood, or rather ignored, in modern studies. I take this example from a recent book, *The Science of Meditation*, written by

Daniel Goleman and Richard J. Davidson (2017: 272), wherein we read:

Soon after Siddhartha Gautama, the prince-turned-renunciate, had completed his inner journey at Bodh Gaya, he encountered some wandering yogis. Recognizing that Gautama had undergone some kind of remarkable transformation, they asked him, “Are you a god?”

To which he replied, “No. I am awake.”

The Sanskrit word for “awake”, *bodhi*, gave Gautama the name we know him by today, Buddha — the Awakened One. No one can know with absolute certainty what that awakening entailed, but our data on the most advanced yogis may yield some clues. For instance, there’s that high level of ongoing gamma, which seems to lend a sense of vast spaciousness, senses wide-open, enriching everyday experience — even deep sleep, suggesting an around-the-clock quality of awakening.

As is clear from this passage, Goleman and Davidson prefer their own speculations based on the word *bodhi* to what the early Buddhist texts repeat *ad nauseam*, viz. that awakening entailed the end of suffering and the end of desire. They ignore all that under the pretext of hiding behind the difference between science and religion, which, they say (copying the biologist Stephen Jay Gould): “represent disparate *magisteria*, realms of authority, areas of inquiry and ways of knowing.” “In taking the measure of the meditator’s mind”, they continue, “we do not speak to the truth-value of what various religions make of those mental states.” It is possible that Musīla would have been delighted to read these words; Nārada certainly would not.⁹

Let us now turn to the theoretical reflections I promised earlier. Recall that the transformation that results from the *destruction of the influxes* takes place in a state of deep absorption. We have seen that one of the features of absorption is that it reduces the number of associations, most of which are unconscious. In other words, absorption requires access to unconscious mental

⁹ Indeed, Goleman and Davidson (2017: 39) speak of enduring traits, such as equanimity, kindness, compassion, and joy, but then add: “Whether these traits are due to some specific transformative experiences that accrue in attaining those levels, or from the sheer hours of practice along the way, we can’t say.” No place here for the “destruction of the influxes.”

contents. There is another side to absorption, this one also connected with its access to unconscious mental contents: what it focuses on receives increased attention, and if it focuses on a mental content that is not normally conscious, this mental content can now become conscious. In other words, absorption can shed conscious light on mental contents that are not normally accessible to consciousness. How and why should or could this lead to the total psychological transformation that the Buddhist texts talk about? The preliminary answer must be that there are unconscious mental contents that are responsible for our suffering and desires. By shedding conscious light on these mental contents, they somehow lose their capacity for causing suffering and desire. How could this possibly work?

It seems clear, then, that we need an understanding of what we are and how we “work” in terms of mental contents, including presumably memories of which we are not normally aware. This understanding should explain how conscious access to these mental contents can have a profound effect on what we are, with as upper limit the disappearance of psychological suffering and desire.

It would no doubt be wisest to stop here and leave it to others more competent than I to develop a theory that fulfills these requirements. Rather than being wise, I have chosen to be reckless and look at what theories are around that might help us in our quest.

Not many existing theories fit the bill. The most obvious candidate is Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Freudian psychoanalytic theory has many shortcomings and is decidedly out of fashion these days. In spite of this, I have made an attempt to use its best parts and confront them with the data provided by the Buddhist texts. The result is Part II of a book that came out some years ago, called *Absorption: Human Nature and Buddhist Liberation* (Bronkhorst 2012).¹⁰

Freudian psychoanalytic theory is not the only theory that tries to explain what we are with the help of unconscious mental content. We all know that we are not consciously aware of all the activities we carry out. When we learn to drive a car, we have to be consciously aware of everything we do. Once we have learned it,

¹⁰ Perhaps because Freudian psychoanalytic theory is nowadays considered taboo in certain academic circles, my observations about the challenge presented by the early Buddhist texts have gone largely unnoticed.

we can leave this activity to our autopilot most of the time and pay attention to other things, such as, for example, a conversation with fellow passengers. Psychologists sometimes distinguish between the *explicit* and the *implicit* system of mental functioning.¹¹ The former concerns conscious activities, the latter the numerous unconscious activities on which we depend in our daily lives, and which consist largely of acquired habits.

As said, we do not normally have conscious access to the implicit system, and we cannot but be grateful that we can leave so much of our daily activities to a system that takes care of so many details. However, this implicit system has aspects that are less attractive. Even so-called healthy people have ingrained habits and compulsions, even addictions, in the face of which they are quite helpless. These habits and compulsions may be the result of emotional experiences in our childhood, or of following the wrong examples at a susceptible age. Whatever the reason, we are, in a way, bundles of habits and compulsions that are beyond our conscious control; the implicit system contains knots that we are unable to disentangle. These knots may be thought of as emotional reactions that have found their way into the implicit system and henceforth determine to a large extent how we carry our bodies, how we interact with other people, and much else. In short, they constitute our character, the sum total of ways in which we interact with the world. Some specialists speak of *body memory*, emphasizing the role the body plays in maintaining and giving expression to the accumulated habits and compulsions that make up what we are (See, e.g., Fuchs 2012).

There are good reasons to think that the explicit and implicit systems of mental functioning are relevant in understanding the early Buddhist texts. One of the practices they emphasize is *mindfulness* (Skt. *smṛti* / Pali *sati*) and I do not need to remind you that this practice consists in becoming consciously aware of activities of which we are normally not consciously aware. In other words, it aims at extending the explicit system of mental functioning at the expense of the implicit system. This may not seem of much use as long as ordinary activities are concerned: our ability to walk without falling over, our ability to speak, ride a

¹¹ See Dietrich 2003, 2004; Dietrich & Audiffren 2011. On the relationship between the explicit system and absorption, see Mohr 2018.

bicycle, and much else. But it suggests that the aim of the exercise, that is, the aim of the Buddha's path, is to get at the knots in the system, at the sources of the habits and compulsions that make us prisoners of our character.

Mindfulness by itself cannot disentangle those knots; it only paves the way by expanding the realm of conscious access. Absorption expands this realm even further, eventually giving conscious access to those knots. Disentangling those knots—which means: facing the emotions associated with fixed habits and compulsions without giving in to them as one has before — is, I propose, what is meant by destroying the influxes (*āsravas*).

The idea that conscious access to the roots of unwelcome aspects of our character may be a step toward removing or reducing them is not altogether new.¹² This is the method applied with some amount of success in various forms of psychotherapy (including hypnotherapy) and, of course, in the practice of mindfulness (See, e.g., Brewer 2017). Its effectiveness is further confirmed by recent research on psychedelic drugs, which are known to make unconscious mental content conscious; these drugs have been shown to be effective against addictions and depression.¹³ This research is still in its infancy, and we may expect further results in the future. It yet allows us to provisionally assume that compulsory behaviors can indeed be undone when the underlying unconscious associations have been made conscious.

Let us now return to the destruction of the influxes, which constitutes the crucial transformation that is the culmination of the Buddhist path. I propose to understand this in the light of these last observations. Practitioners in deep meditation can have access to the unconscious associations that underlie the incorporated habits that make them what they are. By consciously going through the

¹² One might speculate that consciousness allows the dissociation of the object and the dopamine rush that was responsible for the formation of the dispositional desire.

¹³ See, e.g., Froid 2012; Krebs & Johansen 2012; Johnson et al. 2014; Carhart-Harris et al. 2016; Ross et al. 2016; and Pollan 2018, esp. chapter 6, for a recent overview. According to Wong (2018), recent research suggests that psychedelic drugs make brain cells grow branches and form new connections.

knots, they free themselves from the habits and compulsions linked to them and become different, free persons.¹⁴

What has all this to do with desire, and freedom from desire? Freedom from desire, from thirst (*trṣṇā/taṇhā*), is one of the essential goals of the Buddhist path. But what is the connection between habits and desire?

Desire is close to what psychologists call *wanting*. Studies reveal that there is, both in humans and other animals, a difference between two psychological states, *wanting* and *liking*. The two can be connected, as when liking gives rise to wanting, but this is not always the case. People may want something without liking the result; and they may like something without wanting it. Wanting without liking typically happens in the case of addictions: smokers may want a cigarette without liking the effect it has on them; others may want to constantly consult their smartphone without liking this habit. The same can be said about many of our desires: we may want something without liking the result. In other words, most if not all desires are the result of habits and compulsions, broadly conceived,¹⁵ that is to say, they are the result of the knots in the

¹⁴ These "knots" do not have to be memories. See, for instance, Yovell, Solms & Fotopoulou (2015: 1533): "During the last three decades it was discovered that fear conditioning, a powerful type of implicit emotional learning, may be formed, experienced and remembered in the absence of a corresponding explicit memory (LeDoux, 1996). What this means is that someone may have an intense fear of a person, place or situation without any explicit memory of why they fear it. It is important to note that the corresponding implicit memory here is not repressed; it never existed in the first place. It simply was not encoded in the brain."

¹⁵ See, e.g., Dill & Holton 2014. These authors distinguish between *incentive salience desires*, *habits* and *cognitive desires*. About the first they say: "incentive salience desires ... are formed for objects on the basis of their previous association with either rewarding experience (when the system is functioning well) or artificial dopamine stimulation (when the system is hijacked by addictive drugs). These desires form the motivational basis of addiction, but also play an ever-present role in non-addicted agents' motivation, encompassing at least the sphere of motives we normally call 'appetites' even when these are well-regulated (desires for food, drink, sex, and many other typically pleasurable stimuli). Crucially, incentive salience desires motivate independently from an agent's reflective judgments about what is valuable or even pleasurable. This distinguishes incentive salience desires from a second kind of desires, cognitive desires, which are sensitive to and based upon an agent's reflective beliefs about what is valuable; e.g., the desire to read a certain book or pursue a certain career" (4).

implicit system.¹⁶ If these can be undone, desires will disappear. This includes, if we take the early Buddhist texts seriously, sexual and other desires that we do not normally associate with habit formation.

Nārada, as we have seen, held on to a tradition that was losing terrain against its competitor, the cognitive understanding of the Buddhist path embodied by Musīla. As I said earlier, there are good reasons to think that Nārada was closer to the path taught by the Buddha. And yet, Nārada's point of view lost out, presumably for a simple reason: few people knew how to destroy the influxes because they had no idea what that meant. Nārada himself admitted that he had not succeeded in doing so. Without an appropriate theoretical context, few Buddhists of his time may have had a clue what it meant to destroy the influxes. The most important and crucial part of the path remained obscure to most if not all.

Musīla's cognitive interpretation of the Buddhist path was far easier to deal with. An emphasis on the kind of knowledge that had to be acquired opened up new horizons of elaboration and refinement. It was destined to have a glorious future in the development of Buddhist thought, including Buddhist philosophy in its various manifestations. How much of the Buddha's original message survived in all this is an open question.¹⁷

In this presentation, I have made some rather radical suggestions. I claim that the early Buddhist tradition preserves materials that it does not always understand. Faithful preservation was apparently more important than understanding.¹⁸ We owe it to this emphasis on faithful preservation that the Buddhist canon preserves information about a path that was no longer understood. This does not necessarily mean that we, modern scholars, are prevented from understanding what these texts are about. A

¹⁶ These are, of course, primarily the habits that some call *incentive salience desires*; see the preceding note.

¹⁷ See Sujato 2005 on “how insight worsted tranquility in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta.”

¹⁸ Recent voices, such as those of Gregory Schopen (1984: 9-22) and others, claiming that the early Buddhist canon contains only or primarily late material, have been countered by Anālayo 2012. The claim that the historical Buddha may not have existed (Drewes 2017) has been refuted by Hinüber and Wynne (both 2019).

condition for making progress is an improved understanding of the way our mind works.

I have furthermore proposed two rudimentary theories which, I believe, can help us to understand the early Buddhist texts. These two theories concern (1) the importance and cognitive consequences of mental absorption, and (2) the role that knots in the implicit system of mental functioning and their undoing play in human behavior. It should be clear that I have only suggested a first outline for these theories, and that much further work on them remains to be done.

You are free to reject both these theories. It will be harder to reject my observation that we need some theoretical scaffolding to understand what the early Buddhist texts are talking about. There are clear indications that many Buddhists, already at an early date, no longer had such an understanding. As a result, there were differences of opinion about the precise nature of liberating insight and, as illustrated in the story of Musīla and Nārada, uncertainty about the importance of liberating insight. And, as I have argued, there was complete lack of understanding of the most crucial steps of the path to liberation: the destruction of the influxes. For all these reasons, I think that the texts present us with a problem that we cannot hope to resolve until and unless we take up the challenge of elaborating an appropriate theoretical understanding of the functioning and capabilities of the human mind.

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