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***Buddhism  
Questioning Christianity***

Lectures – Questions – Interventions

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## Preface

Practised dialogue at all levels can lead the present world into a peaceful future. Humanity has good reason to be optimistic, and should feel invited and encouraged to follow this path of dialogue. Is this not, after all, a historic chance for all of humanity to reach a qualitatively new stage in its existence where people cannot only share material wealth with each other but above all the spiritual riches of this earth? This is a new chance that has been made possible by the existing network of global contacts, which is constantly expanding and growing in intensity. For the first time in its history, mankind finds itself able to share the same living space and cooperate with one another in making this a reality for all.

But are people prepared for this? Are they capable of responding positively to this new situation? Will the dynamism of this steadily developing global socialisation automatically turn into a promise for the future or will it be in vain? Or, by expecting too much of humans, will it even become a curse for mankind, causing conflicts between peoples, social groups, and individuals? Looking back to the past there may be cause for doubt, since conflicts arose far too often whenever people had to come to terms with those who were different (in whatever way) in a territory which up to then had been their own, or because these newcomers aimed at conquering their new territory and dominating it. Was not the former's 'normal,' spontaneous reaction to wall themselves off from all sides instead of opening themselves up to others? Did they not subsequently fight the newcomers and wage wars rather instead of developing new forms of peaceful coexistence – something they would not do unless forced to do so against their will, waiting for the first opportunity to seize power?

In the past religions – and more concretely, religious communities – played a major role in this context, to such an extent that one is inclined to agree with the well-known axiom that there can be no peace in the world without peace among religions. The method for achieving peace among mankind, notwithstanding all the lamentable litany of negative experiences in the past, is as simple as it is difficult: it is, and can only be, dialogue. Generally speaking, however, religions – like all other social groups in the his-



## On the Genesis of Buddhism in its Historical Context

Proprium and Definition vis-à-vis Hindu Traditions and Jainism<sup>1</sup>

Johannes Bronkhorst

There is no unanimity concerning the Buddha and his doctrine – not among Buddhists, not among scholars, and not between Buddhists and scholars. Everything we know or believe to know about the Buddhism of the Buddha (presupposing that such an expression makes sense at all) is hypothetical. I shall try to present in brief some of the existing hypotheses without discussing which hypothesis seems to me to be most authentic.

Most Buddhists believed and still believe that they possess the true Buddha-word and that they also interpret it correctly. The majority of modern researchers do not agree with this. Most words attributed to the Buddha stem from very different periods and it is probably true that only the earliest collections could perhaps contain words and teachings of the Buddha. Here we are going to limit ourselves to the collections of discourses (*sūtra*) and Order rules, which were preserved by the so-called Hinayāna or Śrāvakayāna schools. If the words and teachings of the historical Buddha did not get lost completely, they are doubtless to be found somewhere and somehow in these collections. But do these texts really contain words and teachings of the historical Buddha?

At first glance these questions seem excessively critical. Practically all Buddhists have acknowledged these early collections as Buddha-word. Why should we not agree with them? Some scholars also believe that it is hardly possible for research to extend further back than these complete collections. What is it in fact that speaks against the assumption that the earliest schools of Buddhism reliably handed down the words and doctrines of the Buddha?

The response is: rather a great deal. It is well-known, for instance, that the Buddhist tradition itself never knew for sure how the Buddha-word was to be differentiated from others. It is not only reported that a monk called Purāṇa, shortly after the Buddha had died, did not join the council held at that time, because he preferred to keep the words of the Buddha as he had

<sup>1</sup> In many respects this lecture refers back to my article, "Der indische Buddhismus und seine Verzweigungen," in: H. Bechert et al., *Der Buddhismus I* (Religionen der Menschheit; 24.1), Stuttgart, 2000, pp. 23–213. Concerning many details reference may be made to it.



heard the Buddha speak them and as he had remembered them; furthermore, rules were put into the Buddha's mouth to verify the genuineness of texts and therewith to have his doctrine recognized.<sup>2</sup> It is also well-known that the early collections were handed down orally for centuries and that they were perhaps still being enlarged down to the first centuries after Christ. But the most important argument is probably that the early texts are not homogeneous at all. They contain a great deal of more or less contradictory material. Examples will be presented later on. In this context it is essential that most researchers have come to the conclusion that the early collections in their entirety cannot be taken as Buddha-word.

How does one proceed from this point onwards? Many researchers have tried to establish criteria which would allow for differentiating between what is authentic Buddha-word (or perhaps rather: Buddha-doctrine) and what is not. One criterion in particular recommends itself: teachings that somehow do not fit in with their canonical context are most likely remainders of the original Buddha-doctrine. The argument is that the later tradition, although it largely changed the original doctrine, could not simply throw overboard the firmly rooted early passages.

As such this criterion is convincing. But the difficulty is that, if one applies this criterion exclusively, the Buddha-doctrine deviates more or less *per definitionem* from the main doctrines contained in the early texts. Scientific literature does not lack examples of reconstructions of the original Buddha-doctrine that in fact no longer have anything in common with what we find in the early texts. From this perspective, the Buddhist canon preserves only very little from the original Buddha-doctrine. Only texts that present views and doctrines contradicting the generally acknowledged canonical standpoints would then contain remainders of the so-called precanonical Buddhism. Another option is to put aside all the early text collections and try to reconstruct the Buddha-doctrine with the help of other sources, as, for instance, the inscriptions of Emperor Aśoka.

It seems to me that it goes too far to apply this criterion in such a way, even though in itself it is convincing. Although the Buddhist tradition did not flawlessly preserve the doctrine of the Buddha, this does not necessarily mean that it preserved this doctrine by mistake only, and then only in some

hidden niches of its canon.<sup>3</sup> This kind of a distrust *vis-à-vis* the Buddhist tradition is as extreme as the absolute trust in the same on the part of others. The truth will probably have to be sought between both these extremes. But how does one distinguish the Buddha-doctrine from everything else?

One proposal has been directed towards the word ascribed to the Buddha.<sup>4</sup> It asserts that the word directly ascribed to the Buddha should be more reliable than other parts of the canon. We could in fact imagine that the tradition shied away from ascribing new doctrines to the Buddha. Unfortunately, there is nothing which proves that one was more sparing in this respect than with reference to other parts of the canon. Concerning this perspective it is even more problematic that even the words directly ascribed to the Buddha contain contradictions, namely the same that also exist elsewhere in the canon. Therefore this method, too, seems uncertain and not very promising.

Here you would perhaps like to know to what extent a stratification of the texts can be undertaken by means of a philological analysis. An analysis of

<sup>3</sup> Erich Frauwallner also criticizes such an approach: "Nun hat Oldenberg in seinem klassischen Werk gezeigt, daß die Pāli-Überlieferung hinsichtlich der Persönlichkeit des Buddha zahlreiche vollkommen glaubwürdige Züge enthält, und ich sehe nicht ein, warum das gleiche nicht auch für seine Lehre gelten soll, an deren Überlieferung seinen ältesten Anhängern sicher mehr gelegen war, als an der Überlieferung über seine Person. Natürlich müssen wir mit verschiedenen Umformungen rechnen, wie sie eine längere mündliche Überlieferung bedingt. [...] Wer jedoch diese Lehrsätze dem Buddha abspricht oder meint, darüber hinaus eine ursprüngliche Lehre des Buddha rekonstruieren zu können, dem fällt die Pflicht zu, in glaubwürdiger Weise darzulegen, wie die überlieferte Lehre des Kanons entstanden ist und wie sie dazu gekommen ist, das ursprüngliche Buddhawort zu verdrängen." [Now Oldenberg demonstrated in his classical work that, as for the Buddha's personality, the Pāli-tradition contains numerous perfectly trustworthy elements and I do not see why the same should not also be valid concerning his doctrine, the handing down of which his earliest disciples were certainly more concerned than with the tradition about his person. We of course have to take several reshapings into account, as they are conditioned by a longer oral tradition. [...] But whoever denies the Buddha these doctrines or thinks it possible to reconstruct beyond them an original doctrine of the Buddha, will be obliged to explain in a credible manner how the traditional doctrine of the canon developed, and how it happened to replace the original Buddha-word.] In: E. Frauwallner, *Geschichte der indischen Philosophie*, vol. 1 (Wort und Antwort), 6.1, Salzburg, 1953, pp. 465 f.

<sup>4</sup> In several articles Tilman Vetter presents, among others, the Vinaya-version of the 'first sermon' as well as the 'Buddha-word' in general as particularly important; cf. T. Vetter, "Bei Lebzeiten das Todlose erreichen. Zum Begriff *anata* im alten Buddhismus," in: G. Oberhammer (ed.), *Im Tod gewinnt der Mensch sein Selbst: Das Phänomen des Todes in asiatischer und abendländischer Religionsstradition, Arbeitsdokumentation eines Symposiums (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, Sitzungsberichte, 624/Beiträge zur Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte Asiens)*, 14, Wien, 1995, pp. 211–230; id., "Tod im Buddhismus," in: C. von Barlowen (ed.), *Der Tod in den Weltkulturen und Weltreligionen*, München, 1996, pp. 296–328.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. for example O. von Hinüber, *Der Beginn der Schrift und frühe Schriftlichkeit in Indien* (Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Mainz, Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftliche Klasse 1989, 111, Stuttgart, 1989, pp. 26 f.



this kind is of course extremely important and must be taken into consideration in every detailed discussion. Unfortunately it is only possible rather rarely and has, up to now, brought relatively few definitive results.<sup>5</sup> In addition, this analysis depends heavily on the examiner's judgement – and this means that it is often a prejudiced judgement. Prejudices can only be avoided or at least be made relatively harmless, if one allows the texts to speak for themselves. But which texts? A merely philological analysis rarely suffices in order to attain more or less safe results. We need something else in addition. But what?

Let us return once more to our point of departure. The early text collections cannot simply be considered as Buddha-word, because they contain too great a variety of statements. For instance, they contain not only one path towards liberation, but several that are very different from each other. These differences are not only at the level of detail but also involve a variety of methods. It can happen that one passage teaches methods that elsewhere, in the early texts, are rejected. Of course, the later Buddhists somehow harmonized these varying methods with one another; this should neither surprise nor deceive us. These later Buddhists were theologians, whose very task it was to interpret their scriptures homogeneously. But theology and philology do not always tread the same path: philology can acknowledge contradictions where theology is not ready to do so.

Now there are in fact contradictions in the early Buddhist texts. We are going to assume that of two contradictory assessments – which may be related to practice or to doctrine – normally only one can be authentic. But which one? It turns out in many cases to be easier to determine which of the two contradictory assessments is *not* authentic, rather than the reverse. In my opinion it is not possible to elaborate a criterion for authenticity, whereas a criterion *against* authenticity is more often possible. Soon I will explain how. First, however, I want to emphasize that eliminating non-authentic elements seems to offer a way to penetrate to the earlier, perhaps even to the original core.

How does one decide that certain elements are not authentic? In a twofold way: first, such elements are sometimes accepted in the Buddhist texts, whereas the same elements elsewhere in the same texts are criticized either explicitly or implicitly. Second, these elements differ because

of their similarity with doctrines and practices that could be found outside the Buddhist community, whereas the competitors that they contradict are marginally or not at all similar to the non-Buddhist doctrines and practices. Therefore, this criterion of non-authenticity is twofold and in principle valid only if both conditions are satisfied. Where both are satisfied, it suggests that the Buddhist community, or perhaps only some members of this community, borrowed these elements from non-Buddhist religions or intellectual movements during the Buddha's lifetime or, more likely, some length of time after his death.

In the context of this methodological procedure it is of course essential that we try to discover, as far as possible, what other religious movements existed at the time of the Buddha. And this is not simple, because we know only a small part of the religious ideas and practices that existed at that time. Fortunately the Buddhist texts themselves help us, because they often criticize those dissenters, sometimes describing their ideas and practices in a critical or ironic way. But these descriptions can be examined and often also affirmed with the help of the early non-Buddhist texts that have been preserved, which are mainly of Jainistic and Brahmanic origin.

It is of course not possible here to present in detail the results of such a comparison. But it is possible to mention a complex of opinions and practices that seems to have been widespread at the time of the Buddha and against which early Buddhism – i. e. probably the historical Buddha himself – tried to defend itself.

This complex revolves around the belief in a cycle of *samsāric* existences that is determined by the deeds (*karman*) that one has performed in a previous life. Various religious movements of that time tried, at least on the individual level, to put an end to this cycle. In order to achieve this, some believed that one has to suppress all deeds; some ascetics went as far as seeking death through motionless fasting. Others again believed that the point is to discover that the core of human (or also, in the case of animals and other living beings, of non-human) nature, its true Self, does not participate in deeds at all and is therefore constant and not subject to change.<sup>6</sup> If one has discovered or realized this, one is liberated from the cycle of *samsāric* existences.

<sup>5</sup> In this context see below the appendix: the verse-literature of early Buddhism.

<sup>6</sup> J. Bronkhorst, *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, Delhi, 1993, pp. 31–67.



As I was saying, the method just discussed leads to the conclusion that the earliest form of Buddhism attainable to us – and I will continue, though carefully, to speak about the Buddhism of the Buddha – rejected these two ways towards liberation. One attains liberation neither by motionless asceticism nor by insight into the true, i. e. non-active nature of the Self. On the other hand, the initial area of problems – the belief in a cycle of rebirths conditioned through deeds and the search for liberation from it – permeates the early Buddhist texts and could, from the beginning, have been a proprium of Buddhism. It is even probable that the rejection of the two usual methods of liberation – in connection with the existing problems of *karman* and rebirth – can explain to a large extent the later tendency in Buddhism to assimilate foreign doctrines in a slightly adapted form. Because if deeds lead toward rebirths, then it is obvious that one has to put an end to deeds, in order to avoid rebirth; also realizing that in truth one has never performed any deeds, leads to the desired result. However, the main thing is that the deeds are taken into account in a satisfactory way. It looks as if for some Buddhists the solution preached by Buddhism was not so elegantly and satisfactorily addressing the problem of deeds as that of their competitors.

The suggestion was made that the historical Buddha did not at all, or perhaps only at the beginning of his career, believe in the cycle of rebirths. On first glance, this suggestion is very tempting. Should it be correct that (at least at the beginning) the Buddha did not search for and later preach a liberation from the cycle of rebirths, one could also not reproach him for proposing a solution that does not elaborate on the problem of deeds. Unfortunately it is practically impossible to prove this suggestion. The method previously presented is at a complete loss as to what to do with this suggestion, because, as far as I know, the early texts never deny the belief in the cycle of rebirths.

The question was also raised whether *karman* played a role in the doctrine of *samsāric* existences in early Buddhism. Here believing in the cycle of rebirths is acknowledged, however, the role of the deeds as a conditioning element is not. This suggestion would also resolve the difficulties just presented. And in fact the early texts repeatedly mention the craving rather than the deeds as a conditioning element.

It seems to me that the aforementioned problems need neither the first nor the second resolution. In Buddhism, the conception of deeds is not strictly physical, as this seems to have been the case for instance in Jainism. In Buddhism craving and intention play a major role and there is

nothing that speaks against the assumption that this has been the case from the beginning. From this perspective craving or thirst are as important or even more important than concrete physical deeds.<sup>7</sup> And since concrete physical deeds were not actually at issue in the first place, the attempts at immobilizing others could not have been resolutions of the problem. From this perspective, it was the misunderstanding of later Buddhists concerning the nature of deeds within the framework of their religion that was finally responsible for the borrowings from other religions.

Furthermore, early Buddhist texts speak not only of the liberation from rebirths, but also of the liberation from suffering. In fact, one often has the impression that, if this is possible, suffering is more essential for Buddhism than the cycle of rebirths, as for instance in the following passage: "Earlier as well as today, o monks, I am merely teaching you suffering and the cessation of suffering." Other passages say that the teaching of the Buddha relates to suffering, to its origin, to its cessation, and to the path that leads toward cessation; these are the Four Noble Truths. As far as I know, the objective of liberation from suffering is never contradicted in the early texts. Therefore, we can assume that it was one of the major topics in the instruction of the Buddha. This topic is often expressed in form of the so-called Four Noble Truths. But the analysis of the Four Noble Truths links suffering with the cycle of rebirths. It identifies the arising of suffering as the craving which leads from rebirth to rebirth. Therefore it seems risky to me and also not necessary to assert that the Buddha only preached liberation from suffering without believing in the cycle of rebirths.

After this excursus about the most likely motivation of the historical Buddha, we are now going to turn our attention to where our method leads us concerning the doctrine he preached. The Buddha preached liberation from suffering and (probably) from the cycle of rebirths, a liberation which he is said to have found himself. There is a path leading toward this liberation, which the Buddha is said to have trodden himself. The early texts contain many statements about this path which are frequently of a contradictory nature, and it is particularly in this case that the method presented above can eliminate what is inauthentic – or rather: some parts that are inauthentic. What remains, in its essence, is the following:

<sup>7</sup> Similarly *Bhāradraṅyaka-Upaniṣad* 4,4,6 f.; cf. T. Vetter, "Das Erwachen des Buddha," *op. cit.* (fn. 4) p. 54, fn. 20.



In order to attain liberation, one has to withdraw from the normal world. Later on, this usually means that one enters into a monastery as a monk. In the earlier period, however, it seems that one moved about all on one's own as a mendicant. Along with observing moral commandments and prohibitions, mindfulness and consciousness in all one's acts are emphasized as being extremely important. In order to attain liberation, it is at first necessary to dedicate oneself to meditation. This culminates in the four so-called stages of meditation (*dhyāna*) which are frequently described as follows:

After he has renounced [the] obstacles and has recognized the weakening obstructions of the senses, by detaching from cravings and by detaching from unwholesome psychic qualities, while thinking and reflecting, he attains satisfaction and well-being through this detachment, and remains therein. This is the first stage of meditation.

After thinking and reflecting have settled down, he attains inner pacification and concentration of the mind and thus, set free from thinking and reflecting, he gains inner satisfaction and well-being through this concentration and remains therein. This is the second stage of meditation.

After detaching from satisfaction, he remains even-tempered, mindful, and conscious, and with his body he feels comfort. This it is about which the nobles say: "He is even-tempered, mindful, and he remains in comfort." This is the third stage of meditation.

After he has detached from comfort and discontent and even before that feelings of happiness and unhappiness have dwindled, set free from discontent and comfort, he attains pure equanimity and mindfulness, and he remains therein. This is the fourth stage of meditation.

These four stages of meditation are still nothing but preparation. The decisive event takes place in the fourth stage of meditation, but it is not identical with it. In the texts this event is described in many different ways, but most of them probably agree that here, due to a certain realization, the defilements are annihilated. What exactly is – or rather was – meant with the term 'defilements' (*āsrava/āśava*) is not clear. The result, however, is obvious. The texts express it in the following way:

By realizing such, by having a vision of such, his mind is liberated from the defilements [the texts enumerate here three kinds of defilements, which I however omit, JBl. 8. After [the mind] is liberated, it develops the insight: "I am liberated." "Annihilated is rebirth, lived is the holy conduct, done is what was to be done so that I do not again return here." Thus he realizes!

<sup>8</sup> Ch. Zafiropolo presents reasons for the assumption that the subdivision into three or four kinds of defilements only came about later; this assumption is also tempting for other reasons. In *L'illumination du Buddha: de la quête à l'annonce de l'éveil. Essais de chronologie relative et de stratigraphie textuelle* (Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft, Sonderheft; 87), Innsbruck, 1993, pp. 101 f. He also presents (p. 125) a witty interpretation of the difference between the part of the Four Noble Truths and that which concerns the cessation of the defilements.

Much necessarily remains unclear in these and similar passages. It has to be noted that liberation is in the first place presented here as the liberation from rebirth. Because, after the discovery: "I am liberated," there follows immediately: "Annihilated is rebirth." Suffering is here not mentioned at all. In my opinion these and similar passages evidently show: first, that it would be a mistake to believe that the Buddha had first of all sought a mystical experience. In my view this contradicts the texts. As far as I see it, the objective is never experience, but always liberation. If mystical experience occurs at all, then presumably because only with its help can one attain liberation. Equally, it seems incorrect to assert that the Buddha – and his disciples – had striven for the conviction to be liberated. As a researcher one can of course declare that one does not believe in Buddhist liberation and that in the case of the Buddha and his disciples it can at best only have been a (wrong) conviction. But such a tendency does not justify the assertion that the Buddha and his disciples had only striven for such a conviction. This is certainly wrong, because the texts say very clearly that they strive for liberation and not for the conviction of being liberated. Many Christians strive for attaining heaven and would certainly not agree with the assertion that they are just striving for the conviction of attaining heaven.

If we now try to establish how the teaching of the Buddha in all probability differed from the most important other doctrines of his time, we have to advance from the similarities. Buddhism, along with most of the other ascetic movements of that time, was based on the belief in rebirth conditioned by deeds. All of these movements considered the cycle of rebirths extremely unsatisfactory and were looking for a way out, i. e., for liberation. Perhaps Buddhism put a relatively strong emphasis on suffering and on the objective of being liberated from suffering. Another important difference was that Buddhism did not interpret the deeds in a concrete, physical way, but attributed much weight to thirst and to intention.

Buddhism and the other movements of that time taught paths, i. e. methods to attain liberation. Here, the Buddha seems to have taken a special position, because he rejected the methods of the other movements. The other movements mainly taught two paths: an ascetic and a cognitive one. The Buddha refused the methods of the ascetic movements striving for immobility in the same way as he rejected the cognition of the true (inactive) nature of the Self taught by others. Instead he taught mindfulness and consciousness, followed by a series of meditation stages. These stages of meditation are



not more or less violent attempts at suppressing all mental activity, as they were undertaken in the non-Buddhist movements. Quite the contrary, the canonical descriptions convey the impression that in this meditation any form of violence is completely missing. The main characteristics of what is probably authentic Buddhist meditation are equanimity and mindfulness, whereas satisfaction, well-being, etc. come about as concomitants.

In yet another respect the Buddha's teaching seems to have differed from the other ascetic movements of his time: the Buddhist liberation took place when people were still alive, whereas the liberation of non-Buddhist ascetics occurred only at death. This has to do with the fact that the Buddhist liberation was a mental one, namely a psychic transformation, whereas the non-Buddhist ascetics strove for ultimate immobilization. (The idea of a liberation during one's lifetime is rather at home with those who acknowledge the recognition of the true, non-active nature of the Self as a liberating insight; however, in the literature it has developed only rather slowly.<sup>9</sup>)

By the way, the observation concerning the psychic transformation as the objective of the Buddha-doctrine is not unimportant in a meeting where Buddhism is discussed as a religion. Was the Buddha's Buddhism a religion? Early researchers in the West often considered Buddhism to be a philosophy.<sup>10</sup> In this respect they were certainly wrong. Other researchers, however, tend to discover shamanistic or mythological elements in early Buddhism.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J. F. Spöckhoff, "Vorbereitung der Vorstellung von der Erlösung bei Lebzeiten in den Upanisaden," in: *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 6:1 (1962) 151–178; W. Slaje, "Nishkreyasam im alten Nvāya," in: *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 30 (1986) 163–177; G. Oberhammer, *La Délivrance, des cetera vie jīvanmukti* (Publications de l'Institut de Civilisation Indienne; 61), Paris, 1994; P. Schreier, *Nāṭyaśāstra-Studien* (Purāna Research Publications; 6), Wiesbaden, 1997, p. 178; W. Slaje (cf. id., *Vom Mokṣopāya-Śāstra zum Yogavāsīṣṭha-Mahātāntrāna* [Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, Sitzungsberichte; 609], Wien, 1994, p. 69) holds the opinion that in a historical perspective it is worth taking into consideration the possibility of a deeper connection between the *jīvanmukti*-idea and the *sopadhiseṣa-nirvāna* of Buddhism.

<sup>10</sup> Buddhism was for instance considered to be a development of the Sāṅkhya-philosophy or simply a dharmā-theory; see J. W. de Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America*, Varanasi, 1976, pp. 32 f.; H. von Glasenapp, "Zur Geschichte der buddhistischen Dharmā-Theorie," in: *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 92 (N.F. 17) (1938) 383–420 (reprint in: *Von Buddha zu Gandhi. Aufsätze zur Geschichte der Religionen Indiens von Helmuth von Glasenapp*, Wiesbaden, 1962, pp. 47–80). On early European ideas about the Buddha as a philosopher, see R.-P. Drotit, *Le culte du néant. Les philosophes et le Bouddha*, Paris, 1997, pp. 61 f.

<sup>11</sup> See J. W. de Jong's remarks (op. cit. [in. 10] pp. 28 f.) on the contrast between the mythological method of Emile Senart and the rationalist method of Hermann Oldenberg.

Here it is important to emphasize the possible difference between the doctrine of the Buddha and the views of even his earliest disciples. Some researchers are probably right in pointing out that one can assume that even during his lifetime the Buddha was more or less considered to be a god.<sup>12</sup> Therefore the Buddhism of the Buddha and the Buddhism of his first (and later) disciples are perhaps two completely different things. What I have tried to present to you is a description of the Buddha's doctrine insofar as the texts seem to make this possible, and not what his disciples believed and practised. And here we discover that the philological analysis of the early texts seems to agree with the idea that at least the founder of Buddhism 'only' taught a psychic transformation. Is this a religion or psychotherapy? The answer probably depends on how one defines religion.

In addition, there is the following. If one agrees to the assumption that the historical Buddha taught a path towards liberation from suffering and from rebirth, a path, as the texts frequently underline, which he himself trod until its end, the question next arises as to whether or not he really achieved this. Did the historical Buddha really attain liberation from suffering and from rebirth? And does raising such a question make sense at all?

For those who do not believe in rebirth the question concerning the liberation from rebirth is a religious question which only makes sense within a tradition in which rebirth is acknowledged. Science cannot deal with it. But the same does not apply to the liberation from suffering. Suffering is described as follows: "Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, disease is suffering, death is suffering, being united with what is unpleasant is suffering, being separated from what is pleasant is suffering, not attaining what one desires is suffering, in brief, the five different objects of grasping are suffering." Liberation from suffering in this sense is something that preoccupies everyone, perhaps in a very banal way. And suffering in this sense is not limited to one or several religious movements. Therefore it seems to make sense and even to be necessary in a certain way to ask whether the historical Buddha in fact succeeded, as the texts maintain, in achieving a complete annihilation of suffering by means of a psychic transformation.

The question is justified, but the answer is extremely difficult. Even if we knew for sure what the Buddha taught (and you have seen that such a certainty can hardly be attained), we would still not know whether he

<sup>12</sup> See e. g. P. Harrison, "Some Reflections on the Personality of the Buddha," in: *Orari Gakuho* 74 (1995): 1–28, here: pp. 18 f.



spoke the truth. He could have exaggerated or have been wrong. Perhaps he also said something in this way only in order to motivate his followers. The texts will never tell us. They only tell us that sometimes the historical Buddha was ill and that he seems to have suffered death by poisoning. Although this was experienced as a problem by some of his later disciples, it was not, apparently, by the Buddha himself.<sup>13</sup> This probably means that the liberation from suffering he preached is somehow not related with diseases in themselves but rather with the suffering they cause. As the case may be, if we consider the possibility that the Buddha in fact liberated himself from suffering (or from certain kinds of suffering), we are confronted, as it seems to me, not with a religious, but with a psychological problem.

This is not the opportunity to deal with these problems in greater detail. The main thing is that the question which was raised right now, is the Buddhism of the Buddha a religion or psychotherapy?, cannot simply be put aside.

At the end there is still another important question. Do we get to the primum of Buddhism by reconstruction of the Buddha's teaching? At this point I would like to quote Paul Hacker, the German indologist, who criticized the search for the origins with the following mocking words<sup>14</sup>: "The scholar has won a total victory. On the philological battlefield there lie the bodies of the texts, smashed to pieces and lifeless, beautifully arranged in a row, beside a rubbish heap of inner contradictions, misunderstandings, corruptions. But above the necropolis, in the distance there shines in a positivistic abstractness the romantic blue flower of the *origin*." Hacker is probably right in critically confronting attempts to question origins. Unfortunately there is no alternative if one tries to find out something about the origin of Buddhism. But Hacker certainly is right in saying that in this way little is left of Buddhism, i. e. of the religion that we know and acknowledge today as Buddhism.

Nothing guarantees that searching for the origin of Buddhism can teach us much about Buddhism.<sup>15</sup> Is what modern academic research says about Jesus necessarily also what Christians acknowledge as the core of their

religion? This is certainly not a given and in the case of Buddhism very probably wrong.<sup>16</sup> Many, perhaps even the majority of academic researchers probably approve of the thesis that much of what is contained in the canonical texts is not consistent with the doctrine of the historical Buddha. The method that I have just presented is relatively conservative in the sense that it attempts in principle to acknowledge as authentic as much as possible in the early texts. But this method, too, is obliged to put aside a lot of significant doctrines and methods of later Buddhism as not authentic. And the question of what the early Buddhist believed, felt, and experienced has at this point not been touched at all.

Even so, our deliberations have brought forth something that fundamentally distinguishes Buddhism from Christian and other occidental conceptions. The Buddha is not simply a human being who had certain experiences; rather, he is a being who once and for all got free of the human condition; in his case, relapsing is out of the question. This idea has probably accompanied Buddhism in all its appearances, and our historical analysis suggests that the historical Buddha himself also shared this view; we have just dealt with the question whether he was perhaps even right. This state of affairs makes comparisons with Christian mystics extremely dangerous and misleading. Christian mystics are of course human beings; Buddhas, at least in the Buddhist perspective, are not.

#### Appendix: the verse-literature of early Buddhism

Some scholars identified parts of the verse-literature preserved in the early canon as especially early and are searching precisely in these early verses for traces of the early and original Buddhism: Noritoshi Aramaki, the Japanese scholar, does this very systematically<sup>17</sup>; others do it more or less occasional-

<sup>13</sup> Cf. in this context e. g. the essay of Richard King, "Is 'Buddha-nature' Buddhist? Doctrinal Tensions in the *Srīmālā Sūtra* – an Early *Tathāgata-gaṇḍa* Text," in: *Numeren* 42 (1995): 1–20, which deals with the question whether a later developed concept like that of the *Tathāgata-gaṇḍa* is really Buddhist.

<sup>14</sup> See e. g. N. Aramaki, "A Text-strata-analytical Interpretation of the Concept 'pañca-skandhas,'" in: *The Humanities (College of Liberal Arts)* 26 (1980): 1–36; id., "The Development of the Term 'pāṇinokkha' in Early Buddhism," in: *Premier Colloque Étienne Lamotte (Brevetés et Liège 24–27 septembre 1989)* (Publications de l'Institut Orientaliste de Louvain; 42), Louvain-la-Neuve, 1993, pp. 33–49; id., "Some Precursors of the Subconscious Desire in the *Attadāṇḍasutta*," in: *Zinbun (Annals of the Institute for Research in Humanities)* 28 (1993): 49–94.

<sup>15</sup> Similarly P. Harrison, "Searching for the Origins of the *Mahāvāna*: What are we looking for?," in: *The Eastern Buddhist* (N. S.) 28 (1995): 48–69, here: 49.

<sup>16</sup> See P. Harrison, *op. cit.* (fn. 12) pp. 8 f.; furthermore P. Demiéville, "Byō – Maladie," in: *Hōbōgin* 3 (Paris, 1937) 224–265, here: pp. 232 f. ("Maladie et sarrheté").

<sup>17</sup> P. Hacker, *Kleine Schriften* (edited by L. Schmithausen), Wiesbaden, 1978, p. 10.



ly.<sup>18</sup> There are in fact reasons for the early date of parts of these collections. Some of them are already mentioned in the inscriptions of Aśoka, others are quoted elsewhere in the canon, their language being antiquated.<sup>19</sup> It can certainly not be excluded that some of these collections are really part of the earliest stratum that has been preserved for us in a relatively unchanged form. Hence, should we, in the reconstruction of original Buddhism, limit ourselves to these verses?

In this context we have to keep in mind that in fact the early verse-collections as a basis for the research do not always lead to the same conclusions as the doctrinal discourses in prose. Recently the question was discussed by Lambert Schmithausen in connection with his investigations on the sentence of plants in earliest Buddhism.<sup>20</sup> If we proceed from the verse-collections, the conclusion is obvious that at the beginning Buddhism considered plants to be living beings, as did Jainism and the Vedic religion. The doctrinal discourses, however, avoid calling plants sentient and alive. Schmithausen tries to reconcile these two kinds of sources by assuming that in early Buddhism the sentence of plants was considered as a borderline case. As a solution this seems to be most plausible; however, it does not change the fact that the verse-collections are frequently closer to the other religions in India, especially to Jainism, than the doctrinal discourses in prose. Other scholars have also stressed the Jainist influence in some of these verses.<sup>21</sup> And the suggestion was made that many of these verses originally are not to be attributed to wandering Buddhist ascetics exclusively.<sup>22</sup> Hence, in searching for the doctrine of the Buddha, must we start with the verse-collections or not?

Our methodological deliberations probably have made it clear that one may best distrust parts of the Buddhist canon that are close to Jainism and

<sup>18</sup> Cf. T. Vetter, "Some Remarks on Older Parts of the Suttanipāṭa," in: D. Seyfort Rugg – L. Schmithausen (eds.), *Earliest Buddhism and Mahāyānaka* (Panels of the VIII World Sanskrit Conference; 2), Leiden etc., 1990, pp. 36–56.

<sup>19</sup> O. von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature* (Indian Philology and South Asian Studies; 2), Berlin etc., 1996, p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> L. Schmithausen, *The Problem of the Sentence of Plants in Early Buddhism* (Studia Philologica Buddhica: Monograph Series; 6), Tokyo, 1991, pp. 67 f.

<sup>21</sup> R. Gombrich, "The Buddha and the Jains," in: *Asiatische Studien* 48 (1994 (1995)) 1059–1096, here: 1078 f.; W. B. Bollée (*The Pādas of the Suttanipāṭa, with Parallels from the Aṅgāra, Sūvāgāda, Uṭṭarajjhāṇā, Dasavevāḍḍiya and Isibhāsīyāni* [Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik: Monographien; 7], Reinbek, 1980) brought to light several parallels between Suttanipāṭa and early texts of the Jaina canon.

<sup>22</sup> Like this J. W. de Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America*, Tokyo, 1997, pp. 97 f.

other ancient religions. Here, too, one returns to the old question: if the doctrine of the Buddha was similar to that of Jainism (or to another religion), who after all introduced the alleged later 'typically Buddhist' elements into Buddhism? The existence of Jainist elements, on the other hand, can quite simply be explained by Jainist influence or by borrowings from Jainism. The fact that very early verses already reveal Jainist influence only proves that this process had played a role in Buddhism practically from the beginning.

To these reflections we should add – as Tilmann Vetter underlines<sup>23</sup> – that the most important function of these verse-collections seems to be to remind the reader of central concepts of doctrine and practice, so that in principle one must not expect in them any details and enumerations. If for instance the four *dhyānas* are not mentioned there, out of it alone we must not conclude that they were absent in the earliest tradition.

<sup>23</sup> T. Vetter, "Das Erwachen des Buddha," op. cit. (fn. 4), here p. 63.