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Space for Controversy in Buddhist Interpretation.

In the case of both Buddhism and Christianity the authors or founders never left anything in written or coded form. In both instances, what we have in written form now are 'memorised,' accounts said to have been handed down from word of mouth through a coterie of close followers. The first Buddhist texts appear around 500 years after the Buddha's passing away. Said renowned British Buddhist scholar, and founder of the London Buddhist Society, Christmas Humphreys (1951), "we, therefore, do not know what the Buddha taught, anymore than we know what Jesus taught."

Today's scholars would argue that Humphrey's view is rather extreme since methodologies are available to ascertain

We are in Charge of Ourselves

I love this down-to-earth central focus of Buddhist teaching. Responsibility is within us and guidance is within us. This makes Buddhism a human-centric teaching. I love the shift away from the sky to the ground. On the other hand, in theistic religions we are enjoined to worship a supreme being and to be focused on such an outside spiritual entity. Muslims worship Allah five times a day at prescribed times. Christians and Jews are similarly sky-oriented with arms outstretched toward an external God. From God everything begins and to God we go after death. Such religionists attribute both their good happenings and tragedies to God's action. It is all God's will or 'inshalla.' The Buddha fundamentally turned things around in order to make us understand a different reality and that is the reality that has natural explanations. One doesn't have to worship or pray to any supernatural entity. The human being's life shouldn't be one of worship, according to Buddha. Buddha repudiated the theism of a prominent contemporary of his time, Makkhali Gosala. KN Jayatilaka states that in both Mahayana and Theravada traditions Buddhism rejects

prevailing existing assumption. It a dominant ideology of the Vedic era. True, there were atheists and materialists during Buddha's time but the latter were not taken seriously. The revolutionary and independent-spirited thinker who Buddha was did not question this prevalent belief. He merely modified the Upanishadic transmigration theory by asserting that there is no permanent substance like the soul (atma) that goes out of the dying body into another womb. Rebirth can occur without such a soul passing from one life to the next. The Buddha likened it to a candle that causes another candle to be lit. Rebirth is an effect of the last dying thought and not the continuity of a self through death.

To my mind, this itself is a hard notion to digest. Many issues arise that makes the belief unsustainable and devoid of sense-altogether. To me the operation of paticca samuppada is confined to the realm of our empirical experience and not beyond to another life. One cannot be said to be in charge of one's future if a karmic effect of the past extends to the next life.

Critical Sense of the Buddha

Such beliefs are also not in sync with the preponderant and impressive emphasis by Buddha of our need for critical analysis. The Buddha was the first thinker or philosopher to highlight mankind's need for critical evaluation of propositions regarding reality that constantly bombard in the human mind-coming as they do from a range of multiple sources. In the world of today where media dominates competing for our attention such an inculcation nearly three thousand years ago is remarkable and vastly ahead of the times. The Vedic and Upanishadic world did not demand critical evaluation. They demanded only faith and unquestioned belief. The Buddha enunciated the Kalama Sutta where we were asked to subject given beliefs to initial doubt and testing. We were enjoined not to accept views on the basis that then latter have been propounded by highly reputed persons. Nor should we accept propositions on the grounds on internal consistency. "Test them yourself," advised the Buddha. He even asked his followers not to accept what he has preached because he teaches but to first test their veracity and evidential support prior to accepting them. "When these teachings, followed out and put into practice, conduce to loss and suffering-then reject them," urged the Buddha in the same Sutta. That was extraordinary for a thinker of that era. The



Western world had to wait until the 15th century to hear Rene Descartes, make a dramatic challenge to our traditional certainties like that.

Buddha Wasn't Omniscience

It follows logically from the above that the Buddha could not have claimed omniscience (knowledge of everything) or even final knowledge of anything. The Buddha of the Kalama Sutta could not have made a claim of that sort. Our religious Buddhism practiced in Dhamma classes and temples tell us otherwise. It is distasteful to the modern mind that anybody can claim omniscience. Socrates famously said, "the more I know, the more I realise how little I know." The modern scientist is essentially a doubter. He researches considerably before coming out with a theory. Even after a theory is announced the scientist keeps looking for his subsequent contradicting evidence. If he does find contradicting evidence he goes back to the drawing board and refashions his search.

The moment one accepts the Buddha's omniscience one fashions Buddhism as a religion, where worship and ritual will follow. The Abrahamic religions-Christianity, Jewish, and Islam are derived form sources claimed to be omniscience and hundred per cent accurate. It is all there in the Holy Book of God and God is omniscience.

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MY KIND OF BUDDHISM 1 NO PRAYERS TO ANYONE

somewhat the core teachings of the Buddha. On the other hand, the available space for controversy in the case of Buddhism is still significant and the grey and the dark patches do nag the honest finder. The consequence of this uncertainty is that we have today at least four schools of Buddhism, with subdivisions in each, proclaiming their view of what Buddhism really is. There is, in a sense, no one Buddhism but many Buddhisms. Standing, as I do, on this marginal line of uncertainty gives me some liberty to speak out about my own preferred likings and leanings with regard to the bones of Buddhist doctrine.

Down-to-Earth Empirical Focus

What stands out in a distant view is that Buddhism was originally not a religion at all but a philosophy. It is a humanistic spiritual teaching that is dominantly empirical. Buddha's teaching is not top-down or derived from revelations by a divine being, a prophet, or a supernatural force. Buddhism starts from bottom-up. This means the Buddha observed and examined the objective reality of our lives as experienced by humans. He starts from natural, empirically observable phenomena out there, which we all can see and touch and smell and hear. He builds a metaphysics from there that explains all phenomena-natural and human- as arising out of a cause-effect nexus that he named as 'Paticca Samuppada,' (Pali) or Dependent origination. This special doctrine of causality is inherent like a common thread throughout Buddhist teaching.

The principle is simply stated in the Majjima Nikaya thus: "When this is, that is; This arising, that arises; When this is not, that is not; This ceasing, that ceases." Every event in nature, human life and every phenomena is explained as having being an outcome of certain given pre-conditions. There is no place for a first cause or uncaused cause in the Buddhist scheme of things. This being the case, there isn't any role for supernatural forces or factors. Our own plight as humans are likewise explainable as having gotten an existence from the operation of preceding given factors-by our own creation or by the creation of others. The fault, dear Bruru is not in our stars but in ourselves.

a personal God.

The very first step in the Noble eightfold Path to living is 'right understanding' (Samma Ditti). All other steps follow from that correct comprehension of the reality we face where events happen as a result of the operation of naturalistic cause-effect processes. If one can explain events and phenomena through natural causes why posit a supernatural cause?

Buddhists Need not Worship any Being-Dead or Alive

It follows that Buddhists are not worshippers. They go to temple to respect the Buddha with Guru Bhakhti and not to worship or to ask for favours from anybody. On the other hand, one observes a different application in most Buddhist temples. Many of these places of popular worship often resemble churches or mosques. This Buddhist religious practice contradicts the above empirical and naturalistic outlook of Buddhism. It is like reintroducing God through the backdoor. The practice of Buddha Pooja, where food is served at almsgiving to a Buddhist statue, is alien to Buddhist thinking. The assumption underlying such a practice is that Buddha is really present in person. This is basically a Hindu practice. Likewise, do I critically look at Bodhi Pooja where we pour water around a Bo tree, worship the tree, and even ask desperately for favours. The latter is a form of animism, which is a primitive attribution of a living soul to a plant.

The Puzzle of Rebirth and Samsaric Cycle

I find it hard to accomodate rebirth and the samsaric cycle within the above scheme of things. I prefer to believe, given the above freedom of interpretation, that the Buddha didn't emphasise this metaphysics of a life after this. He merely fell in line with a strongly

