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Early Buddhist Meditation

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Perhaps I should begin with an apology. This paper is my contribution to an international conference held to commemorate the 100th birth anniversary of Master Seongchul (or Seongcheol). I have read his *Sermon of One Hundred Days, Part One*, in the translation of our host, Dr. Hwang Soon-Il, and have learned that Master Seongchul belonged to a tradition that held that reliance on texts and lectures must be eliminated. Yet I am a philologist, someone who bases his research on texts and on texts alone. So when I am going to speak about early Buddhist meditation, I will base myself only on texts, not on any experiences of my own. I am not sure whether Master Seongchul would have approved of this (even though I notice that he, too, was aware of the work done by philologists on the history of Buddhism, and used it). I would yet like to say something in my defence. Texts and lectures may have to be eliminated for awakening to occur, but awakening is not my purpose in this paper. My purpose is understanding, not spiritual understanding but old-fashioned intellectual understanding. And for this kind of understanding we do need our texts.[1]

Over the years I have repeatedly proposed a method to arrive at the teaching of the Buddha on the basis of the early canonical texts. I did so for the first time in my book *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, which came out in 1986, and most recently in my *Buddhist Teaching in India*, which came out in 2009. An article published in 1998, "Self and meditation in Indian Buddhism", gives a short summary of this method; it is also available in Korean translation and on the internet.

[1] Hwang Soon-il, in the Foreword to his translation (Seongcheol, 2010: xi), contrasts the teaching of Master Seongcheol with modern philology, and makes a comparison with the noisy static that may come out of an old radio set. Perhaps it is good to remember that modern philology, too, can produce lots of noisy static.

In the first part of the present paper I will briefly discuss what this method consists in, and illustrate it with the help of some chosen examples. After that I will offer some reflections on the findings that result from applying this method.

Put very briefly, the teaching of the Buddha as presented in the early canon contains a number of contradictions. There are views and practices that are sometimes accepted and sometimes rejected. The method I have proposed is based on a study of other religious movements that are known to have existed at the time of the Buddha in the same region of India. It turns out that among the views and practices that are sometimes accepted and sometimes rejected in the Buddhist canon many are also found in those other religious movements. We are therefore entitled to suspect that Buddhism, in the course of its development but before the final redaction of its early canon, underwent the influence of those movements and borrowed some of their views and practices. My proposal is to consider views and practices in the Buddhist canon as borrowings, and therefore as non-authentic, if two criteria are met: (1) they are sometimes accepted and sometimes rejected in the Buddhist canon, and (2) they have their place in the other religious movements of the time. I also submit that the original teaching of the Buddha may have to be looked for among the views and practices that remain after deduction of the borrowings.

I know that it is no longer fashionable in modern scholarship to speak about the historical Buddha. Attempts to find out more about his person or his life have largely failed, so much so that further efforts in that direction seem pointless.[2] Even the part of his life we should know most about — his final days, his death and the subsequent incineration of his body — may turn out to be a pious fiction with no basis in historical reality.[3] Skepticism with regard to anything that touches the historical Buddha seems therefore justified. This explains that many scholars prefer to speak of the teachings of early Buddhism, rather than of the teachings of the Buddha.

Here, I think, we should be careful not to push our skepticism too far. The Buddhist tradition maintains that the Buddha had a new message, whereas his followers did little beyond preserving this message. We know that the situation was not quite as

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[2] A number of studies in this domain are referred to by Willemen (2012). Uncertainty about the details of the lives of the founders of other religions, including sometimes their very existence, is widespread; see Spencer (2012) about Muhammad.

[3] Bronkhorst, 2011: 206-224.

simple as this, and that the followers of the Buddha introduced numerous novelties in the course of time. But there is no virtue in denying that the historical Buddha had a new message. If, therefore, our investigation of the earliest sources brings to light new ideas and new practices, ideas and practices that apparently did not exist in India before the appearance of the Buddha, it is bizarre to ascribe those novelties to the early followers of the Buddha rather than to the founder himself. This is why I will not speak of early Buddhism, but about the teachings of the historical Buddha.

Let us consider some concrete examples. If the early Buddhist texts agree on one issue, it is that the Buddha taught suffering and the cessation of suffering. This is repeated numerous times, beside being incorporated in the so-called Four Noble Truths. Moreover, to the best of my knowledge there are no passages in the ancient canon that contradict this. I therefore propose to attribute this to the historical Buddha: he taught suffering and the cessation of suffering. I take this as point of departure for our further reflections.

Many modern scholarly publications ignore this central point without the least explanation or justification, and present another goal, such as: the Buddha taught a method to arrive at an experience of enlightenment. I look upon such claims as illustrations of the temptation to impose one's own views on the old texts.[4] I try *not* to fall into this trap. I am, of course, aware of the fact that one can never free oneself completely from one's presuppositions and cultural baggage. I do however think that it is the task of the philologist to try, and that progress can be made, on condition that we stay close to the texts and carefully scrutinize all notions that we introduce and that do not come straight from those texts.

The early texts, then, are straightforward about the aim of the Buddha's teaching. They are less straightforward about the manner in which one supposedly reaches the goal, i.e., the cessation of suffering. As a matter of fact, we find here a variety of methods that do not always agree with each other. Some of these can collectively be referred to as meditation, and I will concentrate on these in particular, given that Buddhist meditation is the theme of this conference. The details of the forms of meditation described in the canon differ considerably from each other.

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[4] The attempt to "naturalize" Buddhism (Flanagan, 2011) appears to be a variant of this, with its concern to find out whether Buddhism contributes to human happiness.

I will first give three examples of religious practices that are sometimes criticized and sometimes accepted in the early Buddhist texts:[5] The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, in its various recensions, records a discussion of the Buddha with someone called Putkasa (in Sanskrit) or Pukkusa (in Pāli). The Buddha here boasts that once, in a violent thunderstorm when lightning killed two farmers and four oxen near him, he did not notice it. Abilities of this kind were claimed by certain non-Buddhists, according to the testimony of the Buddhist texts. Another Buddhist Sūtra (the *Indriyabhāvanā Sutta* of the Pāli canon and its parallel in Chinese translation), however, ridicules such 'cultivation of the senses' which leads to their non-functioning; the Buddha is here reported to say that if this is cultivation of the senses, the blind and deaf would be cultivators of the senses.

My second example is the following:[6] The *Vitakkasanthāna Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* and its parallels in Chinese translation *recommend* the practicing monk to 'restrain his thought with his mind, to coerce and torment it'. Exactly the same words are used elsewhere in the Pāli canon (in the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta*, *Bodhirājakumāra Sutta* and *Saṅgārava Sutta*) in order to describe the *futile* attempts of the Buddha before his enlightenment to reach liberation after the manner of the Jainas. It is tempting to conclude that these Jaina practices had come to be accepted by at least some Buddhists. This second example appears to concern a detail of certain Jaina practices.

Our third example is even clearer. It concerns practices which certain Buddhist texts explicitly ascribe to Jainas and criticize, and which are confirmed by the Śvetāmbara Jaina canon. In spite of this, they are a number of times attributed to the Buddha himself.[7] A Sūtra of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (the *Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta*) and its parallels in Chinese translation describe and criticize the Jainas as practicing 'annihilation of former actions by asceticism' and 'non-performing of new actions'. This can be accepted as an accurate description of the practices of the Jainas. But several other Sūtras of the Buddhist canon put almost the same words in the mouth of the Buddha, who here approves of these practices. It is, once again, tempting to conclude from this contradiction that non-Buddhist practices — this time it clearly concerns Jaina practices — had come to be accepted by at least some Buddhists, and ascribed to the Buddha himself.

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[5] Cp. Bronkhorst, 1993: x.
[6] Cp. Bronkhorst, 1993: xii.
[7] Cp. Bronkhorst, 1993: x f.

All these three examples have something in common. All three describe practices that are variations of a common theme that might be characterized as "suppression of activity". Suppression of activity was a reaction to the conviction that all activity leads to karmic retribution, a belief accepted by Jainism and other religious movements at the time. Buddhism, it turns out, though accepting the doctrine of rebirth and karmic retribution, accepted it in a form different from Jainism: Buddhism did not accept that *all* physical and mental activity necessarily has a consequence, most probably in a future life. The authentically Buddhist practices were not therefore variations of the attempt to stop all physical and mental activity, as was the case in Jainism and elsewhere. However, the Buddhist canon provides ample evidence that the suppression of activity exerted a certain influence on at least certain early monks and nuns. This explains that such practices found their way into the canon.[8]

The three examples given above are no more than illustrations for the method elaborated in my books. It would take us too far to deal with all the details, and if you wish to know more about them, I must refer you to those books. Here we must turn to the next question: What remains if we deduct the practices and ideas that are due to Jaina and other influences? I proposed the following answer in my *Two Traditions* (1993: 95):

> [W]hat remains that can be considered authentic Buddhist meditation? … The Four Dhyānas and the subsequent destruction of the intoxicants survive the present analysis easily. I know of no indications that they too must be looked upon as due to outside influence. Moreover, they occur very frequently in the canonical scriptures and already made the impression on other investigators of belonging to the oldest layers of the tradition.
> Closely connected with the Four Dhyānas is the practice of 'mindfulness' (*smṛti / sati*). Mindfulness is mentioned in the description of the Four Dhyānas, but is also independently described in the canon. [… There] is no reason to doubt its role in original Buddhism, for mindfulness is nowhere criticized in the Buddhist canon, nor does it conflict with other practices accepted by the Buddhists.

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[8] These three examples have been taken from my article "The Buddha and the Jainas reconsidered", which came out in 1995 in the *Asiatische Studien*. Ultimately they derive from my book *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*. However, the article is more interesting in the present context, because it also deals with alternative ways to explain these same contradictions, presented by Professor Richard Gombrich, from Oxford University, in an article that also came out in the *Asiatische Studien* (Gombrich, 1995). As it so happens, Professor Gombrich had invited me to compare and confront our views in two separate articles in that journal, of which I was an editor at the time. This confrontation was an occasion for me to rethink my positions and learn from alternative ways of looking at the contradictions in the Buddhist canon. In the end I decided that there was no need to abandon my views, at least not yet.

Let me, to refresh your memory, read a part of what Schmithausen (1981) calls the "stereotyped detailed description of the Path of Liberation". This description is repeated numerous times in the canonical Sūtras, more often than one might think if one use the texts of the Pali Text Society, this because the description is there often replaced by a *peyyāla*, an indication to the extent that a passage is repeated, without telling which passage is repeated. For our present purposes it is most important to note that this description resists for the most part all the tests of authenticity which I have proposed. The part I'll read deals with what we might call meditation. It reads:[9]

> Abandoning longing (*abhidhyā*, Pa. *abhijjhā*) for the world, he dwells with a mind (*cetas*) free from longing; he purifies his mind (*citta*) from longing. Abandoning ill will (*vyāpāda*) and hatred (*pradveṣa*, Pa. *padosa*), he dwells with a mind free from ill will, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings; he purifies his mind from ill will and hatred. Abandoning dullness (*styāna*, Pa. *thīna*) and drowsiness (*middha*), he dwells free from dullness and drowsiness, having clear consciousness (*ālokasaṃjñin*), mindful and clearly comprehending; he purifies his mind from dullness and drowsiness. Abandoning restlessness (*auddhatya*, Pa. *uddhacca*) and remorse (*kaukṛtya*, Pa. *kukkucca*), he dwells free from agitation with a mind inwardly peaceful; he purifies his mind from restlessness and remorse. Abandoning doubt (*vicikitsā*, Pa. *vicikicchā*), he dwells having gone beyond doubt, unperplexed (*akathaṃkathin*) about wholesome mental properties (*kuśala dharma*); he purifies his mind from doubt.
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> Having thus abandoned these five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) and the secondary defilements (*upakleśa*, Pa. *upakkilesa*), secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome mental properties (*akuśala dharma*), he enters and dwells in the first stage of meditation (*dhyāna*, Pa. *jhāna*), which is accompanied by deliberation (*vitarka*) and reflection(*vicāra*), with pleasure (*prīti*) and joy (*sukha*) born of seclusion (*vivekaja*). [...]
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> Again, with the subsiding of deliberation and reflection, a monk enters and dwells in the second stage of meditation, which has internal quiet (*adhyātmasaṃprasāda*, Pa. *ajjhattaṃ sampasādanam*) and unification of mind (*cetasa ekotībhāvaḥ*, Pa. *cetaso ekodibhāvo*) without deliberation and reflection, with pleasure and joy born of concentration(*samādhija*). [...]
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> Again, with the fading away as well of pleasure, he dwells equanimous (*upekṣaka*, Pa. *upekkhaka*) and mindful (*smṛtimat*, Pa. *sata*) and fully aware (*saṃprajānat*, Pa. *sampajāna*), he experiences joy with the body; he enters and dwells in the third stage of meditation, of which the noble ones (*ārya*, Pa. *ariya*) declare: "He is equanimous, mindful, one who dwells joyfully." [...]
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> Again, with the abandoning of joy (*sukha*) and suffering (*duḥkha*, Pa. *dukkha*), and with the previous passing away of joy (*saumanasya*, Pa. *somanassa*)

[9] Bronkhorst, 2009: 15-17.

> and dejection **(***daurmanasya***,** Pa. *domanassa***),** he enters and dwells in the fourth stage of meditation, which is neither suffering nor joyful and includes the purification of mindfulness by equanimity (*upekṣāsmṛtipariśuddhi***,** Pa. *upekkhāsatipārisuddhi***).**

The crucial transition comes next, and is described as follows:[10]

> When his mind is thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints (*āsravakṣayajñāna*, Pa. *āsavakkhayañāṇa*). He understands as it really 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."' He understands as it really is: "These are the taints. This is the origin of the taints. This is the cessation of the taints. This is the way leading to the cessation of the taints."
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> When he knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the taint of desire (*kāmāsrava*, Pa. *kāmāsava*), from the taint of existence (*bhavāsrava*, Pa. *bhavāsava*), and from the taint of ignorance (*avidyāsrava*, Pa. *avijjāsava*). When [the mind] is liberated there comes the knowledge: "I am liberated." He understands: "Birth is destroyed, the spiritual life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, so that I will not again return here."

I tend to think that this passage contains the most authentic information we can derive from the Buddhist canon about meditation and what it leads to. For reasons I have hinted at earlier, I also propose that the contents of this passage correspond to the teaching of the historical Buddha about meditation.

I concluded my book *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, back in 1986, with the following words:

> We have come as far as philology could take us, it seems. For a further understanding of Buddhist meditation, philology will probably not be of much help. An altogether different approach may be required to proceed further. Such a different approach does not fall within the scope of the present book. I may return to it in another study.

More than twenty-five years have passed since I wrote these words, and it is time to try to fulfill my promise. If you accept what I have written over the years, there are

[10] Bronkhorst, 2009: 18-19.

implications to be explored that go beyond philology. These implications concern meditation and its possible results.

Our point of departure has to be the finding — and we start from the assumption that it is one — that the historical Buddha claimed that there is a method to put an end to suffering. This method included forms of meditation of which we have relatively precise descriptions. At this point we have to make a choice. Either we assume that all we can derive from ancient texts is information about the beliefs and fantasies of its authors, which had no link to reality. In that case we must conclude that there was a man, more than two thousand years ago, who probably sincerely, but nonetheless mistakenly, believed that he had put an end to his suffering, and that he had found a method to do so that would in principle be usable by others. This belief could then be added to all the other beliefs that people have adhered to over the centuries in the name of religion, all of them at bottom mistaken.

The alternative is that we, at least provisionally, stop imposing upon the texts our presuppositions as to what they are all about. In that case we have to consider the possibility that this same man, more than two thousand years ago, had actually put an end to his suffering and had found a method to do so. If we accept this second scenario, we are confronted with something quite extraordinary and perhaps unique in human history. In this second case we are also faced with the question how this could be possible. If it is really possible to put an end to suffering by following a certain method, we may have to rethink the way humans function. We will in that case also have to consider what role meditation plays in the process.

Buddhist meditation attracts a great deal of attention these days, not only among lay people, but also among brain specialists and other scientists.[11] This scientific interest in Buddhist meditation understandably concentrates on the study of living Buddhist meditators. Philologists and historical scholars in general are more or less excluded from this field of research. This is a pity, because one would like to know whether the brain scientists study the same kind of meditation as the one, or perhaps rather the ones, in the plural, that figure in the texts that philologists study. And we would of course all wish to

[11] See, e.g., Lutz et al., 2007. Even Buddhist philosophers far more recent than the Buddha can no longer be studied without a reference to the brain; so e.g. Arnold, 2012.

know whether the brain scientists study the kind of meditation that the Buddha practiced and taught so many centuries ago.

At first sight, this seems unlikely. Robert Sharf has convincingly argued (1995) that it is far from clear how many Buddhists actually meditated in historical times, perhaps far fewer than is often supposed,[12] and that much the same is true even of those who wrote about meditational states: it is virtually unheard of in classical Buddhist literature that an author speaks about his or her own meditational experiences. It might therefore seem understandable that textual scholars play at best a marginal role in the scientific investigation of Buddhist meditation.

As understandable as it may seem, I think that textual scholarship *can* contribute to the debate, and may indeed come up with essential information that may conceivably put the scientific study of Buddhism on a new footing. The textual scholarship I am referring to is of the kind I have just outlined.

The early Buddhist texts, as we have seen, present a method to put an end to suffering and rebirth. This goal is the prime context provided by those texts, which no philologically sophisticated interpretation of the texts should be allowed to ignore. Part of the method consists of meditational practices. It follows that these meditational practices are not an aim in themselves; they are the means to bring about a permanent state that is free from psychological suffering.[13] (I will leave rebirth out of consideration). They are not a means to bring about pleasant meditational states (or to be more successful in life), but a means to bring about a psychological transformation that will secure that

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[12] Cp. Dreyfus, 2003: 168: "But how many monks meditate in the large Tibetan scholastic centers? Not many, it appeared to me." Buswell, 1992: 159: "the hwadu is not intended to generate a state of samādhi …, but a state in which *both* the calmness of samādhi *and* the perspicuity of prajñā are maintained. This … may account for the reason why I knew few Sŏn monks to have the ability in the deep meditative absorptions, or *dhyānas* (Pali *jhāna*), that I had encountered before among the forest monks of Thailand." About the authors of the Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya, Schopen (2000: 104 [15]) states: "Unlike modern scholars, these 'good' monks did not have much good to say about monks who did engage in asceticism, meditation, and doctrinal learning. If they mention them at all — and they do so infrequently — it is almost always with a tone of marked ambivalence, if not actual ridicule. Ascetic monks, meditating monks, and learned monks appear in our Vinaya by and large only as slightly ridiculous characters in unedifying, sardonic, and funny stories or as nasty customers that 'good' monks do not want to spend much time around."

[13] I say "*psychological* suffering", because the early texts do not hide the fact that the historical Buddha went through bodily suffering toward the end of his life.

psychological suffering will no longer be part of one's life, whether one be in a meditational state or not.

Since confusion can easily arise in this matter, I allow myself a simple comparison. A traveler who has traveled from Germany to Italy and leaves indications for his friends how to accomplish this journey is likely to say a great deal about the Alps, the mountain range that lies between these two countries. Uninformed readers of these indications may think that our traveler wants to describe the Alps, that he encourages his friends to visit the Alps. Of course, he has no such intention. Our traveler could not but describe the Alps, because only by crossing the Alps does one travel from Germany to Italy. The meditational states in the early Buddhist texts correspond to the Alps in this comparison: they have to be gone through in order to reach the real destination, viz., a lasting state that is free from psychological suffering.

The central claim of these texts, then, is that a complete, and lasting, psychological transformation is possible, and that this transformation has been attained by the historical Buddha (and perhaps others). The decisive phase of this transformation, the texts add, was accomplished in one single night. This transformation is the goal, and the meditational practices described in the texts are part of the method to reach that goal, and no more.

This simple observation should, all by itself, be of interest to scientists. It is of course possible to maintain that the central claim of the early Buddhist texts is no more than fantasy, a confusion between dream and reality for which some well-meaning but ultimately misguided monks, or even the Buddha himself, must be held responsible. This is possible, but by no means necessary or self-evident. There is nothing in the claim that goes against established knowledge, whether it be scientific or historical knowledge. Moreover, the early Buddhist claim is quite unique, even in India (with the exception of later currents that have clearly been influenced by Buddhism), so that one cannot claim that it was simply taken over from another movement. I therefore propose not to be hasty in rejecting what is, after all, central to the ancient texts and in a way their very reason of existence.

A lasting psychological transformation must have a neurological counterpart, presumably in the form of a lasting transformation of the brain, or of some of its parts.[14] The crucial part of this transformation of the brain has yet taken no more than one night to be accomplished; the early Buddhist tradition appears to be unanimous about this. This may be taken to mean that the neurological changes that correspond to this radical psychological transformation may well be relatively minor. Unfortunately the working brain of the Buddha is not available for scientific investigation, but if it were, it seems likely that the difference from other brains would be hard to spot.

These simple reflections support the following conclusion: We must assume that psychological processes have neurological counterparts, but even major psychological transformations may not leave clearly identifiable traces in the brain. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the processes involved, we need more than only information about the brain, we also need a psychological theory, i.e., we need to know how the mind "works". This psychological theory should not just be short-hand for neurological processes, nor do we want mere folk psychology (or worse: psychobabble). Understanding brain processes is not sufficient to understand psychological processes, least of all when major transformations like those referred to in the early Buddhist texts are concerned. We need a psychological theory that is yet scientific in the strictest sense.[15]

The reason why we need a really thought out and tested psychological theory is that without it we will be in danger of carelessly using intuitive and experiential impressions, and end up with some kind of pop-psychology that has no more to recommend itself than its intuitive appeal to some of us. This danger is as great for those who swear by the importance of brain research on meditators as it is for others. To illustrate the danger of proceeding without a scientific psychological theory, I will discuss a concrete example.

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[14] Not all agree with this, even among scientists (see, e.g., Kelly et al., 2007), but I think it has to be accepted in scientific studies. "Alan Wallace, a prominent American Buddhist scholar, speaks for the majority in insisting that Buddhism is incompatible with 'neurophysicalism' — the view that mental events are brain events — of the sort that I, like most other philosophers of mind and neuroscientists, defend." (Flanagan, 2011: 3)

[15] When Penrose (2005: 21) states "Until [major revolutions in our physical understanding] have come to pass, it is … greatly optimistic to expect that much real progress can be made in understanding the actual nature of mental processes", we may think that excessive optimism characterizes his expectations rather than ours.

Meditators sometimes comment upon the intense joy they experience in certain meditational states. Having no established psychological theory to fall back on, some of them refer to certain forms of Buddhist thought and claim that bliss is part of the natural state of consciousness.[16] This so-called explanation is of no use to neurological research, nor can it be tested in any other way. In fact, it does not explain anything whatsoever, for it does nothing beyond stating that the bliss experienced in certain states is "natural".

Contrast this with an observation made in the early Buddhist texts. They talk about the bliss experienced in certain meditational states as resulting from absorption (*samādhi-ja*). Absorption, as I use the term, is effortless attention or concentration.[17] Many meditators know that bliss may result from it. A study of mystical literature leads to the same conclusion: Bliss, when it occurs, is always accompanied by absorption. This simple observation has never attracted serious attention.[18] But obviously, if bliss arises from absorption, there is no need to postulate that bliss is part of the natural state of consciousness. Indeed, there is no need to make hypotheses about the nature of consciousness at all. It suffices to hypothesize that bliss, or more generally pleasure, results from absorption.

This last hypothesis — which comes straight from the early Buddhist texts, as we have seen — is a lot more amenable to empirical verification, or refutation, than the one that claims that bliss is part of consciousness. Mystics and meditators experience their bliss in a state of absorption, but others, less privileged, too, experience their pleasures in states of relative absorption. It is true that mystics and meditators may heighten their degree of absorption to a level unattainable by most, and that as a result their degree of pleasure or bliss is higher, too. This does not change the fact that lower degrees of pleasure, the levels that we all know from everyday experience, are accompanied by absorption, even though the degree of absorption in these cases is low. Drawing inspiration from the early Buddhist texts, we may hypothesize that pleasure is not simply *accompanied* by absorption, but is actually *produced* by it; this is the meaning of

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[16] So, e.g., Wallace, 2006: 81; 2012: 68-69.

[17] Effortless attention is, at last, becoming the object of scientific research; see Bruya, 2010, and in particular Dormashev's contribution to that volume.

[18] Indeed, one of the two books by Wallace referred to in an earlier note has the title *The Attention Revolution: Unlocking the power of the focused mind*, and is therefore aware of the importance of absorption. In spite of this, it invokes an altogether different theory to "explain" the bliss experienced.

samādhija in the passage read earlier. And we can refine the hypothesis by giving it this form: absorption gives rise to pleasure, and the degree of pleasure corresponds to the degree of absorption.

Here, then, we have a starting point for what could become a truly psychological theory. For pleasure is a motivating force that is responsible for at least part of human behavior. We might tentatively go further and postulate that much of human mental and physical behavior is carried out in the pursuit of pleasure.[19] More concretely, human behavior seeks to reestablish situations that were accompanied by pleasure on earlier occasions. The human mind is presumably programmed such that situations, or objects (including persons), whose experience is accompanied by pleasure become desirable thereafter, and future activity will seek to find them back, or at least find situations and objects that share features with those earlier pleasurable ones.

I am fully aware that the scheme I am presenting here can at best only be a very simplified picture of what really happens in real human beings. The number of pleasurable and unpleasurable experiences we, all of us, have had from an early age onward is so great that the number of motivating forces that interact at any one time in a normal person, and that are based on the memory of those experiences, must be very high indeed. However, even this simplified picture shows that human motivation is ultimately based on a mistake. We have proposed that pleasure results from absorption, not, or not directly, from the situations, objects and persons that our memory retains as sources of pleasure. These situations, objects and persons were retained in our minds because they were experienced as pleasurable. However, they were not its direct cause, because the (or at least one) direct cause of pleasure is absorption.

I do not delude myself in thinking that the theory of which I have just presented the briefest possible outline can be considered complete. Other factors, too, will have to be taken into account, but this is not the place to do so. However, even the bit that we

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[19] Compare the opening sentence of Jeremy Bentham's *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789): "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do." (cited Kahneman, 2011: 377). Some people are not comfortable with the motivating role of pleasure, so e.g. Roger Penrose (2005: 19): "I would … prefer to have [all my actions, and those of my friends,] controlled by something residing in some … aspect of Plato's fabulous mathematical world than to have them be subject to the kind of simplistic base motives, such as pleasure-seeking, … that many would argue to be the implications of a strictly scientific standpoint."

have considered puts a number of issues in a different perspective. Suppose that it is indeed true that absorption, through the intermediary of pleasure, plays a crucial role in the workings of the mind and in human behavior in general. In that case one can conceive of a person who has discovered the real source of pleasure, viz., absorption, and who has also succeeded in eliminating — or perhaps we should say: deflating — the memory traces that pull him or her to the situations and objects that had been associated with pleasure in the past. This person would then know the real source of pleasure and be free to act in accordance with that knowledge, quite independently of his or her life experience.

This takes us back to our point of departure. I emphasized that the claim that there is a possible enduring state free from psychological suffering is central to the early Buddhist texts. I also drew attention to the need of a psychological theory over and above the findings of brain research. Well, the theory I have just outlined provides us with a fascinating glimpse of what freedom from psychological suffering might look like in terms of this theory. It consists in the "discovery" of what constitutes the real source of pleasure, and in the modification, "deflation", of memory traces that pull us toward mistaken sources of pleasure. This theory does not need to assume that the psychology of the Buddha, or of any person in that state, works according to altogether different principles than us. If the pursuit of pleasure is a major force in the mental and physical activity of ordinary humans, we do not have to postulate that the situation is different in the case of the Buddha. The essential difference lies in the fact that pleasure, in this particular case, is no longer mistakenly associated with earlier experiences in the world and with the resulting attachments, but with its real source, absorption.[20]

Let me emphasize once again that I have done no more that minimally sketch some notions that might be developed into a full psychological theory. Numerous further questions remain to be answered, among them the following: Why should the mere realization that absorption produces pleasure not suffice to put a definite end to suffering? And why does absorption not come about automatically? Why do we, or most of us, have to *learn* to meditate? The full psychological theory I am hinting at would cover much more than the few suggestions I have made so far. It is however clear that

[20] The question whether the Buddha had desires (see e.g. Franco, 2012) may in this way take an altogether different meaning.

even the skimpy outline I have presented makes more sense of the main message of the early Buddhist texts than any other theory I am aware of.[21] I would further suggest that the availability of a sophisticated psychological theory elaborated along the lines indicated above would be a useful guide for the study of the brain processes that underlie the psychological transformations referred to in the Buddhist texts.

By way of conclusion, I like to emphasize that I am not a Buddhist. I do not "believe" in the texts we have been discussing, and I would not protest if someone were to show (which no one has done so far) that the contents of the early Buddhist texts are just a bunch of more or less incoherent ideas, invented perhaps by some dreamers who lost touch with reality. The one thing I "believe" in (if this is the term to use) is that philologists should take their texts seriously. They should, to the extent possible, avoid approaching them with the conviction that they already know what is in them. The point of my presentation is that, if one seriously attempts to read the early Buddhist texts without projecting one's own prior convictions onto them, one may end up with questions and challenges of the kind I have presented to you.

There is another consequence of taking the texts seriously. Countless scholars have edited, translated and studied the numerous passages that state that a transition to a state free from suffering is possible. To the best of my knowledge, none of them have ever taken position with regard to this claim. I do not remember having read a single scholar stating that he does not believe this claim. And yet, it seems clear that many scholars, including probably most Western scholars, do indeed not believe this claim. They somehow assume that their readers, too, will reject this claim without further ado. I think this is patronizing, and leaves the door wide open for the cultural prejudices of the scholar. Everyone is free to believe, or not believe, what he wishes, and I have no dispute with people who reject the early Buddhist claim, with or without arguments. I do have a disagreement with those who sneakily introduce their prejudices, preferably without mentioning them, for example by ignoring as not worthy of serious attention a claim that, if true, might shake our understanding of human nature in its foundations.

[21] For a more elaborate, but still incomplete and tentative, version of this theory, see Bronkhorst, 2012.

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