1. Buddha as Philosopher

This entry concerns the historical individual, traditionally called Gautama, who is identified by modern scholars as the founder of Buddhism. According to Buddhist teachings, there have been other buddhas in the past, and there will be yet more in the future. The title 'Buddha', which literally means 'awakened', is conferred on an individual who discovers the path to nirvana, the cessation of suffering, and propagates that discovery so that others may also achieve nirvana. This entry will follow modern scholarship in taking an agnostic stance on the question of whether there have been other buddhas, and likewise for questions concerning the superhuman status and powers that some Buddhists attribute to buddhas. The concern of this entry is just those aspects of the thought of the historical individual Gautama that bear on the development of the Buddhist philosophical tradition.

The Buddha will here be treated as a philosopher. To so treat him is controversial, but before coming to why that should be so, let us first rehearse those basic aspects of the Buddha's life and teachings that are relatively non-controversial. Tradition has it that Gautama lived to age 80. Up until recently his dates were thought to be approximately 560–480 BCE, but many scholars now hold that he must have died around 405 BCE. He was born into a family of some wealth and power, members of the Śākya clan, in the area of the present border between India and Nepal. The story is that in early adulthood he abandoned his comfortable life as a householder (as well as his wife and young son) in order to seek a solution to the problem of existential suffering. He first took up with a number of different wandering ascetics (*śramanas*) who claimed to know the path to liberation from suffering. Finding their teachings unsatisfactory, he struck out on his own, and through a combination of insight and meditational practice attained the state of enlightenment (*bodhi*) which is said to represent the cessation of all further suffering. He then devoted the remaining 45 years of his life to teaching others the insights and techniques that had led him to this achievement.

Gautama could himself be classified as one of the *śramanas*. That there existed such a phenomenon as the *śramanas* tells us that there was some degree of dissatisfaction with the customary religious practices then prevailing in the Gangetic basin of North India. These practices consisted largely in the rituals and sacrifices prescribed in the Vedas. Among the *śramanas* there were many, including the Buddha, who rejected the authority of the Vedas as definitive pronouncements on the nature of the world and our place in it (and for this reason are called 'heterodox'). But within the Vedic canon itself there is a stratum of (comparatively late) texts, the *Upaniṣads*, that likewise displays disaffection with Brahmin ritualism. Among the new ideas that figure in these ('orthodox') texts, as well as in the teachings of those heterodox *śramanas* whose doctrines are known to us, are the following: that sentient beings (including humans, non-human animals, gods, and the inhabitants of various hells) undergo rebirth; that rebirth is governed by the causal laws of

karma (good actions cause pleasant fruit for the agent, evil actions cause unpleasant fruit, etc.); that continual rebirth is inherently unsatisfactory; that there is an ideal state for sentient beings involving liberation from the cycle of rebirth; and that attaining this state requires overcoming ignorance concerning one's true identity. Various views are offered concerning this ignorance and how to overcome it. The *Bhagavad Gītā* (classified by some orthodox schools as an *Upaniṣad*) lists four such methods, and discusses at least two separate views concerning our identity: that there is a plurality of distinct selves, each being the true agent of a person's actions and the bearer of karmic merit and demerit but existing separately from the body and its associated states; and that there is just one self, of the nature of pure consciousness (a 'witness') and identical with the essence of the cosmos, Brahman or pure undifferentiated Being.

The Buddha agreed with those of his contemporaries embarked on the same soteriological project that it is ignorance about our identity that is responsible for suffering. What sets his teachings apart (at this level of analysis) lies in what he says that ignorance consists in: the conceit that there is an 'I' and a 'mine'. This is the famous Buddhist teaching of non-self (*anātman*). And it is with this teaching that the controversy begins concerning whether Gautama may legitimately be represented as a philosopher. First there are those (e.g. Albahari 2006) who (correctly) point out that the Buddha never categorically denies the existence of a self that transcends what is empirically given, namely the five *skandhas* or psychophysical elements. While the Buddha does deny that any of the psychophysical elements is a self, these interpreters claim that he at least leaves open the possibility that there is a self that is transcendent in the sense of being non-empirical. To this it may be objected that all of classical Indian philosophy—Buddhist and orthodox alike—understood the Buddha to have denied the self *tout court*. To this it is sometimes replied that the later philosophical tradition simply got the Buddha wrong, at least in part because the Buddha sought to indicate something that cannot be grasped through the exercise of philosophical rationality. On this interpretation, the Buddha should be seen not as a proponent of the philosophical methods of analysis and argumentation, but rather as one who sees those methods as obstacles to final release.

Another reason one sometimes encounters for denying that the Buddha is a philosopher is that he rejects the characteristically philosophical activity of theorizing about matters that lack evident practical application. On this interpretation as well, those later Buddhist thinkers who did go in for the construction of theories about the ultimate nature of everything simply failed to heed or properly appreciate the Buddha's advice that we avoid theorizing for its own sake and confine our attention to those matters that are directly relevant to liberation from suffering. On this view the teaching of non-self is not a bit of metaphysics, just some practical advice to the effect that we should avoid identifying with things that are transitory and so bound to yield dissatisfaction. What both interpretations share is the assumption that it is possible to arrive at what the Buddha himself thought

without relying on the understanding of his teachings developed in the subsequent Buddhist philosophical tradition.

This assumption may be questioned. Our knowledge of the Buddha's teachings comes by way of texts that were not written down until several centuries after his death, are in languages (Pāli, and Chinese translations of Sanskrit) other than the one he is likely to have spoken, and disagree in important respects. The first difficulty may not be as serious as it seems, given that the Buddha's discourses were probably rehearsed shortly after his death and preserved through oral transmission until the time they were committed to writing. And the second need not be insuperable either. (See, e.g., Cousins 2022.) But the third is troubling, in that it suggests textual transmission involved processes of insertion and deletion in aid of one side or another in sectarian disputes. Our ancient sources attest to this: one will encounter a dispute among Buddhist thinkers where one side cites some utterance of the Buddha in support of their position, only to have the other side respond that the text from which the quotation is taken is not universally recognized as authoritatively the word of the Buddha. This suggests that our record of the Buddha's teaching may be colored by the philosophical elaboration of those teachings propounded by later thinkers in the Buddhist tradition.

Some scholars (e.g., Gombrich 2009, Shulman 2014) are more sanguine than others about the possibility of overcoming this difficulty, and thereby getting at what the Buddha himself had thought, as opposed to what later Buddhist philosophers thought he had thought. No position will be taken on this dispute here. We will be treating the Buddha's thought as it was understood within the later philosophical tradition that he had inspired. The resulting interpretation may or may not be faithful to his intentions. It is at least logically possible that he believed there to be a transcendent self that can only be known by mystical intuition, or that the exercise of philosophical rationality leads only to sterile theorizing and away from real emancipation. What we can say with some assurance is that this is not how the Buddhist philosophical tradition understood him. It is their understanding that will be the subject of this essay.

2. Core Teachings

The Buddha's basic teachings are usually summarized using the device of the Four Nobles' Truths:

1. There is suffering.
2. There is the origination of suffering.
3. There is the cessation of suffering.
4. There is a path to the cessation of suffering.

The first of these claims might seem obvious, even when 'suffering' is understood to mean not mere pain but existential suffering, the sort of frustration, alienation and despair that

arise out of our experience of transitoriness. But there are said to be different levels of appreciation of this truth, some quite subtle and difficult to attain; the highest of these is said to involve the realization that everything is of the nature of suffering. Perhaps it is sufficient for present purposes to point out that while this is not the implausible claim that all of life's states and events are necessarily experienced as unsatisfactory, still the realization that all (oneself included) is impermanent can undermine a precondition for real enjoyment of the events in a life: that such events are meaningful by virtue of their having a place in an open-ended narrative.