

The ‘External World’: Its Status and Relevance in the Pali Nikāyas¹

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It is usually accepted that although cosmological references in the early Pali Buddhist texts refer metaphorically to meditative states of mind, they should at the same time be understood as referring in literal terms to an externally existent cosmos. Because the ontological status of the cosmos appears to be tangential to what the Buddha taught, however, it is not clear that this literal interpretation is appropriate. From a study of the early textual material, this paper suggests that an alternative understanding of the cosmos is more compatible with the Buddha’s teachings. © 1999 Academic Press

Introduction

In one of his Louis H. Jordan seminar papers given at London University’s School of Oriental and African Studies in November 1994, Richard Gombrich discusses the way in which references to cosmology in the Pali *Nikāya* texts of early Buddhism tend to be metaphorical.² In particular, he refers to the way the mental states achieved at different levels of meditation are associated by way of metaphor with corresponding cosmological levels, and that as a whole the latter have thus been construed as representing a metaphor for stages on the spiritual path in both meditative and ethical terms: insight (through meditation) and ethical behaviour being seen as twin aspects of the spiritual path in Buddhism.³ Professor Gombrich points out that the early texts show little or no concern with cosmology as such, and according to the textual evidence ‘the Buddha was not really interested in what existed “out there”’. On the contrary, the Buddha seems to have ridiculed his contemporaries for their cosmogonic and cosmological speculations.⁴

Over time, however, the Theravāda Buddhist tradition and its textual exegetes have taken the metaphorical references literally. They have ‘lost the original metaphorical structure . . . [and] reified the ethical teaching into a hierarchic cosmology’. For Theravāda Buddhists the various levels of the cosmic hierarchy share similar characteristics with corresponding meditative states, but they in fact take the cosmological references in their texts to be referring to a spacial and real cosmos. Drawing on a range of Theravāda Buddhist sources, academic studies have been made of aspects of this cosmology.⁵ It is generally thought that the worldview of the earliest Buddhism, represented by Theravāda Buddhism, included a cosmology of this nature.

In drawing attention in his Jordan Seminar to the fact that it has only been over time that the cosmological metaphor became reified, what Professor Gombrich is questioning is whether the result has provided an accurate understanding of the world view of early Buddhism. Because of the Buddha’s extensive use of metaphor, and given that he was ‘not really interested in what existed “out there”’, it is in fact not immediately obvious what kind of cosmology would be compatible with what he actually taught. Professor Gombrich wonders, therefore, if the reifying of the metaphor has been justified, at the same time conjecturing ‘surely these subjective [meditative] states have some objective correlate’. But his paper is concerned with drawing out and discussing the diversity of references to the subject in the canonical material, and he declines to offer any specific interpretation, ending his paper: ‘I hope that further study of all these matters will clarify my mind. In the meanwhile, I hope that others will make suggestions’. This paper is my

suggestion, and I am giving it in very much the same spirit of adding to the discussion, drawing primarily, as Gombrich does, on the early Pali *Nikāyas*. This is because (and in this particular instance this is Professor Gombrich's concern also) my interest lies in suggesting an approach that is compatible with the nearest we can get to what the Buddha taught, rather than with any later Theravāda interpreters. Or, put differently, my suggestion is based simply on an interpretation of the early Buddhist doctrinal teachings, as found in the *Nikāyas* of the Pali canon.

What I want to draw together for consideration are: the central orientation of the Buddha's teachings—by which I specifically mean their person-centredness; a look at how the term *loka* (world) is used in the relevant Pali material; the metaphysical implications of the Buddhist doctrinal teachings of 'not-self' (*anattā*) and 'dependent origination' (*paṭiccasamuppāda*); and what is meant by 'transcendental idealism'. What I hope to show in the course of my paper is not that the Buddha would have accepted either that there is or that there is not an 'external world' in the real and spacial sense understood by Theravāda Buddhists but that in the light of his teachings the premise that there must either be or not be an 'external world' is a false one; this explains why his interest was focused elsewhere.

First, it will be helpful to discuss certain relevant contextualising and methodological factors by way of background.⁶

Context and Caveats

I referred above to the fact that the Buddha rejected the cosmogonic and cosmological speculations of his contemporaries. In fact, such speculations were of central relevance to the predominant religious concern of the day. Liberation from the cycle of lives that most believed one is bound to was thought by virtually all religious seekers to be achieved by experientially knowing (the existential nature of the experience is sometimes just called knowledge or knowing) the true nature of Reality—different people teaching different methods by which to achieve this. More specifically, Reality was explained in terms of the nature of the self and the nature of everything else. One might say that the concern of religious seekers of the time was knowledge of the self and its ontological context. Many of the different schools of religious thought in the Indian tradition were, and remain, formulated in this way. Though most were not systematised until some centuries later, many were present in embryonic form at the time of the Buddha. Perhaps the best known of these was the *Upaniṣadic* teaching that the essence of the human being, one's real self, is identical with the immortal and unchanging essence of the universe. This is usually expressed in the ontological formula that the self (*ātman*) is Brahman, the latter referring to the universal Absolute. In the *Upaniṣads*, this is stated as 'you are [all] that' (*tat tvam asi*).⁷ These, and others with similar views, were among those referred to in the early Buddhist texts as eternalists: they believed that the essence of one's self existed eternally. By contrast, others were annihilationists, believing that the self was annihilated either at death or on achieving liberation. Yet others were materialists, rejecting any notion of an essential self, permanent or temporary.

Notwithstanding the fact that there was a wide variety of views as to the precise nature of Reality, so widespread and dominant was this formulation of the approach to understanding it, that the early Buddhist texts repeatedly refer to a plethora of such views and speculations. It is these that the Buddha disdains. In direct contrast to his contemporaries, and as well as rejecting all their views, he remains completely silent on such issues, appearing totally to reject *any* form of ontological statement. Classically in what are called the 'unanswered questions' (to which I shall return below), and in the

well-known *Brahmajāla Sutta*, he refuses to endorse *any* position, on the grounds both that holding on to any such views is spiritually irrelevant and misleading⁸ and that meaningful answers to the questions cannot be given: such issues have to be understood through insight, he says.⁹ It is with this stance of the Buddha's that I am hoping my suggestion that the premise that there must either be or not be an 'external world' is a false one will be compatible.

Given this context, one can perhaps readily see that in writing about it, modern philosophical terms—such as 'transcendental idealism'—need to be used with caution in two respects. First, it is extremely unlikely that an ontology that might be compatible with what the Buddha taught would have been expressed, or even endorsed, by him in terms of a specific philosophical theory. Pinned down in such a way, it would undoubtedly have been rejected along with other 'views'. And second, none of the various ontological views of the time was expressed as a systematic philosophy. Though during the following centuries some *were* systematised, their proponents did not even then describe their views as packages whose ontological stance could be indicated by a philosophical label. This is something that twentieth-century Western academics have sought to do with regard to the various different religious schools of thought within the Indian tradition as a whole, perhaps largely because the central concerns of many of those schools of thought encompass relevant philosophical issues and so have readily lent themselves to this. Thus the non-dualistic (Advaita) Vedānta school of Śaṅkara is described as absolute idealism, Rāmānuja's Vedānta is referred to as qualified monism, Sāṃkhya as dualism, Nyāya as pluralistic realism, and so on.

The focus of Buddhist teachings, by contrast, reflecting their lack of interest in what is 'out there', is such that it is generally regarded that they are 'not about ontology'. Hence, most kinds of Buddhism have not lent themselves to ontological labelling in the same way. What labelling there has been has tended to be confined to considerably later forms, within what is collectively called Mahāyāna Buddhism, than that with which I am concerned. An example is the 'Mind Only' (*citta-mātra*) school of Yogācāra Buddhism. There has been disagreement as to whether the name of this school of Buddhism is representative of its idealism in the ontological sense, or whether it refers to the fact that the focus of the practice of yoga ('practice of yoga' is what *yogācāra* means) is only the workings of the mind.¹⁰ The latter would prioritise the method for attaining liberating insight and leave aside the issue of any underlying ontology. The former would take it that this form of Buddhism teaches that 'all there is is the mind' the sense of 'there is no external world, there is *only* mind: this is what the world *is*'. Such idealism presents the further question as to whether it should be understood solipsistically—that is, there is only *my* mind; or in the broader sense that the entire multiplicity that we refer to as the world is constituted of mind-stuff(s).

With regard to early Buddhism, although there have been some general studies on the nature of phenomena,¹¹ these have not resulted either in consensus or in any specific labelling. Some have offered translations of ambiguous passages in ways which suggest an implicit idealism in the broader sense just described.¹² Within Theravāda Buddhism, what amounts to idealism has been endorsed as part of a concern to refute the existence of any underlying reality because of its original association with the non-Buddhist *Upaniṣadic* Absolute, Brahman.¹³ More often, however, the Theravāda cosmological schema in the spacial sense is accepted.¹⁴ Either within this, or simply leaving aside the question of any underlying ontology, scholars have recently drawn attention to the widespread use of imagery and metaphor to be found in the early texts, both in general and more particularly with regard to the metaphorical correspondence between

meditative states and cosmological levels referred to above.¹⁵ But Professor Gombrich's uncertainty as to what implicit ontological status of the world the Buddha's teachings suggest indicates the dearth of previous work on this particular subject. The nearest relevant works are those which draw on the way Buddhist teachings are focused on understanding the way the mind operates, and those that discuss the Buddhist metaphysical teaching that all things are dependently originated (both areas to which I shall be returning below).¹⁶ I shall be acknowledging my indebtedness to such works in the usual way, but so far as I am aware none has been concerned to draw out a cosmic ontology as such.

What I am doing, then, is focusing on a very specific question—What kind of 'world', in an ontological sense, do the early Buddhist teachings imply?—in a way that has not previously been adopted. In discussing my interpretation of the material, I am drawing on, what in the West is called transcendental idealism, as a model. Transcendental idealism is the philosophical theory that what we take to be the 'external' world (in the cosmic sense) about us, with us 'in' it, only appears to us like that because that is the way our cognitive apparatus presents it to us, not because Reality is in itself really like that. We are unable to see Reality as it is in itself because we cannot transcend our cognitive apparatus. But we only experience the world *at all* because Reality is actually there: what we are experiencing is our *interpretation of* a transcendently existent Reality. Put differently, one might say that our worldly experience and the transcendently existent are twin aspects of Reality as a whole. But apart from its existence, nothing at all, of any nature whatsoever, can be known about the transcendental aspect because, *in being* transcendent, it is beyond any of our cognitive conceptual categories. Though in the West—through its association with Kant, who first formulated this theory—transcendental idealism can be and is sometimes associated with God, in fact the philosophical theory stands on its own. It is strictly in this, as it were God-less, sense that I am using it as a model. Furthermore, in using it as a model I am suggesting, not that the Buddha did or necessarily would have put it this way (indeed, as I stated above, he would probably have rejected it along with all other 'views') but that, loosely understood, its structure acts well as a general model for the answering of my question.

Orientation of the Buddha's Teachings

Turning now to the first of the points I want to draw together, the central orientation of the Buddha's teachings, what I want to do here is to present the teachings in such a way as to draw out what seems to me to be their notable person-centredness. Furthermore, I particularly want to suggest that what is striking in this is that it is not that we are given a detailed account of what a person is but that we are consistently directed towards a study of subjective experience. In the last part of my paper, I will also suggest that understanding the person-centredness of the teachings in this way is crucial if one is to understand their wider implications.

Given that there is no specific place where a discussion of the Buddha's teachings must begin, I shall start by referring to the way in which the Buddha responds to the questions of an ontological nature to which I have referred, and suggest that this response is an active clue to how he wanted his teachings to be approached. The classical 'unanswered questions' are: whether the world (in the cosmic sense) is eternal, whether the world is finite, whether that which is the vital principle (*jīva*) is different from the body (in effect this is a question about the essential self), and whether after death a *tathāgata* (an epithet for the Buddha, and the implication is that it means any liberated being) exists, whether s/he exists.¹⁷ To these are added, in certain contexts, a large

number of other questions in similar vein: focusing mainly on the world and the self.¹⁸ They are all very much the sorts of questions that are frequently asked of religious teachers and indeed the sorts of questions, that virtually all religious teachers other than the Buddha actually answer: not only were the religious in India at the time of the Buddha seeking answers to these questions but most of the religions of the world actively concern themselves with explaining the nature of the self, its relationship with the body, its status after liberation, and the nature of the world.

As I have noted, the Buddha consistently refrains from answering these questions on the grounds that to do so would be irrelevant or misleading. It is repeatedly stated in the texts that he was concerned only with what would be conducive to gaining liberation from the cycle of lives, and these questions are not so conducive.¹⁹ But in some of these contexts it is recorded that he goes on to state that what he *does* teach, and what the questioner should concern himself with, is the reality of unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), its cause, the possibility of its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation.²⁰ It seems to me that what he is doing here is deliberately transferring attention away from objective questions about what things are to the understanding of the subjective experience of existence as a human being. The subjectivity of what is meant by *dukkha* is indicated by the fact that it is explained by the Buddha in terms of the *khandhas*.²¹ I shall be discussing the *khandhas* more fully below but will here explain that in effect they constitute the earthly life of an individual. So what he is stating is that instead of asking all these objective questions, one should understand the unsatisfactoriness one experiences and its cause, and so on. It is this subjective experience that is both the problem which needs solving and the process which needs understanding.

This is the clue: it seems to me that this epitomises the Buddha's approach, not just to the way he gives his teachings but also to his own spiritual life. We read in the texts that he embarked on his spiritual quest because the experience of being human was problematic; it was manifestly unsatisfactory. He wanted to understand both why this was the case and also how to change it for something better. It goes without saying that according to the perspective of his world view, he also believed that the experience of being human would be repeated in a series of lives, and it was in order not to have these repeated experiences that he sought to understand their nature. In the religious milieu in which he lived in North India in the fifth century BCE, he was, as we have seen above, not alone in such a quest. What makes him different from his contemporaries, however, is that in solving the problem, and in teaching others how to achieve the same solution, he did not extend his frame of reference beyond subjective experience. Indeed, it is this very contrast that is exemplified in the questioning of him by so many others to which I am referring, and in his refusal to answer those questions.

Canonical descriptions of the Buddha's Enlightenment also importantly indicate the consistency of the Buddha's concern with subjective experience. It was after his Enlightenment that the Buddha gave his teachings, all of which were specifically intended to assist others in achieving the same liberating insight. Understanding what was involved for him is therefore highly relevant to understanding what he subsequently taught. His Enlightenment is described as seeing why the experience of being human is characterised by unsatisfactoriness in the way that it is, and of realising that in understanding it one can solve that problem.²² Enlightenment can thus also be understood in terms of liberating insight, which is also frequently referred to simply as 'seeing things as they really are'.

The texts describe the Buddha having three insights. First, he is able to see his former lives: where and how and why he was reborn as he was. Second, he is able to see other

beings being born and reborn in different conditions and *why* they are so reborn. In effect, what this means is that he could see the mechanics of the law of karma—how actions have consequences, and that what happens is qualitatively conditioned by what occurred previously: this is both the how and the why of any given individual history. Third, he is able to see how to uproot the deepest of the tendencies which bind one to continued rebirth. In understanding the mechanics of continuity, he is able to do something about bringing his own personal cyclical experience to an end. The deepest of the ‘continuity tendencies’, called *āsavas*, are (all) sensual desire, the desire for continued becoming, ignorance and, in one context, the holding of false ‘views’.²³ Immediately prior to turning his mind to the uprooting of these *āsavas*, the Buddha ‘understood unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) as it really is, its cause, that it can cease, and how to bring about its cessation’, which is precisely what he tells his listeners they should concern themselves with, rather than asking all the questions to which I have referred.

It is this formula that he gives in his so-called first sermon as the Four Noble Truths.²⁴ The subjective nature of *dukkha* is indicated, not just because it is explained in terms of the *khandhas*, as mentioned, but because of the way in which the Truths are elaborated.²⁵ The first Noble Truth of *dukkha* is described in terms of birth, old age, disease and death; of our relationships with what is dear to us and with fulfilling our desires; in short, it goes on to state, all of this can be summed up in terms of the *khandhas*. The second Noble Truth of the origin of *dukkha* is explicitly associated with subjective cravings and desires. The third Noble Truth of the possibility of the cessation of *dukkha* is given as the stopping of those subjective cravings and desires. The fourth Noble Truth, giving the path to follow to achieve that cessation, is one of a variety of subjective disciplines.

Another teaching of the Buddha confirms the subjective nature of the Four Noble Truths as a whole: his teaching on karma. In common with many of his contemporaries, he accepted that actions have consequences. This, indeed, is the underlying rationale of the *Vedic* sacrificial religion: the verbal and physical actions of the sacrificial ritual have the consequence of bringing about what the sacrifice is for, whether it be sons, wealth, crops, rain or the very maintenance of the cosmos. The point was, if actions were performed correctly they had the ‘right’ consequences. In the *Upaniṣads*, this rationale was extended to the human being, in the sense that if one performed all one’s conjoined actions correctly one would be reborn in favourable circumstances. The Buddha, by contrast, introduced a qualitative—and also profoundly individually subjective—notion to the way karma works. He stated that what determines the consequence of any action, its consequence-producing part, is the intention behind it. It is not a matter of doing things correctly according to a given conjoined code but of the qualitative state of mind by which the action is conditioned. It is these ‘intentions’ that constitute the desires and cravings which cause the continuity of the experience of *dukkha*, as stated in the second Noble Truth. Furthermore, it is understanding the mechanics of how this works, insight into which is described as part of the experience of Enlightenment, that enables an individual to set about uprooting the *āsavas* that fuel continuity.

The fact that one of the *āsavas* is ignorance indicates why it is that one goes on fuelling continuity with cravings and desires. It is profoundly associated with the need to understand *dukkha* in the sense that it is *that* experience, the experience of being a human being, that is perpetuated because one is ignorant. It is not enough to know objectively how continuity is brought about: one has to understand subjectively *why* one goes on perpetuating the status quo of human experience. *Why* do we keep craving/desiring/having intentions? It is the elevating of this question to the level of an

āsava (if I may so put it), and therefore associating the understanding of it with liberation, that distinguishes the Buddha's teachings from the *Vedic* teachings. In the latter, it is because of their objective understanding of the process that the priests/sacrificers continue to perform particular actions in particular ways with the aim of *maintaining* the status quo. According to the Buddha, it is all and any of one's actions, interpreted by one as intentions, that perpetuate the very status quo that presents the problem; and so a change in one's subjective experience can be brought about by understanding *why* we act as we do.

The Buddha starts from what one might call normal human experience—it is this that is unsatisfactory, or *dukkha*. And he states that the way we normally think of ourselves and therefore behave is from a standpoint of ignorance. In particular, it is implicit in our 'normally' having cravings/desires/intentions that we assume some degree of permanence and separateness about ourselves and everything we experience. However, he states, that is not the way things, and in this context he explicitly means the factors of human experience,²⁶ really are. In the same way that, according to the law of karma, any given state of affairs or experience is conditioned by one's previous actions,²⁷ so the way all things are is that they are conditioned, they are dependent on their originating circumstances. As such, they cannot be permanent, or independently separate in the way that we normally think things are. Put differently, our thinking that we experience permanence and separateness is what our ignorance is the conditioning factor of. In thinking in such a way, we continue to behave as separate desirers, having separate desires about separate objects of desire.

In separating the factors of our experience in this way, we are conferring on each of those factors, including ourselves, the notion of having an independent identity, of being what we call a 'self'. In this respect the notion of self-hood is applicable not just personally but also generically. If all things are in fact dependent and impermanent, what we are doing is erroneous. Impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-separate-self-hood (each characteristic following from its predecessor) are taught together in the *tilakkhaṇa* formula, giving us the so-called 'three characteristics' (which is what *tilakkhaṇa* means) of experience.²⁸ The key aspects of the nature of our experience—from-ignorance as described here, are emphasised elsewhere by the Buddha when he specifically teaches both dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) at greater length²⁹ and also the non-separate-self-hood (*anattatā*) of all things. The way the latter of these two, what is called the doctrine of *anattā*, is commonly given, is in connection with the analysis of the human being in terms of the *khandhas*, to which I have already referred.³⁰ There are five *khandhas*: the body (*rūpa*), feelings (*vedanā*), apperception and conception (*saññā*), volitional activities (*saṃkhārā*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). The Buddha states that none of these aspects of human experience should be taken to be the essential 'self' (*attā*) that was so central to the religious quest at the time.

I have argued elsewhere³¹ that the Buddha's doctrine of *anattā* is not stating 'there is no self', as is usually thought. I will not rehearse my arguments here (though it is tempting to ask rhetorically why, if this were his meaning, he did not just say so in reply to all the questions he was asked about the nature of the self) but will simply state that it seems to me, rather, that its meaning is that it refers to the way we erroneously superimpose the notion of independence on all the aspects of our experience, including ourselves as experiencers. Because of the frequency with which he is questioned about the self, however, the Buddha has to establish that in drawing the focus of attention to the five *khandhas*, by associating them with *dukkha* in the first Noble Truth and elsewhere, he is not introducing an answer to any of such questions. In explicitly stating

that each of the *khandhas* is not-self (*anattā*), he is in my view doing no more than stating that they—along with everything else—are dependently originated. I would go so far as to say that I think that what he means to highlight by this is how they work: each works in a process of dependent origination, as does everything else—from karma to the continuity of the individual. This view is supported in the texts where the Buddha states that understanding dependent origination means that one *will no longer ask* (my italics) questions about individual existence, past, future or present, such as ‘Am I, or am I not? What am I? How am I? This “being” that is “I”, where has it come from, where will it go?’³²

I think the significance of this context in which *anattā* is most frequently referred to, that is in association with the *khandhas*, is that in being conditioned by our ignorance the process of experiencing things as independent is subjectively imposed. It is by understanding this subjective process, by means of understanding how the *khandhas* work together as an experiencing process, that one can see *dukkha*—the experience of being human—as it really is.³³ Specifically, one understands how the *khandha* of the body provides the locus for the process as well as the sense organs by means of which all primary experiential data are received. Such data are then consciously assimilated, coordinated and identified, aspects of which process are what the other four *khandhas* refer to, in (potentially) increasingly sophisticated or abstract ways. For as long as one is operating from a standpoint of any degree of ignorance, the texts state that one also superimposes ‘manifoldness’ (i.e. separateness, or independent self-hood) onto experiential data.³⁴

It is because we impose this manifoldness that we continue to behave as independent desirers, thus perpetuating our experience of *dukkha*. In other words, what the Buddha is saying is that we have the experience that we do because our cognitive process works in a certain way, based on ignorance. That experience can be changed if we understand how that cognitive process works and if we then, as it were, ‘direct it alright’. One frequently comes across analogies associating human beings with computers, usually given by philosophers trying to understand what human beings are: are we hardware plus software plus electricity, and so on. A slightly different computer analogy is helpful here: if you want to use a computer properly, you do not need to know what it is but you *do* need to know how it works—what it will do and how it does it. To this end, what we identify its component factors as *being* is no more useful to us than the knowing of their names (unless the knowing of their names *also* conveys to us what they *do*). What we need to be aware of is the way that the component factors relate to one another; and it is the effect they have on one another that is significant, not what they are in themselves as separate constituents. This is, in my view, precisely what the Buddha is saying about the human being when he focuses as he does on the *khandhas*.³⁵

The Term loka—World

Whether I am correct in this last point, and I have to say that I think the evidence in support of it is compelling, I think it is clear from this summary of the Buddha’s so-called ‘doctrinal’ teachings,³⁶ and from the way in which they are given in the light of his own Enlightenment experience, that they are notably person-centred and that they focus on human experience. This orientation is highly significant when it comes to looking at the way the term *loka* (world) is used in the early Pali texts—the second of the themes I wish to draw together. In common with so many of the key terms

of early Buddhism, it is used in a wide variety of contexts. Of relevance to my theme in this paper is its specific usage as a metaphor for the life of an individual human being.³⁷ This metaphorical usage of *loka* is one of the correlates of the centrality of human experience to the Buddha's teachings. It is less well known than the metaphorical correspondence between levels of meditation and different cosmological levels (or 'worlds'—the term *loka* is used), from which is derived the psychological cosmology of which Richard Gombrich asked, 'surely these subjective states had some objective correlate?'

The metaphorical link between meditative attainment and cosmological level was not established as a full psychological cosmology until the *Abhidhamma*, Pali texts later than the doctrinal *Nikāyas* that I am drawing on. In the earliest material the correspondence between subjective state and cosmological level is at best unsystematically implicit. For example, the attainment of certain meditative states is sometimes said to be a prerequisite either of being reborn into or of contacting other beings in corresponding 'worlds'.³⁸ It is made clear that no matter how good such a world might be, even if it is a 'completely happy world' (*ekantasukho loko*), it is to be eschewed in favour of attaining Nirvana.³⁹ It is commonly assumed that such unsystematic references are the embryonic form of the later, more detailed metaphorical structure that was in turn reified.⁴⁰

In fact, in the earlier texts, it is as a metaphor for the entire life of the individual human being that *loka* is more specifically used.⁴¹ This is most clearly indicated in the *Khandha Saṃyutta*, which is primarily concerned with referring to the individual in terms of the five *khandhas*. Here we read that the five *khandhas* together comprise a 'phenomenon which is a world in the world'.⁴² The context is one in which the Buddha states that he has no quarrel with the world (*nāham lokena vivadāmi*) or with some of the teachings of other teachers in the world (*loke paṇḍitā*). What he wants, however, is to establish a teaching which is not given by those other teachers, that of the five *khandhas*, which he has thoroughly penetrated and realised (*abhisambujjhati abhisameti*). Here the point is made that the world with which he is concerned is the subjective world of experience.

Similarly, *loka* is sometimes used interchangeably with *dukkha*, itself identified by the Buddha as referring to the individual's subjective experience when he defined it in terms of the five *khandhas*, as I have already discussed. The Buddha's teachings are aimed at no longer being subject to rebirth, and frequently this is expressed as the 'ceasing of all the *khandhas* which are *dukkha*'.⁴³ This means to the point where the individual, who, with the *khandhas* operating from a basis of ignorance persists in being reborn, achieves liberation. In the *Nidāna Saṃyutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, two consecutive *suttas* are the same save for the fact that in the second *sutta* *loka* is substituted for *dukkha*. In these *suttas*, the Buddha states: 'I will teach you, monks, how *dukkha/loka* arises and how it ceases . . . Visual consciousness arises because of sight and (visible) objects (and so on through all the senses); contact is the combination of the three; feeling is conditioned by contact; craving is conditioned by feeling. This, monks, is the arising of *dukkha/loka*'.⁴⁴ The cessation of *dukkha/loka* comes about when the craving which is normally conditioned by feeling no longer occurs: when craving utterly fades away and ceases, then grasping, becoming, birth and cyclic existence cease. Again, the central point to extract from these passages is that one's subjective experience is so much the cardinal factor in the Buddha's teachings that its importance can be metaphorically stated in terms of the 'world'.

This same central point is made elsewhere where it is stated that 'It is these five types of sensual desire that are called the world in the discipline of the noble one'.⁴⁵ The

monk is to become detached from sensual desire and practise appropriate meditation. When he eventually sees that his *āsavas* are completely destroyed, he ‘is said to have come to the end of the world, he lives at the end of the world, he has overcome attachment in the world’.⁴⁶ Again we read: ‘*Bhikkhus*, I declare that the end of the world is not to be learned, seen, or attained by going to the end of the world. Nor do I declare, *bhikkhus*, that the end of *dukkha* can be made without attaining the end of the world’.⁴⁷ Later in the same *sutta*, the individual’s ‘world’ is again defined in terms of the senses. The relevance of the senses in these contexts is that all our incoming experiential data come through our senses. It is because we cognitively process those incoming data as we do that we continue to have cravings; and it is because of such cravings that our ‘world’ has continued existence: this is how the individual continues. And it is this—this particular ‘world’ of experience—that the Buddhist disciple seeks to understand.

In my view, such metaphors serve to emphasise the extent to which the Buddha, in consistently drawing attention away from the ‘external’ world to the subjective world of experience, was, as Richard Gombrich stated, ‘not interested in what existed “out there”’. This ties in with the way in which Buddhist cosmology in general is underpinned by the metaphor of the spiritual path. According to the Pali, this is not incompatible with those contexts where meditative attainments are referred to in terms of ‘worlds’, the contexts which are considered to be the embryonic stages of the psychological cosmology to which I have referred above. The ‘completely happy world’ (*ekantasukho loko*), for example, is described in terms of being ‘realised’ or ‘seen’ or ‘experienced’ (*sacchikata*),⁴⁸ none of which need have a spacial interpretation. The Buddha is clearly using metaphors when in the same context he states that in order to experience the completely happy world the disciple ‘enters and abides in’ (*upasampajja viharati*) the lofty meditative level known as the fourth *jhāna*. No-one would suggest that *this* refers to anything other than an altered state of mind; I suggest the metaphor extends to include the ‘completely happy world’ as that state of mind.⁴⁹

My view is (and I think my reasons will become clear) that the metaphor should be taken as the ‘norm’ and that passages which apparently refer to cosmological levels in spacial terms should be interpreted metaphorically and not literally as the Theravāda tradition later did.⁵⁰ It is significant in this respect that there is no cosmological level associated with Nirvana⁵¹ and that the famous *Udāna* passage about the sphere where there is neither earth nor water nor heat nor wind (the ‘four elements’ by which ordinary life is characterised⁵²) ends by saying: ‘It is *this* that is the end of *dukkha*’.⁵³ Though when taken literally, this passage is open to spacial interpretation, it clearly also lends itself to metaphorical interpretation if *dukkha* is understood as the subjective experience of the individual. Put differently, worldly existence is characterised in terms of the four elements, and this passage is metaphorically referring to the subjective experience of Nirvana, or *dukkhanirodha* (the cessation of *dukkha*), in terms of *lokanirodha*, or the absence of what characterises worldly existence.⁵⁴ I suggest the terms *lokiya*, worldly, and *lokuttara*, beyond the world, which are used to refer in the former case to the disciple on the early stages of the path and in the latter case to the disciple who is nearing the end of the path, are in fact correspondingly metaphorical along the same lines.

Again, whether I am correct in the extent of my interpretation, the Buddha’s concern with the subjective experience of the individual is clear not just from the way in which he gives his teachings—deliberately drawing attention away from externals to internals,

so to speak—but also from his metaphorical use of the term *loka*, world, to refer to that individual subjective experience.

Metaphysical Implications of Not-self and Dependent Origination

In turning now to the metaphysical implications of the doctrines of *anattā* (not-self) and *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent origination), I would like to suggest here that these doctrines should be interpreted in line with this subjective context. From what we have seen so far, the Buddha's teachings can clearly be stated in terms of the subjective superimposition, because of ignorance, of separateness (we make manifold—*papañceti*) onto incoming experiential data. In doing so, we attribute varying degrees of permanence and independence to those manifold things. The point I want to make here is that *we do all this subjectively*. The Buddha's teachings on dependent origination, impermanence and not-permanent-self-ness can lead one to think that there are 'things' that are external to us that are dependently originated from or by other things and that all those things are therefore impermanent and therefore lack independent self-hood. The three-characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*) formula, for example, states 'all conditioned [i.e., dependently originated] things (*saṃkhārā*) are impermanent; all conditioned things (*saṃkhārā*) are [therefore] unsatisfactory; all things (*dhammā*) lack self-hood'. This can be taken in the sense of describing how 'things' are, and that the mistake we make is not to see that 'they' are like that.

But this is in fact remaining in the perspective of reifying what we see as external to us while conceding that we fail to see the dependent originatedness of what we take to be its independent/separate parts. While this might be a profoundly different way of understanding the world from our 'normal' way, it is nevertheless still 'mis-tak[ing] epistemological entities for ontological ones'.⁵⁵ In fact what the doctrines of dependent origination and not-self-hood specifically mean is not just that the things that we see are not as separate as we think they are but that what all of what we see is dependently originated in is our subjective processing faculties. The early texts clearly describe the way that incoming data are received, by way of the senses (which are called 'doors'⁵⁶), assimilated and co-ordinated, recognised and made manifold.⁵⁷ Thus all the things we see are impermanent, and therefore unsatisfactory, because they are conditioned by *us*—not because they are conditioned by one other, so to speak. This suggestion might sound familiar in the context of certain later, Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism that I mentioned above as more readily lending themselves, if controversially, to philosophical labelling,⁵⁸ but as far as I am aware it is not the general understanding of the doctrine of dependent origination in early Pali Buddhism. It is so radically different from—or, the Buddha would say, 'goes against the stream of'—how we think, that it is all too easy to miss the implications of it.

These implications are that the furthest one can go in terms of what anything with which we are familiar *is*—its ontological status, in other words—is that it depends for its existence *as that* on our subjective cognitive processes. This includes not just the things 'in' the world as we conceive of it but 'the world' itself in its totality. The only world there is, in any sense in which it remains the world as we mean that term, is the world of experience; and what we mean by 'the world' is not *other than* experience. In the light of Richard Gombrich's comments quoted in my introduction, the point needing to be drawn out here is that while subjective states do indeed have objective correlates, it is inappropriate to think of such correlates in terms of 'out there' in any reified—or 'other'—sense. While the subjective cognitive process does indeed involve objectivity, it does not at all follow that such objectivity corresponds to what is *externally* real: the

notion of the polarity of the internal ‘me’ *in* the external ‘world’ is part of the construction of manifoldness.⁵⁹

I hardly need to point out at this stage the extent to which this fits in with the Buddha’s emphasis on the need to understand ‘the world’ subjectively, and that it explains why he showed no interest in what existed ‘out there’. And it clearly illuminates the significance of the famous expression ‘In this fathom-long living body lies the world, the arising of the world, and the cessation of the world’.⁶⁰ Furthermore, it ties in with my suggestion that the *khandhas* should be understood in terms of their constituting the subjective cognitive process: because our experience of the world is as it is because of the way we process incoming experiential data, then what we need to understand is that process. By extension from this, a suggestion I would like to make here is that in describing Enlightenment as ‘seeing things as they really are’ (*yathābhūtaṃ*), the Buddha was referring to the understanding of the cognitive process which is so instrumental in fuelling the continuity of our experience: to the seeing of the human *situation* as it really is.⁶¹

None of this means, and I am not suggesting, that the world is not real or that nothing exists. I mean this in two different senses. First, it does not mean that the *objective* world—the empirical world of experience as we know it—is not real because it exists merely as some kind of mental plane, solipsistically just *my* mental plane, or more in a more generally idealistic way. In my view, the notion of solipsism requires little serious consideration. Although it may itself be logically irrefutable, I go along with the view that ‘As a serious conviction . . . [solipsism] could be found only in a madhouse; as such it would then need not so much a refutation as a cure’.⁶² From a sane point of view, it is inconceivable that I alone have experienced every tiny aspect of the entire course of human history, even insofar as I know it. With regard to the reality of the experiential world and any more general idealistic stance, it is *because* ‘the whole world of experience is precisely what it seems’⁶³ that that world requires investigating. In insisting on the primacy of experience, the Buddha seems very specifically to be confirming the reality of the experiential world: it is because the world of experience *is* real that it constitutes the problem needing to be solved, in the Buddha’s terms. In focusing on subjectivity, the Buddha is pointing the way not to discovering the non-existence of the experiential world but to understanding its nature.⁶⁴

Second, from saying that the ‘world’ (as we mean that particular term) is in fact a world of experience, it does not follow that therefore ‘in Reality’ (capital ‘R’) nothing exists: that however much one acknowledges the reality of experience, by *being* experiential (and thus in one sense ‘conventional’, to use the later Mahāyāna Buddhist Nāgārjuna’s term) there is some ‘absolute’ sense in which nothing exists. Thinking in terms of non-existence is clearly stated to be a ‘wrong view’ in an early Pali text: ‘Having the view that nothing exists . . . this is tainted fare’.⁶⁵ In my view much more important, however, the Buddha’s teachings themselves have a further implication about the nature of Reality in this respect. It is because the empirical world of experience is dependently originated, and therefore dependent, that there *must* be something else. If there were not, the conventional world, the world of experience would have to be autonomous, which the Buddha’s teachings both implicitly and explicitly state is not the case. It is indeed the common human experience *of* such Reality (whatever ‘it’ is—and I use the term ‘it’ only because constraints of language preclude any less singularising alternative—in *itself*, whatever its nature, it is clearly not, and *cannot* be, part of experience) that constitutes the empirical world.

Transcendental Idealism as a Model

It is in order to draw out this complementarity between the empirical world of shared human experience and whatever it is that that experiential world is dependent on that I am using the model of transcendental idealism. The sense in which this is crucially different from idealism, as it is usually understood, is as follows. Idealism, as usually understood, posits that all there *is* is mind, or mental construction; in that respect it can be stated that nothing is, as it were, Really real. Transcendental idealism, rather, states that while the world of experience is subjectively conditioned and what there Really is is transcendent of what can be experienced, we can *have* the experience that we do only *because* the transcendently Real is there. I have come to think this is precisely the meaning of the famous (and famously ambiguous) *Udāna* passage:

There is, *bhikkhus*, an unborn, an unbecome, an unconstructed, an unconditioned, without which, *bhikkhus*, the resultant born, become, constructed, conditioned could not be known [experienced]. But because there is, *bhikkhus*, an unborn, an unbecome, an unconstructed, an unconditioned, the resultant born, become, constructed, conditioned can be known [experienced].⁶⁶

It is striking that the meaningfulness of this statement does not lie in its positing of entities, things, the 'what'-ness of the world. Rather, it lies in its indicating the significance of the relatedness of transcendent Reality, the empirical world and experience. Furthermore, I think the negatives—unborn, unbecome and so on—should be understood only in the sense that they serve to highlight the contrast between transcendent Reality and the experiential world, which is described in Buddhism as conditioned and therefore 'born', 'become' (not independent is the point). In being transcendent of the entire framework of our conceptual categories, Reality itself can be indicated only apophatically. Even the notion of 'existence' is problematic in this respect in that the properties so predicated are meaningful only within our conceptual framework. We can perhaps see, therefore, why all questions regarding existence remain unanswered by the Buddha: such terms, predicating as they do external and independent existence in a way that is congruent only with subjective and ultimately inappropriate criteria, are applicable neither to the world of experience nor to ultimate Reality.⁶⁷

Within the confines of the Buddha's teachings, the problem he set himself to solve does not, as he himself makes clear, require any interest in anything other than how the interactive subjective-objective processes of the experiential world operate. In complete contrast to the prevailing approach of the other religious seekers of the day, the Buddha regarded metaphysical speculation to be both tangential to the solving of the problem and inconceivable from the standpoint of ignorance, as I have explained. It was because of this that philosophical labelling in this context needs to be undertaken with caution and understood one might say 'loosely'. And likewise for this reason I readily acknowledge that in some respects I might be skating on thin ice in coming to the conclusion that I have. However, in other respects it is not an illegitimate enterprise to attempt to unravel the implications of the Buddha's teachings for oneself: he himself suggested that we should 'be lamps for ourselves and use the *dhamma* as a lamp'.⁶⁸ Furthermore, as I have pointed out elsewhere,⁶⁹ the principal criterion in the very early stages of the Buddhist tradition for acceptance of material as canonical was compatibility. According to this criterion, I believe my conclusion is at least possible, since it is compatible with what the Buddha taught.

Summary

In summary, then, I am suggesting that all the Buddha's teachings are person-centred in the specific sense of focusing on human experience, and that that experience is not separate from the empirical world. It is because of this non-separatedness that the wider implications of the teachings are best understood in the light of this person-centredness. With regard to questions about the external world, the non-separatedness of the world and experience means not only that what we can know about the world can not be separated from experience but that in understanding experience we *do* understand the world:

Bhikkhus, I declare that the end of the world is not to be learned, seen, or attained by going to the end of the world [i.e., it is not an external, spacial journey]. Nor do I declare, bhikkhus, that the end of *dukkha* [i.e., understanding experience] can be made *without* (my italics) attaining the end of the world [*of experience*].⁷⁰

It is for this very reason that the Buddha diverts attention from the 'external' world to the subjective world of experience, using *loka* metaphorically for the life of the individual in the way he does. His subjective—or 'know thyself'—teaching implicitly involves knowledge of the objective world also: the two are inseparable and correlated. It is precisely this that underlies the metaphor in the sense of the later, more elaborate psychological cosmology: as the objective correlate of subjective states, the entire cosmos is in an *ontological* sense associated with experience.⁷¹

This non-separatedness also means that specific questions about the world in terms which presuppose its independence (such as whether 'it' exists) cannot be answered because they do not correspond to how things really are. This is the case in exactly the same way as it is in relation to questions about the 'self'. An important passage I quoted earlier, in the context of thinking of the separateness of 'self', can be paraphrased in the context of the world: understanding the non-separatedness (that is, dependent originat- edness) of the world means one *will no longer ask* questions about the existence of the world, past, future or present, such as 'is it?' or 'is it not?', 'what is it?', 'how is it?', 'this "thing" that it is, where has it come from, where will it go?'.⁷² As the Buddha kept indicating, answers (or, perhaps, the disappearing of the questions) lie in understanding the only thing to which we have access—the truth about *dukkha*, subjective experience.

Notes

- 1 This is an amended and extended version of a paper given at the Buddhist Forum at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies in December 1995; some of it has been published as 'The Dependent Nature of the Phenomenal World', in K. L. Dhammajoti (*et al.*) (eds), *Recent Researches in Buddhist Studies: Essays in Honour of Professor Y. Karunadasa*, Hong Kong, Chi Ying Foundation 1997.
- 2 Richard F. Gombrich, Louis H. Jordan Lectures Seminar Paper 2, 'Metaphor, allegory, satire', since published as Chapter III in *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*, London, Athlone Press 1996. All citations from this book in the opening paragraphs herein are from pp. 80–9. The Pali *Nikāya* texts form the doctrinal section of the textual canon of Theravāda Buddhism.
- 3 Professor Gombrich first drew attention to this metaphorical correspondence, suggesting that a certain elevated cosmological level constituted 'an elaborate spacial metaphor for spiritual progress', in his 'Ancient Indian Cosmology', in C. Blacker and M. Loewe (eds), *Ancient Cosmologies*, London, George Allen & Unwin 1975, p. 134. Elaborating on this, I myself subsequently suggested that the whole notion of Buddhist cosmology is underpinned by the metaphor of the spiritual path of the individual: that *all* cosmological references are in fact metaphors for different stages on the spiritual path. At each of these stages, moreover, the

- individual exists in a correspondingly different way, ranging through degrees of density and subtlety to formlessly. See my *Identity and Experience*, London, Luzac Oriental 1996, Ch. 7.
- 4 In addition to *How Buddhism Began*, see also Richard F. Gombrich, 'The Buddha's Book of Genesis', *Indo-Iranian Journal* 35 (1992), pp. 159–78. For comments on this, see Rupert Gethin, 'Cosmology and Meditation: From the Aggañña-Sutta to the Mahāyāna', *History of Religions*, 36 (1997), pp. 183–217, Appendix B.
 - 5 See, for example, Gombrich, 'Ancient Indian Cosmology'; Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1982; and Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1988, Ch. 4.
 - 6 More comprehensive accounts of the religious context can be found in Collins, *Selfless Persons*; Richard F. Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1988; and my *Identity and Experience*.
 - 7 *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.8ff. Cf. also *ibid.* 3.14 and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.6, 2.5, 4.4.13.
 - 8 Cf. for example, SN II 223, V 418; MN I 395; DN I *sutta* 1, III 134ff. Cf. also MN I 157, 426ff, 483ff; SN IV 374ff. The way the Buddha puts it is that it would not be conducive to 'good . . . to insight, Enlightenment, Nirvana'. All references to Pali texts are to Pali Text Society editions. All translations from the Pali are my own unless otherwise stated.
 - 9 This is repeated throughout the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN *sutta* 1), and at MN I 487.
 - 10 Different views are given in, for example, Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1989; Thomas Kochumuttom, *A Buddhist Doctrine of Experience*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass 1982; Ian Harris, *The Continuity of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Leiden, Brill 1991.
 - 11 For example, Y. Karunadasa, *The Buddhist Analysis of Matter*, Colombo, Columbo Department of Cultural Affairs 1967; J. R. Carter, *Dhamma: A Study of a Religious Concept*, Tokyo, Hokuseido Press 1978; Bhikkhu Nāṇananda, *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought*, Sri Lanka, Buddhist Publication Society (repr.) 1986.
 - 12 See, for example, R. E. A. Johansson, *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism*, Oxford, Curzon Press 1979, p. 83. I have argued against some of these translations in my *Identity and Experience*, pp. xxv–vi.
 - 13 For example, Y. Karunadasa, 'The Buddhist Doctrine of Non-Self and the Problem of the Over-Self', *The Middle Way* 69 (1994), pp. 107–18.
 - 14 As well as those referred to in note 5 above, see also Peter Masefield, 'Mind/Cosmos Maps in the Pāli Nikāyas', in N. Katz (ed.), *Buddhist and Western Psychology*, Boulder, Prajñā Press 1983, pp. 69–93; Akira Sakadata, *Buddhist Cosmology: Philosophy and Origins*, Tokyo, Kosei Publishing 1997.
 - 15 I think Collins was the first to write in some detail on the imagery in the Pali material in his *Selfless Persons*. Gombrich, in the works already cited, has also written widely on the Buddha's use of metaphor and allegory. And see also my *Identity and Experience*, and Rupert Gethin, 'Cosmology and Meditation: From the Aggañña-Sutta to the Mahāyāna'.
 - 16 As a small example, see David J. Kalupahana, *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press 1975: Kalupahana arrives at a 'phenomenology' not unlike idealism; Frank J. Hoffman, *Rationality and Mind in Early Buddhism*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass 1987; Peter Harvey, 'The Mind-Body Relationship in Pāli Buddhism—a Philosophical Investigation', *Asian Philosophy* 3 (1993), pp. 29–41; and Harvey, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*, London, Curzon Press 1995; Ramakrishna Pugligandla, 'What is the Status of the Doctrine of Dependent Origination?' in Frank J. Hoffman and Deegale Mahinda (eds), *Pāli Buddhism*, Richmond, Curzon Press 1996, pp. 175–83; and my own *Identity and Experience*.
 - 17 I have written elsewhere ('Buddhism: the Doctrinal Case for Feminism', *Feminist Theology* 12 [1996], pp. 91–104) of the inappropriateness of discriminating between male and female in the context of the Buddha's teachings. But it is nevertheless difficult to overcome the awkwardness of writing inclusively, and for this reason alone I shall where necessary use the male pronoun to indicate man *qua* human being.
 - 18 Cf. in particular the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN, Vol 1) and the *Pāsādika Suttanta* (DN, Vol III) for the more extensive range of questions. It is the essential nature of the self that is being referred to here—sometimes expressed in English as soul.
 - 19 The *locus classicus* for this is the *Cūla-Mālunkyasutta*, MN I 428ff.
 - 20 Cf. DN III 136; MN I 431; SN II 223, V 418.

- 21 *Samkhittena pañc' upādānakkhandhā dukkhā*: e.g. SN V 421; MN I 48; AN I 177. Cf. also SN III 158: *Katamañ ca bhikkhave dukkham? Pañc' upādānakkhandhā ti 'ssa vacanīyañ; Dhammapada 202: n'atthi khandhādisā dukkhā*; and Vin I 9f, referred to below, where the first Noble Truth of *dukkha* is summarised as the *khandhas*. On the significance of *upādāna* in association with *khandhā*, cf. my *Identity and Experience*, p. 9; and R. M. L. Gethin 'The Five *Khandhas*: their treatment in the *Nikāyas* and early Buddhism', *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 14 (1986), p. 41. A more detailed discussion of the significance of the *khandhas* being associated with *dukkha* can be found in my 'The Centrality of Experience in the Teachings of Early Buddhism', a paper given at the British Association of the Study of Religions Conference at Manchester College, Oxford, in September 1997, publication forthcoming in a volume of conference papers.
- 22 MN I 22f, AN IV 178f; Vin III 4.
- 23 Vin III 4 gives the four *āsavas*.
- 24 SN V 420f, Vin I 9f.
- 25 The following detail is given only in the *Vinaya* version.
- 26 Coming to know *dukkha* as it really is leads to knowing the *āsavas*, including ignorance, as they really are: cf. AN II 210, IV 178; Vin I 9f.
- 27 Though there are in fact references to circumstances for which karma is not the specific, or only, conditioning factor (see, for example, SN IV 210f; AN II 87), this does not affect the point I am making here, which is that all given states of affairs are conditioned.
- 28 AN I 286; *Dhammapada* 5–7, 277–9; cf. also MN I 336; DN II 157.
- 29 SN II 25 and throughout the *Nidāna Saṃyutta*.
- 30 There are numerous references to this throughout the *Khandhā Vagga* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*.
- 31 'Anattā: A Different Approach', *The Middle Way* 70 (1995), pp. 47–60.
- 32 SN II 27: . . . *ahañ nu kho smi, na nu kho smi; kiñ nu kho smi; kathañ nu kho smi; ahañ nu kho satto kuto āgato so kuhiñgāmi bhavissatī ti*.
- 33 This suggestion is elaborated in my book *Identity and Experience*.
- 34 MN I 111: *Yañ sañjānāti tañ vitakketi, yañ vitakketi tañ papañceti*.
- 35 This suggestion, put differently, is a key point in my paper 'Anattā: A Different Approach'. I would add here that, as with a computer, I am not suggesting that the workings of the cognitive process are *everything* the human being does. To use a computer, we do not need to know *everything* about how it works: we need only to know what is relevant to us in order to use it as we wish. So it is possible there is more to the human complex of processes than the *khandhas*. The point is that it is they that are relevant to the problem the Buddha set out to solve.
- 36 I shall be returning to *paṭicasamuppāda* and *anattā* in more detail below.
- 37 It is a metaphor that pre-dates the Buddha's teaching. Cf. my *Identity and Experience*, pp. xxvi–vii; J. Gonda, *Loka: World and Heaven in the Veda*, Amsterdam, N.V. Noord Hollandsche Uitgers Maatschappij 1966, p. 110 and *passim*; and S. Collins, *Selfless Persons*, pp. 45–9.
- 38 Cf., for example, AN II 126–130; MN II 37, 194f.
- 39 MN II 37.
- 40 Cf. the entry for *loka* in Nyanatiloka's *Buddhist Dictionary* (Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society 1980, pp. 108–9), which reflects the commonly accepted view: 'Though the term *loka* is not applied in the Suttas to those . . . worlds . . . there is no doubt that the teaching about the . . . worlds belongs to the earliest, i.e., Sutta period of the Buddhist scriptures . . .'
- 41 Some aspects of this are discussed in P. Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, Ch. 5.
- 42 SN III 13 9: *Loke lokadhammo*.
- 43 *Evam etassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhassa nirodho hoti*, found frequently throughout the *Nidāna Saṃyutta*.
- 44 SN II 71 ff. *Dukkha/lokassa bhikkhave samudayañca attañgamañca desissāmi Cakkhuñ ca paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuvinnāṇaṃ tiññañ sañgati phasso phassapaccayā vedanā vedanāpaccayā tañhā. Ayañ kho bhikkhave dukkhassa/lokassa samudayo. Tañhāya asesavirāganirodhā upādānanirodho*
- 45 AN IV 430: *Pañc'ime . . . kāmaḡuṇā ariyassa vinaye loko ti vuccati*.
- 46 AN IV 431f. *Bhikkhu . . . paññaya c'assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti. Ayañ vuccati . . . bhikkhu lokassa antañ āgamma locassa ante viharati tiñño loko visattikan ti*.
- 47 SN IV 93: *Nāham bhikkhave gamanena lokassa antañ nātayañ datṭhayañ pattayañ ti vadāmi. Na ca panāham bhikkhave apatvā lokassa antañ dukkhassa antakiriyañ vadāmi ti*.
- 48 MN II 37.

- 49 Though for brevity and convenience I translate *sukha* as 'happy', in fact I think that as the converse of *dukkha*, it is properly understood metaphorically—as the absence of the 'disease' (*dukkha*) of ignorance.
- 50 In this I disagree with Peter Masefield ('Mind/Cosmos Maps'), who sees 'no reason why we should not take such [spacial] expressions quite literally' (p. 81; cf. p. 83).
- 51 Gombrich's reference (*How Buddhism Began*, p. 86) to the 'unboundedness' of the Buddhist universe reflects this.
- 52 Cf. my *Identity and Experience*, Ch. 1. Briefly, the elements correspond to the way our worldly experience is characterised by solidity, fluidity, heat (temperature and decay) and motion,
- 53 *Udāna* 80: *Es' ev' anto dukkhassa 'ti*.
- 54 Masefield ('Mind/Cosmos Maps', p. 81) states that Nirvana is 'spoken of as a place as often as it is a state of mind'. But the examples he gives (island/*dīpa*, cave/*lena*, shelter/*tāṇaṃ*, refuge/*saraṇaṃ*, etc.) are to my mind all clearly metaphors. It would not be considered odd if in daily life one were to refer to having experienced an 'island' or 'oasis' of calm in a busy day. But we would not (certainly not necessarily) expect such reference to island or oasis to be taken literally. Rather, we would mean having found some 'mental space' in a day when the mind was cluttered with many other things.
- 55 Bryan Magee, *On Blindness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1995, p. 19; see also Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1983 (2nd edition 1997), p. 83.
- 56 Cf. my *Identity and Experience*, Ch. 1.
- 57 MN I 111.
- 58 Cf., for example, Paul Griffiths, 'Pure Consciousness and Indian Buddhism', in Robert K. C. Forman (ed.), *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1990: 'As the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* puts it: "Bodhisattvas who are free from constructive activity see this entire [cosmos], just as it has been described, as nothing but construction" . . . all the ways we have of describing things, of dividing the world into subjects and predicates, are the product of the constructive activity of the mind'. (pp. 87–8). (Griffiths' expression 'dividing the world into' illustrates how easy it is to imply the reification, however unwittingly, of 'the world'.)
- 59 In effect, what this is stating is that transcendental realism, the theory that what we see is in fact representative of what is really external to us, is wrong.
- 60 AN II 48ff.
- 61 Y. Karunadasa puts a similar view, though he arrives at it somewhat differently, in his paper 'The Buddhist Doctrine of Non-Self and the Problem of the Over-Self': 'It is clear, therefore, that, according to Buddhism, the object of higher knowledge is not a higher reality, but the phenomenal world'. As will become clear below, I disagree with the conclusions of Karunadasa's paper, which can be summed up in his own words as follows: 'This excludes the possibility of any metaphysical reality which serves as the ultimate ground of existence, no matter under what name it is introduced . . .' (p. 116). Cf. also Karen Lang, 'Meditation as a Tool for Deconstructing the Phenomenal World', in T. Skorupski (ed.), *The Buddhist Forum*, Vol. III, London, SOAS 1994), p. 150.
- 62 Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, p. 122, quoting Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, i. 104.
- 63 *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- 64 Thomas Kochumuttom's much neglected book, *A Buddhist Doctrine of Experience*, interprets Vasubandhu and the so-called 'mind-only' school in these terms, refuting the centrality of an idealistic ontological interpretation. Nāgārjuna also states that if one thinks nothing exists one has not understood the teaching (see *Madhyamaka Kārikās* chap. XXIV).
- 65 Sutta Nipāta 243: *natthikadīṭṭhi . . . esāmagandho*. This is K. R. Norman's translation.
- 66 *Udāna* 80f: *Atthi bhikkhave ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṃkhatam, no ce taṃ bhikkhave abhaviṣṣa ajataṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṃkhatam, na yidha jātaṃ bhūtaṃ katassa saṃkhatassa nissaraṇaṃ paññāyetha. Yasmā ca kho bhikkhave atthi ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṃkhatam, tasmā jātaṃ bhūtaṃ katassa saṃkhatassa nissaraṇaṃ paññāyati 'ti*. My phrasing does not overlook the genitives—which I take in the sense of 'the issuing of what is born, become . . .': it merely makes more sense of the passage in English. In order to support his spacial understanding of Nirvana, Masefield ('Mind/Cosmos Maps', p. 83) translates these genitives as ablatives: that one 'escapes from' the born 'to' (spacially) the unborn.
- 67 That the notions of both 'is' and 'is not' are 'just views' is very clearly put in the *Aggi-Vacchagottasutta* (MN I 485f). Though I do not have space here to develop an argument in

this respect, it is partly for this reason that I do not think one should understand the Buddha's teachings to be implying the existence of an Absolute in the sense of the *Upaniṣadic* Brahman. Nothing I am suggesting in this paper should be interpreted in such a way,

68 DN II 100.

69 'Anattā: A Different Approach', p. 55.

70 SN IV 93: *Nāham bhikkhave gamanena lokassa antaṃ nātayyaṃ daṭṭhavvam pattayyaṃ ti vadāmi. Na ca pañāham bhikkhave apatvā lokassa antaṃ dukkhassa antakiriyaṃ vadāmi ti.*

71 The fact that we are happy to acknowledge that there are vast areas of worldly complexity about which we are at present ignorant *even as to their nature* suggests that we should be correspondingly willing to accept the likelihood of there being subjectively correlated complexities in our cognitive faculties about which we are also at present ignorant in like manner. Furthermore, from twentieth century discoveries in the world of physics, some of which seem literally incredible, we know that there are activities and behaviours of parts of the objective world that are both unobservable *and unimaginable*. Why, then, is there a prevailing persistence in the Western world in limiting the world of subjectivity to a pedestrian intellectualisation of experience?

72 The passage I am paraphrasing is at SN II 27.

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