



Early Buddhism

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The present article explores the term “early Buddhism,” in an attempt to clarify its meaning and explore the significance of what it designates for both scholars and practitioners.

Common Ground

The expression “early Buddhism” refers to the earliest period in the development Buddhist thought and practice, spanning from its inception to about the time of the reign of Aśoka in the third century BCE.¹ The time of inception—in other words, the time when the Buddha himself would have lived—is difficult to determine with certainty.² Nevertheless, the period of early Buddhism can be taken to comprise, very roughly speaking, about two centuries.

These two centuries of development in thought and practice are the common ground from which the different Buddhist traditions developed and which they all took as their central inspiration. One of these is the tradition we nowadays refer to as Theravāda, which needs to be differentiated from early Buddhism. The term Theravāda can be used to describe the South and Southeast Asian tradition(s) since the time of the transmission of Buddhism to Sri Lanka during the reign of King Aśoka (although at that time the term was not yet in use in this way), and from then onwards it can be applied to various manifestations of this tradition

(or better, of these traditions), not only in South and South-east Asia but also more recently in the West.

In contrast, “early Buddhism” is no longer a living tradition, simply because it refers to an early stage in the development of Buddhism that by now is long over.³ It would not be meaningful for anyone nowadays to call themselves “early Buddhists,” just as it would not be meaningful for anyone nowadays to call themselves “ancient Greek philosophers.” Certainly, we can take inspiration from early Buddhist thought or else from the teachings of ancient Greek philosophers, but this will invariably be influenced by the context set by our present worldview and cultural-social conditioning, which needs to be clearly acknowledged.

In other words, “early Buddhism” is a precious fossil from bygone times; it can provide much inspiration, but it cannot be revived.

The Word of the Buddha

Besides not being identifiable with—let alone being the sole property of—any extant Buddhist tradition, “early Buddhism” is also not identical with the “word of the Buddha,” in the sense of the words spoken verbatim by the founder at some time in the fifth century BCE in India. The situation is similar to the so-called “Socratic problem,” in that we do not have direct access to the teachings of Socrates, who also lived in the fifth century BCE. All we know about his teachings stems from reports by others, namely Aristophanes, Plato, and Xenophon. Similarly, we do not have direct access to the teachings of the historical Buddha, as all we know about his teachings stems from texts that are the final result of centuries of oral transmission, with all its strengths and with all its challenges and vicissitudes.⁴

It follows from the above that the question of authoritativeness cannot be tied exclusively to derivation from

the historical Buddha's mouth.⁵ In fact, the early Buddhist textual collections themselves include teachings given by disciples, at the explicit request of the Buddha or without such a request, endorsed by his explicit approval or without such approval. Clearly, the letter of the teachings was from the outset not entirely confined to what the Buddha was held to have said himself.

The situation that emerges in this way is quite in keeping with the teachings on conditionality and emptiness. Full appreciation of the "Buddha's teachings" in the light of these two central doctrines of early Buddhism, in the sense of a full appreciation of the dynamics of early Buddhist oral transmission, undermines any claim to having direct access to the true words of the Buddha in their definite form. Instead, we only have access to the results of what has been passed down by generation after generation of Buddhist reciters in the belief that they were passing on the word of the Buddha.

Even though the definite words of the historical Buddha are beyond reach now, the records of what the first generations of his disciples believed he had taught are within reach. It is precisely these records that made him a lasting inspiration for subsequent generations of Buddhists. In other words, although the Buddha living in ancient India is beyond reach, the Buddha living in the memory of the first generations of his disciples is within reach.

Through comparative research on early Buddhist texts, we can better understand and appreciate what the Buddha was believed to have taught some two centuries after his actual teaching activity, which forms the common ground of the different Buddhist traditions.

These textual memories are as close as we will ever be able to get to "the words of the Buddha." This is definitely closer than later texts, of course, but at the same time not close enough to be able to make definite claims that

such and such a statement was spoken in exactly this way by the historical Buddha.

Source Material for Early Buddhism

For this early period in the history of Buddhism, the primary source material is almost entirely textual.⁶ This is not without its drawbacks, as interpretations based on textual material only, without contact with a living tradition or at least its archeological and iconographic remains, can at times be misleading. Moreover, there is a pressing need to avoid a tendency that emerged in the nineteenth century in the study of Buddhism in the West, namely the construction from texts of a supposedly pure form of Buddhism, set in opposition to allegedly inauthentic or even degenerate manifestations of Buddhism on the ground in Asia.⁷

Another and related problem is a preoccupation in the nineteenth century in Europe with a search for origins.⁸ However, researching what is early need not be equated to obsession with origins. For one, such an obsession can also manifest in relation to later times. An example is the claim that the very construct of “Buddhism” originated in nineteenth-century scholarly writings in the West. This claim is an instance of the search for origins, here mistakenly attributed to the nineteenth century, based on ignoring all Asian antecedents.⁹ This example shows that just avoiding the early period of Buddhism does not take care of the problem of obsession with origins, for this same tendency can also manifest in relation to later times. In the case of early Buddhism, a quest to pinpoint origins with precision is in fact rendered a vain enterprise due to the very nature of the source material.

In addition to the above problems, there is also the understandable wish among some contemporary scholars to distance themselves from nineteenth-century beliefs that the Pāli canon represents the sole authentic form of Bud-

dhism, having preserved the word of the Buddha with precision.¹⁰ This seems to have led to a tendency in Buddhist studies to avoid the period of early Buddhism.¹¹

Yet, it seems to me that sidestepping the early period is not a particularly promising approach to solving this problem. Instead, misconceptions related to early Buddhism can best be clarified based on research guided by the historical-critical method. When carried out with the proper methodology and attitude, studying early Buddhism need not result in demeaning later forms of Buddhism.¹²

Take the case of the evolution of species. We know relatively little about the early period of life on this planet, simply because due to the intervening prolonged time span and the simplicity of life forms at that time there is little fossil evidence. Yet, some things we know for sure, such as, for example, that there were no dinosaurs at that time. We know that because life forms underwent considerable development before dinosaurs came into existence. Having that knowledge does not require that we try to identify a particular individual animal as ‘the first dinosaur’ in order to chart the development that led to their appearance.

The recognition that dinosaurs had not yet developed during the early period in the history of life on this planet is also not a value judgement; it does not mean that dinosaurs are somehow better or worse than other species. It is simply a historical fact that dinosaurs were not in existence at that time.

In the same way, although the evidence for reconstructing early Buddhism is limited, and we are moreover unable to pinpoint with precision an ‘original’ or ‘Urtext,’ we know for certain what came into being later, due to considerable development taking place over time. This holds for Abhidharma just as much as for Mahāyāna thought and practice. The historical perspective that emerges in this way does not entail a value judgement in itself; it does not imply a devaluation. Instead, it provides a

necessary foundation in order to be able to understand later Buddhist traditions properly.

The Historical Perspective

The historical perspective that emerges through the study of early Buddhism can be crucial for both scholars and practitioners alike.

Regarding the former, take for example a study of the “golden age” of Indian Buddhist philosophy. Would this topic not require a survey of early Buddhist philosophy, on a par with attention dedicated to the philosophical traditions of the Abhidharma, Madhyamaka, and Yogācāra?¹³ There are quite substantial differences between early Buddhist philosophy and Abhidharma thought, so that the former is not implicitly covered by a study of the latter.

Moreover, comparative study of the texts of early Buddhism can provide a range of significant perspectives and offer helpful contributions to our understanding of the beginnings of Abhidharma just as much as the genesis of the bodhisattva ideal.¹⁴ Even Pure Land and tantric approaches can be shown to have distant antecedents among Pāli discourses.¹⁵

It seems to me that the time has come to step out of the pattern of reacting to problems caused by 19th-century scholarship and arrive fully in the 21st century by putting early Buddhism in its proper place on an equal footing with other periods and Buddhist traditions, neither more nor less. After more than a hundred years have passed since the translations and interpretations of 19th-century scholars such as T. W. Rhys Davids were published, perhaps now there is no longer a pressing need to distance ourselves from their work. Their presentations could simply be viewed as a product of their time,¹⁶ with the hope that future generations will do the same with our own writings.

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The advantage of seeing ideas and texts as products of their time extends from the world of scholars to the world of practitioners, where such a perspective is particularly beneficial when applied to the tradition, or traditions, to which one feels a sense of belonging.

Buddhism has never been and will never be a static and solid entity existing in the abstract. Instead, it is a continuous process of responding to changing circumstances and various challenges from a Dharmic perspective. Early Buddhism does so from within the cultural and social context of its ancient Indian setting. Even though this particular response is particularly close to the time of the historical Buddha, it is at the same time particularly distant from our own times. This makes it challenging to interpret it correctly and to relate it meaningfully to this postmodern world. It would be absurd to expect that 2,500 years ago a solution to all our contemporary problems was discovered once and for all, which we now should just adopt. At the same time, however, ancient wisdom should not be discarded even if its relevance may not immediately be clear at first sight.

Instead, a process of dialogue and negotiation is needed between our own specific situatedness and that of the various Buddhist traditions, including early Buddhism, each of which has something important to offer. Taking full advantage of these potential offerings does not require forcing them all under a single perennialist umbrella, ignoring the richness of their diversity. Nor, of course, does it help to advocate the tradition one happens to be situated in as the only one that got it right. A middle path that stays aloof from these two extremes can be found in the historical perspective, informed by the results of scholarly research in Buddhist studies.

This historical perspective enables situating different (and at times dissonant) Buddhist teaching traditions along the trajectory of time, enabling an understanding of

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the particular set of conditions that led to each of these positions, without feeling compelled to accept or reject on the spot. The overall aim is then not the construction of a strong sense of identity but rather the growth of understanding.

This is of course not to pretend that the historical perspective will not at times be challenging. It certainly can be, as it can put into question beliefs and assumptions held for a long time. But this type of challenge is a Dharmic one, as it is an invitation to see everything, including our own most cherished opinions and beliefs, as conditionally arisen, impermanent, not capable of providing ultimate satisfaction, and quite definitely empty.

The Dharma is a raft:
it is not to be clung to
but to be used for
crossing over to the other shore.

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¹ Griffiths 1983: 56: “By ‘early Buddhism’ we mean, broadly speaking, pre-Aśokan Indian Buddhism.”

² See Bechert 1995.

³ An example, mentioned in apparent approval by Skilling 2021: 60 (with note 120) in relation to a needed problematization of the term, is when Li 2012: 34 uses and then problematizes the term “early Buddhism” as a referent to “Indian Buddhism that existed before the rise of [the] Mahāyāna Buddhist movement as well as that form of Buddhism that continued alongside the Mahāyāna after the latter has arisen.” The second part of this definition is indeed problematic. The qualification “early” should be used only for what is indeed early and not for the middle period of Indian Buddhism. Later traditions (including contemporary Buddhism) may well be inspired by early Buddhist thought, but that does not make them “early” themselves. The problem here is not just an accurate usage of the qualification “early.” In addition, it needs to be acknowledged that Buddhists of the middle period will not be able to sidestep the viewpoint of their particular exegetical tradition and for this reason cannot become early Buddhists, however much they may appreciate early Buddhist thought. For this reason, it is important to employ the designation “early Buddhism” with a clear understanding of what it can and what it cannot designate.

⁴ See in more detail Anālayo 2022.

⁵ This in a way foreshadows issues related to the notion of *buddhavacana* in later traditions, for a recent study of which see Nance 2022.

⁶ The relevant textual sources are mainly the four *Āgamas/Nikāyas*, together with smaller collections (mainly of poetry) whose Pāli version is found in the fifth *Nikāya*, namely *Dhammapada*, *Udāna*, *Itivuttaka*, and *Suttanipāta*. On the *Āgamas/Nikāyas* see Anālayo 2015 and on the historical value of this type of texts Anālayo 2012.

⁷ According to Almond 1988: 33 and 40, this took the form of creating “an ideal Buddhism, a Buddhism constructed from textual sources increasingly located in and therefore regulated by the West. As a consequence ... Buddhism developed as a ‘something’ primarily said in the West, delimited and designated by virtue of its ideological containment within the intellectual, political, and religious institutions of the West. Buddhism as it manifested itself in the East could only there be *seen* through the medium of what was definitively said about it elsewhere ... the image of decay, decadence, and degeneration emerged as a result of the possibility of contrasting an ideal textual Buddhism of the past with its contemporary Eastern instances. Simultaneously, this provided an ideological justification for the missionary enterprises of a progressive,

thriving Christianity against a Buddhism now debilitated. The Victorian creation of an ideal textual Buddhism was a key component in the rejection of Buddhism in the East.”

⁸ Almond 1988: 95 reports that “there was the obsession throughout the middle and latter part of the nineteenth century with the quest for origins – biologically, geologically, and historically. Underlying the historical quest for origins was the assumption that the original was the essential ... A discourse of ‘pure’ versus ‘corrupt’ Buddhism was developed on the foundation of the historical priority of Pali Buddhism and the posteriority of Mahayana Buddhism.”

⁹ See in more detail Anālayo 2021a: 108–113.

¹⁰ Salomon 2018: 56 explains: “Early scholars of Buddhism in the West, especially in the English-speaking world, had assumed that the Pali canon represented *the* true original scriptures of Buddhism ... This view prevailed mainly because the Pali canon of the Theravāda tradition of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia happened to be the only one that survived complete and intact in an Indian language, and because it came to the attention of Anglophone scholars at a relatively early date as a result of the colonization of Sri Lanka by England. This led to the illusion that the Pali canon was the only true Buddhist canon, and the misconception was reinforced by the self-presentation of the bearers of that tradition, who were the early European scholars’ main points of contact with the Buddhist world. But it is now clear that the seeming primacy and authority of the Pali Tipiṭaka is only an accident of history.”

¹¹ This fairly prominent tendency can perhaps be exemplified with the advice given by Collins 2017: 26: “So, where should we start? *Not*, I strongly suggest, from the first period: we know, and will always know, far too little to produce more than evaluative and prejudicial fantasies.” In a criticism of Gombrich 2009, Collins 2017: 21 then speaks of the “*reductio ad absurdum* of the entire ‘early Buddhism’ mania. Let us, as historians, remain more sober, less pathological.” Without thereby intending to endorse the positions taken in Gombrich 2009, I have difficulties trying to reconcile the call for scholarly sobriety with the immediately following strongly polemic tone adopted by Collins 2017 when disqualifying the writings of another scholar—his former academic teacher, in fact—as “pathological.”

¹² Pace Collins 2017: 19: “Any picture of ‘early’ Buddhism, which can only be extracted from texts composed and redacted centuries after that time, will tend inevitably to see actually-existing Buddhism as some kind of degeneration from an ideal.”

¹³ An adoption of the approach of not granting early Buddhism a proper treatment in its own right in a monograph study of “the golden age of Indian Buddhist philosophy” appears to be motivated by the in itself

understandable wish of Westerhoff 2018: 11f to distance himself from the quest for the “original teachings” or “original thinking” of the Buddha, exemplified by Gombrich 2009.

¹⁴ See Anālayo 2010, 2014, and 2017.

¹⁵ See Anālayo 2018 and 2021b.

¹⁶ In fact, according to Almond 1988: 66: “In contrast to most, Rhys Davids found that the legends and myths had an intrinsic value ... But only rarely do we find echoes of his opinion among his contemporaries.” Perhaps this can help to put to rest any urge to castigate him for his way of presenting/promoting Pāli Buddhism.

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