

Part I

Conceptual Foundations

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The Philosophical Context of Gotama's Thought

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Some Fundamental Problems

Although it is de rigueur to begin any account of Buddhism with the “received” biography of its founder, Siddhattha Gotama, or, as he is more commonly known, the Buddha or the Awakened One, there are at least a half dozen fundamental problems with this practice. First, like Jesus and Socrates, the Buddha never wrote anything – about either himself or his teachings. Second, his supposed teachings were compiled anywhere from a hundred to a few hundred years after his death. Third, the canonical teachings that ultimately informed the “received” view of his life contain numerous conflicting and, in fact, contradictory accounts of his life. Fourth, there is no scholarly doubt that the supposed teachings of the Buddha underwent various changes, editions, and developments as they passed from an oral tradition to a written record. Fifth, there are ongoing scholarly debates over exactly what – if anything at all – can be said with any degree of certainty with respect to what the man who became the Buddha actually thought or taught given the previous issue. And, sixth, the “received” view of his life fails to consider the historical and intellectual contexts in and from which his supposed teachings emerged.

If the foregoing problems were not enough to make one stop and think about what we really know about the Buddha and his teachings, there is the additional question about whether what the Buddha thought and taught is philosophy, religion, both, or neither.

Nevertheless, despite these problems, recent scholarship has begun to shed some light on the social, cultural, historical, and intellectual contexts in and from which the Buddha and Buddhism arose. In order to take advantage of this work and sidestep the thorny issues associated with the supposed biography of the Buddha and the debate over whether Buddhism is a philosophy, a religion, both, or neither, this essay will

instead provide an account of his intellectual biography by analyzing the philosophical context in and from which his thought and teachings emerged.

Indian “Views” of Reality

As I have argued elsewhere (Laumakis 2008), perhaps one of the easiest ways of understanding the basic elements of classical Indian thought – and Siddhattha Gotama’s reaction to it – is to think of them as a collection of intellectual insights in a series of transitions in what we might call the “Indian Way” of seeing and understanding reality (Koller 2006). Conceived of in this way, it is helpful to think of the ancient Indians as offering us at least three distinct conceptual frameworks or “views” of reality.

The first “view,” what we might call the understanding of the *Dasyus*, or the pre-Aryan or “pre-Vedic view” of things, seems to have countenanced belief in many gods, nature worship, fertility rituals, concerns about purification, and some basic ideas about both an afterlife and the possibilities of reincarnation. According to some scholars, the last two points, in particular, appear to be anchored in simple observations about the cycle of birth–life–death in nature, the phases of the moon, the seasons of the year, and obvious family resemblances. Recent archeological evidence also supports the claim that the *Dasyus* appear to have been vegetarians who engaged in ascetic practices and yogic meditation.

The second Indian “view,” the understanding of the Aryans and the Vedas, builds upon this early view of things and seems to have formalized it with ritual sacrifices and celebrations, the production of sacred texts (supposedly not composed by humans) – concerned with the “wisdom” of poet-seers and hearers to whom it was revealed, and liturgical formulae and chants about what had been seen and heard. This second view also contains the “philosophical” (or merely human) reflections and speculations of the Upanishads.

The third and final “view,” what we might call the post-Vedic understanding of reality, is actually a more sustained, careful, and detailed working out of the individual elements of the pre-Vedic and Vedic views of things. This rather complex understanding of reality includes a clarification and specification of the roles of the gods (or a denial of their existence) and their relation to the ultimate, single source of all things (i.e., Brahman), a delineation of the details of the *varṇa*/color and caste systems, an account of the stages of life (i.e., studying under a teacher or being a student; returning home to marry and raise a family as a householder; relinquishing daily affairs to one’s son by retiring and beginning meditative practices; and, finally, leaving home to live and die in the forest as an ascetic) and the various aims of life (i.e., *dharma*/virtue or moral righteousness, *artha*/wealth and success, *kāma*/pleasure and fulfilling material desires, and *mokṣa*/liberation or achieving salvation). It also contains more serious reflection on the cyclical nature of birth–life–death (*samsara*) and the notions of rebirth and the prospects of release or liberation from this cosmic cycle.

At a more fine-grained level of consideration, this third “view” includes what scholars have identified as the nine *darśanas* (“schools” or “viewpoints”) of classical Indian thought – i.e., Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, Vedānta, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Jain, Cārvāka, and Buddhist views (See Mohanty 2000, 153–8). Finally, it involves an elucidation of

the notions and relations of the “self” and society and social regulation through the ideas of norms, duties, obligations, virtues, karma, and Dharma.

Indian Philosophy and/or Indian Religion?

What begins to emerge from this series of “views” is, I think, a rather rich and complex understanding of reality that includes features that are both “philosophical” and “religious”/“theological”¹ in the typical Western senses of these terms. In fact, before delving into the philosophical details of these views, I think it is possible to get a preliminary sense of the intellectual context and cultural milieu that supported the social and philosophical development of Siddhattha Gotama and his emergence as the historical Buddha.

For example, the Dasyu beliefs in many gods, nature worship, and fertility and purification rituals are clearly (by common Western standards) “religious” kinds of beliefs. These same “religious”/“theological” beliefs are also part of the “Vedic view” of the Aryans who formalized them with ritual texts and the Brahmanical priesthood. But it is also important to recall that this same “Vedic view” includes the purely “philosophical” reflections and arguments of the Upanishads. In fact, when conceived of as a whole, it is useful to think of the Vedas as a complex, simultaneously religious and philosophical reconciliation, merging the pre-Vedic and Aryan views of reality.

The Vedas themselves contain virtually every element and theme of the “pre-Vedic view” of the Dasyus as well as the wisdom of their own seers and hearers: hymns for deities, rules for fire sacrifices, music, poetry, magic rituals, and ideas about *ṛta* (order), karma (Skt *karma*: action and its consequences), samsara, and the afterlife.

The Upanishads, on the other hand, continue to develop these themes in a more strictly “philosophical” or purely rational way. In fact, it is this philosophical working out of the same themes and their logical implications as the “post-Vedic view” of reality that provides the immediate historical, cultural, and intellectual context within which the life and teachings of Siddhattha Gotama were formed.

As a result, I think it is safe to say that the “post-Vedic view” that was formed both during and after the life of Siddhattha is what we in the West would call “Indian philosophy” strictly and properly speaking. It is to a finer-grained analysis of this context that we now turn our attention.

Siddhattha Gotama’s Cultural and Intellectual Context

Like many great thinkers, Gotama was born into a rich, complex, and dynamic social and historical setting. On the one hand, he inherited an Indian culture rich in philosophical and religious beliefs and practices. Not only were his contemporaries interested in securing the material goods necessary both for basic subsistence and for making one’s way through the various stages of life noted above, but they were also profoundly interested in trying to understand the meaning and purpose of life and the fundamental nature of reality in order to realize – in the appropriate kinds of ways – the various aims of life.

In fact, Sue Hamilton (Hamilton 2001, 1) has pointed out that in India it was traditionally believed that the activity of philosophizing was directly associated with one's personal destiny. She also notes that what we in the West tend to distinguish as "religion" and "philosophy" was actually combined in India in people's attempts to understand both the meaning and structure of life and the fundamental nature of reality. In other words, in India, especially at the time when Gotama was alive, the two activities of doing philosophy and practicing religion were actually two interrelated or interdependent aspects of the same inner or spiritual quest.

In addition to his personal and cultural wealth, Gotama was born into a society in the midst of great social and political changes. Putting aside for the moment concerns about the actual dates of his birth and death, there is little doubt that he lived at a time when the certainties of traditional ways of thinking and living – in other words, when a historically nomadic and pastoral tribal society morphs into a predominantly agrarian one – were being challenged by the new and unsettling problems arising out of the breakdown of tribal federations and the development of powerful monarchies and emerging urban centers. In other words, Gotama lived in the midst of a transition from an agrarian, village-based economy to a city-based form of life with all of its attendant problems and possibilities (Gombrich 1988).

Yet, as was the case with the many great thinkers who lived before and after him, Gotama's life may be seen as the fortuitous coming together of the right man with the right abilities at the right time in the right circumstances bringing about a truly amazing solution to a very complex set of challenges. It is precisely this image of an appropriately qualified person and a portentous opportunity fortuitously and "karmically" coming together – what Peter Hershock (Hershock 1996, 110) refers to as "virtuosity" – that I want to employ as a heuristic to help explain the cultural and philosophical context for the emergence of Buddhism.

Basic Elements of the Pre-Vedic View – The Remote Origins of Gotama's Thought

As we have seen, the Dasyu or "pre-Vedic view" of reality (c. 2500 BCE), which is supported not by primary texts but rather by archeological evidence and the writings of their successors, is rooted in nature worship and beliefs in multiple gods. Other features of this *darśana* include purification and fertility rituals, vegetarianism, asceticism, yoga, and some rudimentary ideas about an afterlife and the possibility of rebirth. Although it is not possible to be certain about how these basic beliefs were formed, it is not difficult to imagine an ancient agricultural people and their ordinary problems and concerns.

To begin, it is obvious that the basic facts of every human life include practical concerns about food, clothing, and shelter. There are also environmental concerns about one's life and safety in the face of nature and its power, as well as concerns about the dangers posed by wild animals and other human beings. Once these basic biological needs and environmental concerns are met and addressed, it is easy to see how and why ancient peoples would have turned their attention to deeper "metaphysical" questions about the ultimate end and purpose of living and dying, since these are the basic facts of life.

The Meaning, Purpose, and End of Life

It goes without saying that little reflection is required for one to realize that many things in the world are beyond human control, and it is often difficult, if not impossible, to know or predict future events and circumstances, such as the weather and seasons and natural disasters. However, it is also quite clear that many of these very same forces and events in nature seem to follow general patterns, even predictable cyclical patterns. The sun rises and sets, the moon waxes and wanes, the tides rise and fall, and the seasons come and go in relative order and stability. It should not be difficult to imagine ancient Indians being concerned with questions about the source or sources of this apparent order and pattern. Furthermore, it is easy to imagine them asking if the order itself is real or merely apparent. Finally, one could imagine them asking themselves, if things are not in their control, then might or must there be something that does control or explain the order and pattern.

The best available evidence seems to indicate that the ancient Dasyu way of understanding and dealing with the ordinary questions and problems of life was to recognize some superhuman or divine sources of power behind or within natural forces and events. They also seem to have realized that nature itself exercised a kind of control over human affairs. The Dasyus recognized the immutable and inexorable truth that humans are born, live, and die, but they also appear to have held the view – based on their burial practices – that death was not the end of life. It is, however, unknown whether they distinguished clearly between rebirth in a different world in some other location or simply rebirth in this world at some future time. Whether they had considered some kind of causal (i.e., karmic) explanation of either possible rebirth scenario is unclear as well.

Seeds and Fruit: Actions and their Consequences

Consider, for a moment, the same data of experience that we have been highlighting, especially in an agricultural community setting. The sun rises and sets, the moon waxes and wanes, the tides rise and fall, and the seasons come and go in relative order and stability. Humans, plants, and animals are born, grow, mature, and die. Humans interact with one another and the world around themselves, and events and outcomes seem to follow regular patterns. The same kinds of seeds produce the same kinds of trees, which in turn produce the same kinds of fruit and the same seeds all over again. The same kinds of animals produce the same kinds of offspring and the results of similar kinds of human actions tend, always or almost always, to be the same, and, for that matter, even predictably so. In general, when I do action A to object B at time T, the result is always, or nearly always, the same. How can one make sense of this?

One ancient Indian account, whose origin and roots are unknown, is to claim that the similarities in outcomes that we experience in our interactions with nature and other human beings are best explained by appealing to the agricultural idea of seeds and their fruits. Actions, whether human or natural, like seeds, produce fruits or

outcomes or effects, based on the kinds of seeds they are. Orange seeds produce orange trees that produce oranges that once again produce orange seeds. Dogs produce dogs that produce more dogs. Humans produce humans that produce more humans. So, by extension, human actions produce outcomes or results that are causally determined by the kind of actions they are. “Good” actions produce “good” effects and “bad” actions produce “bad” effects. In general, effects follow from their causes in the same way that fruit follows from seeds. In other words, according to the ancient Indians, the world and events happening around us seem to follow law-like, regular patterns.

Whether this regularity is real, or apparent and merely perceived, whether it is a necessary relation or merely a statistical probability or correlation, whether it is a real feature of the world or the result of a psychological habit built up over time in human observers, the fact remains that the ancient Indians used the idea of karma to make sense out of and explain what was happening around them. Like the idea of rebirth, the idea of karma provides a plausible and rational explanation for things and events that are happening around us. Moreover, these ideas seem to have been among the most basic insights of the “Indian way” of understanding reality. In fact, they provided the foundation for Gotama’s philosophical reflections.

Basic Elements of the Vedic View: The Source of Gotama’s Philosophical Concerns

What I am calling the “Vedic view” of reality (c. 1500–500 BCE) is an understanding of life and reality that emerged from a complex cultural and intellectual process of absorption, assimilation, rejection, and revision of Dasyu beliefs and practices. Although there is much historical ignorance and uncertainty about both the geographical origins of the Aryans as a people and culture and their subsequent arrival and impact on the Indus Valley civilization of the Dasyus, there is no doubt that during the second millennium BCE the Aryans, who spoke and wrote a form of proto-Sanskrit, replaced the Dasyus as the dominant people of the Indus Valley.

The basic elements of the Aryan account of the purpose and meaning of life and the fundamental nature of reality are recorded in the Vedas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, and later the Upanishads. These elements, which were “heard” and “remembered” by seer-poets and sages, include an initial polytheism (later replaced by the monism/monotheism of the Upanishads) and formalized ritual fire sacrifices performed by priests or Brahmins. Other features of this *darśana* are a gradual acceptance of vegetarianism, non-violence, asceticism, yoga, karma, and belief in rebirth and the cyclical nature of reality and existence.

Just as there are serious scholarly doubts and uncertainties about the formation of the “pre-Vedic view,” there are similar problems and questions about exactly how the basic features of the “Vedic view” were formed. Nevertheless, the elements of what I am calling the “Vedic view” have the notable advantage of being recorded in written texts.

The texts themselves seem to indicate that the religious and philosophical beliefs and practices of the Aryans underwent two distinct but related types of development. On the one hand, they appear to have absorbed and eventually replaced Dasyu beliefs and

practices. On the other hand, they seem to have undergone an internal development and deepening penetration of vision and understanding of their own insights. In other words, what I want to suggest is that the "Vedic view" sublated the pre-Vedic Dasyu "view" while simultaneously, over a period of some five hundred to a thousand years, deepening its own insight and understanding of reality and the meaning, purpose, and end of life. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that what I call the "Vedic view" is in reality something far more complex and complicated than the single name I employ to denominate it. In fact, this "view" includes a relative spectrum of historically distinct beliefs about important philosophical concepts and ideas.

Despite this oversimplification, I think this way of presenting the "Vedic view" has the advantage of capturing most, if not all, of the important religious and philosophical ideas that came to form the immediate historical, intellectual, and cultural context from which and against which the teachings of Siddhattha Gotama arose.

Basic Elements of the Post-Vedic View: The Immediate Context of Gotama's Thought

The post-Vedic "view" (after 500 BCE) was a more careful, rigorous, and systematic rational working out of the details of the pre-Vedic and Vedic accounts of things. It was also the source of the nine classical "schools" of Indian philosophy. In fact, it is helpful to think of this third conceptual framework as being constituted by the individual views of its nine schools in the same way that white light is the product of the seven colors of the visible spectrum. Each individual color or school has its own unique features and history, and when appropriately harmonized they – in good Buddhist understanding – interdependently give rise to the "post-Vedic view" of things.

As we have already noted, this rather complex "view" included a clarification and specification of the roles of the various deities of the pre-Vedic and Vedic views (or their non-existence) and their relations to the ultimate, single source of all things (i.e., Brahman of the Upanishads), a delineation of the details of the *varṇa*/color and social caste systems, and the enumeration of the stages of life and the various possible aims of individual lives. It also contained more serious and sustained philosophical reflection and, in fact, vigorous disagreement – in which Gotama participated – over the possible outcomes of the cyclical nature of birth–life–death as well as the notions of rebirth and the prospects of release or liberation from this cosmic cycle. Finally, it involved more sustained philosophical debate about the notions and relations of the "self" and society (i.e., metaphysical and epistemological thinking) and social regulation (i.e., ethical thinking) through the increasingly complex ideas of norms, duties, obligations, virtues, karma, and Dharma.

It bears repeating that the living social reality and history of all of this was clearly far more complex and complicated than my simple distinguishing of Indian thought into three "views" would indicate. In fact, the division of Indian thought into the nine classical *darśanas* is itself a simplification of a richer and more complex spectrum of historically and philosophically distinct views. Moreover, when we turn our attention to these various "schools" we encounter a number of ideologically distinct and mutually exclusive accounts of the meaning and purpose of life and the fundamental nature

of reality. In short, what is commonly designated as the teachings of Siddhattha Gotama is actually just one of these nine competing points of view.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the *darśanas* themselves represent, in rather broad strokes, a full spectrum of both logical and real possible positions with respect to the fundamental ideas contained in the pre-Vedic, Vedic, and post-Vedic “views.” In the light of the initial sketches of the three “views” already presented, we may now consider these other systems in more detail as constituting the immediate philosophical context of Gotama’s thought.

Nine *Darśanas*

It may be helpful to begin our consideration of the nine classical “schools” of Indian thought by noting that the Buddhist tradition² itself refers to no fewer than 62 kinds of “wrong views” on matters as diverse as the past, the self, the world, pleasure, the mind, good and bad, chance, the future, life after death, nirvana, and even the teaching on interdependent arising.

From what has already been said about the history of the three “views,” it should not be surprising that the roots of Indian philosophical orthodoxy are traced to the Vedas and the Upanishads. In fact, the traditional and perhaps the easiest way of capturing the distinctions among the classical schools of Indian philosophy is to categorize them as “orthodox” and “unorthodox” or “heterodox,” based on whether they accept or reject the basic “truth” of the Vedas and the Upanishads.³

These are, after all, the first written texts that convey the basic elements of what one might call “the Indian view of the world.” Not only were these texts and their words regarded by the religious leaders of ancient India, the Brahmans, as the primary sources of truth about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life and the fundamental nature of reality, but they also were compiled by those with the power, both materially and spiritually, to confirm their truth and insure their acceptance and continuing influence. It should not be surprising, therefore, to see the religious and philosophical landscape of India, especially at the time of the Buddha, defined by one’s relationship to the “Vedic view” of reality.

Six “Orthodox” *Darśanas*

According to the Indian tradition, six *darśanas* are recognized as “orthodox.” These are the Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, Vedānta, Nyāya, and Vaiśeṣika systems.

According to the Sāṃkhya view, whose name means reason or discriminating knowledge, reality, which is ultimately dualistic (i.e., consists of two irreducible modes of being or existence) in nature, can be classified into 25 categories of matter (*prakṛti*) and spirit (*puruṣa*) – the two most basic principles of being. This view also maintained that reality consists of three elements – water, fire, and air – as well as three qualities (*guṇas*) that helped to explain the material constitution of things – lightness or mental activity (*sattva*), energy or activity (*rajas*), and inertia or dullness (*tama*).

This view, which is sometimes described as an atheistic naturalism (Mohanty 2000, 4–5), admitted an eternal self, numerically distinct for each individual. As Mohanty claims, “In its mature form, it developed a theory of evolution of the empirical world out of the original, undifferentiated nature” (ibid., 5). In fact, the three qualities or *guṇas* of material being, which were originally in a state of equilibrium, were disturbed by contact with spirit or *puruṣa*. The subsequent evolution of the physical world is a progressive and uneven scattering or intermingling of the three *guṇas* and spirit. In order to avoid the logical and metaphysical problem of something coming from nothing, the causal mechanism of this activity is explained by arguing that effects pre-exist in their causes. At the same time, each unique, individual spirit experiences attachment to its materially composite body as a result of failing to distinguish its true “spirit-self” from the composite that is itself a product of nature and its causes. According to this view, release from this condition or *mokṣa*, which is a return to the state of an unmixed spirit, is achieved by realizing or coming to know that the “spirit-self” is really metaphysically different from matter and nature.

Over time, this speculative metaphysical view of the world came to be paired with the more practical or ethically focused system of Yoga. According to the Yoga view of things, ontological dualism is metaphysically correct, but it also recognizes that, in addition to matter and individual spirits, there is a divine/supreme being, a God/Self that exists. Following the Sāṃkhya idea that there is a real metaphysical difference between spirit and matter, the Yoga view insists that the composite being leads the true spirit-self to mistake itself for the composite. The solution to this misidentification, and ultimately to release or *mokṣa*, is the development of discriminating insight or knowledge that is achieved through the disciplined meditation of yoga. It is the practice of yoga meditation that enables the true self to overcome its ignorance and liberate itself from its bondage and attachment to the material and physical.

The third (and fourth) classical Indian school is called Mīmāṃsā, which means exegesis. Without getting too detailed, it should be noted that this system is traditionally divided into an early (Purva Mīmāṃsā) and later (Uttarā Mīmāṃsā or Vedānta) version. In general, holders of this view, at least in its earliest version, disagree with the Sāṃkhya and Yoga belief that knowledge alone is sufficient for release from bondage. According to the early version of this *darśana*, ritual practice is what is essential for *mokṣa*. At the same time, however, those who maintain this early view appear to be ambivalent about the existence of God or a supreme being. On the one hand, they reject typical arguments for God's existence but, on the other hand, they also recognize an ontological category of potency or power that seems to include supernatural agency. Nevertheless, the most important element of the Mīmāṃsā vision of reality (taken as a whole) is its rather elaborate system for understanding and interpreting the Vedas.

As part of their science of interpretation, Mīmāṃsā thinkers believe that words themselves are the ultimate source of knowledge and that they serve as a direct means of truth. They also argue that true cognition originates from multiple sources, among them perception, logical inferences, verbal utterances, simple comparison, and postulation. As Koller points out, the chief concern of Mīmāṃsā philosophers, at least in its early version, is to work out a theory of knowledge that accommodates scriptural testimony as a valid means of knowledge and, on that basis, to provide a science of

scriptural interpretation that captures and explains the meaning and truth of the Vedas, especially the ritualistic Brahmanas (see Koller 2006, 247).

The later Mīmāṃsā or Vedānta philosophers focused their attention on the more philosophical and non-ritualistic Upanishads. While initially accepting the authority of the early Vedas, the Uttarā Mīmāṃsā emphasized knowledge, instead of ritual, as the means to liberation. However, at least some Vedānta thinkers insisted that ritual-type devotion was a means of relating to and knowing Brahman. Not surprisingly, following the Upanishads, they argued that Brahman is the ultimate reality, that the “true self” is metaphysically identical to Brahman, and that knowledge of this truth was essential for *mokṣa*.

Taken together, the two versions of the Mīmāṃsā exegetical system represent the ritual and gnostic branches of the Brahmanical tradition, whose roots can be traced back to the fifth century BCE. These complementary halves of the Vedic and post-Vedic view ultimately came to be known as the action/*karma* and knowledge/*jñāna* interpretations of the Vedas.

The fifth and sixth classical systems of Indian thought are the Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika views. The Nyāya *darśana* is fundamentally concerned with questions and problems in logic. Its roots may be traced back to the belief that faulty reasoning and/or logical mistakes are the causes of suffering and attachment, and that one can arrive at the truth and ultimately liberation by correcting fallacious reasoning. In order to root out mistakes in reasoning, Nyāya thinkers analyzed reality into various logic-based categories, all of which could be proven to exist. In fact, the philosophers of this school worked out an entire epistemological theory of logic, rational argumentation, and proof, as well as an account of valid knowledge. Their ideas in logic and epistemology were subsequently adopted by their “sister system,” the Vaiśeṣika, from whom the Nyāya borrowed their metaphysical views of reality and the self. This sharing of ideas led in time to a nominal joining of the views as the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika.

The Vaiśeṣika contribution to the union was an account of the particularities of all real things. Their pluralistic realism, which involved an atomistic theory of the material world, was rooted in six ontological categories: substance, quality, action, universality, particularity, and inherence. They employed these categories to demonstrate the incompatibility of spirit and matter. They also claimed that “God” made the physical world out of pre-existent elemental substances. More importantly, they argued that through logical analysis one could arrive at a sound knowledge of all things, including the mind and the true eternal self, and that such knowledge was the only source of liberation from attachment and enslavement to matter.

These six *darśanas* or viewpoints of the Vedas and the Upanishads are collectively referred to as the *āstika* – “so-sayers” (Renard 1999, 90) – systems because they are in general agreement, despite their particular differences, with respect to their acceptance of the authority and truth of what I call the “Vedic view” of the purpose and meaning of life, as well as the fundamental nature of reality. Their acceptance of the Vedas and the Upanishads also justifies their designation as the “orthodox” schools. The remaining three classical systems of Indian thought, the Jain, the Cārvāka, and the Buddhist *darśanas*, are collectively referred to as the *nāstika* – “deniers or rejecters” (ibid.) – systems because each, in their own unique way, rejects the authority and truth of the Vedic scriptures and tradition.

Three "Heterodox" *Darśanas*

According to the Jain view of things, there is a sharp distinction between spirit and matter or souls and bodies. The first kind of beings, spiritual beings (*jiva*), are alive, and the second kind of beings, material beings or non-spiritual beings, (*ajiva*) are not alive. Bondage to the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth for spiritual beings is caused by their karmic actions.

The specifics of this account of rebirth involve the idea that karmic actions by spiritual beings causally produce material particles that are attracted to the soul's spiritual energy and thereby bind themselves to the spiritual self. The continuing union of the soul and matter that results from karmic action is itself caused by both ignorance and attachment that result from the passions, wants, and desires of spiritual beings. There is, however, a way out of the soul's bondage, through the practice of moral living, meditation, and great ascetic austerities. In fact, the ultimate cause of release is the acquisition of knowledge or insight into the soul's samsaric situation by way of a kind of awakening or extraordinary insight into the true, pure, and unsullied nature of the soul or self.

This profound insight also includes the recognition that the only way to experience liberation is to destroy, by ascetic mortification – preferably in a monastic setting – the accumulated "material" karmic consequences of prior actions and avoid all future karmic action. In addition to these ethical and metaphysical claims, Jain thinkers reject the sacrificial rituals of the Vedas as well as the monism of the Upanishads.

From the epistemic point of view, the Jains claimed that reality has an infinity of aspects, and that all truth claims can be confirmed by perception, logical inference, or verbal testimony. As a result of their ontological pluralism, they also claimed that all truths are relative to a specific frame of reference. In other words, every claim or proposition is true from a certain point of view and false from some other point of view.

Given this account of the basic features of their view of reality, it should not be surprising that the Jains deny the existence of a single "God" or divine being but simultaneously affirm the existence of multiple gods or divine beings. In fact, Jain thinkers insist that each individual soul or spirit has the capacity, through severe ascetic practice, to develop infinite consciousness or omniscience, infinite power or omnipotence, and absolute happiness or eternal bliss. All that is necessary for this ultimate achievement is sufficiently severe ascetic practices that eliminate impure and harmful thoughts, words, and deeds.

The second "heterodox" classical Indian view is the Cārvāka *darśana*. According to this materialist "school," only material things exist, and, as a result, there are no immaterial beings and hence no spiritual selves. Since matter is the only reality, there is no afterlife (precisely because there is no existence beyond the physical, material world) and, consequently, no karma, no karmic bondage, and no possibility of *mokṣa* or nirvana. Like all materialists, Cārvāka thinkers maintained that the only reliable source of knowledge is sense experience, and that the goal of life is the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.

While individual materialists disagreed about the number and kind of basic material elements from which all material things are composed, they appear to be unanimous

in their denial of *mokṣa* or nirvana and affirmation of causal determinism and fatalism. One such thinker, Gosala, claimed that human beings have no freedom to act precisely because all outcomes are causally predetermined by fate, or the laws of material interactions. According to this view, despite the internal introspective experience of choice, the actual outcome of events is necessitated by the prior physical conditions that give rise to it.

Such a view is, as Gotama saw, obviously at odds with the hedonistic claim which suggests that the purpose of life is to pursue pleasure and avoid pain, because the notions of pursuit and avoidance seem to presuppose, or at least assume, choice or some form of non-determinism. Perhaps it was this inconsistency and other uncertainties about the metaphysics of the self and karma and *mokṣa* that led some materialists to defend a complete skepticism with regard to any true knowledge about the meaning and purpose of life as well as the fundamental nature of reality.

The Buddha, as we know, had a different view of each of these matters. Yet it was within the context of these competing views⁴ and their ongoing debates and disagreements that Siddhattha Gotama worked out his own unique philosophical views and eventually became the Awakened One.

Notes

- 1 For an interesting and persuasive analysis of this distinction, see Fitzgerald (2000). For more on the ongoing debate about the status of religious studies and for other views of the matter, see *Religious Studies Review* 27/2 (2001) and 27/4 (2001).
- 2 *Brahmajala Sutta: The Supreme Net* (DN.I.1–46; Walshe 1995). The Buddha not only compares these wrong views to a fishnet but also refers to them as a net of views that catches and holds those who hold them.
- 3 It should be noted that, even though it is misleading to suggest that both sets of texts share the exact same “view” of reality, I have combined them as part of the “Vedic view” in order to simplify a rather complex situation.
- 4 It is important to keep in mind that the “orthodox”/“heterodox” distinction is just one of many different ways of conceptualizing the relationships among the various philosophical *darśanas* of ancient India. Obviously, there are other possible ways of distinguishing the numerous schools – for example, according to their metaphysical beliefs (about the whole of reality, or about its parts – i.e., the nature of the human person, the soul or spirit or self, nirvana, etc.), their epistemological beliefs (about the nature, origin, and limits of knowledge), or their ethical beliefs (about the goals of human living, the elements of the good human life, the standards of morality, karma, etc.).

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