

The Buddha and the Jainas Reconsidered*

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The early Buddhist Sūtras repeatedly refer to the Jainas. The Buddha and his followers are on various occasions depicted as being in discussion with followers of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, in whom we recognise the last Tīrthaṅkara Mahāvīra. And if the Buddhist tradition is to be believed, the Buddha himself, before his enlightenment, did the ascetic practices which we can identify as typical for early Jainism; he abandoned them when he came to the conclusion that they did not lead him to the desired goal.

These more or less frequent and intimate contacts between the early Buddhists and the early Jainas left their traces on the Buddhist doctrine as recorded in the ancient Sūtras. This, at least, is what one is tempted to conclude. For these ancient texts ascribe statements to the Buddha which directly contradict other statements of his. Moreover, some of these contradicted statements agree with positions which we know were held by the early Jainas. In the case of certain other contradictions we may assume that religious elements have been borrowed from other religious movements of the time.

The following three examples – taken from my book *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India* (2nd revised edition, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993) – of religious practices are criticised at one place, and accepted at another place of the Buddhist texts: The Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, in its various recensions, records a discussion of the Buddha with someone called Putkasa (in Sanskrit) or Pukkusa (in Pāli). The Buddha here boasts that once, in a violent thunderstorm when lightning killed two farmers and four oxen nearby him, he did not notice it. Abilities of this kind were claimed by certain non-Buddhists, according to the testimony of the Buddhist texts. Another Buddhist Sūtra (the Indriyabhāvanā Sutta of the Pāli canon and its parallel in Chinese translation), however, ridicules such ‘cultivation of the senses’ which leads to their non-functioning; the Buddha is here reported to say that if this is cultivation of the senses, the blind and deaf would be cultivators of the senses.

A second example is the following: The Vitakkasanthāna Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya and its parallels in Chinese translation *recommend* the practising monk to ‘restrain his thought with his mind, to coerce and torment it’. Exactly the same words are used elsewhere in the Pāli canon (in the Mahāsaccaka Sutta, Bodhirājakumāra Sutta and Saṅgārava Sutta) in order to describe the *futile* attempts

of the Buddha before his enlightenment to reach liberation after the manner of the Jainas. It is tempting to conclude that these Jaina practices had come to be accepted by at least some Buddhists. This second example concerns a detail of certain Jaina practices, it would seem. I do not, however, know of passages in the Jaina canon which prescribe this detail.

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

All these three examples can be explained with the help of the same assumption: the assumption that Buddhism, early in its history, underwent the influence of other religious currents. It can be shown that this theory is far more homogeneous than it may look at first sight. Indeed, Buddhism, from a very early date onward, has been particularly vulnerable to one specific kind of influence. Most, if not all, of the cases of outside influence which we can discover in the ancient texts, are of this particular kind.

Recall first that Buddhism presented a way to put an end to the cycle of rebirths determined by one’s acts, i.e., to the problem posed by the doctrine of karma. Buddhism was not the only religious current of its time that offered a solution to this problem. It did, however, offer a solution which differed in various ways from the solutions offered by others. In the case of the other currents of the time known to us, the link between the problem and its solution was obvious. In the case of Buddhism this link was not so clear, or perhaps not clear at all. As a result at least some members of the early Buddhist community tended to borrow such elements from other religious currents, which would help re-establish the link between the solution and the problem it was meant to solve.

Which were the methods taught outside the Buddhist community? Two of them are known to us. The one is, in the early period, primarily linked to the Jainas, the other is, for that same period, best known from certain Upaniṣadic passages. Both are frequent in the more recent brahmanical literature. These two methods have one thing in common, the conviction namely that one can only escape the results of one’s actions by somehow putting an end to all activity. The early Jainas, and many other Indian ascetics with them, applied this principle literally, and suppressed all bodily and mental activity. The pains and suffering which these kinds of practices

provoke were looked upon as signs that old karma was being destroyed. Once all the old karma destroyed, no new karma being added, it was sufficient for the ascetic to fast to death, motionlessly, and no new births would await him.

The other method shares the same essential concern. One can only be freed from the result of actions by not committing them. According to this second method, one has to discover that one is not identical with the active parts of the personality. All that is required is that one realise this important insight. Once one stops identifying with the body and the mind, i.e. with all those aspects of the person that are active, one is no longer bound by the actions that have been committed by those parts. Usually this insight consists in the discovery of one's real self, one's soul, which is completely inactive by nature.

These two methods of liberation are organically related to the doctrine of karma. They constitute, in a way, natural answers to the problem posed by this doctrine: Rebirth being occasioned by one's actions, only inaction can stop it. In spite of this, the early Buddhist texts contain clear evidence that both these methods were rejected at one point, most probably by the historical Buddha himself. The early Buddhist texts know the two methods just discussed, but they reject them. On a number of occasions the Buddha is depicted as debating with Jainas, and as rejecting their practices. But nor was he in favour of the method consisting in knowledge of the true nature of the self.

Buddhism, then, accepted the doctrine of karma. Moreover, like the other religious currents that accepted this doctrine, and which constituted together what might be called the Śramaṇa movement, Buddhism looked upon the ongoing cycle of rebirths as thoroughly unsatisfactory, and accepted escape from this cycle as the highest religious aim. But the Buddha did not accept either of the two methods which most naturally fitted the problem connected with this doctrine. Buddhism preached an own method, different from those two. The Buddhist texts present, in fact, various methods, which are sometimes in contradiction with each other. The confused appearance of the early Buddhist texts is most easily explained by the circumstance that, from an early date, the Buddhists themselves were embarrassed by the fact that the solution presented by their tradition did not, or not clearly, fit the problem. This circumstance, in its turn, made Buddhism particularly vulnerable to the influence of the other methods, which fitted the problem admirably.

The three examples given at the beginning of this article illustrate this. They all concern the restriction of the mind, of the sense organs, or quite simply of all bodily and mental activities. Other examples, too, illustrate the attraction which this particular theme exerted on the early Buddhists. However, there is another theme which should be expected to have left its traces in the ancient Buddhist texts. This is the theme of the inactive self, knowledge of which will liberate one from the cycle of rebirths.

The so-called first sermon of the Buddha knows a conception of the self as being permanent, unchangeable and bliss. Such a conception of the self is well known from other, non-Buddhist sources. Indeed, the conception of a permanent,

unchangeable self underlies the religious movements just referred to, which believe that insight into the true nature of the self is the necessary, or even sufficient, condition for the attainment of liberation from the cycle of rebirths. Their self has to be permanent and unchangeable, precisely because it does not participate in any actions. Some texts add that the self is bliss (*ānanda*) which corresponds to the *sukha* mentioned in the first sermon. The author of this passage clearly knew the conception of a self that is permanent, unchangeable and bliss; he was evidently also acquainted with the method of liberation through insight into the true nature of the self. The passage shows acquaintance with that method, and rejects it. It rejects the belief that it suffices to know the true inactive nature of the self in order to be liberated from the effects of one's actions.

The continuation of this sermon, having just rejected one liberating insight, introduces another one. For here the knowledge of not-self is presented as a liberating insight. The mere fact of hearing this wisdom proclaimed is enough for the first disciples of the Buddha to reach Arhat-ship right there and then. No question of retiring into loneliness, of reaching subsequently the Four Dhyānas, etc., which are elsewhere in the Buddhist texts presented as essential prerequisites for attaining to this exalted state.

All this looks mysterious at first sight, but is really relatively easy to explain. For the knowledge of the not-self is, in its essence, hardly different from the knowledge of the self of the non-Buddhists. Why did knowledge of the self signify, for so many Indians, liberation from the effects of one's actions? Precisely because it implied that one is not identical with the active parts of one's personality, i.e., the body and the mind. Well, this is exactly what the knowledge of the not-self does for the Buddhists. It teaches that none of the constituents of the personality are the self. If we understand this to mean that one should not identify with these constituents, we come to the same kind of insight as that of the self for the non-Buddhists. A major difference is, of course, that an empty spot seems to remain there where the non-Buddhists believed to find a soul, but the effect of non-identification with one's actions is exactly the same.

This passage illustrates how a doctrine that was explicitly rejected, found its way into the Buddhist texts through a back-door. The reason is easy to guess: because in the case of such an insight it was clear why it could constitute a solution to the problem posed by the doctrine of karma. The effects of action can only be avoided through non-action. Knowing that one's active parts are not really one's self, implies not being affected by the results of those actions.

The thesis which this last case, as well as the ones considered earlier, illustrates, is that Buddhism was vulnerable to clear and direct answers to the problem of karma. To conclude, two examples from later Buddhism will be considered, which are meant to show that, many centuries after its earliest period, Buddhism remained vulnerable to such answers. The first example is about the notion of an inactive self, the second one concerns physical and mental inactivity.

The idea of an inactive self continued to exert an attraction on the Buddhists. It finds expression in the so-called *tathāgatarbha* doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The similarity between the *tathāgatarbha* of certain Buddhists and the self of certain non-Buddhists was so striking that one Buddhist text – the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* – comments upon it. This shows that the two were so close that even Buddhists started wondering what the difference was. Clearly, the idea of an inactive self had maintained its attraction for the Buddhists of this later period.

For the second example we have to leave India, and consider a controversy which took place within the Buddhist community of Tibet, in the 8th century of the Common Era. It seems likely that the position criticised in the third Bhāvanākrama of Kamalaśīla is the teaching which he ascribed to the Chinese master Mahāyāna and his numerous Tibetan followers. According to Mahāyāna, those who neither think on anything nor perform any deed whatever are completely freed from the round of existences. "No deed whatever, salutary or otherwise, is to be performed". We find here ideas which in early Buddhism we could attribute to the influence of Jainism and related currents, but this time in a country, Tibet, where there were no Jainas.

The above examples show that Buddhism did not borrow just anything that it happened to come into contact with. Quite on the contrary, Buddhism was susceptible to certain kinds of ideas. Buddhism was, one might say, structurally in need of a satisfactory answer to the doctrine of karma. When such solutions were present in neighbouring religious currents, some Buddhists at least were likely to borrow these solutions, or rather adjusted versions of these solutions, and absorb them into Buddhist doctrine. The possibility cannot be entirely ruled out that in certain circumstances ideas of this kind – i.e. ideas concerning the non-active nature of the self, or concerning the need to practice mental and physical inaction – arose within Buddhism itself, without outside influence.

In conclusion we may return once more to the questions from which we started: What was the exact relationship between early Buddhism and early Jainism with regard to the central problem of karma and rebirth? And how do we explain the passages in the early Buddhist texts which proclaim practices similar to those attributed to the Jainas? I have argued that Jainism offered a very straightforward, and therefore satisfactory, answer to the problem of karma. Buddhism did not. The effects are visible throughout the history of Buddhism. It was and remained susceptible to certain kinds of non-authentic ideas and practices. Jaina-like practices, in particular, already exerted a great attraction upon the early Buddhist community. This in itself explains that such practices are occasionally recommended in the early Buddhist texts. No further explanation is necessary, as the above examples illustrate.

Note

- * A fuller version of this article has appeared in *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatique* 49 (2), 1995, pp. 330-350.