8. Modern Ironies

People who hold on to a modern materialist view of the world and the self tend to react to these canonical descriptions of what is known in awakening by offering three main reasons for resisting them.

The first is that these descriptions, in their eyes, go beyond what a human being could possibly know. Sometimes this argument is supported by the claim that the Canon’s descriptions violate the Buddha’s own criteria, stated elsewhere in the discourses, for what can and cannot be known. The passage most commonly cited in this argument is this:

“What is the all? Simply the eye and forms, ear and sounds, nose and aromas, tongue and flavours, body and tactile sensations, intellect and ideas. This, monks, is termed the all. Any one who would say, ‘Repudiating this all, I will describe an other,’ if questioned on what exactly might be the grounds for his statement, would be unable to explain, and furthermore, would be put to grief. Why? Because it lies beyond range.”

- Samyutta Nikaya 35.23

The argument maintains that “beyond range” here means “beyond the range of possible knowledge”. Therefore, the existence of a dimension lying beyond the six senses – such as that of consciousness without surface described in Majjhima Nikaya 49 – is impossible to know. This would invalidate any claim that one has known such things – and, by implication, the freedom from rebirth that such a knowledge would imply. However, there is clear evidence that “beyond range” here simply means “beyond the range of adequate description”, for there are other canonical passages indicating that even though the dimension beyond the six senses cannot be adequately described, it can still be known.

Maha Kotthita: “With the remainderless ceasing and fading of the six spheres of contact [vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and intellection] is it the case that there is anything else?”

Sariputta: “Don’t say that, my friend.”

Maha Kotthita: “With the remainderless ceasing and fading of the six spheres of contact, is it the case that there is not anything else?”

Sariputta: “Don’t say that, my friend.”

Maha Kotthita: “...is it the case that there is both and is not anything else?”

Sariputta: “Don’t say that, my friend.”

Maha Kotthita: “...is it the case that there neither is nor is not anything else?”

Sariputta: “Don’t say that, my friend.”

Maha Kotthita: “Being asked... if there is anything else, you say, ‘Don’t say that, my friend.’ Being asked... if there is not anything else... if there both is and is not anything else... if there neither is nor is not anything else, you say, ‘Don’t say that, my friend.’ Now, how is the meaning of this statement to be understood?”

Sariputta: “Saying... is it the case that there is anything else... is it the case that there is not anything else... is it the case that there both is and is not anything else... is it the case then, there neither is nor is not anything else, one is objectifying the non-objectified. However far the six spheres of contact go, that is how far objectification goes. However far objectification goes, that is how far the six spheres of contact go. With the remainderless ceasing and fading of the six spheres of contact, there comes to be the ceasing, the allaying of objectification.”

- Anguttara Nikaya 4.174
“Monks, that dimension should be experienced where the eye [vision] ceases and the perception of form fades. That dimension should be experienced where the ear ceases and the perception of sound fades... where the nose ceases and the perception of aroma fades... where the tongue ceases and the perception of tactile sensation fades... where the intellect ceases and the perception of idea or phenomenon fades: That dimension should be experienced.”

-Samyutta Nikaya 35.117

So there’s nothing in the Pali discourses to indicate that the Buddha would have agreed with a modern materialist view that experience is limited to the six senses. And it’s doubtful that he would have tried to justify his claims in terms that a modern materialist would accept. After all, he noted that the Buddha-range of a Buddha, and the jhana-range of a person in jhana are “inconceivables that are not to be conjectured about, that would bring madness and vexation to anyone who conjectured about them” (Anguttara Nikaya 4.77). This means that he wouldn’t encourage the sort of conjecture that a materialist – or anyone else – might make about what a mind trained to master jhana or attain the supreme level of awakening could or couldn’t know.

A second modern argument against accepting the canonical accounts of what’s known in awakening – and in particular, the knowledge of rebirth achieved in awakening – is that one can still obtain all the results of the practice without having to accept the possibility of rebirth. After all, all the factors leading to suffering are all immediately present to awareness, so there should be no need, when trying to abandon them, to accept any premises about where they may or may not lead in the future.

This objection, however, ignores the role of appropriate attention on the path. As we noted above, one of its roles is to examine and abandon the assumptions that underlie one’s views on the metaphysics of personal identity. Unless you’re willing to step back from your own views – such as those concerning what a person is, and why that makes rebirth impossible – and subject them to this sort of examination, there’s something lacking in your path. You’ll remain entangled in the questions of inappropriate attention, which will prevent you from actually identifying and then abandoning the causes of suffering and achieving the full results of the practice.

In addition, the terms of appropriate attention – The Four Noble Truths – are not concerned simply with events arising and passing away in the present moment. They also focus on the causal connections among those events, connections that occur both in the immediate present and over time. If you limit your focus solely to connections in the present while ignoring those over time, you can’t fully comprehend the ways in which craving causes suffering: not only by latching on to the four kinds of nutriment (physical food, sensory contact, sensory consciousness and the intentions of the mind), but also giving rise to the four kinds of nutriment as well.

This narrow focus places an obstacle in your ability to develop right view – and in particular, your ability to see dependent co-arising as a self-sustaining process. If, in line with the standard materialist view, you regard consciousness as a mere by-product of material processes, then there’s no way you can appreciate the full power of consciousness and craving to generate the food that can sustain the processes of suffering indefinitely. And if you don’t fully appreciate this power, there’s no way that you can effectively bring it to an end.

A third argument against accepting the knowledge of rebirth as a necessary part of awakening is that many modern people who claim to have experienced the levels of awakening described in the Canon gained no knowledge of rebirth or of the end of rebirth as part of those experiences. The fact that people in the Buddha’s time claimed to gain this sort of knowledge in the course of their awakening can thus be written off as a cultural artifact. They were primed to see it because of their cultural background, and so it wasn’t really an essential part of the experience.

There are, however, two problems with this argument. The first is that, as we have seen, rebirth was not a universally accepted assumption in the Buddha’s time. An important part of any person’s experience of awakening – then as now – would be to prove for oneself whether the Buddha was right on the topic.

The second, more telling problem with this third argument is that it actually defeats itself. If one’s experiences of awakening don’t agree with the Canon’s descriptions of the levels of awakening, why would one want to claim the Canon’s labels for those experiences? An essential part of even the first level of awakening described in the Canon – stream entry – confirms the rightness of right view (Majjhima Nikaya 48), which includes the understanding that there is a deathless, birthless dimension, and that there is a level of craving that, if not abandoned, will lead to repeated birth. The distinguish-

[Page 63]
The irony in all three of these arguments against the teaching on rebirth is that the people who make them all assume that the Buddha was incapable of questioning the views of his time, and yet the fact is that they themselves are unwilling to accept the Buddha’s challenge to step back and question their own. We know how the Buddha responded to materialism in his own time, and there’s no reason to assume that he would respond any differently to materialism today.

Some people might object that modern materialism is much more sophisticated than Prince Payasi’s experiments on criminals, the scientists who conduct them are just as wrong-headed in thinking that a phenomenological process – consciousness and mental events as experienced from within – can be captured and measured in physical terms. Although rebirth is often presented as an unscientific view, the material sciences actually have no way at all of proving the issue one way or the other.

As for the efficacy of human action, the scientific method can never prove whether the scientists applying it are actually exercising free will in designing their experiments. It also can’t prove whether their actions in designing and running an experiment actually have an impact on the experiment’s results. Scientific inquiries and peer reviews certainly act as if these assumptions are true – the idea of criticising a poorly designed experiment would make no sense if scientists had no free will in designing their experiments. And if we can judge by appearances, the assumption of free will and the responsibilities it carries have been crucial in enabling scientific knowledge to advance. But the scientific method itself can’t prove whether the appearance of free will and efficacious action is anything more than an appearance. And of course there’s the irony that many scientists assume that the phenomena they observe operate under strict deterministic laws, while the method they employ assumes that they themselves are not driven by such laws in applying that method. This means that science is in no position to prove or disprove the Buddha’s teachings on the range and powers of human action.

Finally, there’s the whole question of how valid it is to divorce the Buddha’s psychological insights from his cosmological teachings. As we noted in Chapter One, people in the West – beginning with the European Romantics and American Transcendentalists – have long assumed that cosmology is the rightful sphere of the physical sciences, while religion should limit itself to the care of the human psyche. But one of the central insights of the Buddha’s awakening is that events on the micro scale in the mind actually shape experiences on the macro scale in time and space. If we can’t question the clear line our culture draws between psychology and cosmology, we won’t be in a position to appreciate the ways in which the Buddha’s insight on this issue can actually help bring suffering to an end.

So we’re faced with a choice. If we’re sincere about wanting to end suffering and to give the Buddha’s teachings a fair test, then – instead of assuming that he was a prisoner of his own time and place, unable to question his cultural assumptions – we have to examine the extent to which, in adhering to our own cultural assumptions, we’re imprisoning ourselves. If we don’t want to drop our self-imposed restrictions, we can still benefit from any of the Buddha’s teachings that fit within those limitations, but we’ll have to accept the consequences: that the results we’ll get will be limited as well. Only if we’re willing to submit to the test of appropriate attention, abandoning the presuppositions that distort our thinking about issues like karma and rebirth, will we be able to make full use of the Canon’s tools for gaining total release.