

Four errors in traditional Buddhist thinking

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This paper attempts to distil some of the most important arguments and conclusions I have reached from a long process of thought about the key philosophical elements of Buddhism. There will be much more that needs saying to fully argue the points given here than can be given in a short paper. Unfortunately those who challenge conventional viewpoints in any group rarely get the benefit of the doubt when it comes to judgements about the amount of support needed for their arguments (and longer arguments do not get published or read). The challenger is thus caught in a Catch-22: either abbreviate and risk being misunderstood, or remain unread.

The “errors” I shall be discussing are ones that I have identified from within what I understand to be a Buddhist standpoint overall, not those which might obviously occur to a non-Buddhist. Obviously they are “errors” from the standpoint of one particular interpretation of Buddhism, implying criticism of other types of interpretation, but I shall argue that there are good reasons for adopting this type of interpretation.

I do not mean to attribute these errors to any particular individual or group within Buddhism who should be blamed for them, or discuss the question of their causation at all, only to argue that they are errors. They may conceivably be errors made in the transmission or interpretation of Buddhism, or even be errors which go back to the Buddha himself (i.e. inconsistencies in his teaching), and both these possibilities must be left open. It’s even conceivable that they are empty errors (i.e. nobody’s views) – though I doubt this very much; but in that case I’d still want to contest the point that they *would* be errors if anyone held them. I want to keep the argument philosophical without getting drawn into discussion about what person or text said what. This means discussing ways in which contradictions or prejudices in the Buddhist tradition may impede us from the outset in the search for truth.

Doubtless the language of “error” could be put more cautiously, but to do so might detract from its clarity and urgency whilst not necessarily conveying greater provisionality to those who would still disagree with it. Perhaps I could talk of “problems” in a more guarded fashion, rather than “errors”, but I want to put forward for consideration the idea that these are not merely abstract “problems”: they are mistakes with a moral dimension, which have cost the Buddhist tradition dearly and continue to create much unnecessary confusion.

The four errors I shall identify are all interdependent. Philosophically they involve what I shall argue are misjudgements in the areas of epistemology (the first), metaphysics (the second) and ethics (the remaining two). In relation to the first, which is epistemological, I will thus also be able to explain more of the standpoint from which I can claim to identify “errors” within the Buddhist tradition and still hold a Buddhist view.

1. Emphasising revelation over experience

The epistemological tension

Within Buddhism there is a constant tension between two tendencies. These two tendencies amount to two rival epistemologies, because they offer differing (sometimes though not necessarily contradictory) ways of gaining knowledge.

The first, which I shall call “revelation”, is the tendency to accept beliefs on the ground that they have come from the Buddha or another enlightened being, or at least from a teacher who is closer to enlightenment than oneself. The truth is thus “revealed” through the words or example of another, whether through the process of scripture and its interpretation, or more directly through word of mouth.

The second, which I shall call “experience”, is the tendency to accept beliefs on the ground that they have proved consistent with experience (in the broadest sense of the term). This may include personal experience through the senses, “internal” experience through meditation or intuition, or the large amount of second-hand information we receive which records the experiences of others (but which is not understood as especially revelatory).

As sources of knowledge, both of these have their drawbacks. Over-reliance on revelation can lead to a great deal of faith being placed in one source which may turn out to be misplaced. Even if the source is reliable, faults are also very likely in the transmission, communication or interpretation of the knowledge. The appeal to revelation is also irredeemably circular in its self-justification: for example, you can quote one source from the Pali Canon and back it up with another, but no source from the Pali Canon will ever give an independent reason for believing the Pali Canon.

On the other hand, experience is subject to the distorting influence of our own ignorance. We interpret our experience within the categories imposed by our culture, background, and prior beliefs. Various emotional responses tend to interfere with a dispassionate awareness of these categories. Even if we are attempting to compensate for this ignorance, it is impossible to know when we may be wrong or have only partially grasped the truth of the matter. One of the key roles of the Buddha, of scriptures, of spiritual teachers or spiritual friends may be to make us aware of our ignorance and thus “reveal” a truth beyond what was previously assumed.

The most basic principle of knowledge about the Dharma, then, must involve balancing these sources of knowledge in a way which avoids the weaknesses of each as much as possible, and enables the fullest access to truth undistorted either by the ignorance of prejudice or by that of misplaced faith. Whilst we must place faith in some forms of authority, that authority needs to be itself subject to continual scrutiny.

I want to argue, though, that most Buddhist tradition has, on balance, put too much emphasis on revelation and not enough on experience. Whilst there is no doubt that much of the tradition shows recognition of both sources of knowledge, the issue is whether it has effectively balanced them, or whether the wider cultural norms found in the background to traditional Buddhism have swung things too far in favour of revelation.

If one tries to view this in the broadest perspective, it would be astonishing if the bias towards revelation as prime source of knowledge which exists in almost all traditional religious beliefs, and the regard for unquestionable authority which shapes traditional societies, had not skewed the whole epistemology of traditional Buddhism out of balance. It is Buddhism's traditional, rather than specifically its oriental, origins that have ensured this. Whilst personal experience has always had a major role to play in all the world's religions, such experience has nearly always been appropriated to support adherence to doctrines handed down and believed in on the basis of tradition and authority. If Buddhism had wholly avoided this process it would be incredible.

It is of course because of the stress on experience as a basis of judgement in modern science, and on the autonomy of judgement in modern democratic societies, that we have access to a different perspective on this issue from that of traditional Buddhism. This does *not* mean that that different perspective is necessarily correct, only that the standard of comparison available enables a broader and more informed judgement. In the light of science we can understand the epistemology of Buddhism much more fully, without going so far as to assume a standard of judgement based on Western science alone.

Comparison with philosophy of science

So in what way has the tendency to overemphasise revelation compared to experience manifested itself in traditional Buddhism? This starts to become apparent if one compares the balanced approach that one might expect at first sight with a typical picture of an actual Buddhist approach.

The immediate difficulty in making such a comparison is the lack of worked-out models of what a balanced approach ought to be. In my view we can find much help here, by considering the work done in the philosophy of science by such figures as Karl Popper, Imre Lakatos and Thomas Kuhn. These philosophers have engaged with at least some of the complexity of the question "How do we progress towards objectivity¹?" by considering in what ways advances in scientific knowledge may justifiably claim to have done so. The problems involved in claiming advances of scientific knowledge are in many ways similar (though certainly not identical) to those involved in claiming spiritual knowledge. In both cases there is no final reason for believing that any doctrine or theory is correct, whatever the authority of its origins, but it is also possible for experience to be mistakenly interpreted in the wrong framework of belief.

As an illustration of the way the striking of a balance in relation to this problem by a philosopher of science can point to the kind of balance required in Buddhism, consider the ideas of Lakatos². Lakatos was one of the first philosophers of science to consider in detail how scientists actually arrive at new discoveries to create his theories of scientific knowledge. He concluded from this that most scientific theories begin with basic assumptions which inspire 'research programmes'; a whole sequence of further theories and experiments which depend on the basic assumptions. These core assumptions can be neither proved nor disproved within the context of the research programme. However, they do give rise (together with auxiliary hypotheses) to more particular theories which can be tested against experience. When they are falsified by experience, the scientist must go back to the basic assumptions of the research programme and work out alternative testable theories which are still consistent with it.

A balance between revelation and experience is very apparent in this pattern. For many scientists, the basic theories which they assume to be true as the basis of further work are taken on the authority of predecessors and colleagues, as supported by the general acceptance of the scientific community. Although the nature of the investigation is different, the work of many scientists is thus analogous to that of an individual Buddhist who takes the Dharma on faith and tests it against his/her experience in specific ways. For example, this might mean testing the efficacy of meditation in improving concentration and/or positivity. The Buddhist's "experiment" may not be as publicly observable as the scientist's, but it is similarly reproducible. In both cases, also, the basic assumptions behind the experiment have to be accepted on authority in order to make the experiment possible. Without these prior assumptions there would be no clearly articulated theory to be tested and observations would not contribute towards any general conclusion.

So far, then, Lakatos's evidence shows that traditional Buddhist ways of gaining knowledge are more similar to scientific ones than might initially have been expected. However, the differences arise when we consider the issue of in what circumstances an entire research programme can be abandoned: in other words, when our most basic assumptions should be reconsidered. Lakatos argues that there are no conclusive indications from experience as to when such a leap should be made. However discredited, exhausted and unfruitful a particular set of assumptions may appear to be, it can never be ruled out that there may be unexpected discoveries around the corner made using them.

Nevertheless Lakatos argues that there are rational judgements which can be made as to when to make such judgements. The chief one is that there should be an alternative theory available which is not subject to the same falsification. This alternative theory should also explain apparent confirmations of the first theory, and predict new facts which would otherwise appear improbable. In this way he thought that new basic paradigms could still readily be tested.

Lakatos's criteria might well provide justification for many conversions to Buddhism in the West. Compared to other established Western religions and

philosophies, Buddhism may offer an alternative explanation of the purpose of human life which is not subject the same metaphysical doubts. It may also seem to provide an explanation of what we may have found valuable in other faiths or contexts, such as Christianity or art, whilst nevertheless offering new challenges to our goals and values.

If one continues to apply Lakatos in exploring the Buddhist tradition further, though, his approach may point to key failings in the traditional Buddhist approach. Whilst traditionally, for example, a Buddhist for whom one meditation practice was not working might well have shifted to another, the larger failure of what are considered more basic aspects of the Dharma has not led to them being reconsidered or new paradigms adopted. Confronted with challenges to, say, the theory of karma and rebirth or the practice of monasticism, a typical traditional Buddhist response has been to defend these institutions rather replacing them. The typical line of argument in their defence has been an appeal to revelation rather than an examination of practical effects known through experience, or at any rate practical effects have been judged in terms of revelation. Rebirth, for example, is accepted by most Buddhists in the West largely on the grounds that the Buddha seems to have taught it. Even if they don't feel able to say unequivocally that they believe in it, they will say that they are suspending judgement out of respect for the Buddha's teaching. They will interpret a total lack of positive evidence, not as a reason to abandon the theory and replace it with one which can actually be tested in experience, but as an indication that they are not yet in a position to know the truth of the matter.

Failure to strike a balance in traditional Buddhism

The appeal to experience in traditional Buddhist thinking, then, is not wholly disingenuous, but certainly limited in its actual application. The crucial issue at stake is that of whether unfruitful beliefs which are given clear support in traditional accounts of Buddhist teaching are to be retained, and hence whether Buddhism has a non-negotiable doctrinal "essence" or whether it is actually an evolving and changing attempt to reach truth and objectivity. For Buddhism to have an essence would be clearly contrary to the implications of the doctrine of *anatta*, usually included in most accounts of that essence, and hence inconsistent. We cannot theoretically acknowledge the changing nature of Buddhist doctrine and then exempt certain doctrines from change on revelatory grounds, whether or not they actually were the word of the Buddha.

To actually balance revelation with experience requires that a number of awkward questions be asked about the testing of Buddhist teachings through experience. How long should we test them for? When do we consider a teaching tested and thus confirmed or falsified? How much success is required to confirm or deny a teaching? What is the measure of that success? The fact that there is no absolutely justifiable specific answer to such questions, and that they depend on a balance of judgements, is no justification for avoiding them. A balance of judgement, free of distorting prejudice on such questions, seems likely to yield an incrementalist answer: we have to set ourselves small goals and see whether Buddhist practice enables us to achieve them, in doing

so acknowledging criteria both for success and for failure. A given number of such successes may be enough to be judged to provide initial justification for our acceptance of the doctrine, provided that we can make some distinction of this from our own ability to practise it and from other surrounding conditions. Similarly a given number of failures may provide reasons for modifying a doctrine or even abandoning it altogether, *provided* (and here Lakatos's criterion is important) there is a better alternative available with just as much explanatory power.

To strike such a balance would not be to give up on revelation or the recognition of human ignorance. Without this, and without some of the virtue of faith or confidence in such revelation, we would never enter upon the Path at all, and even begin to test out the Dharma. But such confidence is in any case likely to falter or become defensive if insufficient attention is paid to experience.

In striking such a balance it is also important to recognise that in a Western context, many of the "revelations" providing basic assumptions for our investigation may not in any case be Buddhist ones. These may particularly interfere with our testing of the Dharma by creating unacknowledged auxiliary hypotheses in terms of which it is being understood. The most common of these involve unnecessary dualisms which may be present in our interpretation of Buddhist teaching but which may not have been present in the original setting. The dualism of freewill and determinism in Western philosophy is a widespread example of this, applied whenever "taking responsibility for our actions" involves also avoiding recognition of conditions operating on our minds and bodies which limit that responsibility, or on the other hand acknowledging conditions so fully that responsibility is neglected. The false assimilation of non-Buddhist views to Buddhist ones may play a part in this process. A view may be carefully justified through quotations from the scriptures or past masters and yet its entire tenor reflect much more of such presuppositions than of the subtle positions which may have been held by those quoted.

The remaining three "errors" that I shall be considering will all provide further examples of an over-emphasis on revelation over experience in traditional Buddhism. All of them are both due to this initial epistemological error and provide further indications of its implications and effects.

2. Interpreting the Middle Way metaphysically

One's basic approach to the epistemology of the Dharma also determines one's approach to the interpretation of the Middle Way, and the prominence that one gives this teaching. If one concentrates on revelation as the primary source of knowledge in Buddhism, the Middle Way teaching will appear as a non-negotiable dollop of metaphysical truth, or a teaching about which sorts of teachings are true and which false. Such an approach is hardly likely to help modern Buddhists to get much closer to discovering the truth now, even if ancient documents about the Middle Way (such as the *Brahmajala Sutta*)

pinpointed important contemporary errors in the philosophical landscape of the Buddha's time, since that philosophical landscape has changed enormously.

If, on the contrary, one attempts to rectify a traditional imbalance by laying more stress on the Middle Way as a method of interpreting experience, the Middle Way can begin to assume its rightful place at the core of the Dharma, instead of becoming increasingly marginalised. I want to argue that the Middle Way consists in a balanced epistemological strategy, and that eternalism and nihilism consist in unbalanced epistemological strategies which are therefore relatively less likely to lead in the direction of truth. To do this one must do more than appeal to the texts of the Pali Canon, even though this may provide many initial stimuli for discussion (even in considering the Pali Canon it is important to consider the pattern of the Middle Way in the whole story of the Buddha's life, rather than just the explicit teachings given about it³). Instead one must dare to generalise about the beliefs and strategies that promote objectivity both in Buddhist practice and beyond it.

A metaphysical interpretation of the Middle Way begins with a wholly metaphysical interpretation of eternalism and nihilism, and then naturally understands the Middle Way as an alternative metaphysical position lying between them. A metaphysical interpretation of eternalism sees it purely as a belief that the self is eternal, and a metaphysical view of nihilism is seen as the view that it perishes at death. If one limits one's ground of knowledge to revelation, there are certainly adequate grounds in the Pali Canon for arguing that this is all that eternalism and nihilism are, but to do so does not reveal the usefulness of the doctrine.

A moral example: a vegetarian's dilemma

To show this let me take an example of making a moral judgement and finding the point of balance between inflexible adherence to a moral principle and a flexible response to circumstances so as to bring about the best consequences. In this case it could be deciding between sticking rigidly to a moral principle of vegetarianism and avoiding offending my hosts, who are traditional-minded people. In this case, the metaphysical interpretation of the Middle Way would suggest that an eternalist would stick rigidly to the moral principle in the belief that this would result in rewards after death, whilst a nihilist would not follow the moral principle: because of a belief that it did not matter because the self does not survive after death and there will therefore be no karmic reward or retribution.

Neither of these accounts of the reasoning of the eternalist and nihilist get anywhere near capturing the thought-processes in the dilemma of the modern vegetarian (probably even the Buddhist one). The rigid vegetarian who never compromises will probably do so because of a strong identification with the welfare of animals or with the environmental effects of meat production, not because of a belief about rewards after death. The lackadaisical vegetarian, on the other hand, who pays lip-service to vegetarianism but never has the courage to challenge anyone else with the principle when any inconvenience is involved, is likely to be a weak character with insufficient confidence to

challenge others with his moral convictions, not in the least swayed by a lack of belief in the continuation of the self. A Buddhist vegetarian identifying the balanced way to act in these circumstances, likewise, will take into account the full set of conditions, including the effects on animals, the effects on the host, and their own patterns of behaviour and moral resolutions: thoughts about survival after death are very unlikely to play any role.

The vast majority of moral judgements in the modern world will be similar to this. Informally Buddhists are very likely to identify a “Middle Way” consisting of a balance of judgements on moral issues, which take into account all the relevant conditions rather than a single rigid principle and yet maintain moral clarity and continuity. Yet Buddhist doctrine as traditionally interpreted is totally inadequate in helping them reach this balance, and is much more likely to confuse the issue than to aid its resolution.

The Middle Way between many pairs of metaphysical beliefs

To understand the Middle Way non-metaphysically, then, it is necessary to consider what more general principles lie behind the identification of a belief in the continuation or annihilation of the self as the two extremes of wrong view in the Buddha’s time. Undoubtedly the most general balance which is being sought is not one of metaphysical belief, but an epistemological balance. Since metaphysical beliefs consist in dogmatic prejudices held regardless of experience, this epistemological balance must consist in an avoidance of such metaphysical beliefs. Belief in the eternal existence of the self or in the converse are thus *illustrations* of the kinds of metaphysical beliefs which may be dogmatically held and prevent open investigation of the conditions of our lives, but they are not the only such possible illustrations.

They are also not randomly chosen illustrations, but illustrations of a pattern of dualistic thinking in which a positive metaphysical assumption is opposed to its negation, with a lack of recognition of the middle position which may suggest alternative third possibilities. In the traditional metaphysical explanation the eternal existence of the self is opposed to its non-existence, but the third Buddhist position requires us to stop thinking in terms of the category of “self” altogether, and rather engage with the totality of conditions which cause us to think in particular ways. But there are many alternative metaphysical beliefs which could be used as illustrations here (some of these mentioned as the subject of the Buddha’s “silence”). Traditionally the eternity or finite duration of the universe and the spatial infinity versus finite extent of the universe are mentioned, but one could also add others: the existence or non-existence of a physical world apart from our minds, the existence or non-existence of our minds apart from the physical world, determinism or indeterminism of all events, freewill or determinism of human choices, the existence or non-existence of cosmic justice, the existence or non-existence of God, the existence of an absolute good or merely relative goods, and the supervenience of any type of object of study as a distinct type irreducible to the next simplest level (as in the debate as to whether biology is reducible to chemistry, or values to facts). Since the Buddha, and across civilisations, dozens of new types of metaphysical dualism have been spawned, all of them

equally fatuous. Since experience can always be interpreted in a way which is consistent with the truth of either side of a metaphysical dualism, its acceptance constantly makes the believer dependent on revelation alone.

To take a simple example of this, consider the freewill or determinism through which the responsibility of a criminal can be judged. At one extreme, conservatives tend to judge criminals as entirely responsible for their actions regardless of the conditions of their background or situation. At the other, liberals tend to stress the determining effects of social and/or psychological conditions in producing the crime. No amount of evidence either about the conditions or about the thought-processes of the criminal will change these basic presuppositions through which that evidence is judged, and either view can be entirely consistent with any evidence whatever. Whatever the social or psychological conditions, the conservative can always argue that the criminal was responsible for her response to these conditions, and however much deliberate reasoning may have been involved in the crime, the liberal can still see this as determined by the conditions at work.

The epistemological extremes to which the doctrine of the Middle Way is more usefully warning us against, then, could make appeal to any of the extremes of these metaphysical dualisms. Either eternalism or nihilism can be based not just on the belief or disbelief in the eternal self, but alternatively or in addition on a number of other metaphysical claims. The acceptance of one type of metaphysics may be accompanied by the denial of another, so that there is no sure way of distinguishing eternalism from nihilism on the basis of positive or negative claims alone. This becomes clearer the more one attempts to analyse modern philosophies in terms of eternalism and nihilism: Marxism, for example, is materialist and determinist (at least at a social level) and thus denies the basis of much traditional religious or platonic metaphysics, yet it maintains belief in the ultimate good of the communist society as the goal of history. A close and honest look at many modern ideologies will reveal a pattern of metaphysical affirmations and denials far more complex than most traditional Buddhism acknowledges. We cannot always classify them easily into eternalist or nihilist⁴, but to the extent that they depend on explicit or implicit metaphysical claims it is still clear that they have failed (to a greater or lesser extent) to strike the Middle Way.

The Middle Way itself, being a subtle and constantly re-balancing position, and consisting not just of certain right views but of correlative psychological states, must largely be delineated in the negative terms of what it is avoiding. As for a steersman finding his way between two lighthouses in the dark, each of which marks dangerous rocks, there is no way positively laid out before us, only a bearing indicating a general direction and two extremes to avoid. The conditions for the avoidance of the two extremes depend not just on theoretical knowledge of the extremes to be avoided, but on a continual awareness of the course and skill in adjusting it. It is for this reason that the Middle Way cannot be accurately be understood in metaphysical terms. Since a metaphysical view is a belief held to be true dogmatically regardless of experience, and involves a false dichotomy, the Middle Way involves both a continuity of view and a constant adjustment of it in the light of experience,

replacing false dichotomies with continua and incrementalities in order to enable as close and unimpeded an understanding of reality as possible. It is not a metaphysical view but a view that avoids metaphysics. For the very same reason, it cannot be understood only as the avoidance of one particular metaphysical dualism such as the eternal existence of the self and its annihilation, for such avoidance would be fruitless if other metaphysical views took its place. To be a consistent position, the Middle Way must involve navigating between the extremes of *all* metaphysical views.

The confusion of balance with negative metaphysics

One factor which has greatly impeded any such process of balancing in the Western tradition of thought has been the confusion of a balanced position with a negative metaphysical position. The basic distinction here is between claiming that such-and-such a metaphysical quantity (e.g. God, absolute morality, freewill) *does not* exist on the one hand, and on the other withholding assent either to the existence or the non-existence of the quantity due to a realisation of the pragmatically negative effects of any such belief. In the traditional Western discussion about God in the Philosophy of Religion, this bears a relationship to the position in regard to God's existence known as hard agnosticism: God's existence is not denied (as in atheism), nor is judgement withheld only because of a lack of evidence which might still be expected in the future (as in soft agnosticism), but it is recognised that there can never be any such evidence which makes God's existence any more or less probable. In such circumstances judgement can only be made on the basis of the pragmatic effects of holding the belief. The question becomes whether the belief enables the discovery of reality or impedes it, and if it does, the provisional holding of the belief becomes justifiable. To deny God's existence (or to deny any other metaphysical quantity) would involve just as dogmatic a presupposition as accepting it. Such a belief would involve assuming the universe to be meaningless, and imposing that meaninglessness on it rather than being open to all possible meaningfulness which emerges in the process of our engagement with it.

But the distinction between denying a metaphysical claim and withholding judgement is often missed. This can result in two kinds of error: one that of understanding a Middle Way position as nihilistic (for dogmatic reasons, not just a pragmatic failure to strike the balance), the other of understanding nihilistic positions as the Middle Way. The former can be frequently seen in Western interpretations of Buddhism, the latter in the crude and misleading assimilation of the Buddhist Middle Way to nihilistic Western philosophies like existentialism, postmodernism and Wittgensteinianism. The arguments in either case tend to be limited to the theoretical interpretation of Buddhist revelation, and fail to consider the balancing which is required when an experiential and practical dimension of Buddhism is taken equally into account. Eternalism and nihilism have many ways of entering into unholy alliances to confuse the Middle Way.

Another version of this type of error is found in the Buddhist tradition itself, and so I am led to the third of the four major errors.

3. Prioritising eternalism over nihilism

This error, again, is likely to follow from the epistemological error of giving revelation priority over experience. The only reason for ever accepting a metaphysical belief is revelation, and the only possible defence of it is in revelatory terms. To the extent that Buddhist beliefs are conceived as metaphysical and accepted because of revelation, then, Buddhism becomes predominantly eternalist. It is only where it succeeds in taking experience into account as a ground of knowledge that there is any possibility of beginning to reach the Middle Way. Traditional Buddhist reliance on revelation, then, is inseparable from its tendency to eternalism.

This tendency can be seen in two ways. Firstly in the explicit and traditional idea that eternalism is superior to nihilism and a lesser evil than it, and secondly in inconsistencies within traditional Buddhist doctrine between the Middle Way and other doctrines which require an implicit eternalism. In this section I will be considering the first of these errors, and in the final section probably the most important example of the latter, which centres around the doctrine of karma.

The traditional prioritisation of eternalism consists in the view that it is superior to and preferable to nihilism. Eternalism is the lesser evil because (in the metaphysical interpretation of the Middle Way) following religious practices motivated by the desire for favourable rebirth does at least lead to that goal. The eternalist is seen as still in a position to refine his beliefs towards the Middle Way in the final push for enlightenment, whereas the nihilist, without any guiding moral or religious principles, is likely to find herself in much less favourable rebirths where progress is much more difficult. Furthermore, the Buddha himself had to progress to eternalism before discovering the Middle Way, and most of his disciples were converted eternalists.

There are many difficulties in this traditional viewpoint. Most basically, it conveys a lopsided view of the Middle Way which is actually weighted on one side. As an explanation of how objective understanding may be reached, the Middle Way is fatally compromised by this doctrine. How can anyone achieve a balance when one side is preferable to the other? If the Middle Way is a tightrope, the doctrine of the preferability of eternalism makes treading it like crossing a tightrope carrying a balancing-pole with a half-ton of bricks hung onto one end of it.

Misunderstanding nihilism

The major difficulty seems to involve a misunderstanding of nihilism which is the product of a traditional society, and which can be seen as mistaken in a modern context. In a traditional society, the whole justification for the most basic conventional morality depends on positive metaphysical views, whether implicit or explicit. Nihilism, it is then assumed, involves the removal of all motivation for conventional morality. Surely, it is thought, the basic social norms in which children are brought up depend on the assumption of

eternalism, and perhaps the most advanced in society can move onto the Middle Way later? The basic error here is the assumption that nihilism involves the removal of all motives for conventional morality, when all it does is remove metaphysical motives. For most nihilists, conventional assumptions remain and children are brought up in accordance with group norms just as under eternalism. There seems to be no reason to think that the metaphysical justification of eternalism leads to the better teaching of those norms than its denial.

This can be seen much more clearly in the modern context than previously. The modern world has seen a succession of nihilistic movements inclined to deny the metaphysical claims which were previously generally accepted and substitute group or individual judgement: from intellectual movements like empiricist scientism, existentialism, postmodernism and analytic philosophy to more popular phenomena like sixties experimentation, the New Age, and modern youth culture. Contrary to the horrified predictions of conservatives, these groups, whatever their errors, have not led to the collapse of society into anarchy, or even to a significant slowing of the inexorably rising standards being applied to such areas as education, human rights and equal opportunities, and the healthcare and social care provided by the state. This is not the place to give a detailed sociological account of why this is the case, only to point out the way in which group norms continue to prove themselves independent of the distinction between positive or negative metaphysics.

Arguments from complexity and logic

If we understand the relationship between eternalism and nihilism not to be clear-cut but to consist in a constant interchange, affirmation and denial of a range of metaphysical views, then this becomes easier to comprehend. One positive metaphysical view may be accompanied by another negative one, or a negative metaphysical view accompanied by an unrecognised and implicit positive view in another area. For example, a denial of the existence of God may be accompanied by a dogmatic insistence on the absolute status of human rights, or an insistence on absolute responsibility for individual actions where criminals are concerned accompanied by a complete denial of individual responsibility for group norms or for actions taken within the framework of the economic system. Modern thinking contains just as many metaphysical assumptions as any traditional society, but they exist in complex and often inconsistent and shifting relationships. Metaphysics continues to produce prejudice and confusion, but no more on one side than another.

A further demonstration of the equal status of eternalism and nihilism can be found from a consideration of what is actually meant by the terms positive and negative. As applied to claims these are logical terms, and thus are properties only of the way we choose to describe things. A positive claim is positive only in relation to a negative, not in relation to any underlying or absolute standard, and a positive claim can always be re-described as a negative one and vice-versa. For example, a positive belief in God's existence could also be

described as a disbelief in humanity's capacity to find its own justifiable values, and a denial of absolute morality is a simultaneous affirmation of relative morality.

In the light of this complexity, all that can be affirmed is that attachment to (positive or negative) metaphysical beliefs inhibits understanding of reality, not that one type does so more than another. Nor does one type of metaphysical belief promote basic conventional morality more than another, since what is needed for conventional morality is an acceptance of convention, and it makes no difference whether that convention is justified through positive or negative metaphysics⁵.

The implications of balance

The implications of this for modern Buddhists are far-reaching. We do not have to live in denial of the relative strengths of a society in which nihilism is coming more to the fore. Rather, we can rejoice in our nihilistic heritage as much as our eternalistic heritage, drawing the relative truth and relative falsehood out of each. Hume and Sartre, or even Richard Dawkins and Don Cupitt, can be our heroes (or our villains) as much as Jesus, Muhammad, Plato and Kant. Nor do we have to deny the genuine objectivity which has been achieved through science, or perhaps even the idea that Western civilisation may, on the whole, have hit the Middle Way rather more often than the Eastern civilisations in which Buddhism arose. The context in which the Middle Way was first formally identified does not have to be the one in which it is most effectively practised, however great the ironies that this recognition may involve.

4. Confusing karma and conditionality

The fourth and final error consists in a further aspect of the prioritisation of eternalism, that is the presence of doctrines in traditional Buddhism which are inconsistent with the Middle Way, depend on eternalism, and are justified through revelation alone. Foremost amongst these doctrines, I want to argue, is that of karma, where karma is understood as a revealed doctrine subsuming, but going beyond, the mere recognition of conditionality.

A tension has often been observed between two elements in Buddhist doctrine⁶. On the one hand are doctrines concerned directly with the recognition of the unenlightened state and the movement towards an enlightened one: these would include the Four Noble Truths and Noble Eightfold Path, and have been called "nirvanic" doctrines. Others are concerned only with the causes of change, whether for better or worse, within an unenlightened state, and here must be placed the doctrines of karma and rebirth, typical of "karmic" doctrines. These two doctrines are in tension not only because they apparently offer different moral goals (nirvana as opposed to a better rebirth), but because they appeal to different epistemologies. Here, then, I want to argue, we have the moral dimension of the reliance on revelation to the exclusion of experience.

Apart from the problem of the reification of nirvana itself, which is of remote interest to most of us, the nirvanic doctrines of Buddhism do not contain any metaphysical assumptions, nor depend on revelation alone to be believed. They confront us with the possibility of an incremental path of spiritual progress from the point at which we begin now, together with the necessity of recognising and taking into account the conditions with which we begin. Certainly the idea of a path could not be known if one relied on experience alone without any revelation, for we have to trust to the possibility of progress in a future of which we are ignorant, but experience is also required to understand both what may be unsatisfactory about our current condition and how it is possible to change it. We only “know” the First Noble Truth, for example, when we experience dukkha in our lives as well as giving a label to it.

In contrast to this, “karmic” doctrines do contain such metaphysical assumptions. To explain this, first of all I want to distinguish three interpretations of the doctrine of karma and karma-vipaka:

1. That all our volitional acts are requited by effects of the same moral complexion and magnitude, and that all our sense-experiences consist in such requitals.
2. That all our volitional acts are requited by effects of the same moral complexion and magnitude, but that only some of our sense-experiences consist in such requitals. There are thus other types of conditionality at work (as in the teaching of the five niyamas from Buddhaghosa).
3. That events in the universe, including human volitional acts and their effects on the person making them, seem to fall into regular and often predictable patterns of cause and effect.

The all-encompassing view of karma

The first of these positions, still held by many traditional Buddhists, reduces all conditionality to karma. All the phenomena observed by science become the outcome of past human choices, and the universe itself becomes the result of ignorance, in a massive over-interpretation of the central Buddhist insight that our states of mind have a conditioning effect on our experiences. This view can only be sustained through one of two metaphysical assumptions:

- a. The idealist view that only minds exist and there is no physical universe beyond what is observed by our minds. The volitions which occur in our minds are thus capable of conditioning all events in the universe we construct for ourselves.⁷
- b. The realist view that there is a universe separate from our minds, but that this universe is controlled or conditioned by forces which mysteriously make moral requital occur on every occasion. Somehow the universe I perceive is in some sense the same as the one you do, but it is nevertheless the universe we both deserve however different we may be.

One of these views is necessary to explain why karma should operate in such an absolute way, for if we were to acknowledge our experience as comprising elements both internal and external to our minds, the pattern of just requital would become unpredictable from the standpoint of either mind or physical universe. If the universe we experience is only mental projection, the intrusion of any reality from beyond that would break up any pattern created by that mental projection, and if the universe is real but just, that justice could be distorted by any recognition of the ways it is being created by my mind.

Not only this metaphysical dogma, but a further metaphysical view about the identity of the self is required for this view, eternalist in the classic sense. For if karmic requital is to be just or proportionate in any sense, then the self receiving its just deserts must be absolutely identical to the one who did the original volitional action. Traditional Buddhism maintains the doctrine of anatta whilst simultaneously maintaining an *implicit* belief in a self subject to karma. If the contradiction between anatta and karma is subtly pointing towards the Middle Way between them, it is not one which allows any of the gross metaphysical assumptions of karma but rather requires us to abandon them.

The partially-conditioning view of karma

Then let us look at the second type of interpretation of karma, which allows for other types of conditionality alongside the karmic. The advantage of this view at first sight is that it does not require either idealism or realism, but allows us to recognise both a physical and a mental component to our experiences. It also allows for the possibility that we do not deserve everything that happens to us.

However, some of the metaphysical assumptions of the first view still adhere to this one. It still claims that all our volitional actions will be requited, a claim which could only be justified through revelation, as it could never be observed. Not only could we never observe the relationship between previous volitional actions and their effects, but we are not even in a position to observe which effects are due to volitional actions and which are due to other types of conditionality. This belief, again, could be reconciled with any conceivable experience.

On closer examination, too, this view turns out not to have wholly avoided the metaphysical assumptions of idealism or realism, but merely to have a contradictory mixture of the two. For to believe that we will always be requited for our volitional actions requires idealism or realism for exactly the same reasons that the previous view did, regardless of the fact that other kinds of conditionality also operate. The other types of conditionality, on the other hand, require realist assumptions to support the belief that these forms of conditionality are *not* the result of human action or the human mind. The implicit assumption of the unchanging self is also still necessary for us to deserve what we get as a result of volitional action, even if we still get other things that we don't deserve.

To get around the metaphysical assumptions in the doctrine of karma it is not enough to merely think on the level of metaphysics and cobble different doctrines together: we have to go back to epistemology and avoid the unnecessary dualisms which intervened so as to create the problem in the first place. A statement of the situation without these metaphysical assumptions might look something like this: *We have experiences of volition and experiences of an apparent universe of perception, and we seem to be able to trace some regular patterns of relationship between these volitions and resulting experiences. We would do well to act appropriately so as to change our volitions and thus improve some aspects of our resulting experience.*

Conditionality alone

This takes me to the third type of interpretation of what I must now call “karma”: merely the view that there are conditional relationships between volitional actions and other events, as well as other types of conditionality. This view is all that is necessary for the Buddhist to practise and make spiritual progress, for if it is a realisation of the effects of our actions that motivates us in ethics, then this only requires a general recognition of the probable results of our actions, not a belief in a metaphysical law. This is a view that is wholly compatible with the idea that our experiences are due to the combination of mind and external world, rather than merely one or the other. Nor does it assume anything about the identity of the subject of experience, changing or unchanging.

The only problem with this view is that it is often confused with the theory of karma as understood in either of the above accounts, sometimes perhaps disingenuously. One common method of conversion to karmic belief among Westerners seems to be the acknowledgement from experience of conditionality, the identification of this with “karma”, and then the acceptance of the metaphysical doctrine of karma because it has the same name as the one that has been given to conditionality. But in this process the experience has been merely hoodwinked and revelation swallowed whole regardless of its justification.

The Buddhist tradition does have a great deal to contribute to our understanding of the workings of volition and other mental events, but not through the doctrine of karma. Exactly the same remarks can be made about pratyasamutpada interpreted in accordance with this theory of karma, and about rebirth, which almost entirely depends on it. Why do Western Buddhists persist either in swallowing inconsistent traditional metaphysical beliefs, or, when they adopt beliefs which are much more in accordance with the Middle Way and have some relationship with experience, labelling these new beliefs with the old labels? Such a procedure can only grossly impede the search for truth by creating confusion, and encouraging reliance on the very metaphysics which the Middle Way sets out to avoid.

Conclusion: the consequences

So what have been the consequences of these errors for Buddhism? I would suggest that they have been far-reaching.

1. The lack of science

Western Buddhists need to confront one major historical question in evaluating their religion: why is it that science developed predominantly in Greek, Islamic and then Christian civilisation and not in the Buddhist South or East Asia? Why did the experientialist promise of the Kalama Sutta not lead to greater fruit? Obviously the reasons are complex, but that is not a reason for failing to examine them, or for failing to examine the role played by religious and philosophical assumptions (in complex inter-relationship with geographical and other factors) both in the development and the suppression of science.

Whatever the reasons why scientists are given to investigate the world, they are held back or suppressed (whether psychologically, socially or politically) by dogmatic beliefs which would be threatened by any such investigation. So whatever the underlying historical causes, we must conclude that where science actually did arise, the power of metaphysics was actually less than it was in the places where it did not arise. So by this measure, the total power of metaphysics in at least some Christian and Islamic societies seems to have been less than that of most Buddhist societies. Even if this can be explained in terms of “non-religious” factors, Buddhism apparently failed to adapt itself to these conditions sufficiently to bring about much of a shift away from revelation and towards experience. If traditional Buddhism is really “The Middle Way” instead of an inconsistent bundle of doctrines and practices that has merely served as a vehicle for the transmission of that vital doctrine, why has it not made more difference than this? Why have Buddhists not been at the forefront of medical breakthroughs, of new technology to relieve people from drudgery and allow them to practise the dharma, or of revolutions in communications technology?

To say this, again, is not at all to reduce Buddhism to science or to measure it solely by the standards set by science. Rather, it is merely to consistently apply its own core epistemological doctrine. The Middle Way requires us to maintain a continuity of theory as well as constantly working to be adequate to new conditions by investigating them, which appears to mean that if unimpeded it would naturally adapt some approaches and techniques we now call “scientific”. This does not mean that such science would be pursued or applied with the same degree of narrow rationalism or lack of consideration for psychological conditions sometimes found among modern devotees of scientific progress.

2. Polarised and ineffectual ethics

A further implication of the prioritisation of eternalism is again predictable from the nature of eternalism: the idealisation or absolutisation of ethics tends to lead to a division between those who are at least theoretically able to follow such an ethics and those who are not. Eternalistic ethics provides a difficult moral ideal, yet does not address the conditions required to achieve it. Nor can

such conditions be discovered through experiment if the ethics are accepted solely on revelatory grounds. Those few who manage to attain the ideal (or at least make progress towards it) due to natural gifts or by stumbling upon the right techniques, become widely separated from the many who are only required to accept their ability not to attain it and to support those who do. In Christianity this failure to attain the ideal has been institutionalised through the belief in original sin and the gulf between human beings and God, with Christ providing the magical and instantaneous solution, the symbolic “redemption” from such failure.

To the extent that Buddhism has prioritised eternalism, it has developed the same tendencies. At one extreme this results in the gulf between monk and lay-person in Theravada Buddhism, and at the other the saving grace of Amitabha in Pure Land Buddhism. Such polarisation not only removes the motivation for incremental progress from the many (or in some cases, all) who see themselves as necessarily moral failures, but it even removes effectiveness from the ethics of the few, whose practice becomes increasingly formalised as it is dominated by remote revelation rather than constantly refreshed by using experience as a guide. Again, merely attempting to make one’s experience conform to revelation is not enough here, for the theory itself has to be constantly revised to meet new conditions.

This eternalist slant also continues to afflict the discussion of Buddhist ethics in the West amongst both scholars and practitioners. Buddhism is understood predominantly as offering a set of fixed moral teachings which can be known either from scripture or from teachers, not as offering a method which can help to identify the most effective moral response. Discussions of Buddhist ethics rarely go further than appealing to the precepts and the theory of karma, often accepting the metaphysical views implied by a literal interpretation of these teachings without question, and where they do go further they often involve fitting Buddhist ethics uncomfortably into the straitjacket of a Western ethical theory, such as Aristotelianism, and adopting its implied epistemology without question, rather than working out the implications of the epistemological approach found in basic Buddhist teaching.

For example, discussions of the value of life and the moral justification for killing related to such issues as abortion or war often adopt a metaphysical belief in the intrinsic sacredness of human life without question, basing this on the first precept. This suppresses further discussion of such issues as how much suffering will probably be experienced by those involved, what the longer-term effects of the action are likely to be, and how far we should trust our judgement of the probability and the seriousness of such effects. We do not have to go so far as a purely hedonistic approach, judging solely on the likely experience of pleasure and pain, in order to give experience its due place in considering our moral judgement.

For Westerners, too, an ethics which merely pronounces from on high without engaging sufficiently with experience is likely to prove an ineffectual ethics. For we are motivated by experience to the realisation that ethics is not merely “good” in an abstract sense but also in a concrete and particular one, which

simultaneously attunes our desires to reality and makes it possible to fulfil them. How many possible further followers of Buddhism have been initially put off by something other than this basic message being understood as its first principle?

3. A lack of philosophical education

Finally, a further consequence of these errors in traditional Buddhism has been the limitation of its philosophical tradition. A tradition which at times in early Buddhism did contain genuine debate and innovation has declined in its Eastern context to a largely scholarly tradition. Whilst contact with the West has stimulated much more thought, most of this is still constrained by tradition, and the adaptations which have been made to the Western context are still often justified by appeal to Eastern revelatory models.

The over-emphasis on revelation has led to the impoverishment of Buddhist philosophy, in a way which can be seen more clearly when it is compared to the Western tradition. Although in the Western tradition negative metaphysical assumptions have lately become dominant, at least there is still some vestige of a debate between eternalism and nihilism which makes sophisticated and balanced positions possible. The education which is available to those who study philosophy in the West also provides a training in clear critical judgement of a kind which is required to prevent dogmatic assumptions interrupting our investigation of conditions, which can still be beneficial provided that the students are not overwhelmed by nihilism in the process.

By contrast, very little of such training is available to Buddhists, and it is certainly not seen as an essential part of Buddhist practice. "Study" is often still seen basically as absorbing revelation, or is only slightly modified from that conception. A genuine philosophical training is, however, absolutely vital to those living in a world where various implicit and explicit eternalistic and nihilistic views bombard us constantly. We can never learn to practise effectively in such a world by only accepting instructions from one source and denying all others, for this will prevent us from recognising what is relatively true or false elsewhere and thus developing wisdom and compassion instead of defensiveness in relation to what we encounter. The study and interpretation of Buddhist texts, or even of the works of modern Buddhist teachers, will not go very far towards developing balanced judgement in relation to the beliefs around us, if it is not balanced by both appreciative and critical engagement with other ideologies, and the discussion and development of a student's own ideas. In contrast a revelatory style of study, at its worst, merely reinforces metaphysical dogmatism by schooling its students in knee-jerk intellectual reactions.

The appeal to varieties of temperament does not remove the objective need for this kind of philosophical education as part of Buddhism. Those whose temperament inclines them more towards "faith", and who may find philosophical discussion difficult or tedious, still need to develop philosophically if they are to engage effectively enough in the conditions around them to practise Buddhism, just as those who are inclined towards an

undue or inappropriate application of scepticism or over-abstraction need to turn their scepticism against their own negative metaphysics and develop “faith”: greater openness and continuity of purpose. Philosophical training does not have to take place at a very abstract level for those who find this difficult, and the development of a balanced critical perspective can also occur through discussion of concrete examples at the level of narrative rather than of abstract generalisation. What distinguishes philosophical training of the kind I am advocating here is not necessarily its abstraction, but its avoidance of metaphysical assumptions and its open discussion of the possible truth or falsehood of a wide range of views.

If a positive case is to be made for avoiding the four errors I have outlined, then, the development of genuine philosophical training in Buddhism must be the first recommendation. Perhaps the natural outcome of such genuine philosophical discussions (rather than revelatory-scholarly ones) would be the gradual realisation of these errors. However, balanced training and balanced doctrine have a relationship of mutual causality, and it may be necessary to at least stop working on the assumptions created by these errors before genuine philosophical debate within Buddhism is even possible. Such discussions are a further requirement for balanced ethics and a genuinely Buddhist science to follow.

¹ The term “objectivity” here must not be read as necessarily involving any rejection of the “subjective” inner experience of meditation and reflection. Objectivity in the broader and less prejudiced sense I want to use it involves greater awareness of the totality of conditions, (whether “internal” or “external”) and an attempt to work beyond the limitations of one’s current individual view. These philosophers of science in my view share this understanding of objectivity sufficiently to make the comparison valid, though of course not in every respect.

² See Lakatos, Imre “Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes” from Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge ed. I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave, Cambridge 1974

³ The pattern of the Middle Way in the life of the Buddha can be seen in the process of experimentation, involving testing of the two extremes of nihilism and eternalism. His luxurious life in the palace prior to going forth, dependent only on conventional ideas of duty, can be seen as an experiment in nihilism, whilst the exploration of contemporary religious practices, culminating in extreme asceticism, is an experiment in eternalism. There are thus not one but two key moments of realisation required before finding the balanced path to nirvana, but curiously the Buddhist tradition tends to celebrate the first of these (particularly through ordination, which recapitulates the Buddha’s going forth) much more than the second.

⁴ This doesn’t mean it isn’t worth trying. I do not have space here to give a full account of the features I would attribute to eternalism and nihilism as generally (not absolutely) distinct classifications of wrong views, but the key point would be the adherence to an absolute ground of values in eternalism, and its rejection in nihilism leading to deliberate reliance on relative cultural, group or individual values. This criterion can only be argued for by its much greater usefulness in classifying and understanding modern views than the traditional version.

⁵ I would not wish to deny the possible ways in which *individualism* may undermine conventional morality here, and it may well be the case that individualism can be more closely associated with nihilism than eternalism. However, not all nihilism is individualistic, and individualism can also be justified through eternalism (as in God’s call to the hermit to abandon his social responsibilities).

⁶ E.g. in Spiro, M.E., Buddhism and Society; A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes (1971)

⁷ The Hegelian idea of absolute idealism, in which a universal mind is gradually realising its own unity through a process of dialectic, differs slightly from this, but is still subject to the metaphysical assumptions of historical determinism and ultimately of idealism.