

Title line 1: Chapter Thirteen

Title line 2: The Great Ideas in the Noble Buddhist Doctrine of Liberation

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The Great Ideas are integral to Mortimer J. Adler's Great Books Movement in much the same way that the Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*) and the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya aṭṭhangika magga*) are integral to the doctrine (*dhamma*) of the Buddha. The Great Ideas Movement and Buddhism use the words 'Great' and 'Noble' as concepts that point toward human excellence in thought, word, and deed. For Mortimer J. Adler, the Great Ideas are the philosophical (metaphysical and moral) concepts out of which Western civilization developed. They are the main topics of discussion in an ongoing great conversation that has shaped the history of Western culture.² However, it is precisely because these Great Ideas are great, in so far as they point toward human excellence (virtue), that they ought not be thought of as the exclusive property of the Western world. Instead, as Adler recognized, they should be utilized in the analysis of other cultural traditions. In this chapter, I will use two of Adler's Great Ideas (freedom and religion) to analyze the Buddha's doctrine as it is encountered in the early Indian Buddhist texts.

For Adler and the early Buddhists, the ultimate end of human life was to attain excellence and, thereby, secure human happiness. Adler followed in the venerable tradition of the Greek philosophers who believed that the life of contemplation was the most excellent of lives. For this reason, he focused on identifying the Great Ideas as ideal topics of contemplation and conversation. His chief aim was to be able to apply insights gained from this exercise to the social and political realms of Western and global culture and foster world peace. On the other hand, the Buddha taught a noble doctrine that was primarily geared toward transcendence. The Buddha was a man of his time, firmly embedded in the Indic culture of the age, and given his religious vocation, it is unsurprising that he had comparatively little interest in the political order. Instead, the contemplative life of the early Buddhist monastics was dedicated to a regimen of ascetic training designed to lead its practitioners toward the highest level of spiritual greatness.

The importance of freedom in the attainment of human excellence cannot be overstated. The possibility of attaining excellence presupposes freedom to orient personal acts, intentions, and volitions toward attainment of virtue, especially wisdom. In this sense, freedom is a means to the end of human happiness. For this reason, the main goal of Buddhist doctrine is to attain: (1) bliss,³ (2) liberation,⁴ and (3) release.⁵ All these are said to be characteristics of ultimate freedom.⁶ It is said that by following the Buddha's path, a Buddhist is able to become sovereign over one's own life and to accept complete personal responsibility for one's actions in body, mind, and spirit.

Adler makes a distinction among three different types of freedom: natural, acquired and circumstantial.⁷

¹ This chapter relies on the early Buddhist texts in the Pāli Canon (Tipiṭaka; traditional term for the Buddhist scriptures). This is the most complete extant early Buddhist canon. Unless otherwise noted, italicized words inside parentheses are in the Pāli language. All material from the Pāli Canon and commentaries comes from Chatṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka 4.0 (CST4) (Vipassana Research Institute, Mumbai, 2006); see <http://www.tipitaka.org/cst4>. All references to the Pāli Canon will be footnoted in the standard Pāli Text Society format; abbreviations can be found at <https://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/pali/frontmatter/abbreviations.html> and http://www.palitext.com/subpages/PTS_Abbreviations.pdf. Specifically, books cited in this chapter are as follows:

A: Aṅgutta; D: Dīgha 1a; Dh: Dhammapada; M: Majjhima-nikāya; S: Saṅgīta; Th: Theragāthā; and Ud: Udāna.

² Tim Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture: Mortimer J. Adler and the Great Books Idea* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 47.

³ Th 545.

⁴ D.III.249; S.III.189.

⁵ Dh 23 & 126; Ud 8.

⁶ M.I.298 refers to the immeasurable or limitless deliverance of mind, *yāvatā kho āvuso appamāṇā ceto vimuttiyo, akuppā tāsam cetovimutti aggamakkhāyati*, of which the unshakeable deliverance of the enlightened *arahant*, one who has attained nirvana (*nibbāna*), is said to be the best. In this sense, the *summum bonum* of early Buddhism is a state of ultimate and irreversible freedom from bondage.

⁷ Mortimer J. Adler, *Six Great Ideas. Truth Goodness Beauty Liberty Equality Justice. Ideas We Judge By. Ideas We Act On* (New York: Collier Books, 1984), 140–142.

Natural freedom is simply the species-specific endowed ability to choose. Acquired freedom, in the sense of moral freedom, is a habitual willingness to will what one ought to will, which is the type of freedom that comes from acquiring prudence and freeing oneself from bondage to the lower appetites and passions.⁸ Adler's thinking in regard to these two types of freedom is essentially the same as that of the Buddha. However, Adler differs in making the third aspect of freedom, circumstantial freedom, more of a primary area of focus as a political concern than did the early Buddhists. Adler defined circumstantial freedom as being able to do as one pleases without undue external restraint. The early Buddhists also addressed this issue of circumstantial freedom, especially in the doctrine of karma; but Adler was primarily interested in circumstantial freedom as political liberty, whereas the Buddha and his order of wandering ascetics had far less interest in mundane political concerns.

Nevertheless, freedom is crucial to human excellence in all three of these aspects. Natural freedom is that which makes a human being a person rather than an automaton; acquired freedom reveals new dimensions of existence to the human being (such as the aesthetic and moral dimensions), thereby setting the person apart from the beasts; and circumstantial freedom recognizes the external limitations placed on human freedom in the world and attempts to address the concerns that are raised by this fact.

In the socio-political realm, Adler considers the limits of freedom to depend upon the ability of the principle of justice to measure and regulate liberty. This allows liberty to be harmoniously maximized with other goods, such as equality. Considered as an immaterial good, Adler maintains that justice is an unlimited good. By this he means that we can never seek nor have too much justice. In contrast, being conceptually wider in nature than justice, freedom and equality are not chiefly moral terms. Considered in their natures, they are morally neutral. In and of themselves, they cannot be taken to be principles for determining healthy and unhealthy moral and political choices. To determine this, we have to modify these abstract nouns according to the moral and political qualifier justice. When we do this, Adler claims we achieve the right measure of human greatness in health attainable in a socio-political order: everyone has as much liberty as justice allows and as much equality as justice requires, and no more than that.⁹ This idea of justice as a regulating principle, a measure of psychological health that sets limits upon freedom and serves as a sign (semiotic indicator) toward other, qualitatively higher and unlimited principles, with the Great Idea of religion being the most important of these.

Religion's nature orients human life toward perfection as evinced in the form of a supreme God, or transcendental principle of cosmic order. Adler correctly indicates that this means that we cannot reasonably think of religion as blind or emotional belief or as the acceptance of some metaphysical first principles. Instead, properly conceived, we must think about religion chiefly as a rigorous and complete way of life:

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Religion to the man of faith usually means much more than the acceptance of a creed. It means acts of piety and worship, recourse to prayer, the partaking of sacraments, the observance of certain rituals, the performance of sacrifices and purifications. It means rendering to God what is His due, obeying His commandments, beseeching and gaining the help of His grace whereby to lead a life which shall seem worthy to him. When religion is conceived as nothing more than a set of beliefs which men have adopted, it is restricted to one part of life. It does not qualify every other part of it. It does not demand that inner devotion and external conduct constitute the practice of a man's belief if he is to avoid hypocrisy.¹⁰

As a way of life, religion takes on the nature of a measure of the totality of a person's experience and becomes the most universal genus for all other species of human inquiry, thought, and behavior. In this sense, the entirety of human culture is rooted in the religious impulse and in semiotic mythico-religious narratives. All human cultures are first transmitted to children through stories, not by way of abstract philosophical thinking and logic. The first and most enduring of these stories, the "examples of heroism or adventure embodied in narrative tales such as sustain the cultures of humankind and constitute the substance of the enculturation of children in all societies," are mythico-religious narratives.¹¹ Therefore, in a very real sense, all human philosophy and culture is ultimately based

⁸ Mortimer J. Adler, *The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1955 ©1952), 995.

⁹ Adler, *Six Great Ideas*, 137–139.

¹⁰ Adler, *The Great Ideas*, 588.

¹¹ John N. Deely, *Basics of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 2.

in religion, thereby making religion the greatest of Adler's Great philosophical and cultural ideas.

L1: The Noble Doctrine of Early Buddhism

Evidence of a profoundly religious culture existing in the Indian subcontinent stretches into pre-history, and many of the oldest extant religious texts originate in India. Due to the emergence of the Upaniṣads and new, non-Brahmanical, ascetic movements known collectively as the *śramaṇa* schools, by the time of the Buddha the dominant religious tradition of Vedic Brahmanism was being contested. These *śramaṇa* schools are named for the Sanskrit term meaning one who toils, labors, and exerts oneself, with this definition being applied to the religious mendicants who sought a new type of spiritual greatness. Buddhism was only one of these *śramaṇa* schools, coexisting with Jainism, Ājīvikism, and other non-Brahmanical sects that are best described as eternalists, materialists, and nihilists/skeptics.

The *śramaṇa* schools were a reaction against the ritualism of the Brahmanical tradition, which is thought to date back to the Vedic period. In Brahmanism the ritual activities and sacrifices of Brahmins were seen as contributing to the divine activity of maintaining and ordering the cosmos. The rituals and sacrifices were seen as a link between the human microcosm and the divine macrocosm in a type of analogical reciprocity. Due to the internalization of this type of ritual activity over time, the entirety of human life eventually came to be viewed as a divine enterprise in which humans are engaged with the divine caring for, maintaining, and perpetuating the existence of the cosmos. This attitude toward ritual activities eventually comes to encompass all human activities. When this type of human activity becomes ethicized, we then see the emergence of the Indic doctrine of karma.

The Sanskrit word karma (*kamma*) means action, particularly action of a ritual variety. As the idea of divine ritual activity came to encompass all significant human action, this activity was ethicized and became soteriologically significant as it was incorporated into rebirth eschatologies as karma. This appears to have been a distinct feature of Indic thought;¹² and the 'ethicization' of the rebirth cycle seems to have occurred in response to the increasing complexity of Indic societies during the transition from small-scale villages to urban settlements.¹³ It is also commonly thought that the swift, and usually merited, punishment in the here and now, which occurs in small-scale societies, tends to become less certain during periods of urbanization. This means that the interests of justice demand recompense in the cycle of rebirth.¹⁴ And this is usually seen to be accompanied by the presence of some sort of a universalizing religion.¹⁵ The end result of this process is what is known as a karmic rebirth eschatology. In karmic rebirth eschatology a person's present existence is deemed to be at least partially determined by the quality of this person's actions in previous lives. Likewise, a person's actions in the present are said to influence one's future lives.

This idea of karmic rebirth in an eternal cycle of continuity (*saṃsāra*) emerges from the aforementioned reciprocal relationship between human and divine activity in perpetuating existence. Since the universe exists and existence cannot come from non-existence, it logically follows that the universe exists eternally. Likewise, since human beings exist in a reciprocal relationship with the universe, if someone is self-evidently existing and existence cannot come from non-existence, it logically follows that he or she must also exist eternally (although not necessarily in human form). And if someone's activity contributes to the preservation and maintenance of the cosmic order eternally, it follows that all activity is significant, in that it may be beneficial or detrimental to the harmony of the cosmos. Therefore, if all significant human action contributes to cosmic disorder or cosmic order, then human beings have moral responsibility for their own activity and will experience the consequences of their actions as part of their reciprocal relationship with the universe.

However, this notion of karmic rebirth becomes a serious problem for *śramaṇa* schools that accept the possibility of finding an escape from continuous rebirth in *saṃsāra*. If karmic activity is perpetuating existence on a cosmic scale in the macrocosm, then karmic activity must also perpetuate one's existence in the microcosm. This

¹² Gananath Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 14–18.

¹³ Gananath Obeyesekere, "The Rebirth Eschatology and Its Transformations: A Contribution to the Sociology of Early Buddhism," in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 138.

¹⁴ Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma*, 75.

¹⁵ Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma*, 77.

means that all karmic activity, even activities that are beneficial to cosmic harmony, only serve to keep one immersed in the eternal cycle of birth and death.

This idea of being trapped in an eternal cycle of birth, death, rebirth, and re-death leads to an existential problem of dissatisfaction, because this type of eternally conditioned and mutable existence is ultimately unsatisfactory. This unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*)¹⁶ arises due to: (1) the presence of ordinary pain and repeated death, and (2) the inherent lack of permanence and stability in existence. This means that if any possibility of escape from this problem of existential dissatisfaction exists in the cycle of continuity, it will involve stepping outside of the cycle. However, if all significant human activity is karmic activity that serves to perpetuate existence, then the only way to escape the cycle of continuity is to stop all activity. In this way, a religious practitioner hopes to expiate past karma (often by way of austerities) by allowing its results to come to fruition, while at the same time avoiding the creation of any new karma through the use of immobility practice.

Many ascetic sects, most notably the Jains, sought liberation from *samsāra* through this path of non-action. However, the Buddhists did not. Instead, the Buddha reframed the idea of karma by equating it with the intention (*cetanā*) behind action instead of applying it to action itself. In this way, liberation from the cycle of continuity can be attained through the purification of one's own intentions. This emphasis on the purification of the mind is part of the Buddha's famed middle path (*majjhimāpaṭipadā*). Instead of engaging in severe austerities and immobility practice to expiate past karma, the re-definition of karma as intention turns Buddhist asceticism into an ethical practice; a practice in which a Buddhist endeavors to remove unskillful/unwholesome intentions (*akusala kamma*) and replace them with skillful/wholesome intentions (*kusala kamma*).¹⁷ Thus it becomes possible to purify one's consciousness while acting in the world.¹⁸

Four types of karma exist in the Buddha's teaching: (1) dark karma with dark results, (2) bright karma with bright results, (3) dark and bright karma with dark and bright results, and (4) neither dark nor bright karma with neither dark nor bright results leading to the destruction of karma.¹⁹ This fourth type of karma is the product of the perfectly purified consciousness. It is essentially an intention directed at abandoning the other three types of karma that produce results in *samsāra*. Karma that is neither dark nor bright does not produce results in *samsāra* because, "unlike that of the first three categories, this karma is selfless."²⁰ "Only the deed done with complete disinterest or equanimity (*upekkha*) bears neither good nor bad consequences. Only in such deeds, moreover, has the tendency to cling to the deed and its consequences been overcome. *Nibbāna* [the supreme bliss of nirvana] can be attained only when *kamma* is no longer produced and when past *kamma* has been consumed."²¹

Thus, the Buddhist can free himself or herself from bondage in the cycle of continuity by actively purifying personal consciousness instead of by following a path of non-action. This is accomplished by following the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path until a person becomes an *arahant* (fully liberated noble disciple), someone enlightened by direct knowledge of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths. The *arahant* is a noble disciple of the Buddha who has attained this ultimate freedom, the supreme bliss of nirvana (*nibbāna*).

The Pāli word for noble (*ariya*) is used in many contexts in early Buddhism. It signifies an *arahant* or other spiritually advanced disciples of the Buddha. The *arahant* is one who has attained enlightenment,²² (1) the 'noble happiness' of the renunciant when compared to the ignoble happiness pursued by worldly men,²³ and (2) has come to direct knowledge of the heart of the Buddha's doctrine—the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha famously declares

¹⁶ The Pāli word *dukkha* has a wide range of meanings and can be translated as angst, anxiety, despair, distress, dread, insufficiency, pain, suffering, unease or unsatisfactoriness. Unsatisfactoriness is often used as the preferred translation because the common translation of *dukkha* as suffering in English is thought to carry with it a sense of extreme hardship and pain, whereas the word *dukkha* can refer to anything from excruciating physical pain to a seemingly trivial worry.

¹⁷ A.I.58; M.I.415–16.

¹⁸ Dh 183.

¹⁹ A.II.230–32; M.I.389–91.

²⁰ James Paul McDermott, *Development in the Early Buddhist Concept of Kamma/Karma* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2003), 24.

²¹ McDermott, *Development in the Early Buddhist Concept of Kamma*, 56.

²² Noble liberation (*ariyā vimutti*) is referred to in S.V.223; and foremost noble liberation (*ariyā paramā vimutti*) in D.I.174.

²³ A.I.81.

that the entirety of his doctrine consists in the Four Noble Truths of suffering (*dukkha*); origination of suffering (*dukkha-samudaya*); cessation of suffering (*dukkha-nirodha*); and the Noble Eightfold Path leading to the cessation of suffering.²⁴

While Buddhist modernists have often portrayed the Buddha as if he were a secular, political liberal who just happened to appear 2500 years prior to the ascendancy of Western Enlightenment liberalism, use of the term ‘noble’ in the early Buddhist texts appears to indicate that the Buddha’s thinking is far more hierarchical and traditional than is commonly portrayed in contemporary Buddhist studies. As John Powers elucidates in *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex and the Body in Indian Buddhism*, the Buddha is consistently portrayed in Indian Buddhist literature as the ideal man in his wisdom, conduct, and physical form:

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The Buddha is described as the paragon of masculinity, the ‘ultimate man’ (*purusottama*), and is referred to by a range of epithets that extol his manly qualities, his extraordinarily beautiful body, his superhuman virility and physical strength, his skill in martial arts, and the effect he has on women who see him. Many Buddhist monks are depicted as young, handsome, and virile, and the greatest challenge to their religious devotion is lustful women propositioning them for sex.²⁵

This is radically different from the “androgynous figure of modern imagination . . . the ascetic meditation master and philosopher” who is presented by many contemporary scholars, but it is quite in keeping with the figure of the Buddha as a man who was born a noble prince in the warrior caste (*Kṣatriya*) and who was destined to become either an all-conquering universal monarch (*cakkavatti*) or that most excellent of all beings, a fully enlightened Buddha.²⁶

Of course, given the doctrine of karma, as a Bodhisattva (*Bodhisatta*) or Buddha-to-be, the texts recount that Prince Siddhārtha had already lived as a universal monarch and as a god in numerous past lives.²⁷

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The purport of such descriptions is clear: the authors wished to establish that the Buddha experienced every possible exalted situation and spent many lifetimes at the very apogee of power and divine embodiment within cyclic existence. Thus when he decided to renounce the world, he did so with full knowledge of exactly what he was leaving behind. Also related is the notion that birth as a buddha transcends all mortal conditions, even those of the highest gods.²⁸

To become a Bodhisattva, a person must spend countless lifetimes perfecting one’s wisdom and virtue while accumulating karmic merit. Eventually, someone who has accumulated enough merit to be born human during the lifetime of a Buddha, can, in the presence of that living Buddha, make a binding resolution to endeavor become a Buddha in the future. If this resolution is accepted by the living Buddha, the one making the resolution becomes a Bodhisattva. Reportedly Siddhārtha Gautama, the Buddha of the present age, made his own resolution in front of Dīpaṃkara Buddha four incalculable (estimated at approximately 10^{140} years) aeons (~ 10^{63} years) and one hundred thousand kalpas (each kalpa estimated at about 16 million years) ago. This gives us an example of the way time is considered in early Buddhism, which it must be remembered, unfolds in an eternal universe. It also shows how in the countless births following his resolution, the Bodhisattva devoted himself to meritorious works as he began to acquire the thirty-two marks of a ‘great man.’²⁹ While other men of great karmic merit may also acquire some of

²⁴ D.I.83–4; M.I.140; S.V.421–22; S.V.437.

²⁵ John Powers, *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex and the Body in Indian Buddhism* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1.

²⁶ Powers, *A Bull of a Man*, 2.

²⁷ D.II.186–99.

²⁸ Powers, *A Bull of a Man*, 27.

²⁹ The *Lakkhaṇa Sutta*, D.III.142–79, details all thirty-two marks and the deeds needed to obtain them. While the combination of characteristics described would seem to make the Bodhisattva a rather odd-looking being, the list of characteristics is meant to demonstrate that the virtue of the Bodhisattva is not merely an internal psychological state, but is also evidenced ontologically in his physical appearance.

these marks of a great man, it is said that only a Buddha or a universal monarch will have all thirty-two marks.

The Bodhisattva must take his final birth as a man into a worthy family of the caste of warriors (*Kṣatriya*) or priests (*Brāhmaṇa*). The final birth of the Bodhisattva also requires a mother of the highest quality. In the case of Siddhārtha, this was Queen Māyā of the Śākya clan. Because nothing greater can be attained in her current life after giving birth to one who will become a fully enlightened Buddha, the mother of the Bodhisattva dies within a week of giving birth. The birth is said to be painless, with the babe emerging undefiled from the womb. Prince Siddhārtha is said to have emerged from his mother's right side while she reached up to touch a flowering blossom in the garden at Lumbini in present-day Nepal. Upon exiting the womb Siddhārtha is recorded as being bathed in two streams of water (one hot and one cold) which spontaneously appeared from the sky. The infant then took seven steps in a northerly direction while being supported by the gods and declared loudly, "I am chief in the world, eldest in the world, foremost in the world. This is my last birth. I will never be born again."³⁰

Given what we know about the influence of karma in the process of rebirth, that someone who becomes a Buddha is born as the ideal man, the epitome of human excellence, is unsurprising. The final birth of the Bodhisattva is reported to be the final result of having spent countless lives perfecting wisdom and virtue until he finally comes to embody all possible signs of mental, physical and spiritual greatness in a human being. To attain Buddhahood is to attain physical and spiritual perfection, and the early texts are not reticent about this fact:

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One of the recurring tropes of Buddhist modernism, particularly in Theravada countries, is the notion that in the Pali canon the Buddha is 'only a man,' but even a cursory examination of those texts that describe him indicates that this is not the way in which the tradition viewed him. The most modest descriptions of the Buddha credit him with superhuman strength and wisdom; physical skills surpassing those of all other people; a perfect physique; and the ability to perform a range of magical feats, including levitation, walking on water, passing through solid objects, wading through earth as though he were in water, mentally creating bodies that can travel anywhere in the universe, telepathy, clairaudience, and clairvoyance. His wisdom and power transcend those of gods, and the Indian deities... [who] appear at various junctures in his life, proclaim his complete superiority to them, beg him for instructions, and declare themselves his disciples.

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He is referred to by a range of epithets that highlight his manly qualities, including 'ultimate man' 'great man,' 'manly,' 'leader of men,' 'best of men,' 'god among men,' and 'possessing manly strength.' Other epithets emphasize his royal heritage and sovereign power: 'lord of bipeds,' 'king of kings,' 'king of the dharma,' 'best in the world,' victor in battle, decisive leader in battle, crusher of enemies, god above all gods, and unsurpassed tamer of men. Another recurring trope links the Buddha with various powerful or ferocious animals: bull of a man, fearless lion, lion-hearted man, savage elephant, and stallion.³¹

This should make clear that early Buddhism is no precursor of twenty-first-century egalitarianism, nor is it a passive retreat from life. Instead, it is best conceived as a habitual way of living and a doctrine of heroic struggle to be undertaken by a noble ascetic who aspires to spiritual perfection. Noble Buddhist monastics aim at victory over suffering and the conquest of every realm of existence by coming to direct knowledge of reality as it is in its totality (*yathābhūtam*). This type of supreme struggle has often been downplayed as Buddhism has grown into a universal religion with hundreds of millions of lay adherents; but need exists to remember that early Buddhism was a way of life preached to a small elite of monastics who renounced their homes for lives of homelessness.³² They undertook rigorous ascetic training to perfect themselves for the sake of attaining the supreme spiritual goal.

As reported in Buddhist texts, the newly enlightened Buddha hesitated to teach the eternal truth that he uncovered under the Bodhi Tree because he thought that the *dhamma* was unlikely to be understood by the vast majority of human beings. The great god Brahmā Sahampati is recorded as descending from the heavens to beg the Buddha to teach the *dhamma* for the sake of the few who were deemed capable of understanding. These happy few

³⁰ D.II.15.

³¹ Powers, *A Bull of a Man*, 25–26.

³² D.I.62–63.

are compared to the lotus flower that emerges from the stagnant water of a pond, rising above the water without being soiled by it, rising above the other loti that are content to live immersed in the water.³³ Among the elite few who have accumulated the karmic merit necessary to be born human, to live in the time of a living Buddha, and who possess the ability to understand his deep and profound teaching, still more qualifications exist that must be met to be ordained into the Buddhist monastic order:

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The Buddha indicated on several occasions that he only wished to admit exceptionally gifted men and women to his order. He explicitly forbade ordination of sexual deviants and hermaphrodites, and the Monastic Discipline contains a long list of other prohibited types, including people whose hands or feet had been cut off (a common punishment for theft) or whose ears, nose, fingers, nails, or tendons had been severed (other common legal punishments); dwarves; hunchbacks; people with goiters; people with brands on their skin (indicating that they were slaves); people who had been whipped; those who had crooked limbs; and those who were very ill, deformed, lame, paralyzed on one side, blind, mute, or deaf. These prohibitions are not unique to the Buddhist community but reflect societal norms for world renouncers.

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The Monastic Discipline provides no reasons for these discriminatory prohibitions, but reading between the lines in the Pali canon these exclusions are clearly based on cultural assumptions prevalent at the time. Religious mendicants were highly regarded, and sincere aspirants to liberation were viewed as exceptional individuals whose moral behavior and generation of merit in past births had placed them in a life situation in which they could pursue the religious path. Such people should also be marked with the physical signs of past karma, including a beautiful body and excellent health.³⁴

Although many Buddhist modernists portray the Buddha as a reformer who rejected caste, little evidence exists that the Buddha opposed the caste system in socio-political affairs.³⁵ It is clear that caste is not considered a barrier in matters of ordination or to the pursuit of spiritual excellence,³⁶ because a disciplined renunciant from the lowest caste will exemplify the spiritual excellence of a Brahmin to a much greater degree than a hereditary Brahmin who does not pursue the holy life.³⁷ This is why all distinctions of caste are lost when someone is accepted into the Buddhist monastic order.³⁸ In their spiritual potential, the Brahmin and the Śūdra are equals; however, this is clearly a matter of spiritual equality, not of any normative declaration of socio-political equality.

The Buddha, as the embodiment of spiritual excellence, also clearly sought noble disciples of the highest quality who were willing to follow his example. This was the example of a royal prince who renounced his throne to attain the highest spiritual reward, a reward that transcends even the heavenly realms populated by the gods. The Buddhist order was not founded for timid people who wished to escape from mundane concerns. It was established for those who sought the highest degree of spiritual perfection: the freedom of an *arahant* who stands in front of the world unafraid, because he is the sovereign master of himself and of the world. The monk renounces, not out of disgust as such, but out of disdain for an existence that is ultimately unsatisfying. This nobility of spirit leads these aspirants toward another dimension entirely—a transcendent dimension of ultimate freedom.

L1: Freedom in Early Buddhism

As I have already noted, the Buddhist path is one of action and freedom. The Buddha shunned the doctrine of

³³ M.I.167–70; S.I.136–38.

³⁴ Powers, *A Bull of a Man*, 85.

³⁵ David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 94; 101; and Y. Krishan, “Buddhism and Caste System,” *East and West* 48, no. 1 (1998): 41–55.

³⁶ M.II.128–29.

³⁷ The most famous formulation, *na jaccā vasalo hoti na jaccā hoti brāhmaṇo, kammanā vasalo hoti kammanā hoti brāhmaṇo* (Not by birth is one an outcaste; not by birth is one a Brahmin. By deed one becomes an outcaste, by deed one becomes a Brahmin), is found in Sn 142.

³⁸ A.IV.202.

inactivity when he redefined karma as intention. He also explicitly condemned the doctrines of the annihilationist materialists and the determinism of the Ājīvika fatalists. Indeed, because it was completely deterministic and denied the efficacy of human action and all moral responsibility, the Buddha went so far as to refer to the Ājīvika doctrine as the worst teaching to be found among all ascetics³⁹. This early Buddhist defense of free will is in line with Adler's conception of natural freedom as the freedom to choose between alternatives. And, in a manner that resembles Adler's idea of circumstantial freedom, the Buddha also recognizes that natural freedom is necessarily subject to external limitations.

Many of these limitations are produced by one's actions in past lives, the consequences of which are carried over into one's present existence through karma. However, the Buddha does not teach karmic determinism. He teaches that karmic influences help to shape personal circumstances and, thereby limit natural freedom. In early Buddhism, past karma primarily determines where and to whom one is born and the length of one's life. That the circumstances of one's birth are decisive for the rest of one's life is self-evident. And, while some Buddhists would reject the length of one's lifespan being determined prior to birth, as is the case in many Hindu traditions, most people would still accept that the circumstances of one's birth may also have a profound effect on one's life expectancy. In this way, the Buddhist theory of karma acts as an explanation for the diversity found among human beings. It explains why some children are irascible and others are mild-mannered; why some people are beautiful while others are ugly; why some are born into wealth and others into poverty. The doctrine of karma provides a coherent explanation for any ostensible accident of birth; and it can account for why any particular being is thrown into existence at any particular time, in any particular place, and in any particular set of circumstances.

While it is clear that past karma is powerful, it is also relatively unimportant in early Buddhism, except as an explanatory device. Crucial in early Buddhism is the karma that one creates in one's current life: the karma over which one has control by virtue of each person's natural and acquired freedom. For the Buddhist, karma is intention; and it is self-evident that one's intentions inevitably shape one's dispositions. These, in turn, inspire mental and physical actions that become habits. In this way, all of a person's actions, including mental acts of intention (karmic activities) actively create the human personality. Given the Buddhist doctrine of not-self (*anattā*), which denies that there is any permanent, immutable and substantial metaphysical self underlying individual experience, this is a crucial concept. In short, in early Buddhism, karma is not something that adheres *to* a person. Karma *is* that person.

This is evinced by the fact that if a person cultivates vicious intentions, then that person will be inclined toward vicious dispositions. Someone who has vicious dispositions will tend to act viciously. Someone who acts viciously cultivates a vicious character; and, because these karmic dispositions are carried across lives, someone who possesses a vicious character is likely to incur unpleasant consequences in this life and an unpleasant rebirth in the next life. This is why it is often said in regard to karma that one is not punished *for* one's deeds, instead, one is punished *by* one's deeds. In the same way, a person who constructs a virtuous character will be inclined toward virtuous acts and will likely reap pleasant rewards in this life and a pleasant rebirth in the life to come. This means that early Buddhist karma cannot be considered deterministic. A person is always completely free to start reshaping the overall quality of present and future lives (although this necessarily occurs within the broad limits imposed by one's karmic inheritance and the external circumstantial forces beyond one's control in nature). Therefore, if a person uses this freedom to cultivate a habitual willingness to will what one ought to will, that person will attain wisdom and virtue, or what Adler refers to as acquired freedom. This acquired freedom has the most profound impact both on this life and the next life for the Buddhist.

However, the nobility of the Buddhist doctrine lies in the fact that the Buddha did not simply stop by teaching a way to avoid unfortunate rebirth and to secure pleasant rebirth, whether as a human being or as a god. Although the Buddha undoubtedly agrees that a pleasant rebirth in a Heavenly realm is preferable to an unpleasant rebirth in a Hell realm, he also insists that neither is comparable to the supreme morality, supreme wisdom, and supreme freedom of *nibbāna*.⁴⁰

Note that, while many early Buddhist discourses exist about the proper behavior of kings, just governance, and the conduct of laypersons in society; the reason that, in contrast to Adler, the Buddha is far less interested in these aspects of freedom is that the Buddha's sights are set on a higher freedom that transcends the world. Adler and

³⁹ A.I.286–87.

⁴⁰ D.I.174.

the Buddha were both able philosophers, but the Buddha was more than a philosopher. He was the founder of a religion, a noble religion that teaches people to rely on personal power in order to free themselves from every bond.

L1: The Noble Eightfold Path and *Nibbāna*

The *summum bonum* of the Buddha's teaching is nirvana (*nibbāna*), the liberation from suffering and freedom from bondage in the cycle of continuity. In early Buddhism there is no higher goal than attaining *nibbāna* in one's present lifetime. This is to be accomplished by following the Noble Eightfold Path, which is made up of the following eight practices:

- (1) Right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*)
- (2) Right intention (*sammā-saṅkappa*)
- (3) Right speech (*sammā-vācā*)
- (4) Right action (*sammā-kammanta*)
- (5) Right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*)
- (6) Right effort (*sammā-vāyāma*)
- (7) Right mindfulness (*sammā-sati*)
- (8) Right concentration (*sammā-samādhi*)

This path is the Buddha's fourth Noble Truth: the path to the cessation of suffering. The eight components of the path to freedom are traditionally grouped into three categories: morality (*sīla*), mental discipline (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). Right speech, action and livelihood are practices pertaining to moral virtue. These include abstention from lying and abusive, divisive, or idle speech (right speech); abstention from killing, stealing, and illicit sexual relations (right action); and abstention from dishonest employment (right livelihood).

Right effort, mindfulness, and concentration are practices pertaining to mental discipline. These include undertaking exertions to avoid evil and to do good while cultivating and maintaining one's practice on the path (right effort); remaining focused on the body and mind in order to set aside any attachments stemming from greed, hatred, and delusion (right mindfulness); and obtaining advanced meditative states (right concentration). Right intention and right view are the Buddhist practices pertaining to wisdom. A Buddhist must have confidence in the Buddha's message and an intention to follow the Buddha's teaching and embark upon the path to free oneself from greed, hatred, and delusion (right intention), however, the full actualization of wisdom only occurs when the Buddhist attains direct experiential knowledge of the Four Noble Truths (right view).⁴¹ Only at this stage does the Buddhist attain *nibbāna* and release from suffering.

For the Buddhist, craving (*taṇhā*), whether it be craving for sense pleasures, continued existence, total annihilation, permanence, the unconditioned, and so on, is the proximate cause of all suffering.⁴² Cravings lead to attachment, or clinging (*upādāna*), which manifests itself as an attachment to other people, things, wrong views, habits, and so on. Because every object to which a person clings and to which a person becomes attached is impermanent (*anicca*), the attachments that craving produces are at the root of suffering. Therefore, due to their unsatisfactory nature, to cling to these transient objects is to suffer. Whatever the cause of suffering, all species of suffering are rooted in the fact that the person chiefly aspires to a world in which peace, permanence, and stability exist, while actually existing in an unsatisfactory, conditioned world of impermanence and non-substantiality.

The Buddhist response to this state of affairs is to eradicate craving and any resulting attachments, thereby eradicating suffering through the cessation of the causes of suffering. The problem of how to eliminate craving leads the Buddhist to the idea of purifying one's consciousness in order to perceive all things as impermanent, non-substantial, and ultimately unsatisfactory. By understanding the way in which phenomena arise and cease a person comes to see that all craving is ultimately rooted in ignorance of reality. Eradication of this ignorance will result in cessation of craving, clinging, and suffering; in the cessation of the entire cycle of birth, death, rebirth and re-death in the realm of *saṃsāra*. Burton sums up the Buddhist solution in this way: "If one's craving, attachment, and hence suffering are caused by one's failure to understand the way things really are, then it seems that the solution to this

⁴¹ D.II.91.

⁴² D.II.308.

predicament must be to understand things as they actually are. Ignorance must be replaced by knowledge.⁴³

The way to attaining the liberating knowledge of *nibbāna* is found by following the Noble Eightfold Path until one comes to know the Four Noble Truths.⁴⁴ However, this is not a theoretical knowledge. To understand the Four Noble Truths as liberating knowledge, the Buddhist has to have direct, experiential knowledge of the origination and cessation of suffering. Since cessation of suffering is attained by way of the Noble Eightfold Path, the liberating knowledge of the Buddha can never be merely theoretical. The practice of following the path is intertwined with the chief aim of acquiring the liberating knowledge of the Four Noble Truths; and these are obtained by following the path to its completion. In this sense, much like in the well-known Catholic theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Buddha's liberating knowledge is a synthesis of practical and theoretical knowledge.⁴⁵

This liberating knowledge is approached gradually and one's karmic proclivities and corruptions of character (*āsava*)—especially the three unwholesome roots of greed, hatred and delusion (*akusala-mūla*)—are increasingly diminished as someone follows the path. When *nibbāna* is finally attained, the enlightened disciple is in possession of the totality of the Buddha's liberating knowledge; and all of that person's karmic proclivities, taints, and corruptions are eradicated.

This is the state in which someone has attained 'the deathless supreme security from bondage';⁴⁶ the 'peaceful, fumeless, untroubled, wishless';⁴⁷ and the 'supreme bliss.'⁴⁸ In early Buddhism, the focus is placed on attaining *nibbāna* in this life. Upon attaining enlightenment, because the noble disciple has destroyed all the defilements that kept him in bondage, the *arahant* knows with certainty that no further rebirth in the realm of *saṃsāra* will exist. The enlightened Buddhist experiences the direct knowledge of having obtained the freedom of release.⁴⁹ *Nibbāna* is this state of liberation, of absolute freedom: the state of being unbound from this world or any other. *Nibbāna* is freedom from dissatisfaction and rebirth, it is absolute truth and ultimate reality.

L1: Conclusion

Contemporary apologists for Buddhism tend to claim that Buddhism is not a religion, preferring to refer to it in ambiguous terms as a *culture*, *philosophy*, or *way of life*. However, Buddhism is really all of these and something else qualitatively beyond them. This is why Buddhism is rightly included in the category of world religions, because it asserts religious truths that can be rationally debated, which inform the explicit orthodoxies and orthopraxies semiotically manifested in the general behavior of a religious community. This is why Adler also views Buddhism as a religion.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the essential properties of Buddhism are religious in that they are geared toward the rational improvement of human life and the attainment of moral and spiritual excellence.

Unfortunately, while Adler correctly recognizes that Buddhism is a religion, his knowledge of Buddhism is minimal. He is apparently unacquainted with Indian logic.⁵¹ He also appears to have been largely unaware of the interaction between Hellenistic philosophy and the Buddhist religion in Bactria, an interaction that predates the birth of Christ, let alone the Christian religion. Also, I find a tendency in him to engage in an explicitly orientalist reading of all 'Far Eastern' philosophy as idealistic, or as an example of 'fuzzy mysticism' (in contrast to the ostensible clear-headed rationality of the West). This betrays a superficial acquaintance with the philosophies and religions he criticizes. However, these specific, glaring deficiencies in Adler's knowledge of particular religions do not detract from the value of his generic conception of religion as a complete way of life grounded in universal moral and

⁴³ David Burton, "Knowledge and Liberation: Philosophical Ruminations on a Buddhist Conundrum," in *Philosophy East and West* 52, no. 3 (2002): 328.

⁴⁴ D.II.91.

⁴⁵ D.II.122–23.

⁴⁶ Nanamoli Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*, 3rd ed. (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2005), 259–260.

⁴⁷ Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Anguttara Nikāya* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2012), 229.

⁴⁸ Dhṛp 204.

⁴⁹ Dhṛp 126.

⁵⁰ Mortimer J. Adler, *Truth in Religion: The Plurality of Religions and the Unity of Truth: An Essay in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Collier, 1990), 48.

⁵¹ Adler, *Truth in Religion*, 70.

metaphysical truths, with particular aspects of these truths being unequally reflected in particular religious communities. This is a context within which early Buddhist doctrines can be judged and compared with other religions. And, in this context, that the early Buddhist religion is a manifestation of spiritual greatness should be evident to any unbiased, knowledgeable observer.

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