

## Early Buddhism: A Conversation with David J. Kalupahana

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Several years ago I had the pleasure of talking with David J. Kalupahana of the Philosophy Department at the University of Hawaii. Dr. Kalupahana is a scholar specializing in early Buddhist thought. He has authored many works including *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*; *Buddhist Philosophy, A Historical Analysis*, *Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*; and *The Principles of Buddhist Psychology*. The following is a summary of the points Dr. Kalupahana made during our conversation. Comments of my own are included as footnotes.

The philosophy of Buddhism as it is often presented is actually not the original, but rather a later scholastic development. For example, there is the idea of momentariness, that everything is in a constant state of change from one moment to the next and that continuity of existence from one moment to the next is only illusory. This idea, while central to almost all of later Buddhist philosophy, is not found in the earliest strata of Buddhist literature, *i.e.*, the sutras (Pali: suttas) retained in the Pali canon.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it comes into being later with the development of the Abhidharma. In other words, it is part of the effort to devise a consistent philosophic position out of the sayings of the Buddha.

This difference between what is recorded in the sutras and what is presented in the Abhidharma and later Buddhist philosophers, highlights the importance of starting one's study of Buddhism with the sutras themselves. This is particularly true for Americans. It is the teachings of early Buddhism which have the greatest relevancy for the modern world. Contemporary thinking is essentially naturalistic as a result of the influence of the scientific world-view. Early Buddhism is itself practical and empirical in ways which are distinctly comparable to contemporary thought. Early Buddhism does not have the sort of transcendental orientation which has led so many religions into

mystification, and it is mystification which many Americans are rejecting in religion today.

Unlike both other Indian religions and the majority of Western thinking, Buddhism is not oriented toward an Absolute of any kind.<sup>2</sup> There is no Absolute Truth, no Absolute God, no Absolute Ethic and no Absolutely Certain Knowledge. In its ethics early Buddhism is essentially situational. In its metaphysics early Buddhism defines causality simply as the conditioning factors and their results:

When this is present, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises. When this is absent, that does not come to be; on the cessation of this, that ceases.<sup>3</sup>

In the epistemology of early Buddhism the only absolutely certain knowledge is the certainty that one who has entered the stream will attain enlightenment. But here we are dealing with a personal determination to achieve a result, rather than the ability to predict the future outcome of some event.

The practical nature of early Buddhism is reflected in its understanding of the highest form of knowledge. This is "knowledge of the cessation of defilements." This knowledge is based on an understanding of the conditioned nature of being. Not momentariness, but rather a much more

humanly scaled attainment: an understanding that everything which exists is existent because of causes.

The idea of a transcendental insight into the non-dual nature of reality only takes primacy over the earlier "knowledge of the cessation of defilements" when mysticism begins to arise within Buddhism. If anything, the practicality of early Buddhism is antimystical. There are, for example, two cases recorded in the sutras where monks are led to suicidal despair because of a lack of mystical experiences. Yet the sutras make it quite clear that their enlightenment is in no way dependent upon the generation of any special experiences.

This attitude is likewise to be found in the understanding of the nature of language. The Pali term used to describe language is one which simply means "conventional." The Sanskrit word, although apparently a cognate, has a different connotation. In Sanskrit the meaning is "to cover up." Thus, the Pali indicates that language arises conventionally, out of shared use, rather than giving the impression that there is some Absolute Reality which is hidden from us by language.

The practical and straightforward, almost mundane, nature of early Buddhism was itself covered over in at least two stages. Abhidharma systematization tried to make of the Buddha's teachings a philosophic structure — logically coherent and defensible. Later, Buddhaghosa introduces Mahayana and proto-Mahayana ideas into what becomes the Sinhalese/Theravadin Buddhism of today.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, his major work, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhi Magga)*, can virtually be read as a Yogacara text.

Early Buddhism, however, is very immediate, personal and human. As such, its message has

the ability to speak to people in today's world who are looking for a form of religiosity which can reach directly into their daily experience. Scholarly abilities — historical, linguistic and philosophic — can facilitate our attempts to recover the content of early Buddhism for our own use, and for the sake of others.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. This emphasis on the sutras indicates that Kalupahana is not discussing any mythical "Primal Buddhism," the quest for which can result more in the free reign of the investigator's imagination than in any substantial information. (See G. R. Welbon's *The Buddhist Nirvana and Its Western Interpreters*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968, pp. 240 to 247.) Rather he is talking about the actual record of Buddhist teachings and the differing positions within it which result from its historical development.

2. It is this aspect which makes Buddhism so comparable to existentialism and phenomenology.

3. Quoted from *Buddhist Philosophy*, Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1976, p. 28. See also Kalupahana's *Causality*, (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1975) pp. 90ff for a thorough discussion of this traditional formula.

4. H.V. Guenther has also mentioned this. See his *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma*, Baltimore: Penguin, 1971, p. 193 in particular, as well as elsewhere throughout that text.