

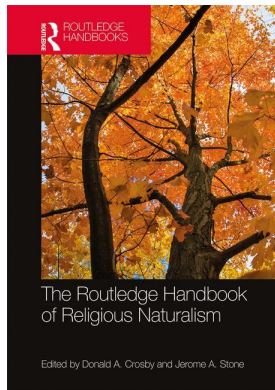
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BUDDHISM AND RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

Jay N. Forrest

Buddhism has many ideas and practices that can be naturalized, and these should be of great interest to Religious Naturalists. Both historically and in modern times, Buddhism has shown its adaptability. But some strategies have not gone far enough. In this essay, I offer my own attempt at a Buddhist Naturalism. Buddhism, once it is naturalized, can provide Religious Naturalists a fertile field of ideas and practices to think outside a Western mindset.

Historical context

Dating the life of Siddhartha Gautama is important for understanding the historical context of his time. Traditional sources date his life from 623 to 543 BCE. But modern scholarship has placed it later. Richard Gombrich, based on his extensive research, has given 484–404 BCE as the most likely dates (Harvey 2013: 8). It is important to know about the other schools of thought at this time. In the words of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, “This was one of the most fertile periods of philosophy in India” and “most of the systems had their beginnings about the time of the rise of Buddhism, and developed side by side for centuries” (1957: xix).

Much is often made of the uniqueness of Buddhism, but as Radhakrishnan points out, “Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, in all their branches, also accept the underlying doctrines of karma and rebirth” (1957: xxix). With a better understanding of Indian philosophy, we find that the Buddha did not create his philosophy out of thin air. He developed it within the intellectual climate of his days. As Radhakrishnan explains,

The Buddha takes up some of the thoughts of the Upanishads and gives them a new orientation. The Buddha is not so much formulating a new scheme of metaphysics and morals as rediscovering an old norm and adapting it to the new conditions of thought and life.

(1957: 272)

Jack Maguire agrees: “The Buddha’s spiritual vision rose out of a predominantly Hindu culture, and his career as a teacher was geared towards refining common religious beliefs rather than overthrowing them” (2001: 26). One way to think of the relationship of Brahmanism and Buddhism is to think of Judaism and Christianity. As Dale Riepe explains, “Buddhism is

to Brahmanism what Christianity is to Judaism, if we remember that Brahmanism much more than Judaism contributed to philosophical speculation and that Brahmanism much more than Judaism was receptive to the new movement” (1961: 117). This relationship is not surprising. As Riepe writes, “The Buddha, it is believed, received training along orthodox lines, probably studying the Vedas and the Upanishads” (1961: 122). Certain common teachings that were considered orthodox had the status of dogma at this time, “these included rebirth or transmigration, karma, enlightenment (*mukti*), and that life is suffering” (1961: 33). These became the building blocks of Buddhism.

But that does not mean that Siddhartha Gautama bought into the doctrines of Brahmanism wholesale. Gombrich argues “The central teachings of the Buddha came as a response to the central teachings of the old Upanishads” (2010: 31). He says that “It is a historical misconception that the Buddha took over a pre-existing doctrine of karma,” rather, “The Buddha defined karma as intention; whether the intention manifested itself in physical, vocal or mental form, it was the intention alone which had a moral character: good, bad or neutral” (2010: 50–51). He also redefined the self or atman as an illusion. This redefinition also affected the doctrine of reincarnation. If there is no self, what gets reborn? The traditional answer is the stream of consciousness.

But of particular interest to Religious Naturalists is another group that predated Buddhism and existed during and after the life of Gautama. This group is known as the Carvaka or Lokayata. *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* defines the Lokayata as a “Naturalist” or “Worldly” school (Buswell and Lopez 2014: 481). According to Pradeep Gokhale, this group believes that

(a) perception is the only means to knowledge; (b) consciousness is the product of matter; (c) pleasure – rather, sensuous pleasure – is the only goal of life, which could be achieved even by immoral means; and (d) there is no God, no other world, and no life after death.

(2015: 1)

However, Gokhale notes that this interpretation may be too simplistic, for “there were at least two trends in the Lokayata School or tradition, one materialist, the other skeptic” (2015: 5).

Bhupender Heera makes an interesting point: “As Lokayata is undoubtedly prior to Buddhism there is no harm in believing that Buddhism was greatly influenced by the Lokayata, that the doctrines of Buddha and Caraka almost amalgamated, and that the name Carvaka sometimes applied to Buddha” (2011: 28–29). In fact, if you think of Brahmanism as the supernaturalists and the Lokayata as the Naturalists, you could see Buddhism as a middle way between them. This explains the Buddha’s rejection of an immaterial self (atman) that transmigrates from body to body. Brahmanism accepted the unchanging self or atman, the Lokayata rejected it completely, and the Buddha sought a middle way between them, that is, accepting anatman but keeping rebirth. The Buddha wanted to keep morality while jettisoning other metaphysical claims.

Before moving on, I should also mention Jainism, which was founded by Mahavira (599–527 BCE). “I suggest,” writes Gombrich, “that the positive influence of Jainism on the Buddha was massive” (2009: 51). In fact, he credits the Jains “for the first ethnicized karma theory,” and “not the Buddhists” (2009: 51). According to Gombrich, the doctrines the Buddha borrowed from the Jains include, “the doctrines of samsara, of the desirability of getting out of samsara, and the role that ethics played in making that escape possible” (2009: 51). It is also interesting to note the similarity of the five precepts of Buddhism with the Jain’s practice of the five virtues, which,

as Radhakrishnan explains, are: “(1) ahimsa (non-violence), (2) truth-speaking, (3) non-stealing, (4) chastity, and (5) non-attachment to worldly things” (1957: 251). He also points out that the Jains were the first to make non-violence “into a rule of life” (1957: 251).

After the Buddha passed away, the Sangha remained unified for a time. But as Noble Ross Reat explains,

most accounts agree that about a hundred years after the death of the Buddha a large group of monks – known as the Mahasanghika or ‘majority group’ – rejected the authority of the Elders, and that as a result a major schism in Buddhism occurred.

(1994: 19)

Although according to the Sthaviravada tradition, notes Reat, the first schism was “over the ten lax practices,” the Sarvastivada claimed “that the cause was doctrinal” (1994: 89). From this schism there arose at least 18 different schools.

Just like Protestantism, the divisions have never stopped. Buddhism today is usually divided into three branches: the Theravada, the Mahayana, and the Vajrayana. But even this is too simplistic. Under the heading of Mahayana, there are drastically different schools. Pure Land Buddhism and Zen Buddhism are so different, it is hard to see them as part of one religion. “Buddhism,” writes Rupert Gethin, “is something of an intellectual abstraction: in reality there is not one Buddhism but many Buddhisms” (1998: 2). “As the host culture gradually assimilated Buddhism,” writes Maguire, “every aspect of that culture was subtly imbued with a new Buddhist character. Simultaneously, a fresh, innovative variation of the religion emerged bearing the host culture’s likeness” (2001: 210).

Buddhism’s encounter with modernity

Although immigrant Buddhism was already in the United States, most people see the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 as the first introduction of Buddhism to the West. It was here that Paul Carus met Soyen Shaku, who later introduced him to D. T. Suzuki, and it was partly through the writings of D. T. Suzuki that Zen Buddhism entered into the consciousness of America.

Soyen Shaku, however, did not teach traditional Buddhism. His aim was to convert Americans to Zen, and hence to accommodate Buddhism to the American Christian and scientific mind. This accommodation and modernization have not stopped. As David L. McMahan explains,

What many Americans and Europeans often understand by the term ‘Buddhism,’ however, is actually a modern hybrid tradition with roots in the European Enlightenment no less than the Buddha’s enlightenment, in Romanticism and transcendentalism as much as the Pali Canon, and in the clash of Asian cultures and colonial powers as much as in mindfulness and meditation.

(2008: 5)

Bernard Faure agrees: “In their effort to modernize, Buddhists have sought to emphasize the compatibility of Buddhism with modern-day science, discreetly failing to comment on any areas of disagreement” (2009: 104). As he points out, many of the modern “ideas about Buddhism are not supported by tradition,” but are “the result of a series of reforms in various Asian countries and of increased contact with the West. It has developed in response to colonization, the requirement to modernize, and the influence of Protestantism” (2009: 3–4).

Before we can honestly think about a naturalized version of Buddhism, we must first understand the tradition as it has come down to us. For this, we look primarily to the Buddhist Sutras. Each branch of Buddhism has its own canon. But, as Gethin explains, “The production of Mahayana sutras spans a period of some six or seven centuries” (1998: 57). Thus they are clearly not historical records of the Buddha’s teaching. Reat states, “From a historical point of view it is clear that the Mahayana scriptures are highly embellished accounts of historical events, if indeed they record historical events at all” (1994: 29). The vast majority, if not all of the Mahayana scriptures, are pious fictions, for they claim to be spoken by the Buddha. What they are in reality is a living testimony to Buddhist experience and insight into that experience within the culture of the writer. They tell us what others thought about the Buddha’s teachings, but they do not tell us what the Buddha actually taught. For that, we turn to the Pali Canon.

The Pali Canon is, along with the Chinese Agama, the oldest surviving record of the Buddha’s teaching. Although, admits Bhikkhu Sujato and Bhikkhu Brahmali, “The texts as we have them now are not a verbatim record of the Buddha’s utterances, the changes are in almost all cases details of editing and arrangement, not of doctrine or substance” (2014: 12). Furthermore, these two writers do not consider the following as Early Buddhist Texts: “Abhidhamma, Mahayana Sutras, Buddha biographies, historical chronicles, as well as the majority of the Khuddaka Nikaya and the Vinaya Pitaka” (2014: 12). But even within the accepted books, there are questions. We must remember that the Buddha’s teaching was originally handed down by oral tradition. Although oral citations were much more accurate and common at this time in India, they are still not infallible. After about 400 years, the oral tradition was written down sometime in the early first century CE. But none of these early manuscripts exist today. Just like the Bible, we have copies of copies of copies, which means that the written record has been clearly corrupted to some degree. But in what follows, I will assume the general authenticity of the Digha Nikaya, Majjhima Nikaya, Samyutta Nikaya, Anguttara Nikaya, and parts of the Khuddaka Nikaya.

As Buddhism interacts with modernity, with its secular and scientific viewpoint, certain aspects of historical Buddhism will need reconsideration. We begin with the fact that gods are everywhere in the Pali canon. In early Buddhism, the gods were a part of samsara. The Buddha is really above the gods, because he alone has attained Nirvana. Gods exist, but they are stuck in the same trap as people – the trap of samsara. So you will find the Pali canon treating the gods as irrelevant. The problem of the place of the gods becomes more complicated. It is reported in Majjhima Nikaya that before becoming Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha existed as a god in the heavenly realm known as Tusita. In the Itivuttaka the Buddha said,

Whenever the aeon contracted I reached the plane of Streaming Radiance, and when the aeon expanded I arose in an empty Brahma-mansion. And there I was a Brahma, the Great Brahma, the Unvanquished Victor, the All-seeing, the All-powerful. Thirty-six times I was Sakka, the ruler of the devas.

(Ireland 1997: 165)

From this, we learn that, according to the Buddhist Sutras, the Buddha to be was god made flesh. Were these zealous monks putting words into the Buddha’s mouth, or did Siddhartha Gautama actually say this?

When it was time for the future Buddha to be born, the Majjhima Nikaya says that he “passed away from the Tusita heaven and descended into his mother’s womb” (Bodhi 2009: 980). At his conception, it says, “a great immeasurable light surpassing the splendour of the gods

appeared in the world” (980). Then “four young deities came to guard him at the four quarters so that no human or non-human or anyone at all could harm the Bodhisatta or his mother” (981). Instantly his mother “became intrinsically virtuous” (981). As soon as he was born,

he took seven steps facing north ... and uttered the words of the Leader of the Herd: ‘I am the highest in the world; I am the best in the world; I am the foremost in the world. This is my last birth; now there is no renewal of being for me.

(Bodhi 2009: 983)

Throughout, the author continually assures us, “I heard and learned this from the Blessed One’s own lips.” Personally, I doubt it. Rather I think this was pious propaganda to bolster trust in the Buddha’s teachings. For the Religious Naturalist, all of this can be overlooked, since it probably does not affect the Buddha’s main teachings.

Another difficulty is the repeated mention of psychic powers. As Vessantara (1993: 183) explains, “In the Mahayana sutras and in the Pali Canon psychic powers, including clairvoyance, clairaudience, telepathy, levitation, and memory of past lives, are frequently mentioned.” The Samyutta Nikaya lists off some of the superpowers of certain monks:

a bhikkhu wields the various kinds of spiritual power: having been one, he becomes many; having been many, he becomes one; he appears and vanishes; he goes unhindered through a wall, through a rampart, through a mountain as though through space; he dives in and out of the earth as though it were water; he walks on water without sinking as though it were earth; seated cross-legged, he travels in space like a bird; with his hands he touches and strokes the moon and sun so powerful and mighty; he exercises mastery with the body as far as the brahma world.

(Bodhi 2000: 1727)

Claims of psychic ability will cause the Religious Naturalist a moment of pause. However, whether or not psychic abilities really exist, this does not require a belief in a supernatural realm.

There are two major teachings of the Buddha that will cause difficulties for Naturalists, namely, karma and rebirth. Let’s first look at rebirth. Before we consider how to naturalize it, it would be best to understand what rebirth means within the Pali Canon. The Digha Nikaya says that “any who die while making the pilgrimage to these shrines with a devout heart will, at the breaking up of the body after death, be reborn in a heavenly world” (Walshe 1995: 264). Since Buddhism teaches that there is no permanent self, no soul in the Christian sense, what transfers from one life to the other? The Pali Canon is unclear, but Bhikkhu Bodhi gives the traditional answer, “The channel for the transmission of karmic influence from life to life across the sequence of rebirths is the individual stream of consciousness” (2015: 187). He further argues, “The teaching of rebirth crops up almost everywhere in the Canon, and is so closely bound to a host of other doctrines that to remove it would virtually reduce the Dhamma to tatters” (2015: 183). The problem for Religious Naturalists is that there is very little empirical evidence for rebirth. In fact, everything we know about the mind indicates that consciousness and the brain are interconnected. Change the chemicals in the brain, and consciousness is affected. Damage the brain and consciousness is diminished. Get drunk and consciousness gets drunk. There is no evidence that consciousness has any independence from the brain. As far as science is concerned, consciousness cannot exist outside of a brain.

When we turn to the subject of karma, we may seem to be on safer ground. But we must understand karma within the Pali Canon. First, it is important to understand the importance of

Karma in the Buddha's system. As Gombrich points out, karma "is fundamental to the structure of his thought" (2010: 33). But the Buddha did not define karma as the law of cause and effect. He was not interested in physics, he was interested in morality. In the *Anguttara Nikaya*, the Buddha said, "It is volition, bhikkhus, that I call kamma [i.e., karma]" (Bodhi 2012: 963). As Bodhi explains, "'kamma' literally means action, but technically it refers to volitional action" (2005: 146). Intentional action creates one's current life and determines one's future rebirth. This is where the Buddha departed from the Jains' understanding. They suffered for both intentional and unintentional acts, where the Buddha limited this consequence to only intentional acts.

One last troubling claim is that the Buddha was claimed to be omniscient. In *The Questions of King Milinda*, which is included in the Burmese edition of the Pali Canon, Nagasena is asked if the Buddha was omniscient. He answers,

Yes, O king, he was. But the insight of knowledge was not always and continually (consciously) present with him. The omniscience of the Blessed One was dependent on reflection. But if he did reflect he knew whatever he wanted to know.

(Davids 2007: 163)

This claim is problematic for a number of reasons. First, because it cannot be true. This is an attribute for a god, not a man. No man has or ever will be all-knowing. Second, it places the Buddha's authority beyond dispute. Such a claim makes the Buddha infallible. How can an omniscient person be wrong? The authority of the Buddha ends up being a major obstacle in secularizing and naturalizing the Dharma. Many of these beliefs, including rebirth and karma, are said to be verifiable through meditative experiences.

Strategies for responding to science and secularism

A first response to the intrusion of science on the doctrines of any religion may be to deny the science. Nobody better exemplifies this than B. Alan Wallace. He clearly draws the lines: "The metaphysical views of materialism are in fundamental conflict with the Buddhist worldview regarding the nature of the mind; if materialism is correct, then the Buddha's claims of having direct knowledge of past lives, karma, and nirvana would be invalid" (2012: 18). Since Wallace assumes that the Buddha could not have been wrong, science is wrong, because "of the materialistic assumptions saturating scientific inquiry" (2012: vii).

But Buddhism must respond to modern day science. Most have retreated to the defense that you can't scientifically disprove karma, rebirth, and the six realms. For example, the Dalai Lama has said that "if scientific analysis were conclusively to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon those claims" (2005: 3). At first, this may seem reasonable, but notice where the Dalai Lama places the burden of proof. From his viewpoint, Buddhism doesn't have to produce evidence for its claims; rather science has to "conclusively" demonstrate a claim in Buddhism to be false. This is all backward. A person making a claim that asserts that something is the case, has the burden of proof. The skeptic is under no obligation to accept a mere assertion. Furthermore, the skeptic who denies the claim has no obligation to prove a negative; in many cases it is impossible to do so. Critical thinking tells us that we should reject any claim that has little or no evidence for it. Suspending judgment, which many modern Buddhist do concerning rebirth, is reserved for claims that have a balance of evidence both for and against it. So we see that by shifting the burden of proof, the Dalai Lama can continue to believe and teach reincarnation. How can you "conclusively" demonstrate that the reincarnation claim is false? As Carl Sagan states, "Claims that cannot be

tested, assertions immune to disproof are veridically worthless, whatever value they may have in inspiring us or in exciting our sense of wonder” (1997: 171).

Another strategy is to be upfront about rejecting karma and rebirth. Stephen Batchelor started a revolution with his book *Buddhism Without Beliefs*. In it, he proposed, “The dharma is not something to believe but something to do” (1997: 17). He made the claim, which surely sounded like heresy to traditional Buddhists, “In accepting the idea of rebirth, the Buddha reflected the worldview of his time” (1997: 15). This led Bodhi to fire back,

He begins as if he intended to salvage the authentic vision of the Buddha from the cultural accretions that have obscured its pristine clarity; yet, when he runs up against principles taught by the Buddha that collide with his own agenda, he does not hesitate to discard them.

(2015: 85)

According to this critic, Batchelor’s great crime is not accepting the doctrine of rebirth and karma “on the authority of the Buddha” (2015: 85). This will be a recurring problem for secular Buddhists.

Several years later Batchelor published his book *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*. He calls himself a “secular, nondenominational lay Buddhist” (2011: ix). In this book he responds to the “furor” that his early book caused, “The ensuing controversy showed that Buddhists could be as fervent and irrational in their views about karma and rebirth as Christians and Muslims could be in their convictions about the existence of God” (2011: 175). He also pointed out that, “Belief in the existence of a non-physical mental agent, I realized, was a Buddhist equivalent of belief in a transcendent God” (2011: 39). He could not bring himself to accept either assertion.

Recently Batchelor has published his most systematic presentation of his views in a book entitled *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age*. “A secular approach to Buddhism,” he writes, “is thus concerned with how the dharma can enable humans and other living beings to flourish in this biosphere, not in a hypothetical afterlife” (2015: 16). The secular Buddhism he envisions “would seek to return to the roots of the tradition and rethink and rearticulate the dharma anew” (2015: 19).

Another strategy is practiced by many psychologists, what I call the minimalist approach. In this case, psychologists have gone through the Buddhist teachings and practices and taken only those that can be easily secularized for psychological care. Here I am thinking about such therapies as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, and Dialectical Cognitive Therapy. All you have to do is browse through the psychology section at your local bookstore to realize that mindfulness has taken psychology by storm. But minimalistic approaches are too shallow; they offer techniques for momentary suffering but offer no philosophy of life. They fail to answer the ultimate questions of life.

Buddhism and Religious Naturalism

For the Religious Naturalist, accepting Buddhism in its traditional form is impossible. We can adopt many of the meditation techniques and some of the Buddhist practices. Humanist author Rick Heller has collected and secularized 32 practices in his book *Secular Meditation*. He explains that,

Although the group’s practices are chiefly adapted from Buddhism, we exclude any beliefs and practices—such as the concept of rebirth—that conflict with mainstream

academic science. We see the Buddha as an important cultural, literary, and historic symbol and figure but who is no more authoritative than Socrates or Benjamin Franklin.

(2015: xiii)

Religious Naturalists will agree with this sentiment.

Just drawing on the *practices* of Buddhism leaves a world of philosophical ideas behind. This, I believe, would be a mistake. As Sam Harris says, “Buddhism offers a truly sophisticated, empirical approach to understanding the human mind” (2014: 20). Secular Buddhism is a step in the right direction. But the problem with secular Buddhism is that it is still Buddhism. A Buddhist, by definition, is a follower of the Buddha and his teaching. I call this “the Buddhist box.” Again, the issue of appealing to the Buddha’s authority enters in. I advocate moving the locus of authority to science and Naturalism. There is a great advantage in being free from the Buddhist conceptual framework. You can think outside the Buddhist box. With this freedom, one can rethink and reconstruct Buddhism along naturalistic lines. I call this *Buddhist Naturalism*. It aims to develop a fully naturalized and philosophically sophisticated reconstruction of Buddhism. This means bringing in the latest findings in all relevant sciences, including evolutionary psychology, positive psychology, neuroscience, and related disciplines. Nothing is sacred and beyond revision or rejection. The great thing about Buddhist Naturalism is that it is Naturalism, not Buddhism. That means we are not trying to change traditional Buddhism and should not offend Buddhists.

For the Religious Naturalist, explains Donald A. Crosby, nature is the focus of ultimate concern (2002: 119). Although Buddhism tends to be more environmentally friendly than some religions, primarily because of its teaching of interdependence, nature is not its ultimate concern. In Theravada Buddhism, the primary concern is one’s own attainment of nirvana. Mahayana Buddhism saw the selfishness in this and expanded its concern to all sentient beings, as exemplified in the Bodhisattva vow. But Buddhist Naturalism expands this concern even further to include all of nature. Environmentalism is no longer an optional addition; it becomes a central focus. Human happiness is never chosen over the good of nature; rather a harmony with nature is aimed for. After all, nature does not need us, but we need it.

In approaching the Buddhist teachings, we no longer are looking for the authentic teachings of the Buddha, but helpful and illuminating insights from all corners. In this sense, Buddhist Naturalists have no canon, no scriptures, and no authority outside of science, reason, and human flourishing. Buddhism forms a conceptual framework that is adjusted, rethought, and reconstructed based on the best available evidence. This confronts us with the difficulties of evaluating which teachings and practices meet the naturalistic and scientific criteria, which need to be reinterpreted, and which need to be rejected. We have to be honest about the problems of decontextualizing the Buddha’s teaching, the challenges of recontextualizing them, and the various difficulties of reinterpretation. None of this will be easy, and the process will never be perfected. Like all things, it will be impermanent and subject to evolution and progress.

In an effort to illustrate what this interpretive process might look like, let me give you my version of a Buddhist Naturalism. We will begin with the Four Noble Truths, which are, according to the Samyutta Nikaya,

the noble truth of suffering ... the noble truth of the origin of suffering, it is this craving ... The noble truth of the cessation of suffering ... The noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering, it is this Noble Eightfold Path.

(Bodhi 2000: 1844)

I will call the Four Noble Truths *the four psychological realities*.

The first psychological reality is that unhappiness pervades life. You will notice that I translated *dukkha* as “unhappiness.” This is because rendering it as stress, suffering, or pain misses the mark. Pain sounds like something physical, stress is only one form of unhappiness, and suffering sounds like it only refers to serious problems. But *dukkha* covers all forms of suffering, anguish, and distress, from the small to the large. It is a catch-all word, just like unhappiness.

The second psychological reality is that the cause of unhappiness is selfish desires. You will notice that I translated *tanha*, which literally means thirst, as “selfish desires.” It is usually translated as clinging or attachment. This makes it sound like all attachment is bad, which we know from psychology is not true. Attachment is one of the most important forms of social development that occurs during infancy. It is better to think of wholesome and unwholesome attachments, rather than completely condemning all attachment. The same goes for desire; not all desire is bad. What makes a desire bad is when it hurts either me or others, including aspects of nature. “Selfish desires” catch this idea the best.

The third psychological reality is that the pervasiveness of unhappiness can be stopped by letting go of selfish desires. Although it is at least theoretically possible to be completely free from all selfish desires, most of us will not reach such completeness. But we can substantially overcome our selfish desires and reach a place where unhappiness is no longer pervasive. By saying that unhappiness is pervasive, I mean that it is present or noticeable in every part of a person’s life. We notice it in levels depending on the circumstance. This unhappiness becomes acute when we lose a loved one, get divorced, lose a job, or get sick. The selfishness of our desires is what makes them painful; we want things to be different than what they are. It is the “I” and “me” that makes the desires selfish and causes our unhappiness.

The fourth psychological reality is that there is a way to overcome our unhappiness and let go of our selfish desires, and that is the eightfold transformative path. Literally, “the Eightfold Noble Path” would be the “Eightfold Ennobling Path,” but since the point of the path is to transform one’s character, I think it is best translated as “the eightfold transformative path.”

So let’s look briefly at the eightfold transformative path. The eight parts are right view, right thought, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The first problem is the translation of “right.” Perhaps a better translation is “wise.” The eightfold transformative path, then, includes eight parts that are interconnected like a wheel. You may start by learning them in steps, but they are to be practiced as a complete interlocking system.

Wise view deals with our perspective on things, the way we look at it. You could even understand it as wise worldview. Our worldview, if it does not correspond to reality, is not wise and it is not helpful. Worldviews matter, they influence our lives and the lives of others. So the first step in the eightfold transformative path is to have a wise view of the world, based on the best scientific evidence we have.

The second step in the eightfold transformative path is wise thought. So if the first step deals with philosophy, the second step deals with psychology. “Cognitive therapy,” writes David D. Burns, “is based on the simple idea that your thoughts and attitudes – and not external events – create your moods” (1999: xxxi). So, as he points out, “by learning to change your thoughts, you can change the way you feel” (1999: 4). The key here is that “every type of negative feeling results from a specific kind of negative thought” (1999: 5). Change the thought and you will change the feeling. We think ourselves unhappy because we keep “telling ourselves things that simply are not true” (1999: 7). But wise thought also includes making wise decisions. We don’t always make the best decisions, and as a result we sometimes suffer or cause suffering.

The next three steps in the eightfold transformative path are wise speech, wise conduct, and wise livelihood. These deal with basic ethics. The seventh step in the eightfold transformative path is wise mindfulness. “Mindfulness,” writes Jon Kabat-Zinn, “is awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (2012: 1). This attitude, along with wise concentration, is the how of transformation.

There are other Buddhist concepts that need rethinking. One is karma. We already said that, in the words of Gombrich, “The Buddha defined karma as intention” (2010: 51). This means that karma is a psychological mechanism, not a cosmological law. From a naturalistic perspective, karma is not something that determines future rebirths, but something that has lasting psychological consequences. The best psychological translation of karma is “conditioning.” The second edition of the *APA College Dictionary of Psychology* defines conditioning as, “the process by which certain kinds of experience make particular actions more or less likely” (VandenBos 2016: 87). Since the Buddha specified karma as intention, I am primarily concerned with voluntary conditioning. Everything we think, say, and do conditions future actions. We are not punished *for* our unwise deeds; we are punished *by* them. Interpreting karma as conditioning, we can see at least three ramifications. Dale S. Wright spells these ramifications out, noting that,

- (a) it [karma] shapes our character and helps determine who or what we become, (b) it helps shape others and the society in which we live, now and into the future; and (c) it encourages others to treat us in ways that correspond to our character—they will often do onto us as we have done onto them, although not always.

(2016: 81)

Every choice we make opens some doors and closes others. Making unwise choices means that making wise choices later is just that much harder. Our actions have consequences, both in a guilty conscience and in molding our character, which in turn limits our future options.

Another concept that needs naturalization is nirvana. Nirvana literally means to extinguish or blow out, usually referring to a flame. As Owen Flanagan points out, “There are tame and untame conceptions of nirvana and rebirth. A tame view of nirvana would be this: nirvana involves release from unwholesome attachment and suffering” (2011: 22). Nirvana is the goal of the Buddhist system, so nirvana is happiness. But this goal can be easily misunderstood, as positive psychology discovered. It is best to translate nirvana as “inner peace,” referring to the eudaimonia type of happiness. Eudaimonia is usually translated as flourishing, but within the Buddhist context, inner peace makes more sense.

Rebirth (*patisandhi*) is a little harder to naturalize, for it includes the idea of an afterlife, which Religious Naturalists generally reject. But if we consider what purpose rebirth serves within the Buddhist system, we might find a modern equivalent. In Buddhism, rebirth serves the purpose of demonstrating that the actions of our life have consequences even after we die. A modern equivalent might be our “legacy,” the positive or negative influence of our lives that is passed down from one generation to the next. Every person we help or harm can start a domino effect of positive or negative repercussions. Our thoughts and actions live on in the lives that we impact. Our words and writings can influence others for good or ill. In other words, our negative words and deeds re-become, which is the literal meaning of *patisandhi*, in the hearts and minds of others. These can continue to re-become over and over again.

One of the interesting teachings of Buddhism, as it relates to science and ecology, is dependent co-arising (Pali: *pratityasamutpada*). As Joanna Macy has noted, “The systems view of causal

process also reveals striking convergences with the Buddha's teaching of causality, called *paticca samuppada*, or dependent co-arising" (1991: 1). I think the best translation is "interdependence." This takes us to the heart of environmental science, which Eldon D. Enger and Bradley F. Smith define as "the study of interrelationships between humans and the natural world" (2013: 1).

This discussion is just a sampling of what a Buddhist Naturalism might look like. You will notice that Buddhism has a naturalistic bent to it. This makes it very adaptable for Religious Naturalism. Religious Naturalists tend to focus most of their attention on the Western religious and philosophical traditions. Many of the Religious Naturalists I have read tend to give only a passing mention of Buddhism. But Western thought tends to be steeped in supernatural assumptions and undercurrents, which are sometimes hard to identify and correct. Buddhism can help us to see with Eastern eyes the presuppositions and possible blind spots of Western thinking.

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