The Buddha’s No-theory Approach

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In December of 2018 I took a three-day meditation “retreat,” or rather an advance-forward, at Wat Ambhavan near Singburi, Thailand, to escape the dusty world and practice Vipassana (insight) meditation. I took exception with an out of date translation using “mental formations” for the Pāli (Thai: Bali) term “sañkhara” (Thai: sang-kan; Sanskrit: Śaṅkara), which I would translate as “dispositions”. The “sañkhara” are the material aspects that are passed on in Buddhist reincarnation via the sex act of reproduction. To call them “mental formations” misses the material (read genetic) dispositional aspect of what is passed on in the rebirth process, and “mental” is part of the “act of consciousness” (Bali: viññā; Sanskrit: vijnāna) among the five threads or (Sanskrit: pancha skandhas).

When I attempted to engage a young monk, who had taken the oath only 2 years ago, in a discussion of the terms and the translation, he told me that his master told him only to practice mindfulness meditation and not to delve into the theories of interpretation, that wisdom would arise out of the practice, that there was no need to study the sutras.

I replied that Buddhists take refuge in the three gems, that is, in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. If we are to understand the Dharma seriously to be able to take refuge in it, then we need to study it, understand it and bring it into the practice of meditation to develop that wisdom properly. The young monk said that “we don’t know the truth and only by practice may someone gain insight and wisdom.” I replied, “the dharma is the truth according to Buddhist teaching. We know what it is; it is written in the ancient sutras. We must confirm the dharma teachings in the sutras, the law or truth of Buddha’s teachings, in our meditation experience.” He was perplexed by my retort.

This essay proposes that the Buddha did not present a theory to be interpreted. The teachings of the compassionate Buddha, that is the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, are not presented as a theory among other theories to be accepted or rejected. Rather the historical Buddha’s approach was to present a series of true statements. The truth value of the statements might be debated. But for most people the truth value should be apparent and if they are accepted as true statements, then the subsequent advice on how to practice the intellectual, moral and meditation practices of the Middle Way or Eightfold Path would follow naturally.

The questions not tending to edification:

It is fairly well-known that the historical Buddha would not engage in metaphysical speculations. In Sutra 63 of the Majjhima-Nikaya we encounter the way the Buddha avoided questions that would require metaphysical speculations. In that passage a disciple is troubled by the big metaphysical and theoretical questions of the day. He wonders:

Is the world eternal or not eternal; is it infinite or finite; are the soul and body identical or are they separate; does the arahat (enlightened monk) exist after death or not; or does the arahat exist nor not exist after death.
The Buddha uses and analogy of a person who is wounded with a poison arrow who will not accept assistance or treatment until someone can answer his questions about the man who shot him. He wants to know his name, his clan, his personal characteristics, height, weight, complexion, place of residence and other details. The disciple sees that the man will die before these questions can be answered. Likewise he will die before the Buddha can answer his metaphysical and theoretical questions.

It is open to some interpretation whether or not the Buddha and his approach is or is not making metaphysical speculations, especially when it comes to the ultimate goal of enlightenment and the experience of nirvana Bali: nibbana).

From No Metaphysics To No-Theory:

In a similar vein of not doing metaphysics, the basic teachings of the Buddha abstain from presenting a theory. Rather than present another theory the Buddha presents a series of true propositions that are supposed to be readily apparent to anyone, such as, the Four Nobel Truths and the Three Marks of Existence.

These truths are the Three Marks of Existence, namely impermanence (anicca), no-soul (anatta; literally no-atta, no-eternal-immortal soul or metaphysical spiritual substance; in Sanskrit anātman no-atman), and dis-ease, discomfort or suffering (dukkha), which leads to the Four Nobel Truths. Things are constantly changing and as such they are impermanent. Everyone should be able to confirm this basic fact of existence. Even those who propose that there is a higher transcendent reality (heaven) that is perfect, eternal and unchanging usually recognize that the things of this world are changing, not long lasting and impermanent. Those who advocate such a metaphysical view propose that their practice is to lead a person out of the lower realm of changing existence to a higher realm of perfection and eternal constancy, a heaven, a paradise where things do not change. The Buddha way proposes that there is no higher realm based on metaphysical speculation and focuses only on this here-and-now realm of changing impermanence.

The impermanence is so pervasive that it applies to our own self-nature. The belief in a soul, in an eternal or immortal soul, that is the core of our existence is merely a metaphysical speculation. If people can take their experience of the changing, impermanent world seriously, then they must acknowledge that the impermanence applies to their own self-nature. That is, they themselves are also changing and impermanent. Thereby we are without an unchanging core or soul. Hence to counter the Hindu belief in an ātman or the Jain belief in a jiva, an unchanging spiritual or metaphysical core or soul, the Buddha taught that there is no-ātman, no-eternal-jiva; there is no-soul (anatta or anātman). This view is merely an extension of the fact that things are constantly changing and impermanent, so too the person is only changing and not comprised of an unchanging, eternal core or soul hidden within its bodily form.

These statements are presented as mere fact. Fact: things are impermanent. Fact: one’s own self-nature is also impermanent or without an eternal, unchanging core or soul.

If someone can accept these facts and does not suffer because of them, then such a person would be a spontaneously enlightened creature, a naturally awakened one or a Buddha.

However, most people even if they know the facts of impermanence and no-soul, suffer because they long for and cling to a desire that things not fall-a-part, that their property last and persevere, despite the ongoing vicissitudes. Especially, people do not want to accept the fact that they
themselves are changing, growing old, getting sick, and dying. People deny or wish to escape from their own self-nature of constant change, which is dragging them to their final demise and ultimate death. By trying to deny the variegates of their property and their own ultimate demise, they suffer. They are in a state of dis-ease, discomfort and then their health fails, and they suffer from diseases; and finally, they die. So, most people by being attached to their desire that their property last long and that they themselves not die young, not die too soon, or not die at all, they suffer. They live in a perpetual state of dukkha.

These basic teachings are established on facts about the world, they are not based on theoretical or metaphysical speculations. One does not need to theorize about the impermanent character of the things in existence or one’s own changing self-nature. If one is not spontaneously enlightened, then the Middle Way or Eightfold path is offered as a dis-continuous path to put into practice for the release from suffering caused by such selfish desire that things and self-nature last longer or last forever.

The method of the practice is to train to release one’s attachment to the desire for things and self-nature to persevere, to stop changing.

Therefore, there is no need for a young monk to be concerned about interpretations or theories about what the Buddha said. We need to only read and study the sutras to grasp the basic facts of existence and how to become detached and released from our misguided understanding of trying to avoid impermanence and clinging to a false self-nature or eternal soul.