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# **Non-dogmatism in Buddhism:**

**An Exploration of the Secular and Agnostic  
Approaches in the West  
And the Early Buddhist Scriptures**

## Abbreviations:

AN =	Anguttara Nikāya
DN =	Dīgha Nikāya
Dhp =	The Dhammapada
MN =	Majjima Nikāya
MW-Skt.D =	Monier-Williams' Sanskrit Dictionary
NBD =	Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines by Nyanatiloka.
OED =	Cross corroboration of the online 'www.oxforddictionaries.com', 'The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary', vol I & II, Ed. by BROWN, L. 1993 and digital Oxford Dictionary of English 2010, 2012 (full updated edition) and The Oxford paperback Dictionary Thesaurus & Wordpower Guide. 2001
PH =	Lectures from MA. on Buddhist studies by Peter Harvey at Newport University of Wales 2012-2014; indicated by: Module: Buddhist traditions (BT), Buddhist Ethics (BE) Buddhist Psychology and Meditation (BPM), or Buddhist philosophy (B.Phil), Session (S.#), and Section (S-#). For example: (PH-BPM: S.11-5)
PTS-D =	The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary
SN =	Samyutta Nikāya
S-Nip =	Sutta-Nīpāta
Ud =	The Udāna
It =	The Itivutaka
Vsm =	Visuddhimagga by Buddhaghosha, trans. by Ñānamoli.

## Introduction

This dissertation seeks to explore the issues and values behind contemporary secular or agnostic Buddhism in western Buddhism as opposed to the more traditionally "religious" approach that includes or values the aspects of faith/belief, ritual and devotional practices. It attempts to answer how much the secular/agnostic response or reactions are at the heart of western arguments and values, whether these are superficial or deeply grounded.

This dissertation tries to demonstrate that secular/agnostic Buddhism is spurred by an uncompromising search for truth or at least a non-dogmatic approach to the Buddhist doctrines (arguably from more contemporary western influences), though possibly misguided or oblivious to the equally dogmatic stance of nihilistic/extreme scepticism. It warns of an unnecessarily hasty distrust and dismissiveness of the legitimate values behind traditional Buddhism. That is, it argues for a high regard for the necessary emotional factors (in the form of provisional faith, receptivity and devotional practices) – arguably a more traditional and eastern approach – to motivate an effective engagement with and commitment to the Buddhist path and realization of its goals and ideals.

In order to do this, this research starts by examining the meanings and implications of dogmatic approaches and their relationships with a "secular" and/or "agnostic" stance. It examines the ambiguity and kinds of "agnosticism" and philosophical background of the agnostic movement (particularly 'scepticism') and approaches to religious practice. Then it explores how those tensions, from a Buddhist perspective that integrates western cultural values, can be resolved or held creatively. To do that, the present research shows existing criteria and guidelines of non-dogmatic approaches in ancient Buddhist scriptures. This study in turn, leads naturally towards an exploration of the epistemological and soteriological implications of Buddhist theory and practice.

Finally, this dissertation tries to answer in brief the question of how Western Buddhism can integrate "religious" aspects like the traditional Buddhist faith (*saddhā/śraddhā*)<sup>1</sup>, ritual and devotional practices (*pūjā*). That is contrasted with a "soteriology of salvation" more dependent on the grace/power of a personal and God-creator of the universe (as in Abrahamic religions which are along with Buddhism the most widespread in the world). A soteriology of liberation is clearly emphasized in "main-stream Buddhism"<sup>2</sup>.

Due to the well-known variety of Buddhist schools and traditions in its historical development and the complexity of influences, such as the interpretations and adaptations in "western Buddhism"; this dissertation focuses on basic doctrines and practices of early Buddhism, fundamentally from the Pāli Canon, which arguably predate and are a coherent continuation of later developments of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This dissertation will show first the Pāli and then the Sanskrit terms, when the term appears alone it means is both the Pāli and Sanskrit term, unless indicated before.

<sup>2</sup> Though the term can be polemic, I refer here only to core doctrines that sprung from early Buddhism but are not unique to it; as used in Williams, Tribe & Wynne 2012, pp. 30, 69-72, 79, 82-97, 122-3; other scholars have a similar understanding (see below).

<sup>3</sup> From e-mail interchanges with Sarah Shaw: 'I honestly think there is a real development of early sources and practices in other traditions, and agree with the position held by Lance on this, as opposed to that held by for instance Schmithausen, who argues that radically new elements that come in to later traditions hold no relationship to older ones that might have subsided when the new elements are introduced.'<sup>3</sup> From e-mail interchange with L.S. Cousins 'I think what Sarah is referring to is my arguments on Bhavaṅga, etc. as

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predecessors to *Ālayavijñāna* in Cousins, L. S. (1981). "*The Paṭṭhāna and the Development of the Theravādin abhidhamma.*" *Journal of the Pali Text Society*: 22–46. Schmithausen has a different view. (I think in his *Ālayavijñāna*.) I don't think I have published more on this issue; so Sarah is probably referring to conversations we have had. On 'Mainstream Buddhism' this was a term used first by Paul Harrison to refer to the established schools of Buddhism in the period when *Mahāyāna* was developing. I don't think Schmithausen would deny that all later forms of Buddhism contain significant elements inherited from early Buddhism.'

## 1. What is dogmatism?

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the term 'dogmatism' is 'the tendency to lay down principles as undeniably true, without consideration of evidence or the opinions of others'. It is the positive assertion of dogmas or opinions of dogmatic character. It applies also to a system of philosophy with principles based on reasoning alone, not experience. The English term 'dogma' meaning opinion, decree, belief, doctrine or tenet especially in religious matters, laid down authoritatively or assertively<sup>1</sup>; apparently first appeared in the 16th century via late Latin 'dogma' from the Greek 'dokein' "to seem good, think" (opinion)<sup>2</sup> which in turn derives from the ancient Indo-European base 'dok', 'dek' as 'orthodox' and 'paradox'<sup>3</sup>; and more clearly from the classical Greek-Roman philosophical term 'doxa' (opinion or belief).<sup>4</sup> While the Latin 'dogmatismus', became more explicitly 'philosophical tenet'. So 'dogma' is usually understood as doctrines or opinions. And the adjective 'dogmatic' (usually in philosophy or natural sciences) denotes a statement based on *a priori* assumptions rather than empirical evidence; or the propounding of opinions asserting doctrines or views in an opinionated or arbitrary manner<sup>5</sup>.

### 1.1. The Dangers of dogmatism

To ask why a dogmatic approach in any cultural arena is undesirable might seem unnecessarily obvious. However a careful review of the roots of dogmatism and apparent or secondary benefits rooted in the human condition can reveal unsuspected grey areas between dogmatism and a positive or healthy engagement with one's life. After all the latter involves the very existential search for meaning within the mysteries of life/death and consciousness; the existential fear of or aversion towards uncertainty as Loy points out.<sup>6</sup>

So we need to start by understanding the psychological dynamics behind 'dogmatism' which could be argued is a human tendency, rather than a particular or necessary trend in religious practice. Dogmatism, as shown by the definition above and many philosophers, (maybe most notably by Karl Popper)<sup>7</sup>, has been present also in political movements and regimens and in academia, with rationalist or "scientific" claims.

#### 1.1.1. Political and Academic dogmatism.

Well known are the terrible examples and consequences of the fascist states of Nazism, Stalinism, and Mao's China and these are unfortunately only a few examples among many of political dogmatism throughout the history of humankind.<sup>8</sup>

In academia the old claims of scientific theories like psychoanalysis, communism and grand economic theories, and of course philosophical dogmatism are examples that have been seriously challenged.<sup>9</sup> A major contemporary area of interest and interdisciplinary research

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<sup>1</sup> OD under 'dogma'.

<sup>2</sup> OD under 'dogmatism'

<sup>3</sup> Ayto 1990, under 'dogma' & 'doctor'

<sup>4</sup> Audi 2009, p. 243

<sup>5</sup> OD under 'dogmatic'

<sup>6</sup> Loy 2000, p. xi-xvii

<sup>7</sup> Magee 1985, p. 3-12

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 6-10, 75-113

<sup>9</sup> Ibid; Popper 1962, p. 336-346; Loy 2000, p. xi-xvii; Persky 1990; pp. 165-172; Rappaport 1996, pp. 215-236; Hadot 1995, pp. 60-1.

are the polemic debates between materialist reductionist theories of the phenomena of consciousness and its still mysterious nature, where there is an assumed identification of brain activity (bio-chemical reactions) with self-awareness of thoughts, emotions and volition. This is despite the fact that there is no actual evidence and some scientists and philosophers of science admit that there is not even a scientific hypothesis but simply a belief.<sup>1</sup> So vast and intricate are these implications in natural and social sciences or disciplines (neurosciences, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, etc.) that the last decades saw the emergence of the specialised branch of philosophy of mind.<sup>2</sup>

Of course there is the question of what constitutes "evidence" as criteria of a non-dogmatic approach to truth-statements. Suffice to say now that there are different kinds of evidence according to different disciplines and while scientific-evidence (another matter of complex exploration) usually holds the greatest authority and reliability over all disciplines of study it is never absolute or infallible.<sup>3</sup> Thus it is disingenuous, not to say foolish, to dismiss scientific evidence altogether, but it is also naive and hasty to take it as the ultimate and perennial proof of certain theories. According to the history of science, as Thomas Kuhn in his influential book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* has shown, some scientific-laws have been repeatedly overturned or were simply incomplete.<sup>4</sup>

### **1.1.2. Popular dogmatism.**

In popular culture one can see also the effects of dogmatic thinking and attitudes in what Popper calls 'the myth of public opinion'.<sup>5</sup> Recent examples are the trends of 'new-age' approaches with partial truths that have been resisting, not to say assailing, the advances of natural sciences in medicine, biology and astrophysics; like polemic approaches to diets and alternative medicine, therapies and education in some parts of the globe.

These have led many times, for instance, to pretensions to scientific theories of illness that are merely speculative and counter-productive in their punitive health approaches.<sup>6</sup> Those dogmatic overgeneralisations and over simplifications about the psychosomatic causes of illness have tended to transform diseases into metaphors of moral vices and life-lessons. Whatever the potential for creative and wholesome responses one could associate with these approaches; it usually brings damaging consequences and very unhelpful attitudes of shame, guilt and indifference or cruelty towards those who suffer.<sup>7</sup>

Such beliefs or rigid views have led many to resist the use of reasonably tested and effective medicinal drugs, vaccines and treatments, which in turn have led and can lead to catastrophic consequences; such as major psychological problems or even mental illness in vicious cycles of puritanism and health-negligence.<sup>8</sup> One is usually better off with a non-dogmatic approach, like the one taken by stoic philosophy or Buddhism itself. That is, that one needs to

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<sup>1</sup> Hick 2010, pp. 84-5

<sup>2</sup> Blackmore 2005

<sup>3</sup> Bishop 2010, Hick 2010, pp. 80-94.

<sup>4</sup> Okasha 2002, p. 77; Hick 2010, p. 3

<sup>5</sup> Popper 1962, p. 347-354

<sup>6</sup> An example of this approach is the book *'Illness as a Path'* by T. Dethlefsen y R. Dahlke (Psychiatrist and Psychologist), apparently scientifically authoritative, which became quite popular - at least- in the English and Spanish speaking world; written originally in German (1983) and then translated into English and Spanish (<http://www.accmagazine.com.ar/en/la-enfermedad-como-camino-de-t-dethlefsen-y-r-dahlke>)

<sup>7</sup> Sontag 1978, p. 3-17; Kolenchuk 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

embrace the uncertainty of the causes and even the possible remedies, and focus on what is actually in our sphere of choice or influence (rather than control), in other words the cultivation of positive mental and emotional states through wholesome "spiritual exercises" or techniques.<sup>1</sup>

Another example of popular dogmatism is the many conspiracy theories about great corporations, as ultimate economic and political powers that overrule state-governments. It would be naive to deny the presence of low to severe corruption and attempts at mass-manipulation in many first and third world countries, and the clear existence of some corporations and governments in cahoots with organised-crime or terrorist groups as seen in current news stories. However, it is simplistic and usually speculative to assume the deliberate and conscious evil machinations of a very few highly organised people. From the Buddhist point of view, it is more likely that both people in positions of great economic and political power and "us", the rest of the people are in half-blind complicity. That is, it is just part of the human condition, burning all with the fire-poisons of greed/attachment, hatred and delusion.<sup>2</sup> One can even witness the institutionalisation of those poisons in social bodies like the advertisement, war/army and entertainment industries.<sup>3</sup> No doubt some people have much more influential power, and others have more or less freedom according to their level of awareness or ignorance through the given conditions they were born in (however religiously or philosophically it can be explained or not).<sup>4</sup> The point here is that it is more comforting to make scapegoats of governments and great corporations rather than acknowledge our individual responsibility (also part of the human condition, and precisely where Buddhism is so radically different to other religions). It is easier to turn a blind eye to our own complicity as compulsive consumers, aggressors and polluters of our atmosphere in the aggravating problems of the present state of our planet.<sup>5</sup>

So ignorance is not merely passive, we are not simply victims of it. At some point in our lives (not to engage now in the polemic issue of past lives) we have engaged in deliberate and convenient ignorance, which is not only intellectual or dis-information, but moral and spiritual.<sup>6</sup> As such, it has its consequences in omission, apathy and cynicism. Various philosophers have asserted this in different words, but maybe more refreshingly through the popular aphorism: 'All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing'.<sup>7</sup>

### **1.1.3. Dogmatic education and bigotry.**

Following the idea of deliberate-ignorance one can see a connection with dogmatic education. Richard Dawkins in his *The God Delusion*, despite the irony in his 'overzealous hostility'<sup>8</sup> – only apparently – towards all religions,<sup>9</sup> is right to denounce the complicity of governments in the avoidance of teaching evolutionary biology in some parts of the planet for

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<sup>1</sup> Morrison 2009; Hadot 1995, pp. 12-13, 136, 187-195; Long 2002, pp. 231-244

<sup>2</sup> Harvey 2013, p. 73

<sup>3</sup> Loy 2008, p. 87-94

<sup>4</sup> Harvey 2007b; Harvey 2013, p. 68-9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, Loy 2008

<sup>6</sup> Harvey 2013, pp. 67.

<sup>7</sup> Apparently this is a bogus quote usually attributed to Edmund Burke or others

<sup>8</sup> OD, as a fit definition of being fanatical; and according to the renowned religions scholar Reza Aslam (2014) this makes him more of an "anti-theist" rather than merely an atheist, as dogmatic and fundamentalist as those who call themselves "true believers".

<sup>9</sup> Since Dawkins (2006: 280-4) anti-religious campaign is more for creationist-doctrines, and most be remember that there is clearly not a personal-god much less a God-creator of the universe in Buddhism.

the mere sake of adhering to religious dogma regarding the God-creation of the Universe. This is especially shocking in apparently first world countries like the USA.<sup>1</sup> Biased education or misinformation about the discoveries of science and advances in other disciplines like history (paying no heed to the criteria of evidence and developments in the humanities) is precisely what keeps ignorance afloat together with its terrible consequences of religious intolerance, racism, xenophobia and all forms of exclusivism.

#### **1.1.4. Religious Dogmatism.**

According to *'Fundamentalisms Comprehended: an anthology of Articles'*<sup>2</sup>, the basic ingredients of religious fundamentalism are 1- ultra-orthodoxy (taking religious scriptures as the absolute and infallible authority of truth), 2- ultra-orthopraxis (literalistic rather than hermeneutical and reasonable interpretation of codes of conduct, based on the cultural and sociological reality of the historical moment, to be able to discriminate universal ethics from conventional morality); 3- Exclusivism, 4-Militant piety, and 5- Fanaticism.

"Exclusivism" can be seen as the root-cause of all forms of fundamentalism.<sup>3</sup> In other words, it springs from a dogmatic approach to religious practice. "Fundamentalism" can be defined as the rigid or literalistic adherence to and interpretation of religious scriptures and their conventional rather than universal codes of ethics.<sup>4</sup> And it is the breeding ground of any form of religious fanaticism. "Fanaticism" tends to be described as excessive zeal or obsessive concern with an ideology or set of practices,<sup>5</sup> particularly when is carried forward by actions with pseudo-spiritual justifications of cruelty and any form of violence (verbal and/or physical) on the basis of righteous indignation based on dogmatism or the rigid and/or absolutist holding of views, ideas or values.<sup>6</sup> These traits of religious dogmatism certainly may be the most gross and shocking kind of dogmatism seen in modern times; with its terrible consequences of politicised religious wars and/or terrorism all over the world, but particularly in the Middle East. However only for the historically unaware and culturally-biased will these seem new or exclusive to the Muslim religion.

#### **1.1.5. The Myth of Universalism**

Paradoxically, one can fall into the other extreme from exclusivism, though more subtle and usually unnoticed by most religious practitioners except the specialist scholar or well-cultivated practitioner. This is the dogmatic approach of universalism, which assumes the ultimate un-differentiation of religions.<sup>7</sup> This take is based on vague and superficial parallelisms, which certainly cannot be denied, like the fact that fundamentally all religions attempt to make stable sense of life in the face of the imminence of death and provide a sense of belonging and unity within communities.<sup>8</sup> They look for some sort of salvation/liberation from suffering by means of ritual and/or moral purification; and some degree of self-renunciation or receptivity to the influence or grace of spiritual-guides or "other power", either from transcendentalist or immanent models. However, often the cosmology,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, pp. 66-9

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Karunadassa 2013, p. 159.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> OD under 'fundamentalism'; Hinnels 2010, pp.354-68.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, under 'fanaticism'.

<sup>6</sup> Hinnels 2010, pp.354-68.

<sup>7</sup> Bodhi 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Hinnels 2010:426-7, 433-4; Hick 2010, pp. 122-3.



soteriology, ontology and practices of different religions vary greatly.<sup>1</sup> The philosophical and psychological principles of the moral codes (meta-ethics) and those of the theories of salvation/liberation (soteriology) can vary greatly with important implications. One example is the radical difference between theistic or creationist religions and Buddhism, its underlying principles of ethics and its goal. Buddhism is based on individual responsibility and the centrality of mind (intentionality and awareness), where the precepts are not mere prohibitions to avoid rebirth in hellish realms, but reasonable or intelligent guidelines to a happier life, the reasonable recognition that acts have consequences. Moreover, the Buddhist scriptures in comparison with Abrahamic religions (among the most widespread on the planet), do not have the status of revealed truth or forbid questioning, and clearly are not expected to be taken with blind-faith.<sup>2</sup> Even the role of the Buddha (in comparison with most religious-founders) is secondary in the process of liberation – at least in early Buddhism – where the teacher only points out the path, but the follower has to walk it himself.<sup>3</sup> Like any dogmatism, universalism is motivated by wishful thinking. The romantic ideas seen in mystic traditions and New age movements;<sup>4</sup> force interpretations of religious scriptures and the history of its role models and institutions, to appease the terror of uncertainty, impermanence and even the chaotic nature of all cultural expressions. While a universalistic approach is naive, an extreme scepticism and intellectually reckless reaction to it can of course lead us to another form of dogmatism, this time a form of nihilist or negative dogmatism.<sup>5</sup> As we shall see certain kinds of scepticism can be a creative and productive methodology towards a non-dogmatic-approach, but most of the modern kind tends to be expressed as a fixed and biased tendency to deterministic, fatalist, reductionist and nihilistic assumptions; all of them dogmatic.

#### 1.1.6. The dogma of pseudo-egalitarianism

Similar to the myth of universalism and popular opinion, there is the wrong view, or rather, the very vague and misleading notion that all persons or even more absurd, all living beings or things "are the same" or "equal", with no clear reference to what is qualified as equal. This pseudo-egalitarianism is often masked by superficial mysticism, demagogic political propaganda and mere reactivity to the abuses of authority and hierarchies in all sorts of institutions throughout the history of humanity. There is usually a confusion or deliberate manipulation between "liberal egalitarianism" and "pseudo-egalitarian libertarianism". The former is the authentic promotion of the "equal fundamental human worth" expressed in the *Universal declaration of Human Rights* and the latter is modelled by American Capitalism that dogmatically and conveniently blurs and ignores individual and social differentiations, exacerbating social injustice.<sup>6</sup> That is, from a socio-political perspective, the dogma of pseudo-egalitarianism hinders the opportunities for growth and social integration of the less fortunate. As we have seen, there should be no doubt that precisely a non-dogmatic stance would imply taking responsibility and action to denounce and refute any form of bigotry or intolerance of diversity.

However, when it comes to following the Buddhist path, one needs to recognize (at least the possibility) of the greater "spiritual maturity" of others. Thus, it is very common in Buddhist

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<sup>1</sup> Hick 2004 pp.233-240

<sup>2</sup> Bodhi 2005, p. 83.

<sup>3</sup> Dhp 276.

<sup>4</sup> Thanissaro 2012; Bodhi 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Kuzminski 2010, pp. 3-10

<sup>6</sup> Coleman & Deutsch, p. 73-5.

literature to contrast the spiritually mature or ennobled person (*ariya-puggala*)<sup>1</sup> with the ordinary or spiritually immature person (*puthujjana/prthagjana*). They have a different perception and understanding of reality. The latter cannot see that the world is ultimately burning with the fires of suffering (*dukkha*) and are stupefied by the relative or false pleasures. But the "spiritually ennobled" sees true pleasure and happiness in the transcending of sense-objects and the self (as insubstantial and impermanent). That is, transcending or exhausting the 'bundle of fuel' (*upādāna-kkhandhas*) that made up the phenomenal appearance of a self, and its illusory substantiality.<sup>2</sup> If a true-disciple or follower of the Buddha-dharma is unwilling to admit differences in spiritual maturity he/she cannot be receptive and benefit from spiritual community (*saṅgha*) and spiritual friendship (*kalyāṇa-mitta/kalyāṇa-mitra*); thus cannot make effective progress on the Path towards ethical purification, meditation and wisdom-development.<sup>3</sup> In traditional Buddhism, one expresses this receptivity by bowing, revering or paying respect to others and the three Jewels (*Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha*), particularly in the form of devotional rituals (*pūjā*).<sup>4</sup> In other words, one needs to be able to recognize different degrees of freedom from the poisons of greed, hatred and delusion between oneself and others to be able to emulate those qualities and their practice. To counteract any negative comparisons, the Buddhist scriptures contain – one may say a paradoxical non-dogmatic corrective, since many passages remind us that equality-conceit (*māna*), inferiority-conceit (*omāna*) and superiority-conceit (*atimāna*) should be dropped; because all of them are forms of conceit or self-importance (*māna*) that cause unnecessary suffering (*dukkha*) and constitute one of the fetters (*saṃyojana*) that hinders one's progress on the path (SN.22.89).<sup>5</sup>

### 1.1.7. Spiritual dogmatism and alienation.

So far we have shown the obvious damaging impacts of dogmatism on society and the development of a healthy body and psyche in an individual. However one can talk of subtler "spiritual" implications in the pursuing of a religious path that brings the danger of existential alienation and the whole problem of "transcendence". Various existentialist philosophers like Nietzsche have warned us about this, being very suspicious of the alienating consequences of speculative metaphysics within religious thinking.<sup>6</sup> That is, the forceful and unwholesome rejection of this very life, as "mundane" in a pejorative and dismissive sense; and in contraposition to the after-life or a "transcendental" life, either called heaven, Nirvana or some kind of mystic union with the divine. This dogmatic take on spiritual life tends to construct literalistic divisions between a pragmatic self and a "transcended-self"; either as supra-mundane and "spiritual" presumptions, or simplistic assumptions on the absolute-non-existence of the objective world and a self. If active integration of the psyche, body and present experience is not cultivated, "spiritual practice" tends to result in a sort of paradoxical or ironic religious-escapism. It brings the danger of repression of objective needs, the avoidance of daily responsibilities; and stagnation or delay of growth towards real adulthood, which is, a mature acceptance of and dealing with individual limitations or emotional "issues". This form of dissociation can bring catastrophic consequences in the psychological

<sup>1</sup> Those who have reached one of the supramundane paths, from stream-entrant (*sotāpanna/srotāpanna*) to Arahantship or "awakening" (Powers 2000, under '*prthag-jana*'; Harvey 2013: 85).

<sup>2</sup> Harvey 2013, p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> Gombrich 2009, p.15; Harvey 2013, pp 310-14, 319.

<sup>4</sup> Harvey 2013, pp. 240-1.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 65; Bodhi 2005, pp.402-6; NBD, under '*māna*' (AN.VI,49)

<sup>6</sup> Morrison 1997 pp. 5, 14, 22; Loy 2000, pp. xv-xvi.

wellbeing of the individual. Some call it alienated or disintegrated awareness, others call it "spiritual bypassing".<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Are agnosticism and secularism expressions of non-dogmatism?

The last decades seem to show the growth of a movement that calls itself 'agnostic' and/or 'secular' Buddhism around the globe in westernised countries, particularly in Europe and the USA, giving form to another kind of approach, even among the many varieties of Western Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> Scholars in the field are well aware of the great capacity for adaptation that Buddhism has had in different cultures throughout its history. However, with the risk of discussing the very nature of "Buddhism" which cannot be reduced to a uniform or homogeneous set of doctrines, soteriology and practices; we need to clarify the ambiguities of the terms 'agnostic' and 'secular' in order to explore their possible relationship with or contradiction to a non-dogmatic approach.

First of all it is important to notice behind these new approaches, that they are not always necessarily mere reactive attitudes to traditional forms of "Buddhism", but can be a genuine and uncompromising search for "truth" or an approach that seems more appropriate in the modern era, taking into account the advances of historical research and its associated disciplines and sciences. "Dharma practice" – rather than 'Buddhism' as another belief system- as Stephen Batchelor suggests in his '*Buddhism without Beliefs*' is after all a 'course of action'.<sup>3</sup> But here it is relevant to note also, that what we regularly call 'Buddhism' is a much more complex cultural phenomenon than what the concepts of 'religion' or 'philosophy' tend to denote.

### 2.1. What is a Secular Buddhism?

So let's start by asking what does it mean to be a secular Buddhist? 'Secular' tends to mean '*not connected with religious or spiritual matters [and] contrasted with sacred*'.<sup>4</sup> According to McMahan, in Buddhism this has implied a "detraditionalization" of institutions and practices, dissolution of hierarchies and many rituals being seen as rigid and stagnated; accompanied by a "demythologization" and "psychologization" of the Buddhist cosmology.<sup>5</sup> Many, no doubt- may see this as a healthy and necessary cleansing and grounding of what is relevant for humankind in postmodernity.<sup>6</sup> Others may ask how appropriate – not to say legitimate or realistic - it is to practice the Buddhist path depriving it of a sense of the "sacred", of reverence and ritualized practice? For many Buddhists this sense of the sacred does not have to be connected with the veneration of a God or goddesses or "holy" in theistic terms as the etymology and definition suggests,<sup>7</sup> but a positive projection<sup>8</sup> of the highest

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<sup>1</sup> Welwood, 2002: 207-13; Subhuti 1994, p. 187.

<sup>2</sup> Batchelor 2012; McMahan 2008, pp. 244-6; see '*Secular Buddhist Association*' website (<http://secularbuddhism.org>)

<sup>3</sup> Batchelor 1997, p. 7

<sup>4</sup> OED, under 'secular'.

<sup>5</sup> McMahan 2008, p. 241-4

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> OED, under "sacred".

<sup>8</sup> Sangharakshita in the '*Essence of Zen*' (1992: 60-2) admits that ultimately all projections are a hindrance, like that to the "mythic" Buddhas and Bodhisattvas or our spiritual teachers, since – like all sorts of identifications, they are empty (*suñña/sūnya*) and have to be let go of; but that in early and even mature stages of Buddhist practice (i.e. as an ordinary person) "spiritual projections" are beneficial, even necessary; that not all

values, particularly the traditional Three Jewels or true refuges (*saraṇa/śaraṇa*) of *Buddha*, *Dharma* and *Śaṅgha*. They are "true refuges" in the recognition of the existentially precarious and fragile human condition, where all are trying to free themselves or escape from suffering and find respite in one way or another. In taking refuge in the Three Jewels one acknowledges the possibility of more skilful, wise and effective ways to escape (*nissaraṇa*) from suffering than the apparent "escapism" and unrecognized danger (*ādīnava*) of quick or superficial gratification (*assāda*). This implies that a life indulged in sensual pleasures, accumulation of wealth and fame, or even religious status and the delusion of essentialist and alienated "spiritual" views, is doomed to fail and disappoint sooner or later.<sup>1</sup> That is why "Going for refuge to the three Jewels" is considered by practically all Buddhist traditions the central act that establishes a person as a Buddhist.<sup>2</sup>

However, the literal and rigid take on the "supranatural"<sup>3</sup> aspects of Buddhist cosmology<sup>4</sup> is what agnostic and secular Buddhists tend to reject,<sup>5</sup> and one may say quite rightly. That is, the existence of all sorts of gods and goddesses (*devas*) and extra-ordinary beings in different planes or realms of existence, inextricably linked with the worldview of an unmeasurable cycle of rebirths, even innumerable Buddhas in vast universes. According to the earliest scriptures that vision is out of reach for ordinary persons (*puthujjana/prthagjana*) whose sense-perception is limited; but not for the spiritually awakened or those who have developed psychic powers like the Buddha through supra-ordinarily meditative states.<sup>6</sup> But of course there can be a more positive take on Buddhist mythology, a metaphorical and even poetic take that can enhance understanding and effective engagement with the intricacies of the spiritual life and practice; issues that the rational mind and the many irrational and unconscious aspects of human nature tend to miss out. Some might see this as an extreme psychologization of the Buddhist cosmology.

In brief, the secular/agnostic Buddhist movement clearly attempts a non-dogmatic approach to the *Buddha-Dharma* in an uncompromising search for truth and what is relevant in the actual context beyond cultural bias. For that purpose, they welcome and integrate modern disciplines in order to understand and apply the Buddhist practices; like western psychology, psychotherapy, philosophy and the arts. Batchelor is certainly not the first western Buddhist who has attempted to do this as he himself admits in his *'The Awakening of the West: The encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture'*.<sup>7</sup> To mention just a few with international impact: Chögyam Trungpa<sup>8</sup> mainly in the USA, Thich Nhat Hanh in France and Sangharakshita<sup>9</sup> in the UK. However, this attempt can have traces of unsuspected dogmatism or misguided identifications, if one analyses the connotations of 'secular' in the face of the nature of the Buddhist path or Dharma-practice and reviews the philosophical background of the agnostic movement.

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"projections" have to be negative or detrimental to personal development as the psychotherapeutic jargon tends to suggest.

<sup>1</sup> Bodhi 2005, pp. 186-7.

<sup>2</sup> Powers 2000 under '*śaraṇa*'

<sup>3</sup> This or 'suprasensory' are less-polluted terms than 'supernatural' which tends to have more superstitious 'associations with the occult, the spooky, ghost, witches, magic, spells and so on' (Hick 2010: 5)

<sup>4</sup> Harvey 2013, pp. 32-8

<sup>5</sup> Batchelor 2012; see '*Secular Buddhist Association*' website (<http://secularbuddhism.org>)

<sup>6</sup> Harvey 2013, pp. 25-26, 81, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Batchelor 1994.

<sup>8</sup> McMahan 2008, pp. 8, 45-6; Lopez, 2002, p. 244-5 Batchelor 1994, p. 323-40, 353-69

<sup>9</sup> McMahan 2008, pp. 8, 136-8; Lopez 2002, p. 186-7; Batchelor 1994, p.327, 333-335

## 2.2. Can scepticism be dogmatic?

Scepticism has been the major source of inspiration for the agnostic movement or *agnosticism*<sup>1</sup> as the philosophical attitude applied to metaphysical ideas and religious claims and beliefs, particularly of theism. The colloquial uses of *sceptical* or *sceptic* denote a person 'not easily convinced; having doubts or reservations..., inclined to question or doubt accepted opinions... from the Greek *skeptikos*... inquiry, doubt'<sup>2</sup>.

There is a difference between philosophical scepticism and ordinary incredulity.<sup>3</sup> The former can be varied and complex,<sup>4</sup> since there have been different schools or traditions of scepticism from Ancient Greece to modern times, not to say similar parallels in Indian philosophy, sometimes with subtle differences but with striking implications regarding different kinds of agnosticism and even the failed non-dogmatic stance.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.2.1. The Pyrrhonian approach vs 'Academic' negative-dogmatism.

However, in general terms one can draw from the whole history of philosophy two basic forms of philosophical scepticism: "Academic" and "Pyrrhonian".<sup>6</sup> The first refers to the heirs of Plato's Academy and leaders of one of the most prominent schools of Hellenistic times, from the 3rd to 1st century BCE. Apparently they categorically assented that we cannot have knowledge of any kind, arguing that our sensory experience is only apparently evident, but ultimately illusory and unreliable like most of the modern sceptics from Descartes to Hume and other extreme sceptics.<sup>7</sup> In other words Academic scepticism denies the possibility of any knowledge whatsoever. They are what mostly we call sceptics in modern times, that is, in the nihilistic sense. More importantly, Academic or nihilistic scepticism is – ironically one may say for the secular and agnostic movement- a form of negative dogmatism. The second kind, "Pyrrhonian scepticism" emphasises a departure from both positive and negative dogmatism. It "suspends" belief or assent, instead of affirming or denying beliefs about non evident things. It is not nihilistic because it leaves the question open; it remains open about the possibility or not of some kind of experience or transcendence that is not evident at the present moment. According to the Pyrrhonians, "academics" confuse direct experience with the belief about a given direct experience, and take doubt too far, making it indiscriminate and absolute.

As put by Kuzminski in his *'Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism'*: '[Pyrrhonism] has confidence in the world of immediate experience, and remains open to its scientific study and to its pleasures, though alert as well to its pains, dangers and mysteries'. According to Sextus Empiricus, the foremost representative of Pyrrhonian scepticism, the *modus operandi* of the Academics' philosophical dialectic – like that of other dogmatists- is to hold with "strong inclination" and "conviction" even plausible beliefs. But 'Pyrrhonists do not accept the Academics' appeal to plausibility as a criterion of belief in things not evident'<sup>8</sup>. Empiricus insists also that the Pyrrhonians differ in their commitment to their original goal

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<sup>1</sup> Le Poidevin 2010, pp. 35-9

<sup>2</sup> OED under '*sceptical*' and '*sceptic*'

<sup>3</sup> Klein 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Audi 2009, under '*skepticism*'.

<sup>5</sup> Klein 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Klein 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid; Kuzminski, pp. 4-5

<sup>8</sup> Kuzminski, pp. 8-9.

'*ataraxia*', that is freedom from worry or tranquillity. The Academics seem to have forgotten it and fall into the seduction of argumentative virtuosity and self-elation. They still hold to plausibility or rational persuasion, opinions and beliefs like other dogmatists. While Pyrrhonists are willing to suspend all belief, either non-evident or plausible; not even asserting categorically or definitely the impossibility of knowledge of a certain matter. This does not mean that Pyrrhonists become apathetic or indifferent and vague with philosophical inquiry or disengaged with life and its moral responsibilities – as many philosophers have assumed- despite their insistence on the great differences from common scepticism. Pyrrhonian scepticism develops the ability to inquire and refute until they have exhausted equally opposing arguments, or are at a loss whether to assert or deny anything, arriving then at perplexity (*aporia*) and suspension of judgement (*epochē*). Thus, they are still able to respond ethically and actively to direct experience, following ordinary life without passivity. Once beliefs are dissolved, confusion between beliefs and direct experience dissolves, and emotional resonance dissolves too. In this way tranquillity of mind (*ataraxia*) naturally arises, being able to see direct experiences as they are, cleared from the mist of belief.<sup>1</sup>

In this way, from the Pyrrhonian point of view, Academic or modern scepticism (nihilistic) is on the other side of the same coin as dogmatic approaches. Negative dogmatism is categorical and extreme, while positive dogmatism is essentialist and tends to speculate on metaphysical and eternalist doctrines, claiming knowledge of transcendental truths (beyond the scope of human knowledge) by appealing to non-evident experience or authority.<sup>2</sup> Thus Pyrrhonism is a moderate or methodological scepticism, of "investigation" and "inquiry" in the strict sense of the etymology of *sceptic*, lit. "one who looks".<sup>3</sup> This is a truly non-dogmatic approach – that very interestingly not only shares striking similarities with, but apparently draws influence from early Buddhism. Since apparently Pyrrho (the founder of non-dogmatic scepticism) had an encounter with Indian sages, particularly *Madhyamika* Buddhist philosophers and practitioners. This happened in one of the expeditions with Alexander the Great in what are now Northwest India and the Ionian Greek cities of Asia Minor.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.2.2. Modern scepticism.

From the previous explorations one can see then that what agnostic and secular Buddhists stand against, i.e. dogmatism, they might in the end – though unintentionally – fall precisely into; unless they clearly qualify what kind of agnosticism they profess. And it has to be remembered that the agnostic movement arose mainly as a reaction to the 'gnostic' movement, who assumed the possibility of knowing God and its nature.<sup>5</sup> Most of the arguments in the history of agnosticism – until very recently - have been around the Christian God and the metaphysical doctrines associated with it, i.e. the monotheistic God-creator of the Universe<sup>6</sup>. This has led of course to a particular investigation of the soteriology of "salvation" ultimately centred on the grace of a transcendental and personal God and shared by all major and traditional abrahamic religions (i.e. Jewish, Christian and Muslim) and certainly pre-Buddhist Hinduism/Brahmanism.<sup>7</sup> That soteriology is radically different from a

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, pp. 6-16; Vogt 2014

<sup>2</sup> Kuzminski 2010, pp. 4-5; Klein 2014; Vogt 2014

<sup>3</sup> Kuzminski 2010, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Kuzminski 2010, pp. 35-7

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 21; Smart 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Smart 2013

<sup>7</sup> Jones 2005, under 'authority'

soteriology of "liberation" that is ultimately depending on individual responsibility, which is much more emphasized in Buddhism, particularly the early traditions; despite what some Universalists or eclectics – well intentioned but misguided - like to admit, even since ancient times.<sup>1</sup>

One might be reminded of other great philosophers that had great influence on the agnostic movement discussing these very issues, particularly David Hume and Emmanuel Kant. Hume has sometimes been portrayed as an extreme sceptic arriving at the pinnacle of Scottish enlightenment, but it might be more correct to describe him as a radical inquirer, like the Pyrrhonians (though apparently Hume himself misunderstood them as dogmatic and nihilistic sceptics)<sup>2</sup>. He was willing to question everything and suspend all belief, from metaphysical ideas to the very assumption of the criteria of "justified belief" and the assumptions of the inherited theories on the "principle of sufficient reason (regarding laws of logic/deductive thinking, criteria of "evidence/proof" in scientific experimentation and even the principle of causality)<sup>3</sup>. These issues had a defining influence on modern epistemology and philosophy of science; like Karl Popper who more deeply explored and challenged the "principle of verification" and the inductive method. Since then, the taken for granted criteria for scientific hypothesis, theories and laws, could be no more.<sup>4</sup> Another greatly influential insight of Hume was the "bundle theory" of personal identity, i.e. a made-up notion resulting from a simple bundle of sense-perceptions and beliefs without inherent unity or essence.<sup>5</sup> This was incredibly original and progressive for his historical and European-cultural background, but not for the very similar and already widespread *anattā* (Skr. *Anātman*, lit. no-Self) Buddhist doctrine, known throughout most of Asia and the Far-East; and explained through the five aggregates or groups of existence (*khandha/skandha*, lit. heaps).<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, Kant revolutionised philosophy in all areas like no one before him, though supported by, and synthesising the philosophical idealism and empiricism that he inherited in the mist of the scientific revolution. Kant himself mentioned that he was awakened from the "dogmatic slumbers" by Hume and empiricism. He did this precisely through what is called his "Copernican revolution" regarding the scope and limits of human knowledge. Just as Copernicus revolutionised the Aristotelean-Ptolemaic dogma of astronomic science in his time, Kant revolutionised epistemology; since ancient times the old idea of the assumed objectivity and power of the human cognitive-apparatus. He showed that "time", "space" and "causality" were not necessarily objective realities "out there" in sense-experience (what he called '*phenomena*'); but contingent or dependent categories inherent in human thought; arriving then at the paradox that "human knowledge" is necessarily limited. In other words, human-kind can only know, or think that it knows based on the blind assumption that he/she can think/know out of his/her limited cognitive-apparatus. He also showed that reality as it really is (what he called '*noumenon*') is outside of ordinary human knowledge. That is, the way the human cognitive-apparatus is set up implies that humankind cannot think without the 'a-priori' notions (independent from experience) of "time", "space" and "causation".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gombrich 1998, p. 119; McMahan 2008, pp. 108-10; Bodhi 2005, pp. 81-4; Thanissaro 2012

<sup>2</sup> Kuzminski 2010 pp. 13-6

<sup>3</sup> Klein 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Popper 1962, pp. 3365, 107-19.

<sup>5</sup> Audi 2009, under 'Hume'.

<sup>6</sup> Harvey 2013, p. 56.

<sup>7</sup> Klein 2014; Smart 2013; Audi 2009, under 'Kant'.

The insight of these philosophers has represented a turning point in western civilization, and still keeps impacting the XXI century. Since then, an era of uncertainty and existentialism began, with the surfacing of ancient and deep philosophical questions regarding the nature of the universe and the place and meaning of humankind in it. Moreover and relevant to the subject of this dissertation, it has forced a more open and deeply uncomfortable questioning of religious-faith; that is, the existence of a personal, creator, omnipresent and omnipotent God, religious activity and existential loneliness. From then onwards one could say there were three doors open in this crucial moment of western history: 1) the dogmatic and religious-orthodox stance of eternalist and essentialist doctrines, based on wishful thinking and deliberate ignorance; 2) the nihilistic and cynical approaches of fatalistic materialist-reductionism and rampant hedonism; or 3) a middle way embracing uncertainty, either in the form of secular "humanism", or the emergence of Buddhism as "religion" or "spiritual" path in its own right; but freed from theistic dogmas and indulgence in metaphysical speculation.

Though the humanist movement is basically secular, it usually has great regard for human values, the arts, and individual rights (freedom of speech, education, free-thinking, "equality", etc.) and sees no need for religious cults or reverence. While "individuality" has become much more prominent than satisfying the primal need of "belonging" to the conventional values and customs of traditional societies, many thinkers and committed practitioners (secular or not, of Buddhism or other religious-inspired movements) have expressed their concern about the great tendency to fall into "individualism", cynicism, rampant hedonism and capitalist-materialist exploitation/alienation.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, one cannot assume that Buddhism in all its forms represents and guarantees a faithful middle way embracing uncertainty. Since certainly one can find forms of Buddhism with a "soteriology of salvation", particularly later *Mahāyāna* forms, like 'Pure land' and '*Nichiren*' of the far-East. And of course one can frequently find "eternalist" and superstitious views similar to theistic religions in all forms of ethnic and syncretic Buddhism. That is, historically conditioned by pre-Buddhist animistic religions, like '*Bön*' in Tibetan Buddhism, 'Taoism/Daoism' in China and 'Shintoism' in Japan'. These are similar to pre-Christian paganism. Though Animism has traces of eternalist and metaphysical views, it has been an important part of many forms of syncretic Buddhism, with a more positive/respectful response to Nature's resources (including flora and fauna) than Abrahamic religions for example.<sup>2</sup>

However, one can talk of "main-stream Buddhism"<sup>3</sup> as the set of doctrines and approaches based on core principles and practices as expounded in the earliest Buddhist texts, but still latent in many forms of later Mahayana traditions and modern/western Buddhism, which focus on a "soteriology of liberation", and remain open to and embrace the classic "metaphysical reticence" and the "Middle Way" originally taught by the Buddha.

### **2.2.3. The need to qualify agnosticism in the Buddhist context**

In this way, previous thinkers and movements have been very relevant in the establishment of the philosophical background and methodology of the agnostic movement. And similar to philosophical scepticism, agnosticism can be divided into two main forms: 1) either called

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<sup>1</sup> Moulakis 2011; McMahan, pp. 188-91, 195.

<sup>2</sup> Tüker & Williams 1997, pp. 358.

<sup>3</sup> See notes in introduction on discussions with Sarah Shaw and L.S. Cousins regarding "main-stream" Buddhism.



strong, strict, hard, closed or permanent: that one "cannot" know... i.e. Academic scepticism or negative/nihilistic dogmatism; and 2) either called weak, soft, open or temporal: that one "does not" currently know... i.e. Pyrrhonian scepticism or committed to inquiry and suspension of all beliefs including – it cannot be emphasized enough, the belief/assumption that knowledge of a particular issue is impossible.<sup>1</sup> This open or temporal agnosticism is closer to the actual etymological origin of the term 'agnostic', lit. 'no [without]-knowledge'<sup>2</sup>; first coined by the scientist Thomas Henry Huxley in 1869 emphasising "lack of certainty" rather than "impossibility of knowledge" to contrast the facile claim of knowledge of the "gnostic movement", especially of an esoteric and mystical nature.<sup>3</sup> In this way Huxley's agnostic approach was methodological (as modelled by Pyrrhonian scepticism) rather than descriptive (i.e. extreme scepticism or negative dogmatists from ancient to modern times as we have seen).

Therefore one needs to be careful not to apply indiscriminately the old agnostic approaches to the Buddhist view of the world and "spiritual" practice. Not just because there is clearly no God-creator in the Buddhist cosmology, but because the Buddhist scriptures – overall – do not play the role of revealed truths, as we shall see in more detail.

Another major characteristic of Buddhist modernism in general, though particularly of secular/agnostic Buddhism, seems to be a misguided and over-enthusiastic need to legitimize all Buddhist doctrines and practices from the point of view of the natural sciences,<sup>4</sup> when after all the Buddhist path and doctrine as expressed in several passages of the *Nikāyas* is about the nature of suffering and the path to its end. This can be seen as scientific naivety if not dogmatic at times as the following examples show.

It is clear that when one talks of an agnostic approach in Buddhist teachings, the subject of doubt is not anymore the existence and nature of a God-Creator, but that of supernatural phenomena and what some might take as metaphysical claims (like karma and re-birth). Therefore there are metaphysical issues in Buddhist doctrine that certainly should not be simply dismissed if one really commits to a non-dogmatic approach. And the rejection of the doctrine of re-birth is perhaps the most polemic between agnostic-seculars and traditionalists (including western adaptations).

In fact, Stephen Batchelor has said recently<sup>5</sup> that his reason to remain agnostic about the doctrine of re-birth, was his need to honour reason, but then he made it clear that by calling himself "agnostic" he does not assume that nobody can know, or indeed that is impossible that someday he himself might be able to have a direct experience of re-birth or past lives through some very high meditative states as traditionally put in the scriptures. He explicitly admitted to being open about that, but said that at the moment he could only honestly say he has not direct experience of it. Thus in fact he was admitting to being an open or soft agnostic but had failed to qualify what kind of agnosticism he was adhering to before. Failing to qualify the kind of agnosticism might seem meaningless, but if we compare it with hard materialists (reductionists) and over-generalized hostility towards all forms of religion; i.e.

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<sup>1</sup> Le Poidevin, pp. 9-17; Smart 2013; Borchert 2005 under 'agnosticism'; Craig 1998 under 'agnosticism'.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> OED, under 'agnostic'; Le Poidevin: 18-21

<sup>4</sup> MacMahan 2008, pp. 203-7. Cooper 2010.

<sup>5</sup> In an debate with the Norwegian Bhikkhu Ajan Brahmalī on March 2013 in Melbourne, Australia (YouTube link: <http://youtu.be/MuHi9Zpx7zo>)

dogmatic scepticism/agnosticism like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, one might appreciate more the importance of this distinction.<sup>1</sup>

A similar ambiguity regarding an agnostic stand on the Buddhist doctrine of re-birth is made by Jones in his *'Rebirth and consciousness'*<sup>2</sup> where he argues for an agnostic approach in favour of recent scientific research. While initially he says he does not believe in re-birth, he later clarifies he does not mean that he actually knows what the case is, and he admits like Batchelor that the early Buddhist scriptures advance without doubt that doctrine. And of course one should not take it blindly or literally on the basis of scriptural and traditional authority. Therefore he would be more correct to qualify his agnosticism as open, provisional or soft, as simply not having gained knowledge by some sort of direct experience. Perhaps, in order to avoid all the jargon which is potentially misleading, it would be both easier and more correct – for a committed non-dogmatic Buddhist practitioner or disciple – to simply say that he does not know but is open to the possibility.

On the other hand it is clear that there are some forms of western Buddhism committed to a non-dogmatic approach that at the same time embrace "religious" practices in their own right, like rituals, the important role of Buddhist "faith", even the sense of the sacred and the rich and enhancing symbolism of Buddhist cosmology and certain devotional practices. They see it as a loss to dismiss them altogether.<sup>3</sup> And this does not involve an absolute "demythologization", "detraditionalization" and "psychologization" as McMahan in his *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* seems to suggest.<sup>4</sup> In fact several of these western movements would feel at a loss with a purely secular or agnostic approach.

While Batchelor and other secular Buddhists claim that the "Buddhism without beliefs" that they promote is a 'return to the original, ancient source of Buddhism'<sup>5</sup>, that is of early Buddhist scriptures there is overwhelming scriptural evidence and secondary scholarly criticism that the Buddha of the earliest scriptures (i.e. *Pāli Nikāyas* and Chinese *Āgamas*) did not advocate an extreme sceptical and agnostic attitude, or dismiss the role of Buddhist "faith" (*saddhā/śraddhā*) and "ritual" and "devotion" (*pūjā*)<sup>6</sup>. To put these terms in scare quotes might seem excessive, but it is necessary. Since their varying connotations according to different cultural conditioning has brought so much misunderstanding, reactivity and sometimes unnecessary polemic in the globalized modern world. How Buddhist faith and ritual – including, but wider than and beyond, its cognitive/believe aspect – fits with a non-dogmatic approach will be explored at the end.

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<sup>1</sup> Kaufman 2006

<sup>2</sup> Jones 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Stout 2009, pp. 445-472; Chögyam Trungpa 2004, pp.138-149;

<sup>4</sup> McMahan 2008, p. 52

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 244

<sup>6</sup> Gethin 1998, pp. 165-9.; Cousins in Hinnels 1997, pp.372-3.

### 3. The Buddhist parallel to non-dogmatism:

#### 3.1. *Diṭṭhupādāna*

Perhaps the closest concept in the ancient Buddhist scriptures resembling the meaning of 'dogmatism' is *diṭṭhupādāna* literally meaning clinging, attachment, or grasping (*upadānā*) to fixed and/or false views or doctrines (*diṭṭhi*)<sup>1</sup>. It is the second of the four *upādānāni* or attachments and, according to Buddhaghosha, they are intensified degrees of craving (*tanhā/trsnā*). These defile the mind-heart (*citta*) and impede the realization of insight (*vipassāna*) in varying degrees towards full awakening (*bodhi*)<sup>2</sup>. A synonym to *diṭṭhupādāna* is *diṭṭhi-parāmāsa*, though in *Abhidhamma* literature this tends to specify the 'contagion of speculative opinion'<sup>3</sup> or what is called the proliferation of mind (*papañca/prapañca*).<sup>4</sup>

#### 3.2. The nature of views: as propositional content and or "attitude".

From the Buddhist perspective, all view or opinion (*diṭṭhi*) is an obstacle to 'seeing things as they really are' (*yathabhūta-dassana*)<sup>5</sup>. And most early scriptures posit an opposition between right-view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) and wrong-view (*micchā-diṭṭhi*). However there are a few texts – apparently some of the oldest – (particularly the *Aṭṭhakavagga* of the *Sutta-nipāta*) that equate the notion of "right view" with the notion of "view-transcendence" or "no-view" at all.<sup>6</sup> In this perspective, crucial to the overall non-dogmatic approach in Buddhism and the thesis of this dissertation; any view, even right-views, if held with attachment are wrong views. According to Fuller in the early scriptures, right-view, the first limb of the classic Noble Eight-fold Path, involves not so much the correcting of wrong-views but 'a detached order of seeing'. It is primarily a matter of attitude rather than of intellectual or propositional content. Certainly it involves an acquaintance with the correct knowledge of the doctrine, but ultimately right view is to be practiced, rather than adopted or believed in. That is, wrong-view is fundamentally a form of attachment and greed, even if it involves a true statement.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore the key to understanding this apparent contradiction is to differentiate and notice two different meanings and contexts in which "right views" and "wrong views" are referred to; one as propositional content, and the other as attitude. The first includes for instance the classic teachings and formulas of "Conditioned Arising", "The Four Ennobling Truths" (which includes "The Noble Eight-fold Path"), the "three marks of conditioned existence" (*ti-lakkhaṇa/tri-lakṣaṇas*: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality), or the gradual Buddhist path as fundamentally formed by ethics (*sīla*), meditation (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*pañña/prajñā*). The second refers to the attitude towards those views or the way to hold them.

According to recognized scholars, the view-transcendence approach implied in the famous Parable of the Raft, like that of the *Atthaka-Vagga* verses, refers precisely to the "attitude" aspect of *sammā-diṭṭhi*.<sup>8</sup> There are similar though more rare passages in the *Pāli* Canon with

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<sup>1</sup> PTS-D & NBD under '*diṭṭhupādāna*'.

<sup>2</sup> Vsm. XVII

<sup>3</sup> PTS-D & NBD under '*upādāna*' & '*parāmāsa*'

<sup>4</sup> NBD & PTS-D, under '*papañca*'.

<sup>5</sup> Fuller 2005, p. 1

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Gómez 1976, Thanissaro 1997c.

<sup>7</sup> Fuller 2005, p.1.

<sup>8</sup> Fuller 2005, pp. 105, 112, 136-7, 147-50; Thanissaro 1997c; Gómez 1976.

this proto-*Madhyāmika* approach; where the notion of "emptiness" (*suññatā/sūnyatā*) became more prominent in later *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, though intimately related to the notion of insubstantiality (*anattā/anātman*, lit. no-Self); that has caused so much misunderstanding and misapprehension among both Buddhist practitioners and philosophers since ancient times.<sup>1</sup>

However, there is no doubt that early scriptures state clear criterion for wrong-views or doctrines regarding propositional content. The most exhaustive analysis and enumeration of these is in '*The Brahmajāla-Sutta*', the very first *Sutta* of the *Digha-Nikāya* and of the entire *Pāli* canon or *Tiṭṭaka*.<sup>2</sup> These wrong views are better understood as cognitive misperception, a distortion or perversion of reality (*diṭṭhi-vipallāsa*) of the above marks of conditioned-existence that lead to delusion (*moha*) greed and hatred; and so to the whole mass of suffering.<sup>3</sup>

### **3.3. The in-built mechanisms of self-refutation in the Buddhist doctrine and Path.**

Thus there is a clear non-dogmatic approach to the Buddha's teachings and doctrines, and it cannot be emphasised enough, the liberation from all attachment, particularly to views, is a fundamental concern of the whole Buddhist soteriology. Ultimately, "Buddhism" as a spiritual path should be seen more as a therapeutic exercise,<sup>4</sup> rather than as an intellectual exercise of philosophical discourse or of religious orthodoxy regarding the doctrines that the Buddha advances and asks to be taken seriously. Many passages of the canonical scriptures show that the Buddha never demands blind faith or discourages inquiry. On the contrary, several passages in ancient scriptures show the Buddha clearly encouraging the testing of his teachings through actual experience.

#### **3.3.1. How to identify a reliable spiritual guide/teacher/friend.**

The *Kalama-Sutta* is maybe the most famous text within Buddhist circles attesting to this non-dogmatic approach.<sup>5</sup> However Anālayo in his '*The Scope of Free Inquiry According to The Vīmaṃsaka-Sutta and its Madhyama-Āgama Parallel*' states that this text goes even further in the advocacy for free inquiry. This challenges the traditional and great Indian regard for the authority of a spiritual teacher or a guru that should never be questioned. Here the Buddha not just allows but encourages that his own claim of being fully awakened, of being an example and an able teacher should be thoroughly scrutinised.<sup>6</sup> Here is an extract:

The Blessed One said: «If based on [the abilities of] one's own mind, one does not know the mind of another as it really is, one should investigate... [like this]: "Could defiled states knowable through the eye or the ear be found in this venerable one?" ...If there are no [such defiled states], one should further investigate: "Could mixed states knowable through the eye or the ear be found in this venerable one?"... "Could pure states... be found in this venerable one?"... "Has this venerable one been practising this Dharma for a long time, or is he practising it [only] temporarily?"... "Does this venerable one enter into meditation for the sake of fame or gain, or does he enter into meditation for the sake of neither fame nor gain?"... [Then by direct witnessing the investigator can say].... I do not know the mind of others, and I also do not have knowledge of other [by way of psychic power]. Yet, that venerable one, whether he is in seclusion, or among the

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<sup>1</sup> Gombrich 2009, pp. 8-12; Harvey 1995, pp. 7-8

<sup>2</sup> Bodhi 2007, p. v

<sup>3</sup> Fuller 2005, pp. 75-6, 83-; Harvey 2013, p. 73

<sup>4</sup> Ruegg 1995, pp. 150-3

<sup>5</sup> Bachelar 1997, Nagapriya 2001; Analayo 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Analayo 2010.

[monastic] community, or in a [public] assembly; if [some] are progressing well; if [he] becomes the teacher for [those who] are progressing well; [or else] in relation to material things; [in any of these instances] one can see [the detached nature of] that venerable one... I heard it from that venerable one, [after] asking [him] face to face, [whereon he said]: 'I delight in the practice, I am not afraid. Being free from desire I do not engage in sensuality, having already eradicated sensual desires'... (MN.47)<sup>1</sup>

Here the Buddha himself encourages his loyal disciples to question their over-enthusiastic reliance on the authority of his words and given status as "spiritual teacher". Of particular interest is the challenge of admitting the lack of psychic powers – contrary to the approach of revealed truth in many "sacred texts" in world-religions and coinciding with the non-dogmatic approach as the presumed highest value of the secular/agnostic Buddhist. Instead, the Buddha asks the disciples to base their confidence in him on his example rather than purely on his own words. In the text he insists over and over that they should base their "investigation" (*dhamma-vicaya*) on personal and direct experience (visual and auditory) of the behaviour and the reflected quality of mental/emotional-states (*dhamma*) of the Buddha either in private or in public. He suggests also that they should investigate the consistency, length of practice and motivation to meditate (since traditionally, one can just meditate for the sake of gaining mental pleasure – which, though more refined, is still a potential trap to get attached to and stagnate on the spiritual path)<sup>2</sup>. In short, one needs to investigate for a long time before one can pass from provisional to firm confidence/faith (*saddhā/sraddhā*) in a "spiritual teacher". In modern times one could apply these criteria to "spiritual friends" (*kalyāṇa-mitta/kalyāṇa-mitra*), as more reliable "spiritual guides" than others.

One can find very similar criteria of the "Buddhist faith" in the *Thana-Sutta* (AN 4.192) and *Canki-Sutta* (MN.95). The Buddha of the Nikāyas was very clear that there was no place for a fanatical "defence" of his teachings or status as a spiritual teacher. This is brought out in the compound term *sīlabbata-parāmāsa*, usually best understood as "righteous indignation" in the face of criticism of one's teacher or spiritual community, which involves a form of dogmatic exclusivism.<sup>3</sup>

### 3.3.2. The Three fetters (*saṃyojana*) towards irreversible Insight

#### 3.3.2.1. Attachment to "Self-identity view".

From the Buddhist point of view the root-poison of all fixed or "wrong views", of all dogmatic stances is *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* (personality or self-identity view), this is the first of the ten fetters (*saṃyojana*) that impede full spiritual awakening or liberation. There can be 20 variations of this fixed belief in a "Self" depending on the combinations of the five groups of existence (*khandha*: corporeality, hedonic-tone, perception, mental formations, or consciousness) and the particular kind of belief, either 1) to be identical with, 2) to be contained in, 3) to be independent from; or 4) to be the owner of them. This should not be taken as an absolute denial of the "empirical self", the provisional and even necessary development or cultivation of a "great-self" (*mahattā*)<sup>4</sup> within oneself and in society (as the recognition of individual/self-responsibility in ethics); nor its functional and colloquial uses in language. Instead, it should be seen as a radical and bold denial of essentialist and metaphysical speculations on the "Self-identity" – compared to what many religions claim as

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid (Trans. By Ānālayo)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Karunadasa 2013, pp. 166, 169; Keown 2001, p. 47; Sangharakshita 2001, pp. 204

<sup>4</sup> Harvey 1995, pp. 55-8

an immutable and immortal soul. Thus, the no-self doctrine (*anattā*) should be seen only as the denial of a fixed/eternal "Self" with capital "S" as Harvey suggests.<sup>1</sup> Actually the Buddha was very clear on the danger of these nihilistic implications, which are nothing but a deluded aspect of the other side of the same dogmatic view, i.e. the annihilationist-view. The former is the metaphysical and speculative construction of an eternalist view like that held by theistic religions which believe in the existence of an immortal and unchangeable soul. And the latter is a literalistic rather than methodological take on the *anattā*-doctrine, and mostly a simplistic reduction of consciousness to the physical-body. This view has been called materialist-reductionism, but has been thoroughly challenged in the contemporary philosophies of mind and science<sup>2</sup>. It assumes or "believes" (disguised as pseudo-scientific hypothesis) that all the unfathomable aspects of consciousness (like volition, emotion, intuition, empathy, imagination, or even particular forms of perception and interpretation, etc.) are originated or absolutely dependent on the physical brain and vanish at the moment of death. This is an example of scientific-dogmatism or "blind-faith in science" in modern times, taking for granted the "authority" of scientific-claims. Another example is the wide-spread fascination with astrophysics theories taken as given facts. Apparently nowadays millions of people have a copy of Stephen Hawking's '*A Brief History of Time*',<sup>3</sup> without actually having read it; or have read it but forget that theoretical-physics, like many "scientific theories" deals greatly in "speculation" with no substantial evidence. No matter how interesting and "apparently" supported by advanced mathematics and physics,<sup>4</sup> they are far from being actual scientific theories (like that of Newton's or Einstein's). And these, are not even "scientific laws", or fully adequate descriptions of the nature of the universe; as thought before Kuhn, Popper or even earlier by Hume. They are only provisional, and no doubt functional enough, as the great advances of computational and telephonic technology have shown, but they cannot take away the still remaining greatest mystery of all in the universe, "consciousness".<sup>5</sup> However the scientific attempts to understand the "natural world" and the mind should not be simply dismissed for the sake of holding those mysteries unknown, since one would just fall into dogmatic and reactionary religiosity; after all science at best adds to the wonder and awe of the universe.

According to the early Buddhist teachings, ignorance (*avijjā/avidyā*) is an underlying tendency or proclivity (*anusaya*), and one of the deep-rooted defilements of human nature (*āsava*, lit. intoxicant influxes) usually translated as cankers, taints, corruptions or intoxicant biases. However the canker of ignorance (*avijjāsava*), like the rest of the *āsavas*, is not something permanent or that one has to be resigned to accepting but adventitious defilements (AN.1.8-10), formed by external conditioning.<sup>6</sup> This can be a relief from a great burden, particularly for those conditioned by previous belief in an "original sin" as stated in most Christian creeds or dogma.<sup>7</sup> In this way, Buddhist meta-psychology considers the moral nature of humankind to contain both the roots of skilful/wholesome and unskilful/unwholesome actions (*kusala* and *akusala-mūla*), in a cosmogonic sense and as innate/inherent potential, one could say originally pure and loving. This reference is found in the earliest scriptures as '*pabhassara-citta*' (lit. the brightly shining mind-heart)<sup>8</sup>. Therefore,

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, pp. 1-2, 6. & Harvey 2013 pp. 64-5.

<sup>2</sup> Horst 2007, pp. viii, 23, 47.

<sup>3</sup> Hawking 2013. BBC News 26 December 2000.

<sup>4</sup> On the limitations of theoretical mathematics and physics one should refer, for instance, to Gödel's "incompleteness theorems" and Karl Popper's philosophy of science.

<sup>5</sup> Blackmore 2005, pp. 1-16.

<sup>6</sup> Harvey 1995, pp. 166-8.

<sup>7</sup> Jones 2005, under 'creation and original sin', 'catholic morality', 'theology of the rites'.

<sup>8</sup> Harvey 1995, pp. 155, 166-70.

ignorance can only be destroyed through the cultivation of virtue (*sīla*), mental unification or integration of mind and heart (*samādhi*), and the cultivation of wisdom (*paññā*); ultimately through meditative insight (*vipassanā*).<sup>1</sup>

### 3.3.2.2. Fruitless or detrimental doubt.

The second fetter is *Vicikicchā* (Skr, *Vicikitsā*), and is a synonym of the term *kankhā*; they frequently occur together in many *Pāli* passages and commentaries. *The PTS-Pāli-English Dictionary* translates it as doubt, perplexity or uncertainty. While Nyanatiloka has translated it as "sceptical doubt", similar to the term '*kankhā*', it covers different kinds of doubt; that is, intellectual, critical, or ethically and psychologically detrimental. And he sees it as persistent negative scepticism or wavering indecision.<sup>2</sup> This definition clearly resembles the dogmatic or nihilistic scepticism of the Academics that the Pyrrhonians wished to avoid and differentiate from, as we have seen previously. However this doubt is usually best understood as hesitation or indecisiveness, that is as ethical and psychological wavering or lack of commitment to the three Jewels as the *Samaññaphala-Sutta* (DN.2) shows;<sup>3</sup> very much what modern psychotherapy calls 'rationalization' as a defence-mechanism and avoidance of individual-responsibility.<sup>4</sup> From the Buddhist point of view, these doubts or rationalizations arise on the basis of "wrong-views" (*micchā-diṭṭhi*), distorted views (*diṭṭhi-vipallāsa*), or "vagueness". The latter is what the *Brahmajala-Sutta* (DN.1) deems "a theory of eel-wrigglers" (*amaravikkhepavad*).<sup>5</sup> On the other hand *vicikicchā* is also one of the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇas*) to meditative calm (*samatha*); and one of the seven proclivities/inclinations/tendencies (*anusaya*). In other words, *vicikicchā* is deeply ingrained, one could say, as dogma and hesitation to act, and only through the combined effort of applying study, personal investigation, reflection, meditation and contemplation or insight; is it thoroughly dissipated. This effort in turn can only be effective through right motivation, including faith or confidence (*saddhā/śraddhā*). So one should not despair or surrender to despondency and nihilistic views when "doubt" appears, but keep coming back to the basics of Buddhist practice; of ethics, meditation and wisdom. It is insisted throughout the canonical literature that moral practice purifies the mind-heart and releases it from restlessness and uneasiness of consciousness (*uddhacca-kukkucca*), another of the five mental hindrances,<sup>6</sup> which is caused by remorse (*hiri/hṛi*) and shame (*ottappa/apatrapya*). These latter are painful or unpleasant mental-states, which are actually positive or wholesome (*kusala*) and considered among the "beautiful" mental-factors (*sobhanacetāsika*).<sup>7</sup> They show an ethical sensitivity that supports higher states of meditative calm and concentration. And likewise the practice of sitting-meditation and "mindfulness" in general supports ethical awareness and sensitivity. In fact, the gradual and simultaneous cultivation of wisdom, virtue and meditative stillness and concentration feed and support each other. How Buddhist faith encourages inquiry (non-dogmatic scepticism) and relates with detrimental doubt will be more fully explored in the last section.

### 3.3.2.3. Attachment to rules and observances as ends in themselves

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey 2013, p. 324

<sup>2</sup> NBD in "kankhā"

<sup>3</sup> Ibid; Harvey 2013, p. 85; Thanissaro 1997f

<sup>4</sup> De-Silva 2005, pp.95-97

<sup>5</sup> Bodhi 2007, pp. 15-26, 331-2; Fuller 2005, pp. 34, 160-2; PH-BP.11.2; Nagapriya 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Ānālayo 2009, pp. 63-9; NBD under "*kukkucca*"

<sup>7</sup> My emphasis on "beautiful" (Bodhi 2007: 85).

Lastly, *sīlabbata-upādāna*, 'attachment to rules and observances' is the third of the first three fetters that have to be broken before gaining stream-entrance.<sup>1</sup> One can see it also as the loss of distinction between conventional morality and universal ethics. The former can be seen as customary modes of behaviour (rules of etiquette or "good manners") that certainly can bring harmony in a particular social context and facilitate the whole practice of Buddhist discipline (like the monastic code or *pātimokkha* found in the *Vinaya* that can comprise around 150 common core rules among still existing traditions)<sup>2</sup>. The latter is based primarily on individual responsibility and recognition of the consequences of one's acts and ultimately on heartfelt empathy/sympathy (*anukampā*) (as latent and preliminary universal-unconditional love and compassion)<sup>3</sup>; that is the integration of the altruistic dimension in one's very mode of acting and being. The perfect examples of these can be summarized in the five precepts (usually for lay people) or the ten wholesome courses of action' (*dasa-kusala-kammapathā*) as universal criteria.<sup>4</sup> Similarly 'absolutely grasping moral precepts' (*aparāmaṭṭhaṃ*) is to be avoided according to the *Pāli* passages (SN.149).<sup>5</sup>

So, from the perspective of *sīlabbata-upādāna*, conventional morality should not be rigidly imposed on universal ethics or principles of skilful/wholesome behaviour, but only applied appropriately. The ultimate ethical criterion is therefore intention or volition (*cetanā*), which is how in fact the Buddha re-signified Buddhist "karma" (*Pāli*: *kamma*) from its Hindu/Brahmanic origins.<sup>6</sup> As its negative counterpart, moral dogmatism could also include a mistaken understanding or apparent dismissal of the overall role of ethics (sprung from cognitive dogmatism). Some call this the 'transcendence trap'; which results from holding the no-self doctrine (*anattā/anātman*) and the idea of emptiness (*suññatā/sūnyatā*) in a dogmatic and unsophisticated way; and thus relativizing all values'.<sup>7</sup> Also misleading and potentially with dangerous implications is the idea that ethics (*sīla*) – traditionally a fundamental part of the path in early Buddhism, is unnecessary or an obstacle in an advanced stage of the spiritual path. Keown also relates the problematic "transcendence thesis" to the misunderstanding of *sammā-diṭṭhi*, by mixing up its connotation as content or attitude (right view and view-transcendence), in different contexts as we have already seen above.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the right view here, in its contextualized and non-dogmatic approach, is that an enlightened being or someone whose awakening is irreversible might not need to make great effort to behave skilfully, but his ethical behaviour is not absent, it is just natural.<sup>9</sup> That is simply because ongoing awareness of one's behaviour is allied to mindfulness (*sati*), the central of the five spiritual faculties (*pañca-indriya*).

However the wide-spread understanding of "mindfulness": 'awareness of the present moment... as therapeutic technique'<sup>10</sup> doesn't do full justice to the ancient term. Since *sati* provides balance (*indriya-samatta*) to the remaining pairs of faculties; first between *saddhā* (faith, confidence or conviction) and *pañña* (wisdom), and the other between *virīya* (virtuous-

<sup>1</sup> Harvey 2013, pp. 85, 237, 264; PTS-D; NBD

<sup>2</sup> Cousins in Hinnels 1997, p. 278

<sup>3</sup> Keown 2001, p.74-5

<sup>4</sup> The ten precepts, as listed in Keown 1992, pp.29-30 are not the same as the 'ten good paths of action', but they certainly overlap (PH-BE.3)

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Karunadasa 2013, p. 163.

<sup>6</sup> Gombrich 2009, pp. 29-38; Harvey 2013, p. 265

<sup>7</sup> Keown 2000, pp. 17-36

<sup>8</sup> Keown 2001, pp. 83-105

<sup>9</sup> BE-S.5.5

<sup>10</sup> OED, under 'mindfulness'.



energy) and *samādhi* (concentration and/or integration)<sup>1</sup>. Thus, *sati* provides precisely the fundamental ingredient of what one might call the antidote to dogmatism.

It is clear that the Buddha of the *Pāli Canon* opposes any form of dogmatic-exclusivism listed as *sanditt̥hi-rāga* ('infatuation with the rightness of one's own view/dogma/ideology'<sup>2</sup>). The passage in MN.II.170 shows the Buddha rejecting the attitude: "'this alone is true, all else is false" (*idaṃ eva saccaṃ, moghaṃ aññaṃ*)'. One can also find in the *Pāli* scriptures a similar but more common expression: '*idaṃ-saccābhiniṇesa* (adherence to one's own view, while asserting that this [alone] is the truth)<sup>3</sup> and it is listed as one of the four ties (*gantha*) that bind and limit the mental and material body.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.3.3. Embracing Uncertainty:

A well-known and crucial aspect of Buddhist philosophy is what is called the "metaphysical reticence" of the Buddha, known as the undetermined questions (*avyākata/abyākata-pañha*) which occur in many Suttas (i.e., MN.63, U.6.4). These tend to be presented in eight or ten categorical questions, though discussing fundamentally three issues: 1) the nature of the life-principle (*jīva*) and the mind (*citta*) beyond death (as either the same or different); 2) the nature of the universe/world (*loka*) (as either eternal, non-eternal, finite, or infinite); and 3) the nature of the *Thathāgata*<sup>5</sup> after death (as either 'is', 'is-not', 'both is and is-not', or 'neither is nor is-not'. These questions use the ancient Indian categories of logic (*Catuṣkoṭi*) adopted since the earliest scriptures. They present a 'two-valued logic of four alternatives' rather than just two (i.e., necessarily false or true; but not both or neither of them).<sup>6</sup> From a purely philosophical point of view, many scholars would agree that these contain a rich exploration of ontological matters with important implications in other philosophical subjects. However the Buddha of the *Nikāyas* is consistently uninterested in them and instead insists that his teaching concerns only the understanding of the nature of suffering and the way of its cessation.<sup>7</sup> This is precisely a "soteriology of liberation" which is in sharp contrast to the indulgence in metaphysical speculation, both in theistic religions and the history of philosophical discourse, for example, the western "idealism" from Plato to Hegel. That is why – regarding ontology more properly than metaphysics, the early Buddhist texts (particularly of *Theravāda* tradition) might be best characterized as mainly phenomenological<sup>8</sup> in their approach.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the earliest texts present fundamentally a philosophical methodology for the analysis and introspection of direct experience. They systematically dispense with all assumptions about non-evident causal connections of objects and the continuum of experience, particularly the traditional philosophical tendency (within "idealism") to fixate or substantialize "provisionally existing" objects of experience into

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<sup>1</sup> PTS-D, MW-Skt.D & NBD under '*indriya*', '*virīya*'.

<sup>2</sup> Karunadasa 2013, p. 159-160

<sup>3</sup> Ibid p. 160: DN.III.230, SN.V.59, Dhs.1135, Vbh.375

<sup>4</sup> DN.33, PTS-Dic, NBD, Vsm XXII, 54,

<sup>5</sup> '*Thathāgata*' is one of the epithets of the Buddha, with an obscure literal meaning (PTS-D). However for Harvey (1995: 8) literally means 'thus gone'; or it can be rendered as 'the great renouncer' (Dhivan 2011: 6). Ultimately it tends to signify the 'attainment of awakening (*BODHI*), a transcendental state that surpasses all mundane attainments' (Powers 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Jayatilleke 2000, pp. 49-51; PH-BP.1-4.

<sup>7</sup> Thanissaro 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Ronkin 2005, p. 5; Thanissaro 1996; Nyanaponika 1981; Bodhi 1993b.

<sup>9</sup> Though "Buddhism" can be seen as fundamentally empirical in its approach, or relying on direct experience as the ultimate source of knowledge, we will see in section 3.3.5.3, that "Buddhism" cannot be fully matched to "empiricism" or any western philosophical category, but might be better described as "spiritual pragmatism".

inherent being/existence or independent entities (essence/immortal-soul). However there were some schools of early Buddhism that fell into this temptation, like the *Pudgalavādins* and *Sarvastivādins*. Therefore, it is important to note that the philosophical boundaries of the undetermined questions are not just ontological but by implication logical. This is because of the inherent misconception in them, regarding a fixed substance within the objects in question.<sup>1</sup>

Another text portraying not just the famous metaphysical reticence of the Buddha but of great relevance in this dissertation is the '*Acintita Sutta: Unconjecturable*' (AN.4.77). This warns of the dogmatic and spiritually unproductive speculations regarding matters that contemporary secular and agnostic Buddhists tend to give great importance to, that is, the extremely complex and non-evident workings of Karma and re-birth, and the superfluous talk of psychic powers (either boasting or indulging in superstitious thinking that many other *Suttas* condemn). Here is the quote:

"There are these four unconjecturables that are not to be conjectured about, that would bring madness & vexation to anyone who conjectured about them. Which four?

"The Buddha-range of [his powers] is an unconjecturable that is not to be conjectured about, that would bring madness & vexation to anyone who conjectured about it.

"The jhana-range [of powers] of a person in jhana...

"The [precise working out of the] results of kamma...

"Conjecture about [the origin, etc., of] the world is an unconjecturable that is not to be conjectured about, that would bring madness & vexation to anyone who conjectured about it.

"These are the four unconjecturables that are not to be conjectured about, that would bring madness & vexation to anyone who conjectured about them." (AN.4.77)<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, one should see in this metaphysical reticence precisely an embracing of uncertainty, so fundamental to a moderate sceptic or agnostic approach and an authentic-open-inquiry and "letting go" or suspension of all beliefs. We have seen that embracing uncertainty is indispensable to keeping a middle way between the extremes of annihilationist/nihilistic dogmatism and eternalist/substantialist dogmatism. It is well known by practically all schools of Buddhism that "The Middle Way" is a fundamental and particularly Buddhist approach, and clearly the right criterion to discriminate what constitutes "Right-Vision" (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) – both as proposition and as attitude. One may say it is the "wisdom" approach in the deepest and most ancient sense of the word, incorporating both the cognitive proficiency (knowledge and analytical-intelligence) and the appropriate responsive heart-attitude (emotional-intelligence)<sup>3</sup> as presented in the *Muni-Sutta* (S-Nip.1.12).<sup>4</sup> It is the attitude that the Pyrrhonists defended so much, despite it being confused and identified with the apathetic and alienated attitudes of the Academics or extreme sceptics.

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<sup>1</sup> PH-BP.12a-1

<sup>2</sup> Thanissaro 1997g

<sup>3</sup> As described by Goleman 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Collins 1982, p. 117; Ryan 2013; PTS-D. under 'muni'.

### 3.3.4. Are there articles of dogma in "main-stream Buddhist" scriptures?

Still, the question remains: are there articles of dogma in Buddhism? To give a satisfactory answer one has to explore the role and development of Buddhist scriptures in the Buddhist traditions, like in many if not all religious traditions. Pierre Hadot in his book *Philosophy as a Way of Life*<sup>1</sup> gives illuminating examples of how dogmatism is a human tendency of the gradual crystallisation of 'spiritual exercises' emerging in oral traditions (like the Socratic or Buddhist). It first happens through the written word, either of philosophical discourse (rather than "philosophy" as a way of life or therapeutic exercises) or religious/sacred scriptures. And then it becomes further rigidified in interpretations and approaches to spiritual life in scholastic discourse or commentarial work.<sup>1</sup> In the Early Buddhist tradition it can be seen as a gradual distortion from the oral tradition, then into the *Pāli Canon* or its parallel Chinese *Āgamas* and further into the analytical synthesis of the *Abhidhamma/Abhidharma* and commentarial work.<sup>2</sup>

There is no point then in denying the existence of metaphysical doctrines, clearly stated as Right-View (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) in early Buddhism, that are removed from direct experience, at least for non-enlightened beings or ordinary persons (*puthujjana/prthagjana*) without significant insight into the reality of things. But these need not become dogmas, since what makes precisely any view a wrong view (*micchā-diṭṭhi*) is its dogmatic aspect, more explicitly, it is attachment to those views no matter whether they are truth (correspond to reality) or not. From the early Buddhist perspective Right-view – as a fundamental aspect of the Buddhist path – needs not just to correspond to reality but also implies an attitude of holding lightly and provisionally any view. Right view is both the content of propositional truths (or correct knowledge of doctrines) and value judgment (descriptive and prescriptive of the right attitude). This is what makes *sammā-diṭṭhi* more than anything an actualisation of wisdom, an integration of knowledge and appropriate attitude. 'Seeing things as they really are' necessarily involves transformation, one can say that Right-view is above all the skilful/wholesome response to having seen (not simply intellectually understood) the nature of conditioned-reality/phenomena, as ultimately impermanent, insubstantial and unsatisfactory in all sense-experience including mental events.<sup>3</sup>

### 3.3.5. The Buddhas criteria for discriminating his teachings.

#### 3.3.5.1. Which are the authentic and valid teachings?

Maybe one of the most appealing passages for people that first come across the ancient Buddhist texts is that of *Mahapajapati-Gotami's* troubled question (AN.8.53) regarding the criteria of authenticity of the Buddha's teachings:

...the qualities of which you may know, 'These qualities lead to dispassion, not to passion; to being unfettered, not to being fettered; to shedding, not to accumulating; to modesty, not to self-aggrandizement; to contentment, not to discontent; to seclusion, not to entanglement; to aroused persistence, not to laziness; to being unburdensome, not to being burdensome': You may categorically hold, 'This is the Dhamma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher's instruction'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hadot 1995, pp. 60-2

<sup>2</sup> Gombrich 2009, pp. 100-110

<sup>3</sup> Fuller 2005, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Thanissaro 1996b

In very similar fashion, the '*Satthusasana-Sutta: the Teacher's instruction to Upali*' (AN.7.79) advance a practical criteria for what to consider as the Buddha's teachings. Moreover these texts seem to exhort the incorporation of other teachings not necessarily taught exactly and explicitly by the Buddha himself but that align well to his overall "soteriology of liberation". One could find for example useful connections with other philosophies and similar approaches and maybe intellectually stimulating and inspiring resemblances with the western heritage of ancient Greek philosophy in the fundamental therapeutic approach and non-dogmatic attempts as we have seen.

However, as clarified by plenty of scholars, this should not be taken as 'carte blanche' for a universalistic and indiscriminate approach to the Buddhist doctrines in comparison with other religious or philosophical standpoints; since it would be simply false and naive, encouraging confusion or delusion.<sup>1</sup> Instead, they should be taken as methodological criteria, rather than propositional. In other words, it emphasizes the ultimate spirit and goal of the Buddha's teachings; meaning the path towards liberation, accessible and grounded in simplicity, joyful renunciation and ultimately in individual responsibility. And the Buddha of the *Nikāyas* clarifies also the open and accessible nature of his teachings, rather than hidden, elitist or esoteric:

"These three things, monks, are conducted in secret, not openly. What three? Affairs with women, the mantras of the brahmins, and wrong view.

"But these three things, monks, shine openly, not in secret. What three? The moon, the sun, and the Dhamma and Discipline proclaimed by the Thathāgata." (AN.3.129)<sup>2</sup>

### 3.3.5.2. 'Conditioned-arising' and 'the principle of sufficient reason'.

However, if one asks for a rigorous criteria to determine the right epistemological and ontological approach to the Buddha's teachings (as told in the *Nikāyas*), it should be answered by the foundational principle of 'Dependent co-arising' (*paṭicca-samuppāda/pratītya-samutpāda*)<sup>3</sup>. It's most common and simplified formula:

*imasmim sati idaṃ hoti, imass'uppādā idaṃ uppaṭṭhati;  
imasmim asati idaṃ na hoti, imassa nirodhā idaṃ  
nirujjhati.*

This being, that becomes; from the arising of this, that arises.

This not being, that does not become; from the ceasing of this, that ceases.<sup>4</sup>

Put in more colloquial and contemporary language it would go like this: '*everything that exists has come into being dependent on particular causes and conditions; and when those causes and conditions cease, the things that depend on them will also cease*'.<sup>5</sup> This central and uniquely Buddhist principle presents, from one perspective, the overall approach to "conditionality", a wider understanding and scope of what in science and epistemology is

<sup>1</sup> MacMahan 2008, pp.108-11; Bodhi 2005, pp. 81-2; Thanissaro 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Bodhi 2005, p. 88

<sup>3</sup> 'Dependent origination' and 'Dependent arising' have become apparently the standard translations nowadays; but one can also find it as 'Conditioned arising'; and it has been previously translated as, 'conditioned co-production' (Edward Conze) or 'causal genesis' (Rhys Davids). (Jones 2011, pp. 6, 181).

<sup>4</sup> Jones 2011, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

referred to as "causality".<sup>1</sup> From another perspective, *paṭicca-samuppāda* provides the right framework to the first aspect of the Noble eight-fold Path. That is '*sammā-diṭṭhi*' (Right View) towards ultimate liberation from suffering. It can also be seen as the Buddhist paradigm concerning the ontological status of things (nature of things and reality). To some degree it can also be compared to the much discussed and constantly adjusted 'principle of sufficient reason' (PSR) of western philosophy.<sup>2</sup> This PSR is an attempt at a logical safeguard, to secure rigorous intelligibility; particularly relating to metaphysical matters and the complexities of the formation of knowledge. The PSR was first coined by Leibniz though previously stressed by Spinoza, implicitly preceded by most of Greek Philosophy and Medieval Scholasticism.<sup>3</sup> However most of them, up to Descartes succumb to the temptation of eternalist and essentialist theories under the cultural pressure to prove the existence of God. Not without being later heavily criticized by Hume and "amended" by Schopenhauer in his '*On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*'.<sup>4</sup> It is relevant to compare this western development of the PSR to the central Buddhist principle of *paṭicca-samuppāda*, since it concerns the subject of "non-dogmatism" and the Buddhist criteria of Right-View. The latter postulates that things do not arise randomly or spontaneously but in dependence on conditions, though this might seem obvious the Buddha insisted on his great difficulty in really apprehending it; not only intellectually but through spiritual insight.<sup>5</sup> And as a principle it does not pretend to exhaust the complexities of all phenomena including mental-emotional states (*dhammas/dharmas*)<sup>6</sup>, but "embraces uncertainty"; as seen before, a crucial attitude for a non-dogmatic approach, a middle way between extreme/nihilistic scepticism and moderate/open scepticism or agnosticism. Most importantly, the principle of dependent co-arising supports the very important and traditional doctrine of the Middle-Way (*majjhima-paṭipadā/madhyama-pratipad*)<sup>7</sup> as overall perspective of Buddhist vision and practice. This, the middle way between two extremes, can be seen in three aspects: 1) life style: between self-mortification and hedonistic indulgence, 2) ontological: between annihilationism and eternalism and 3) Karma (intentional action): between determinism (the wrong idea that everything is due to past karma) and nihilism (that acts have no consequences so nothing we do matters).<sup>8</sup>

### 3.3.5.3. Kinds of statements and truths in canonical literature warning of dogmatism.

One of the major characteristics of religious fundamentalism, as we have seen is the rigid and literal take on religious texts as revealed or unquestionable truths. Many of these texts seem only relevant and "spiritually useful" when taken as meaningful "myths" or "poetic truths" about the mysteries of nature "inside" and "outside" the mind. By means of symbols, metaphors and similes, they can become more than fictional stories or objects of dogmatic "belief" that point to existential and psychological truths of the human condition, rather than

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<sup>1</sup> Jones 2011, p. 27

<sup>2</sup> Bodhi 1995; Smith 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Melamed & Lin 2014

<sup>4</sup> Yitzhak & Lin 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Harvey 2013, p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> The investigation or discrimination of mental/emotional states (*dhamma-vicaya*) is an important practice within many schools of Buddhism, particularly early Buddhism and some forms of Tibetan Buddhism, directly connected with the development of wisdom (*pañña-bhāvana*) and the second factor of awakening (*bojjhaṅgas/bodhy-aṅga*) (Gethin 2001: 146-7)

<sup>7</sup> Jones 2011, p. 112

<sup>8</sup> Jones 2001, pp. 112-124.

logical or scientific ones.<sup>1</sup> They can also offer powerful methodological tools to motivate effective practice to "purify" the mind and heart, either by following guidelines of ethical behavior, devotional rituals or different "spiritual exercises". Thus, making of "religion" a wholesome and existential "therapy", rather than a set of dogmas and practices blindly followed for the mere sake of traditional heritage; that just feeds wishful thinking and numbs the mind at the imminence of death and existential uncertainty. Although this dissertation is not devoted to the exploration of the meanings and role of myth and ritual;<sup>2</sup> what is relevant to the subject of "non-dogmatism" is the form of language they use. This is a major problem in the interpretation of religious texts, particularly if they are ancient or canonical. And of course it is in the discipline of hermeneutics that one finds a wide range of methodologies and polemic approaches.

However the ancient scriptures of early Buddhism have something valuable to offer in this regard. Another example of the fundamentally "pragmatic" approach of the Buddha-dharma is the differentiation between explicit teachings (*nītattha-dhamma*) and implicit teachings (*neyyattha-dhamma*):

"Bhikkhus, these two misinterpret the Tathāgata. Which two? One who explains a discourse whose meaning requires interpretation as a discourse whose meaning is explicit, and one who explains a discourse whose meaning is explicit as a discourse whose meaning requires interpretation. These two misrepresent the Tathāgata. (AN.I.60)<sup>3</sup>

It is important to clarify that this "pragmatic" approach is not meant as a criterion of truth, that is, that only what is useful and practical at a given moment is what makes it a "truth". That is how "pragmatism" or "utilitarianism" as a philosophical perspective would tend to see it.<sup>4</sup> It would be more correct to say that the Buddhist theory of truth accords more with the "theory of correspondence with reality" of western philosophy. In Buddhist terms 'seeing reality as it really is' (*yathabhūta-dassana*) is ultimately ineffable and can only be pointed at. Therefore explicit or implicit "statements" should not be confused with "truths". In fact early scriptures have another set for two kinds of truths: conventional truth (*sammuti-sacca/saṃvṛti-satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramattha-ssacca/paramārtha-satya*). In other words, '*yathabhūta-dassana*' can be expressed in explicit terms (philosophical) like '*kandha*' (aggregates/groups), '*dhatu*' (elements), '*āyatana*' (sense-bases) or the classic '*ti-lakkhana*' (three marks of existence)<sup>5</sup>, or it can also be expressed in implicit ways (metaphors or similes). One could say that this is where the language of Buddhist cosmology, myths, parables and symbols fits perfectly. Clearly most of ordinary language refers to conventional reality, like when referring to persons, actions and all sorts of objects, which is appropriate in a practical or ethical context.<sup>6</sup> And of course, conventional reality can be expressed also in implicit ways, like in the use of slang or all sorts of figurative language and poetry (that does not attempt necessarily to point to ultimate truths but describes moods or atmospheres, either fictitious or conventionally real).

Concerning the theory of knowledge or epistemology in Buddhism, one should be careful in making hasty parallels with western philosophy. However it would be fair to say that this is closer to Kant's "transcendental idealism", in the sense of the natural limitation of the

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<sup>1</sup> Hinnels 2010, pp.372-384

<sup>2</sup> For guidelines on scholarship on the subjects refer to Hinnels 2010, pp.372-393.

<sup>3</sup> Bodhi 2012, p. 151.

<sup>4</sup> Harvey 1995b

<sup>5</sup> NBD under "paramattha"

<sup>6</sup> Keown 2001, pp.19; Gombrich 2009, pp. 13-14.

ordinary or un-awakened mind to 'see reality as it really is' ('noumenon' in Kantian terms). But this cognitive limitation (or spiritual ignorance) does not have to be inherent or definitive, at least from the Buddhist perspective. That is, only an epistemological-shift, positively conditioned or supported by "spiritual development", can bring about a real Insight into reality, one may say "transcendental reality". One should also not confuse the theory of truth with the 'criteria of justified belief' (as explored in western epistemology since ancient times), since for Buddhism, there are no reliable criteria to justify absolutely any "belief" (*diṭṭhi*). Not just the authority of scripture, tradition or a teacher's word is an insufficient ground of truthfulness or justified belief; but even reasoning, logic or deduction as expressed in the *Kālama-sutta* (AN.3.65)<sup>1</sup>. All belief is provisional, even right view as we have seen.

So it is clear for modern scholars, despite previous over-enthusiastic comparisons, that "Buddhism" or rather the "*Buddha-dharma*" cannot be fitted into any school of philosophy. There is no doubt that a continuous comparative study with western philosophy has been relevant in the deeper understanding and clarification of many misunderstandings and approaches; discriminating and closing the gap between the cultural differences in which both traditions of thought and practice have developed. However one could agree with Peter Harvey in his '*Contemporary characterizations of the philosophy of the Nikāyan Buddhism*' that if one were to use a western categorization for "Buddhism", then the most correct would be "spiritual pragmatism" as an overall general criterion of what is worth discussing ("philosophizing"), teaching and learning about. But especially in the sense of methodology towards freedom from greed, hatred and spiritual ignorance; the only reliable means towards authentic happiness.<sup>2</sup> Others have put it more simply, a path towards the total integration of wisdom and compassion.

### **3.4. The role and non-dogmatic approach of "faith" in the Buddhist Path.**

While it is true that many passages of the early Buddhist canon attest to the freedom from blind-faith and the belief in God and the saving power of rituals; it is not true that Buddhism is devoid absolutely of a sense of faith or even belief. That would be far from accurate, much less the actual practice in traditional Buddhism. The idea of Buddhism as not-religious and almost scientific was first introduced in the West by the positivist rationalism of the Enlightenment period<sup>3</sup>. And many enthusiasts from then to the present see in "Buddhism" the answer to the world's "crisis of faith"<sup>4</sup> and search for a non-dogmatic approach to "religious" practice or self-development. And one can presume quite rightly, having seen the previous chapters. However it would be also dogmatic and biased to simply dismiss – without actual study and experience, the undeniable role and place of faith and ritual in the early texts and contextualized with the central teachings and practices advanced by the Buddha of the *Nikāyas*.

#### **3.4.1. '*Saddhā/śraddhā*' and the forsaken emotional aspect of "faith".**

Despite that post-modernist biased presentation of Buddhism, and the emergence of agnostic/secular Buddhism, some scholars have brought attention to and explored in recent decades the meaning and relationship of '*saddhā/śraddhā*' to other core aspects and principles of the early Buddhist teachings and traditional practices. This is of course, apart from the

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<sup>1</sup> Nagapriya 2001

<sup>2</sup> Harvey 1995b

<sup>3</sup> Gethin 1998, p. 65

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p. 166-7

relevant input from some founders of western-Buddhist movements in Europe and the USA that endorse its significant if not fundamental role in an effective and integral practice of the *Buddha-Dharma*.<sup>1</sup> So for the sake of academic rigor and an unbiased approach let's explore its meanings from the point of view of recognized scholars. '*Saddhā/sraddhā*' has been mostly translated as 'faith', but also as 'trust', 'confidence', or 'conviction'.<sup>2</sup> However none of them does full justice to its actual meaning and role, particularly in the varying contexts where the term is used in the early scriptures. That is why some prefer to use some combination of them like 'trustful-confidence'<sup>3</sup>

There are two important aspects that can give a more accurate or meaningful connotation to '*saddhā*'. On the one hand, there is the affective or emotional aspect of "faith" versus the most popularly assumed cognitive aspect, as "belief", or propositional content.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, there are the contextual aspects in which the term appears in traditional formulas of the early Buddhist texts.

According to Gethin 'the Buddhist understanding of 'faith' [*śraddhā*] is almost entirely affective'<sup>5</sup>. This is corroborated by the highly respected philologist and scholar of comparative religious studies W.C. Smith. According to him we have inherited corrupted connotations of the words "credo" and "belief", through the dogmatic approaches of theological literature and religious liturgy, in which they have abandoned their original affective aspect; '*credo*' is a cognate of '*śraddhā*' (to place the heart upon), while 'belief' derives from the Germanic '*belieben*' (to hold dear).<sup>6</sup>

The Pāli '*saddhā*' shares a common etymological origin with the Latin '*credo*', old Irish '*cretim*' and the German '*kredhe*', that is the Sanskrit components: *śrad* (or *śrat*), literally 'heart' and *dha*, 'to put'; meaning 'to set one's heart on'.<sup>7</sup>

The most general description of the Buddhist Path is that it is about avoiding what is evil (or harmful for oneself and others), cultivating what is good, and purifying one's mind-heart (i.e. Dh.183; AN 2.33). This seems simple enough for a little boy to understand, but too difficult for even an old man to realize. This is what apparently an elder monk replied to a disappointed Chinese emperor longing to know the secrets of the Buddha's teachings.<sup>8</sup> It is what Sangharakshita has insightfully summarized in a few words: 'the central problem of the spiritual life is to find emotional equivalents for our intellectual understanding'.<sup>9</sup> In other words, what tend to be missing are the motivating elements to make effective progress on the spiritual path, pointing again to the fundamentally pragmatic character of the Buddha's teachings. Traditionally this motivating element is precisely noted in the second factor/limb of the Noble Eight-fold Path (*sammā-saṅkappa*) usually translated as Right intention or resolve,<sup>10</sup> but 'Perfect Emotion' as rendered by Sangharakshita<sup>11</sup> can give an even clearer sense of the affective role that faith plays in spiritual life. And this "Perfect Emotion" can be

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<sup>1</sup> Like Sangharakshita, Chögyam Trungpa, Thich Nhat Hanh, among others.

<sup>2</sup> Gethin 201, p. 106; Gustarini 2006; Bodhi 2007, p.85; Thanissaro 1997a; NBD, under '*saddhā*'.

<sup>3</sup> Harvey 2013, p. 31

<sup>4</sup> Gethin 2001, p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> Gethin 1998, p. 167

<sup>6</sup> Smith 1998, pp. 69, 105.

<sup>7</sup> MW-Skt.D

<sup>8</sup> Stout 2009, pp. 387-8

<sup>9</sup> Stout 2009, p. 389

<sup>10</sup> Harvey 2013, p. 84; Gombrich 2009, p. 203

<sup>11</sup> Stout 2009, p. 389.



seen as the outward movement (lat. *emovere*)<sup>1</sup> or driving force towards our highest values and aspirations.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, '*saddhā*' is far from being "blind faith", but the indispensable emotional counterpart of Right-View (*sammā-dhitti*)<sup>3</sup>. That is, there is no right motivation (emotional drive to awakening) without the right view, i.e. a "soteriology of liberation"; a spiritual goal free from the dogma of theistic salvation (that is, the dogma that relinquishes the individual responsibility to think and decide moral actions for ourselves, and the capability to imagine and empathize with the suffering, needs and aspirations of all sentient beings). Usually theistic ethics are more based on the fear of God's punishment or falling into mortal sin and eternal hell. This is not to say of course that ethnic Buddhism does not often forget the right motivating principles of Buddhist ethics and tends to fall into similar kinds of motivations and superstitions, like the misguided motivation to merely accumulate "merits" or "karmic-fruitfulness" (*puñña/punya*) to ensure a better rebirth or fortune and escape different classes of "hells" according to Buddhist cosmology. However, this dogma has also been the object of discussion, criticism and implementation of ritualized correctives since ancient times and in the very early scriptures.<sup>4</sup> Since this gave way to the very traditional "transference and self-surrender of merits" (*pariṇāmanā*) in later developments of traditional Buddhism<sup>5</sup>, which, one may say, is another mechanism of self-refutation.

Interestingly enough, the English "faith" and similar European words are strongly linked with the words "fidelity" and "confidence". The first meaning good faith, loyalty, respect for promises and oaths, and the second deriving from '*confido*' literally 'with faith'; which in turn derives from the Latin '*fides*' meaning "act of faith" as the expression of love, and longing with a sense of commitment or resolution.<sup>6</sup> This fits very well with the affective aspect of right intention/resolution/emotion that recognizes the need for appropriate "belief" and motivation as Gombrich admits.<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the occurrences of '*saddhā*' in the *Pāli Canon* and commentarial works, surely the most classic is in reference to the ancient formula and traditional chanting of "The Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels" (*tisarana*):

*Buddham saranam gacchami*  
I go to the Buddha as my refuge.

*Dhammam saranam gacchami*  
I go to the Dhamma as my refuge.

*Sangham saranam gacchami*  
I go to the Sangha as my refuge.<sup>8</sup>

The ritualized expression of these verses represents the central admission and act of Buddhist faith and conversion.<sup>9</sup> The suffixes "-*aṃ*" are accusatives not just of the verb but the appellative 'refuge', which could read as: "To the *Buddha/Dhamma/Saṅgha* who is a refuge I

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<sup>1</sup> OED under "emotion"

<sup>2</sup> Sangharakshita 1990, pp. 36-7

<sup>3</sup> Saibaba 2005, p. 133

<sup>4</sup> Harvey 2013, pp. 43-6, 68, 151, 217, 237.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.157.

<sup>6</sup> Smith 1998, pp. 81-5, 261

<sup>7</sup> Gombrich 2009, p. 203

<sup>8</sup> Kariyawasam 1996

<sup>9</sup> Bodhi 1994, Strong 2002, pp. 44-60

go".<sup>1</sup> This stresses the quality of each Jewel as a "True Refuge", instead of the misunderstood idea of "taking refuge" as an evasive attitude towards everyday life-responsibilities, based in superficial understanding and vague impressions of this traditional chanting.<sup>2</sup>

The *Buddha* is the perfectly awakened being and unsurpassable teacher; the *Dhamma* is the precious and testable teachings of the Buddha towards true liberation and happiness; and the *Saṅgha* or spiritual community is traditionally and strictly speaking of those who have attained stream-entrance at least, since only they are reliable and true refuges. However, one can refer to the wider sangha also, as indispensable support in the spiritual life, what the Pāli passages refer to as beautiful or good friendship (*kalyanāmittatā*)<sup>3</sup>.

However the most systematic occurrence of '*saddhā*' is as part of the five spiritual faculties (*pañca-indriya*) as seen in section (3.3.2.3). Here the indispensable and balancing counterpart of the "faculty" of faith (*saddhā-indriya*), i.e. the faculty of wisdom (*paññā-indriya*) is explicit and emphasized. Many authors and scholars have written extensively and eloquently about this. Sometimes they are referred to as "powers" (*bala*). It is interesting here that "faith" (*saddhā*) is referred to as a "faculty" or "power", as the intrinsic potential to rule, commit, influence and actualize our latent spiritual aspirations.<sup>4</sup> This spiritual aspiration can be seen simply as the intuition of the greater and natural goodness and happiness of a life dedicated to thorough liberation (i.e. the Buddhist path) when we first come across the words of the Buddha. So "Buddhist faith" is the indispensable "drive-force" that can be cultivated, made mature, grounded and fully integrated through the development of wisdom (*paññā-bhāvanā*) in all its stages and supportive conditions (ethics and meditative practices).<sup>5</sup>

The *Canki-sutta* (MN.95) offers a very relevant clarification of the role of faith that takes us back to the criteria of truth. Here provisional faith (*saddhā*) is seen as having the function of only "preserving the truth", one might say of remaining receptive and even embracing uncertainty rather than adopting a dogmatic nihilism, of premature dismissal or extreme scepticism. And it is very emphatic in stating that the discovery of Truth is only realized through "direct experience".<sup>6</sup>

Some Pāli passages refer also to what one might call "spiritual psychological types" where it is recognized that certain temperaments start with a particular approach in order to make progress on the Buddhist path.<sup>7</sup> One could say that some feel more affinity to study and reflection on the *Buddha-Dharma*; others just make more progress through meditation in which they are more naturally keen. While others might have a more emotional and intuitive response to the three jewels expressed through ritual and devotional practices. The most common differentiation in the early scriptures is that of the Faith-follower (*saddhānusārī*) and the Dharma-follower (*dhammanusārī*) (SN.25.3)<sup>8</sup>; but also one finds the body-witness (*kāya-sakkhi*) who has the faculty of concentration (*samādhi-indriya*) well developed. The first is eventually liberated by faith (*saddhā-vimutta*) characterized by firm resolution (*adhimokkha*) and unshakable faith in the Buddha and his Dharma; and the second by

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<sup>1</sup> Warder 1991, p. 17

<sup>2</sup> Bodhi 1994

<sup>3</sup> Bodhi 2005, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Gethin 2001, p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp. 106-12.

<sup>6</sup> Bodhi 2005, pp. 87, 96-103.

<sup>7</sup> BT-S.11.9

<sup>8</sup> Thanissaro 2004.

wisdom (*paññā-vimutta*), while the body-witness seems to destroy some of the taints (*asavas*) by seeing with wisdom under the conditions of '*samādhi*' (integration and concentration of the mind-heart supported by '*samatha*' or tranquillity of mind) and meditative insight (DN.II.70-1)<sup>1</sup>.

Many passages connect also faith (*saddhā*) with "spiritual urgency" (*saṃvega*) and '*pasāda/prasāda*' (clarity and serene confidence). This is because the arising of '*saddhā*' – by the heart-felt listening and understanding of the Buddha's teaching, brings about a natural sense of serenity and confidence through knowing the possibility of the true liberation. That is, liberation from greed, hatred and delusion and the whole mass of suffering, i.e., the realization of *Nirvāna* (Pāli, *nibbāna*). *Saddhā* in turn spurs a natural sense of inner-urge (*saṃvega*) or resolution to act upon the well-mapped path of the Dharma.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore it should not be surprising that '*saddhā*' occurs in many lists or formulas among the earliest scriptures as one of the four streams of "merit" or karmic-fruitfulness (*puññadhārā*), one of the elements of exertion (*padhāniyanga*) and one of the seven treasures (*dhana*).<sup>3</sup>

### 3.4.2. The need for provisional belief and the stages of faith-development.

We have seen previously (3.3.1) that the *Vīmaṃsaka-Sutta* lays the ground for a thorough and free inquiry into the qualities and capabilities of a "spiritual teacher" before one can commit to following his teachings, which represents a clear example of the many mechanisms of self-refutation within doctrinal-scriptures of early Buddhism and a radically non-dogmatic approach. However this same text also shows and expounds how faith can be developed gradually in three stages, which are similarly expressed in the *Canki-Sutta* (MN.95).

We saw that the first, provisional faith or initial confidence is gained after a thorough investigation of a spiritual teacher, based on progressive questioning and first hand witnessing of the teacher's behaviour. When one is assured of the wholesome quality of the teacher's mental states and motivations to practice meditation and teach, both in private and public (i.e. free from hedonic attachment and fame-seeking) the way for initial faith is cleared and then one can comfortably call oneself a disciple or follower of that teacher. Then he/she is truly ready to thoroughly hear the teachings of the Buddha in a deeper way, arriving at glimpses of insight and a second and higher level of faith, of "tranquil confidence". However it is only by testing, discriminating and experiencing for himself/herself the benefits of applying the thorough methods to purify and liberate the mind-heart that the disciple arrives at the third stage of firm or unshakable faith.<sup>4</sup>

The first stage of faith tends to be put in the most common terms of '*saddhā*', evoked through the traditional formula of Going for refuge to the Three Jewels; clearly as a "seed" or potential of all wholesome states (S-Nip.v.77). While the second stage tends to use the terms '*pasāda*' or '*okappana*', suggesting a sense of joyful and serene reassurance, of reliance or trust accompanied by mental clarity or purity. This tranquil faith is 'reasoned and rooted in understanding' (*ākāravatā saddhā dasanamūlika*) (MN.47)<sup>5</sup>. That is in the Buddha's

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<sup>1</sup> BT-S.11.9, Walshe, p.229

<sup>2</sup> Harvey 2013, p 31; Thanissaro 1997a; Saibaba 2005, p. 133

<sup>3</sup> PTS-D & NBD under '*saddhā*'

<sup>4</sup> Āṇalayo 2010, p. 13-4; Bodhi 2005, pp. 87, 96-103.

<sup>5</sup> NBD under '*saddhā*'

dispensation of True Dharma (*Saddhama/Sadhama*),<sup>1</sup> sometimes referred to as the Buddha's 'dassana' (literally, 'seeing', 'noticing or 'looking') similar to the term 'yathabhūṭadassana' (seeing reality as it really is)<sup>2</sup>. And the third stage of firm confidence or unshakable faith is 'avecca-pasāda'. This last is a result of reaching the first stage of "holiness" or irreversibility towards awakening, 'stream-entry' (*sotāpatti*). That is when the pull of greed, hatred and delusion have been weakened enough and one has broken the first three fetters (seen in section 3.3.2), when direct seeing or Insight (with capital "I") into the nature of mind and all phenomena is experienced.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to notice that the analytical commentaries of the *Theravādin Abhidhamma* categorize two different kinds of *saddhā*; one mundane or lower (*lokika-saddhā*), and another, supramundane or higher (*lokuttara-saddhā*). These can be also seen as five progressive stages from lack to refinement of faith: 1) lack of faith (*asaddha*) of the ordinary person (*puthujjana*), 2) blind faith (*okappana-saddhā*) of an ordinary person, 3). rational faith though still trapped in fruitless doubt (*ākavati-saddhā*) of an ordinary person but with beautiful/spiritual aspirations and in primary training (*kalyāṇa-puttujjana*), 4) unshakable faith (*aveccappasāda*) of the spiritually-mature person (*ariya-puggala*) as stream-winner (*sotāpanna*), and 5) realized faith based on experience rather than mere knowledge or information (*adhigamana-saddhā*) of the *Āryans* (Noble ones).<sup>4</sup>

After exploring the in-built mechanism of self-refutation and the role of *saddhā* one might ask: Can there be non-evident beliefs in main-stream Buddhism without being dogmatic at the same time? From the perspective of both the early scriptures and non-dogmatic scepticism, as we have seen, yes! The key is to hold them lightly and provisionally, one could say as objects of study/learning (*suttā-mayā-pañña*), investigation and reflection (*cintā-mayā-pañña*) and contemplation or insight (*bhāvanā-mayā-pañña*); that is as the three kinds of knowledge and stages of cultivation of wisdom (*pañña-bhāvana*) (DN.33)<sup>5</sup>. In short, one could say even that there are "right-beliefs" (as propositional content of right view) that serve as a guiding framework to the practice of the Buddhist path. And here it is worthwhile to emphasize that this does not mean indulging in wishful thinking; which is one of the fundamental fallacies of poor or dogmatic thinking behind theistic, eternalist and essentialist views. After all there is no real appeal in the doctrines of karma and re-birth (for example), since in all Buddhist traditions one is told that '*saṃsara*' (the round of rebirths) is full of suffering and disappointment.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> BHS.D and MW.Skt.D under "*saddharma*".

<sup>2</sup> PTS.D under "*dassana*"

<sup>3</sup> Gethin 2001, pp. 112-16; Saibaba 2005, pp. 137-8; NBD & PTS-D, under '*saddhā*', '*pasāda*'

<sup>4</sup> Saibaba 2005, pp. 137-8

<sup>5</sup> Harvey 2013

<sup>6</sup> PH-BT.6.3

## CONCLUSIONS

We have seen that dogmatism and its Buddhist parallel '*diṭṭupādāna*' is more than anything an attachment or fixation of views with a clear affective or emotional charge that tends to counteract the great existential fears of incertitude about the meaning of life and the place of human kind in the universe and the vulnerability of the human condition. We have also seen that dogmatic beliefs are permeated by all sorts of views, not just religious or political, but even in the scientific arena. It has been shown that the dogmatic expressions of religious fundamentalism and fanaticism are not an exclusive trait of religions but rather a human and cultural tendency. That is, from the gradual development and potential to corruption of an oral tradition (as is the case in early Buddhism), to the writing down, systematization and institutionalization of practices and doctrinal material. However, it is interesting that several general book-texts on comparative studies of religion do not provide examples of fundamentalism and fanaticism in Buddhism, as they do of monotheistic or abrahamic religions. It is only in specialized Buddhist studies that one can also find reference to those traits in the history of Buddhism that in comparison with the great world religions tend to be less frequent.

We have seen that the main motivation of secular and agnostic Buddhism (fighting dogmatism) can paradoxically and unintentionally fall into reactionary and dogmatic positions; and an unrealistic regard for the very early sources of Buddhist doctrines and practices. Also that the sceptical philosophical background from which the agnostic movement has drawn inspiration contains an unsuspected or usually ignored form of "negative dogmatism"; which is actually more elusive and dangerous. This nihilistic dogmatism can easily corrode the sense of moral responsibility towards oneself and other beings and undermine a healthy existential meaning. The latter, is not based on wishful thinking and metaphysical speculations, but on genuine investigation and searching for tranquillity or freedom from worry/anxiety (*ataraxia*). This is similar to the Buddhist goal of *Nibbāna/Nirvāna* as the ultimate freedom from suffering or anguish (*dukkha*). We have seen that an authentic non-dogmatic approach, as promoted by "Pyrrhonian sceptics" and the ultimate transcendence of views implicit in "Right View" (*sammā-diṭṭhi*), implies an embracing of uncertainty. Not before exhausting equally opposing arguments to arrive at perplexity (*aporia*), and suspension of judgement (*epochē*). Thus it involves a radical letting go of all sorts of metaphysical speculations and beliefs; including the extreme assumption/belief of the impossibility of knowledge by "direct experience".

Then the term agnosticism can be vague and misleading. In agnostic terms, an authentic non-dogmatic approach to the earliest Buddhist doctrines would be better qualified as open or soft agnosticism, and methodological rather than descriptive. In simple terms, it implies simply admitting the lack of present knowledge, while being open to the possibility of direct knowledge of particular non-evident-beliefs. That is without holding them rigidly, but lightly and provisionally; without giving way to facile eternalist or nihilistic conclusions.

We have learned that while this approach is radical in the sense of not compromising a thorough investigation in the search for truth, it actually holds a moderate position, precisely by embracing uncertainty. This is called in Buddhism the "Middle Way", the fundamental principle and guiding criteria regarding extreme ontological views (eternalist or annihilationist), extremes in moral practice or life-style (indulgence in pleasure or self-mortification) and the extremes regarding free will (determinism vs. absolute freedom). In other words, while we have no absolute control of our lives, being conditioned by many

factors, we still having undeniable gaps of "choice". These gaps of free-will are widely and gradually opened by the central practice of mindfulness (*sati*) and supported by ethical practice (*sīla*), meditation (*samādhi*) and cultivation of wisdom (*paññā-bhavānā*). Thus "spiritual process" is possible and framed within the overriding principle of conditioned arising, which one could say, is also the fundamental criterion of non-dogmatism. This in turn frames the "soteriology of liberation" that characterizes "main-stream Buddhism" (as informed by early Buddhist doctrines and practices); rather than of "salvation", or dependent on the grace of a personal God-Creator.

Certainly this dissertation does not provide evidence of the uniquely Buddhist "mechanisms of self-refutation" in relation to the doctrines and traditional practices and formulas contained in the earliest scriptures. But it does show a way to the very interesting and relevant subject of comparative religious-study against dogmatic approaches, which does not seem obvious and explicit in contemporary studies regarding the canonical literature of other major world religions. So far the general impression is that the rigour and depth of these non-dogmatic safeguards can only be matched by some of the western traditions of philosophy, starting with the ancient Greeks, with figures like Socrates and Pyrrho and continuing with Hume, Kant, etc.

While agnostic and secular Buddhism have drawn inspiration from the humanist movement that commits to a non-dogmatic approach and self-development, it differs from some other strands of Western Buddhism, that still embrace "religious" aspects like "faith", ritual and devotional practices. They can be seen as enhancements of effective "spiritual practice". They do not see the need to throw out the baby (i.e., the driving force of spiritual practice) with the bath-water (dogmatic tendencies that are always present). In fact, many do not see the need for extreme "demythologization", "detraditionalization" and "psychologization" of Buddhist cosmology and provisional non-evident-beliefs like "karma" and "rebirth". From the perspective of the early Buddhist texts we have seen that, there are plenty of warnings and reminders to keep vigilant to dogmatic tendencies inherent in the human condition, so one can still honour reason and avoid blind-faith without removing the fundamentally emotional aspects of the Buddhist faith and its expressions.

Therefore, the Buddhist faith (*saddhā/śraddhā*) can perfectly be integrated with a non-dogmatic approach, as a clear aspect of right intention or resolve (*sammā-saṅkappa*). This is the indispensable emotional drive to "spiritual awakening" (*bodhi*), and the indispensable counterpart of right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) in the Noble Eight-fold Path.

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