The Buddha's Awakening

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Abstract

A comparative study of early Buddhist textual accounts of the Buddha's awakening helps to put into perspective the impression that these texts present competing theories of liberating insight and realization. Although the actual event of awakening would be a non-conceptual breakthrough to the experience of Nirvana, its ramifications can be expressed with the diagnostic scheme of four truths, as a way of conveying in words what in principle is beyond words.

Keyword Awakening · *bodhi* · Buddha · Four noble truths · Nirvana · Realization · Truth

The Buddha's awakening is the key event in the background of traditional mindfulness practice. A perusal of the relevant textual sources brings to light differing descriptions of this key event, which some scholars have considered to reflect competing theories of how liberating insight leads to the realization of awakening (see, e.g., Bareau 1963; Bronkhorst 1993/2000; Schmithausen 1981; Vetter 1988; Wynne 2007; Zafiropulo 1993).

Without intending to deny that such studies have indeed highlighted complex issues, closer inspection suggests a different perspective, which emerges based on a close reading of the relevant sources. Such a possibility need not be rejected out of hand as an enforced harmonization of incompatible divergences. Just as it needs to be acknowledged that the texts at times offer conflicting presentations, it also needs to be acknowledged that examining textual accounts from a distant past and culture is in itself not without possible drawbacks and hence needs to remain open to potential revision, in particular if this is based on a historical perspective on developments in Buddhist thought. The purpose of the present article is therefore to take another look at what appears to be the heartwood of the matter in question: accounts of the Buddha's awakening found in parallel versions of the early discourses (due to lacking a parallel, the account in AN 9.41 falls outside of the scope of the present survey).

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According to the standard narrative depiction of the Buddha's quest for awakening (Anālayo 2017), during a period spent under the guidance of two ancient Indian teachers he eventually attained what in the early discourses feature as the higher two of four immaterial spheres. Realizing that such profound meditative experiences did not satisfy his quest for a definite solution to the predicament of being subject to old age, disease, and death, the future Buddha changed his approach and instead engaged in ascetic practices, in particular forceful control of the mind, breath control, and fasting.

As these ascetic practices also did not produce the type of liberation he was seeking, the Buddha-to-be came to reconsider his overall approach. Based on the resultant reorientation and giving up of asceticism, in the first parts of what came to be known as the night of his awakening he developed two higher knowledges. These are recollection of his own past lives and the so-called divine eye, which according to tradition enables seeing the passing away and being reborn of other beings in accordance with the law of karma. Both higher knowledges require the previous development of the fourth absorption as a means to bring mindfulness and tranquility to a peak. Based on the same mental condition of having previously developed the fourth absorption, reports of the actual event of awakening take the following form in the *Bhayabherava-sutta* and its *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel:

> With a mind composed like this, purified, clarified, unblemished, rid of imperfections, become malleable, workable, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed my mind to the knowledge of the destruction

of the influxes. I directly knew as it really is: this is *dukkha*; I directly knew as it really is: this is the arising of *dukkha*; I directly knew as it really is: this is the cessation of *dukkha*; I directly knew as it really is: this is the path to the cessation of *dukkha*. I directly knew as it really is: these are the influxes; I directly knew as it really is: this is the arising of the influxes; I directly knew as it really is: this is the cessation of the influxes; I directly knew as it really is: this is the path to the cessation of the influxes. Knowing like this and seeing like this, my mind was liberated from the influx of sensuality, my mind was liberated from the influx of becoming, and my mind was liberated from the influx of ignorance. In being liberated, there was the knowledge that 'it is liberated,' and I directly knew that 'birth is ended, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more of this state beyond.'

(MN 4: *so evaṃ samāhite citte parisuddhe pariyodāte anaṅgaṇe vigatūpakkilese mudubhūte kammaniye ṭhite āneñjappatte āsavānaṃ khayañāṇāya cittaṃ abhininnāmesiṃ. so idaṃ dukkhan ti yathābhūtaṃ abbhaññāsiṃ, ayaṃ dukkhasamudayo ti yathābhūtaṃ abbhaññāsiṃ, ayaṃ dukkhanirodho ti yathābhūtaṃ abbhaññāsiṃ, ayaṃ dukkhanirodhagāminī paṭipadā ti yathābhūtaṃ abbhaññāsiṃ. ime āsavā ti yathābhūtaṃ abbhaññāsiṃ, ayaṃ āsavasamudayo ti yathābhūtaṃ abbhaññāsiṃ, ayaṃ āsavanirodho ti yathābhūtaṃ abbhaññāsiṃ, ayaṃ āsavanirodhagāminī paṭipadā ti yathābhūtaṃ abbhaññāsiṃ. tassa me evaṃ jānato evaṃ passato kāmāsavā pi cittaṃ vimuccittha, bhavāsavā pi cittaṃ vimuccittha, avijjāsavā pi cittaṃ vimuccittha. vimuttasmiṃ vimuttam iti ñāṇaṃ ahosi: khīṇā jāti, vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ, kataṃ karaṇīyaṃ, nāparaṃ itthattāyā ti abbhaññāsiṃ*).

Again, relying on this concentrated mind, with its flawless purity and freedom from fettering tendencies, a state of mind that has attained concentration and has attained fearlessness, I attained the destruction of the influxes in my mind. I knew that 'this is *duḥkha*' as it really is, not falsely. Then, at that time, when I had attained this mental condition, I attained liberation of the mind from the influx of sensuality, from the influx of existence, and from the influx of ignorance. By attaining liberation, I in turn attained knowledge of liberation, knowing as it really is that birth and death have been extinguished, the holy life has been established, what had to be done has been done, there will be no more coming again to a womb.

(EĀ 31.1: 我復以三昧心清淨無瑕穢, 亦無結使, 心意得定, 得無所畏, 得盡漏心, 亦知此苦如實不虛. 當

我爾時得此心時, 欲漏, 有漏, 無明漏心得解脫. 以得解脫, 便得解脫智: 生死已盡, 梵行已立, 所作已辦, 更不復受胎, 如實知之).

A prominent difference between the two accounts relates to the comprehension of *dukkha* (Sanskrit *duḥkha*, Chinese 苦, Tibetan *sdug bsngal*). The *Bhayabherava-sutta* presents this topic by way of the scheme of four truths, which is also then applied to the influxes (*āsava/āśrava/*漏/*zag pa*). The *Ekottarika-āgama* version, however, just speaks of understanding as it really is that "this is *duḥkha*." It thereby does not bring in the whole scheme of four truths and also does not apply that scheme to the influxes.

Nakamura (2000, p. 211) commented on the Pāli version's presentation of the four noble truths that, "because it does not appear in [the] Chinese translation, [it] must be a later addition." An alternative possibility would be an abbreviation on the side of the *Ekottarika-āgama* version, which would then have preserved only the first part of what would originally have been a fuller statement (Anālayo 2011c, p. 218 n. 47 and Bareau 1963, p. 86). Given that there is a general tendency of abbreviation in the early discourses to mention explicitly a beginning and an endpoint between which the text has been abbreviated (Anālayo 2020 and 2021a), this would require assuming that a textual loss of the endpoint has occurred. Although possible, this seems less probable than supposing that the Pāli version could have expanded a reference to *dukkha* with the help of the well-known scheme of four truths.

Such a suggestion does not require, as assumed by Bareau (1963, p. 86), that only the first of the four noble truths was known. Instead, the *Ekottarika-āgama* version may simply reflect a stage at which the scheme of the four truths had not yet been applied to the description of the Buddha's awakening. Schmithausen (1981, p. 210) reasoned that "it may seem doubtful whether … the discovery of the four Noble Truths is a genuine reflection of what the Buddha's Enlightenment, as an experience, actually was," adding that this does not imply, however, that the four noble truths are late in themselves, "for why shouldn't the pattern of the four Noble Truths have already existed for some period before it came to be regarded as the content of Enlightenment?" (note 36).

The impression of an expansion on the side of the Pāli discourse finds further support in the application of the same scheme to the influxes, which has no counterpart at all in the *Ekottarika-āgama* version. Nevertheless, the two discourses agree in presenting the results of the event of awakening in terms of being liberated from the three influxes. An application of the four truths scheme to the influxes is also absent from an account of the Buddha's awakening in the *Saṅghabhedavastu* (Gnoli 1977, p. 118). Unlike the *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse, the *Saṅghabhedavastu* version has the full set of four truths and also agrees with the two

discourse versions in describing the results of awakening in terms of liberating the mind from the three influxes. Again, this does not imply, as assumed by Bareau (1963, p. 87), that the type of presentation now found in the *Bhayabherava-sutta* is necessarily a late invention in itself. The suggestion is only that a gradual development of the description of the Buddha's awakening could have been based on integrating textual pieces and forms of presentation found elsewhere among the early discourses. From the point of development evident in the *Ekottarika-āgama* version, this would have taken the form of supplementing the full scheme of four truths and then applying the same scheme to the influxes.

Teaching the Four Noble Truths

According to tradition, the four noble truths were the chief content of the Buddha's first sermon, the *Dhammacakkappa-vattana-sutta* (SN 56.11), given to five former companions from the time of his ascetic practices. Although it seems that the first sermon may not have explicitly applied the qualification "noble" to each truth (Anālayo 2006) and perhaps not even used the term "noble truth" when presenting the four singly (Norman 1984), the basic teaching found in the parallel versions of the discourse clearly corresponds to the scheme of four truths (Anālayo 2012 and 2013).

According to the narrative setting of the first sermon, previous to delivering this teaching the recently awakened Buddha had announced his successful realization to a potential convert by the name of Upaka, yet this failed to impress and convince the latter (MN 26 and MĀ 204). At the present juncture, he had come to teach his five former companions, who saw asceticism as the path to deliverance and consequently considered his earlier giving up of ascetic practices as implying that he had relinquished what was required to reach awakening. In this setting, the Buddha had to find a convincing way of communicating his realization. In fact, his reported teaching starts off with the middle path that avoids the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification, thereby alerting the five to the existence of an alternative approach, making it clear that giving up asceticism does not necessarily equal pursuing sensual indulgence.

The actual teaching then begins with the commonly accepted fact of *dukkha/duḥkha*, together with the announcement that the Buddha was about to teach what had not been heard before. In other words, he had discovered something substantially different from contemporary religious thought. Therefore, when communicating his discovery, he had to find new ways of expression that differed from the philosophies and doctrines proposed by his contemporaries. At the same time, however, his teaching had to rely to some degree on notions and ideas already known in order to be understood. In teaching the middle way, the Buddha had to follow a middle way in his use of concepts and expressions.

In this situation, the employment of a scheme of four truths falls neatly into place, apparently based on an analogy with Indian medical diagnosis (Anālayo 2011d). The employment of a scheme, presumably known to his audience as a form of medical diagnosis, reflects a thoroughly pragmatic approach that stands in clear contrast to mere philosophizing for its own sake. Moreover, it points directly to a psychological attitude toward *dukkha/duḥkha* and its solution. In this way, the use of a medical diagnostic scheme provides the appropriate frame for the essential teaching that the cause for the arising of *dukkha/duḥkha* is to be found within one's own mind. Expressed in medical terms, the core teaching could be represented in this way:

disease: *dukkha/duḥkha*
pathogen: craving
prognosis: Nirvana
cure: eightfold path

The converging point for these four truths is the realization of Nirvana, which involves a cessation of all links of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda, pratītyasamutpāda,* 因緣, *rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba*) up to the cessation of *dukkha/duḥkha*. Since this implies a cessation of name-and-form as well as of the six sense spheres, an experience of Nirvana would not involve concepts and also not impli-cate the operation of the normal avenues of experience, such as seeing or hearing, etc.

In other words, the teaching on the four truths was at the outset quite probably not meant to convey that the actual realization of the Buddha's awakening implies the reflections "oh, this is *dukkha/duḥkha*," and then "oh, this is its arising," etc. Instead, the original purpose of employing the scheme of four truths appears to be mainly to express the realization of awakening in a form comprehensible to others. The difference is a subtle one, however, as the scheme just makes explicit the repercussions of the experience of Nirvana for full awakening, due to which *dukkha/duḥkha* is fully understood (as one knows what completely transcends *dukkha/duḥkha*), craving is eradicated, the cessation of *dukkha/duḥkha* is realized, and the cultivation of the eightfold path reaches its consummation.

The *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* and its parallels agree in presenting the matter in terms of three turnings relevant to each of the four truths (one version, EĀ 24.5, just refers to this in brief). The resultant presentation can be illustrated by employing the Roman numerals I to IV for the four truths and the Arabic numbers 1 to 3 for the three turnings in relation to each of the four:

dukkha/duḥkha (I.1), should be understood (I.2), has been understood (I.3);
the arising of *dukkha/duḥkha* (II.1), should be eradicated (II.2), has been eradicated (II.3);

the cessation of *dukkha/duḥkha* (III.1), should be realized (III.2), has been realized (III.3);
the path (IV.1), should be cultivated (IV.2), has been cultivated (IV.3).

The three turnings make it clear that the tasks related to each the four truths involve, in actual practice, a more or less prolonged development. This begins with the implementation of the medical scheme of diagnosis as a framework for the recognition of *dukkha/duḥkha*, of its cause, of the possibility to abandon that cause, and of the path of practice leading to that aim. Based on this initial appraisal comes the awareness that something needs to be done about each of these four truths. The fact of *dukkha/duḥkha* needs to be fully understood, craving needs to be eradicated, the cessation of *dukkha/duḥkha* needs to be realized, and the eightfold path leading to such cessation needs to be cultivated. Implementing this orientation eventually finds its culmination when *dukkha/duḥkha* has indeed been fully understood, craving has indeed been eradicated, the cessation of *dukkha/duḥkha* has indeed been realized, and the path has indeed been successfully cultivated to its consummation point. Having completed this trajectory himself, the Buddha could confidently claim to have reached unsurpassed awakening.

The idea of three turnings to be applied to each truth does not conflict with the actual event of awakening necessarily being a non-conceptual experience of Nirvana. The event of this experience has become possible through previously developed understanding and practice, which here is conveniently subsumed under the scheme of the four truths. This comes to its culmination when the experience of Nirvana serves as the realization of the cessation of *dukkha/duḥkha*, which at the same time completes the full actualization of the other three truths. In this way, the scheme of four truths can serve as a convenient way of expressing the implications of awakening in a conceptual manner suited to the ancient Indian setting, and at the same time provide an orientation point for actual practice leading up to its personal realization. The different accounts of the Buddha's first sermon agree that this happened right away, as the exposition of the four truths enabled one of his five former companions to gain stream-entry. This can be taken to confirm the ingenuity of the Buddha's choice to rely on a scheme of medical diagnosis to express his awakening in such a way that the resultant teaching can serve as a point of orientation for insightful reflection and meditative contemplation leading others to the same realization.

From the viewpoint of the above exploration, then, the difference discussed above between the *Bhayabherava-sutta* and its *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel appears to be less dramatic than it may perhaps have seemed at first sight. A description of the Buddha knowing as it really is that "this is *duḥkha*" is in itself already a conceptualization of a non-conceptual experience (although "this is the cessation of *duḥkha*" would have been even more apt). To present the same matter by bringing in all four truths does not entail a substantial innovation, as it only involves a more detailed conceptualization. In other words, there is nothing intrinsically problematic in the *Bhayabherava-sutta*'s indication, in relation to the four truths (and their application to the influxes), that it was on understanding like this and seeing like this that the Buddha's mind was liberated from the influxes. However, at least originally this would quite probably not have been meant as describing an intellectual type of understanding operative at the moment of awakening. Instead, it is best seen as meant to draw out the implications of the non-conceptual experience of Nirvana, in line with what according to tradition was the successful mode of explanation adopted by the Buddha in his first sermon. As already noted by Stuart (2013, p. 25), in a context more specifically related to the attainment of cessation but similarly applicable to the realization of Nirvana, "the cessation model and the realization-of-the-truths model … may very well have originally been positive and negative sides of the same coin."

The success of the scheme of four truths in leading to the first successful conversions and therewith to the commencement of the Buddhist tradition must have led to a considerable emphasis placed in later tradition on this teaching. The description of the Buddha's awakening, in the way this is found, for example, in the *Bhayabherava-sutta*, was perhaps quite naturally taken literal. Here, the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel to the *Bhayabherava-sutta* offers an important glimpse on the textual processes that eventually would have led to an identification of the four truths as the content of awakening in some exegetical texts, although others still return attention to the key element in the experience of Nirvana (Schmithausen 1981, pp. 240–246).

In this way, rather than competing theories of how liberating insight leads to realization, what we seem to have here appear to be competing theories on how literal descriptions of realization by way of the scheme of four truths should be read. On this understanding, the present instance would be in line with the keen assessment by Gombrich (1996, p. 21) that "unintentional literalism has been a major force for change in the early doctrinal history of Buddhism."

The Buddha's Noble Quest

Another discourse still remains to be examined, namely the description of the Buddha's noble quest for awakening, given in the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel. The relevant passage sets in after the future Buddha had just left his two teachers, realizing that attaining the higher two immaterial spheres had not brought him to the

goal of his noble quest for freedom from old age, disease, and death. The extract given below, which serves as a transition to his proclamation that he did indeed reach Nirvana and gain freedom from old age, disease, and death, proceeds in the following manner:

> Monastics, it occurred to me: 'This is indeed a delightful piece of land, the grove is charming, the river's flow is clear, it has delightful smooth banks, and a nearby village for [alms] resort. This is indeed adequate for the striving of a clansman intent on striving. Monastics, I sat down right there [thinking]: 'This is adequate for striving.'
> (MN 26: *tassa mayhaṃ, bhikkhave, etad ahosi: ramaṇīyo vata, bho, bhūmibhāgo, pāsādiko ca vanasaṇḍo, nadī ca sandati setakā supatitthā ramaṇīyā, samantā ca gocaragāmo. alaṃ vat' idaṃ kulaputtassa padhānatthikassa padhānāyā ti. so kho ahaṃ, bhikkhave, tatth' eva nisīdiṃ: alam idaṃ padhānāyā ti*).

> I thought: 'This place that I have reached is a delightful lush mountain forest by the river Nerañjarā, which is clean and full to its banks. If a son of a good family wishes to train, he can train here. I also should train; I would now rather train in this place.' I promptly took some grass and approached the tree of awakening. Having reached it, I spread [the grass] as a sitting mat beneath [the tree] and sat down cross-legged with the determination not to break my sitting until the influxes had been eradicated. I did not break my sitting until the influxes had been eradicated.
> (MĀ 204: 便作是念: 此地至可愛樂山林欝茂, 尼連禪河清流盈岸. 若族姓子欲有學者, 可於中學. 我亦當學, 我今寧可於此中學. 即便持草往詣覺樹, 到已布下敷尼師檀, 結跏趺坐, 要不解坐, 至得漏盡. 我便不解坐, 至得漏盡).

The *Madhyama-āgama* parallel is more detailed than the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta*, which breaks off right after the future Buddha sat down with determination and thus has no reference at all to the actual event of awakening. In the Pāli version, his awakening only comes up implicitly in the ensuing passage, found in both versions, which reports the Buddha's proclamation of his successful realization. But even the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse does not mention the three higher knowledges and just has a terse reference to the eradication of the influxes.

Bareau (1963, p. 74) saw the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel as presenting an alternative and earlier account of the Buddha's awakening, composed out of ignorance of the more developed version that has the three higher knowledges, which consequently should be considered a later development. Wynne (2007, p. 16) also considered this discourse to be "the oldest account of the awakening." In support of this assessment, he noted that in particular the unsuccessful meeting with the potential convert Upaka must be ancient, as it involves some old phrasing and because such an episode would hardly have been invented later (see also Levman 2020, p. 154).

Granting the ancient nature of this episode, however, does not imply that the whole discourse must be similarly early. The episode in question also occurs in later texts, among which feature the *Lalitavistara,* the *Mahāvastu*, and the *Saṅghabhedavastu* (Anālayo 2011b, p. 184). The occurrence of this episode in these texts does not imply that their differing coverage of the Buddha's quest and awakening must be early in its entirety. The same holds for the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta*, simply because the prolonged period of oral transmission of the early discourses left ample scope for early episodes to be combined with later material. Elsewhere the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* in fact shows a substantial difference from its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, as the Buddha's hesitation to teach is completely absent from the latter (Anālayo 2011a). Whichever way one decides to interpret this difference, whether as an expansion of the Pāli version or a textual loss in its Chinese parallel, there clearly has been some substantial development during the prolonged period of their transmission in at least one of the two versions even though both have the apparently early episode involving Upaka.

The reasoning originally proposed by Bareau (1963) appears to some extent to be based on a failure to take fully into account that the early discourses are records of individual oral teachings given to a particular audience and in a specific setting. It follows that the expectation that each discourse should treat a particular topic or issue in a thoroughly comprehensive manner, failing which there must be a substantial doctrinal problem, risks being to some extent a category mistake (Anālayo 2021b).

It follows that the presentation in the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel does not necessarily imply that these discourses came into being at a time when the account of the Buddha's gain of the three higher knowledges had not yet come into existence, as assumed by Bareau (1963, p. 74). In fact, the *Bhayabherava-sutta* (MN 4), which reports the Buddha's realization of the three higher knowledges, occurs previous to the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* (MN 26) in the same *Majjhima-nikāya* collection. A subsequent discourse in the same collection, the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* (MN 36), has a detailed report of the Buddha's ascetic practices. This shows that the reciters of this collection must have been aware of these textual pieces.

Wynne (2007, p. 21) attempted to harmonize Bareau's proposal with the actual textual evidence by arguing that

the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* "was closed early on because it was known to be the most ancient account of the awakening." Yet, if what he refers to as the "early redactors" had indeed known that, they could have easily adjusted the other accounts accordingly in order to ensure that the most ancient and thereby most authentic version becomes the normative one. Besides the problem of interpreting oral literature based on ideas taken from the production of written texts, it seems considerably more straightforward to see these different discourses as complementary rather than competing accounts.

Such a perspective would also do more justice to the main theme of the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, which is to provide a contrast between the Buddha's noble quest and the ignoble quest for sensual pleasures:

> Monastics, there are these two [types of] quest: the noble quest and the ignoble quest.
> (MN 26: *dve' mā, bhikkhave, pariyesanā: ariyā ca pariyesanā, anariyā ca pariyesanā*).

> There are two types of quest, the first is called a noble quest, and the second is called an ignoble quest.
> (MĀ 204: 有二種求: 一曰聖求, 二曰非聖求).

The basic contrast proposed in this way can be related to a distinction made at the outset of the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* and its parallels, which take up the two extremes that should be avoided. One of these is the same quest for sensual indulgence. The other extreme of asceticism, however, is different and does not fit easily into the contrast that informs the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its parallel. In fact, in a way ascetic practices would even have to be considered an instance of the noble quest, depicted in the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta*, since they spring from the motivation to find a way out of old age, disease, and death. It is precisely for this reason that the Buddha is on record for having himself engaged in such ascetic practices.

Yet, a description of his ascetic practices would not fit smoothly into the presentation of the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its parallel, whose purpose is to present the Buddha's noble quest as a source of inspiration and emulation by his disciples. In this setting, the immaterial spheres do find a placing, but not a description of the Buddha's asceticism, which the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* and its parallels explicitly reject as an extreme to be avoided.

If this much is granted, it becomes perhaps more understandable why the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel may have on purpose avoided a full coverage of the topic of the Buddha's ascetic practices, namely because it does not fit the overall thrust of their exposition. The most natural way of doing so is to be brief on what happened after he left his two teachers and focus just on the actual accomplishment of the noble quest (this being anyway the main topic of both discourses) in terms of freedom from old age, disease, and death. This enables continuing the narrative thread in a way that directly relates to the two teachers already described, namely by depicting the recently awakened Buddha's wish to share his discovery with them. This would explain why neither the ascetic practices nor the ensuing three higher knowledges come up for a detailed examination, even though the reciters of the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* must have been aware of these.

In fact, the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel briefly mentions the two extremes, yet it also does not go into the details of the Buddha's own pre-awakening asceticism. Moreover, the report of the reaction by the Buddha's five former companions in both the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel clearly reflects awareness of his former ascetic period. These are not related in detail probably because the purpose of the presentation is the specific topic of the contrast between the noble and the ignoble quest, rather than the idea of presenting a comprehensive account of each of the Buddha's experiences from the time of his going forth to his awakening.

Needless to say, it is of course not possible to be completely sure what motivated the choice of topics covered in the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its parallel, so that the reasoning presented here remains hypothetical. Nevertheless, as long as the hypothesis is coherent, it suffices to show that there is no need to problematize the narrative thread of the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its parallel as involving a substantial departure from reports of the Buddha's awakening in other discourses of the same collection.

The central topic of the exposition in both versions is the contrast between the two types of quest. From that perspective, a detailed account of the Buddha's pre-awakening attainment of the immaterial spheres fits the context as an illustration of profound realizations that still fall short of the final goal of the noble quest. It is also meaningful to depict how the realization of this noble quest meets with initial rejection by those who believe that asceticism is the only way to salvation. But an account of his own ascetic practices would no longer fulfil the purpose of providing an inspiring illustration of the noble quest. In other words, the explicitly formulated narrative purpose of the discourse explains why some topics would have been treated in more detail and others just covered in short.

Ignoring this purpose has led Anderson (1999/2001, p. 63) to another and similarly unconvincing conclusion, namely that the Buddha's teaching of the four noble truths must be a later development: "the *Ariyapariyesana-sutta* shows that certain redactors of the canon conceived of the Buddha's act of teaching without the four noble truths." As already noted in Anālayo (2012, p. 30).

> The expectation that the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* should give a complete account of everything that is in some

way related to the Buddha's awakening mistakes a discourse with autobiographical features for a full-fledged autobiography. Such a full-fledged autobiography, however, is not provided in any discourse in the four Pāli *Nikāya*s.

In other words, basing far-reaching conclusions on the mere absence of certain descriptions in the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* fails to recognize that the construction of a full biography is not a concern of the early discourses and only becomes important in later times. In relation to the Buddha's awakening, as already pointed out by Gethin (2020, p. 48), the presentation in "the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* (MN 26) and its parallel (MĀ 204) represents not so much an account of the Buddha's awakening according to an alternative scheme, as simply the omission of the details of any scheme." This in turn goes to show, as argued by Gethin (2004, p. 209), that at times "the focusing on the divergent and incompatible in the early Buddhist accounts of the path and goal is a classic instance of a failure to see the wood for the trees."

In sum, the Buddha's "awakening" described in the early textual sources can be understood to converge on the experience of Nirvana, equaling the cessation of *dukkha/duḥkha* together with the cessation of all links of dependent arising leading to *dukkha/duḥkha*. Being necessarily a non-conceptual experience, the far-reaching ramifications of this breakthrough can conveniently be expressed with the help of the diagnostic scheme of four truths which, according to the traditional account, was the means employed successfully by the Buddha in his first sermon for the conversion of his first five disciples.

Abbreviations AN: *Aṅguttara-nikāya*; EĀ: *Ekottarika-āgama* (T 125); MĀ: *Madhyama-āgama* (T 26); MN: *Majjhima-nikāya*; SN: *Saṃyutta-nikāya*; T: Taishō (Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association)

Declarations

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies performed by the author with human participants or animals.

Conflict of Interest The author declares he has no conflict of interest.

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