

*Postscript to Reconstructing Early Buddhism*

This book is the fruit of years of study and meditation by Rod Bucknell, from when he was a monk in Thailand to while he was teaching Buddhism and Chinese at the University of Queensland. It began to take definite form, however, after he retired from active teaching in 2003 and could devote himself to intensive study of the āgamas (阿含經), the texts of the early schools of Buddhism preserved in Chinese translation, along with systematic comparison of these with Pali texts. What fascinated him was the comparison of lists, of everything from moral hindrances to stages of meditation, whose prominence in early Buddhist texts reflects their original mode of oral transmission.

Rod Bucknell, for those who do not know him, is a gifted linguist who works in a dozen languages. In addition to writing A Sanskrit Manual, he compiled and published A Dictionary of Polyphonic Chinese Characters and at various times taught Pali, Thai, and German. It was his command of Chinese that led him to collaborate with Marcus Bingenheimer and Bhikkhu Anālayo in translating the *Madhyama-āgama* into English. Over the years, however, between his translations and contributions to international conferences and workshops on Buddhist texts, Rod Bucknell produced, one by one, the chapters that appear in this book. And as he did so, he gave a copy of each to me to read, edit, criticise, and discuss at length on his back verandah in Brisbane.

Rod has mentioned our meeting in Chiang Mai, after he became a monk, and the subsequent research we conducted together in India that led to publication of *The Twilight Language*. We actually first met, however,

while undergraduates studying evolutionary biology. Thereafter we pursued paths parallel but apart. We both worked in Papua-New Guinea, Rod on freshwater fisheries in the Highlands, I on coastal fisheries. We both found our way, separately, to Asia, where we both were drawn to the study of Theravāda Buddhism. In addition, we were both fascinated by the phenomenon of altered states of consciousness, how they might be produced, and, once experienced, how practitioners explained and understood them. And we were both interested in symbolism, particularly in Tibetan Buddhism. Once we met up again, these common interests led naturally to our collaboration on *The Twilight Language* and a number of shorter publications, a collaboration made easier after we both ended up teaching at the University of Queensland.

As the number of chapters increased, I urged Rod to begin thinking about publication. But there was always another set of lists to compare, or another paper to be written for another conference. By 2018 I was becoming increasingly concerned over these delays. Introductory and concluding chapters were still missing. By the following year, the manuscript was coming together, albeit still without a conclusion. One reason for this was that originally Rod had intended to write a second “slim volume” (his description) on meditation, including notably the methodology to be applied in interpreting both the states of mind produced and the technical terms used in Buddhist texts that might refer to them. As it was becoming increasingly unlikely that this second book would ever get written, I suggested that Rod incorporate a brief summary in his concluding chapter.

The manuscript that came together in 2019 originally numbered fourteen chapters, four of which do not appear in this book. The first two to be deleted were on the twelve links that make up the chain of causality known as Pat.icca-samuppāda, the doctrine of “Conditioned Arising” or “Dependent Origination”, and on sammā vāyāma, the stage of the eightfold path known as right effort. These deletions were made by Rod himself on the grounds that the arguments and comparisons were too abstruse for the general reader, for Rod always hoped that his findings would be of interest to a wider readership than just Buddhist scholars.

Rod also hesitated over another chapter on the Three Characteristics or Signs of Being (anicca, dukkha, anattā), which states that all conditioned things, or “formations” (san.khārā), are impermanent, inherently unsatisfactory, and devoid of any abiding essence (or “self” in the Hindu sense of ātman), the last applying also to all mental phenomena (dhammas). To these three, as Rod pointed out, Chinese texts add a fourth characteristic, kong (空), meaning “empty”, a concept that gains prominence only in later Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna schools. The argument here was that experiential realisation of the Three Characteristics, in the order listed, was fully achieved only in conjunction with the sequence of meditative practices constituting the Three Knowledges. And the significance of this conclusion, I need hardly add, is that the full meaning of the Three Signs of Being ultimately depended not on the Buddha’s metaphysics but on his profoundly original method of introspective cognitive analysis.

The fourth chapter was entitled “The Four Noble Ones” and discussed the so-called “four ariyan grades” of stream-enterer (sotāpanna), oncereturner

(sakadāgāmī), non-returner (anāgāmī), and arahant, or “worthy one”. Progression from one to the next comes about for the first three through progressive eradication of the ten fetters (sam. yojana) and to arahant through destruction of the final three āsavas or taints. This last “grade” points directly to the Path, and invites identification of equivalent path stages for the first three grades.

The original inclusion of these last two chapters in the manuscript submitted for publication provided strong support for the claim reflected in the title “Reconstructing Early Buddhism” to encompass the full range of doctrines addressed by the Buddha. But their inclusion did divert from the primary purpose of the book, which was to reconstruct as nearly as possible what is most likely to have been the Buddha’s original path of practice through application of which he believed he had achieved liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The final omission of all four limits coverage to the eightfold/tenfold path to be followed by means of the ‘Stepwise Training’. As a result, the title could have been changed to “Reconstructing the Buddha’s Path to Enlightenment”. The grounds for not doing so are that the methodology applied to reconstruct the Path through comparative analysis of the doctrinal differences that developed during the period of oral transmission – as recorded in the earliest texts in Pali, Sanskrit, and Chinese – can broadly be applied by future scholars to all aspects of doctrine.

By the time the manuscript was submitted, Rod Bucknell’s health was in decline. Further delay caused by the Covid pandemic in sending the manuscript to reviewers made matters worse, so by the time a reply was received Rod felt that he was not able to undertake the required revisions

and so asked me to take over. Since these revisions entailed major changes particularly to the chapters on The Three Characteristics and the Four Noble Ones, I reluctantly took the decision, despite their intrinsic interest, to leave them out and to reduce, reorganise, and rename the parts into which the remaining ten chapters are now divided, a process that required alterations to the introductions and conclusions of some chapters. In addition I have provided introductions to each part. These are brief but for a longer introduction to Part III where I have included elements drawn from the excised chapter on “right effort”, for the reason that “right effort” as the first member of the mental discipline group provides the foundation for the practice of mindfulness and concentration.

Most of my attention, however, focussed on the last two chapters. Restructuring entailed transferring discussion of the “reviewing-sign” from the final chapter to the chapter on The Three Knowledges, re-writing the summary I had contributed to the original manuscript, including an account of Rod’s own description and interpretation of the practice of retracing, and adding an explanation of how the Buddha could have believed that applying this technique achieved liberation from the cycle of rebirth. I have presented a summary of Rod’s reconstruction of what is most likely to have been the Buddha’s stepwise sequence/tenfold path of practice in Table 10.1. For consistency of presentation, I have made all changes and additions in Rod’s name by continuing use of the firstperson pronoun. I have felt confident in doing this because, after decades of discussion together, I know that they reflect Rod Bucknell’s own thinking.

The conclusions arrived at are not those of a committed orthodox

Buddhist but of a critical scholar with an intense interest in understanding the method applied by arguably the most profound introspective analyst of the human mind ever to have lived, Gotama, the Buddha.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the assistance provided by Peter Harvey in the process of review and revision of the original manuscript. Professor Harvey would certainly not concur with the conclusions that Rod has reached and that I endorse, but his detailed criticisms have been crucial in shaping the final manuscript. I would also like to thank the second anonymous reviewer of the manuscript for several pertinent suggestions and references. Finally I am most grateful to Alex Wright for his assistance and patience in facilitating the above revisions and additions and to Cambridge University Press for undertaking publication of this admittedly controversial, but significant, contribution to Buddhist studies.

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