

David J. KALUPAHANA, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992. xvi + 304 pp. Cloth \$36.00; ISBN 0-8248-1384-7. Paper \$14.95; ISBN 0-8248-1402-9.

This erudite, well-written, highly instructive, and constantly interesting work, which replaces the author's earlier *Buddhist Philosophy* (1976), covers a broad spectrum including Dignāga, Tantrism, and Ch'an. A single focus is maintained, however, by Kalupahana's insistence on the non-absolutistic, non-foundationalist, non-essentialist character of the Buddha's philosophy, set off against the absolutism of previous Indian philosophy and against the recurring revivals of absolutism within the Buddhist tradition itself. His examination of a tension running through the entire Buddhist tradition should help anyone who wants to bring this tradition into perspective. Though ill-equipped to dispute any of Kalupahana's findings, I shall nonetheless note the points that struck me as most debatable and about which I hope to be convinced one way or the other, as the scholars give this book the intensive attention it deserves.

The way Kalupahana's central theme resonates with current philosophical debates, and the free use made of such terms as "deconstruction," is likely to prompt the classic objections against a "determination to modernize, to show that in early Buddhist thought we find fully appreciated ideas which have only slowly and laboriously been elaborated in Europe, and are normally regarded as the particular achievement of modern philosophy" (KEITH 1923, pp. 4-5). Against myths of the Buddha's omniscience and sudden complete enlightenment, Kalupahana emphasizes the Buddha's readiness "to recognize the limitations of human knowledge and provide a reasonable description of truth and reality without reaching out for ultimate objectivity" (p. 21), and presents him as above all a rational, reflective thinker: "His enlightenment can be considered the combination of a mature response to the traditional learning that he received as a student and a penetrating understanding of human life" (p. 23). He is seen to brood on such questions as the following: "What is the relationship between an experience and a statement about that experience? Are all experiences veridical and the statements about them false?" (p. 30), and to find a middle path between "a picture theory of language" and the idea "that knowledge transcends all forms of description" (p. 31). This way of putting things risks portraying the Buddha as a classmate of William James or Wittgenstein. Does it do justice to the religious context, which may be beyond the grasp of our philosophical categories?

The discussion of the eight *jhānas* (pp. 35-37) presents them as "fruitful epistemological sources" of "information," and the "cessation" to which they lead is only "a moment of peace and serenity" (p. 38), a rest from cognitive endeavors. The Buddha's recall of past lives is seen as part of his effort "to look at human experience from a contextual or historical standpoint" (p. 40; cf. p. 25). There is little sense here of a concern for salvation.\*

To say that the Buddha was concerned with "what a reflective human

being does with the so-called object...rather than...providing an ultimately objective description of the object itself” or to talk of “his realization that ultimate objectivity regarding the object itself cannot be achieved and that the human perspective is unavoidable” (p. 32) locates his message within a Kantian problematic. Again, to talk of “his rejection of the Brahmanical claim that contemplation leads to the knowledge of an extra-sensuous and extra-linguistic ultimate reality such as *ātman*” (p. 38) may mislocate the thrust of Buddhism. Surely *nibbāna* might as well be called extra-sensuous and extra-linguistic as *ātman*? Kalupahana would reply that *nibbāna* is a concrete experience of moral transformation, which “like any other phenomenon, is non-substantial” and not to be thought of as “eternal happiness” (pp. 96–97), and that the apparent absolutism of the language used about it merely expresses the exhilaration of those experiencing liberation and feeling that it was “almost impossible for them to revert back to a state of bondage” (p. 42). It is only when people “obsessed with survival” confer on this experience an “ultimate objectivity” that they then begin to find it to be “beyond linguistic description” (pp. 99, 97).

It might be objected that a positivist allergy to the “ineffable” cannot do justice to the numinous terms in which the Pali Canon presents *nibbāna*. These are listed by CONZE, who concludes: “Nirvana is obviously transcendental, and uncognizable by logical thought” (1982, pp. 76–77). Even if *nibbāna* is primarily an empirical experience, it seems reductive—and perhaps a form of the annihilationalist “view” rejected by the Buddha—to insist that it has no higher ontological reach, but is nothing more than an “empirically verifiable condition of life (i.e. freedom from greed, hatred, and confusion)” so that “as a result of the ultimate goal being reduced to such experience, without being elevated to a transcendent reality, the Buddha has no difficulty claiming that the doctrine leads to the desired goal” (p. 116; cf. p. 26).

The Buddha’s “radical empiricism” (pp. 35, 57)—a loaded Jamesian term—“left no room for a sharp dichotomy between the true and the false” and is thus at the antipodes of the requirement, formulated by Quine, that “each *statement* be true once and for all or false once and for all, independently of time” (p. 46). For the Buddha truth is “what is available in the present context” (p. 47). “If something is empirically true, then its denial is not to be characterized as absolutely false, but as something that is simply contrary to the situation.” Even the First Noble Truth is an empirical proposition: “all *this* is suffering,” not a general thesis, “all is suffering” (p. 48). When the Buddha practices the fourfold negation (e.g. denying that “the world is eternal,” “the world is not eternal,” “both eternal and not eternal,” “neither”)

\* Even more glaringly tilted towards modern epistemology is this remark (p. 11): “The attempt to reach ultimate objectivity in explaining the subject of experience compelled the Upanisadic thinker to present a conception of ‘I’ (*aham*) as the primordial ‘self’ (*ātman*), thereby combining the philosophical perspectives suggested by the Cartesian cogito as well as the Kantian ‘transcendental unity of apperception.’ The Cartesian doubt is eliminated by the assertion that certainty is associated with the knowledge of itself.”

he is not flouting the principle of contradiction; he is simply marking that none of these propositions accords with his “pragmatic criterion of truth that steers clear of the two extremes of correspondence and coherence” (p. 52). This way of linking the Buddha’s teaching with contemporary theories of truth runs many hermeneutical risks.

The Buddhist tradition, claims Kalupahana, has often been in flight from the empirical basis of its founder’s wisdom, aiming instead to formulate time-less dogmas about the structure of the real. The doctrine of “dependent arising” was not such a dogma for the Buddha: “All he is asserting is that this principle *has remained* valid so far” (p. 55). Is Kalupahana reading too much into the use of the past participle in the text he quotes here? One might query whether a distinction between the past and future validity of dependent arising had the same weight for the Buddha as in a Humean philosophy of induction (cf. pp. 45, 47).

One of the early forms of resistance to the Buddha’s empiricism was a “tendency to single out and exaggerate the *intellectual* content of enlightenment” (p. 122), seeking a lasting metaphysical possession in it. The first reforming effort to suppress these absolutistic tendencies (as they bore on the ontological status of the person, the dharmas, and the Buddha’s transcendent existence in *nibbāna*) was that of Moggaliputta-tissa at the Third Council, recorded in the *Kathāvatthu* (pp. 125–43). Reading the Abhidhamma in light of this text rather than “the commentarial traditions that introduced the substantialist (= Sarvāstivāda) and essentialist (= Sautrāntika) interpretations” (p. 150), Kalupahana challenges received ideas on this topic: “Absolutism and transcendentalism, essentialism or reductionism, all of which are explicitly abandoned in the *Kathāvatthu*, should not be utilized in explaining the Abhidhamma.” The “various psychological and physical items listed in the canonical Abhidhamma texts (both in Pali and in Sanskrit)—as opposed to the Sarvāstivādin canon preserved in Chinese—are not “ultimate realities” but “items of experience” (pp. 144–45; cf. KALUPAHANA 1976, pp. 98–100). Is it plausible that a complex set of texts, based on traditions of various ages, will have complete philosophical purity and consistency and that everything incompatible with the refinements of the *Kathāvatthu* will have been ironed out?

In the English translation even the *Kathāvatthu* seems quite essentialist, describing some sixty dharmas as “real and ultimate facts,” unlike the “person” (AUNG 1969, p. 17). Kalupahana’s translation, in contrast, suggests that “one should not speak of an absolute truth or ultimate reality” (p. 136) at all. Still less acceptable is Buddhaghosa’s “essentialist explanation” of the conceptions of absolute truth and reality “in terms of intrinsic nature (*sabhāva*)” (p. 133). The *Vibhanga* provides “a method or framework whereby the meaning of [a] conception can be understood within each *context*” (p. 147). The concepts of the dharmas have only the same contextual status as the concept of “person” in the *Puggalapaññatti*, where the rules for the use of this expression carry no implication that it refers to anything ultimately real (p. 150). If

the Abhidhamma indeed grasps meaning as entirely context-dependent, dissolving all essentialist definitions, then its subtlety and modernity have been missed in the standard accounts. But is this perhaps an idealized reading?

The second part of the book brings the Mahāyāna tradition into a distinctive perspective. Kalupahana's view that Nāgārjuna was not a Mahāyānist has been misinterpreted by some critics as a denial that there was any such thing as Mahāyāna. The discussion of Mahāyāna in the present work distinguishes a good element, in continuity with the early Buddhist mainstream, seen in the *Vajracchedikā Sūtra*, Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, and Dignāga, from a bad element—absolutist and sectarian in its sense of superiority to “Hīnayāna”—represented by the *Lotus* and *Laṅkāvatāra* sūtras, Yogācāra idealism, and Candrakīrti's version of Mādhyamika. Rinzai Zen is associated with Mādhyamika and Sōtō Zen with Yogācāra (pp. 228–36) in what at first sight seems an unconvincing schematization.

Kalupahana shows (vs. KALUPAHANA 1976, p. 124) that a sūtra central in Mahāyāna, the *Vajracchedikā*, lends itself to interpretation in Abhidhamma terms. In the formula of the type: “What was taught by the Tathāgata as heap of merit, as no heap of merit, that has been taught by the Tathāgata. Therefore, the Tathāgata teaches, ‘heap of merit, heap of merit’,” the first “heap of merit” represents ontological commitment, substantialism; the “no heap of merit” is a “deconstruction, negation of substance or unique character, with possible nominalist implications”; the final “heap of merit” reconstructs the concept in terms of dependent arising; each concept is “a substitute for a human experience which is conditioned by a variety of factors” (pp. 156–57). One wonders if this would satisfy the Rinzai Zen Buddhists, whose use of this formula to “deconstruct absolutist metaphysics” (p. 158) is approved by Kalupahana.

Nāgārjuna is presented not as the destroyer of Abhidhamma categories but as “using a surgeon's scalpel to peel off the cancerous elements infecting a healthy body of conceptions” (p. 164, vs. KALUPAHANA 1976, pp. 131–34), especially the Sarvāstivādin notion of *svabhāva*, “one of the most explicit and unqualified essentialist views ever to appear in the Buddhist philosophical tradition” (p. 128). In the common interpretation of Nāgārjuna these conceptions retain their surface validity as conventional or world-ensconced truth, while the ultimate reality is emptiness alone. Kalupahana claims that on this point Candrakīrti's quasi-Vedantic transcendentalism has misled scholars. The correct conception of the two truths mentioned by Nāgārjuna (MMK 24.8–10) does not oppose “the conventional and ultimate” as usually supposed (as in KALUPAHANA 1976, p. 135), but rather the first, second, and fourth of the Four Noble Truths and the third, which “represents truth in an ultimate sense only in terms of being an ultimate fruit” (p. 168). “There is no ultimate or absolute reality that transcends conceptual thinking” (p. 169). But is there any support for this view of the two truths in the ancient commentaries on Nāgārjuna (see HOORNAERT 1991)? Nāgārjuna's own texts may be too short and cryptic to decide the issue on their own. Paradoxically,

Kalupahana rejoins Murti in seeing Nāgārjuna as retrieving the essence of the Buddha's own philosophy. He might agree with Murti's assertion that: "Criticism itself is philosophy for [the Buddha]," while rejecting as Vedantist his claim that the criticism points to "the indescribable nature of the Unconditioned Reality" (MURTI 1955, pp. 47–48).

The aspect of Mahāyāna that Kalupahana sees as a betrayal of Buddhism emerges in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Whereas the *Perfection of Wisdom* sūtras remain in "the mainline Buddhist tradition" (p. 172), the *Lotus Sūtra* "downgraded the early discourses as mere fodder for the unintelligent disciples who surrounded the Buddha" (p. 161) and "went to the extent of maligning the Buddha himself,...represented as enjoying the rift among his disciples when he is made to say that...the assembly has been cleared of trash" (p. 238). Within the "absolute nominalism of the *Lotus*, the concrete historical Buddha, the concrete teachings relating to man and morals..., [and] concrete individuals...have no place....The wayfarer has no opportunity to reflect on the consequences of his or her actions....All he is left with is the 'unproduced *dharma*,' the noumenon, of which he has no understanding until the attainment of Buddhahood" (p. 174). On the Theravāda side, Buddhaghosa is treated with similar severity: "His was no voice of the Buddha" (p. xiii).

The *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* uses the deconstructive method of the *Vajracchedikā* to uphold the ideology of the *Lotus*. It preaches "an absolute form of emptiness" (p. 182) associated with the psychological idealism that sees the *ālaya-vijñāna* or *tathāgatagarbha* as the only reality. The work was "put together in haste" for the purpose of "the introduction of Mahāyāna transcendentalism into a country [Sri Lanka] that had remained faithful to the earlier, pragmatic form of Buddhism" (pp. 242–43). It is "a textbook for the conversion of Lanka to Mahāyāna Buddhism" (p. 244). Asaṅga's metaphysical idealism is close to this sūtra, but Vasubandhu has a close affinity with Nāgārjuna and remains immune to such absolutism (vs. KALUPAHANA 1976, pp. 142–51). These, again, are bold and illuminating claims, but I do not know whether they will be able to establish themselves as scholarly orthodoxy.

In conclusion, I would underline a great merit of Kalupahana's *History*: his ecumenical view of the entire Buddhist tradition as a unified, meaningful process, in contrast to the encyclopedic miscellany into which it crumbles in many accounts. If many aspects of Mahāyāna are rejected as perversions of Buddhism, so are many aspects of Theravāda. There can be few if any Theravāda writers who have brought so much of Mahāyāna into their purview and found there so much that is in authentic continuity with the message of the Buddha.

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