

# **Buddhism without negativity bias: *dukkha*, *taṇhā*, and modern psychology**

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# **Buddhism without negativity bias: Early Buddhism versus Secular Buddhism on *dukkha* and *taṇhā***

The success of the Buddhist-inspired concept of mindfulness and of interventions based on it both in psychological practice and in basic research suggests that parts of the Buddha's teachings should be compatible with the results of contemporary science. This clearly does not hold true for all claims in the canonical texts, or for all Buddhist practices. Thus, it is of interest to explore to what extent the Buddha's teaching can fit into a coherent picture with contemporary scientific knowledge. This paper has two goals: 1) an evaluation of Stephen Batchelor's approach to the above question, and 2) to illustrate that contemporary psychology has to be taken into account when discussing obviously psychological concepts like *dukkha* and *taṇhā*. Specifically, I argue that Batchelor's use of canonical texts is incoherent, and that he makes implicit psychological claims that are reflective of *negativity bias* and possibly *cognitive dissonance*. In remarkable contrast, the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* (possibly the oldest account of Gotama's enlightenment) presents Buddhism free from negativity bias.

Keywords: negativity bias; Secular Buddhism; Early Buddhism; mindfulness; Positive Psychology; harmony; cognitive flexibility; Buddhist Psychology;

## **Introduction**

### ***Background***

Interest in Buddhism has recently increased globally, not least because of the runaway success of the Buddhist-inspired notion of mindfulness and of various mindfulness-based interventions rooted in it. Beyond an undeniable contribution of hype, there is more to the mindfulness boom than fashion: robust evidence attests to the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions like MBCT, and suggestive scientific research takes

place regarding possible mechanisms (at least some of which are compatible with ancient Buddhist psychology). Thus, it seems that at least some tenets of Buddhism are compatible with today's scientific knowledge and practically useful. On the other hand, much of ancient Buddhist texts like the Pali canon is rife with contradictions, supernatural beings, and claims about the world which may or may not have seemed plausible 2500 years ago, but which we now know to be wrong. Therefore it is of considerable interest to many to understand to what extent Buddhism is or can be compatible with contemporary science.

### *Naturalistic Buddhism and canonical texts*

Superficially it may seem that the supernatural is inextricably interwoven with the Buddha's teaching. For example, Anālayo (2013, p. 19) asserts that it is 'undeniable that supernatural occurrences [...] are an integral part of the teachings of early Buddhism in the way they have been preserved in the texts.' Nevertheless, he also concedes that 'the texts we have in front of us are not verbatim record of what the Buddha said' (p.16) and that at least some descriptions of supernatural events were added later (p.19).

If this is so, then it is hard to see why the addition of supernatural elements in the texts should suddenly have started when these texts were written down, likely centuries after the time of the Buddha. It would appear more likely that this process started much earlier, so that backward extrapolation from the time when the texts were written down to the time of the Buddha himself suggests that the original amount of supernatural elements in the Buddha's original teaching will have been much lower, possibly zero. Thus it would appear that a naturalistic interpretation of Buddhism is by no means unreasonable.

## ***Buddhism and psychology***

The considerations in the previous subsection may motivate some caution in identifying Buddhism with the canonical texts in existence today. To this can be added general doubts about these texts (Schopen, 1997; Beckwith, 2015) and about our ability to accurately understand them, given that changing the translation of a single word was already able to radically change the understanding of the *R̥g Veda*: Mattes (2018, p. 253) referring to Gombrich (2009, p. 32).

Instead of exclusively relying on the philological study of texts, it would appear to make sense to let the interpretation of early Buddhist teachings be also informed by psychology. In this direction, Bronkhorst (2012) attempts to understand Buddhist liberation in a psychoanalytic framework, and Fabbro, Fabbro and Crescentini (2018) argue that psychology (in their case, specifically neuropsychology) can enable ‘a more profound understanding of themes characterizing human experiences that ancient literature has already explored.’ In the present paper I use concepts from two branches of psychology (‘positive psychology’ and ‘judgement and decision making’), both in discussing Batchelor’s reordering of what is usually called the Four Noble Truths, and in relation to what seems to be the oldest account of the Buddha’s enlightenment: the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta*.

## ***Purpose and method***

The present paper has two parts: The first part is a critical discussion of what is probably the currently most prominent attempt to read the ancient texts in a contemporary way: Stephen Batchelor’s “Secular Buddhism” (or “Secular Dharma”, as he seems to prefer recently). Finding this wanting in some important ways as explained below, the second part attempts a first step towards developing an alternative,

psychologically literate and scientifically informed, approach towards the Buddha's possible teachings. This may seem hopeless if one bases one's reconstruction of the Buddha's teachings on what one might call the principle of maximal credulity (as when Bronkhorst (2009, p.7f) "opt[s] for the general principle that the teaching that the ancient discourses ascribe to the Buddha can indeed be ascribed him. Only where there are reasons to doubt the authenticity of a certain teaching—because it contradicts other canonical statements, for example—should we deviate from this principle"): Under this principle, we might have to conclude that the Buddha really believed to have seen himself how the wardens of hell drove red-hot iron stakes through the middle of people's chest without killing them (*Devadūta Sutta*, [AN 3.36](#)), or that 84000 kings in succession each governed for 84000 years (which is incompatible with the age of the earth, let alone of humanity) as the *Makhādeva Sutta* ([MN83](#)) claims.

Fortunately we are not forced to accept this principle; instead, I want to proceed in a minimalistic way: What are the consequences if we look only at those ancient texts where there is positive reason to believe they might go back to the Buddha himself? Of course, posing this question only makes sense if there are such texts. Fortunately, there seems to be at least one important example: Wynne (2007) argued that (parts of) the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* are historically authentic. Consequently, the second part of this paper discusses this *sutta* and puts it in the context of modern psychology and psychotherapy. To my (pleasant) surprise this turns out to be compatible with a naturalistic interpretation of the Buddha's teaching.

One issue where I do follow Bronkhorst (2009, p.9) is in relying on existing English translations. Specifically, Pali texts and translations are taken from <https://suttacentral.net/> (links are provided, the translation used is that by Bhikkhu

Bodhi unless otherwise indicated) and from Ñānamoli and Bodhi (1995). The *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* ([MN 26](#)) will usually be abbreviated *APS*.

## **Secular Buddhism**

### *Overview*

#### *Secularity*

One attempt at a ‘complete secular redefinition of Buddhism’ is mainly driven by Stephen Batchelor under the heading of ‘Secular Buddhism.’ By ‘secular’ he means non-religious and separated from religious institutions, as well as pertaining to the (present) age (*saeculum*). Batchelor sees this secular Buddhism to be in contrast to schools of traditional Buddhism, i.e., those that are based on metaphysical beliefs that underlie ‘the soteriological worldview of ancient India.’ (Batchelor, 2012) His goal is to find a version of Buddhism that would

be founded upon canonical source texts, be able to offer a coherent interpretation of key practices, doctrines and ethical precepts, and provide a sufficiently rich and integrated theoretical model of the dharma to serve as the basis for a flourishing human existence. (Batchelor, 2012)

The stated aim is to prevent Buddhism from becoming increasingly marginalized in today’s secular mainstream culture, which might entail the risk that the potential of the Buddha’s teachings to make positive contributions to ‘many of the pressing issues of our *saeculum*’ be lost.

#### *Central tenets*

Batchelor (2015, p. 55f & 58f) recalls that Wynne (2007) argued for the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* (*APS*) being the earliest account of Gotama’s awakening. Based

on this *sutta*, Batchelor claims that the essence of the Buddha's experience is 'a radical shift in perspective,' a 'twofold ground' ('ground' being Batchelor's translation of *thāna*): seeing the conditionality of events (the 'causal unfolding of life') and seeing liberation ('the stilling of inclinations, the relinquishing of bases, the fading away of reactivity [*taṇhā*], desirelessness, ceasing, nirvana'). From his translation of *thāna* as 'ground', and in analogy with the German word *Grund*, Batchelor then goes on to claim that what the Buddha discovered was a ground for action based on practical reason rather than being predicated on habitual reactivity. (Batchelor, 2015)

Central to traditional Buddhism are the so-called Four Noble Truths. Batchelor starts from the idea to reread these four as a Fourfold *Task* rather than Four Truths, i.e., to shift from a metaphysical to a pragmatic approach to Buddhism. This is based on what is generally assumed to be the Buddha's first sermon after his enlightenment, as reported in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* ([SN 56.11](#)), which he nevertheless recognizes to 'bear the marks of a text worked and reworked over a long time.' (Batchelor, 2015) In particular, Norman (2003) argued that in this *sutta*, the entire first listing of the Four Noble Truths (what Norman refers to as the 'introductory set') is a later addition, as are all other appearances of the phrase *ariya-saccam*; hence, the earliest form of the *sutta* did not contain any reference to Noble Truth(s). In addition, Batchelor argues that in this *sutta* 'the Buddha defines what he means by *dukkha* [...] as birth, sickness, aging and death as well as the 'five bundles of clinging' themselves' rather than mental anguish caused by craving for these things not to be happening, and instead of *taṇhā* (craving) being the cause of *dukkha*, Batchelor posits that contact with the *dukkha* in the world leads to *taṇhā* (now translated as 'reactivity', and identified with *samudaya* – the latter translated as 'arising' rather than the usual 'origin'). (Batchelor, 2012)

Phrased to parallel the classical ‘Noble Truths’, the fourfold task then becomes:

Suffering (*dukkha*) is to be comprehended (*pariññā*). The arising (*samudaya*) is to let go of (*pahāna*). The ceasing (*nirodha*) is to be beheld (*sacchikāta*). The path (*magga*) is to be cultivated (*bhāvanā*). (Batchelor, 2015)

This shift to pragmatism in Secular Buddhism is assumed to lead to a different outlook on life, such that

One embraces *dukkha*, that is whatever situation life presents, lets go of the grasping that arises in reaction to it, stops reacting, so that one can act unconditioned by reactivity. This procedure is a template that can be applied across the entire spectrum of human experience, from one’s ethical vision of what constitutes a “good life” to one’s day-to-day interactions with colleagues at work [with] no interest in whether or not such a way of life leads to a final goal called “nibbana.” (Batchelor, 2012)

Beyond everyday life and well-being, this is claimed to lead to existential fulfillment:

To fully embrace suffering does not increase suffering, but paradoxically enhances your sense of astonishment at being alive. By saying “yes” to birth, sickness, aging, and death, you open your heart and mind to the sheer mystery of being here at all. (Batchelor, 2012)

If ‘saying yes’ is augmented with letting go of attachment this can result in liberation.

Batchelor approvingly paraphrases the Buddha’s declaration (*Paṭhamapubbhesambodha Sutta*, [SN 35.13](#)) as

the happiness and joy that arise conditioned by life, that is the delight of life; that life is impermanent, *dukkha* and changing, that is the tragedy of life; the removal and abandonment of grasping (*chandārāga*) for life, that is the emancipation of life. (Batchelor, 2015)

Secular Buddhism develops a naturalistic image of Gotama (the Buddha) as a person concerned mostly with how to live life in *this* world, and acting in a perfectly



flexible way (following a ‘situational ethics’); acting spontaneously as when “[The Buddha] responds immediately and intuitively, surprising, perhaps, even himself” (Batchelor, 2015).

### ***Secular Buddhism: Māra is in the details***

Overall I agree with the direction of Batchelor’s work, in particular, with the pragmatic emphasis and with the ambition to peel away later and/or unnaturalistic layers of the Buddhist scriptures. Nevertheless, as they say, the devil (the Evil One) is in the details (Batchelor, 2015).

I have two objections to parts of Batchelor’s development of a secular Buddhism, which I will discuss in the following: First, while I see no problem in selecting which (parts of) ancient texts to refer to *per se*, one should be consistent in it; it seems to me that Batchelor fails to be. Second, there is a considerable negativity bias in his work (and that of many others), which distorts the conclusions that he draws.

### *Textual basis*

I will start by discussing the texts which Batchelor mainly rests his arguments on, i.e., the *APS* ([MN 26](#)) and the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* ([SN 56.11](#)). In keeping with the aim of a naturalistic account I will remove all passages that refer to encounters with supernatural beings (this is consistent with the view in Batchelor (2015) that ‘[a]lthough gods and demons occasionally appear in the early canon, they function as supporting cast or Greek chorus for the all-too-human protagonists’) and superhuman powers (‘divine eye’, knowledge where one will be reborn), for more details see the section ‘Naturalizing the Ariyapariyesanā Sutta’ below.

Based on the work of Alexander Wynne (2007), Batchelor uses the *APS* as providing the earliest account of Gotama's awakening. Nevertheless, he thinks that only the beginning part of the *sutta* should be so used because the initial reluctance of the newly awakened Buddha to teach, that the *sutta* reports, is claimed to be contradicted by a passage in the *Mūlarsarvāstavādin Vinaya* in which the Buddha declares to *Māra* his resolve to teach the dharma (Rockhill, 2000), this passage in turn is supposed to be an early text since it is referred to in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* ([DN 16](#)). (Batchelor, 2015) He discards the entire rest of the *sutta* as 'an attempt to present the Buddha as deferring to the cultural and religious norms of Brahmanism' (Batchelor, 2015), except that the encounter with the wanderer Upaka 'might refer to a historical event' (Batchelor, 2015), even though it happens later in the *sutta*.

This way of treating the *sutta* seems problematic in several ways. For example, why would a historically plausible event that portrays the Buddha in an unfavorable way (the encounter with Upaka) appear in an otherwise a-historic piece of propaganda? Also, Batchelor's shortening of this *sutta* would eliminate one of the points that Wynne (2007) considers 'likely to be a record of historical events,' namely the Buddha's praise for his former teachers. In addition, quite contrary to Batchelor's claim that the freshly awakened Buddha's hesitation to teach 'sounds a jarring note' (Batchelor, 2015), it actually fits in perfectly with the part of the *sutta* that Batchelor accepts and on which he bases one of his central assertions (that of the 'twofold ground'): what could be more natural than that his attainment of the *Dhamma* (which was found by Gotama only after a long struggle, and which was not found even by 'wise, intelligent, and discerning' seekers like Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta!) – a *Dhamma* for which his generation (*saeculum!*) did not care – was followed by the expectation that trying to

teach this *Dhamma* would be ‘wearying and troublesome’ for him? It is also corroborated by the *Māgandiya Sutta* ([MN 75](#)) where the Buddha again expresses weariness about teaching: "Magandiya, if I were to teach you the Dhamma thus: ‘This is that health, this is that Nibbana,’ you might not know health or see Nibbana, and that would be wearisome and troublesome for me." Finally, even though Batchelor correctly quotes the *Mūlarsarvāstavādin Vinaya* as the Buddha declaring to *Māra* that he will not pass away ‘as long as my [...] teaching has not been spread far and wide among the gods and men,’ and takes this to imply that the part of the *APS* reporting that the Buddha had doubts about teaching must be discarded as a-historic, he neglects to mention that on the very next page(!) this *vinaya* reports the Buddha entertaining those very doubts. The same situation pertains in the *Catuṣpariṣatsūtra*: in a rather implausible context full of kings, gods and *Māras* the Buddha declares that he will teach, only to express doubts soon after (Kloppenborg, 1973).

The *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* basically continues where the *APS* ends: With the Buddha lecturing to the five ascetics at the Deer Park near Benares. Batchelor refers to this *sutta* not only with regard to Norman’s reading of what is usually called the noble truths, but also for Kondañña (one of the five) having a vision of the *Dhamma* in understanding and uttering ‘Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation.’ (Batchelor, 2015) This seems hard to square with Batchelor’s denial during his discussion of the *APS* a few pages earlier (p.67) that this lectures have taken place at that location.

In view of this discussion I would suggest that secular Buddhists should accept the *APS* as the closest that we can get to the essence of early Buddhism, excepting only the parts incompatible with naturalism. The one major part where this happens is where Brahmā Sahampati supposedly talked the Buddha into teaching, which may be a later

insertion when a need was felt to portrait the Buddha's teaching as divinely inspired. The only other encounter with supernatural beings in this *sutta* is when deities bring to Gotama the news that his former teachers, whom he wanted to visit to start teaching the *Dhamma*, had died one day and one week before, respectively. This looks suspicious, not only because of the strange coincidence that both supposedly died right when the Buddha wanted to teach them, but also because Rāmaputta apparently was still alive later (compare Wynne (2007) referring to the *Vassakāra Sutta* [AN 4.187](#)). Nevertheless, this need not mean that this otherwise plausibly historical episode in the *sutta* has to be completely discarded, it would have been entirely natural for Gotama to attempt to first talk to his former teachers and companions (compare Batchelor (2015)), once he decided to try to teach despite the difficulties he expected. A plausible guess might be that he failed to convince his former teachers, later the deity-involving story was invented as cover for this (with failing to convince his 'wise, intelligent, and discerning' former teachers likely being seen as much more embarrassing than not being able to persuade an Ājīvaka like Upaka).

#### *Some implications for Secular Buddhism*

If we follow the above suggestion to take the (naturalized) *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* as the basis for Secular Buddhism, what if anything would have to be changed relative to 'After Buddhism'? Relatively little, it would seem: unlike most other accounts of Gotama's awakening, this *sutta* does not talk of four noble truths, nor of three (supernatural) knowledges. It does report what the future Buddha *did* to achieve liberation. This is perfectly in line with the emphasis on pragmatism, on tasks rather than truth as Bachelor puts it.

Nevertheless, this *sutta* does not support Batchelor's denigration of the *jhanas* (absorptions: e.g., 2015, p.301f, p.231), culminating in the claim that the Buddha himself in the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* supposedly 'firmly rejects at least two of them' (Batchelor, 2015), namely those taught by Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta (note the contrast with Wynne (2007) who does not see 'a total condemnation of [those] teachers' meditative methods'), unless one follows Batchelor in disregarding (erroneously, as I argued above) the end of the *sutta* where a *bhikkhu*'s going through the *jhanas* finally leads to him having 'crossed beyond attachment to the world. He walks confidently, stands confidently, sits confidently, lies down confidently.' In other words, rather than the *jhanas* being some irrelevant waste of time (cp. Batchelor (2015)), they lead to acting, and acting confidently.

A second point where the view elaborated in 'After Buddhism' is in dissonance with this earliest report of the awakening is the claim that Gotama's resolve was primarily to change the world, rather than himself (Batchelor, 2012): As noted above, even if the reports of Gotama stating to *Māra* that he will teach had an authentic kernel (despite the supernatural context), the same reports confirm that soon thereafter he had doubts about teaching; furthermore, what Gotama declared sounds to me less like a *resolve* to teach than a *forecast* that he will teach, thus telling us nothing about his motivations.

Nevertheless, related to the last point there is one more important issue with Batchelor's version of Secular Buddhism that is actually independent of the above discussion of the textual basis. This will be discussed next.

### *Tasks, truth, and the relationship of dukkha and taṇhā*

Buddhism is a practical thing, not a form of theory-for-theories-sake, I agree with Batchelor on this. Yet, the details seem to need more attention again:

As noted above, Batchelor understands the key term *taṇhā* (literally: ‘thirst’) as ‘reactivity’ and reverses the order of the tasks/truths, so that in contrast to standard Buddhist teaching now *dukkha* leads to the arising of *taṇhā*. The argument advanced for this is roughly that Gotama explains *dukkha* as birth, disease, old age, death, losing what is agreeable, and being stuck with what is aversive, from which Batchelor concludes both that 1) *dukkha* refers to events in the world rather than to our mental reaction to these events, and that 2) *taṇhā* can not possibly be the origin of *dukkha*, as the standard rendering of the Four Noble Truths has it. Instead, Batchelor proposes that in our contact with the world we are exposed to *dukkha* (which he here translates as ‘suffering’), once we notice this we (usually automatically) react, when we notice this automatic reactivity (his translation of *taṇhā*) we can let go of it and then react in a more reasoned manner, thereby allowing us to follow the eightfold path. This seems inadequate for a number of reasons (see also Anālayo (2013) for a critique of Batchelor’s position):

First, *pace* Batchelor, it is to a large extent our mental reaction that causes *dukkha*. This is indeed consistent with the examples of *dukkha* that Gotama lists: Most obviously, and in contrast to deeply ingrained prejudice in our society, being old *in itself* is not a form of suffering. Of course, old age often brings disease – but the suffering comes from the illness, not from old age itself. It would have been pointless for the Buddha to list both old age and disease in the explanation of *dukkha*, if only the physiological state had been meant. To this can be added the fact that old age also brings its advantages, as a recent but rapidly increasing amount of scientific literature on ‘positive aging’ proves (Carstensen, 2003; Chang, Toh, Fan & Chen, 2015; Hill & Smith, 2015; Levy, 2018). In fact, the research shows that the low point in human well-being tends to be in middle age rather than in old age, the development of well-being

over lifetime is roughly U-shaped (Laaksonen, 2018), and in some places the canon seems to recognize that for example wisdom is more likely among elderly, as in the *Sabhiyasutta* ([SNP 3.6](#), tr.Sujato) Sabhiya wonders how somebody as young as Gotama could possibly answer a question that certain ‘old, elderly, great figures, come to the last stage of life, seniors’ were unable to answer. Overemphasis on negative consequences of aging seems to be a case of the widespread *negativity bias*, see below.

Similarly, there is no naturalistic reason to consider death a form of suffering, as sages like Epicur (Sharples, 1996; Braddock, 2000) and ZhuangZi (Graham, 2001) perfectly understood – though clearly, fear of death is. (Nor is disease necessarily a form of suffering, but a discussion of this would lead too far.) Last not least, not only the actual loss of something that one values can cause *dukkha*, but so can the expectation that one might do so in the future (and similarly for aversive situations). Quite simply (and in line with the a-metaphysical approach advocated by Batchelor), *dukkha* are human judgements *about* the world rather than intrinsic features of the world (evil as a feature of the world is consonant with religion, where the Evil One, Devil, or other evil principle be ‘out there’).

We should also remember Gotama’s well-known statements that ‘intention, I tell you, is kamma’ ([AN 6.63](#), tr.Thanissaro), and that ‘I describe mental action as the most reprehensible for the performance of evil action, for the perpetration of evil action, and not so much bodily action and verbal action’ (*Upāli Sutta* [MN 56](#), tr. Ñānamoli and Bodhi (1995)), both again pointing to the prime importance of the mental.

Second, ‘reactivity’ as rendering of *taṇhā* – for which Batchelor seems to give no rationale – and the related reordering of the first two tasks look unconvincing, as well. The basic meaning of *taṇhā* is ‘thirst’, and thirst is something that primarily does *not* arise through reaction to contact with the world: thirst is caused by forces *internal* to

a person. Therefore it is no surprise that the *APS* explicitly says that the ignoble search is searching for what is subject to birth, ageing etc.,

And what may be said to be subject to birth? Wife and children are subject to birth, men and women slaves, goats and sheep, fowl and pigs, elephants, cattle, horses, and mares, gold and silver are subject to birth. These acquisitions are subject to birth; and one who is tied to these things, infatuated with them, and utterly committed to them, being himself subject to birth, seeks what it also subject to birth. [and *mutatis mutandis* for the other examples of *dukkha*],

whereas in contrast, the Noble Search is for ‘supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna.’ This unambiguously says that being tied (attached) to acquisitions that are subject to ‘death’ (etc.) is what the Buddha achieved liberation from. Another point confirming that words like ‘birth’ and ‘ageing’ should not be taken too literally here is that even gold and silver are said to be subject to birth and ageing. Finally, the Buddha did grow old, got sick, and died; so if liberation from these (in a literal sense) had been his goal, his quest would have been an utter failure – unlike liberation from the fear of dying and irrational prejudice against growing old, for which there seems to be no naturalistic reason to discard the possibility that he might have achieved it. In fact, contemporary research suggests that the methods he used are quite appropriate in this respect (Kiken & Shook, 2011; Mayer, Polak & Remmerswaal, 2018).

Taken all this together, we see that the usual translation of *taṇhā* as ‘craving’ seems clearly preferable to ‘reactivity,’ and *taṇhā* (thirst, craving) with the resulting clinging (mental inflexibility, the desire that things must be a certain way – ‘musturbation,’ to borrow a term used by the cognitive therapist Albert Ellis) is what leads to the arising (*samudaya*) of the feeling of discontent/unsatisfactoriness/suffering in us (i.e., *dukkha*).



## ***Negativity bias and a tale of two soteriologies***

### *Reality check*

And here is a shocker: *The world has made spectacular progress in every single measure of human well-being.* Here is a second shocker: *Almost no one knows about it.* (Pinker, 2018) emphasis in original.

Only bad news are good news: You do not sell newspapers by writing ‘today in our country there was no war, nor any major natural disaster.’ Media want to be sold, to be sold they need to grab our attention, and humans tend to pay more attention to negative than to positive aspects of their environment. This bias is a form of the *negativity bias* (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs, 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001) (Pinker, 2018). This bias is compatible with humans in a few respects showing bias towards the positive, e.g., in judging their own abilities (overconfidence), or in autobiographic memory (evaluation of one’s past experiences tends to be more favourable the more time passes since them). Note that the latter bias may contribute to age bias by making old people unduly perceive their present to be worse compared to their past, i.e., to their experiences when they were younger.

Space does not allow a detailed discussion, but as one example of how badly distorted our view of the world is, consider global share of people living in extreme poverty: Most people tend to believe this is increasing or at best stable, here is the result (typical for rich countries, in this case the UK) of one survey:

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE.

The truth comes as a shock to most: The global share of people living in extreme poverty has been *falling for two centuries* and it has *fallen massively* in the last three decades (the time frame of the above survey):

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE.

Pinker (2018) presents further voluminous evidence that the world is in much better shape than we habitually believe, and improving on almost all measures. He also explains the psychological mechanisms underlying the widespread denial that this is true or could even possibly be true. Rather than discussing this further, I want to point out another influence likely magnifying the negativity bias, which seems of highest relevance to the goal of naturalizing/secularizing Buddhism.

*Judgement Day, cognitive dissonance and clinging to world-saving*

Batchelor (2015) wants to ‘bracket off anything attributed to Gotama that could just as well have been said by another wanderer, Jain monk, or brahmin priest of the same period’ because he takes ‘such utterances to be determined by the common outlook of that time rather than reflecting an intrinsic element of the dharma.’ In addition, he

believes that we are in a "post-credal age" (p.28).

This latter belief has been forcefully questioned by Gray (2003). According to him, we have a new de-facto religion: "the post-Christian faith that humans can make a world better than any in which they have lived so far." (p.xiii) In contrast, in pre-Christian Europe it was taken for granted that the future would be like the past. (Note that Gray does not deny scientific and technological progress, as "Knowledge and invention might advance, but ethics would remain much the same" (ibid), and conversely, Pinker (2018) makes clear that on his view "[t]he ideal of progress should not be confused with the 20th-century movement to re-engineer society for the convenience of technocrats and planners." Thus, there is no necessary contradiction between the view of Gray and Pinker's examples of progress.)

It is consistent with this that Calobrisi (2018) sees "a moral framework that provides a narrative arch of human decline and restoration" in contemporary mindfulness. Similarly, Mattes (2018), building on the work of Fried (2016), suggests that there

seems to be a permanent craving to "save the world" widely spread in supposedly secular mindfulness circles (and the rest of our society, including many of those who consider themselves Buddhists) likely due to Christian cognitive dissonance. (p.238)

Cognitive dissonance is a classical psychological theory (Festinger, 1957; Festinger, Riecken & Schachter, 1964; Cooper, 2007), here it refers to the mental state of early Christianity when it was realized that, in contrast to firm expectations, Judgement Day did not come soon after the crucifixion of Jesus. Rather than acknowledging the disconfirmation of their expectations, Christians preferred to believe that their own virtuous behaviour persuaded God to postpone the end of the world. Fried (2016) narrates how the resulting permanent feeling that we are on the brink of

unprecedented disaster and our intentional action is urgently needed to save the world was propagated through the centuries and took firm hold even in our supposedly secular times. Of course, a world view thoroughly biased towards seeing the negative – a tendency rooted in human nature and increasingly exacerbated by modern media – helps to reinforce this, and we are rarely mindful of all the failed doomsday predictions (including the supposedly scientifically proven ones) of the past.

### *The soteriology of not-so-secular Buddhism*

To me it seems that secular Buddhism has two independent parts: On the one hand, there is the project of understanding to what extent the Buddha / Early Buddhism was (or at least can be read as being) naturalistic, i.e., compatible with the results of natural science.

The second part is related to negativity bias and Christian heritage. One aspect is the age-bias discussed above, but in fact the negativity bias in Secular Buddhism goes much deeper, in that according to Batchelor (2015) the whole of the human existential condition is ‘suffering’! Consistent with this and the discussion above, Batchelor uses the *Nagara Sutta*, [SN 12.65](#) (where the Buddha compares: someone finding the path to an ancient city, seeing the city, and later the city becoming again successful and prosperous; to: him finding the ancient eightfold path, directly knowing the stages of dependent origination and their origin, cessation and path to cessation, and later the holy life becoming again successful and prosperous) to claim that ‘Gotama is concerned to establish a form of society’ (p.88). To me this is suggestive of what Gray (2003) noted: the idea that the aim of life was to see the world rightly and calmly rather than to change the world, though perfectly normal in earlier times, is today ‘a subversive truth,’ which many find unpalatable because ‘political action has become a surrogate for salvation.’

In this sense it seems to me that rather than ridding Buddhism of ancient soteriology, this second part of Secular Buddhism only replaced the 2500 old soteriology of South Asia with a 2000 year old soteriology that arose in the Eastern Mediterranean – hence it is incompatible with looking for what is ‘an intrinsic element of the dharma.’

## **An Attempt on Early Buddhism**

### ***Naturalizing the Ariyapariyesanā Sutta***

Let us return to the idea that (most of) the *APS* is historically accurate. In the section entitled ‘textual basis’ I suggested to remove only those sections of the *APS* referring to supernatural beings (Brahmā Sahampati) or superhuman powers (divine eye, knowing where one will be reborn – assuming that *upapatti* here really means rebirth rather than attainment). Now I add a few details.

From a naturalistic point of view there seem to be two issues where there may be doubt whether they should be excluded: the appearance of *Māra* and the mentioning of rebirth. *Māra* appears in the expression ‘blindfolded *Māra*, to have become invisible to the Evil One by depriving *Māra*’s eye of its opportunity’ which is obviously metaphoric (you can not literally blindfold anyone by abandoning pleasure and pain etc.), so its mentioning has no anti-naturalistic implications. Given the Buddha’s concern for a person’s inner life (see above), I suggest that in the *APS*, *Māra* stands for unwelcome forces within oneself: inner compulsion, inner conflict, etc.

Rebirth appears in the expression ‘last birth; now there is no renewal of being’ following after ‘I attained the undefiled supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna.’ Again, this does not seem particularly problematic for a naturalist: this may or may not be a later addendum, the Buddha may or may not have believed in rebirth and may or may not have taken such a belief seriously, this makes little difference from a practical point of view except maybe that belief in rebirth helps sustaining a very helpful attitude to practice: that it is at the same time extremely important because an infinitude of rebirth bringing *dukkha* threaten, but not at all urgent – if you are not liberated in this life, then you can be in one of the future ones. (This is in contrast to various reports of

alleged recollection of past lives in the Pali canon, which are definitely incompatible with today's scientific knowledge.)

What we are left with is a coherent narrative that has four parts: 1) The introductory story. 2) The contrasting of the noble search (for 'the unborn supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna') with the ignoble search for what is subject to birth, ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, defilement (e.g., 'Wife and children are subject to birth, men and women slaves, goats and sheep, fowl and pigs, elephants, cattle, horses, and mares, gold and silver') and 'one who is tied to these things, infatuated with them, and utterly committed to them' seeks them. 3) The Buddha's own noble search, enlightenment, and first teaching: going forth to search for *nibbāna*, 'in search of what is wholesome, seeking the supreme state of sublime peace' under Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, in both cases leaving since their *dhammas* did not lead far enough; attaining *nibbāna* after settling on an 'agreeable piece of ground, a delightful grove'; doubts about teaching because it is 'hard for such a generation to see this truth, namely, specific conditionality, dependent origination' so that 'others would not understand me, and that would be wearying and troublesome for me.' Then thinking about teaching his former teachers and companions, on the way to meet his five former companions the encounter with the Ājīvaka Upaka; the five criticizing him for having given up asceticisms that he had undertook and for not 'achiev[ing] any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones' to which the Buddha only replies that he is accomplished and fully enlightened, that 'the Deathless has been attained,' and denying that he lives luxuriously (nothing about superhuman states!), ending with the five attaining *nibbāna*. 4) Finally a lecture on seclusion from sensual pleasures, the *jhānas*, destruction of the taints, and crossing beyond attachment to the

world so that one ‘walks confidently, stands confidently, sits confidently, lies down confidently.’

### ***Buddhism without negativity bias***

What is not mentioned are the four noble truths (or fourfold task). In fact, experiencing *dukkha* appears only in one place in the whole *sutta* and it is balanced with *sukkhā* (when ‘abandoning of pleasure and pain, and [...] the previous disappearance of joy and grief’ happens in the fourth *jhāna*). To be sure, there is talk of those who are ‘tied to [...] infatuated with [...] and utterly committed to’ sensual pleasures having met calamity and disaster because ‘the Evil One may do with them as he likes’ (i.e., they are driven by inner compulsion, compare above) - this seems to me far from claiming that all life (or the entire human existential condition) is suffering. Thus, if this *sutta* is indeed indicative of Early Buddhism, then it would indicate that the latter was free from negativity bias. (It should come as no surprise if negativity later encroached when the teaching was passed on since the social transmission of information is conducive to this (Bebbington, MacLeod, Ellison & Fay, 2017).)

### ***Liberation without checklists***

Checklists can be very useful (Gawande, 2010). Nevertheless, Bronkhorst (2009) warns us that ‘in cases where teachings are presented in the form of lists, the possibility of later scholastic influence has to be taken into account, given the later scholastic tendency to present all the teachings it ascribed to the Buddha in lists.’ I would suggest to be particularly suspicious when an oral tradition (like Buddhism in its first few centuries) is supposed to be based on lists that are longer than what human working memory can hold (about seven items). Hence it is remarkable that in the account of Gotama’s quest and enlightenment, even though Dependent Origination is called a truth



and clearly central to the *Dhamma*, the frequently used twelve item list is not mentioned. Similarly, the noble eightfold path is not mentioned (the Middle Way between asceticism and sensual pleasures is hinted at indirectly by the five mentioning that Gotama abandoned asceticism, and by him insisting that this does not mean him living in luxury).

It is therefore consistent with this *sutta* that Dependent Origination and the Middle Way are central to the *Dhamma*, but the specific lists (twelve step dependent origination, eight part path) are only didactic devices, initially helpful checklists for those who need concrete guidelines to hold on to while starting on the way, but not something where one should attach much attention to the details. If so, this frees us naturalistic Buddhists from a number of problems, for example: explaining how *upādāna* (clinging) is supposed to lead to *bhava* (existence, becoming) and then to birth (*jāti*), compare Batchelor (2012): ‘I have never understood how clinging gives rise to *becoming* which then gives rise to *birth*’ (emphasis in original); how to reconcile having to have ‘right view’ with the places in the canon which are unfavourable to views *per se* (Fuller, 2005); or why the ability to recollect and remember what has been done or said long ago (the standard definition of the seventh item on that list - mindfulness - in the canon: Anālayo (2017)) should be indispensable to one’s ability today to cross beyond attachment to the world and walk confidently.

### ***The Ariyapariyesanā Sutta, Positive Psychology and Psychotherapy***

"In spite of the disinclination on the part of modern investigators to attribute significance to the pleasure felt in mystical and meditative states, reports about them abound." (Bronkhorst, 2012) In fact, pleasure and other positive feelings have been neglected also in most other research areas besides meditation. For example, only over the last twenty years or so has there been a turn in psychology toward studying what is

enjoyable, positive, what makes life worthwhile. This goes under the name of Positive Psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), which unifies and greatly extends a few research directions which partly go back to the 1970s, including Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2010) and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), among others.

Space does not allow a detailed discussion, but I do not want to finish this paper without at least pointing toward parallels between Early Buddhism (if indeed correctly represented in the *APS*) and modern science. For example, the absorption of the *jhanas* parallels the claim in Flow Theory that ‘*a good life is one that is characterized by complete absorption in what one does,*’ according to Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002), who later in the same chapter state that intense (but effortless: Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (2010)) concentration is ‘perhaps the defining quality of flow.’

(Compare also the attempt by Bronkhorst (2012) to relate absorption to psychoanalysis.) Autonomy, the most fundamental human psychological need according to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), is in direct opposition to something undesired in me (‘the Evil One’) ruling me; the importance of freedom from ties and bondage while still being able to act (‘walk confidently’) also turned up in an extension of Self-Determination Theory in the contrast between harmonic and obsessive passions (here not to be understood in a romantic sense!), see Vallerand et al. (2003); Vallerand (2015). ‘Harmonic’ here means what is in harmony with other aspects of oneself, whereas ‘obsessive’ is what one is attached to, what one clings to, what controls the person.

The opposite of (metaphorical) bondage, of attachment, of clinging, is (mental) flexibility. This mental flexibility is crucial in at least a number of important psychotherapy methods, as can be seen from a few examples: It is considered the

hallmark of mental health in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, an empirically well-supported behavioural method; the psychoanalyst Sheldon Kopp noted that "You are free to do whatever you like. You need only face the consequences"; Albert Ellis, founder of the first school of cognitive behaviour therapy and still the most widely cited CBT theorist (Ruggiero, Spada, Caselli & Sassaroli, 2018) also seems to have seen inflexibility stemming from the belief that one must do certain things or that the world has to be a certain way – inner compulsion, or, in his somewhat colourful language ‘musturbation’ – as the central impediment to a flourishing life. He stated for example (Ellis, 1999) that he ‘sees disturbance largely as rigidity, dogma, absolutism, and musturbation.’ I happen to believe that this ‘musturbation’ is the cause both of individual *dukkha* and of various problems at the societal and global levels, like religious and political fanaticism. It is what ties us, and what the *Dhamma* can liberate us from. If so, than a naturalistic Buddhism along the lines of the naturalized *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* is what both the *saeculum* and we human beings need.

Acknowledgements: to follow

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