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Early Buddhism Reconsidered



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There is a quiet revolution afoot in our understanding of Early Buddhism, Pyrrhonism, and the Greek, Indian, and Central Asian cultural worlds of Hellenistic antiquity. The implications for the history of philosophy and religion are potentially profound.

Christopher Beckwith's recent remarkable and provocative book, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism*, is the latest work breaking important new ground in this area.¹ It offers no less than a wholesale geographical and chronological restructuring of traditional Buddhism, upsetting decades of scholarship. Along the way, Beckwith advances the following audacious claims:

1. That the Buddha was a Scythian, not an Indian.
2. That he lived much later than commonly thought, most likely well into the fifth century B.C.E.
3. That the earliest datable form of Buddhism anywhere is the ancient Greek school of Pyrrhonism, founded by Pyrrho of Ellis in the late fourth century B.C.E., based on his experiences with Buddhists in central Asia, where he accompanied Alexander the Great on his campaigns.
4. That what we would recognize as "normative" Buddhism—that is, Buddhism as we know it—can only be attested in the first century C.E., long after the Buddha's lifetime.
5. That Early Buddhism, when shorn of later accretions, appears a much simpler, more direct, more accessible practice of liberation from at least some common forms of attachment.

Beckwith claims to reach these conclusions by disallowing speculation in favor of datable facts. "My approach in this book," he tells us, "is to base all of my main arguments on hard data—inscriptions, datable manuscripts, other dated texts, and archaeological reports. I do not allow traditional belief to determine anything in the book . . ." ² He is concerned, he adds, "only with issues of historical accuracy." ³

Beckwith cites scholarship postdating not only Buddhist texts and monastic life, but also Bramanical texts, including many of the *Upanishads*.

He also cites evidence undermining the authenticity of the stone inscriptions of the Mauryan period traditionally attributed to Asoka. He further notes the disputed meaning of key terms, such as *dukkha*. For these and related reasons, the assumptions of “normative Buddhism”—including monastic life, the veneration of the Buddha, the contemporaneous existence of Jains and Ajivikas in the Buddha’s day, the Pali canon and other later texts, etc.—cannot, in Beckwith’s view, be legitimately superimposed back onto the period of early Buddhism.

What can be attested to the Buddha’s lifetime, he says, is the introduction of Zoroastrian beliefs under Persian rule into eastern Scythia and what is now northwestern India. These views introduced a supreme God, a strict dichotomy between good and evil, and a final judgment after death leading to heaven or hell. It is these “metaphysical” views, Beckwith contends, that are most plausibly those against which the Buddha reacted, not those, as commonly supposed, of a Bramanical tradition for which Beckwith maintains no early evidence exists. Finally, Beckwith argues that the epithet of the Buddha—Sakyamuni—means “sage of the Scythians,” or Sakas. In the Prologue of his book, regarding what he calls “Scythian Philosophy,” he points out that it was the half-Scythian Anarcharsis, one of the seven sages of Greek antiquity, who in the sixth century B.C.E. introduced an early version of the problem of criterion to ancient Greek thought, while a similar version of the problem emerged in the *Chuangtzu* in China. Scythia, Beckwith suggests, was a plausible common source for this diffusion both West and East.

These startling arguments are made on the basis of connecting a few important historical dots. In the absence of further evidence, Beckwith offers on this basis a kind of imaginative reconstruction consistent with the known facts, though of course, in filling in the gaps, Beckwith necessarily goes beyond them. He has not actually proven that the Buddha was a Scythian, that “normative” Buddhism was not present much earlier, that the Buddha was not reacting against beliefs already present in the Bramanical tradition of his day, and so on. But, if he is right about the facts he does cite, and those he dismisses, his imaginative reconstruction of something he calls Early Buddhism gains a plausibility hard to refute and opens the doors to new understanding. He has restructured the scholarly debate about the origins of Buddhism relying on datable evidence, and it will be up to the scholarly community to assess his achievement on this level.

Beyond the issue of datable evidence and plausible reconstruction, however, important philosophical questions remain about Beckwith’s work and Buddhism and Pyrrhonism generally. Before raising them, I should disclose my own interest. I wrote a book published in 2008, *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism*, which argues, very much in line with Beckwith’s thesis, that Pyrrho, as a result of his contacts in India, developed a form of Buddhism which he imported back to Greece, and which flourished afterward for several hundred years.⁴ We agree on

this basic and vital point. The traditional view, long held by Western classicists, that Pyrrho's philosophy could be explained entirely in terms of ancient Greek thought, seems increasingly implausible. The similarities between Pyrrhonism and Buddhism are far too striking to be ignored any longer.

Both Pyrrhonist and Buddhist schools—at least down to the time of key second century C.E. thinkers, Sextus Empiricus and Nagarjuna—present a practical philosophy based on techniques for suspending judgment about beliefs (dogmas, attachments, speculations, views). Such suspension, they argue, eliminates the distorting anxieties, which accompany the uncertainties of belief, and leads to a state of tranquility: the *nirvana* of the Buddhists and the *ataraxia* of the Pyrrhonists. To achieve this end, they say, we need to overcome our beliefs, which both dogmatically overvalue and inflate certain experiences, and simultaneously undervalue and deflate others. Once free of the distortions imposed by our beliefs onto ordinary experience, and secure in our hard won tranquility, we are able to live a balanced, pragmatic life, one in which we can take ordinary pleasures and pains in stride.

If only it were so simple to realize, or even understand, this practical philosophy! The key issue is just how do we find ourselves in bondage to our beliefs, and just how do we liberate ourselves from them. If Beckwith is right that Pyrrhonism is the earliest extant form of Buddhism, then an analysis of the Pyrrhonian texts is essential to tackling this problem. On this level, his arguments do not serve him well.

Although Beckwith recognizes that “late Pyrrhonism hardly deviates systematically in any significant way from early Pyrrhonism,”⁵ he nonetheless largely ignores the texts of Sextus Empiricus, by far the richest and fullest account we have of Pyrrhonism, in favor of a short and much contested passage from Aristocles, included in a history of philosophy by Eusebius, which quotes Pyrrho's most important disciple, Timon.

The standard translation of the Aristocles passage, by Long and Sedley, is as follows:

(Pyrrho of Elis . . . himself has left nothing in writing, but his pupil Timon says that) whoever wants to be happy must consider these three questions: first, how are things by nature? Second, what attitude should be adopt towards them? Thirdly, what will be the outcome for those who have this attitude?

According to Timon, Pyrrho declared that things are equally indifferent, unmeasurable, and inarbitrable. For this reason neither our sensation nor our opinions tell us the truth or falsehoods. Therefore for this reason we should not put our trust in them one bit, but we should be unopinionated, uncommitted and unwavering, saying concerning each individual thing that it no more is than is not, or it both is and is not, or it neither is nor is not.

The outcome for those who actually adopt this attitude, says Timon, will first be speechlessness, and then freedom from disturbance (and Aenesidemus says pleasure).⁶

Beckwith accepts this translation, with minor modifications, and one correction. (He argues, convincingly, that “speechlessness” (*aphasia*) was mistakenly inserted in the Greek text for passionlessness (*apatheia*), the two words being similar in Greek, and easily confused.)

More seriously, Beckwith focuses on the key word in the passage: “things” (*pragmata*). Just what are these *pragmata* whose nature we are supposed to understand, and which supposedly are entirely indifferent, unmeasurable, and inarbitrable? They are neither simply thoughts and sensations (that is, phenomena), nor are they beliefs or opinions. What could they possibly be?

Much of Beckwith’s book struggles with this question. *Pragmata* is a slippery word, and he duly notes its extensive range and ambiguity in Liddell and Scott’s Greek *Lexicon*.⁷ Possible meanings they list include deed, fact, matter, thing, necessity, consequence, circumstance, and affair, among others. Although there seems to be no justification for it in Liddell and Scott, Beckwith concludes that *pragma* (singular) and *pragmata* (plural) “. . . is largely abstract. It means ‘something, things’ but in the abstract logical sense of ‘an object of our cognition or disputation’ . . . ”⁸ *Pragmata*, he argues, are distinguished by some kind of abstract generalization, which he links to the Aristotelian categorization of species and genus.⁹

This seems dubious and misleading. If there is a thread running through the Liddell and Scott definitions, it is a sense of the flow of events, of how things happen or turn out; *pragmata* are not just phenomena as such, or things, but some pattern of phenomena, of things, to which we become attached, prompted by attraction or repulsion. *Pragmata* are not just things, or isolated thoughts and perceptions, but the way things are, or have been. This is far from an abstraction; it’s a series of concrete experiences that we have had, of one or another specific stream of thoughts and sensations, which have intruded into our consciousness, and which we seek to replicate, if we like it, or to avoid, if we dislike it.

To be sure, there is a process of abstraction, one in which, after encountering a number of specific things—say, this dog, that dog, yet another dog, and still more dogs, and so on—we form an abstract idea or concept of a generic or ideal ‘dog.’ Such concepts do *not* exist phenomenally—there is no existing, flesh-and-blood ideal ‘dog’ that we can actually see, touch, etc. There are only various individual, different dogs. We can assert the existence of a dog-concept only by reifying it, by positing, as Plato and Aristotle did, a special, fictional, cognitive realm—the mind or intellect—in which such concepts supposedly can be located.

It is surely a belief that a generic ‘dog’ (or any other such concept) exists, but this belief can only come from a series of discrete phenomena we’ve already experienced; in this case, the phenomena seem to share certain features: barking, tail-waging, etc. Our attachment (or repulsion) to dogs (our love or fear of them) is rooted in our experience of dogs as *pragmata*, particularly in the emotions they prompt in us on the occasions we encounter them, not in any concept about them we might have formed along the way. It is our judgments about them that confirm those emotions—give them a definitive seal—and thereby turn them into attachments.

We are not attached to concepts, and concepts do not create our attachments; we are attached, by judgments, to *pragmata*—to the dogs we have known, for instance, and our reactions to them, and to the dogs we anticipate. Any concept is only a placeholder for some already established pragmatic sequence. It is not the concept but the concrete emotion presented in that sequence which invites our judgment. The judgment, the key thing, is not an abstraction but a decision to respond to *pragmata* in one way or another: it is essentially a “yes” or a “no.”

Pragmata, as Pyrrho and presumably the Buddha understood, and as the multiple meanings of the Greek word suggest, are concrete narratives: various streams of phenomenal experience, that is, the various ongoing facts, events, deeds, circumstances, affairs, etc. as they are distinguished but interwoven in the texture of experience. *Pragmata* are the ways in which phenomena are displayed to us. Experiencing *pragmata* is one thing, but once we jump to a definitive conclusion about the nature of our *pragmata*—that, for instance, they are intrinsically pleasurable or painful, good or evil, just or unjust, beautiful or ugly, and so on—we have formed a judgment, an attachment, a binding belief about them. Both Pyrrho and the Buddha advocated detachment, it seems, not from *pragmata* themselves, but from our judgments about them. To suspend such judgments is to suspend the feelings they arouse, to become passionless (*apatheia*), after which tranquility follows.

Interpreting *pragmata* as abstractions presupposes a normative assumption of Western philosophy, one which makes it impossible to understand Pyrrhonism, and thereby Early Buddhism, if we are to take the former as serious evidence for the latter. The Western philosophical tradition, at least since Plato and Aristotle, has presupposed that concrete, phenomenal experience—our direct thoughts and sensations, out of which our *pragmata* are made—is a kind of chaotic flood of particulars, of elusive fleeting entities, which Kant called the raw and unstructured “manifold” of intuition. In this view, our phenomena and the *pragmata* they display are no more than illusions, nothing in themselves; they receive what form and definition they have from being conceptualized by some process of abstraction by which they are fixed and organized into preexisting universal categories.

This approach in the end leads to Academic skepticism, not Buddhism or Pyrrhonism. If conceptual abstraction is the sole organizing principle of experience, as mainstream Western philosophy has presumed, and if any concept can be challenged and deconstructed (as recent Western philosophy has insisted), then no knowledge of experience can be secure. All is thrown into question; our concepts become so many beliefs, all subject to dispute.

Beckwith, who astutely brackets out “normative” from early Buddhism, might well have done the same with “normative” Western philosophy. Instead, by accepting the tradition uncritically, as so many others have, especially the core dichotomy of phenomenal particulars versus conceptual universals, he leaves us saddled with a philosophical scheme that blocks our understanding of Early Buddhism and perpetuates the confusion of Pyrrhonism with Academic skepticism—a confusion which has bedeviled the history of Western philosophy.

This is evident in his invocation of David Hume as a modern representative of Pyrrhonism. In spite of evidence that Hume never read Sextus Empiricus or “other primary sources,” but relied on the distorted account of Pierre Bayle, Beckwith touts Hume’s legitimacy as a Pyrrhonist: “Hume clearly understood the significant of the basic points raised by the Pyrrhonists, and overcame his sources.”¹⁰ Beckwith overlooks Hume’s thoroughgoing skepticism, his reliance on the passions as the determining factors in life, and his assumption of the illusory nature of our perceptions, which are all hallmarks of Academic skepticism, not Pyrrhonism. His suggestion that Hume is a “covert” Pyrrhonist is hard to square with Hume’s own language.

In a central passage, not quoted by Beckwith, Hume confusingly mislabels his radical skepticism as Pyrrhonism, which he plainly sees as a dead end. “. . . a PYRRHONIAN,” he writes (his capitalization), “. . . must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge anything, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence . . . And though a PYRRHONIAN may throw himself or others into a momentary amazement and confusion by his profound reasonings; the first and most trivial event in life will put to flight all his doubts and scruples, and leave him the same, in every point of action and speculation, with the philosophers of every other sect, or with those who never concerned themselves in any philosophical researches. When he awakes from his dream, he will be the first to join in the laugh against himself, and to confess, that all his objections are mere amusement, and can have no other tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act, and reason, and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent inquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them.”¹¹

This is a far cry from the Early Buddhism of Pyrrho, with its confidence in its acceptance of experience and suspension of belief. The Pyrrhonists surely did not hold that “all life must perish” were their principles to prevail, or that the outcome would be to leave them “the same, in every point of action and speculation, with the philosophers of every other sect,” or that their philosophy is a kind of “dream” or “amusement.” These remarks might apply well enough to Academic skepticism, but hardly to the serious Pyrrhonian tradition.

The Pyrrhonists, of course, did not end up as total skeptics, a group they vigorously opposed. In their view, the phenomenal world comes to us already organized and unavoidable. Thoughts and sensations are not fleeting, illusory particulars, but are to be understood as reliable universals whose patterning (*pragmata*) can be scientifically observed. The world is not some mass of illusion but more or less orderly and predictable if sometimes challenging and surprising process. The phenomena (thoughts and sensations) that make up our *pragmata* are not “appearances” of some other reality; they are their own reality. If we take Pyrrhonism as our earliest evidence of Buddhism, as Beckwith suggests, the skepticism toward the phenomenal world as fleeting and illusory characteristic of “normative” Buddhism may have to be edited out of Early Buddhism as well.

Pyrrho and the Buddha evidently thought it possible to experience life without judgments, indeed both are reputed to have lived just such lives. In Pyrrho’s case, his famous indifference to any experience at hand, to any *pragmata*, gives us a clue to how it might be done. He would wash a pig, clean house, go to market, as well as do anything else, all indifferently. He showed neither preferences nor aversions, refusing to judge anything over anything else. Indifference here does not mean some kind of detached passivity from phenomena, but rather a consistent and comfortable acceptance of any and all phenomenal experience, just as it comes to us. Pyrrho, it seems, found everything equally absorbing and worthy of respect as it presented itself in our thoughts and sensations, in our *pragmata*. The Buddha as well appeared to be at ease in ordinary life, accepting it as it came to him. Far from dismissing it, or seeking to escape it, this attitude ascribes a certain respectful reality to our experience. In the case of Pyrrhonism, at least, it fostered a compatibility with scientific curiosity and inquiry. That may have been the case with Early Buddhism (we don’t know), but “normative” Buddhism (in spite of recent interest in connections between neuroscience and meditation) has displayed little interest in anything we’d call science and has tended instead to discount ordinary experience and nature as something to be overcome.

The suffering invoked by Pyrrho—and by extension the *dukkha* of the Buddha—is not some kind of inescapable experiential malaise or unfortunate psychological state, rather it is the unavoidable reality of our direct experience. We “suffer” our experience in the sense that we cannot avoid

having it. And we suffer it as pain or pleasure or indifference. To “suffer” something is to have to experience it involuntarily, whether we like it or not. If I have eyes that work, and if I can go outside on a sunny day and look up, I cannot help but see the blue sky. And so it is for all the phenomenal experience as we live it every moment. The point is that we are, for better or worse, in bondage to our *pragmata*—the objects of our consciousness—that constitute our experience. Pyrrhonism and Early Buddhism focus on restraint of judgment. Our experience invites judgment, but we do not have to accept the option of judgment, and, according to them, we would be wise not to do so.

We are ensnared by our judgments, by our opinions about *pragmata*, which is to say, by our interpretations of things, and by our beliefs. Opinions or beliefs go beyond the facts, beyond the *pragmata* themselves. A judgment is a premature decision about something, an unnecessary and harmful self-assertion superimposed on the facts, which proceeds by claiming that the phenomenal *pragmata* in question are not just what they appear to be, but also, or instead, something else.

Who makes these judgments? Our *pragmata* make no judgments; they simply unfold in our experience. A judgment about our *pragmata* can only come from outside our *pragmata*, from ourselves. It is we who make such judgments, variously affirming, denying, or otherwise characterizing our *pragmata*. Indeed, the recalcitrance of the phenomenal world, the fact that it is not under our control, is arguably evidence that it is not us that should differ from it. If so, the problem of judgment becomes a problem of the self. How is it that the self can judge and why does it do so?

“Normative” Buddhism famously argues for the nonexistence of the self, maintaining that it is our mistaken belief in a personal identity of some sort, apart from our experience, which enables our judgments. It is because we believe we are somehow distinct from our *pragmata*, that we are independent souls or selves, that, in the “normative” Buddhist view, allows us to respond to them independently, judging them to be good or bad, beautiful or ugly, just or unjust, and so on, and act accordingly. This presumption of self is said to be the source of attachment, and unnecessary suffering.

Unlike “normative” Buddhism, however, the Pyrrhonists do not argue for the nonexistence of the self. On the contrary, they routinely speak of a self or soul. “Even if . . . humans can be conceived of,” Sextus Empiricus writes, “we shall find that they are inapprehensible. For they are composed of soul and body, but neither bodies nor souls are perhaps apprehended.”¹² That is, we cannot determine, or define, what body or soul is, yet we recognize both bodies and souls. This appears to be a sharp departure from “normative” Buddhism, as indeed it is, but it is not necessarily a departure from Early Buddhism, as we shall see.

There was in fact at least one school of Buddhism, now extinct, which accepted some sort of reality for the self. This was Pudgalavada Buddhism,

dated by Leonard Priestley from the third century B.C.E. to the eleventh century C.E. Priestley's important book, *Pudgalavada Buddhism: The Reality of the Indeterminate Self*,¹³ now sadly out of print, is arguably the definitive work on the movement.

The Pudgalavada—who may have presumed they were following the Buddha in a line descended from Vacchagotta, who raised the question of the self with the Buddha¹⁴—distinguished the *pudgala*, or person, from the Bramanical notion of *atman*, or some sort of eternal soul. The pudgalavadins, in Priestley's account, hold that the *pudgala* can neither be identified with nor distinguished from the *skandhas*, the groups of mental and physical existence (or *dharma*s) plausibly identified with what we have been calling *pragmata*. Instead, the *pudgala* is something real—like the *pragmata* that we experience—but which resists explanation. We may be confident, then, in our experience both of *pragmata* (*skandhas*) and *pudgala* (soul, *psyche*), but skeptical of explaining them. *Pragmata-skandha* and *psyche-pudgala* are not things to be explained, but, if anything, the basis of any subsequent explanation of anything else. We know what the self is when we experience it, as it were, but we cannot say what it is that we experience when we experience it.

"The *pudgala*," as Priestley summarizes it, "is a kind of self which is inexpressible in the sense that it cannot be said to be either the same as the aggregates . . . or different from them. Error concerning the self is accordingly the opinion that the self is the same as the aggregates and so on, that it is different from them, or that it does not exist. The *pudgala* in fact exists, and is what passes from one life to another; it is not non-existent even in Parinirvana. It is known through all of the six kind of consciousness, and forms a distinct, fifth category of things that are knowable. It is the author of its actions and the enjoyer of their results."¹⁵

The parallels with Pyrrhonism are striking, and make a better fit with it than "normative" Buddhism. Pyrrhonists point out that, insofar our judgments (pro and con) about *pragmata* can be essentially contested, as seems to be the case, we would do well to suspend them, and similarly with our judgments (pro and con) about the self or soul. We are thereby not only liberated from the anxieties that arise over these judgments (or beliefs), but left with the simple clarity of our uninterpreted experience, not only of our thoughts and sensations and the *pragmata* they combine to display, *but also of our own selves*. The Pudgalavadins rejected the (dogmatic) judgment that the self does not exist. The reality of the Pyrrhonian soul, like the Pudgalavadin self, is acknowledged in this process, but, unlike *pragmata*, revealed to be entirely indeterminate, lacking the immediate diverse character of thoughts and sensations. Again, the self is not the cause of attachment; the cause is rather the judgments it chooses to make.

These speculations suggest the outline of a new reading of Early Buddhism—to accept Beckwith's proposed new category—which turns out to be a remarkable practical and realistic philosophy based on

suspension of beliefs about nonevident matters in favor of an acceptance of our direct experiences of body and soul. The key point of suspension of belief, and a resulting sense of tranquility and release from many (if not all) anxieties, suggests a path to personal well-being (not self-denial), while the separation of direct experience from gratuitous interpretation supports scientific objectivity and discounts unfounded religious claims as well as unfounded secular ideologies. Ancient cultures have often been a source of renewal, and it may be that the recent reappraisal of Pyrrhonism and Early Buddhism has the potential to spark yet another philosophical transformation.

Notes

- 1 – Christopher I. Beckwith, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
- 2 – Ibid., pp. xii–xiii.
- 3 – Ibid., p. xiii.
- 4 – Adrian Kuzminski, *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008); see also Everard Flintoff, “Pyrrho and India,” *Phronesis* XXV, (2) (1980).
- 5 – Beckwith, p. 20.
- 6 – Quoted by Beckwith, *ibid.*, pp. 186–187.
- 7 – Ibid., pl 23, n. 6.
- 8 – Ibid., p. 24.
- 9 – Ibid., p. 193.
- 10 – Ibid., p. 139, n. 3.
- 11 – David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, second edition, 1993), pp. 110–111.
- 12 – Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Bk. II, sec. 29, p. 75.
- 13 – Leonard C.D.C. Priestley, *Pudgalavada Buddhism: The Reality of the Indeterminate Self* (Toronto: University of Toronto, Centre for South Asian Studies, South Asian Studies Papers No. 12, Monograph No. 1, 1999).
- 14 – Ibid., pp. 17–19, 21, 34–36.
- 15 – Ibid., p. 80.