

The Greeks Reintroduced Hierarchy to Buddhism

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After some extensive Wikipedia-Hopping, I want to summarize my stream of thoughts in a small New-Year's article. As a practitioner of meditation and information scientist I have a natural interest in both schools of thought: the one that goes back to Buddha and the ancient Ionian. I argue that in the course of history, Ionian thinking reintroduced hierarchy to Buddhism.

Ionian Schools of Thought

The school of thought that today still dominates scientific cultures started to take its form in ancient Ionia, at the west coast of Asia Minor. In the city of Miletus, a paradigm shift from the dominance of substantial to abstract metaphors occurred. Early naturalistic religions were not dominated by concepts of all-encompassing Gods. Their gods were constructed from a human point of view and included personified nature and idealized or distorted manlike creatures that can be directly experienced such as the earth, rivers, mountains, sun, thunder, titans, giants, heroes, etc. Their stories were myths. In these myths, the relationship of gods is described as a family tribe. So not only do the gods mirror human experience, but societies of gods also mirror human societies. Mythos was widespread in Bronze Age societies, e.g. in the Greek Dark Ages, in which Homer has been writing his Odyssey.

Many scholars suggest a common Indo-European source, or at least mutually influenced co-generation of Vedic, ancient Greek, Latin and Celtic pantheons and myths. Not only do they share the names of certain Gods, but also common prototypes in their stories. Common examples include:

- Sky Father (skt. Dyáus Pitā, gr. Zeus, lat. Jūpiter (< Iovis pater, Diēspiter))
- Goddess of Dawn Heus(os) (skt. Ushas, gr. Eos, lat. Aurora, germ. Eos) that later developed into a Goddess of Hearth and Family (lat. Vesta, gr. Hestia, germ. Ostara, Anatolian Istarsa)
- River Goddess Dehnu (skrt. Danu, wal. Don, compare rivers Dnieper, Dniester, Don and Danube)
- Divine twins Sun and Moon (Sehul & Mehnot, skt. Surya, gr. Helios & Menelaus, lat. Sol & Luna).

Prominent myths include that of fighting a serpent or dragon, floods, or *cycles of death and rebirth* of the attributed deity to cause natural phenomena such as seasons, days or other cyclic phenomena. Myths are accompanied by ritual in order to connect with and appease the personified forces of nature. Thus the understanding of rebirth in mythical societies is not that of a transmigrating soul, but that of a self-similar, cyclic recurrence of materialistic phenomena. In absence of terms for a concept of an independent soul such thinking simply had not been invented yet.

Starting with the Ionian Thales of Miletus and his contemporary thinkers things changed dramatically. Thales dropped mythology and tried to explain phenomena without reference to personified Gods as their driving forces. Instead, he explained the nature of things as consisting of

one single substance: water. Thus he can be termed both monist and materialist, and for some he is the father of science. Anaximenes refined this principle by saying everything consists of air, as air condenses to water and water evaporates into air. This characterizes the style of thinking that has been present in Ionia. It was reasonable to think that water evaporates into air, with *into* meaning that it now *is* air, not constitutes a part of it (as reductionist thinking of the elements had not been invented yet ...) If you assume the air is the smallest essence there is, you will not think that water could be part of it, or even think of smaller phenomena that the air could consist of. If you don't see it anymore and there is light, then it is air.

From today's perspective, we primarily think of the air as oxygen and carbon-dioxide, as the functional relationship to breathing oxygen and our existence dominates our thinking. That the air also contains water primarily becomes important when our windows steam up. However, if fine particles have not been established in thinking, it is reasonable to say that water becomes air and air becomes water. Anaximander, also of Miletus, *abstracted* this water or air theory to an infinite source of all things (apeiron), what may be a tribute to the mythical Chaos. The principle of archê now transmigrates from beginning to perpetual change. Everything is driven by this perpetual change. Thus, Anaximander is considered to be the first mechanist. However, this notion of primordial cosmic power (cf. Hindu Shakti) is different from a functional-mechanistic thinking in cause and effect, as the deductive effect-side had not been invented yet. It was thinking in causes as common grounds that gave rise to new phenomena.

The Emergence of Thinking in States

Xenophanes introduced another, important aspect into thinking. Believing that the two extremes water and air dominate the earth, he institutionalized the two as alternating *states*. Instead of their circular dynamics, he focused on their states. Also, he describes the cycle of human life as alternating states of perishing and coming back (compare *yin* and *yang*). He thus digitized causal-loop thinking by cutting its transitory phenomena into stages called states. There are important implications. One, these stages may now be described relative to each other with functional descriptions. Two, truth now no longer is a problem solely of *identification* (as in following a school of thought, i.e. belief), but becomes an attributable property to such states. Along with that, there needs to be a justification of such a truth, as it is now no longer backed up by an (indisputable) way of living that automatically tracks its progress towards a goal. As a mere explanation of phenomena (knowledge) it has to be backed up by proof. Xenophanes thought that reality carries an intrinsic truth that mere mortals are unable to grasp. Similar thinking can still be found with Foucault, who sees knowledge as some eternal reality that gradually unfolds as human cultures are ready for it.

Anaxagoras extends this thinking to a world of primary, imperishable ingredients with the mind (*nous*) as an ordering force. In superimposing the mind to ordinary phenomena he transduces thinking in lineages or power to thinking in *hierarchies*. Opposites now no longer constitute alternating states in a global whole, but they *dominate* each other. Thinking in theological terms, mythical personification of Gods had now mutated into an abstract, dominating, supra-hierarchical phenomenon. It is a *One* that has no superior, no equals, and of which there are no categories, name or appearance, but is yet immanent in everything as a driving force. Of course, people may again personify this principle, as we will see later on. Additionally, Anaxagoras carried the newly established discipline of Philosophy from Ionia to Athens. Democritus expanded on his theory by becoming a scientific rationalist, stating that everything is composed of *atoms*, the result of *natural*

laws. In claiming that the *earth is round* he introduced yet another abstraction to human thinking, as people can now mentally approach the earth from a three-dimensional third person perspective. They are no longer being confined to an intermediate position in the heaven-earth dichotomy, which was the only way of thinking available before.

Migration to Athens

Bringing Philosophy to Athens gave rise to the Sophist practice of charging money for knowledge. The sages were now no longer respected, “holy” peregrines on a quest for knowledge, but exploited themselves as teachers for payment. Therefore, they needed to concentrate on questions of rhetoric, of which Protagoras invented a first taxonomy of assertion, question, command, etc. Socrates, however, reversed this trend, refusing payment for teaching, and introducing a dialectic method of enquiry (discourse) to solve the truth problem that came with Xenophanes’ states of knowledge. Karl Popper described this as an art of intellectual intuition, trying to grasp a reality that is unavailable to the senses. Thus, discourse is also a sociological phenomenon achieving consensus. Plato therefrom abstracted a theory of forms. In accepting the mind a dominating principle, he thought of the material world as a copy of the real, mental world, thus reversing the order of nature. Principles that originally were derived from observation are now superimposed on nature as structuring force. This thinking is understandable, as once abstract structures have fossilized as parts of ones thinking, they automatically are superimposed on every perception, shifting centers of gravity in the perceived images. Plato thinks of these forms as archetypes, abstract representatives of real phenomena, and knowledge is justified, *true* belief.

Aristotle, as the last of the philosophers that shall be discussed here, shifted from Platonism to Empiricism. He emphasized that all knowledge is ultimately based on perception and distinguished between four causes (material, formal, efficient and final), the latter of which give way to thinking in cause and effect. However, Aristotle’s causal thinking is still one of mutual influence, and the same cause can give way to contrary effects. Aristotle taught Alexander the great. Then Alexander the great conquered the East, extending his influence to India.

Alexander the Great Reaches India and Egypt

India was dominated by two schools of thought. Brahmin, on the one hand, centered about the Vedic ritual; Srmana, on the other, was a countermovement of wandering Sages that later gave rise to Jainism, Buddhism, Ajivika and Yoga. Shramans centered their philosophy on perception. Early Buddhist (and Yogic) practices try to overcome suffering by mastering perceptual phenomena that are, for example, explained in the Samkhya model or in Buddhist Sutras. So while Vedic model was still caught in mythical polytheism, Buddha, rejecting the notion of dualistic terminology, proclaimed peace of mind to be the absence of even a concept of a God. Then the Greek and Indian cultures met. Settling in India for a couple hundred years, Greek stonecutters produced Buddha statues (including greek garments).

Together with the Ionian school of thought Buddha became a deified representative of the abstract principle that dominates everything that he never intended to be and had tried to get rid of to begin with. Buddha himself taught everybody to be equal in his sangha. Only his pupil Ananda introduced a hierarchy between elder and younger monks. As much of the Sutra Pitaka goes back to Ananda’s recitals, it is unknown how many of the details are in fact attributable to him or Buddha, but following the spirit of the messages, an attempt at authenticity can be attempted.

The alienation was aggravated by the Greek habit of idolizing their rulers to god-like status. In course, Theravada Buddhism was extended (and opposed by) Mahayana Buddhism. Simply becoming an Arhat (attaining personal liberation) no longer was enough. Below the deified Buddha, additional Bodhisattvas were created, god-like supra-humans that spent their life to attain liberation for the sake of all beings. Buddha himself had only offered a way to transcend one's sensual phenomena. The Pali Canon was then extended with the Abhidharma, a philosophical section complementing the Sutra Pitaka (Buddha's scriptures) and Vinaya Pitaka (rules for monastic life).

It is important to consider that once a reified picture of Buddha has been mentally fossilized, there needs to be another attempt at bracketing it, returning this fossilization to consciousness, so it can be overcome. To accept the liberation of all beings as a purpose for following the path, as opposed to an egocentric one to become a super-human, may be a first step in transcending this dichotomy, but will finally have to be given up to attain liberation. In the Maurian Empire thus a Graeko-Buddhism formed where the Sages no longer wandered, but gradually became monastic, starting with rainy seasons. The Greeks were referred to as Yonas (Ionians), and prominent Ionian figures played a role in spreading Buddhism throughout India, e.g. Mahadharmaraksita, a Yona who led 30.000 monks from Alexandria of the Caucasus to Sri Lanka.

The Hellenistic Melting Pot

With the dominance of the mental over the material, back in Greece the Hellenistic period brought a variety of philosophical and religious phenomena. Stoic criticism emerged, gymnasia were established, old Gods were recast to abstract phenomena as Intelligence (Athena), as an opposition, new personified concepts arose as deities, and other foreign elements were integrated, e.g. the Egyptian Isis-cult that spread throughout Europe (I guess sex sells in any epoch). Of course, the melting pot of philosophies and rudimentary scientific practices also produced phenomena like astrology, alchemy, and many others that emerged in a cycle of opposition and identification. Unfortunately, it was not the most advanced way of thinking that was carried into the Middle Ages by the rulers of the Roman Empire together with the dominating Catholic Church, institutionalized by Emperor Constantine. In the period of Enlightenment, many things had to be rediscovered, including the idea that the earth is a sphere.

Conclusion

Today, as the brain has been discovered to be a complex, recurrent network, we are yet again at a point where the scientific investigation found its metaphysic limits. There is a threshold where chains of cause and effect are not sufficient to explain the complexities of the mind and thinking in states has to be given up. Instead, developmental trajectories have to be followed. Thus, we can now feel what thinking was like in the times of Buddha, when causality only meant *dependent origination*, not effect or spiritual meaning. Dependent origination can happen without the need to make concepts of it, although making them is part of the human nature. Along with these concepts questions of meaning arise. Buddha had understood and shown a way out of these mental side effects that came with rational thinking.

The rise of Mahayana Buddhism, that Tibetan and Zen-Buddhism root in and spread to the Western societies in the 20th century CE, was heavily influenced by the advent of Ionian thinking in India. Ionian customs and art brought deification back into Buddhism that is contrary to Buddha's teachings and a way of thinking that Buddha (and arguably later Jesus Christ) tried to abolish. The

anthropomorphic representation of Buddha himself may be of Greek origin. Buddha, in opposition to Vedic traditions and ascetic extremes renounced both ritual and dualistic thinking, propagating a middle way by reducing any perceived phenomenon to just that: a phenomenon of perception, pure unqualified consciousness. The advent of Greek thinking reintroduced hierarchical, abstract thinking to Buddhism by way of deifying Buddha as a seeker and representation of the abstract, driving force of the universe, thus introducing a notion of soul into Buddhist thinking that it was completely devoid of.

References

All central terms are backed up by their respective Wikipedia entries. No other sources have been used.