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## Compassion as Means to Nirvana

Richard Gombrich's 1997 Gonda Lecture, "Kindness and Compassion as Means to Nirvana in Early Buddhism,"<sup>1</sup> marked a signal event in contemporary Buddhist studies. (My title is an obvious reference to his.) In this Gombrich explicitly announced the "bold claim" that the Theravada tradition – according to which the Buddha taught that insight into how things are (in some deep and important sense) was the way to enlightenment – is mistaken. Contrary to received orthodoxy of more than two millennia, Gombrich claims to have "discover[ed]" that the Buddha considered "the cultivation of kindness and compassion to be a way \* \* \* to reach salvation, nirvana."<sup>2</sup> In this important respect, he tells us, "the conventional view of the Buddha's message and his place in the history of religion is wrong."<sup>3</sup>

Taken seriously, this "radical" claim dramatically shakes up our understanding of the Buddha and his teachings, as Gombrich well appreciates. He tells us at the outset of the lecture that the task he has set himself is "to justify my approach and explain how I can dare to reach so radical a conclusion and defy established wisdom."<sup>4</sup> He then proceeds to set out rather persuasively (although not uncontroversially) textual evidence from the Pali canon in support of this.

It is somewhat surprising, then, given Gombrich's prominence as perhaps the pre-eminent scholar of early Buddhism in the English speaking world, that his announced "demonstrat[ion]"<sup>5</sup> of his claim appears to have

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<sup>1</sup> Gombrich, Richard, "Kindness and Compassion as Means to Nirvana." Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1998. Recently collected in Williams, Paul ed. (2005), *Buddhism, Critical Concepts in Religious Studies*, Vol. II.

<sup>2</sup> Gombrich (1998), p.1 (page numbers are to the post on the website of The Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies.)

<sup>3</sup> Id.

<sup>4</sup> Id.

<sup>5</sup> Gombrich (1998), p.14.

caused such little reverberation, at least if we are to judge by general writings purporting to describe the life and teachings of the Buddha that continue to appear.

Karen Armstrong, in her popular *Buddha* (2001),<sup>6</sup> repeatedly cites to Gombrich's writings as authoritative. She references his *Theravada Buddhism* (1988)<sup>7</sup> numerous times. And she twice references his more scholarly work, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (1996),<sup>8</sup> published the year before the Gonda Lecture, in which he prefigures the thesis of that lecture. Indeed, one of her citations to that work is to the very paragraph on pages 60-61, in which Gombrich states, albeit somewhat in passing, that in the *Tevijja Sutta* "the Buddha is saying that infinite kindness, compassion, etc. bring Enlightenment." But in presenting her version of the traditional account of the Buddha, nowhere does she evidence any appreciation that Gombrich just may have upset that apple cart. In addition, her later book, *The Great Transformation, The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (2006),<sup>9</sup> largely repeats (in an abbreviated form) her earlier presentation, again with no mention of Gombrich's demurrer.

Likewise, to take just one other example of a widely read work (to judge by the New York Times best seller lists), in *An End of Suffering, The Buddha in the World* (2004),<sup>10</sup> Pankaj Mishra, who in marshaling a wide variety sources to the telling of his story including Gombrich's *Theravada Buddhism* and *How Buddhism Began*, similarly displays no indication that he has encountered the "radical conclusion" of the Gonda Lecture.

This may be partially explained by the fact that for some time the Gonda Lecture was not widely available. (It is now conveniently posted on

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<sup>6</sup> Armstrong, Karen (2001), *Buddha*.

<sup>7</sup> Gombrich, Richard (1998), *Theravada Buddhism*.

<sup>8</sup> Gombrich, Richard (1996), *How Buddhism Began, The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*.

<sup>9</sup> Armstrong, Karen (2006), *The Great Transformation, The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*.

<sup>10</sup> Mishra, Pankaj (2004), *An End of Suffering, The Buddha in the World*.

the web site of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies.) And, as Gombrich says (in a somewhat understated manner), in *How Buddhism Began* the radical conclusion was “not given great prominence.”<sup>11</sup> At least this explanation agrees with my own experience.

When, some five or more years ago now, I began to be drawn more and more into reading and reflecting on the historical figure of the Buddha, I eventually found my way to *How Buddhism Began*. Initially I struggled with the riches of the work in repeated revisits. (It is not any easy read for the non-specialist; nor is it intended to be.) And increasingly Gombrich’s way of approaching the Buddha and early Buddhism came to influence my own thinking – his emphasis, for instance, on seeing the Buddha as in conversation with followers of other world views, particularly that of brahminism, and as not incidentally employing their own language in a playful, almost jocular manner to turn their ideas around to his own purposes. But for the longest time I seemingly did not pick up on the thesis that Gombrich would present so straightforwardly in the Gonda Lecture, even though I was slowly coming to a similar idea myself, albeit from a rather different, non-textual direction. (I say “seemingly” because I cannot rule out a surreptitious influence that I wasn’t aware of or wasn’t willing to credit.) It was only later as a result of correspondence with Gombrich and then reading the Gonda Lecture that I came to appreciate this. In any case (as will be clear), I am sympathetic to the nut of Gombrich’s “def[iance] of received opinion.”<sup>12</sup>

His thesis, in its most limited and specific form, is a textual one. He contends “there are texts in the Pali canon which not only commend kindness but value it so highly that it can be a means to nirvana.”<sup>13</sup> This thesis does not altogether reject the orthodox position that one may attain enlightenment by insight; Gombrich concludes that “the Buddha considered the cultivation of kindness and compassion to be a way \* \* \* to nirvana,” but “not the *only* way.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Gombrich (1998), p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Id.

<sup>13</sup> Gombrich (1998), p. 14 (his emphasis).

<sup>14</sup> Gombrich (1988), p. 1.

In addition, I take Gombrich to maintain that this reading was true of the Buddha himself and not just an understanding (or misunderstanding) of the compilers of the canon. He says, for instance, that in his mind “the conventional view of the Buddha’s message \* \* \* is wrong.” But it is not Gombrich’s view (at least as here expressed) that the “message” that nirvana can be attained through “kindness and compassion” also reflects how the Buddha himself achieved his enlightenment and so came to nirvana. That is, Gombrich does not reject that piece of “the conventional view” according to which the Buddha achieved enlightenment through some form of insight, commonly understood as a realization of the truth or reality of *anatta*, the idea that we have no essential self. In the Gonda Lecture, Gombrich speaks of this idea as the “Buddhist doctrine” on which “liberation \* \* \* consists of a gnosis with a specific content, an insight into the nature of the phenomenal world as being \* \* \* without essence.”<sup>15</sup>

I, on the other hand, find the insight model of enlightenment problematic on general, philosophical grounds and favor thinking of the Buddha’s break with brahminism as so deep as to lead him to disavow the idea that any type of knowledge or gnosis could be liberational. (I critically discuss both the insight model of traditional Theravada, as well as Sue Hamilton’s Kantian interpretation of it, in “Rethinking the Buddha’s Enlightenment: Reflections on Hamilton’s *Early Buddhism: A New Approach*.”<sup>16</sup>) My own thinking about the historical Buddha and what we might plausibly suppose was his personal path to enlightenment grew into a book-length essay, tentatively titled *Compassion, A Naturalistic Portrait of the Historical Buddha*. In this I attempt to motivate, articulate and develop an idea similar to Gombrich’s but which is directed towards an understanding of the Buddha’s own enlightenment. My guiding thought, in a word, is that the Buddha achieved his enlightenment through compassion, not insight.

I came to accept as central to the Buddha’s teachings the Noble Truths of suffering, of thirst (*trishna*) as the cause of suffering and of the (possible) elimination of thirst as the way to bring an end of suffering. But I also came to conclude that the tradition was quite unilluminating as to just how to understand what suffering (most importantly) *is* – or, as we might also put it,

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<sup>15</sup> Gombrich (1998), pp. 11-12.

<sup>16</sup> Hamilton, Sue (2000), *Early Buddhism: A New Approach*.

what *is* the suffering that thirst causes and which ceases when thirst is eliminated. This thinking led me towards the idea that the key to the Buddha's enlightenment, the ending of his suffering, lay in a shift from thinking in terms of some form of cognitive accomplishment (an insight or apprehension) to thinking of it as involving a modification of conation or motivation, how we are moved to act in the world. It is at this point that my reflections make contact with Gombrich's "radical" idea.

My central suggestion, briefly stated, goes like this. The Buddha sought to better understand human suffering in order to find a way to end it. Taking this problem as its focus, my essay suggests that the Buddha came to conclude that suffering, at its most troubling, is best understood in terms of the conflict in which we live with others, a conflicted state of affairs that arises as a result of *trishna* (thirst) motivating us to seek our own benefit in what we do. Because of this, he surmised, we find ourselves alienated from others and from the here and now world we jointly share with others. His solution to this problem was a non-intellectual one – in that sense, a non-rational one. It did not come about through some act of cognition, some type of insight or apprehension or gnosis. It occurred, rather, through a self-directed shift in conation: he altered his impetus to act for his own welfare to become someone who was dominantly disposed to act for the well being of all. In this he did not simply eliminate *trishna*; he transformed it into *karuna* (compassion). And as a result of this, he discovered that (among other things) this shift eliminated his suffering, his alienation from others. In this sense, compassion, the concern for the well being of all, is the key to the Buddha's enlightenment, his end of suffering.

This idea is no less audacious than Gombrich's, especially coming from a non-specialist. And, needless to say, it raises many questions or problems. Prominent among these is whether there is any textual reason to believe it. My essay places considerable emphasis on the *Metta Sutta*. (This, I suggest, should be read in two distinct ways, each of which supports a different (though related) teaching of the Buddha.) But the textual evidence that Gombrich adduces for his "radical conclusion" provides more than welcome additional support for my own, or so I would submit.

What I propose to do in this instance is, first, discuss some of the textual support that Gombrich finds for his "bold" thesis; second, raise some questions which Gombrich does not discuss but which rather naturally arise concerning his view; and, third, discuss these questions as they might

reasonably be directed at my own radical view and in this way perhaps provide some measure of credence to it.

### **Gombrich's Reading of the Canon.**

Gombrich draws support for his view that “kindness and compassion” provide a way to enlightenment principally from his readings of two *suttas* of the canon, the *Metta Sutta* and the *Tevijja Sutta*. The first of these begins with a reference to “the peaceful state,” which is generally taken to be nirvana. It then goes on most famously to encourage that, much as a mother could protect her child even at the risk of her own life, so too “[t]owards the whole world one should develop loving thoughts, boundless: upwards, downwards, sideways, without restriction, enmity or rivalry;” and then concludes: “They call this divine living in this world.”<sup>17</sup> Since here “divine living” is another reference to nirvana, Gombrich concludes that “it seems clear that the purport of the whole poem is that kindness is salvific.”<sup>18</sup>

The idea of the *Metta Sutta* that one should “let one’s thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world” appears to derive from the *Tevijja Sutta*.<sup>19</sup> As Gombrich comments, “some vocabulary and phraseology of the *Metta Sutta* comes straight out of the *Tevijja Sutta*.”<sup>20</sup> In particular, the former references what came to be called the four *brahma-vihara* of *metta* (loving kindness), *karuna* (compassion,) *mudita* (sympathetic joy) and *upekkha* (equanimity). And these *brahma-vihara* make their first of several appearances in the canon in the *Tevijja Sutta*, although they are not referred to as such there. (“The four *brahma-vihara* occur in several canonical texts, but the *locus classicus* is the *Tevijja Sutta*.”<sup>21</sup>)

The *Tevijja Sutta* is a prose text. In this it differs from the *Metta Sutta*, which is a poem, indeed, a quite famous Pali poem. It records a

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<sup>17</sup> Gombrich (1998), p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Id.

<sup>19</sup> Gombrich (1998), p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Gombrich (1998), p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Id.

conversation between the Buddha and two youths that Gombrich summarizes as follows:

Two young brahmins are arguing about the direct way to what they call “companionship with Brahma”, and decide to ask the Buddha. This leads to a long conversation, in which the Buddha makes fun of brahmins for claiming to teach the way to a goal they have never seen; he compares this, among other things, to declaring one is in love with a beauty queen without have the faintest idea what she looks like, who she is or where she lives. He contrasts the brahmins who claim to know all their sacred texts, the three Vedas, with the picture they draw of Brahma, whom they claim they will join because they resemble him, and says that on the other hand it is a Buddhist monk who resembles Brahma. His account of the monk’s way of life culminates in saying that the monk permeates every direction with his kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. Thus it appears plausible that at death such a monk “goes to companionship with Brahma”, he says. Convinced by this, the two young brahmins convert to Buddhism.<sup>22</sup>

In the course of achieving this “conversion,” the Buddha has engaged in what, following Gombrich, we might describe as metaphorical word play to lead his brahmin questioners to see that the true path to what they seek does not lie with brahmin culture. Cutting to the chase, the Buddha explains the way to the brahma-world is to, first, renounce the life of a householder and take up that of a mendicant, in this case a monk who is a follower of the Buddha. And then to learn how to “pervade every direction,” north, south, east and west, “with thoughts of kindness.”<sup>23</sup> Here the Buddha stresses “the entirety of the [intended] pervasion,” by describing it as “‘extensive, magnified, *boundless*, without hatred or ill will’.”<sup>24</sup> This process of pervasion is “described as ‘release of the mind’” and “when it has been thus developed,” Gombrich tells us, “no bounded (i.e., finite) karma remains

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<sup>22</sup> Id.

<sup>23</sup> Gombrich (1996), p. 60.

<sup>24</sup> Id.

there.”<sup>25</sup> In addition, Gombrich points out that “the last point” is repeated in the text “for emphasis.”<sup>26</sup> Achieving this, the Buddha tells his listeners, is the way to companionship with Brahma. The text then, “in the usual style,” repeats the same account with each of the other three “kinds of thought,” compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.<sup>27</sup> In sum: “The Buddha says to the two young brahmins that a monk who has boundless kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy or equanimity is \* \* \* like Brahma \* \* \* and so at death may well \* \* \* go to join Brahma.”<sup>28</sup>

For Gombrich, this talk of the Buddha showing the “way to the brahma-world is just Vedantic language, borrowed from the interlocutors, for the way to nirvana in this life.”<sup>29</sup> He “was using the brahminical way of putting things as a metaphor for what he saw as the highest goal \* \* \*. He was using the brahminical description of their *summun bonum*, which was itself couched in metaphorical terms, to describe his own *summun bonum* in precisely analogous metaphorical style.”<sup>30</sup> And this reading of the *Tevijja Sutta* convinces Gombrich that here the canon acknowledges a path to enlightenment other than that of orthodox Theravada.

I find it particularly interesting that, on Gombrich’s reading of the *Tevijja Sutta*, when someone succeeds in pervading the world with kindness (compassion, etc.), their finite karma has been eliminated (“no bounded karma remains”). Gombrich develops this by discussing a comparison with brahminism. In *How Buddhism Began*, this discussion occurs in the chapter entitled “Kamma as a Reaction to Brahminism.” In the Gonda Lecture he provides this summary:

According to the Upanisads [or brahminism], every significant act [karma] brings its result, but that result is finite. To escape

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<sup>25</sup> Id.

<sup>26</sup> Id.

<sup>27</sup> Id.

<sup>28</sup> Gombrich (1998), p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Gombrich (1996), p. 61.

<sup>30</sup> Gombrich (1998), p. 10.

this finitude requires gnosis; gnosis leads one to join *brahman*, that which pervades the entire universe as consciousness.<sup>31</sup>

For Gombrich, “the Buddhist monk is pervading the universe with his consciousness, but it is an ethical consciousness. In enlarging his mind to be boundless (metaphorically, of course) he is emulating the brahmin gnostic who identifies with universal consciousness – or rather, going one better, showing the brahmin what he really should be doing. His consciousness, moreover, is \* \* \* an activity. It is karma, but not the kind of karma that is finite: that he has transcended.”<sup>32</sup>

Drawing on this we may say that the central insight of Gombrich’s discussion of the *Tevijja Sutta* has two components: the first is the idea that pervading the world with kindness (or compassion) should be understood in terms of an idea of karma; the second is that the process of pervading the world with kindness (or compassion) represents an attempt to transform bounded karma into unbounded karma, so that at the end of the day, as Gombrich puts it, finite karma has been transcended.

By karma, as Gombrich has emphasized in several places, the Buddha meant intention.<sup>33</sup> Although he tells us “there is no canonical text or commentary” that spells this out, Gombrich does not doubt that it is a bedrock idea of the Buddha’s. In the Gonda Lecture, for instance, he relates that “the Buddha \* \* \* took the brahmin term for ritual action, *karman* in Sanskrit, and said that for him *kamma* (the Pali equivalent) was purely a matter of intention” – in other words, he took a brahminical term meaning action and “us[ed] it to mean the opposite,” i.e., intention – “and,” as Gombrich emphasizes, “the whole edifice of [the Buddha’s] thought built on that foundation.”<sup>34</sup> So in the *Tevijja Sutta* the Buddha is alluding to the idea that by pervading thoughts of kindness (or compassion) one can come to expand his bounded intention, or motivation, into an unbounded one characterized by an attitude of kindness towards all. Or, to put this in terms of the *Metta Sutta*, if we can “cultivate a boundless heart,” we can arrive at

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<sup>31</sup> Gombrich (1998), p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Gombrich (1996), p. 61.

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., Gombrich (1998), p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Id.

“the divine abode [the brahma-world] in this life.” In other words, pervading the world with kindness (or compassion) can unbind our karma, the intention with which we act, and if we fully succeed in doing this, we will arrive at nirvana.

Returning to the *Metta Sutta*, we may see how it helps us to understand the talk in the *Tevijja Sutta* of “pervading the whole world” with *metta* (or *karuna*). For the *Metta Sutta* instructs us that to cultivate a boundless heart is to take up or inculcate in ourselves the same attitude or disposition to respond toward all beings that a mother has towards her own child. (“[M]ost of the poem prescribes how one should love all living beings as a mother loves her own child.”<sup>35</sup>) In other words, to successfully pervade the whole world with *metta* (or *karuna*) is to acquire within oneself a disposition (character trait; internalized commitment) to act towards everyone as a mother is disposed to act towards her child. To be so motivated to move in the world – to be in that sense a compassionate being – is to be enlightened, to be living with Brahma; it is “divine living in this world.”<sup>36</sup>

In this way, the scholarship of Gombrich allows us to appreciate that the *Tevijja Sutta* and the *Metta Sutta* are metaphorically describing a path to enlightenment that, as I would have it, the Buddha traversed himself. Compassion, understood as the boundless heart of the *Metta Sutta*, was the Buddha’s way to nirvana, so goes my suggestion.

### **Some Topics Gombrich Does Not Address.**

One can hardly object that, having announced and defended the “radical” thesis that early Buddhism recognized “kindness [as] a means to attaining nirvana,”<sup>37</sup> Gombrich leaves many questions concerning this idea unaddressed. Nonetheless, I want point out several topics which his “bold” idea invites discussion of, and discuss these as they are analogously implicated by the suggestion that compassion was the Buddha’s personal route to enlightenment.

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<sup>35</sup> Gombrich (1998), p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted by Gombrich (1998), p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Gombrich (1998), p. 14.

First, for Gombrich the *Metta Sutta* speaks of kindness (*metta*) as a way to nirvana. But *metta* is just one of the four *brahma-vihara*. And Gombrich in the Gonda Lecture speaks of kindness *and* compassion as means to nirvana. Moreover, in *How Buddhism Began* he says of the *Tevijja Sutta* that “infinite kindness, compassion, etc. brings Enlightenment,” where here the “etc.” appears to refer to the other two *brahma-vihara*, *mudita* and *upekkha*,<sup>38</sup> and the Gonda Lecture says “all the four states, from kindness to equanimity” are means to nirvana.<sup>39</sup> How, then, does he intend us to understand this? Are kindness and compassion to be understood as two ways of speaking of a common path to enlightenment? And are sympathetic joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekkha*) also means to nirvana? How many ways do we have here? One? Two? Four? There is reason to think that Gombrich has in mind just one unorthodox path to enlightenment, though perhaps the *Tevijja Sutta* speaks of four. But if so, what is the relationship between this one path and the four *brahma-vihara*? Why is one of them a path and the others are not?

Second, however we come out on this first topic, it is plain that, whether on Gombrich’s reading it is one or more than one paths to nirvana that these texts reference, they differ from the orthodox position that it is insight that does the job. Gombrich is entirely clear on this. But what about the Buddha’s own path the enlightenment? All suppose he achieved enlightenment in some way or other. But, of course, he did so only once. So if we have multiple ways of reaching nirvana, which of these was the Buddha’s? How did *he* achieve enlightenment? In raising this question I intend no criticism of Gombrich, whose focus was primarily textual and not biographical. It is just that once we begin to entertain alternatives to Theravada orthodoxy concerning how to achieve enlightenment the question as to the Buddha’s own historical path is inevitable. And this is so, whether or not we think there is any possible way of answering it.

Third, Gombrich offers an alternative to the traditional insight model of enlightenment. In doing so he draws on language in the canon that speaks of pervading the world in every direction with boundless love (or boundless compassion). But how are we to understand this as a path to enlightenment? In particular, how can we get a better conceptual grasp of Gombrich’s

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<sup>38</sup> See Gombrich (1996), p. 61.

<sup>39</sup> Gombrich (1998), p.10.

heterodox alternative and how, practically speaking, are we to understand how someone could go about pursuing it. What is the trick and how can we pull it off?

And fourth, the Buddha famously taught that *trishna* (thirst) is the cause of suffering and that the elimination of *trishna* will cause suffering to cease. How, then, are we to understand the alternative, unorthodox path (or paths) to nirvana that Gombrich finds in the canon in terms of these Noble Truths? Is pervading the world with boundless kindness or compassion to be understood as a way to eliminate *trishna*? If so, how is that supposed to work? Otherwise put, worthy as it may be to pervade the world with thoughts of kindness, just how is that supposed to eliminate our suffering?

### **Remarks on the Unaddressed Topics.**

Summarizing the previous section, here are four questions that any radically alternative view of enlightenment such as that Gombrich presents in his Gonda Lecture should address:

1. If one or another of the four *brahma-vihara* provides a path to enlightenment, which ones do and how many paths are we talking about?
2. Which, if any, of these was the Buddha's own path to his enlightenment?
3. Regarding any such alternative path, how may we conceptually understand what is involved and how, practically speaking, is one supposed to actually walk the path, what technique or practice is supposed to take us to nirvana?
4. The Buddha taught that *trishna* (thirst) is the cause of suffering – so does the unorthodox path yield an end of suffering, and, if so, how is this accomplished?

These four topics are all related one to another, at least in the view advanced in my essay. So, where shall we begin?

Let's come back to the topic of enlightenment. We have spoken thus far of enlightenment in the same breath as nirvana. In some ways this is

quite appropriate. But let us begin to be more careful. The Buddha sought a solution to the problem of suffering. He found a way of achieving this end. His enlightenment was his attaining an end of suffering. And on becoming enlightened he was “living with Brahma,” he was in nirvana. Enlightenment was his cessation of suffering. Nirvana, as I would have it, was how he was once he had achieved this end. So the two are not just the same, although they may often be referred to interchangeably. We shall come back to this.

In answering the second question, “What was the Buddha’s way to enlightenment?” I am suggesting that compassion, a concern for the welfare of others, was the Buddha’s means to an end of suffering. But this idea will only be intelligible on a particular understanding of suffering. Surely, someone could not become pain free by becoming more other regarding in his actions. So what, we may ask, could the Buddha have meant by suffering (*dukkha*) so that it would be at least plausible that coming to intend the welfare of all beings could be connected in some way to an end of one’s own suffering?

We know – or at least I assume that we do – that the Buddha diagnosed *trishna* (thirst) as the cause of suffering. And the elimination of *trishna* was to yield an end of suffering. So, we may ask, how are we to understand *trishna* so that, for the Buddha, becoming compassionate can be understood as eliminating *trishna* and so bringing on enlightenment?

Briefly – for all I can do in this context is to lay various pieces end-to-end, as it were; to provide support for all the connections of one piece with another requires the space of a larger essay – *trishna* is the human version of the inborn intention (desire; motivation) of all creatures to act in self-preserving and self-enhancing ways. It leads us to see the world in terms of what will benefit us and what will not, valuing (approaching) the first and devaluing (avoiding) the second. This native egoism, which at some level we not only recognize in ourselves but also attribute to others, leads to continually placing or finding ourselves in conflicts (actual and anticipated) with others and so, as a consequence, we suffer a sense of disconnection from others. It is this alienation, I conclude, that the Buddha recognized as the most enduring and most poignant form of suffering that characterizes human existence. With this as background, the idea that becoming compassionate brings enlightenment means that by acquiring the intention to act for the well being of all, compassion supercedes egoism (*trishna*) as our dominant impetus to action so that we no longer see the world in anything

like the stark Hobbesian terms of a war of all against all. Or, putting this more in the terms of the *Tevijja Sutta*, by expanding our karma from the finite karma of *trishna* to the unbounded karma of *karuna* we eliminate our otherwise enduring sense of alienation.

This, in bare outline, is how we can intelligibly understand (so I suggest) the idea that becoming compassionate can bring an end of suffering. And this is how (on my understanding) the connection is forged between the Noble Truth that *trishna* is the cause of *dukkha* and the idea, that Gombrich directs attention to in the *Tevijja Sutta* and the *Metta Sutta*, that nirvana can be reached by cultivating a boundless heart.

Turning to the third question, let's look at the "how to" part. How is it, according to the Buddha that someone can go about attempting to shift from being a quite self-regarding person to becoming a more other-regarding one? To begin with we might broadly distinguish between two possible approaches to altering our basic motivational structure, our moral character, if you will. One of these keys on action: we seek to change how we are disposed to act by acting differently; we attempt to act more and more in the ways that would be characteristic of how we wish to be. This we might call an Aristotelian approach, recalling his idea in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that one can become virtuous by acting virtuously. So for instance if, as he believed, courage is a virtue, the idea is that we can become courageous by acting as this virtue requires in situations calling for it, that is by acting courageously in circumstances calling for acts of courage. In this way we will build the requisite disposition so that when, in the future, courage is required of us, we shall respond to the call. (As we act, so we will become; as we become, so we will act.) The second, broadly distinguishable approach to altering our basic inclinations focuses on thought as the agent of change, rather than on action. The idea, very roughly put, is that by thinking about how we want to be in one situation after another, how we wish to act in one way rather than in another, we can change how it is we are disposed to act so that it may come to pass that we actually do come, naturally (as it were), to act more in the preferred fashion. This second line of attack may initially seem a good deal less promising than the first. But (I want to suggest) it was the Buddha's way.

The *Tevijja Sutta* and the *Metta Sutta* both display a preference for thought over action as the agent of change; they do this in their talk of pervading the world with thoughts of kindness (compassion, etc.). In this

both *suttas* show a decided preference for thought, at least if we operate with a thought versus action distinction. So it is, for instance, that the *Metta Sutta* urges us to “let one’s thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world.” And, although we may feel that we are still rather in the dark about the details, we might, nonetheless, be prepared to rephrase the idea in terms of thinking of all beings with compassion or with love. So, I would say, the textual evidence supporting both Gombrich’s unorthodox understanding of how one may reach nirvana and that of my essay evince a preference for thought over action as the means.

Furthermore, if it is the Buddha’s own enlightenment that we are considering, this must have come about (in terms of our distinction) through thought rather than action. This is because during the relevant period of time he was living in a rather solitary way with minimal interaction with others. So he would scarcely have been able to practice changing his actual behavior as a technique to changing his characteristic behavior, how that is he was fundamentally disposed to act. Whatever there is to be said for the “radical” alternative that Gombrich finds in the canon, if it is to be presented as an account of the Buddha’s enlightenment, it appears that it must elaborate in some fashion on the idea that pervading the world with thought provides the means to do the job.

Accepting this, we still have not gotten very far towards understanding how one might actually go about changing one’s dispositional structure, one’s abiding intention as to how to act. I think, however, that the *Metta Sutta* has more to say of assistance. Its additional tutelage comes in the course of encouraging us to “cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings.” This famous passage not only directs attention to a certain end: that we act quite generally out of unbounded karma, out of an intention to act for the well being of all. It also guides us towards how we may cultivate that state. Drawing on earlier observations, we may paraphrase this counsel of the *Metta Sutta* this way:

Our karma is finite, limited, bound up with our idea of self. And so we suffer. But we have it within us to expand that karma, that disposition of how to be in the world. A mother does this when she has a child. (Although, we should say, this is not something she actually *does*; nor is it something that necessarily involves any *thought* on her part.) For when her child arrives, her karma, the conative aspect of her self,

just naturally expands to include her child – so that now not only does she act that her child may survive and prosper, she may do so even at the cost of her own life.

So too, the *Metta Sutta* assumes that we all have within us the capacity to so unbind our karma, to expand our self that we can come to care about wider and wider circles of others in something like the fashion that a mother cares for her child. *Trisha*, we can then appreciate, is not only the cause of our suffering; it harbors the seed, which if cultivated, may eliminate that suffering. We can, the *Metta Sutta* suggests, so cultivate our heart that it becomes boundless and we arrive at the state where our karma, our intention is to treat all beings much as a mother treats her child. Understanding the message of the *Metta Sutta* this way begins to give us a picture of a shift in ourselves that could induce enlightenment.

But, we may still ask, just how is it that we are actually going to go about this? In a word: meditation. This should come as no surprise. Certainly the importance of meditation for the Buddha's enlightenment is attested to by the legend of him reaching enlightenment one moonlit night seated cross-legged under the *bodhi* tree. I speculate that he devised some practice or set of practices of meditation, some meditation technology, by which he was able to pervade the world in every direction with compassion and in such a way that he was successful in unbinding and expanding his karma until he created in himself a dominant intention to act for the well being of all. In this way he liberated himself from his suffering and achieved his awaking (*bodhi*), his enlightenment. In my essay, I suggest that the type of compassion meditation that the (current) Dalai Lama recommends in many places may well trace back all the way to the Buddha himself and that it was by this means that he achieved his enlightenment. The fact that it is not prominent in the canon or prominently discussed in commentaries is likely due to the fact, as Gombrich concludes, that the denial of compassion as a means to enlightenment "became orthodox at a very early stage."<sup>40</sup>

Having now had something to say on the second, third and fourth of our original set of questions, let us turn back to the first. In discussing Gombrich's "radical conclusion" involving the *brahma-vihara*, we noted that there are four of these and inquired as to how many of them, according

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<sup>40</sup> Gombrich (1996), p. 61.

to Gombrich, early Buddhism recognized as providing separate paths to enlightenment. In particular, when he wrote of “kindness and compassion as means to nirvana,” was he prepared to treat kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*) as simply two words for the same thing? Or did he – or do we – think that there is a difference in meaning that matters in the present context? It is this question that I now wish to pursue, not as regards to Gombrich’s rejection of “established wisdom,” but rather to further elaborate on my own thinking.

To this end I want to distinguish four related, but somewhat different, uses of the word “compassion.” It may be employed, I will say, to describe a *process*, a process of meditation, a meditation technique that we might speak of as compassion meditation. It may also be used to refer to the intended *object* or end of the technique or process, which we understand to be the installation of a disposition to act for the welfare of all concerned. It may also refer to a *person*, someone who has achieved enlightenment through undergoing the process to attain its object, one who has become dominantly disposed to act for the well being of all. And, finally, “compassion” may be used to describe *nirvana*, understood (as previously mentioned) as how someone is who has become enlightened, what it is like to have become a compassionate being.

In all of these usages, the kernel understanding and connecting idea is of someone becoming predominantly disposed to act for the well being of all – that is their karma, their most basic intention. Each of the four, as I shall elaborate, is to be understood in terms of this idea. And, given the substance of this idea, it is quite natural (I submit) to use the word “compassion” in each of the four instances. But it is the idea that matters, not the particular word. (I am not, by the way, asking you to accept that this central idea is altogether clear. I do not suppose that it is. Just that it is clear enough to get our hands on.)

Process. Compassion is a process in which (on my view) someone meditatively pervades the world with the idea that they regard everyone in a way not unlike the way a mother feels towards her child. Though in saying this it is important to realize that this “feeling” is necessarily linked with a certain propensity to act. So we might better put it, if a bit clumsily, that the process is one by which someone attempts to become with respect to everyone (or everyone that she encounters) much as a mother is with respect to her child – which is to say, at all times disposed to act for the benefit of

her child. (Although this is true of a mother all the time, the full extent of the disposition in her case would rarely, if ever, be manifested. Most mothers are not called on to protect their young at an evident risk to their own life.) I do not say, however, that a compassionate person would at all times necessarily be prepared to sacrifice his life to save that of another. (I would not deny that a good deal of unclarity clings to the idea of a “boundless heart.”)

Object. The object of the process, the employing of the meditative technique, is to transform our motivational selves, to alter our basic impetus to action (our finite karma) so that we become dominantly disposed to act for the well being of all – and in this way to become (in my word of choice) compassionate. “Compassion” then describes the process and also the object of the process, the intended result.

Person. “Compassion” may also quite naturally then be used to describe someone who has become so disposed to act for the benefit of all. This is how I understand the Buddha to have been at his enlightenment. Indeed, I understand his enlightenment to have been the result of his successfully embarking on the described process. It also belongs to my portrait of the Buddha that he undertook the experiment of engaging in the process precisely in order to see if this would, if successfully carried through, bring an end to his suffering. (It is also how I understand the tradition when it speaks of the Buddha as the Compassionate One, even though the tradition does not understand with me that he achieved this status by means of the process here imagined.)

Nirvana. Finally nirvana, as I understand it, refers to how the Buddha was after becoming enlightened. (I discuss this way of thinking about nirvana in more detail in a short piece entitled “What is Nirvana?”) He was, perhaps not surprisingly, changed in many ways. But prominent among these, he was changed in how he interacted with others. And this was because he had transformed his karma from his previously finite, egoistic karma into what had become his boundless intention or orientation towards acting for the well being of all. And so “compassion” can also be used to describe his nirvana.

That said, let us return to the question of whether there is a difference worthy of the name between compassion and kindness. Regarding the first of the four usages of “compassion,” compassion as process or path, there can

be no basis for a distinction of two or more paths to nirvana if we are talking (as I am here) of the Buddha's own way of attaining enlightenment. However he came to nirvana, that was the way it happened. (This, of course, does not by itself foreclose the possibility that later he, or others, advocated other, distinguishable paths to enlightenment.) Similarly, just as there is no basis on which to distinguish two (or more) paths the Buddha took to enlightenment, the same is true with regard to the object of the process of compassion and the person of compassion he became as the result of this.

But when we come to our use of "compassion" to describe nirvana, that is how the Buddha was after his enlightenment, we may wish to pause. On the portrait of the Buddha I draw in my essay, "compassion" assuredly describes him post-enlightenment. But perhaps we may want to also describe him otherwise and then draw a distinction between compassion (*karuna*) and kindness (*metta*). Compassion is the fact (as I take it to be) that the Buddha was disposed after enlightenment to act for the well being of all. But in addition to this disposition, might we not be inclined to say that, as a result of his enlightenment, he had come to feel an empathetic connection with others, something veering towards a feeling of oneness with all? If so, then we might naturally enough use "*metta*" (loving kindness) to mark out this aspect of how he had become. And then compassion and loving kindness would sensibly be thought of as two different features or aspects of nirvana. And it might then seem to us an open, empirical question just how the two are related, whether (for instance) there could be one without the other.

In any case, whatever we decide to say about distinguishing in this way between *karuna* and *metta*, the more important point would be that in speaking of nirvana we are talking about how the Buddha was as a result of his enlightenment. And, accepting this, we may then appreciate that there may be many instructive ways of thus describing him. (In my essay I suggest that *mudita* and *upekkha* are also best thought of as descriptions of nirvana. But I did not there distinguish *metta* and *karuna* in the above way.)

## Conclusion

I hope that I have gone some way towards showing how the scholarship of Richard Gombrich can be mobilized to support a claim that the thought of compassion as the Buddha's path to enlightenment is not altogether foreign

to the Pali canon and that I have made some progress in suggesting how we might begin to address some questions that such an idea raises.