

Rethinking the Buddha's Enlightenment: Reflections on Hamilton's
Early Buddhism: A New Approach, The I of the Beholder

What is enlightenment? Most would count the enlightenment or awakening (*bodhi*) of Siddhartha Gotama as the pivotal event in his life. Something took place six or seven years after he had left the comforts and responsibilities of home and family as, according to the legend, he sat one night in deep meditation. He was never the same, and he was now to be known as the Buddha. As Sue Hamilton phrases it in her stimulating study, Early Buddhism: A New Approach, “during * * * deep contemplation * * * he had the experience which is called his Enlightenment.”¹ So what was this “experience,” or event? How can we understand it in the context of both what had been the Buddha's concern before the event and how he was subsequently, apparently as a result of that event?

For Hamilton: “The Enlightenment experience of the Buddha can * * * be best understood as the occasion on which he solved [a] problem.”² That problem, in a word, was suffering (*dukkha*). Or, as Hamilton puts it, “his problem derived from an existential concern with the human lot.”³ As she explains:

From simple observations he could see that [human life] involved a great deal that was manifestly unsatisfactory: for any number of reasons one loses things and people one is fond of, pleasurable experiences do not last, people become ill, they age, and they all eventually die.⁴

Thus, she continues, “he set up his problem in this way: why is human experience as it is and how can one do something about it?”⁵ It is, then, the suffering (*dukkha*) of human life that the Buddha sought to better understand so that to perhaps a find a way of eliminating or ameliorating. And it was his success, in his

¹ Hamilton, Sue (2000), *Early Buddhism: A New Approach*, p. 48.

² Hamilton (2000), p. 5.

³ Id.

⁴ Hamilton (2000), pp. 51-52.

⁵ Hamilton (2000), p. 52.

own eyes, in solving this problem that marked the occasion of his enlightenment. And for Hamilton, “it is primarily in understanding the implications of this focus that we can better understand the teachings [of the Buddha] as a whole.”⁶ This is a perspective that I am broadly sympathetic with.

The centerpiece of Early Buddhism is an approach to understanding the solution to the Buddha’s problem that diverges markedly from the standard Theravada reading of the Pali canon. Hamilton agrees, however, with the understanding of Theravada – as set out, for instance, by Walpola Rahula in his What the Buddha Taught – that “[t]he heart of the Buddha’s teaching lies in the Four Noble Truths” that he reportedly “expounded in his very first sermon.”⁷ These she sets out as “the fact of *dukkha*; *dukkha* arises because of cravings; cessation of *dukkha* can be attained; the Noble Eightfold Path is the way to attain such cessation.”⁸

The first of these Truths states that *dukkha* exists, by which the Buddha apparently meant that suffering (in some sense) is characteristic of human life as we know it. As Hamilton says, “*dukkha*” “describes the intrinsic characteristic of human existence.”⁹ “*Dukkha*” in this context is generally rendered in English as “suffering,” although typically with reservations and qualifications. Hamilton, however, prefers “unsatisfactory.” She tells us:

Until recent years, *dukkha* was usually translated as “suffering”, with “pain”, or “ill”, being common alternatives; now “unsatisfactory” is more usually used.¹⁰

Her choice has the advantage that it seems to cast a wide net: something there is about being human that is deeply unsettling, disturbing. But her choice also inevitably – and appropriately, I would say – invites the question as to just what it is about human life that struck the Buddha as so dissatisfactory. Plainly it seems, any account of the Buddha’s enlightenment, the event that brought an end of his

⁶ Hamilton (2000), p. 56.

⁷ Rahula, Walpola, *What the Buddha Taught* (1959), p. 16. Hamilton describes Rahula as “an eminent contemporary Theravada Buddhist,” Hamilton (2000), p. 139, and describes his book as a “model of clarity.” Hamilton (2000), p. 17, n. 20.

⁸ Hamilton (2000), p. 62.

⁹ Hamilton (2000), p. 12.

¹⁰ Id.

suffering, will necessarily include (if only by implication) a more refined or specific understanding of the nature of the *dukkha* of human existence, as the Buddha understood it. Indeed Hamilton emphasizes that “one’s understanding of the [fourfold] formula [of the Noble Truths] w[ill] be profoundly affected by one’s understanding of *dukkha*.”¹¹ So one major task on the path to understanding the Buddha’s enlightenment would appear to be gaining a clearer idea of his understanding of *dukkha*.

The second Noble Truth identifies thirst (Pali: *tanha*; Skr.: *trishna*) as the cause of *dukkha*. Evidently the term “thirst” – or such alternative renderings as “desire” or “craving” – is used in an extended sense. So Rahula comments:

Here the term “thirst” includes not only desires for, and attachment to, sense pleasures, wealth and power, but also desire for, and attachment to, ideas and ideals, * * * conceptions and beliefs.¹²

And Hamilton similarly refers to the “textual account” that “it is because we are always wanting things in one way or another, ranging from all sorts of sensual pleasures to the desire either to live forever or not to live at all, that we are perpetuating the experience of unsatisfactoriness.”¹³

Indeed, both Rahula and Hamilton understand *trishna* – I prefer the Sanskrit to the Pali because “*trishna*” sounds rather much like “thirst” – to refer to some form of deep-seated motivational component of our basic human constitution. This is in no way surprising if *trishna* is understood to be the cause of *dukkha*, the most fundamentally dissatisfying aspect of human existence. But what then *is* this conative component of our humanity? What is *trishna*?

The third Noble Truth announces that there is a cure for *dukkha*; thirst can be eliminated so that suffering ceases. As Rahula phrases it, there is “emancipation, liberation, freedom from suffering, from the continuity of *dukkha*.”¹⁴ Or, in Hamilton’s words:

¹¹ Hamilton (2000), p. 62.

¹² Hamilton (2000), p. 30.

¹³ Hamilton (2000), p. 63.

¹⁴ Hamilton (2000), p. 35.

In stating that the cessation of *dukkha* is * * * a factual possibility, the third Truth tells us that one can achieve a situation in which * * * one will no longer have any cravings or desires: the mechanics of the continuity of unsatisfactoriness will cease.¹⁵

But to that she also adds a “word of caution,” to underscore that enlightenment, the end of suffering, was not the end of the Buddha.

If one takes this [Truth] at face value to be stating that the aim is to stop wanting anything *at all*, this raises the question of how one eats and functions normally after Enlightenment.¹⁶

“[T]his is an important point” or concern, she tells us, because the Buddha “lived for forty-five years after his Enlightenment;” at his enlightenment he “did not fizzle out of existence.”¹⁷ We shall return to this concern over how the elimination of *trishna* can leave a life worth living.

Extending this concern we may add that, not only did the Buddha continue to live “normally” after his enlightenment, he reportedly lived well. Enlightenment apparently involved not only the cessation of suffering, it also affirmatively enhanced how he was or how he characteristically felt post-enlightenment. Hamilton puts this point in terms of a shift from *dukkha* to *sukha*, from suffering to “living a life of ease (*sukha*), the opposite of the dis-ease that is *dukkha*.”¹⁸ And she speaks of “the aim of Buddhism” as:

to achieve * * * *sukkha*, the “bliss” or “ease” that is the converse of the dis-ease that is *dukkha* in the sense of representing unsatisfactoriness that needs to be “cured”.¹⁹

¹⁵ Hamilton (2000), p. 64-65.

¹⁶ Hamilton (2000), p. 65.

¹⁷ Hamilton (2000), p. 139.

¹⁸ Hamilton (2000), p. 65.

¹⁹ Hamilton (2000), pp. 116-17.

Rahula elaborates the same idea somewhat more effusively:

In almost all religions the *summon bonum* can be attained only after death. But Nirvana [enlightenment] can be realized in this very life; it is not necessary to wait till you die to “attain” it.

He who has realized [this] is the happiest being in the world. * * * He is joyful, exultant, * * * his faculties pleased, free from anxiety, serene and peaceful.²⁰

So, we may say, the Buddha’s *bodhi*, his ending of his suffering, did not just bring a sense of relief; it was not simply a freeing of burden. It was also attended by – and not accidentally so, we may assume – a “positive” benefit. A sense of ease and joy ensued, with which he lived and acted throughout his subsequent life. And this too, it would seem, an adequate understanding of enlightenment need to account for; it should explain the onset of joy, as well as the cessation of suffering.

Furthermore, it is not only that the Buddha personally benefited by achieving a shift from his *dukkha* life to a more *sukha* one. An equally profound shift occurred in how he interacted with others, in the interpersonal aspect of him and his behavior. It was not for nothing that he came to be referred to as the Compassionate One. Both Rahula and Hamilton acknowledge this, although neither particularly highlights or develops it.

Rahula, in the same passage in which he describes the “happiness” of the enlightened Buddha, also describes his relationships with others in these terms: “he is pure and gentle, full of universal love, compassion, kindness, sympathy, understanding and tolerance.”²¹ And Hamilton, in discussing the third Noble Truth, speaks of the post-enlightenment Buddha in terms both of “normal living” (as we have seen) and of “being concerned for the welfare of others.”²² Later on she refers to his manifesting “compassion,” as well “wisdom.”²³

²⁰ Rahula (1959), p. 43.

²¹ Id.

²² Hamilton (2000), p. 65.

²³ Hamilton (2000), p. 211.

This too – the blossoming of the Buddha’s compassion, his concern for the well being of all – needs to be understood, it would seem, as a consequence or an outgrowth of his enlightenment. It also is something that a satisfactory account of the Buddha’s enlightenment should explain.

The fourth Noble Truth concerns how thirst may be eliminated and enlightenment achieved. According to classical Theravada Buddhism this is accomplished through attaining a particular insight or understanding into how things are.²⁴ Here we encounter the confluence of the ideas of the Noble Truths and the Buddha’s doctrine of *anatta* (no-self). This is the idea that we do not have any essential, everlasting soul or Self. Insight into this truth, the reality that this is “how things are” cures us of our suffering; it eliminates *trishna* and brings on enlightenment.

Hamilton accepts the broad contours of this traditional insight model of enlightenment, but diverges from the standard view that insight into *anatta* provides the understanding that engenders enlightenment. While not denying outright the classical Theravada doctrine of *anatta*, she denies it pride of place for an understanding of enlightenment. Her focus, the place where she piles her chips, is rather on the related idea of *paticca-samuppada*, the interdependence of all things. She gives this, as we shall see, a novel interpretation. And then it, together with her reinterpretation of the Theravada doctrine of the Five Aggregates (the five components of a person) constitutes the centerpiece of her “new approach” to early Buddhism.

Using these Noble Truths as our frame of reference, in section I we will look in more detail at the traditional Theravada understanding of enlightenment. We will do this in connection with the Theravada understanding of the Five Aggregates and the Buddha’s revolutionary idea that, as he is quoted as saying, “It is intention that I call karma.” This section will also pose (what may seem to be) difficulties for this traditional understanding of the Buddha’s enlightenment. In this regard, our object will not be just to understand the Buddha’s ideas as interesting, early entries in the history of ideas. We shall also want to understand how it is that the Buddha actually achieved the transformational event of his enlightenment – what this involved and how did he do it. The distinction between these two, albeit related, objectives is

²⁴As to the traditional Eightfold Path, I pass over this teaching as one that at best could not be descriptive of the Buddha’s own enlightenment and note that Hamilton also offers only a few perfunctory comments on it. Hamilton (2000), p. 65.

important. It concerns whether we can credit the Buddha with having *discovered* something, namely a path to enlightenment. For it is one thing to attribute certain ideas to the Buddha – ideas which we might or might not regard as of doubtful substance or truth; it is something else to agree that these ideas (or some of them) are of sufficient reality that they can provide others with a way of achieving what he claims to have found for himself.

Section II will begin with Hamilton’s objection to taking *anatta* as the key to enlightenment. We will then examine her provocative presentation of the Five Aggregates (*khandhas*) as our cognitive apparatus for constructing a shared world of experience. And examine how it is that this, rather than insight into *anatta*, is, for her, the achievement that induces enlightenment. We will also revisit our questions concerning the adequacy of the Theravada account of enlightenment in the context of her “new approach.”

In the concluding section III, I will briefly introduce the thought that we may be better off letting go altogether of the idea that some kind of cognitive accomplishment, some insight or understanding, explains the Buddha’s enlightenment.

Section I. Theravada Enlightenment.

Brahminism Rejected.

Brahminism was the dominant religion or ideology in India at the time of the Buddha. A central feature of the brahminical worldview was its conception of what we are and how we can obtain liberation from the travails of an otherwise endless succession of rebirths and redeaths. According to this, we humans have a certain enduring, essential nature or soul, an *atman*. It is this that passes from one life to the next. In addition, the universe itself also has an essential nature, known as *brahman*. Moreover, to come to truly know ourselves is to know that, for each of us, *atman* is *brahman*; there is a form of identity of individual essence and the universal essence. Indeed, to attain this knowledge – that “thou are that” – is to achieve the salvational goal of brahminism; it is to be released from the cycle of *samsara* (reincarnation). To come to know this identity in this life makes it that you will not be reborn again, that at death you will become one with *brahman*. In the all-too-simple words of Richard Gombrich: “He who understands *brahman* will become *brahman*.”²⁵

²⁵ Gombrich, Richard, *How Buddhism Began* (1996; 2nd ed. 2005), p. 32.

In addition, not only did *brahman*, that essence of reality, order the universe into a functioning cosmos so as to keep it from falling into abject chaos – or did so if suitable religious acts of sacrifice were properly performed – the metaphysical principle of *brahman* also ordained a certain class structure for society. It required that a certain social hierarchy obtain, in which members of distinct class structures have distinct social functions to perform. This, it was said, was needed in order for a functioning human society to exist rather than abject anarchy.

The Buddha broke sharply with much of this brahminical worldview, in both its metaphysical and sociological aspects. Just how far, or how deep, his rejection went, however, is something of an open question.

Orthodox Theravada, for all its immense differences from brahminism, retains the brahminical idea that knowledge (of some sort) effects liberation; it both brings our suffering in this life to an end and ends our entrapment in an otherwise unending cycle of future lives. “There is” in this way, as Hamilton observes, “a strong emphasis on knowing” in early Buddhism.²⁶ More specifically, for Theravada the Buddha’s doctrine of *anatta* (no-self) plays the role of the macrocosm-microcosm identity of self and reality in brahminism: it is, for Theravada, knowledge of *anatta* that liberates us.

For Theravada *anatta* is the view that, quoting Rahula, “the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality.”²⁷ We simply have no enduring essence; “there is no underlying substance like Self, or Soul within or without.”²⁸ Rather – and here Rahula refers to the Theravada theory of the Five Aggregates that comprise an individual – “what we call a ‘being’, or an ‘individual’, or ‘I’ is only a convenient name or label given to the combination of these five groups.”²⁹ It is then knowledge of, or insight into, the truth of *anatta* that liberates one from suffering. That is, much as brahminism maintained that it was by knowledge of self (*atman*; Pali, *atta*) that one achieved liberation, so for Theravada it is knowledge of no-self (*anatta*) that frees one from suffering. As Hamilton puts

²⁶ Hamilton (2000), p. 21.

²⁷ Rahula (1959), p. 51.

²⁸ Rahula (1959), p. 39.

²⁹ Rahula (1959), p. 25.

it, for early Buddhism, liberation is attained by knowledge “not of what your self is, but that you do not have one: ultimately, you *are not*.”³⁰ This much of the intellectualist strain in brahminism is carried over into Theravada, despite its radical rejection of brahminism’s essentialist idea of self.

For Theravada, insight into the reality of *anatta* eliminates *trishna* (thirst) and thereby causes suffering to cease. What then is this thirst that is the cause of our suffering?

What is Thirst?

The notion of thirst is central to early Buddhism not only because it is posited as the cause of suffering, but also because it interweaves with other central Buddhist doctrines, notably those of the Five Aggregates (*khandhas*) and the claim that the Indian notion of karma should be understood not so much in terms of *what* we do as *why* we do it, in terms of the idea of intention (*cetana*). These doctrinal interconnections are, however, in some ways complex. So let us begin to delve a little into this subject.

Rahula tells us that thirst, understood as in the second Noble Truth, is “one of the Five Aggregates which constitute a being.”³¹ It is *samkhara*, the fourth of the five individually listed components that make up an individual. Rahula refers to this as “the Aggregate of Mental Formations,” but since this group includes “all volitional activities, both good and bad,” he generally uses the term “volition” for “*samkhara*” in this context. Furthermore, Rahula also informs us that *trishna* (thirst) and *samkhara* (volition) are the same as karma, as that idea is understood with the Buddha as intention (*cetana*); “the terms ‘thirst’, ‘volition’, * * * and ‘karma’ all denote the same thing.”³² Finally – and here we are just outlining the Theravada understanding – what these three seemingly separate ideas all denote is “the desire, the will to be, to exist, to become more and more, to grow more and more, to accumulate more and more.”³³ And it is this thirst “to be” and “to become more and more” – understood in terms of the ideas of intention and karma – that is the maker

³⁰ Hamilton (2000), p. 20; her emphasis.

³¹ Rahula (1959), p. 31.

³² Id.

³³ Id.

of the *dukkha* of human life: “This is the cause of the arising of *dukkha*.”³⁴ To which Rahula adds, this “is one of the most important and essential points in the Buddha’s teachings.”³⁵

Hamilton is in general accord with the equating of *trishna* with the seemingly disparate ideas of intention and karma. She tells us:

The second Truth corresponds to the Buddha’s interpretation of karma [as intention, and] [t]hough the two words cravings (*tanha*) and intentions (*cetana*) do not on the face of it necessarily refer to the same things, it seems to me that if one understands what is being said here they must both have been used generally. * * * Intentions and cravings are simply two different words used to point to [what moves us to act as we do].³⁶

This equating of *trishna* with karma, however, is not a particularly straightforward matter. Rather plainly there are several balls in the air. And so we shall look more closely into this Theravada understanding.

The Equation of *Trishna* with Karma.

We will approach the four-fold equation of *trishna* with *samkhara* with *cetana* with karma in a stepwise fashion.

1. *Trishna* as egoism.

“Thirst” is used in the second Noble Truth not literally, but in an extended sense as something of a technical term. “It is,” as Rahula puts it, “this ‘thirst’, desire, greed, craving manifesting itself in various ways, that gives rise to all forms of suffering.”³⁷ Given this, and given that suffering (*dukkha*) is inherent in the human condition, *trishna* must, it would seem, be a rather deep-seated feature of how we are. And it must operate quite broadly: a good deal of what we do must be traceable

³⁴ Id.

³⁵ Id.

³⁶ Hamilton (2000), p. 63

³⁷ Rahula (1959), p. 29.

back to this impetus to action. When we ask why someone acted in one way rather than in another, much of the time the ultimate answer, if we could know it, must be in terms of *trishna*. Not that *trishna* makes us act one way rather than another, but simply that much of the time it correctly identifies why we act as we do, our reason (or part of it) for so acting.

One question we may then raise to this view is, just how much ground does it cover? Is it at bottom the sole motivating basis of human behavior? Or are there other, equally fundamental conative bases that account for some portion of human conduct?

Backing up to come at this topic from a slightly different angle, when we think of “thirst” in its root use for explaining behavior, the motivating impetus in question is for something to satisfy a particular desire of the agent himself or herself. In the normal case, if we inquire of someone why he drank a glass of water and receive (or imagine) the answer that he was thirsty, we readily understand that the person recognized his own thirst, took the glass before him to contain thirst-slaking water and so drank it to quench, or at least reduce, *his* thirst. Assuming, as I think we should, that the broader, specialized meaning of “*trishna*” retains this aspect of its most basic use, we will conclude (if we have not already assumed as much) that *trishna* in the second Noble Truth identifies the cause of *dukkha* as the desire for some type of self-benefit. Literally it is “my” thirst that I want to satisfy, and so, in the expanded sense, *trishna* is the impetus, one with which we are born, to further our own self-interest.

In this regard Rahula speaks of a “selfish ‘thirst’” or “selfish desire” that encompasses “not only desire for and attachment to sense-pleasure, wealth and power” – and here the implication is clear that this is desire for sense-pleasures, etc. for oneself – “but also desire for, and attachment to, ideas and ideals, opinions, theories, conceptions and beliefs.”³⁸ It is thirst so understood that causes suffering. Indeed, we are told, “all economic, political and social problems are rooted in this selfish ‘thirst’.”³⁹

And Hamilton similarly explains that when the Buddha attained enlightenment he did not “stop wanting,” – which would seemingly make it impossible for him to

³⁸ Rahula (1959), p. 30.

³⁹ Id.

continue living and teaching as he did – he simply ceased “having selfish wants,” desires of the sort that had been causing his dissatisfaction with his life.⁴⁰ As she later states, “Enlightenment * * * brings about the cessation of all self-centred desires.”⁴¹ This is a matter to which we shall eventually return.

Lifting a term out of the history of Western philosophy, we might then appropriately render “*trishna*,” as understood in early Buddhism, as a form of egoism. The thesis of the second Noble Truth is that we all are, at least to some considerable extent, egoistic creatures – born to be that way – and that this egoism is the cause of our *dukkha*. This thesis, we should note, does not commit us to the view that we are all egoistic through and through in our motivational makeup – at least it does not do so by itself.

To take two contrasting historical examples, on the one hand Jeremy Bentham famously declared:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure.⁴²

By this he seems to have meant that whenever anyone does anything, this conduct is to be understood in terms of some combination of the attainment of pleasure and the avoidance of pain for oneself. This is egoism as a general explanation of all human behavior.

Schopenhauer, on the other hand, while accepting that egoism accounts for much or most of human behavior also recognizes an alternative, competing form of motivation in “the desire to promote the welfare of others, sometimes in disregard of our own.”⁴³ This we might reasonably call “altruism.” Schopenhauer’s is a description of people as egoistic at the most fundamental level of motivation, but not as generally egoistic; there is at the same level as well an equally affirmative – if not an equally strong – motivation to aid others. Altruism co-exists in us with egoism.

⁴⁰ Hamilton (2000), p. 65.

⁴¹ Hamilton (2000), p. 110.

⁴² Bentham, Jeremy, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), p. 1.

⁴³ Magee, Bryan, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (1983), p. 196. In this context I ignore Schopenhauer’s third co-ordinate form of motivation, the desire to harm others.

We may then ask how it was for the Buddha or for early Buddhism? Should *trishna* be understood as exhaustive, as did Bentham? Or as sharing a space with altruism, more in the manner of Schopenhauer? As we have noted, the second Noble Truth would not seem to require that *trishna* be understood in the stronger, completely general sense of egoism that entirely precludes any inherently altruistic aspect to ourselves.

In fact, however, the Buddha did maintain this, at least according to Theravada Buddhism. We are completely egoistic in our basic motivational makeup: we always act out of an intrinsic desire to be furthering our own self-interest. And one place where this commitment is manifest is in the Theravada understanding of the Five Aggregates (*khandhas*), the five constituent parts or aspects that, in properly functioning combination, make up what a human being is. To understand this is our next step.

2. The *khandhas*: *trishna* as *samkhara*.

Classical Theravada espouses a view of how to understand what little boys (and little girls) are made of. This is the Doctrine of the Five Aggregates, the understanding on which human beings can appropriately be understood as composed of five separate components (*khandhas*). As Rahula states:

What we call a “being”, or an “individual”, or “I”, according to Buddhist philosophy, is only a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies, which may be divided into five groups or aggregates.⁴⁴

This doctrine of the *khandhas*, as we have commented, is closely connected with that of *anatta*, the doctrine that we have no substantial essence. Hamilton recites the standard Theravada position this way:

Traditionally, the link between *anatta* and the *khandhas* is established by way of an analogy which states: “When all the constituent parts are there, the word ‘cart’ is used; in just the same way, where there are five *khandhas*, there is the convention of a ‘living being’. This suggests that we are made up of five separate parts which, when together, constitute our

⁴⁴ Rahula, p. 20.

functioning self but there is * * * in fact no essential self other than that temporary combination.”⁴⁵

So the two ideas or doctrines go together. On the one hand, we have the doctrine of *anatta*, that there is no “essential self” to be found; on the other, the five *khandhas* taken together provide a complete accounting of our human make-up so that they preclude the possibility of an “essential self” hiding somewhere else amidst us.

Hamilton, as we shall see, offers a differing interpretation of the five *khandhas*, an understanding that lies at the heart of her “new approach” to early Buddhism. She also reconfigures the standard *anatta* doctrine so that she does make a claim for a self “other than” just a combination of the five *khandhas*. For now, however, we will look at what the five *khandhas* are for Theravada Buddhism and at which of them are we to understand as *trishna*. In Pali terms, the five components are *rupa*, *vedana*, *sanna*, *samkhara* and *vinnana*. These terms, Hamilton tells us, “are typically translated as matter, sensations, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness.”⁴⁶ She, however, prefers: “body, sensations, apperceptions, volitional activities and consciousness.”⁴⁷

The first, *rupa*, refers to our bodily aspect. (The other four, we may say, are “mental” aspects of ourselves, being careful, however, not to assume or impute anything like a Cartesian distinction of substance between the “mental” and the “physical.”) Hamilton emphasizes that with *rupa* “what is being referred to * * * is the body as a living organism and not just body *qua* material body.”⁴⁸ Her point is well taken, and there is (I think) no reason for Theravada to take issue with it.

The second *khandha*, *vedana*, refers to unconceptualized sensations that (it is assumed) we receive as input from the world around us – and also from various goings on within us.

The third, *sanna*, is understood as a kind of conceptualizing of experience. This term, as Gombrich explains it, “carries a connotation of naming, so it refers to

⁴⁵ Hamilton (2000), p. 20.

⁴⁶ Hamilton (2000), p. 27; citing Rahula (1959).

⁴⁷ Hamilton (2000), p. 70.

⁴⁸ Hamilton (2000), p. 29.

perceptions to which one can put a name, as distinct from mere consciousness of something being there.”⁴⁹ Hamilton gives much the same gloss in describing *sanna* as “making manifold and naming what one is experiencing.”⁵⁰

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Skipping over the fourth for the moment, the fifth *khandha*, *vinnana* or consciousness, is (as Hamilton puts it) “the awareness that accompanies the operation of the *khandhas* as a whole.”⁵¹ Or, in Gombrich’s words, *vinnana*, in contrast to *sanna*, is the “mere consciousness of something being there.”⁵² What consciousness is not, as Rahula felt obliged to particularly emphasize, “is a sort of Self or Soul that continues as a permanent substance through life [and] has persisted from the earliest time to the present day.”⁵³

The remaining *khandha*, *samkhara*, is the object of our interest at present. Rahula, we have observed, renders this as “Mental Formations” – but then directly tells us that it “includes all volitional activities.”⁵⁴ And Hamilton’s usage, as we have also seen, accords with this. We may then express the idea of *samkhara* (in this context) as that component of human beings that leads us to act, intentionally act, one way rather than another.⁵⁵ John Holder captures this idea nicely in the Glossary to his Early Buddhist Discourses by translating “*samkhara*” as “dispositions to action,” understood as “the features of the human mind that motivate a person to act, or react, to events or objects within one’s experience.”⁵⁶ Thus we can begin to get a feel for the idea that *samkhara*, the motivational

⁴⁹ Gombrich (1996), p. 92.

⁵⁰ Hamilton (2000), p. 76.

⁵¹ Hamilton (2000), p. 75.

⁵² Gombrich (1996), p. 92.

⁵³ Rahula (1959), pp. 23-24.

⁵⁴ Rahula (1959), p. 22.

⁵⁵ We should note that confusion is easily possible concerning this term because the same word “*samkhara*” has another important and more general usage in Theravada. As Rahula explains: “*Samkhara* in other contexts may mean anything conditioned, anything in the world, in which sense all the Five Aggregates are *samkhara*.” Rahula (1959), p. 22, n.2.

⁵⁶ Holder, John, ed., *Early Buddhist Discourses* (2006), p. 204.

component of person, is none other than *trishna*, that thirst that is the cause of *dukkha*.

This shows us the interlocking of the doctrine of the five *khandhas* with the second Noble Truth. But here we also have the Theravada answer to our question regarding egoism, whether we are born egoistic all the way through – that is whether all thirsts, desires, hankerings, etc. have their source in *trishna*, or whether there are other, alternative sources of motivation that at least occasionally may move us to act. The identification of *trishna* with *samkhara* tells us that *trishna* alone is the ultimate source and explanation of all human conduct. It does this because the *khandhas* purport to be a complete accounting of what we are and *samkhara* is the only motivational element included.

3. The Indian concept of karma.

Shifting attention to the right-most term in the general equation that we seek to better understand, we encounter the Indian idea of karma. That idea was deeply engrained in the Indian psyche in the Buddha's time and was closely bound up with that of *samsara* (reincarnation), “the pan-Indian belief that human beings are reborn again and again in a series of lives.”⁵⁷ Although, as Rahula expresses it, “the Pali word *kamma*, or the Sanskrit word *karma* (from the root *kr* to do) literally means ‘acting’, ‘doing’,”⁵⁸ it came to carry the idea that “one's actions have consequences.”⁵⁹ It became, in Rahula's words, a “theory of cause and effect,” a kind of “natural law”:

if you act well, good will come to you, if not in this life then in another; if you act badly, ill will come to you, if not in this life then in another.⁶⁰

In particular, how you act in this life will affect how you will be born in the next and, thereby, affect your chances of succeeding (by whatever means a particular religion held out) in liberating yourself from *samsara*, the endless round of rebirth

⁵⁷ Hamilton (2000), p. 55.

⁵⁸ Rahula (1959), p. 32.

⁵⁹ Hamilton (2000), p. 39.

⁶⁰ Rahula (1959), p. 32.

and redeath. Indeed, as Hamilton emphasizes, karma, reincarnation (*samsara*) and liberation (*moksa*) are the “three principal features” of “the Indian worldview.”⁶¹ And, as Gombrich tells us, “all classical Indian religions, from the Upanisads on, took it as axiomatic that never-ending rebirth was undesirable and one’s aim was to off the treadmill.”⁶²

4. Karma as *cetana*.

The Buddha effected a radical break with the accepted view of karma. He uprooted and reconceived the idea that “an action produces a fitting result at some later time” – as Gombrich neatly phrases it.⁶³ He did this with his pronouncement that karma is *cetana*: “It is *cetana* I call karma.”

The term “*cetana*” (Pali; Skt.) is commonly translated as “intention.” As Damion Keown’s *Dictionary of Buddhism* glosses it, it is a term “denoting the functions of intention, or volition or motivation.”⁶⁴ When the intention lies close to a relevant action, we may speak of *cetana* as a choice or decision; when it lies more in the background, we may think of it more dispositionally as motivation or conatus. And so, as in Gombrich’s rendering of the Buddha’s announcement, it was intention that he called karma. If our aim is liberation, we should be concerned not with *what* we do, so much as with *why* we do it, with the intent or motive with which we act. As simple as this is to say, it amounted to a great upheaval of accepted brahminical ideas.

“The brahminical ritual religion,” as Hamilton writes, “in requiring accuracy and precision in conforming to ritual injunctions, both for the sacrificial rituals and for the performing of one’s [social function] in the hierarchy, held that it was ours to do very precisely but not to reason why.”⁶⁵ Stated in brahminical terms, then, the Buddha was saying that it is not the punctiliousness with which a ritual sacrifice is performed or the generosity with which someone pays for it that has soteriological

⁶¹ Hamilton (2000), p. 37.

⁶² Gombrich, Richard, *Theravada Buddhism* (1988), p. 48.

⁶³ Gombrich (1996), p. 50.

⁶⁴ Keown, Damion, *Dictionary of Buddhism* (2003), p. 51.

⁶⁵ Hamilton (2000), p. 57.

value. On the contrary, for the Buddha it is the motive behind the act, whatever the act, that advances or not one's liberation. In Gombrich's words, the pronouncedment that "It is intention that I call karma" is the Buddha's answer to brahmin ritualism,"⁶⁶ although it goes well beyond that. Indeed, in Gombrich's estimation, the Buddha's "audacious" redefinition of karma marks "a turning point in the history of civilization."⁶⁷ For present purposes, however, it is enough that the Buddha was roping the Indian idea of karma into a view on which it is to be understood as the motivation from which we act that matters. The karmic (or consequential) value of anything that we do resides in the intention with which we act, not in the observable behavior or its consequences.

5. *Cetana* as *samkhara*.

Joining together the two sides of the equation under examination, Rahula speaks for the orthodoxy when he identifies *samkhara*, the one of the five *khandhas* that is the motivational or conative aspect of human beings, with *cetana*, understood in terms of the Buddha's idea of karma. He does this when he translates both "*samkhara*" and "*cetana*" – without ambiguity – as "volition." And then goes on to say (for example): "Sensations and perceptions are not volitional actions. They do not produce karmic effects. It is only volitional actions * * * that can produce karmic effects."⁶⁸ And Hamilton, for her part, signals her agreement with this piece of orthodoxy when she says (for instance) that "our intentions [i.e., *cetana*] in their broadest sense – including all volitional activities – are effected by the *khandha* of volitional activity," i.e., *samkhara*.⁶⁹

This brings us then to our final step, how it is that Theravada can maintain that "'thirst' * * * and 'karma' * * * denote the same thing."⁷⁰

6. *Trishna* as karma.

⁶⁶ Gombrich (1996), p.51.

⁶⁷ Id.

⁶⁸ Rahula (1959), pp. 22-23.

⁶⁹ Hamilton (2000), p. 109.

⁷⁰ Rahula (1959), p. 31.

Since *trishna* is *samkhara*, and *samkhara* is the same as *cetana*, and *cetana* (for the Buddha) is karma, then *trishna* is karma. So we seemed to have just learned.

Hamilton identifies and accepts this traditional identification of *trishna* (Pali: *tanha*) with karma. She writes:

The second Truth corresponds to the Buddha's interpretation of karma * * *. It is the intention behind all of our actions, he said, * * * that is consequential. Though the two words cravings (*tanha*) and intentions (*cetana*) do not on the face of it necessarily refer to the same things, it seems to me that if one understands what is being said here they must both have been used generically. * * * Intentions and cravings are simply different words used to point to the [same] fact.⁷¹

That is, "the second Noble Truth and the Buddha's definition of how karma works both refer" to one's "volitional activities."⁷²

Thus we arrive at the four-fold equation. But on the explication that we have thus far provided, surely what it fully means is still not all that clear. *Trishna*, for instance, is the cause of *dukkha*, and so it needs to be eliminated to achieve one's liberation from suffering. But karma, understood as intention, occupies a place in the Buddha's thinking that is analogous to that which sacrificial acts do in brahminism: for the Buddha our aim should be not proper sacrifices properly carried out but proper intentions properly acted on. But then karma is not to be eliminated; it is rather to be (in some sense) augmented if we are to achieve liberation. So how then can *trishna* be identified with karma?

This conundrum deserves (I believe) a serious answer. And we shall return to it. But for the time being, having attempted to get a better hold on *trishna*, let us turn to look at how, according to orthodox Theravada, the elimination of *trishna*, and so of suffering, is to be achieved.

Enlightenment: Anatta Eliminates *Trishna*.

⁷¹ Hamilton (2000), p. 63.

⁷² Hamilton (2000), p. 80.

We earlier observed in passing how Hamilton places classical Theravada in the intellectualist tradition of brahminism. Much as for brahminism knowledge gains us liberation – in its case, it is the knowledge or gnosis that “*atman = brahman*” that frees us from the bindings of this world – so with Theravada, it is the knowledge or insight into *anatta*, the realizing that (in a certain sense) “I am not” that brings an end to *trishna*, the cause of the inherently dissatisfying nature of human existence.

Rahula pungently expresses the centrality of *trishna* in the Theravada understanding of enlightenment when he states: “*Dukkha* arises because of ‘thirst’ and it ceases because of wisdom.”⁷³ The wisdom that he here refers to is the knowing of what he calls “the Absolute Truth,” which he identifies as that “there is no unchanging, everlasting, absolute substance like Self, Soul or *Atman*.”⁷⁴

“To eliminate *dukkha* completely,” he tells us, “one has to eliminate the main root of *dukkha*, which is ‘thirst’.”⁷⁵ And “‘thirst’ * * * is cut off” when we (properly) “see Reality,” that is, see the Truth of the doctrine of *anatta*.⁷⁶ The elimination of this root cause creates enlightenment: “The realization of the Truth, i.e., to see things as they are without illusion or ignorance, is the extinction of craving ‘thirst’ and the cessation of *dukkha*, which is Nirvana.”⁷⁷

Knowledge of *anatta* liberates us from the *dukkha* of our existence. This is the standard Theravada understanding of enlightenment.

Theravada Summarized.

The Theravada conception of enlightenment can (for our purposes) be somewhat starkly summarized in three statements:

1. Suffering (*dukkha*) exists: the human condition as we know it is inherently and profoundly dissatisfying.

⁷³ Rahula (1959), p. 42.

⁷⁴ Rahula (1959), p. 29.

⁷⁵ Rahula (1959), p. 35.

⁷⁶ Rahula (1959), p. 34.

⁷⁷ Rahula (1959), p. 40.

2. Thirst (*trishna*) is the cause of *dukkha*: the origin of our suffering lies within us; it is our most fundamental motivational component (*samkhara*).
3. *Anatta* is the cure of our condition: insight into a fundamental feature of how things are, namely that we have no essential self or soul, eliminates our thirst and brings our suffering to an end.

Probings and Puzzles.

These summary theses of the traditional Theravada account of enlightenment raise some difficult questions, or so it seems to me – some of which we have already touched on. Taking each of the three theses in turn, I will attempt to convey something of my sense of dissatisfaction with the Theravada account, as far as we have thus far looked at it.

Dukkha. Taking first the existence of suffering, let us ask once again just what is suffering? What more particularly is it about human existence that is so disturbingly dissatisfying and whose elimination will be the condition of enlightenment? Consider this rather typical comment of Rahula talking about what he calls “ordinary suffering”:

All kinds of suffering in life like birth, old age, sickness, death, association with unpleasant persons and conditions, separation from loved ones and pleasant conditions, not getting what one desires, grief, lamentation, distress – all such forms of physical and mental suffering, which are universally accepted as suffering or pain, are included in *dukkha* as ordinary suffering.⁷⁸

Seemingly, this sets the problem (or at least a significant portion of the problem) to which the Buddha found a solution. Rahula is clear on this. He tells us: “‘thirst’ * * * gives rises to all forms of suffering,”⁷⁹ and the “realization” of the “Truth” of *anatta* “is the extinction of * * * ‘thirst’.”⁸⁰

This, however, seems to be one of those cases where to speak of everything is to tell us nothing, or nothing useful. To say that “*dukkha*” refers to all forms of

⁷⁸ Rahula (1959), p. 19.

⁷⁹ Rahula (1959), p. 29.

⁸⁰ Rahula (1959), p. 40.

suffering, and then to provide such a varied assortment of examples, can seem more of a way of posing the question “What is suffering?” than enlightening us with a somewhat informative answer. What is it about the many and various examples of such pain and suffering that is, or directs our attention to, something relevantly characteristic of the human condition? Is it contended, for instance, that human life unavoidably features more pain than pleasure? And if so, then would some form of a “hedonic booster shot” potentially solve the problem? Is nirvana potentially available pharmacologically? Presumably not. But why not? And what then does this tell us about the nature of suffering (*dukkha*)? Or does the unsatisfactoriness of human existence lie in the “fact” that, no matter what we want, we must either suffer the frustration of not obtaining it, or the experience of knowing that the satisfaction of possessing the object of our desire will not outweigh the dissatisfaction of knowing that (in all likelihood) that success will not be lasting? And if this is the problem, is the solution to just not want anything or not want anything very much? Should we simply convince ourselves not to care all that much about what we want whether that be material wealth, the love of a family or world peace? Should we in that way disengage from whatever wishes, hopes or aspirations we may have? Does this identify more particularly the cause of *dukkha* and the path to its elimination? But if it does, what kind of life does it offer? And is this dulling of the affect (if that is what it is) the best we can do by way of trading in *dukkha* for *sukkhā*?

My point in raising these somewhat rambling questions is that we seem to need an answer to the question “What is suffering?” that at least begins to hone in on what (allegedly) is so disturbing about our human lot. We need this if only to be able to gauge whether a proposed solution – or suggestion as to what must have been the Buddha’s solution – is even plausible. And simply providing an array of examples does not do this. This is one problem that I have with orthodox Theravada, at least as to how this is explained by (for instance) Rahula.

There is a second, related difficulty in Rahula’s description of *dukkha* that, for all its obviousness, warrants an explicit reminder. If sickness and injury provide examples of *dukkha*, does Theravada really suggest that insight into *anatta* can address this suffering? Surely it is too much to ask of a solution to the problem of *dukkha* that it eliminate everything that is generally “accepted as suffering or pain.” It was certainly not true of the Buddha, for instance, that after his enlightenment he was never visited with any pain or suffering whatsoever. It is generally accepted, for instance, that he experienced bouts of intestinal distress towards the end of his life. And one would suppose that over the years he must have been disappointed with the uptake of his teachings by some (at least) of his followers. This too tells us, I think, that we need a more focused understanding of just what *dukkha* is if we are to

understand and assess the Theravada account of enlightenment or any other account of it.

Trishna. However it is that we might better understand *dukkha*, we know this, or suppose that we do: it is the elimination of *trishna* that causes suffering to cease. But we have also seen that for Theravada *trishna* is to be understood as our most deep-seated form of motivation for how we conduct ourselves. It is that conative egoism that Rahula speaks of as our “will to be.”⁸¹ But then Theravada appears to confront the obvious difficulty, as noted above, of squaring this account with someone being able to eliminate suffering and still continue – as the Buddha plainly did – to live a recognizable form of human life.

Hamilton highlights this difficulty when she comments that if we take the talk of the elimination of thirst “at face value,” it might seem that “the aim [should be] to stop wanting *at all*” – which then, she says, “raises the question of how one eats and functions normally.”⁸² For her, she tells us, “the solution is simple.” It is to accept that the elimination of *trishna* applies to only certain wants, just the ones she calls “bindingly consequential cravings.”⁸³

Putting aside for the time being the question of just how to draw her distinction within the general class of wants, we should appreciate that she is here making a move that is not open to Theravada. Because (as we shall see) she rejects the classical Theravada understanding of the Five Aggregates on which the listed five *khandhas* are treated as the constituent components of human beings, she is able (at least in theory) to think of the fourth element, *samkhara*, as giving less than a full accounting of our motivational makeup. She can suggest that *trishna* is not the whole of our conative constitution and so it is possible (again, at least in theory) to eliminate *trishna* and not, as she phrases it, “fizzle out of existence.” But Rahula, as spokesman for traditional Theravada, does not have that luxury. *Trishna* as *samkhara* commits Theravada Buddhism to the general egoistic account of human beings that we have described. So for Theravada, to maintain that the elimination of *trishna* causes the cessation of *dukkha* simply cannot be the whole story. On the Theravada account of the five *khandhas*, plucking out *trishna* must leave a someone or something who would lack all motivation to do anything whatsoever, a someone who certainly could not live a life such as the Buddha did after his enlightenment.

⁸¹ Rahula (1959), p. 31.

⁸² Hamilton (2000), p. 65.

⁸³ Id.

Theravada, it seems, is committed to not just the *elimination* of *trisha* but to the *replacement* of *trisha* with something else or the *transformation* of *trishna* into something else. But the standard Theravada story does not develop along either of these lines. So we are left with the problem of how to understand the Buddha's life after enlightenment when his enlightenment is given the Theravada understanding.

In addition, there is another puzzle with *trishna*, or with its elimination, that we should take a closer look at. This concerns how *trishna*, the cause of *dukkha*, can be identified with karma, understood as *cetana* (intention). Karma, we have observed, came to be generally understood in Indian religions in terms of those of our actions that affect, either positively or negatively, how we will be born in the next life and how well that life will go. In the brahminical system the idea of karma took on the further, more specialized meaning of a religious act, a sacrifice (in perhaps an extended sense) well performed. "Karma" then refers to actions that have positive soteriological effects, those that advance one's cause of liberation. The Buddha in announcing that it is intention that he calls karma was responding to brahminism in two ways. He was keeping the brahminical association of karma with that which furthers the goal of individual liberation, while at the same time cutting the legs from under the sacrificial perspective of brahminism by locating the karmic value of our comportment in the intention out of which someone acts and not in the sacrifices or other actions that someone performs.

Our puzzle may then be stated as, how can *trishna*, which needs to be eliminated if we are to liberate ourselves from suffering, be identified with karma, understood as acting out of the type of intention that leads to liberation? Plainly, whatever type of intention or motivation has karmic value for the Buddha it is not the egoistic impulse of *trishna*. However we are to fully understand the Buddha's theory of karma, karma as *cetana* cannot literally be identified with *trishna*, understood as egoism.

Stating our puzzlement in this way, however, also suggests the form of a possible solution. If thirst (*trishna*) is to be identified with intention (*cetana*), as Theravada has it, then we might think of the elimination of thirst as something more of a modification of *trishna* than a simple removal, or extirpation, of it. We might conceive of *trishna*, as it originally is, as having a negative karmic valence: acting from our thirst causes, rather than eliminates, our suffering. Then what the elimination of *trishna* would call for would be the transposition of its karmic valence from negative to positive. This, we might imagine, could have the effect that our (prior) thirst, or desire, becomes one that is not so much for our self-benefit as a

thirst of a different kind. In this way we might conceive, if only in abstract terms, how to join thirst with intention, *trishna* with karma. But then, what kind of a “new thirst” could we be talking about here? And how could we conceive of such a “revaluing” of *trishna* taking place? Whatever else we might say about such questions, they do not seem to have much of a place in the Theravada tradition. Still it seems that something more than standard Theravada, such as Rahula offers it, needs to be provided if we are to have a satisfactory understanding of the identification of *trishna* with karma. In this regard, I count myself a student of Gombrich in taking the Buddha’s redefinition of karma to be of critical importance and (I would say) of co-ordinate status with the second Noble Truth. So this puzzle deserves some prominence in our consideration of the Theravada account – or in any proposed account – of the Buddha’s enlightenment.

Anatta. In addition, however we shall understand the nature of the elimination of *trishna*, it is very much at the center of Theravada that it is insight into *anatta*, the idea that there is nothing about us that is our essential self, that does the trick, that accomplishes that elimination. I am nonetheless troubled about just how we are to understand that some form of knowledge or cognition could alter or eliminate this fundamental conative component of our makeup.

If Ponce de Leon, who has been searching for the Fountain of Youth, becomes convinced that there simply is no such thing to be found, then he will give up the search. In such a case, it seems that we readily understand how gaining a new piece of knowledge or information can eliminate an antecedent desire. At least we appreciate that a certain incoherence adheres to the idea that de Leon accepts the new information but still continues his search.

Rahula sometimes writes as though he is attempting to fit the idea that insight eliminates *trishna* into the Fountain of Youth model. At least we might plausibly so take words such as these:

When wisdom * * * sees * * * the reality of things as they are * * *, because there is no more illusion, [there is] no more ‘thirst’ for continuity.⁸⁴

Does this not sound more than a bit like saying, if de Leon accepts the “illusion” of the Fountain of Youth, he will no longer “thirst” for it? And we may agree that if I accept *anatta*, I will no longer crave a certain sort of continuity, that is one which is

⁸⁴ Rahula (1959), pp. 42-43.

premised on an enduring, essential self. But how does this – how could this? – alter the fact that I am inherently a being motivated by self-concern, as I am according to standard Theravada? It is not as though accepting the transitory nature of my existence means that I no longer exist. I still will be living in this world around us interacting with it and with others. Moreover, might not having become newly convinced that “this is all there is” cause me to seek all the more to get what I can while I can? Might I now act all the more avidly in a self-interested fashion? Where is the impossibility or incoherence in that? If with Theravada, we understand *trishna* as *samkhara*, the *khandha* that comprises our fundamental motivational makeup, how could any kind of knowledge or insight alter or eliminate the character of this – as opposed to, say, redirecting it in one way rather than another? This does not seem to be a question that concerns Rahula, but it troubles me.

And failing a better, more informative account of what is involved in the elimination of *trishna*, how will we be in a position to explain how this eventuality not only eliminates the *dukkha* of our existence but also yields up a *sukha* life in its place? Unless we simply identify *sukha* with the absence of *dukkha*, there must (it seems) be more to the story to tell. This is another concern that I have, since I accept that an adequate account of the Buddha’s enlightenment needs to address this aspect of how he was henceforth.

And again, to add one more question, how can the orthodox Theravada view explain how the elimination of *trishna*, so as to relieve us of suffering, induces us to be more concerned for the well being of others? How does enlightenment lead to a life of compassion or to more of a life of compassion than before? Theravada assuredly wants to maintain that the Buddha was as compassionate as he was wise, that enlightenment marked not only the end of his suffering but also the beginning (or the beginning in a new way) of his compassion. But what is the connection between attaining the insight of *anatta*, which brings about the cessation of suffering, and the onset or manifestation of compassion in an enlightened being? Is insight the cause of compassion, much as it is said to be the cause of the end of suffering? Or does insight counsel compassion in some peculiarly persuasive manner? Does it, that is, provide compelling moral instruction? This is also an area of puzzlement for me concerning orthodox Theravada Buddhism.

For now, I will leave these questions or concerns and turn to look directly at Hamilton’s new approach to enlightenment. This, we shall see, takes its start from a rather different problem that she has with traditional Theravada. It is a problem in an area other than where I have probing, but one, she tells us, which has particularly vexed her in her attempts to come to a satisfactory understanding of early Buddhism.

Towards the end of this next section, we will examine how Hamilton’s “new approach” responds to the problem that provoked her, as well as look at how successful that approach may be in addressing the concerns I have been giving voice to with traditional Theravada.

Section II. Hamilton’s “New Approach” to Enlightenment.

Reconfiguring the Doctrines of *Anatta*, *Anicca*, and *Paticca-samuppada*.

The traditional Theravada understanding of enlightenment, as we have seen and as Hamilton emphasizes, is closely allied with the doctrine of *anatta*. As Hamilton observes, *anatta* is “regularly singled out as being the heart or core of what Buddhism is about.”⁸⁵ For Theravada, in Hamilton’s words, “in order to achieve liberation you need to understand that you are not, and nor do you have and nor have you ever been or had, an abiding self.”⁸⁶ And, as she continues – and we have discussed: “This interpretation of *anatta* is taken in tandem with the teaching that one should understand oneself in terms of the five *khandhas*.”⁸⁷

But this idea of *anatta*, she tells us, she found “at best seriously problematic and at worst incoherent in the context of * * * other key Buddhist teachings.”⁸⁸ She reacted strongly – one might say viscerally – to this.

With the best will in the world, I could not but think that in any context outside of a madhouse the very idea [that one is or has no self] is incoherent.⁸⁹

She borrows the figure of a madhouse from Schopenhauer, whom she quotes as saying of solipsism: “As a serious conviction . . . it could only be found in a madhouse; as such it would need not so much a refutation as a cure.”⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Hamilton (2000), p. 19.

⁸⁶ Hamilton (2000), p. 20.

⁸⁷ Id.

⁸⁸ Id.

⁸⁹ Hamilton (2000), p. 21.

⁹⁰ Hamilton (2000), p. 184; quoting *The World and Will and Representation*, i.104, quoted in Magee (1977), p. 122.

More specifically, Hamilton suggests that the “profound incoherence”⁹¹ in the traditional understanding of *anatta* is at odds with the Buddha’s notion of personal responsibility. This she describes as the idea that, in coming to appreciate the phenomenon of suffering that is seemingly inherent in the human condition, it becomes possible for someone to alter this situation in such a way as to bring the suffering to an end:

Perhaps above all the [Buddha’s] teachings are about knowing how and why one is continuing as one is, and about knowing that one can, and how one can, and eventually does, attain liberation.⁹²

A principal impetus for the studies which led to her “new approach” to early Buddhism was the task she set herself. This was to frame an understanding of the texts that explains “both * * * how one is responsible for one’s own experiences, now and in the future, and also * * * how one can achieve liberation.”⁹³ In the course of developing her “new approach,” she rejects or reconfigures both the traditional understanding of *anatta* and that of the five *khandhas*.

Anatta is one of three related doctrines that are closely interwoven in early Buddhism: *anatta* (no-self), *anicca* (impermanence) and *paticca-samuppada* (interdependence). The first, *anatta*, we have discussed. It is the view that “there is no underlying, everlasting, absolute substance like Self, Soul, or *Atman*.”⁹⁴

Anicca is the doctrine of the impermanence of all things; everything is always changing, nothing stays the same or lasts forever. In the words of Rahula: “The world is in continuous flux and is impermanent.”⁹⁵ Here *anicca* can be seen as something of a generalization of the doctrine of *anatta*. Much as I am without any

⁹¹ Hamilton (2000), p. 25.

⁹² Hamilton (2000), p. 21.

⁹³ Hamilton (2000), p. 22.

⁹⁴ Rahula (1959), p. 39.

⁹⁵ Rahula (1959), p. 26; internal quotation marks omitted.

substantial element that defines my true being, so also are all things without a self-subsistent aspect or “self.” Nothing bears the mark of permanence.

Paticca-samupadda Rahula refers to as “Conditioned Genesis.”⁹⁶ Hamilton equivalently speaks of “the metaphysical doctrine that everything is dependently originated.”⁹⁷ “The principle of this doctrine,” Rahula tells us, “is given in a short formula of four lines:

When this is, that is;
This arising, that arises;
When this is not, that is not;
This ceasing, that ceases.⁹⁸

More prosaically expressed, the idea is that whatever happens affects to some extent whatever else happens. “Everything is conditional, relative and interdependent.”⁹⁹ This doctrine can thus be seen as a reformulation or elaboration of that of *anicca*: if nothing is self-subsistent, everything is interrelated; “nothing * * * exists or occurs independently of conditioning factors.”¹⁰⁰

This presentation of the three doctrines is attuned to a Theravada perspective: through insight we realize *anatta*; *anicca* and *paticca-samuppada* flow out of this. Hamilton, while not outright rejecting these views – and that of *anatta*, in particular – reframes how we may consider them. For her, *paticca-samuppada* is the primary phenomenon; *anicca* and *anatta* are more special cases of this:

If all things are dependently originated, then it follows that nothing has independent self-hood. [And] [t]he way human beings occur is * * * not as independent selves.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Rahula (1959), p. 29.

⁹⁷ Hamilton (2000), p. 22.

⁹⁸ Rahula (1959), p. 53; citing the canon.

⁹⁹ Id.

¹⁰⁰ Hamilton (2000), p. 22.

¹⁰¹ Id.

For her, then, the doctrine of *paticca-samuppada* takes the pride of place that *anatta* has for Theravada. And it, we shall see, is to be understood in terms of a novel construal of the doctrine of the Five Aggregates, the five *khandhas*.

Re-examing the *Kandhas*.

Turning our attention then to look, with Hamilton, at the doctrine of the Five Aggregates, she reminds us that:

According to Theravada tradition, the[y] should properly be regarded as representing one physical and four mental aggregates, or, collectively, mind and matter * * *: we are, and should realize ourselves to be, a coming together of [these] one physical and four mental aggregates.¹⁰²

But, she observes, the particular traditional list of the five, when viewed as Theravada does as the five component parts of ourselves, can seem rather artificial or arbitrary; “several more meaningful and readily recognizable ways of analyzing oneself could be arrived at without too much difficulty,” she reflects.¹⁰³

So why do the texts present this list? Is it just an artifact of the process of the canon’s composition? Or perchance the reflection of a scholastic proclivity towards creating lists? Perhaps. But what if this is not the case? What if something like this list is the surface manifestation of a deep and important Buddhist idea?

The idea that Hamilton arrives at is that the five *khandhas* do not represent an attempt at an exhaustive itemization of the components that, functioning together, comprise a living human being. But they do represent something of great importance. “[T]he answer to the question ‘why the *khandhas*?’,” she tells us, “is that * * * what they represent is the process by which one is having one’s experience.”¹⁰⁴ They are, in other words, providing an account of “how human cognition operates.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Hamilton (2000), p. 27.

¹⁰³ Hamilton (2000), pp. 28-29.

¹⁰⁴ Hamilton (2000), p. 30.

¹⁰⁵ Id.

This is how, for instance, she has come to understand a passage in the Pali canon which, in her admittedly “free translation,” reads:

Seeing occurs when there is contact between an eye and [visible] forms, accompanied by consciousness; this gives rise to sensations, which are then identified; and what is identified one reflects on and makes manifold.”¹⁰⁶

On this she offers the following commentary:

Involved in this are the *khandhas* of the body (*rupa*), providing both the living locus of subjectivity and, more specifically, the sense organs – in this case the eye; sensations (*vedana*), in the sense of the initial feeling of awareness of seeing; apperception (*sanna*), in the sense of being the process of identifying what that initial feeling of awareness is; and consciousness (*vinnana*), the fact that the process is one of knowing that one is (in this example) seeing something.¹⁰⁷

So it is, for her, that the *khandhas* (or at least the four of *rupa*, *vedana*, *sanna* and *vinnana*) “represent the process by which one” experiences the world as we know it. This take on the *khandhas*, Hamilton suggests, casts new light on the idea of dependent origination (*paticca-samuppada*) and leads to a novel understanding of enlightenment.

The doctrine of *paticca-samuppada* plays, for Hamilton, the role *anatta* does in the traditional Theravada account of enlightenment. Insight into interdependence – rather than into no-self – eliminates *trishna* and brings an end to suffering. And this new take on the *khandhas*, as Hamilton will go on to develop it at some length, provides a deep, one might say philosophical, account of the “fact” of *paticca-samuppada*, the dependent origination of all things. As she puts it early on in her exposition:

The significance of the reference to an occurrence of seeing giving

¹⁰⁶ Id.; internal quotation marks omitted.

¹⁰⁷ Id.

rise to reflection and making manifold lies in the metaphysics of dependent origination. If all things are dependently originated, then the fact that we normally see them as independent and separate, as we do, is itself dependent on what happens in the process of cognition: it is that process that ‘makes manifold’.¹⁰⁸

With this we encounter what will be the central thesis of her book, namely the “centrality of this link between the operating of the *khandhas* as our cognitive process and understanding dependent origination.”¹⁰⁹ Nothing in the world about us is self-subsistent, but rather everything is inter-related and interdependent on everything else precisely because everything in the world as we know it exists for us as a result of a Kantian process of construction, as the outcome of “the operating of [our] subjective cognitive apparatus.”¹¹⁰ For Hamilton, that is, “what all things are actually dependently originated in is our cognitive apparatus,” i.e., the *khandhas*.¹¹¹ And this cognitive machinery of the *khandhas* is to be understood in terms of a metaphysical model of Kantian transcendental idealism.¹¹²

Transcendental Idealism as the Model for Early Buddhism.

The Buddha of the Pali canon is famous for declining from answering outright certain Big Questions, notably ones concerning the ultimate nature of the universe or of the self. In one common formulation, such questions are given as a set of four, which Hamilton renders this way:

Whether or not the universe is eternal; whether or not the universe is finite; whether or not the vital principle of a person * * * is separate from the body; and whether or not a liberated person exists after death.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Id.

¹⁰⁹ Hamilton (2000), p. 92.

¹¹⁰ Id.

¹¹¹ Id.

¹¹² Hamilton credits Magee with “stimulating [her] interest in the parallels between what is suggested in the early Buddhist texts and the thinking of Kant.” Hamilton (2000), p. 200, n.30.

¹¹³ Hamilton (2000), p. 44.

In coming to terms with the many different Indian worldviews of the Buddha's time and thereafter, Hamilton suggests that using "ontological model[s]" drawn from Western philosophy may be helpful. Such models may at least aid in mapping out in more familiar terms the basic structure of one or another rather foreign systems of ideas.

When faced, for example with attempting to understand Sankara, a Westerner might find it helpful to use the structure of absolute idealism as a model. I emphasize that I mean the *structure* of absolute idealism here, and not any detailed partisan kind of absolute idealism as propounded by A rather than B. The structure gives one the key factors of impersonal monism, and a phenomenological world of appearances. And one can then adapt this to reflect exactly how Sankara understands it. Similarly, Samkhya can be understood within the general framework of ontological dualism, one part of which is numerically plural.¹¹⁴

(Hamilton somewhat earlier had described these two worldviews. Samkhya, a classical Indian conception, "is ontologically dualistic. [It] states that Reality is * * * comprised of souls (numerically plural but ontologically identical) and matter (the plurality of which is only phenomenological)."¹¹⁵ And Sankara was a religious figure who espoused a monistic interpretation of the Upanishads called Advaita Vendanta on which *brahman* is radically One" and the Absolute ground of all we experience, which in turn is merely appearance.¹¹⁶)

Concerning early Buddhism more specifically, considerable discussion has involved whether the Western philosophies of Realism or Idealism provides the better model, in Hamilton's sense. Realism she describes this way:

In our normal everyday perceptions, we assume that the world about us is independently real, what is called transcendently real – that is, really existent external to and independently of us. And we assume that the separate parts of it are separately real

¹¹⁴ Hamilton (2000), p. 182; her emphasis.

¹¹⁵ Hamilton (2000), p. 180.

¹¹⁶ Hamilton (2000), pp. 180-81.

too, what is called pluralistic realism. This is the nature of things as they really are.¹¹⁷

“Idealism,” she explains, “might loosely be described as the theory that ‘all there *is* is the mind’, in the sense of ‘there is no external world, there is *only* mind-stuff: this is what the world *is*’.”¹¹⁸

Historically, she explains, Theravada Buddhism has tended toward “what one might call a working realism.”¹¹⁹ But there have also been suggestions,” she goes on, “that one should understand [early Buddhism] in the idealist sense [that she has] explained.”¹²⁰ But as concerns Hamilton’s own take on early Buddhism, she wants to show us that the use of such ontological models is, in a strict sense, quite inappropriate, precisely because, in a different sense, the use of “what one might loosely call an ontological model”¹²¹ is profoundly instructive.

For Hamilton, ontological models in her strict sense are inappropriate because, as we have noted, the Buddha “was consistent in maintaining his silence when asked ontological questions of a wide variety of kinds, formulated principally around the nature of the self and the world.”¹²² And this silence, Hamilton would have it, reflected an eschewal by the Buddha of ontology in much the way that we might say that Kant eschewed metaphysics, meaning the attempt to limn the nature of ultimate reality.

On the other hand, in the looser sense, the working model Hamilton proposes as most appropriate to bring the big picture of the Buddha’s worldview into focus is precisely that of Kant; it is “what is called transcendental idealism,” a view that she credits Kant to have “first formulated.”¹²³ This she expounds as follows:

¹¹⁷ Hamilton (2000), pp. 178-79.

¹¹⁸ Hamilton (2000), p. 186; her emphasis.

¹¹⁹ Id.

¹²⁰ Hamilton (2000), p. 187.

¹²¹ Hamilton (2000), p. 183.

¹²² Id.

¹²³ Hamilton (2000), pp. 188-89.

Transcendental idealism is the philosophical theory that what we take to be the “external” world (in the cosmic sense) about us, with us “in” it, only appears to us like that because that is the way our cognitive apparatus presents it to us, not because Reality is in itself really like that. We are unable to see Reality as it is in itself because we cannot transcend our cognitive apparatus. But we only experience the world *at all* because Reality is actually there: what we are experiencing is our *interpretation of* a transcendently existent Reality. Put differently, one might say that our worldly experience and the transcendently existent are twin aspects of Reality as a whole. But apart from its existence, nothing at all, of any nature whatsoever, can be known about the transcendental aspect because, *in being* transcendent, it is beyond any of our cognitive conceptual categories. In fact, being transcendent of the entire framework of our conceptual categories, Reality itself can properly be indicated only apophatically – even the notion of “existence” being problematic in this respect in that the properties so predicated are meaningful only within our conceptual framework.¹²⁴

It is transcendental idealism, then, that provides Hamilton with her proposed understanding of the function of the *khandhas*:

the four *khandhas* of body, sensation, perception and consciousness * * * represent one’s cognitive system: the apparatus by means of which we have all our experiences.”¹²⁵

It is only because our cognitive system operates as it does that we have the experiences that we do and so arrive at the conception of inhabiting a shared world as we do. The well-working of the *khandha* system generates that process by which “we delineate and reify our experiences by means of verbal differentiation;” “it is by this process that *anything* one experiences acquires reality for us.”¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Id.; her emphasis.

¹²⁵ Hamilton (2000), p. 78.

¹²⁶ Hamilton (2000), p. 147; her emphasis.

“Put differently,” she continues,

one might say of the entire mass of incoming data that in order for them to become in any meaningful sense one’s *experience*, the process by which they are objectified corresponds to what we understand to be the real world.¹²⁷

And so she moves to the robust Kantian conclusion that

the structure of the objective world is not independent of the subjective process. Whatever conforms to this structure, what we experience as its contents, so to speak, are not in themselves, independent or inherently, x, y and z. Rather, in the process of making manifold they are apperceived, conceived of, verbally differentiated and named x, y and z *by us*.¹²⁸

She finds it “clearly implicit in the Buddhist texts that the entire world of experience is as it is because it is dependent on our cognitive processing apparatus,” the *khandhas*.¹²⁹ So for her the Pali texts “are not referring to the *khandhas* as the five constituent parts of which human beings are comprised, as the Theravada Buddhist tradition has interpreted them, but to the way the world of experience is subjectively dependent.”¹³⁰

Gombrich, for one, thinks that she may be right about at least this much of her textual interpretation. In the Introduction to the second edition of How Buddhism Began he comments that he previously found the texts “ambiguous whether the Buddha was a realist or an idealist.” But Hamilton, he says, makes “a powerful case” that in the early texts “the Buddha is not talking, as most of his interpreters have assumed, about what exists, or whether there really is a world out there or not, but deliberately restricting himself to lived experience and how it works.”¹³¹

¹²⁷ Id.; her emphasis.

¹²⁸ Hamilton (2000), p. 165; her emphasis.

¹²⁹ Id.

¹³⁰ Id.

¹³¹ Gombrich (1996), Introduction to Second Edition.

As we have just seen, however, Hamilton draws a more fully Kantian conclusion. The world we experience does not, on her reading, have a subsistent reality at all; it is “a world that is *ontologically not other than* our experience,” she tells us.¹³²

In addition, it also belongs to the perspective of transcendental idealism that she advocates that the existence of an experiencer is inseparable from the existence of the experienced world. “Experience is experienced *by* the subject.”¹³³ “[T]he polarity between subject and object is,” as she puts it, “a part of the way the [cognitive] process operates.”¹³⁴

As objectivity becomes increasingly and more clearly manifold
so subjectivity is also more clearly polarized from the objectivity.¹³⁵

In this way, “the dependently originated processes of the objective world and the cognitive subjectivity * * * are parallel aspects of one process.”¹³⁶ Or, as she says, in a “more Buddhist way of putting it,”

Subjectivity and objectivity [the knower and the known]
are mutually dependently originated, * * * [and] it is intrinsic
to there being such a things *as* human beings in the world that
it is polarized in this mutually dependent way.¹³⁷

Here then we may begin to catch the meaning of the subtitle of her book, “The ‘I’ of the Beholder” and of her response to the Theravada view of *anatta*. More on this shortly.

¹³² Hamilton (2000), p. 111; her emphasis.

¹³³ Hamilton (2000), p. 126; her emphasis.

¹³⁴ Hamilton (2000), p. 110.

¹³⁵ *Id.*

¹³⁶ *Id.*

¹³⁷ Hamilton (2000), pp. 127-28; her emphasis.

But first, concerning the classical Unanswered Questions – and taking the “ontological status” of the self as an example – Hamilton tells us: “All questions to do with permanent existence, including non-existence, [of the ‘I’ of ‘I am’] are misconceived.”¹³⁸ Rather:

Understanding dependent origination, in the sense that subjectivity and objectivity are mutually dependently originated, means *one will no longer ask* questions about existence, past, future, or present, such as, “is it/am I?” Or “is it/am I not?”¹³⁹

Or, as she also phrases it: “with insight into the nature of the experiential world comes the disappearing of all such questions.”¹⁴⁰ “[T]his was [why] the Buddha remained silent.”¹⁴¹

Understanding Enlightenment on the “New Approach.”

We turn now to examine how, in Hamilton’s hands, her Kantian take on the *khandhas* leads to an understanding of the Buddha’s enlightenment, the cessation of the *dukkha* of his existence. In concert with the Theravada tradition, Hamilton understands that our suffering, “our bondage,” is “cognitive” in nature.¹⁴² It is the result of a kind of ignorance. On the occasion of the Buddha’s enlightenment, he ended this ignorance; “he achieved insight – described as seeing things as they really are which released his bondage and ended his suffering.”¹⁴³ This insight, however, “relates to human experience,” Hamilton tells us.¹⁴⁴ It was not a mystical connection with something extra-human. But neither, for Hamilton, was it an understanding focused on the irreality of the self, in the Theravada sense of *anatta*. The awakening

¹³⁸ Hamilton (2000), pp. 137-38.

¹³⁹ Hamilton (2000), p. 184; her emphasis.

¹⁴⁰ Hamilton (2000), p. 174.

¹⁴¹ Hamilton (2000), p. 138.

¹⁴² Hamilton (2000), p. 122.

¹⁴³ Id.

¹⁴⁴ Hamilton (2000), p. 55.

insight, on her reading of the canon, is more a realization of the nature of human experience itself.

It is the truth of [human experience] as it really is that the Buddha gains insight of, and it is to this that the expression “seeing things as they really are” refers.¹⁴⁵

This insight, moreover, was the Kantian one that forms the basis of Hamilton’s interpretation of the doctrine of dependent origination (*paticca-samupadda*); it was that

he saw *that it is we who make manifold* rather than manifoldness as an objective something in itself (as it were). Put differently, * * * having been in deep meditation, what the Buddha came to realize was that what the entire structure of our experiential world is correlated and mutually dependent with is subjectivity, and that the operating factor of this correlation for any *given* individual is his cognitive apparatus [i.e., his system of *khandhas*]. This would have involved his gaining a clear insight into the status of both the subjective and objective aspects of the correlation – of the fact that all things are dependently originated.¹⁴⁶

Hamilton’s passing allusion to the legend of the Buddha achieving enlightenment seated cross-legged in meditation under the *bodhi* tree is not merely incidental. Early on she identifies “the most radical difference” between the world views of Western and Indian thought as the fact that most Indian traditions sought “to achieve liberating knowledge” and did so through a “practical methodology,” foreign to Western philosophy, namely, “meditation,” “the practicing of mental disciplinary exercises.”¹⁴⁷

In the Theravada Buddhist tradition, in particular, although it is by insight that one attains enlightenment, the necessary insight “is not merely an intellectual understanding”¹⁴⁸ and it is achieved only when “meditative disciplinary exercises are

¹⁴⁵ Id.

¹⁴⁶ Hamilton (2000), p. 132-33; her emphasis.

¹⁴⁷ Hamilton (2000), p. 37.

¹⁴⁸ Hamilton (2000), p. 129.

practiced for a very long period of time.”¹⁴⁹ For classical Theravada, it was the truth of *anatta* (no-self), experientially absorbed in meditation, which triggered the Buddha’s awakening. On Hamilton’s understanding, however, “realizing impermanence is the purpose of meditation.”¹⁵⁰

As part of the meditative exercises both the bodily (internal) and worldly (external) factors * * * are to be seen as impermanent. No matter how solid and permanent they seem * * * the nature of *all* aspects of the experiential world is the same: continually changing and impermanent.¹⁵¹

In other words “it is the generic dependently originated status of all things that the meditator should come to understand.”¹⁵² Then and only then does enlightenment dawn.

Does this mean, then, that for Hamilton it was an insight into the truth of transcendental idealism that brought an end to the Buddha’s suffering? In effect, yes. She accepts, with Theravada, that *trishna* causes *dukkha*:

The second Truth states that *dukkha* arises because of cravings that collectively fuel the on-going unsatisfactoriness of the human lot.¹⁵³

And, according to Hamilton, our motivation (conation, craving) is directed (at least largely) as it is because of a mistaken belief as to how the world is: we believe in a permanence that is altogether illusory.

For Hamilton, it is “we ourselves who construct the world as we know it” and the knowers of this world, and we do this through the operation of the *khandhas*.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ Hamilton (2000), p. 130 (“[I]t can take lifetimes.” Hamilton (2000), p. 81).

¹⁵⁰ Hamilton (2000), p. 176.

¹⁵¹ Id.; her emphasis.

¹⁵² Hamilton (2000), p. 177.

¹⁵³ Hamilton (2000), p. 63.

¹⁵⁴ Hamilton (2000), p. 109.

As to how the world and we really are, in and of themselves, of this we can know nothing. Nonetheless – and this is now the immediate point – this metaphysical model also tells us that we are “wired” so as to regard the world on the model of Realism: it belongs to our human (empirical) nature to presuppose a permanent external world in which we live amidst self-subsistent things of some permanence. But this resulting “false consciousness” – this ignorance – is at the root of the dissatisfaction we find with our common lot. As Hamilton puts it, “permanence requires independence, autonomy,” but “because all things are conditioned * * * they are [all] impermanent.”¹⁵⁵ Still, “because things are seen as independent and therefore permanent one * * * craves them in one way or another.”¹⁵⁶ And just this, on Hamilton’s view, is the cause of the *dukkha* of human existence. What is impermanent is unsatisfactory. Nonetheless being as we are we are “continually craving for things that do not last,” and so the “unsatisfactoriness of [human life] is perpetuated.”¹⁵⁷

Although in this way human nature is the cause of our suffering, knowledge of this feature of our nature can be the cure of that condition. Craving comes from, what we might call, an inherited conviction of permanence, but (we are told) an appropriately experiential insight into the dependent origination of the world and of our self cures us of this conviction, and with this also eliminates our craving, our impetus (*conatus*) to behave as we otherwise would do. With the subsiding of the seas of craving, enlightenment occurs. This, in a nutshell, is Hamilton’s new account of enlightenment.

But how, more particularly, does this work? Just how is it that achieving the Kantian insight eliminates suffering?

Attaining Enlightenment.

In setting out Hamilton’s suggestion that the *khandhas* should be understood as our human cognitive apparatus, we did not discuss *samkhara*, the fourth of the five *khandhas*. This is because the volitional component of the *khandhas* is not, strictly

¹⁵⁵ Hamilton (2000), p. 90.

¹⁵⁶ Hamilton (2000), p. 134.

¹⁵⁷ Hamilton (2000), p. 64.

speaking, part of the mechanism that co-creates our world and our self on her view. As she states:

The * * * *khandha* of volitional activities is not included in the description of th[is] * * * cognitive process [because] it is not crucial to it.¹⁵⁸

Nonetheless, for her, *samkhara* is involved with the operation of the Kantian cognitive machinery. It is interwoven with the working of the cognitive apparatus because it affects the ways we act in response to our perceiving and understanding the world as constructed by the cognitive system.

The way [volitions] participate in the cognitive system, which indeed they do until one does achieve [enlightenment], is that they are one's affective response to whatever one is experiencing.¹⁵⁹

Our responses to our encounters with the world tend to be one of either approach or avoidance. We are drawn to some things or experiences and repelled by others. So, for instance, in the example Hamilton gives of this:

Having identified the rough, wet and warm thing I am touching as a hot, wet towel, I respond to it negatively: because it is clammy I desire not to continue touching it. Or I respond to it positively: it is refreshing and I desire to make more of the feel of it.¹⁶⁰

“These negative or positive desires,” she tells us, “are volitions: I am not indifferent, or neutral, to the touch of the towel.”¹⁶¹ And this absence of indifference matters, because my volitions are incipient approachings or avoidings. They form what Hamilton refers to as “the causal matrix” of *dukkha*.¹⁶² And, as we concluded with her before, “the second Noble Truth and the Buddha’s definition of how karma

¹⁵⁸ Hamilton (2000), p. 78.

¹⁵⁹ Id.

¹⁶⁰ Hamilton (2000), p. 78-79.

¹⁶¹ Hamilton (2000), p. 79.

¹⁶² Hamilton (2000), p. 80.

works both refer” to this.¹⁶³ So, we are to understand, it is these volitions, or cravings – that which brings on “one’s affective responses” to the world around us – that need to be eliminated for our suffering to cease.

But how is this to be brought about? Using her wet towel example, what Hamilton tells is:

Although I am not indifferent, or neutral to the touch of the towel * * * I *can* be * * * I *can* simply register the touch (or whatever is the relevant sensation) and see that it is what it is simply in the factual sense.”¹⁶⁴

And how are we to accomplish this? How are we, as she puts it, to “disengage the affective response from the cognitive operation”?¹⁶⁵ Her answer is that the Kantian insight into the nature of our cognitive operations does this for us. Our affective responses to happenings in the world occur only because, so goes this view, we remain ignorant of the nature of the dependently originated status of all things. But the Kantian insight eliminates this ignorance and frees us from our “normal” reactions to the world at large. This is, or can be, our enlightenment.

What ceases with insight, itself the cessation of ignorance, is the affective responses [to one’s experience].”¹⁶⁶

* * * * *

In seeing, at Enlightenment, the way the [cognitive] process works, [one] is aware that affective responses are based on ignorance as to the nature of one’s experience and has uprooted this binding [cause of *dukkha*].¹⁶⁷

* * * * *

¹⁶³ Id.

¹⁶⁴ Hamilton (2000), pp. 78-79; her emphasis.

¹⁶⁵ Hamilton (2000), p. 164.

¹⁶⁶ Id.

¹⁶⁷ Id.

While ignorant we *do* react affectively to our sense data; when liberating insight is attained, we “see things as they are” *without* reacting to them.¹⁶⁸

For Hamilton, this state of “disengagement” or detachment from the flux of the world was the Buddha’s enlightenment, his end of suffering.

Reflecting on Hamilton’s Conception of Enlightenment.

Hamilton’s bold reconfiguring of the insight model of enlightenment characteristic of early Buddhism raises many questions. In this concluding portion of section II, I will look at only a couple of these, ones which are related more or less directly to my earlier concerns with the traditional Theravada account of enlightenment. But we will move to this by examining how – and how well – her Kantian turn of interpretation deals with the principal difficulty she finds with Theravada, its inability to provide an account of personal responsibility. This is the thought that there is at least a practical incoherence in denying the existence of self and, at the same time, subscribing to any idea that we are responsible both for how we are, and for changing how we are or for not doing so.

Here a comparison with David Hume is inviting. As is commonly noted, Hume, with his “bundle theory” of the self, arrived at a philosophical position somewhat resembling that of Theravada: I am but a combination of certain elements; there is nothing substantial and enduring that is the real me of me. For Hume such reflections left him distraught and baffled. So much so that, as he writes, he felt himself “confounded” and “in the deepest darkness.”¹⁶⁹ However, when thus unable to live with the idea (for instance) that he was not, he found that “nature herself * * * cures me of the philosophical melancholy and delirium.”¹⁷⁰ He relates: “I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, and am merry with my friends” – and soon the pull of life draws him out of the darkness of his philosophical condition.¹⁷¹ So goes Hume’s response to his recognition of the practical incoherency of the idea of no-self.

¹⁶⁸ Hamilton (2000), p. 103; her emphasis.

¹⁶⁹ Hume, David, *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Bk. I, sect. 7 (Selby-Bigge edition, p. 269).

¹⁷⁰ Id.

¹⁷¹ Id.

But this is not Hamilton's way with the doctrine of *anatta*. Nor could it be. Unlike Hume (apparently), Hamilton is convinced that the very idea of personal responsibility requires that our philosophy – or at least that of the Buddha – have room in it for a self in some recognizable sense. And it is rather plain how it is that her Kantian construal of the *khandhas* provides her with this: the cognitive mechanism that is the *khandhas* creates it. Each of us in the process of constructing the world of experience creates a self, our self. On the other hand, it should be rather clear how this is less a rejection of the doctrine of *anatta* than a recasting of it: Hamilton agrees with Theravada that all things are impermanent, including without exception our selves, in the sense in which we each of us has one.

Nonetheless, it is not altogether clear just how the self that comes forth from Hamilton's construal of the *khandhas* is suitable for an account of personal responsibility given that it is much more a "self-as-knower" – the "I of the Beholder" of which the subtitle of her book speaks – than a "self-as-actor," an agent intervening in the world. How it is that this *khandha*-created self permits an account of personal responsibility is somewhat underdeveloped, we shall see.

The Kantian insight, into the nature of the world around us and that of the self that knows this world, changes how we act in the world, Hamilton tells us. The "liberating insight * * * involves undoing and reorientating (reprogramming, as it were) the way one's entire cognitive process works."¹⁷² Before, "because we cognitively process[ed] * * * incoming data as we d[id] * * * we continue[d] to have cravings," those pre-enlightenment affectively consequential urges that were the *samkhara* of the old system.¹⁷³ After the liberating insight, we interface with the world differently and so bring our *dukkha* to an end. This is how enlightenment comes about, as Hamilton reads the canon. After the Kantian insight, one no longer has those cravings or volitions, and yet one "is able to function volitionlessly (in the affective and consequential sense) in order to meet the needs of his normal and inconsequential functioning."¹⁷⁴ So she tells us. But how are we to understand this?

The insight model of enlightenment, as we have discussed it, involves some type of cognitive apprehension (insight) that eliminates some inherent aspect of us with the consequence that suffering (*dukkha*) ceases. For Theravada, it is insight

¹⁷² Hamilton (2000), p.107.

¹⁷³ Hamilton (2000), p. 98.

¹⁷⁴ Hamilton (2000), p. 97; her emphasis.

into the truth of *anatta* (no-self) that eliminates *trishna* (thirst) and brings about the end of suffering. This is the basic message of the Noble Truths, as Theravada understands them. This understanding, however, is not without its difficulties. For instance, it is difficult to see (it seems to me) how a cognitive act of insight or understanding could causally affect our fundamental motivational makeup so as to eliminate *trishna*. And also, even if it could, we would then seem to be left with the puzzle about how an enlightened being could continue to live a robustly human life.

To inquire into whether either of these problems is to be found in Hamilton's alternative account of enlightenment, we might ask, what (for her) does insight eliminate – and thereby bring on an end of suffering? First, it is clear (or clear enough) what for Hamilton is the insight that triggers enlightenment. It is the Kantian insight into the impermanence, the dependently originated status, of all things. What, then, does this insight eliminate? Hamilton gives verbally diverse answers to this question. At various places and in various, similar ways she tells us that the Kantian insight into how things are breaks the bindings that otherwise channel our activities with the result that “affective responses” cease.¹⁷⁵ Through that insight we achieve the liberating knowledge of how things are so that we see them “without reacting to them.”¹⁷⁶ Once the Kantian insight has permitted one to “accept the fact and value neutrality of impermanence,” “one will no longer have any cravings or desires.”¹⁷⁷ Or, as she tells us in other places, achieving this insight means that that one will no longer have any volitions, although “the individual, in achieving liberating insight * * * [remains] able to function volitionlessly.”¹⁷⁸

Two points are worth making about these apparently divergent ways that Hamilton here expresses herself. The first is that to a large extent they reflect the background assumption of the earlier discussed Theravada equation of *trishna* (thirst) with *samkhara* (volition), and both with *cetana* (intention) understood as karma. So she speaks easily of either ending desires or of ending volitions. Here the general idea is that in the absence of insight the cognitive system of the *khandhas* so strongly convinces us of the permanence of things that the *khandha* of *samkhara* (volition) drives us into seeking a kind of satisfaction of our desires that is doomed

¹⁷⁵ Hamilton (2000), p. 164.

¹⁷⁶ Hamilton (2000), p. 103.

¹⁷⁷ Hamilton (2000), p. 65.

¹⁷⁸ Hamilton (2000), p. 97.

to frustration and so creates for us a life of dissatisfaction (*dukkha*); after insight, this is no longer the way we are.

The second point, however, is that her general statements about the complete end of desires or volitions are all overstatements; they do not accurately represent Hamilton's understanding of enlightenment, as she full well knows. The reason is that if we were to take any of these statements literally, we would be left with the problem of understanding the possibility of life after enlightenment. As we have seen, Hamilton's view is not that insight actually eliminates all desires or all volitional activity. Indeed when she first says that after insight "one will no longer have any cravings or desires," she goes on to say (as noted earlier) that we cannot take this "at face value" as stating that at enlightenment one will "stop wanting anything *at all*." This is precisely because that would conflict with the idea that the Buddha attained enlightenment at about the age of 35 and yet "lived for forty-five years after [that]."¹⁷⁹ And when she says that insight enables one "to function volitionlessly," she parenthetically adds: "in the affective and consequential sense" of this expression.¹⁸⁰ This, indeed, is her "simple" solution to the puzzle over – in Theravada terms – how someone could eliminate *trishna* and yet continue to live a human life. In other words, for Hamilton, "it is only bindingly consequential cravings that are relevant" – an enlightened being functions "without in any way having any * * * wants that are affectively consequential."¹⁸¹ So she repeatedly assures us.

Here I think that the language "affectively consequential" simply means (something like) "productive of suffering" or "*dukkha* inducing." It is, in other words, just a placeholder expression for the cause of suffering, whatever that is. So if we are tracking out how personal responsibility finds its place in Hamilton's reading of the canon, the question becomes, "What are these *dukkha* causing wants?" or "How shall we mark the distinction between wants (desires, volitions, motivations) that are affectively consequential, in her sense, and those that are not?" But as to this crucial question, I do not see that Hamilton ever gives us an answer. More importantly, I think that this is not simply an oversight, or a topic deferred, on her part.

¹⁷⁹ Hamilton (2000), p. 65.

¹⁸⁰ Hamilton (2000), p. 97.

¹⁸¹ Hamilton (2000), p. 65.

In the discussion that I have just been quoting from on page 65 (and elsewhere), Hamilton sometimes writes as if the way to distinguish acceptable wants from *dukkha*-causing wants lies with the idea of self-centeredness. She speaks of “having selfish wants that are affectively consequential.” Now this could mean either of two things. Either selfish wants are among those wants (perhaps in addition to selfish wants) that are affectively consequential. Or, it could mean that affectively consequential wants simply are (can be understood as) selfish wants. Context argues for the latter understanding. And this understanding is quite forcefully displayed in her later comment that “the cessation of ignorance [that the Kantian insight provides] brings about the cessation of all self-centred desires.”¹⁸² But I do not believe that the idea of self-centeredness is available to Hamilton to make use of in drawing the desired distinction between two categories of wants, the good ones and the bad ones. The reason is that with *trishna*, classically understood, *all* desires (thirsts) are self-centered – even when, to all appearances, someone seems to be acting for the benefit of someone else rather than selfishly for herself. And nothing in Hamilton’s account of enlightenment has suggested any modification in this understanding of *trishna*. So self-centeredness does not distinguish *dukkha*-causing from other wants or desires.

Although I am not sure that Hamilton is entirely clear on this, I think that the distinction she has in mind is actually not one that turns on an idea of self-centeredness, but rather one suggested by the term “craving,” used as a rendering of “*trishna*.” The root idea here is that of excessiveness. That this is her idea emerges in the examples she offers to show us that the distinction she is after is, indeed, a recognized one. She says that “there is a difference, for example, between eating to live and being greedy for one’s food,” and she similarly tells us that “there is a difference between sleeping because one needs to and being lazy.”¹⁸³ In addition, she refers in support of her distinction, to Pali texts “where moderation in eating, control of the senses and composure of thoughts are associated with living a life of ease (*sukha*), the opposite of the dis-ease that is *dukkha*.”¹⁸⁴ So what we have here, I gather, is a general idea of the avoidance of excessiveness, an idea of moderation in all that we do, where eating neither too much, nor too little is an example of this idea.

¹⁸² Hamilton (2000), p. 110.

¹⁸³ Hamilton (2000), p. 65.

¹⁸⁴ Id.

As appealing, however, as some idea of moderation may be, it is (I believe) a non-starter for Hamilton's purposes in this instance. To appreciate why this is, we need to understand something that it does not involve. For Theravada, *trishna* causes *dukkha*, and the elimination of *trishna* causes the elimination of *dukkha*. (It also generates the puzzle about continued longevity that Hamilton seeks to address.) For Hamilton, the liberating insight on her view of enlightenment does not eliminate *trishna*. We might, however, be tempted to say that it curbs somewhat the effect of *trishna*, tempers it so that we no longer act in quite the same impulsive manner in seeking to satisfy our desires. This way of thinking cannot, however, be translated into an idea that, although insight does not eliminate *trishna*, what it does do is to eliminate a *part* of *trishna*, as Hamilton's "simple" solution would seem to require. It is not like pruning away the diseased branches of a tree, the better to allow the healthy part to flourish. The notion of moderation does not admit of such a figurative way of picturing it. This is to say that to rely at this point on the idea of excessiveness would be to give up the thesis of the Third Noble Truth that insight eliminates the cause of suffering.

Much the same point may perhaps be made in another way. Determinations of excess made in the real world involve an exercise of judgment, what Aristotle, in the Nicomachean Ethics, calls practical wisdom. And what reason do we have to suppose that the Kantian insight instills in one such practical wisdom, the ability to make in particular situations in the flow of life discriminations of what would or would not be excessive along some pertinent dimension? Indeed, the very idea of this seems to confuse the causal (or natural) with the normative (or rational), as if someone were to think that it might be possible to develop a pill the taking of which would produce in the taker good manners, or political savvy, or a feel for the subtleties of a foreign language.

Actually, however, although Hamilton quite explicitly states (for instance) that "the cessation of ignorance brings about the cessation of all self-centred desires," I am not so sure that this is really her position or represents the whole of her thinking about the relation between the Kantian insight and the end of suffering. Although it appears to be her Official View, there is another position, which (it seems to me) is in play in Hamilton's presentation. This is an account of enlightenment on which the Kantian insight plays an important, but only a supportive, role. On this view insight does not bring about enlightenment; rather it enables us to pursue an end of suffering – and then it is up to us whether we do so or not. We might call this her Unofficial View of enlightenment.

To develop this a bit, let's return again to the remarks on page 65 that we have already looked at in some detail. At the beginning of the long paragraph that takes up much of this page she tells us, as we have quoted more than once, that when insight is achieved, "one will no longer have any cravings or desires: the mechanics of the continuity of unsatisfactoriness will cease." This is the Official View, as I now call it. But in the same passage she also says – and this too we have quoted before – "when one sees things as they really are [as one does after the Kantian insight] one *can* function spontaneously without having selfish wants that are affectively consequential."¹⁸⁵ Previously we, in effect, read this "can" as "will," as telling us how, in fact, things are with us after enlightenment.

What I shall now suggest is that perhaps we should read this "can" as saying that post-enlightenment it becomes possible for us to act in ways that previously were not open to us. We were previously bound to act in *dukkha*-causing ways because of the nature of the motivational *khandha* of *samkhara* (understood as *trishna*) and the operation of the conceptual apparatus of the other *khandhas* working in concert with one another. This conceptual machinery creates a world of apparent permanence, and the *khandha* of *samkhara* causes us to react to this world in "affectively consequential" ways. The Kantian insight, however, changes this. After it we see the world as impermanent through and through – everything is dependently originated – and as a result we are no longer bound to act in those "affectively consequential" ways. We *can* act in other ways, though in what ways and for what reasons remains to be considered.

Now consider a set of remarks on pages 210-211 commenting on what Hamilton calls "the intimate, indeed intrinsic, association of insight and behavior." She begins with the now familiar idea that without the Kantian insight we are ignorant: "Ignorance consists primarily of our failure to understand we are not in fact separately independent in the way that we think we are." And it is this failure, she continues, that is the source of our dissatisfaction with life:

[I]t is this failure that leads us to behave as desirers, craving things we also mistakenly perceive separately, and having all manner of self-centred aspirations and responses, and self-absorbed, narrowly subjectively focused states of mind. All these activities and their consequences constitute the operation of karma as taught by the

¹⁸⁵ Id.; my emphasis.

Buddha.”¹⁸⁶

This, for her, is the way our *dukkha* “is fueled.”¹⁸⁷

So far this is familiar ground. But now listen to the note she strikes in this instance in framing the cure of this condition:

The way to overcome this * * * is to see the way one’s self-centredness is detrimental for one’s well-being in the long run, however much one might feel self-indulgently, even self-righteously, fulfilled in the short term. And in the long-term process, one gains insight into the way one is responsible not just for present states of mind and action, but for one’s present and future circumstances also.¹⁸⁸

Here is a different way of mobilizing her Kantian take of the *khandhas* to address the topic of personal responsibility. With this we are offered an idea that is complementary to the claim that insight opens up new possibilities of behavior. Before we learned that “when one sees how things are one can function * * * without in any way having selfish wants that are affectively consequential.”¹⁸⁹ Now we are told, it seems, that the Kantian insight itself in some way counsels us on how we might better act. We *can* act otherwise than how our “selfish wants” immediately incline us. And we can see that our narrow “self-centredness is detrimental for [our] well-being in the long-run.”¹⁹⁰ And so the way is open to us to act out of a more enlightened self-interest – the phrase seems too apt to be foregone – and live the better for this. This is what I am calling Hamilton’s Unofficial View of enlightenment: the Kantian insight does not *cause* an end of suffering so much as it *counsels* what we should do to reduce or eliminate our individual suffering, as well as creating within us the possibility of taking this counsel to heart and altering our behavior in line with it.

¹⁸⁶ Hamilton (2000), p. 210.

¹⁸⁷ Id.

¹⁸⁸ Hamilton (2000), p. 211

¹⁸⁹ Hamilton (2000), p. 65.

¹⁹⁰ Hamilton (2000), p. 211.

I believe that this view is there for the seeing in Hamilton's discussion. But whether or not you agree with my attribution of it to her, it is hard to see how it provides a good start towards a satisfactory account of enlightenment. For one thing, it is still not clear on this view just what suffering is. For instance is there anything on this Unofficial View that we might call suffering that is actually eliminated? If not, then this view appears to give up a central teaching of the Noble Truths that suffering ends when something about us get altered or eliminated.

It also relinquishes that portion of the legend of the *bodhi* tree on which seated meditation (in the right place, at the right time) brought the Buddha to his enlightenment. This is not necessarily a criticism of the Unofficial View – but it does (it seems) point up the distance of this view from what is implicit in the myth of the *bodhi* tree, the idea that meditation induces enlightenment.

And as wise as the advice to “respond, not react” may be, is there anything in the Unofficial View – at least as far as we have looked at it – to suggest that the counsel offered for the reduction of *dukkha* could engender *sukha*? An (increasing) absence of suffering is nothing to scoff at. Still, we may ask, where's the joy in this?

And what about compassion? How can enlightened self-interest account for enlightenment if we require an account to explain (or provide room for) how it is that an enlightened being is compassionate? The complaint here would be that no matter how “enlightened” your self-interest may be, it remains your fundamental motive for action; no matter what you do, you are still acting for the well being of yourself – and not (not really) acting out of a concern for the well-being of others. Thus whatever the merits of enlightened self-interest, it does not – indeed, could not – add up to compassion, so it would seem.

Whether or not an egoistically motivated person can be said to be capable of truly acting altruistically, out of a concern for others, is a large question quite apart from how it may arise in the context of early Buddhism. For present purposes I propose to set this question to one side in order to take notice that Hamilton's Unofficial View also includes (I will suggest) an answer of sorts to the question, “whence the compassion of an enlightened being?” But this view, I shall further suggest, has problems of its own, quite apart from the general worry about the possibility of genuine altruism.

Returning to the passage on page 65 in which Hamilton says that after the Kantian insight one “can function * * * without * * * affectively consequential

[wants],” she goes on to tell us that this permits such a person, in addition to being able to engage in “normal living,” to be able to act out of a concern “for the welfare of others.” Here, more fully than previously set out, is that key passage.

When one see how things really are one can function * * * without in any way having selfish wants that are affectively consequential. [This] does not preclude either being concerned for the welfare of others or normal living.¹⁹¹

In other words, the Kantian insight into the dependent origination of the world and hence the impermanence and interdependence of all things makes it possible not only for us to not act in a short-sighted fashion concerning achieving our own well being, but also for us to be able to act less out of a concern just for ourselves and more for the well being of others. This is how, as we might put it, that, though we are born egoists, altruism is possible: post-enlightenment acting out of a concern “for the welfare of others” is no longer “preclude[d].”

Suppose (for present purposes) we just accept these claims about the Kantian insight. Still we may wonder even if insight renders us capable of acting altruistically, why should we? What reason could we have to so act? It would seem that if an adequate account of enlightenment needs to explain the dawning of compassion, then Hamilton needs an answer to this question if she is to go forward with her Unofficial View. I confess that I do not see an answer to this question surfacing in the course of her book. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to imagine the type of answer that might be offered. It is something of a commonplace in the general Buddhist literature that the realization that we are all interrelated and interdependent – an idea (it would seem) that forms part of the content of Hamilton’s Kantian insight – tells us that we should act less out of pure self-regard and more out of a feeling of compassion with and concern for others. In this way, it could be said, the content of the liberating insight counsels compassion. (It does so somewhat analogously to how it counsels enlightened self-interest.)

Accepting here this description of the content of the Kantian insight, how does it answer our question of why we should (if we should) act compassionately? It tells us that our insight into the nature of things *instructs* us to act compassionately, but why should we accept this teaching? This is the question that needs answering. (This question about accepting or not the teaching of the insight did not seem to

¹⁹¹ Hamilton (2000), p. 65.

arise when we were previously speaking of our enlightened self-interest because there we were still talking about acting for the benefit of ourselves.)

I have no wish to deny that someone might – as a result of the Kantian insight or otherwise – conclude that he wanted to act in more compassionate ways than had been his wont. My point is just that the insight does not appear to compel this conclusion. It, indeed, belongs to the nature of advice (if that is what it is) that it is not self-executing. But then we do not have a direct connection on this view between enlightenment (the end of suffering) and someone who is enlightened being compassionate, as I suppose we would want in a satisfying account of enlightenment.

Someone might respond to this that there is more to the Kantian insight than we have credited to it: we can appreciate from the interconnectedness of all things that, since we are all in this together, we will all benefit from everyone acting in more other regarding ways. Here, it may be suggested, is the genesis of compassion in the enlightened.

It is easy enough to question the cogency of this counsel applied in an individual case. (“That may be true, but why should *I* act more altruistically?”) But here I am more concerned with another difficulty that I sense with the general drift of the argument. First, apparently this line of reasoning essentially involves an appeal to enlightened self-interest. (“Do it for your own good.”) And this inevitably raises (once again) the question of whether any type of rational self-interest could be the basis for an understanding of compassion as the Buddha is thought of as the Compassionate One. But, second, should we not also be concerned that if the basis for the counsel of compassion in the Kantian insight involves reasoning from self-interest, whether we really need the Kantian insight to give us this counsel? Let us assume (for the moment) that the Kantian insight would provide the basis for concluding that it is in one’s self-interest to act in more other regarding ways. But if that is so, could not a more direct, empirical inquiry lead us to the same conclusion? In other words, as far as the counsel of compassion goes, can we not simply dispense with the rigors of the extensive meditation practice that is needed to achieve the Kantian insight. The straightforward empirical facts that buttress the insight’s counsel of compassion would seem to be more readily available in other ways. That is, would not whatever it is about how the world is (constructed, as we now assume, by the operation of the cognitive machinery of the *khandhas*) that counsels compassion be something that we could know by more directly investigating the world and without the need of the Kantian insight?

This suggests that if reasons are offered in support of the Kantian counsel that we should be more compassionate beings – reasons in the nature of supposed facts about the world and the people in it – then these reasons will be independent of the Kantian insight itself. Not only is the liberating insight not sufficient to bring about compassion, the content of the insight that (we suppose) counsels compassion need not come from the insight itself. And, on the other hand, if the Kantian insight does not give us reason to act compassionately, then it fails to provide an answer to our question of why one should do so, even if that insight creates the possibility of this. But then the Kantian insight which is the centerpiece of Hamilton’s account of enlightenment fails to give us an adequate understanding of the phenomenon of enlightenment, if we adhere to the idea that it is in some sense an integral feature of enlightenment that an enlightened being is a compassionate one.

This is not necessarily a criticism of Hamilton, who may wish to object that I have read too much into some of her remarks. It does, however, cast further doubt on whether the insight model, however well entrenched in the tradition it is, can point the way to an adequate understanding of the Buddha’s enlightenment. Or so I would suggest. So I will now turn to some quite brief comments directed towards sketching an alternative to the insight model.

III. Enlightenment without Insight.

The alternative I will suggest is a radical one. It is radical in terms of rethinking the Theravada tradition. But it is also radical in terms of the religious culture of the Buddha’s day. That is to say that my suggestion positions the Buddha as an even more radical figure than he is commonly credited with being, one whose rejection of brahminism goes deeper than is generally accepted. It involves thinking of the Buddha’s break with brahminism as including a rejection or avoidance of the brahminical idea (also prevalent in other soteriological programs of the day) that liberation from the ills of this human existence comes through some sort of realization or insight or understanding of some deep truth or reality of how things are. It involves a bypassing or non-adherence to any form of intellectualism in this sense. In saying this, I do not mean to diminish or downplay the importance for the Buddha of his general ideas about (for instance) how the world most fundamentally is or what we creatures of this world most fundamentally are, his ideas (for instance) of *anicca* (impermanence) or *anatta* (no-self). To the contrary, these ideas (I would say) with their decidedly anti-essentialist cast bespeak a general philosophical outlook that comes to inform most everything he said and did once he undertook his life of teaching. It is to suggest, however, that such ideas did not – or not directly – pave the way he took to his enlightenment; his end of suffering was not achieved by

some form of cognitive accomplishment. But, then, if his philosophy did not gain him his enlightenment, what did?

Appreciating that this section is going to be just a rough sketch, let's begin with the traditional idea that meditation results in insight and insight results in enlightenment. We schematically have the formula:

Meditation → Insight → Enlightenment.

I agree with Hamilton, and with the tradition, that it was by meditating that the Buddha achieved the end of his suffering. Meditation is the key that unlocks the door of nirvana. So then we may ask, what is to replace insight in our formula?

On the traditional view, *trishna* (thirst) is the cause of *dukkha* (suffering), and meditation produces the insight that eliminates *trishna*, thereby creating enlightenment. As we have seen, however, the idea that insight simply eliminates *trishna* is problematic, especially if we adhere to the traditional idea that *trishna*, identified with the *khandha* of *samkhara*, is the fundamental conative feature of our makeup. Certainly no account of enlightenment could be satisfying if it leaves enlightened beings unable to live a human form of life. And I do agree with the tradition that, for the Buddha, we are creatures most moved by a “thirst” for self-benefit; we are (in that sense) born egoists. What this suggests – as was alluded to in the earlier discussion of Theravada – is that we will want to replace insight in the formula with something that does not (simply) eliminate *trishna* so much as it modifies *trishna* so that it begins to change its character, and does so in such a way that this alteration in the nature of our “thirst” (somehow) brings about an ending of suffering.

Here, then, may be the point at which to return to a question that has tagged along in this essay without receiving much in the way of an answer: What is it about human existence that is characteristically and most fundamentally dissatisfying? What is suffering? Forbearing, as I must, any detailed discussion, I suggest that we think of the Buddha as concluding (undoubtedly slowly, over the course of some time and various of his investigations) that suffering in its most deeply human form involves the nature of our relations with others.

If, as tradition has it, we are born egoists, striving for self-preservation and self-gratification, then it is unavoidable that we are all in competition one with another, at least potentially. And this is something that we will all come to understand, if only as a vaguely felt part of our general outlook. And our appreciation of it will

guarantee that we can never find or establish a true sense of connection (solidarity) with others. We will always live in something of a Hobbesian world of all against all. So we are, and importantly so, isolated one from another. And it is this sense of social alienation (as we might call it) – this separation from those creatures with whom we share this earth and with whom we should (it seems) have the most connection – that (I suggest) the Buddha came to regard as human suffering at its most poignant. I hasten to add that this is not all there is to say about suffering, or indeed all that the Buddha had to say. But it is (I would say) the kernel idea for understanding him. It is this aspect of suffering that he sought to bring to an end.

So the stage is set. Conflict (actual and potential) with others is the disease; and *trishna* (egoism) is its cause. The objective is to find a way to modify *trishna* so as to address this problem. Otherwise stated, might there be some form of meditation, some technology of meditative practice, that could alter our native egoism in such a way as to transform, in some suitable fashion, how we relate to others? The suggestion I offer is that the Buddha, perhaps borrowing (though reworking) a page from the Jainist book, fastened on the idea of compassion (*karuna*). He hypothesized (I imagine) that if he could, through a meditation practice, transform his innate emphasis on self-benefit to a more other-regarding attitude of seeking the well being of all (himself included), his suffering (in the emphasized sense) would cease. He then conducted his Grand Experiment, somehow or other. (It may well have taken up a chunk of those six or seven years he spent largely alone in the forest.) And – lo, and behold – it worked: he emerged transformed; he now saw the world and others in it differently; his concern for self had become inclusive of others. He was, in this sense now a compassionate being. And – and this was the proof of the pudding – his feeling of dislocation from others had ceased. This was his enlightenment.

This (of course) is at most a sketch. A wealth of questions will arise. And I cannot begin to survey – let alone address – these here. I will permit myself just a couple of comments in closing.

First, the transformation of *trishna* to *karuna* is by no means the whole story of the Buddha's enlightenment or his subsequent teachings. It is just the central point around which others arrange themselves.

Second, plainly this view differs markedly from traditional Theravada. So, it might be asked, is that any textual basis to support it? Can anything like this be glimpsed in the canon itself? I think so, if you look for it; but for this I must primarily rely on the scholarship of others. Hajime Nakamura, for one, emphasizes

in his “biography” of “Gotama Buddha” that “documentary evidence from a very early period attests that Gotama was thought to have embodied compassion” and that “[a]ncient verses relate that he ‘practiced the state of compassion for seven years’” before attaining his enlightenment.¹⁹² And Richard Gombrich, for another, has advanced the self-described “radical conclusion” that in early Buddhism compassion was a way to attain enlightenment and nirvana.¹⁹³ And if he is right, might not this early evidence that compassion was considered *a* way to enlightenment mark a point in the transition from the Buddha’s holding that compassion was *the* way to enlightenment to the eventually orthodox position that insight was the only way?

Third, I would go so far as to suggest that the *Metta Sutta* contains, albeit in poetic expression, the nub of the alternative conception of enlightenment I offer. (Though this not the only reading of which the *Sutta* admits, or even the only reading expressive of the Buddha’s own teaching.) It does so in admonishing us to cultivate a boundless heart and offers us a model of how to conceive this. This is the reminder that a mother’s love of her child is so strong, or that her child is so much a part of her that she will be prepared to sacrifice herself for the sake of the child. Cultivating a boundless heart, then, is the process by which we (somehow) expand the “self” of our ordinary self-interest to, progressively, broaden it out until it may become boundlessly inclusive of the welfare of all. In more doctrinal terms, our *samkhara* (which is *trishna*) progressively takes as its object the well being of all beings and thereby transforms *trishna* (our inborn impetus to seek self-benefit) so that our basis of intending (*cetana*) how we will be in the world becomes one of compassion (*karuna*) – this is now our karma. And – so this alternative conception goes – it is through a process (a practice) of meditation, compassion meditation, that the Buddha accomplished this for himself. In this way, meditation eliminates the cause of *dukkha*, by eliminating *trishna* through breaking its bounds and expanding it into *karuna* – and this brings about enlightenment.

Finally, even a few years ago this might have sounded like the wildest of fantasies. Perhaps it still does. But a revolution is going on in how cognitive science (itself a rather new field) is coming to understand the extent of the

¹⁹² Nakamura, Hajime, *Gotama Buddha, A Biography Based on the Most Reliable Texts*, Vol. 1 (2000), p. 170.

¹⁹³ 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), *Critical Concepts in Religious Studies*, Vol. II. I have separately written about Gombrich’s piece in “Compassion as Means to (the Buddha’s) Nirvana.”

neuroplasticity of the human brain. A great deal of ongoing research is demonstrating how much even the adult brain has the capacity to reorganize itself, and indeed how much it is possible for someone to self-direct deep changes in the structure and function of their own brain. In this regard, the continuing research of Richard Davidson (and his lab) into the neurological effects of meditation has begun to build a case that, over time, meditation can produce long-term changes in the brain.¹⁹⁴ If this is right, then maybe the Buddha was really on to something, something we can understand both experientially (from the inside) and scientifically (from the outside). Maybe the Buddha's accomplishment was not idiosyncratic; maybe he did blaze a path that others can follow, if they choose to do so. Though this is not to suggest that only in this way would the life and teachings of the Buddha be of interest or of value.

¹⁹⁴ See Lutz, Antoine, Dunne, John D. and Davidson, Richard J., "Meditation and the Neuroscience of Consciousness: An Introduction," pp. 542-43, in Zelazo, P. D., Moscovitch, M. & Thompson, E., ed., *The Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness* (2007).