
Early Buddhism and the Greeks

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ABSTRACT Greek thinkers are important witnesses for the Buddhism of the fourth to first centuries BCE in India. Both Pyrrho and his teacher Anaxarchus were exposed to Buddhist ideas while travelling with Alexander in India in 326 BCE. Buddhist forms of argument, such as the *tetralemma*, reappear in Pyrrho. Some scholars have argued that key elements of Buddhism, including the Four Noble Truths, and the doctrine of no self, only arose much later; but archaeological evidence, such as the sculptures of Sanchi, indicate that key doctrines, as enshrined in the *jatakas*, were circulating in the Indo-Greek period in India. Anecdotes about Anaxarchus also suggest familiarity with the idea of no self, while the Pali work *The Questions of King Milinda* suggests that the Greek king Menander could have raised questions about Buddhist doctrine at an early date (*ca.* 150 BCE).

KEYWORDS Buddhism, India, Greek philosophy, Pyrrho, Anaxarchus, King Menander.

1. The Argeads and the early stages of their kingdom

The Greek thinkers are important witnesses for the Buddhism of the third to first centuries BCE. This is not an uncontroversial statement, though the idea has been gaining adherents in the last few decades. In 1980 the British scholar Everard Flintoff first proposed to the English-speaking world that the Sceptical philosopher Pyrrho of Elis (*ca.* 365-275 BCE) was influenced by Buddhist thought. He had been preceded by the Romanian scholar Aram Frenkian (1957) who drew attention to the form of argument known as the *tetralemma* (Latin: *quadrilemma*) used both by the Buddha and by Pyrrho. A classic example of this form of argument occurs in *Samannaphala-Sutta* D 1 58:

“Sanjaya Belatthiputta asked me ‘is there another world?’ ... That is not what I think. I do not say it is so, I do not say it is otherwise, I do not say it is not so, and I do not say it is not so. Is there no other world? Is it that there both is and is not another world? Is it that there neither is nor is not another world?”

Nagarjuna, writing *ca.* 100 CE, uses the same form of argument to describe the Buddha following his *parinirvana*: “Having passed into Nirvana, the Victorious Conqueror/ is neither said to be existent/ nor said to be non-existent./ Neither both nor neither are said”¹.

Pyrrho (as reported by the later philosopher Aristocles of Messene) used the same form of argument in order to induce the radical suspension of belief which, in the

¹ Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarika* 25.17; transl. GARFIELD 1995.

Sceptical view, is supposed to induce freedom from anxiety, tranquillity. He says “one should not trust in our sense-perceptions or our opinions, but should be without opinions, uninclined, and unwavering, saying about each single thing that it no more is than is not, or it both is and is not, or it neither is nor is not”².

Since Flintoff wrote, other scholars have developed the argument and reinforced it, Adrian Kuzminski in two books –*Pyrrhonism: How the Greeks reinvented Buddhism* (2008) and *Pyrrhonian Buddhism* (2021)–, Christopher Beckwith in his *Greek Buddha* (2015), and Giorgios Halkias in two papers of 2014 and 2020 –the second of them published in a collection edited by Oren Hanner and entitled *Buddhism and Scepticism*. I have also proposed this in my book *The Greek Experience of India*³. But there have been dissenters. Most notably, the classical scholar Richard Bett (2000, 171-177) examined the resemblances of Buddhist and Sceptical doctrine and concluded (p. 176) “it is extremely difficult to believe that anything as abstruse as a quadrilemma could possibly have been communicated in any remotely intact form from the Indian ‘naked wise men’ to Pyrrho”. I take issue with this assertion on several grounds. First, the *tetralema* does not seem to me a particularly abstruse idea, though it is certainly paradoxical. Secondly, Bett assumes that Pyrrho’s only exposure to Indian philosophers took place on an afternoon in Taxila. Thirdly, he assumes that the naked philosophers of Taxila were purveying Buddhist doctrine. The second and third points are the important ones.

We must not forget that Pyrrho, who travelled with his teacher Anaxarchus on Alexander’s expedition, spent six months with the rest of the court on board ship on the voyage down the Indus from November 326 to July 325 BCE. Also in Alexander’s entourage at this time was the renegade Naked Philosopher Calanus, who had abandoned the disputations in Taxila to join the king, seduced, some said, by the comforts of his court –Anaxarchus, too, was accused by contemporaries of being too in love with the luxuries the king could provide. In those six months of voyaging, I cannot imagine that the king and his philosophers did not gather on the poop deck of the royal ship to learn something about each other’s languages and to apply them in philosophical discussions.

But as regards the third point, there is little reason to characterise the Naked Philosophers of Taxila as Buddhists. Some have thought they might be Jains. Most likely is that they professed a variety of creeds⁴. I have come to think it likely that Calanus was an Ajivika, a sect much despised by both Buddhists and Jains for its combination of extreme ascetic mortification with bursts of decadent hedonism⁵. All we are told of the Naked Philosophers in what survives of the account of Onesicritus, who interviewed them, is that they were vegetarians, receive alms, sought to eliminate pleasure and pain from the soul, and regarded death as a release. These features are true of almost any Indian *sadhu*. Calanus, however, was surely in a position to outline the salient features of all these creeds to his Greek companions, and it seems to have been the Buddhism that impressed Pyrrho.

So, if Bett’s argument is based on false premises, and we may regard Pyrrho as an inheritor of Buddhist ideas, there is a danger of circular argument and of using what little we know of Pyrrho as evidence for the state of Buddhism in his time. Buddhist philosophy was elaborated through the centuries following Buddha’s death (late fifth

² Eus. *PE*. 14.18.1-5; STONEMAN 2019, 348-349.

³ STONEMAN 2019, 346-357.

⁴ STONEMAN 1995.

⁵ STONEMAN 2019, 303-307; the standard survey of the Ajivikas is BASHAM 1951.

century BCE?) up until the *Madhyamaka* of Nagarjuna (*ca.* 100 CE) and for many centuries afterwards⁶, while our fullest source for Scepticism is the works of Sextus Empiricus, probably third century CE. Are we in danger of reading into Pyrrho –or into early Buddhism?– ideas that were only developed several centuries later?

Perhaps surprisingly, I think this is unlikely. The essential ideas of Buddhism seem to have sprung fully formed from the head of the Buddha himself. Beckwith (2015, 169), it is true, has suggested that even the Pali canon is an unreliable witness for original Buddhism; but I would say there is a remarkable consonance between the texts that purport to be records of the Buddha’s own teaching and conversation. We have already noted the presence of the *tetralemma* in an early text, and it may be found in other places too. Nagarjuna says firmly: “Everything is real and is not real, both real and not real, neither real nor not real. This is the Lord Buddha’s teaching” (*Mulamadhyamakakarika* 18.8.49). The fundamental results of the Buddha’s long journey of discovery are the Four Noble Truths –suffering, the causes of suffering (craving and attachment), the cessation of suffering, and the path to the cessation of suffering. This end is to be achieved by understanding the non-existence of self, the impermanence of all things, and dependent arising: that is, nothing has an existence of itself but only as a result of something else. Beckwith (2015, 169) asserts that “it is widely accepted that the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path are later inventions”, and goes on to apply the same claim to the First Sermon. But this claim is too extreme. For example, the verses that form the opening of the collection of *Jatakas* (Former lives of the Buddha) are probably to be attributed to the fifth century BCE⁷, and in their listing of the Ten Perfections, number eight is Truth, which must be read as the Four Noble Truths⁸. This part of the doctrine, then, existed in the earliest stages of Buddhism, prior to the arrival of the Greeks.

The *Jatakas*, like the philosophical discussions, took shape over several centuries on the basis of the fundamental insights of the Buddha. But if we seek evidence of the Buddhist doctrines of the earliest centuries, the archaeological record can help us. The Maurya emperor Aśoka (third century BCE) is received as a promoter of Buddhism, but his inscriptions preaching the *dharma* are notoriously ambiguous as regards their doctrinal affiliation. It is hard to read them as evidence for the detail, let alone the philosophical detail, of early Buddhist ideas. We are on firmer ground with the sculptural programmes of major early Buddhist sites including Sanchi, Amaravati, and Kanaganahalli. The stupa at Sanchi belongs to the third century BCE –as do the earliest paintings in the Ajanta caves–, and though developed over succeeding centuries, the subjects depicted include a number of *Jataka* stories, as well as scenes from the life of the Buddha including his birth, his enlightenment, his first sermon (represented by the wheel atop a pillar), and his decease⁹. Most significantly for our purposes, the scenes include a group of musicians, generally identified as ‘Greeks’ from their style of dress and instruments, which may be evidence for the participation of Greek craftsmen among the sculptors of the monument; and a scene generally taken to be King Aśoka, supported by his two wives, overcome with emotion on visiting the Bodhi-tree at Bodhgaya. This latter identification is supported by a similar representation at Kanaganahalli, where the king is identified in a caption¹⁰. As Monika Zin (2018, 27)

⁶ WESTERHOFF, 2018.

⁷ SHAW 2006, liv-lv; CONE–GOMBRICH 1977.

⁸ The Four Noble Truths are also extolled in *Dhammapada* 190-192: transl. CARTER–PALIHAWADANA 2000.

⁹ MITRA 2003, 46-47.

¹⁰ ZIN 2018, 192 pl. 24.

writes of this iconography, which is similar at all three sites, “[t]he reliefs at Kanaganahalli can be utilised in an attempt to discover the folklore tradition which preceded the literary sources”. At Amaravati, too, scenes from the life of the Buddha are prominent, not only his mother’s dream and her giving birth to the Buddha, but the First Sermon, represented by a *dharmacakra* above an empty throne¹¹. Though sculpture cannot represent doctrines, the evoking of the First Sermon is evidence for the currency of its content at this time (third century BCE). The archaeological record, then, from the third century BCE onwards, provides evidence of concerns directly arising from the fundamental insights attributed to the Buddha. It would appear that we can be confident that the doctrines that are supposed to have influenced Pyrrho were current at the time that Pyrrho was exposed to Indian philosophy. Both Pyrrho’s ideas and the Buddha’s were criticised and developed in detail in successive generations in their respective Indian and Hellenic traditions.

I have argued in another paper¹², which I can do no more than summarise here, that Alexander’s companion Anaxarchus, who is described in the sources as a pupil of Democritus and the teacher of Pyrrho, was similarly influenced by Buddhism. We know rather little of Anaxarchus, as none of his writings survives at first hand¹³. I have already drawn attention to a possible temperamental resemblance to Calanus. About his ideas, we know that he expounded the doctrine that there are infinite worlds –which prompted Alexander to regret that he had not yet conquered even one of them. Though this idea can be interpreted in various ways, one possibility is that it is derived from the Buddhist idea of an infinite succession of worlds. Anaxarchus is also said to have “likened existing things to a scene-painting and supposed them to resemble the impressions experienced in sleep or madness”. That is, the world is illusory. The corollary of this is that if nothing exists, including no self, it is impossible to decide how to behave in daily life. One can only behave ‘as if’, like an actor playing a part. Thus, the strict Sceptic is enacting a Buddhist life. The question whether, if there is no self, persons exist, is one that was exercised by early Buddhists and was answered affirmatively by the Pudgalavada school of Buddhism, which however did not survive the hostile arguments of its opponents¹⁴.

Anaxarchus’ reputation for indifference recurs in the story of his reaction when being tortured to death by being pounded with iron pestles in a grain mortar: “Pound the pouch of Anaxarchus, you pound not Anaxarchus”, he is supposed to have said¹⁵. This utterance can be interpreted in several ways. It was very popular with ancient Christian writers, who saw it as analogous to the endurance of the Christian martyr; this, in turn, had developed from the Stoic attitude to suffering, expressed, for example, by Epictetus who imagines a tyrant threatening the Stoic sage: “I will cast you into prison’. ‘My wretched body, rather’ [...] What should we have at hand on such occasions? Why, what else than to know what is mine, and what is not mine, what is within my power and what is not?” (Arr. *Epict* 1.1.24 and 21)¹⁶. But some Roman philosophers, including Cicero and Seneca, believed this philosophic indifference to suffering and death derived from Epicurus’ belief that the sage is actually happy under torture. An Epicurean, as an Atomist, could also hold that the tortured sage has no self,

¹¹ KNOX 1992, 130.

¹² STONEMAN forthcoming.

¹³ The fragments are collected by DORANDI 1994.

¹⁴ PRIESTLEY 1989.

¹⁵ On Anaxarchus’ death, see BERNARD 1984.

¹⁶ A similar argument is used by Dandamis in response to Alexander’s threats in Palladius, *Life of the Brahmins* 2.17; see STONEMAN 2012, 42-43.

there is only a congeries of atoms being rearranged. This view was also held by some Indian ascetics¹⁷. It is, I believe, possible that Anaxarchus' endurance of suffering was encouraged by what he had learnt of Buddhism, and his experience of Calanus' own self-immolation in Pasargadae.

My final example is of a rather different kind. The Indo-Greek king Menander, who reigned in the second century BCE, some 150 years after Alexander's expedition, became the hero of a canonical Buddhist work known as the *Questions of King Milinda*. In this, the king poses a series of questions about Buddhist doctrine to the sage Nagasena. The questions are well-conceived and enable the sage to expound all the major Buddhist doctrines quite systematically. The subject of no-self comes up right at the start of the discussion (40), followed by the puzzle about the continuity of persons (63: if the self is not continuous, how does the doctrine of karma work?)¹⁸. Later come the subjects of craving and perception (82-86), and the technical question of inference, which Greek Sceptics continued to worry about for centuries¹⁹. The *tetralemma* makes an appearance (206), and the idea of Pyrrhonian indifference is discussed (297). The idea of the body as a mirror, a field of dreams, is also discussed (2.160). One might almost say that Milinda is putting just the questions that Anaxarchus or Pyrrho might have put to Calanus; and from the Buddhist Nagasena he is getting well-argued answers.

Some earlier scholars believed that the *Milinda-Questions* might originally have been a Greek work, translated into Pali²⁰. This idea has been thoroughly discredited by now, not least by Olga Kubica (2014, 197-199; 2016; 2023, 129-163); but the possibility remains that the work reflects something genuine about the historical Menander²¹. On his death, the king was revered, and his relics were distributed among a number of stupas, suggesting that he was accepted as a real hero of Buddhism. It is not far-fetched to imagine him taking an interest in Buddhism, the dominant religious tradition in north-west India, and engaging in discussion with sages, as so many rulers before and after him, from Alexander and Aśoka to Akbar and Dara Shikoh²², would do. Thus, Menander takes his place among the Greeks who were influenced by Buddhist philosophy.

In this short paper, I have been able to do no more than throw out a few ideas and suggest a few pointers in the study of Greek interactions with Buddhist philosophy. But I hope I have persuaded you that the fact of such interaction is incontrovertible. In a controversial lecture, entitled *Why is there philosophy in India?*, Johannes Bronkhorst (1999) proposed that philosophy developed in India developed as a result of the arrival of the Greeks, who first showed the Indians how to construct a logical argument and to debate a point; before that, according to Bronkhorst, Indian thought had consisted of woolly cosmological speculation and unprovable ideas like karma²³. To me, it is clear that the Buddha was not only a great religious teacher but also a sharp and analytical thinker. The debates that his preaching initiated were truly philosophical, and they

¹⁷ FILLIOZAT, 1967.

¹⁸ On the inescapability of karma, see *Dhammapada* 127-128.

¹⁹ The question arises because of the insistence of Epicurus (among others) that all sense-perceptions are 'true' or 'real', because they are our only source of information about the outside world. Yet it seems that some perceptions can be false. The literature is considerable; for my own discussion, see STONEMAN 2020.

²⁰ TARN 1951, 432-436; DERRETT 1967.

²¹ A thorough historiographical survey is BOPEARACHCHI 1990. See also KUBICA 2014, 192-194.

²² SCHIMMEL 2004, 113-115.

²³ SEAFORD 2020 rejects this characterization of pre-Buddhist thought and finds the *Upanishads*, for example, also philosophically sharp.

found fertile ground among the Greeks who encountered them. It may not be too much to say that Indian Buddhist philosophy and Greek Scepticism are parallel developments from the same roots.

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