

## A View from the Crossroads: A Dialogue

Paul Fuller

University of Sydney

&

David Webster

University of Gloucestershire

ABSTRACT: A dialogue, somewhat in the spirit of Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot*, exploring early Buddhist attitudes to views, especially as in the *Māgandiya-sutta* of the *Sutta-nipāta* (vv.835-847). Is the aim to have right view, or go beyond views; or is right view about not being attached to any view?

### PROLOGUE: A CHANCE MEETING

The storm had ended. All around the forest, water rolled down leaves until it found the soft earth and began the next, darker, phase of its never-ending journey. Small patches of steam rose where the sun found a path through the foliage.

Drowning out all the small sounds of the forest, the gurgling earth as it swallowed the water, the insects resuming their business, was the clumsy and unmistakable sound of a human. Two, in fact, although as yet neither was aware of the presence of the other. From a distance the two men would have looked identical, with rain-streaked orange robes, shaven heads, and a steady, thoughtful gait. A closer observer would notice not only that one was heavier, and the other slightly taller, but also that their deeply lined faces told different stories. Now is not, however, the time for these faces to relate what has shaped them, for both have sought to leave behind them that which caused them to take up the robes, to go forth from home into homelessness. Both wished to find a space beyond memory in which to take up mental residence, as part of the very act of undertaking physical rootlessness.

Now, as the forest seemed to luxuriate in an almost post-coital sense of release, the two monks headed towards the same point, a crossroads where the paths they were taking intersected. They had both started their journey at the same point, a small hermitage on a treeless hill in the east of the vast forest. Nevertheless, within a large forest the paths are many and twisting, and now, despite leaving an hour apart, the two converged on a single point.

There was no large clearing where the roads crossed; just a few stumps indicated the human efforts made to allow passage through the thick growth. It was because of the thick tangle of vegetation that the collision happened. Both monks were walking with part of their consciousness trained on the path, but also with a significant portion turned inwards, pondering the words they had heard spoken at the hermitage. Both trains of inward contemplation were rapidly derailed when their bodies thundered solidly together, the slight difference in height preventing a painful clash of heads. After some inner attention to prevent the arising of states of anger both monks smiled, and while they looked at each other a recognition passed between them — a recognition that they would not have walked into each other had not both of them been so lost in thought. As fairly systematic thinkers, both were also able to deduce that their preoccupations must have sprung from a single source: the *Dhamma*-talk at the hermitage. Without a word yet spoken, both monks found a smooth tree-stump and, at the same time, sat.

#### THE MĀGANDIYA-SUTTA

It was the *Māgandiya-sutta* (Sn 835–47) that both were contemplating, and it was this *sutta* that had led them both to very different conclusions. In the *sutta* the Buddha tells Māgandiya that purity is not attained by views, learning or knowledge, or by precepts and vows, *nor* by absence of these.<sup>1</sup> It is by non-attachment and non-dependence that one achieves calm (*santi*). Māgandiya contends that if purity is not found by means of views, learning or knowledge, or by virtuous conduct and vows, *nor* by absence of these, then the teaching is ‘foolish’ (*momuham eva*, Sn 840). In the *sutta* the Buddha replies to Māgandiya in the following way:

Dependent upon view, inquiring, Māgandiya, ... you have become infatuated in respect of what has been grasped, and hence you have not even the slightest notion [of what I am talking about]. Therefore you regard [it] as foolish.<sup>2</sup>

Neither Bhikkhu Vladimir nor Bhikkhu Estragon, now sat at the crossroads, regarded these teachings as foolish, but did regard the other’s interpretation of them as misrepresenting the teachings of the Buddha. Bhikkhu Vladimir understood that the *sutta* was advising the abandonment of all wrong-views, not of

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1. *na diṭṭhiyā na sutiyā na ñāṇena (Māgandhiyā ti bhagavā)*  
*sīlabbatenāpi na suddhim’āha*  
*adiṭṭhiyā asutiyā aññāṇā*  
*asīlatā abbatā no pi tena*, Sn.839
  2. *diṭṭhiṅca nissāya anupucchamāno ...*  
*samuggahītesu pamoham āga*  
*ito ca nāddakkhi añum pi saññaṃ*  
*tasma tuvaṃ mohuhato dahāsi*, Sn 841.

right-view itself: the *Dhamma* itself. Bhikkhu Estragon took the *sutta* as pointing to the abandonment of *all* views, wrong or right. The positions of Bhikkhu Vladimir and Bhikkhu Estragon suggest two understandings of views: the opposition and no-views understandings. Should one adopt right-view in opposition to wrong-views; should one strive to attain right-view and abandon wrong-views (Bhikkhu Vladimir's position)? Or is the aim of the path the relinquishment of all views, wrong or right (Bhikkhu Estragon's position)?

#### A DIALOGUE OF *DIṬṬHI* 1: THE CASE FOR 'NO VIEWS'

*Bhikkhu Vladimir:* In the *Māgandiya-sutta*, when the Buddha says that 'purity is not got by views', he means that purity is not got by means of wrong-views. For, as the Buddha goes on to say, purity is not got by absence of views, for purity is clearly achieved by right-views.

*Bhikkhu Estragon:* My friend, you are clearly misrepresenting the word of the Buddha. For when he says that 'purity is not got by views', he means precisely that: one cannot achieve the goal by means of views; by holding any view, wrong or right.

*Bhikkhu Vladimir:* So there is no such thing as right-view?

*Bhikkhu Estragon:* I don't deny that. But tell me Bhikkhu Vladimir, how do you understand right-view, what exactly is right-view?

*Bhikkhu Vladimir:* In the *Sammādiṭṭhi-sutta* (MN I 46–55), sixteen right views are described. These can be summarized in the following way:

Knowledge of what is wholesome and unwholesome (*kusala/akusala*):

'When a noble disciple understands the unwholesome and the root of the unwholesome, the wholesome and the root of the wholesome, in that way he is one of right-view, whose view is straight, who has perfect confidence in the *Dhamma* and who has arrived at this true *Dhamma*'.

Knowledge of the four noble truths (*ariyasacca*):

'When a noble disciple understands suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the way to the cessation of suffering, in that way he is one of right-view, whose view is straight, who has perfect confidence in the *Dhamma* and who has arrived at this true *Dhamma*'.

Knowledge of dependent-origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*):

'When a noble disciple understands ageing and death, birth, being, attachment, craving, feeling, contact, the six-fold base, name and form, consciousness, constructions, ignorance, the origin of ignorance, the cessation of ignorance, and the way to the cessation of ignorance, in that way he is one of right-view, whose view is straight, who has perfect confidence in the *Dhamma* and who has arrived at this true *Dhamma*'.

Add to these the right-view that ‘actions have consequences’ and this is how I understand right-view. One should strive to attain right-view, to achieve accomplishment in view (*diṭṭhi-sampadā*). Practising right-view, one becomes accomplished in view (*diṭṭhi-sampanna*), and cultivates purification of view (*diṭṭhi-visuddhi*). In spite of this, are you not suggesting that right-view is without value?

*Bhikkhu Estragon*: I do not deny that right-view has value, but rather I suggest that the abandonment of all views, the practice of no-views, is the true aim of the *Dhamma*. One may achieve right-view, but have no understanding of the teachings; one may achieve right-view, but still crave and be attached; one may achieve right-view, but still lack understanding. You yourself mention purification of view, but it is stated clearly in the *Rathavinīta-sutta* (MN I 145–51) that purification of view (*diṭṭhi-visuddhi*) is for purification by overcoming doubt (*kaṅkhā-vitarāṇa-visuddhi*). It has, at most, this aim, and once it has achieved this it should be abandoned. Better still, it should never be taken-up. All views are a source of craving, they lead to *dukkha*.

*Bhikkhu Vladimir*: So the *Dhamma* leads to *dukkha*?

*Bhikkhu Estragon*: All attachment leads to *dukkha*. I don’t like to simply keep citing texts to you, I would prefer my actions and conduct to do the talking, but allow me one more example. In the *Duṭṭhaṭṭheka-sutta* (Sn 780–87) the Buddha says the following:

An involved person is indeed involved in disputes in respect of doctrines, but how, about what, could one dispute with one who is not involved? He has taken up or laid down nothing. He has shaken off all views in this world.<sup>3</sup>

This is quite clear to me: the follower of the Buddha has abandoned *all* views, not only wrong-views, but *every* view.

*Bhikkhu Vladimir*: No, the follower of the Buddha abandons all wrong-views, not *all* views. The one on the Buddhist path has shaken off all views in this sense.

*Bhikkhu Estragon*: This is not true, for later in the *Sutta-nipāta* it is said that the brahmin should ‘not fall back on any view’ (*diṭṭhim pi so na pacceṭi kiñci*, Sn 800) or ‘adopt a view’ (*diṭṭhim anādiyānaṃ*, Sn 802). Now this, to me, is pretty unambiguous stuff. I grant you the ordinary person may realise some benefit from right-view. They may think that ‘actions have consequences’, and this may be wholesome: it may influence their conduct, and lead them towards non-attachment. But how can one hold the right-view, the content of which is the four truths? What is the nature of the right-view of dependent-origination?

3. *upayo hi dhammesu upeti vādam,  
anūpayaṃ kena kathaṃ vaddeya,  
attaṃ nirattaṃ na hi tassa atthi:  
adhosi so diṭṭhi-m-idh’eva sattā ti*, Sn 787.

Are you suggesting that the Buddhist path aims at assent to certain propositions?

*Bhikkhu Vladimir:* Indeed, the follower of the Buddha follows the teachings of the Buddha. We strive to understand the right-view as shown to us by him.

*Bhikkhu Estragon:* I think you misperceive again the teaching. Right view is a stepping stone to no-view. One abandons wrong-view for right view, but then must abandon even this.

#### A DIALOGUE OF *DIṬṬHI* 2: THE CASE FOR 'RIGHT-VIEW'

*Bhikkhu Vladimir:* You are so full of those Mahāyāna ideas aren't you? I guess you think we should abandon the Raft completely and not practise any *Dhamma*?<sup>4</sup> We should be so detached that we don't have a path, for the path is relative, a skilful means. Let's all practise no-*dhammas*! Don't you think this is taking things a bit beyond the logical? There is right-view. I just told you what it is. Actions have consequences; knowing what is wholesome and unwholesome; the four noble truths and the doctrine of dependent-origination. There, that is right-view. One should practise right-view. Granted, these views are different in nature.

Right-view is not holding to the doctrine, 'actions have consequences', but the realization that 'actions have consequences', and the conduct of the one who has this insight is the practice of right-view. I advise those on the Buddhist path to strive to attain right-view in this sense: right *seeing*, which is then expressed in right practice.

The four noble truths are an expression of right-view. But a person can hear the four noble truths a thousand times, and not attain right-view. Further, a person may understand the four noble truths as a series of Buddhist doctrines but still not attain right-view. No, to attain right-view a person must have an insight into suffering and its cessation. And this insight must change all his views about phenomena — this is the attainment of right-view.

At stream-attainment a person abandons all views – viewpoints, theories and opinions – and is no longer able to adhere to any view – this after all is right-view, right seeing, free of attachment. Right-view is this non-attached attitude.

*Bhikkhu Estragon:* I'm glad you are mentioning the stages of the path. For after stream-attainment, as you say, all attachment to views are abandoned. It makes me think: are we talking about different stages of the path? Are you talking about the path and I the goal of the path itself? Are you talking about how to get there and I what it is like when we arrive? ...

4. See Gombrich (1996, 25).

## A MEDITATIVE INTERLUDE

... Maybe, Bhikkhu Vladimir, we should agree not to dispute, maybe, Bhikkhu Vladimir, we could sit for a few moments and reflect. I will reflect on what you have informed me of right-view and you, if you will, on what I have said of no-views.

*The thoughts of Bhikkhu Estragon:* My companion in the holy life has taught me that one striving for realization should not abandon all views. But realization involves abandoning all attachment to views. Before stream attainment one should strive to cultivate the view that our actions have consequences. This view will affect our conduct and, in those who reflect on the nature of their conduct, and who change the way that they act, a calmness will arise leading to a different way of seeing the world, a new insight; one's view will change. At stream-attainment all views are abandoned, that is, there are no views that are objects of attachment, and, so Bhikkhu Vladimir informs me, this is right-view. This is a view of phenomena that has none of the characteristics of wrong-view: rigidity, attachment, grasping, craving or desire. This right-view must be something to attain.

*The thoughts of Bhikkhu Vladimir:* My companion in the holy life has taught me that views do not lead to purity; that all attachment leads to *dukkha*; and that one should strive to abandon all views. Well, all views do lead to *dukkha*, except right-view, which is not a view at all. The four noble truths are not doctrines, the teaching of not self is not something to believe in – to hold the view 'there is no self' is wrong-view; all views are wrong views. All views are a form of attachment. At stream-attainment, all views are abandoned. This is right-view, which is no view, or at least a step towards the relinquishment of all positions. It seems that I may be talking about the path, which involves right-view, and my friend the goal, which involves no views.

## A DIALOGUE RESUMED — A DILEMMA SOLVED?

*Bhikkhu Estragon:* You were right.

*Bhikkhu Vladimir:* Not as right as you.

[Both laugh]

*Bhikkhu Estragon:* I wish to attain right-view.

*Bhikkhu Vladimir:* I will strive to attain no-view.

*Bhikkhu Estragon:* Right-view is an insight beyond all views.

*Bhikkhu Vladimir:* To hold to no-views is the aim of the path. It is true insight. This insight is beyond all attachment.

## DEPARTURE: A RESUMPTION OF PATHS

Both monks sat in silence for a time; a time measured by neither of them, as they sought to establish calm, wary that the stimulation of debate brought hazards also in the wake of insight.

At the same moment, both rose and smoothed their robes, and with an almost imperceptible nod to each other, resumed the paths they were taking. To the observer, they were as they were before. Both the monks, if they knew anything at all, knew that nothing is ever as it is before.

## ABBREVIATIONS

Sn *Sutta-nipāta*  
MN *Majjhima-nikāya*

## REFERENCES

Gombrich, R. 1996. *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*. London: Athlone.