

Buddhism and Soteriology: Research Implications of the *Cūḷamaḷunkya Sutta*

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Abstract: This paper argues that research in Buddhism must have a soteriological focus. To demonstrate this, an overview of the *Cūḷamaḷunkya Sutta* (MN 63) is presented. This *sutta* consists of a conversation between the Buddha and one of his students, and it reveals that Buddhism's topics of inquiry must address how one can be free from suffering. The implication of this conversation – the soteriological focus – seems to suggest that Buddhist research excludes topics in metaphysics, such as addressing the nature of the universe (if it has a beginning or an end, if it is finite or infinite, and so forth), or the nature of the self. Soteriology seems to suggest that ethics is the only focus of research in Buddhism; that is, to know how to be free from suffering, one must study how one should live and conduct oneself. Though this appears to be the case, this paper will show that research in Buddhism is not limited in this manner. Instead of excluding metaphysical research entirely, Buddhism instead excludes research that is done for its own sake; topics must therefore be researched for the sake of soteriology. Thus, the research implication of the *Cūḷamaḷunkya Sutta* is not that certain topics are unable to be researched, but rather that a qualification of soteriology is attached to topics of research.

Buddhism contains many topics of research, but none is as important as soteriology – that is, freedom from suffering. Buddhism's concern with the problem of suffering is evident in the Four Noble Truths, one of the well-known teachings of Buddhism. The first three truths discuss the nature of suffering and its relation to life, and the fourth truth teaches a path to be free from suffering (Rahula 16). It is therefore clear that Buddhism is fundamentally soteriological; however, the research implications of the soteriological nature of Buddhism are not so evident. This paper demonstrates that the soteriological focus in Buddhism does not limit its topics of research, but rather adds a qualification to Buddhist research.

To demonstrate this, an overview of the core teaching of the *Cūḷamaḷunkya Sutta* (henceforth MN 63) will be presented. This *sutta* consists of a conversation between the Buddha and one of his students, and it reveals that Buddhism's topics of inquiry must address how one can be free from suffering. The implication of this conversation – the soteriological focus – seems to suggest that Buddhist research excludes topics in metaphysics, such as addressing the nature of the universe (if it has a beginning or an end, if it is finite or infinite, and so forth), or the nature of the self. Soteriology seems to suggest that ethics is the only focus of research in Buddhism; that is, to know how to be free from suffering, one must study how one should to live and conduct oneself. Though this appears to be the case, this paper will show that research in Buddhism is not limited in this manner. Instead of excluding research in metaphysics entirely, Buddhism instead excludes research that is done for its own sake; topics must therefore be researched for the sake of soteriology. Thus, the research implication of MN 63 is not that certain topics are unable to be researched, but rather that a qualification of soteriology is attached to topics of research.

Cūḷamaḷunkya Sutta (MN 63)

A *sutta* – or *sūtra* in Sanskrit – is a discourse that contains a dialogue that is usually between the Buddha and his student(s). The Buddha is the founder of Buddhism, which is a philosophical-

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religious school of thought. There are many schools within Buddhism, and while these schools differ in some areas, they share key similarities. The term “Buddha” means “awakened,” and referring to the Buddha as such signifies an honorific manner of address. The title signifies the Buddha as someone who has attained enlightenment. Upon attaining enlightenment, the Buddha taught to others what he had learned. He addresses concerns that his students raise, and these dialogue-style discourses are presented in the *suttas*.

MN 63 begins with a student of the Buddha’s sitting in meditation. While the student was meditating, he reflected on how the Buddha never addressed some topics in metaphysics. Questions that the student was curious about included topics about the nature of the universe and the nature of the self. Since the student had not received answers to these questions, he decided to pose these questions to the Buddha. When the student poses his questions, the Buddha responds by saying that he never claimed to provide an answer to these questions. To explain the reason for the exclusion, the Buddha provides an allegory (MN 63.5), and this allegory presents the key teaching of this *sutta*.

The Buddha asks the student to consider a man who has gone to a forest to hunt. As the man was hunting, he was suddenly struck by a poisoned arrow. In order to heal him, the man’s friends bring a doctor to see him. However, the man says that he will not let the doctor treat him until he obtains answers to some questions. The man says that he must know the height of the one who had shot him – the man questions if the shooter was tall, short, or of a middling height. He also asks if the one who shot him lives in a village or a city. He asks other questions as well, encompassing topics beyond the nature of the shooter. For instance, the man asks if he was shot with a longbow or a crossbow, and he asks about the construction and makeup of the arrowhead that he was shot with.

The point of this allegory is to show that when the man is struck by the poisoned arrow, there is an important question to ask, and this is the question about how the man can heal himself from the wound. That is, when struck by the arrow, one must not ask questions about the nature of the arrow, the bow, or the shooter, but instead seek to find ways to be cured from the ailment. This allegory relates to the condition of one’s life. The Buddha notes that in life, there are many questions that one can ask, but it is necessary to consider the important questions. He mentions, therefore, that he only addresses questions that discuss how to be free from suffering (MN 63.6-7).

Research Implications of MN 63

According to MN 63, it is evident that some questions are indeed unanswered because they do not address the problem of suffering. The questions posed by the student reveal that topics in metaphysics are not conducive to overcoming the problem of suffering; hence, the Buddha did not address them. In noting that the important questions must be researched, and that among these important questions, those addressing metaphysics are not included, it may seem that metaphysics is not a topic to be researched in Buddhism. Thus, the research implication of MN 63 is that research into metaphysics must be excluded. The question of how one can be free from suffering seems, rather, to be a topic of ethics. The question of how one should live in order to be free from suffering is a topic that belongs to ethics. This indicates the importance of ethics in Buddhist research, though at the expense of other topics of inquiry.

The idea that research into Buddhist ethics should not be undertaken alongside metaphysics is noted by Damien Keown (Keown 19), a prominent scholar of Buddhist ethics. Keown does not specify MN 63 when making his claim, but it may be that this *sutta*, or *suttas* presenting a similar teaching, are what Keown had in mind when asserting that research into Buddhist ethics excludes metaphysics. Even if Keown did not have a particular *sutta* in mind when making his claim, his point

about the exclusion of metaphysics is still noteworthy as a potential implication of MN 63. As he mentions in an endnote, an approach to ethics is sidetracked by the inclusion of metaphysical principles (Keown 233). This point fits the teaching of MN 63, as the *sutta* seems to suggest that topics in metaphysics should not be researched, since they do not address how to be free from suffering. The sufficiency of Keown's claim will not be contested here. The point of discussing Keown's claim is that the Buddha's exclusion of topics in metaphysics in MN 63 can be used to develop certain interpretations of Buddhism that may not be correct – for instance, Keown develops a theory of ethics that does not address metaphysics, which is a claim that can be contested.

Overall, one can conclude that the research implication of MN 63 is that metaphysics has no place as a topic of research in Buddhism – either by itself, or alongside other topics of Buddhist inquiry. Since the main purpose of Buddhism is freedom from suffering, it follows that this soteriological goal relies on discussing topics in ethics and not metaphysics. This, however, is a flawed understanding of MN 63's teaching, and this produces a flawed understanding of Buddhism. In what follows, it will be seen that Buddhism does not exclude research into metaphysics. This will be shown through a chapter from a *sutta* titled *Khandhasamyutta Sutta* (SN 22.59.7). It will therefore be evident that the research implication of MN 63 must be reconsidered.

***Khandhasamyutta Sutta* (SN 22.59.7)**

In this *sutta*, the Buddha discusses the nature of the self with a group of monks. The Buddha tells the monks that the body is not the self, and to demonstrate this, the Buddha considers if the opposite is true. He considers that if the body is indeed the self, then the body would not bring about afflictions. That is, if the body is the self, then every aspect of it could be controlled and made to produce favourable conditions. However, since the body brings about afflictions and suffering, it cannot be the self since the body is beyond one's control. The Buddha provides the same argument for other elements that may be considered as the self, such as feelings, thoughts, and consciousness. He notes that these are also beyond one's control, and therefore these cannot be the self (SN 22.59.7).

The Buddha's argument is not explained in detail here, nor is the validity of his argument considered. This is because for the purpose of this paper, the importance is not on the argument itself, but rather on the topic of the argument. In this argument, the Buddha is discussing the nature of the self, and this topic belongs to the field of metaphysics. This appears to contradict MN 63's claim that metaphysics is not conducive to the soteriological goal of Buddhism. This is because, as mentioned in MN 63, the Buddha's teachings are intended to help others be free from suffering – anything he teaches must have a soteriological significance. Thus, the teachings of metaphysics in SN 22.59.7 must have a soteriological import. Therefore, to reconcile the points from these two *suttas*, it is necessary to reconsider MN 63's research implication.

Conclusion: Soteriology as the Research Implication

The discussion of SN 22.59.7 shows the presence of metaphysics in the Buddha's teachings, thereby showing that metaphysics must be conducive for Buddhism's soteriological purpose – otherwise, the Buddha would not have taught it. Therefore, rather than drawing the conclusion that soteriology is the focus of Buddhist research at the expense of other topics of inquiry, one must instead see that soteriology is merely the principal aspect of all research. So, when the Buddha did not answer questions about the origin of the universe, he only did so because this question was not addressed with soteriology in mind; it was addressed for its own sake. Thus, MN 63 does not imply

that entire topics of research are excluded, but rather that the goal, or purpose of research is narrowed.

In relation to the field of Buddhist ethics, instead of arguing like Keown does – that Buddhist ethics must exclude research into metaphysics – one must instead consider an interpretation of ethics that first and foremost accounts for soteriology. Such an interpretation is presented by some scholars, and one interpretation is that of Jay Garfield's. Garfield argues that soteriology involves an understanding of the nature of reality, and this is an understanding of metaphysics. Ethics, in being soteriological, must therefore relate to the understanding of the nature of reality. Thus, Garfield argues that ethics aims to change one's perception of the world in order to attain an understanding of reality (Garfield 288), which leads one to be free from suffering. Overall, Garfield's interpretation presents a theory of ethics that accounts for the principal aspect of research in Buddhism. Commencing Buddhist research from the correct standpoint – which is soteriology rather than the exclusion of certain topics – enables a better understanding of not just ideas within Buddhism, but also of Buddhism itself.

Though this paper presents the importance of soteriology with a focus on its ethical implications, the same idea applies to other areas of research, such as epistemology or phenomenology. That is, any topic of Buddhist research must be undertaken for the purpose of soteriology and not for its own sake. In conclusion, what should be evident from the presented overview is that the Buddha's refusal to answer certain questions in MN 63 does not indicate an exclusion of these topics in research, but rather adds a qualification to Buddhist research. This qualification is at the heart of Buddhism – it is the soteriological goal of how one can be free from suffering. Therefore, the research implication of MN 63 is that research in Buddhism must have a soteriological focus.

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