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Conundrums of Buddhist Cosmology and Psychology

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Abstract

Despite the Buddha's renowned aversion to metaphysical-cum-cosmological speculation, ostensibly cosmological systems have proliferated in Buddhist traditions. Debates persist over how to interpret these systems, a central puzzle being the relation between apparently cosmological and psychological aspects. This article critically analyzes three main interpretive orientations, namely: psychologization, literalism, and the *one reality* view. After examining a tendency in the third of these to equivocate between talk of two co-referential *vocabularies* and talk of two corresponding *orders*, I discuss at length the debate between literalist and psychologizing approaches. The latter emphasize how accounts of "realms of existence" are most cogently read as figurative descriptions of mental states, whereas literalists argue that at least some of the accounts should be understood cosmologically, as descriptions of spatiotemporal regions. Notwithstanding weaknesses in some literalist arguments, the importance to Buddhist soteriology of a conception of rebirth beyond one's present life counts against psychologizing approaches that either ignore or downplay this importance. Returning to the one-reality view, I develop the idea that it is the *existential state* being described that constitutes the common factor between "cosmological" and "psychological" passages. Treating the texts in an overly literal-minded manner, I suggest, risks missing these descriptions' affective and conative significance.

Keywords

Buddhism – cosmology – literalism – psychology – realms of existence – rebirth

> Even specialists find it difficult to understand the structure of Buddhist cosmology. (Nakamura 1997:11)

One of the things for which Gautama the Buddha is renowned is his aversion to metaphysical or cosmological speculation, an aversion typified in the stories of how he responded (or declined to respond) when would-be followers posed to him questions of a metaphysical or cosmological nature.[1] Despite this purported aversion, however, Buddhist traditions have developed a vast corpus of what is widely regarded as cosmological and metaphysical speculative literature, among which are elaborate descriptions of various places or destinations (*gati*s) wherein one may be reborn,[2] depending on the ethical quality of one's actions (*karmāṇi*) in the present and in former lives.

Debates persist among scholars, some of whom are also themselves practitioners of Buddhism, over how the Buddhist cosmologies are to be interpreted. A central issue is that of how to understand the relation between what appear to be cosmological and psychological aspects of certain central ideas. As Rupert Gethin has pithily asserted, "Buddhist cosmology is at once a map of different realms of existence and a description of all possible experiences" (1998:120, 2004:186). But how or in what sense can it be both at once? Different interpreters have gone in different directions. Some approaches have occasionally been described as

[1] See, e.g., *Cūḷamāluṅkya Sutta* and *Aggivacchagotta Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2009:533–536, 590–594). For relevant discussion, see Hayes 1994:356–361; Schroeder 2001:28–36.

[2] More literally, *gati* means "a going, or bourne, a career" (Aung and Rhys Davids 1915:211 fn. 1).

instances of "demythologizing" (on the basis of a loose analogy with Rudolf Bultmann's demythologizing project in New Testament studies) or "psychologization" (McMahan 2008:45–57; Pedersen 2001); these approaches have emphasized the psychological aspect, maintaining that the accounts of "realms of existence" are really figurative descriptions of mental states, especially with regard to those mental states' affective and conative characteristics. Critics of these approaches, while admitting that descriptions of mental states are indeed central to Buddhist teachings, have accused the demythologizers and psychologizers of unwarranted reductionism. According to one version of this criticism, the Buddhist sources are unequivocally committed to cosmological theories in addition to psychological ones, and hence interpreting the cosmological vocabulary as merely figurative psychology is hermeneutically misguided. According to another version, there is a sense in which neither "cosmological" nor "psychological" appositely captures the meanings of the relevant passages in the Buddhist sources, which ought ultimately to be understood as describing a reality that outstrips both cosmology and psychology as normally construed; on this view, the texts ought instead to be regarded as "denoting … some neutral, though elusive, ground lying amidst the two" (Masefield 1983:76).

My discussion is intended to be of interest both to scholars of Buddhism and to Buddhist practitioners who wish to think through what it means to speak of such things as different rebirth destinations or realms of existence. Since Buddhist traditions are far from unique in having generated diverse ideas concerning ostensibly cosmological themes, the discussion may also have implications for other religious traditions, though I shall not have space to explore these in this article. My approach is both comparative and hermeneutical: comparative in the sense that I compare and contrast a variety of interpretive frameworks, and hermeneutical in the sense that my critical evaluation of those frameworks is directed toward an enhanced sensitivity to the requirements of an adequate understanding of

traditional doctrinal sources. As my background is in philosophy of religion and religious studies as well as in Indic philology, I draw upon each of these disciplines in my analysis. Although my focus in this article is textual rather than ethnographic, the interpretive questions I am raising and the analysis I provide do open up possibilities for empirical study, such as the investigation of how apparently cosmological discourse and imagery are understood among various Buddhist communities.

I begin by indicating the prodigiousness of what has come to be designated as Buddhist cosmology, a prodigiousness that strikes many modern readers as surprising in the light of the Buddha's purported aversion to metaphysical or cosmological speculation. In order to restrict the range of sources to a manageable selection, my discussion takes as its starting point some important themes articulated in Abhidharma texts, treating the multiplicity of "hell realms" (*naraka*s/*niraya*s) adumbrated in those texts as an illustrative example. I then outline three main interpretive orientations regarding Buddhist cosmology, to which I have already alluded above. These are: (i) psychologization, (ii) literalism, and (iii) the third position, which I call the *one reality* view. Some complications attach to expositions of the latter, and these will be highlighted in my discussion. The remainder of the article assesses the credibility of these respective orientations, critically examining certain arguments in favor of literalism and against psychologizing approaches, and then developing a more nuanced version of the one-reality view.

In the evaluative components of my discussion, the principal criteria of hermeneutical adequacy that I deploy are: first, sensitivity to figurative resonances within Buddhist textual sources; second, attentiveness to Buddhist soteriological discourse and practice; and third, internal consistency. Indicative of the first of these criteria is my response to literalizing construals of passages from the Pāli Nikāyas, in which I point out the general acceptance among scholars of a pervasive use of nonliteral forms of language in Buddhist discourse and

the need for openness to the possibility that such forms are in play when interpreting the particular texts under consideration. The second criterion comes to the fore in my response to psychologizing interpretations that significantly downplay or jettison entirely the notion of rebirth as consisting in a succession of distinct bodily lifetimes; by reconceptualizing rebirth exclusively or primarily in terms of the succession of thoughts or mental states within a single life, psychologizing approaches risk obliterating the ontological background against which it makes sense to seek a nirvāṇa that is characterized as release from the ongoing flow of saṃsāra. The third criterion, though present in the evaluation of all three interpretive positions, is especially pertinent to the one-reality view, whose proponents, while intending to explain how ostensibly cosmological and psychological vocabulary might be referring to "the same thing," repeatedly slip back into implying that there are in fact two discrete, though somehow correlated, orders of existence being denoted.

The concluding section summarizes my appraisal of the interpretive approaches, noting that the typological analysis of these approaches that I have provided is a useful preliminary exercise. It should alert us to the need for careful attention to the particularities of specific sources, recognizing their affective and conative content without assuming that this content is explicable in either purely literal or purely nonliteral terms.

Prodigious Cosmologies

It has been said of Indian cosmology in general that its "most discouraging feature … is not its fantastic and uncritical character but its complexity" (Gombrich 1975:110). Complexity is undoubtedly a feature of Buddhist cosmologies, both Indian and non-Indian. Whether we ought to feel discouraged by it is another matter, but it certainly presents challenges for any prospective interpreter. Since Buddhism is itself a vast constellation of different traditions and sub-traditions, any treatment of Buddhist cosmologies can hardly hope to be exhaustive

or even particularly comprehensive. My own discussion takes as its initial focus some ostensibly cosmological themes as they are presented in Abhidharma sources and in interpretations thereof, both early and modern. Subsequent sections will also make reference to the Pāli Nikāyas, but limitations of space preclude detailed consideration of other texts. In particular, relatively little attention will be given to specifically Mahāyāna materials.[3]

The Abhidharma is the body of work that attempts to systematize elements of the Buddha's teachings gleaned from reports of his discourses. According to its advocates, the Abhidharma is that which "leads one toward the highest reality" (Hayes 2010:3); according to more critical voices, it evinces a tendency to interpret the words attributed to the Buddha in unduly literalist ways (Gombrich 2006:ch. 3). Caution needs to be taken with regard to this latter contention, however, lest we beg the question against possible ways of reading the Abhidharma texts as themselves containing nonliteral renditions of Buddhist teachings. Although there are various schools of Abhidharma, the broad contours of their cosmologies are "substantially the same" (Gethin 2004:183). They generally offer a threefold cosmological model, comprising the "desire realm" (*kāmadhātu*), the "form realm" (*rūpadhātu*), and the "formless realm" (*arūpadhātu* or *ārūpyadhātu*), with each of these being divided and subdivided into multiple further realms.[4] The desire realm contains five, or in some accounts six, main destinations (*gati*s) in which one could potentially be reborn.[5] The five standard destinations are said to be populated by, respectively, (i) deities (*deva*s), (ii) humans beings (*manuṣya*), (iii) animals (*tiryañc*), (iv) spirits of the dead (*preta*s), and (v) the

[3] Although I shall later be citing some interpretive ideas from the well-known Vajrayāna Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa, these ideas are not specific either to Vajrayāna traditions or to Mahāyāna more generally.

[4] In addition to "realm," the Sanskrit and Pāli term *dhātu* is also sometimes translated as "sphere" or "world." As Gombrich notes, it was introduced into cosmology specifically by Buddhists, its more common meanings being "something like 'element', e.g. an essential ingredient of the body, or a grammatical root" (1975:133–134). Instead of *dhātu*, the terms *avacara* and *loka* are sometimes used, which are synonymous in this context (see, e.g., Nyanatiloka 1980:58–59, 173).

[5] For an indication of which sources favor five and which favor six *gati*s, see the translator's note in Vasubandhu 1991 II:500 n. 26.

damned who have been cast into hell (*naraka*).[6] The sixth destination that is sometimes added is that of demons or anti-gods (*asura*s), who "are considered inferior to human beings but superior to animals" (Sadakata 1997:54). Within the form realm there are, according to Vasubandhu (fourth century C.E.), seventeen further "places" (*sthāna*s), each occupied by successively higher deities and classified into four *dhyāna*s (AKBh 3.2b–d [1991 II:366]). Since the term *dhyāna* is characteristically understood to denote a state of meditative absorption, there is already a blurring of any supposed distinction between spatial and psychological categories here. In the case of the formless realm, Vasubandhu denies that it is a *sthāna* while nevertheless referring to each of its four divisions as an *āyatana*, a term whose most natural translations include "resting place" and "abode" (Monier-Williams 1899:148; see AKBh 3.3b [1991 II:366]).[7] This inevitably generates trouble for interpreters, who generally wish to maintain that the formless realm is not strictly cosmological since "it is completely detached from spatial concepts" while nevertheless continuing to use such terms as "abodes" to denote its subdivisions (Sadakata 1997:76).[8]

To illustrate the complexity of Buddhist cosmologies I shall here take the example of the various kinds of hell. The terms that are commonly translated as "hell" or "hell realm" are *naraka* and *niraya*. It is sometimes assumed that *naraka* is the Sanskrit term and *niraya* is the Pāli (e.g., Keown 2004:106). Although it is true that *niraya* is more common in the earliest sources and *naraka* in later ones (Braarvig 2009:259), in fact both terms occur in Sanskrit and

[6] See, e.g., Sadakata 1997:ch. 2, whose account is based primarily on the third chapter of the *Abhidharmakośa* and its *bhāṣya* (hereafter "AKBh"), which is in turn based on earlier sources (as noted by La Vallée Poussin 1911:130–131).

[7] For further possible translations of *āyatana*, see footnote 29 below.

[8] The interpretive situation becomes still more paradoxical when "abode" is used to translate *sthāna*. This leads Kloetzli (who is translating from La Vallée Poussin's French edition) to assert that "there are no abodes" in the *ārūpyadhātu* (1983:30).

in Pāli works.[9] Some translators prefer the term "purgatory" in order to indicate that these realms serve an expiatory function and that no one is doomed to remain in them for all time (Marasinghe 1974:47; Walshe 1995:40). However, similar expiatory functions could also be attributed to the three other "woeful" or "unhappy" (*apāya*) realms, namely those of the spirits of the dead, animals, and *asura*s respectively, for these too are places in which one is born for the purpose of expunging the demerit accumulated from previous sinful actions. As for the qualification that *naraka/niraya* is not a permanent destination, this same qualification applies equally to all the realms of Buddhist cosmology, since it is held that participants in saṃsāra (the "ongoing flow" of life) perpetually rise and fall in the hierarchy of beings until eventually achieving nirvāṇa (cf. Keown 2010:247–249).

As in Christian thought, Buddhist hells can be burning hot or freezing cold.[10] Vasubandhu identifies eight major hot hells and eight cold ones. Each of the former is adjoined by sixteen sub-hells, thus making a total of 136 hot hells. Added to the eight cold ones, this makes 144 hells overall. The descriptions of the hell realms, though terse, are nevertheless sufficiently gruesome to rival any product of Dante's or Bruegel's imagination. A flavor of them is provided in the following summary by Sadakata (1997:51–52):

> In the first sub-hell, evildoers are forced to walk over hot ash. In the second they wallow in a quagmire of corpses and excrement, and maggots infest their skin, chewing the bone to the marrow. The third is of three kinds:(a) the razor road, where evildoers have to walk along a road of upward-facing sword blades; (b) the razor forest, where leaves like blades fall when the wind blows, nearly severing the evildoers" arms and legs, which are then

[9] See Monier-Williams 1899:529, 553; Rhys Davids and Stede 1993:347, 369–370. The term *naraka*, for instance, occurs twice in *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 1.209 (Feer 1884), where Bodhi renders it as "an inferno" (2000:309).

[10] For discussion of Christian conceptions of hell, see Casey 2009, esp. chs 5–8. As Casey remarks, "Accounts of hell agree that its eternal fires are dark as well as light, cold as well as hot, all consuming while yet they do not consume" (215).

> pulled off and eaten by dogs with black spots; and (c) the forest of blades, where evildoers are forced at swordpoint to climb trees whose trunks are embedded with blades, so that if they try to climb up or down they are impaled, but if they stop hordes of ravens peck out and eat their eyes. The fourth is a hell in the form of a long, narrow moat or river of boiling water; [etc.].

What, we might wonder, are readers to make of descriptions such as these, or of the baroque system of multiple realms or levels of existence more generally? When Rudolf Bultmann declared that the New Testament needed to be "demythologized," one of the things that bothered him was the assumption of "a three-storied structure, with the earth in the centre, the heaven above, and the underworld beneath" (1972:1). But a mere three stories looks positively austere in comparison with the numerous levels and sublevels that we find in Buddhism.

Just as the debate surrounding Bultmann's demythologizing project involves conflicting theological claims concerning how literally certain elements of the New Testament worldview ought to be understood, so also among interpreters of Buddhism and among Buddhists themselves, both traditional and modern, are there disagreements over how literally we ought to take the accounts of different realms of existence. In the following section I begin my analysis of the various competing interpretations.

Three Interpretive Orientations

As one might expect, there is a broad spectrum of interpretations of Buddhist cosmological (or *ostensibly* cosmological) texts, ranging from what we might call the most to the least "literal." A simple schema cannot do justice to all the nuances between these diverse interpretations, but as a starting point I shall delineate three broad positions or orientations.

Each of these has been articulated most categorically in the modern, post-nineteenth-century, period, while nevertheless claiming for itself, either implicitly or explicitly, a high degree of authenticity as an exegetical approach to traditional sources as opposed to a revisionary reimagining of those sources. The first two of the orientations can be called *literalism* and *psychologization* respectively. The third is harder to name or define but is in some ways the most philosophically interesting; it tries by one means or another to overcome the dichotomy between the other two.

Virtually all interpreters of Buddhist texts, including literalists and psychologizers, agree on certain points. They agree, first, that one of the primary purposes of the Buddhist teachings is to outline practical methods of eradicating suffering from one's life, and second, that according to these teachings one of the central methods of achieving this purpose, at least for monks and nuns, is sustained meditation. The extent to which such meditative practice has been followed by monastic practitioners in reality remains an open question,[11] but that some traditional sources are indeed concerned with methods of meditation and with states of mind achieved thereby is hardly controversial. In short, it is widely agreed that psychological matters play a significant part in traditional Buddhist texts and that, in the case of passages that patently *seem* to be about psychological states, there is no need to view them as being about anything else.

The disagreements arise with regard to other passages, which on the face of it seem to be about phenomena that are not, as it were, internal to the meditator's mind, but are instead external and public — indeed, which seem to refer to the sorts of "realms of existence" that I have mentioned already. A literalist view is one that takes these passages to be descriptions of spatiotemporal locations and hence as having cosmological or cosmographical rather than exclusively psychological significance. So, for example, with regard to the lurid accounts of

[11] This and related themes are discussed in Sharf 1995.

hell realms that were summarized above, the literalist would understand these as descriptions of places with spatial and temporal dimensions that are supposed by the Buddhist authors and by a significant proportion of their traditional audiences to exist somewhere "out there" (or, in the case of the hells in particular, somewhere "*down* there," so many thousands of *yojana*s beneath the earth[12]) rather than to be figurative descriptions of psychological states.

The psychologizer, meanwhile, interprets both the explicitly psychological passages and the ostensibly cosmological ones as being best understood in psychological terms. So, on this view, the depictions of hell realms and other rebirth destinations should be read as figurative descriptions of psychological states. For the purpose of illustration, I shall here cite two examples from twentieth-century authors, though it would be a mistake to assume that this style of interpretation has no premodern forerunners. As Gethin (1997:189) reminds us, "the Buddhist tradition itself at an early date was quite capable of demythologizing," not least because the earliest narrative sources that were subjected to systematic interpretation themselves blend psychological descriptions with accounts of physically personified figures — in tales such as those in which Māra along with his armies and tempting daughters try to disrupt the Buddha's meditative absorption, for example (Gethin 1997:189–190). The examples that I offer here are from the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa and the Thai Buddhist philosopher-monk Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu. Despite the fact that Trungpa's background is in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism whereas Buddhadāsa's is in the Theravāda tradition, the views of these two exponents are in many respects remarkably similar. "The realms are predominantly emotional attitudes toward ourselves and our surroundings," writes Trungpa.

[12] Although *yojana* is a common unit of measurement in Buddhist literature, its precise length is unknown. Gombrich notes that one *yojana* is either "about nine miles" or "just half that," depending on which of two classical Indian systems of measurement is being used (1975:127).

> As human beings we may, during the course of a day, experience the emotions of all the realms, from the pride of the god realm to the hatred and paranoia of the hell realm. Nonetheless, a person's psychology is usually firmly rooted in one realm. (Trungpa 2002:24).

Elaborating on the notion of "hell," Trungpa remarks:

> The aggression of the hell realm does not seem to be your aggression, but it seems to permeate the whole space around you. There is a feeling of extreme stuffiness and claustrophobia. There is no space in which to breathe, no space in which to act, and life becomes overwhelming. The aggression is so intense that, if you were to kill someone to satisfy your aggression, you would achieve only a small degree of satisfaction. (38)

Buddhadāsa's understanding of the realms of existence and of "hell" in particular, while being very close to that of Trungpa, is grounded in a more comprehensive semantic distinction between what Buddhadāsa calls "everyday language" (*phasa khon* in Thai) and "Dhamma [or *dharma*] language" (*phasa tham*). Since the dharma is, for Buddhists, the body of teachings imparted by the Buddha, to interpret a term or concept at the level of dharma language is to interpret it in accordance with the Buddha's teachings. To interpret it at the level of everyday language, meanwhile, is to interpret the term or concept more literally, treating it at face value rather than looking for a deeper significance.[13] While acknowledging that, "In everyday language, hell is a region under the earth … a place where one may go after death," Buddhadāsa contrasts this with a dharmic understanding, according to which "hell is *anxiety*":

[13] For exposition of Buddhadāsa's linguistic distinction, see Buddhadāsa 1971:ch. 3, 1974. See also Jackson 2003:ch. 3.

> Anyone who is consumed with anxiety, just as he might be consumed by fire, is said to fall into hell in that same moment. And just as anxiety is of various kinds, so we recognize various kinds of corresponding hells. (1971:71)[14]

The third interpretive approach, which tries to go beyond both literalist and psychologizing interpretations, can be termed the *one reality* view; this is because in its most prominent guises the view proposes that the relevant premodern Buddhist sources are describing or referring to a single reality, or a single *kind* of reality, but are doing so by means of two kinds of vocabulary, one psychological and the other cosmological. Though of considerable philosophical interest, the view tends to be put forward in suggestive rather than fully worked out terms and tends also to equivocate between two divergent positions. I shall endeavor to bring out both its interest and its difficulties below.

The *One Reality* View

The suggestion that Buddhist texts are referring to one reality by means of two vocabularies might at first be assumed to resemble Buddhadāsa's distinction between everyday language and dharma language. However, when Buddhadāsa makes this latter distinction he is really distinguishing not between two different languages or vocabularies but between two levels of meaning of the same vocabulary. Thus, as we have seen, the term "hell" can denote a place of torment beneath the earth or a state of anxiety, according to whether it is understood in its everyday or in its dharmic sense. The one-reality view, when it is being put forward in its

[14] Cf. Nagapriya (2004:99): "Hell beings … live in a very isolated world dominated by nightmares, horror, fear, and desperation. Conditions such as paranoid schizophrenia exemplify this kind of experience all too graphically."

most distinctive manner, is saying something quite different. With reference to the Pāli Nikāyas, Peter Masefield states, for example, that

> it is simply taken for granted in these texts (and assumed that those to whom their teachings are addressed already are fully aware) that to talk in terms of the cosmos and to talk in terms of the individual — or better in terms of an individual's various levels of consciousness — are simply two alternative, and equally valid, means of denoting the same thing, some neutral, though elusive, ground lying amidst the two. (1983:76)

In contrast with Buddhadāsa's dual meaning view, this view of Masefield's looks more like a form of neutral monism, which "holds that ultimate reality is all of one kind" (Stubenberg 2013:opening paragraph). Unlike other types of metaphysical monism, such as idealism and materialism, neutral monism asserts that ultimate reality is "intrinsically neither mental nor physical in nature" but "neutral between the two" (ibid.).

In support of his interpretation Masefield draws an analogy between the Buddhist Nikāyas and the Brahmanical Upaniṣads. In the Upaniṣads, he observes, the terms *brahman* and *ātman* are used to denote the same reality, but the first of them does so "from the cosmic perspective" whereas the other does so "from the perspective of the individual person" (Masefield 1983:70). While proposing that this is not an especially controversial interpretation of the Upaniṣadic material, Masefield contends "that it has not been generally appreciated, or at least ever taken into serious account, that very much the same world view is presupposed in the teachings of the Pāli *Nikāyas*" (76). This contention has been largely endorsed by Gethin, who remarks "that Masefield has indeed identified here a way of thinking that runs very deep in the Indian philosophical tradition" (1997:192).

Notwithstanding the philosophically engaging nature of this one-reality view, there are some difficulties that arise when efforts are made to elaborate it. What tends to happen is that proponents of the view, most notably Masefield and Gethin, slip into talking as though it is not that there is a single reality referred to in two vocabularies, but rather that there are two realities that in some way correspond to one another. Gethin asserts, for instance, that "Buddhist cosmology is at once a map of different realms of existence and a description of all possible experiences" and that there is a "parallelism between the psychological order and the cosmological order" (1998:120, 122). Statements such as these are most naturally understood as implying that there is in fact only one vocabulary but that it is systematically ambiguous in a way that enables it to be interpreted both cosmologically and psychologically. What has been added is that the cosmological and psychological realities are held to parallel or reflect each other.[15]

Masefield, too, speaks of there being, "for any level of consciousness, a cosmic realm that is its counterpart" (1983:81). He then proceeds to argue that although there are indeed patently psychological descriptions in the Buddhist sources, there are also cosmological ones, which ought to be taken "quite literally" (ibid.). Thus, what began as an attempt to present a kind of dual *aspect* interpretation appears to get replaced by a counterpart or dual *reality* interpretation; in effect, it collapses into a version of literalism, since it is proposing that the ostensibly cosmological passages ought indeed to be understood as descriptions of spatiotemporal cosmological realms. Elsewhere, Masefield dispenses with this talk of taking the texts literally and instead characterizes the counterpart relation as obtaining between two

[15] "[C]osmology is essentially a reflection of psychology and vice versa" (Gethin 1998:121). See also Hamilton (2000:94): "This correspondence has produced what the Theravāda tradition sees as a psychological cosmology. That is to say, they see the various different levels of the external world, the cosmos, as paralleling the different subjective levels attained in meditation …." It should be noted, however, that Hamilton herself regards this "'double picture' understanding of the world" as a mistaken interpretation of the early Pāli sources; on her account, the purportedly cosmological levels are best understood in metaphorical terms (see Hamilton 2000:206 and passim).

"model[s]," which "are equally figurative ways of referring to some elusive neutral phenomenon lying somewhere between the two" (1986:xvi). Although this way of putting it retrieves the one-reality view, Masefield, rather than advancing any further arguments for it, merely refers the reader to his earlier essay. There does, however, remain more to be said about the one-reality view, and I shall return to it after having considered in more detail the dispute between literalist and psychologizing accounts.

A Closer Look at the Literalism versus Psychologization Debate

A more careful discussion of psychologizing approaches than I have provided so far would have to acknowledge that they come in varying degrees of thoroughness. At the most thoroughgoing end of the continuum are those interpretations according to which all talk in traditional Buddhist sources of rebirth realms, and moreover of rebirth itself, must be understood figuratively as describing psychological phenomena that occur within a single lifetime. At the other end of the continuum are more liberal or concessionary interpretations, which maintain that even though ostensibly cosmological passages are *best* understood in psychological terms, a more literalist cosmological reading would not be incorrect.

Among those who exemplify a thoroughgoing psychologizing approach are J. G. Jennings, who argued that the emphatic Buddhist denial of a permanent soul vitiates any interpretation of rebirth other than one that reads it as relating exclusively to the recurrence of selfish desires within a single lifetime (1947:xxiv, xxxvii). Also thoroughgoing in a certain respect is an interpretation proposed by Kenneth Inada, though this has a more broadly naturalistic emphasis rather than a purely psychological one. Inada's interpretation, which considers talk of rebirth to offer a mythic account of "the microscopic life-process" of "moment to moment existence" (1970:52), typifies the tendency among recent sympathetic exponents of Buddhism to seek ways of presenting traditional Buddhist doctrines as

compatible with modern science, a theme that I have touched on elsewhere (Burley 2016:ch. 5) and which has been illuminatingly discussed at length by others.[16]

Less categorical in their interpretations of rebirth are the two authors whom I quoted earlier, namely Trungpa and Buddhadāsa. Trungpa does not explicitly rule out a non-psychological reading and Buddhadāsa explicitly allows it. It seems, however, that each of them regards the psychological interpretation as the best, in the sense that it is the one that has most immediate soteriological value.[17] Buddhadāsa makes this evident in his distinction between two levels of meaning; the reason why the psychological level of interpretation brings out the dharma language is that it is this level that serves the higher purpose. As Peter Jackson puts it, "Buddhadāsa does not deny the traditional supernatural interpretations of doctrine but rather renders them irrelevant for the purpose which he takes to be the goal of Buddhism. That is, they are irrelevant to the attainment of *nibbāna* in this life" (2003:80).

The form that a literalist critique of psychologizing approaches takes would thus have to vary in accordance with the particular version of the approach that it is targeting. Many literalists may end up finding little from which to demur in a position such as Buddhadāsa's, perhaps agreeing that it is the psychological level of doctrine — the idea that rebirth concerns the recurrence of particular mental states — that is most soteriologically pertinent while nonetheless maintaining that some passages lend themselves more readily to a cosmological (or "supernatural") interpretation than to a psychological one. There is at least one line of literalist argument that would count against both the thoroughgoing and the concessionary versions of psychologizing, and I shall come to that in due course; first, however, it will be instructive to critically examine three weaker arguments for literalism whose vulnerability to

[16] See esp. McMahan 2008:ch. 4; Lopez 2008, 2012; Cho 2012.

[17] In the case of Trungpa, his status as a *tulku* or reincarnated lama made it hardly viable for him to reject the idea that rebirth occurs over successive lifetimes; yet his own writings generally refrain from explicitly affirming this idea, even when the topic is "Acknowledging Death" (Trungpa 1991:ch. 9).

possible objections in fact serves to strengthen the psychologizing form of interpretation. Ironically (given that he takes himself to be arguing for what I have designated the one-reality view), it is Masefield in an essay to which I have referred in the previous section who offers the three literalist arguments to be outlined here. Although his main focus is the concept of nibbāna in the Pāli Nikāyas, the points he raises have, and are intended by Masefield to have, wider implications.

The first argument is that, given the extensive vocabulary available to the Buddhist authors, if they had wanted to avoid giving the impression that nibbāna is a cosmic location as well as a state of mind they could easily have chosen other words; but, as it is, nibbāna is described as such things as an island, a cave, a shelter, a refuge, "a delightful expanse of level ground," and as "the Unshakeable Abode" wherein, having gone there, one no longer grieves (see Masefield 1983:81).[18] The point of this argument could be extended to encompass the "realms of existence" more generally: had the authors not intended to imply that these are actual locations with spatial dimensions, they would have described them in purely psychological terms.

The second argument is that the traditional sources describe nibbāna as being perceptible by means of sight and hearing, thereby implying that it has a reality outside the mind of the one who has achieved it (Masefield 1983:81). Again, the same could be said of the realms of existence: the fires and excrement and implements of torture in the hell realms, for instance, are described in very physical, perceptual terms.

Thirdly, some of the descriptions of nibbāna are similar to descriptions of brahman in the Upaniṣads. Thus, if we accept that the term *brahman* denotes reality as conceived "from the cosmic perspective" (Masefield 1983:70), then, by analogy, nibbāna can be conceived in

[18] The two quoted phrases are from *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III.108 and *Dhammapada* 225 respectively. In place of Masefield's translations, I have used those in Bodhi (2000:930) and Carter and Palihawadana (1987:51).

cosmic terms as a realm that is situated beyond our ordinary world and not characterized by such things as birth and death (83). This and the other two arguments just outlined suffer from a number of shortcomings, the most serious of which I present below.

In response to the first argument it may be admitted that the authors of Buddhist works had access to an extensive vocabulary, including a large repertoire of terms for mental states, without our needing to concede that ostensibly cosmological passages cannot therefore plausibly be understood as figurative. On the contrary, one of the reasons why it is true to say of languages such as Pāli and Sanskrit that they are rich in psychological vocabulary is precisely that they lend themselves so well to figurative uses. The method of teaching by means of nonliteral forms of expression is widely recognized in various religious traditions (Tracy 1978; McFague 1982), and Buddhism is a paradigm case. The Buddha himself is commonly portrayed as utilizing "anecdotes, metaphor, imagery and symbolism" to elucidate his teachings (Keown 1998:201) and, as Gombrich observes, he "seems to have had a lively awareness of the dangers of literalism" (2006:22).[19] Canonical Buddhism evinces a distinction between discourses of the Buddha "whose meaning is explicit" and those "whose meaning requires interpretation" (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* I.60 [Bodhi 2012:151]), which might very well be a distinction between those that are intended literally and those that deploy figurative language. As Amber Carpenter remarks, it is regrettable that no authoritative texts specify "which sayings fall into which category" (2015:31 fn. 7); but even so, the mere fact that the distinction is readily acknowledged within the sources highlights the misguidedness of expecting those who impart the Buddhist teachings to opt for literal language wherever it is available.[20]

[19] For useful discussion of some extended metaphors in the Pāli Nikāyas, see Hamilton 2000, esp. chs 4 and 8.

[20] I am aware that further argument would be needed to extend the case for nonliteral readings to interpretations of Buddhist sources later than the Pāli Nikāyas. It is, however, precisely the latter

With regard to the second argument, it is ironic that the examples offered by Masefield to illustrate the claim that nibbāna is depicted as visible and audible come across as being decidedly figurative or at least as being amenable to highly plausible figurative readings. As Masefield reminds us, the Buddha presents himself as a physician who replenishes sight by means of his teachings, opening "the doors to … *nibbāna*" and thereby enabling others to see and hear it; travelling to the city of Kāsi, the Buddha aims to "set in motion the Wheel of Dhamma" and "beat the drum of the Deathless" so that others may stand before its doors.[21] Evidently, the remark about travelling to Kāsi need not be understood metaphorically; there is no reason to suppose that it means anything other than that the Buddha did indeed travel to that city in northern India. But is the talk of opening doors and beating a drum to be taken literally? *Pace* Masefield, who feels that the "temptation" to treat these descriptions as figurative is "to be avoided" (1983:81), I would propose that the temptation to be avoided is that of treating the descriptions as all of a kind and hence as, necessarily, either all literal or all figurative. The portrayal of the Buddha as a physician is a common trope in many Buddhist traditions and is in keeping with the extended metaphor of spiritual therapy, which is often used as a device for framing the central doctrine of the four *ariya-sacca* ("noble truths," "ennobling truths," "truths for the ennobled").[22] The image of opening doors, meanwhile, indicates that by means of the Buddha's teachings one may indeed come to see something new; one comes to see the world itself differently — recognizing its characteristics

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category of texts to which Masefield's argument relates, and it is to that argument that I am most directly responding.

[21] For the phrases "set in motion …" and "beat the drum …" I have used the translation in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (2009:263) rather than Masefield's own rendering, but all the examples occur in Masefield 1983:81.

[22] For the Buddha's sermon on the four noble truths, see *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V.420–424 (Feer 1898; Bodhi 2000:1843–1847). The analogy between the four noble truths and Āyurvedic medicine is concisely summarized in Kariyawasam 1992. See also the parable of the skillful physician and the notions of the "king of medicine" (*bhaiṣajyarāja*) in the Mahāyāna *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka ("Lotus") Sūtra* (Kern 1884, esp. 213–226, 304–306, 370–372), discussed in Florida 1998:180–184.

of impermanence, suffering, and inessentiality, for example.[23] It would, as Masefield insists, be too simplistic to regard the forms of language to which he draws attention as "simply a figurative means of referring to what is, in fact, only a state of mind" (1983:81), but that is not because it all has to be interpreted "quite literally." Rather, it is because the range of phenomena being described *in metaphorical terms* would not be fully encompassed by the notion of a "state of mind."

The third argument for a literalistic reading outlined above relies not only on the credibility of an analogy between certain central aspects of Buddhist and Brahmanical thought but also upon the plausibility of a particular way of understanding the concept of brahman in the Upaniṣads. The analogy is indeed credible to some extent, and Masefield cites some poignant passages. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, for instance, speaks of brahman as "the brilliant light of lights," the exclusive illuminator of the universe. From the perspective of "those who know the self" there is no other light source; the sun, moon, stars, lightning, and fire emit no light; it is brahman (or the self) alone who "shines" and which "all things reflect" (2.2.10 [Olivelle 1998:447–449]). Similar passages occur in the *Kaṭha* and *Śvetāśvatara* Upaniṣads.[24] Within the Pāli Buddhist Canon, passages reminiscent of those in the Upaniṣads include two in the *Udāna*, each of which is cited by Masefield.[25] The first of these, following an account of a man named Bāhiya who attained "complete cessation" (*parinibbuto*) by practicing the dhamma, describes a condition in which the four elements find "no footing" (*na gādhati*),[26] neither the stars nor the sun and moon emit any light, and yet there is no

[23] *yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ* || *yaṃ dukkhaṃ tad anattā* (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* III.44–45 [Feer 1890]).
[24] See *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 5.15 and *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 6.14. Note, however, that the latter text gives a theistic slant to the passage by placing it in the context of an account in which it is by "God" (*deva*) that brahman is created (see Olivelle 1998:431–433). Olivelle tentatively places these Upaniṣads "in the last few centuries BCE" (1998:13), subsequent to the founding of Buddhism.
[25] The *Udāna* ("Inspired Utterances") is one of the fifteen works that constitute the heterogeneous collection known as the *Khuddaka Nikāya* (Hinüber 1996:41–43, 46).
[26] The same phrase occurs in *Dīgha Nikāya* I.223 (Rhys Davids and Carpenter 1890) and *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I.15 (Feer 1884).

darkness.[27] The other declares there to be a "condition" (*āyatana*) in which, again, there are no elements and neither are there the *āyatana*s of, respectively, endless space, endless consciousness, nothingness, and "neither apperception nor non-apperception" (*neva-saññā-na-asaññā*);[28] nor is there this world (*loko*), nor another world (*paraloko*), nor both together, nor sun and moon.[29]

From passages such as those just cited, Masefield considers it to be "abundantly clear … that there was envisaged, even witnessed, by the authors of the *Nikāyas* a realm lying beyond the phenomenal world of becoming … in which the limitations pertaining in the phenomenal world — such as being born and dying — were unknown" (1983:83). Whether enigmatic pronouncements such as those cited from the *Udāna* make anything "abundantly clear" is, however, highly debatable. Moreover, proponents of a psychologizing interpretation may question whether the analogy with excerpts from the Upaniṣads does anything to support this contention, especially in view of the fact that the Upaniṣads are themselves often thought to present a conception of spiritual practice in which Vedic ritualism is "internalized." In place of the earlier notion of brahman as "the sacred power … manifested in the sacrificial ritual" (Brockington 1996:32), it is commonly held that the Upaniṣads develop an alternative view; following certain Āraṇyaka texts, notably the *Kauṣītaki Āraṇyaka*, they emphasize the cultivation of knowledge of brahman by means of "the inner, mental offering as distinguished from the outer, formal sacrifice" (ibid.:41).[30] Invoking comparisons with Upaniṣadic material

[27] For the Pāli text, see Steinthal 1885:9. I have used the term "condition," which I take to be relatively ontologically neutral, because the text specifies neither a physical location nor a state of mind; it reads simply "Wherein [*yattha*] … therein [*tattha*] …" (cf. Masefield 1994:11).
[28] For a discussion of why "apperception" is a suitable translation of *saññā*, see Hamilton 1996:53–58.
[29] For the Pāli text, see Steinthal 1885:80; but see also the correction in Woodward 1935:97 fn. 3. *Āyatana* is translated by Woodward (1935:97) as "condition" in its first occurrence in this passage and as "sphere" thereafter. It is consistently rendered as "base" in Masefield (1994:165) and Ireland (1997:96), "sphere" in Masefield (1983:82), "state" in Strong (1902:111) and "dimension" in Ṭhānissaro (2012:112).
[30] See also Heesterman 1985:38–39; Doniger 2010:174; Kinnard 2011:10. For further discussion and references, see Collins 1982:61, 214–215.

is thus hardly an uncontentious way of strengthening the case against a psychological interpretation of the Buddhist sources; indeed, it begs the question against those who would argue for a psychologized reading of the Upaniṣadic passages themselves.

There remains, however, a further argument, which I alluded to earlier in this section and which counts more decisively against psychologizing approaches than those arguments that have just been examined. It has been concisely articulated by Paul Williams (and colleagues) as follows:

> The Buddha's concern with liberation was precisely liberation from among other things continued rebirth. It was because the Buddha accepted rebirth that the search for liberation was so acute for him. Otherwise at least old age and death (that thus comes but once) would not be so frightening (indeed old age could be avoided by an early death). Moreover since *ucchedavāda* would then be true,[31] many wicked deeds would never bring about their unpleasant results for their perpetrators (*karma* would collapse). All would attain the final cessation of greed, hatred and delusion, and all suffering, at death. It is difficult to see what would be left of Buddhism as it is traditionally understood with a denial of rebirth. (Williams, Tribe, and Wynne 2012:204 n. 20)[32]

The argument could be described as a form of *argumentum ad absurdum*: it points out that doctrines which have been central to Buddhism (at least as "traditionally understood") would lose their point if rebirth were to be denied. The argument has force against both the thoroughgoing and the more concessionary psychologizing interpretations that I described

[31] *Ucchedavāda*, literally the "cutting-off view," is often translated as "annihilationism." "This is the view that there is no rebirth or fruition of karma, and that the individual is utterly annihilated at death" (Keown 2004:315).

[32] Cf. Dumont (1960:50): "[W]ithout transmigration the liberation or extinction *(nirvāṇa)* which he [the Buddha] recommends would lose all meaning …"

previously. It has force against thoroughgoing versions because it offers a strong reason why rebirth cannot be construed exclusively as the recurrence of desires or other mental states within a single lifetime; and it has force against more concessionary versions such as that of Buddhdāsa because it states why, far from being a relatively trivial level of understanding, the conception of rebirth as a succession of lifetimes is in fact essential to the coherence of the Buddhist teachings.[33]

Taken on its own, however, the argument just adumbrated leaves room for a partially psychologizing view, according to which, although rebirth is accepted as a phenomenon that transcends any single lifetime, the ostensible cosmology comprising multiple "realms of existence" is regarded as an elaborate myth — an allegorical picture that serves to guide a Buddhist's ethical judgments and practices without its needing to be supposed to be literally true.[34] This, it seems, would be a perfectly consistent position for many Buddhists to adopt; something like it finds favor among, for example, the many Buddhists who have been influenced by evolutionary formulations of rebirth, which maintain that rebirth involves ongoing spiritual progress without any possibility of "retrogression" or "devolution" from human to animal or to other "lower" forms of life.[35] It is also, of course, compatible with formulations that do allow for spiritual "retrogression," provided the retrogressive rebirths are held to be earthly human ones.

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[33] See also Bodhi 2010: "The aim of the Buddhist path is liberation from suffering, and the Buddha makes it abundantly clear that the suffering from which liberation is needed is the suffering of bondage to samsara, the round of repeated birth and death."

[34] A comparison could be made with, for instance, the idea of the role of biblical narratives in the religious lives of Christians put forward by Richard Braithwaite (1971), but I shall not pursue that comparison here.

[35] Such progressive conceptions have been especially promoted by Buddhist exponents influenced by the Theosophical Society. See, e.g., Evans-Wentz 2000:39–61; Humphreys 1983:82. For critical discussion of this line of interpretation, see Story 2000:52–79.

Before drawing this article to a close I want briefly to return to the one-reality view, to consider a proposal from Gethin that complements some of the suggestions from Masefield that I have discussed.

One Reality, Different Time Scales

The distinctive claim of the one-reality view is that within relevant Buddhist contexts talk of cosmological matters and talk of psychological matters are really two "equally valid" (yet "equally figurative") ways of talking about "the same thing," the thing in question being "some elusive neutral phenomenon lying somewhere between the two" (Masefield 1983:76, 1986:xvi). But is there anything positive that can be said concerning this "neutral phenomenon" beyond the fact that it is neither precisely cosmological nor precisely psychological? Gethin makes a suggestion relevant to this question, namely that, according to the Abhidharma,

> to shift from talk about levels of existence to talk about levels of the mind is to continue to talk about the same thing but on a different scale. What is involved in moving from the psychological order (the hierarchy of consciousness) to the cosmological order (the hierarchy of beings) is essentially a shift in time scales. (Gethin 1997:195)

One thing to note is that, already in this passage, Gethin has again slid from the linguistic category of "talk about …" to what appears to be the ontological category of "orders" or "hierarchies." He thus recapitulates the equivocation, which I highlighted earlier, between the idea of there being two vocabularies referring to one reality and the idea of there being two realities, or two kinds or two orders of reality, that stand in some relation of correspondence to one another.

Nevertheless, Gethin's mention of different time scales remains significant and does provide a possible point of intersection between a one-reality view and a correspondence or counterpart view. It allows for there to be a sense in which, for example, talk of "hell" as a psychological state and talk of it as a realm of existence might be said to be "about the same thing": they are about the same thing inasmuch as they are both concerned with what, in general terms, we could call a *state of being* or perhaps an *existential state*. That state could be described as one of anxiety, aggression, paranoia, etc., since although these are precisely the sorts of terms used by proponents of psychologizing interpretations, they might usefully be understood as denoting states that affect a person's whole being and color one's entire outlook on the world. In fact, those whom I have referred to as exemplifying a psychologizing approach are already alert to this point, as is evident for instance in Trungpa's remark that aggression can seem "to permeate the whole space around you."

Gethin's suggestion is that when a state such as anxiety is spoken of in relation to a "hierarchy of consciousness" it is thought of as a relatively short-term condition that is liable to come and go within a single lifetime, but that when it is spoken of in relation to a "hierarchy of beings" it is thought of as a predominant characteristic of a lifetime as a whole. The way Gethin puts it is to say that when someone undergoes certain "unpleasant mental states" he or she can be aptly described as making "a brief visit to the hell realms," but that if those states become the person's "habitual states of mind," the danger arises that he or she will not simply visit hell but will be "reborn there" (1998:122–123). The emphasis in this account is thus on there being a qualitative equivalence between what might be undergone within one's present lifetime and what, given certain conditions, one may be forced to endure in a future life. In the example given, both phenomena may be referred to as "hell," and so the significant point is not really that there are two *vocabularies* in play; rather, the point is that what is being referred to as "hell" in each case is "the same thing" by virtue of its

involving the same *type* of experience, albeit a type that has to be endured for differing periods of time.

The use of the term "visit" in Gethin's account helpfully reminds us of the sorts of spatial metaphors that pervade idioms associated with psychological states in many languages. In English, for instance, it is perfectly intelligible to speak of *falling in* love, *entering* a state of euphoria, *descending into* (and eventually *emerging from*) a *deep* depression, and so on.[36] In his harrowing memoir of depressive illness, William Styron recounts his "panic and dislocation, and a sense that my thought processes were being engulfed by a toxic and unnameable tide that obliterated any enjoyable response to the living world" (2004:14). "For myself," he adds, "the pain is most closely connected to drowning or suffocation — but even these images are off the mark" (15). However "off the mark" they may be, such images typify those that people search for when trying to describe an all-encompassing mood. It is figurative language, certainly; but this need not imply that there is any more accurate — more "literal" — mode of description available. Neither, importantly, does it entail that what is being described would be well characterized as "merely a state of mind." What Styron is struggling to articulate is a transformation of his whole being and of what Trungpa might call his "style of relating to the world" (Trungpa 2002:28); it is both "a veritable howling tempest in the brain" and an atmosphere that encloses one "in a suffocating gloom" (Styron 2004:37, 44). Thus neither the language of internality nor that of externality is adequate alone: the mood, the existential feeling, encompasses both.[37] It is, we might say, precisely a kind of terrible hellish rebirth.

Conclusion

[36] These are similar to some of the examples given in Lakoff and Johnson 2003:32.
[37] I have here borrowed the term "existential feeling" from Ratcliffe 2008.

Where have we ended up in this exploration of interpretive conundrums? Inevitably, given the complexity of the issues, some deficiencies in my initial schematic division between three interpretive orientations have been revealed. For a start, it has become evident that what I have for the most part been referring to as psychologizing interpretations need not be thought of as reducing talk of "realms of existence" to talk of "states of mind," at least not in a narrow sense of this latter phrase. They could just as well (or better) be described as talking about holistic states of being — ways of being-in-the-world, to borrow a well-known locution from Heidegger.[38] One may still refer to them as psychologizing interpretations if one so wishes, provided one's conception of what is "psychological" is not hampered by simplistic notions of a purely private "inner life." At the same time, however, there remain limitations to any psychologizing approach that fails to acknowledge not only the presence in the Buddhist sources of a many-lives understanding of rebirth but the essential role of this understanding in giving sense to Buddhist soteriological aspirations.

The suggestion from Gethin that I have noted is that what the traditional accounts of "realms of existence" are describing are types of experience that could pervade a future life if one allows them to become habitual in the present one. This suggestion accords well with the soteriological implications of many Buddhist sources, which both accentuate how ethical failings in this life lead to detrimental consequences in the next and, implicitly, rely on a background ontology of multiple lifetimes to give sense the idea of nirvāṇa as a release from otherwise interminably recurrent suffering. All I have added is to point out more explicitly than does Gethin that, on this interpretation, the "same thing" or "neutral phenomenon" that justifies talk of a one-reality view is the existential state in which one finds oneself, a state that radically colors one's experience of the world. While Gethin's mode of explication, like Masefield's, still leaves us with a bifurcated picture, in which there are two orders or

[38] Cf. Heidegger 1962, esp. 78–90, 149–180.

hierarchies that parallel or reflect one another, an emphasis on existential states goes some way towards overcoming this bifurcation.

Ultimately, the key to unraveling the hermeneutic conundrums of Buddhist cosmology and psychology is to relinquish the blanket assumption that there is a straightforward dichotomy between either two orders or two vocabularies, and to instead attend to the particularities of specific textual material. In the present article I have been able only to begin that task, most notably in connection with certain passages from the Pāli Nikāyas that are cited by Masefield, as my principal purpose has been the preliminary one of critically explicating a typology of interpretive orientations. Taking the analysis further would require giving closer and more sustained attention to the affective and conative significance of the descriptions of such things as hell realms and heavenly abodes without assuming that the descriptions *must* be understood either "quite literally" or in "purely psychological" terms. Whether it is the opening of the doors to nirvāṇa or wallowing in a quagmire of corpses that features in the description, treating this imagery in an overly literal-minded manner is almost guaranteed to lead one down the wrong path. Doing so is liable to display, at least in many instances, an insensitivity to the texts that is as great as the insensitivity involved in failing to recognize in them a commitment to the reality of rebirth beyond this life.

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