

Naturalistic Buddhism: Gil's Orientation for Interpreting the Buddha's Teachings

By Gil Fronsdal

As a Buddhist teacher, I am often asked to identify the form of Buddhism with which I am associated. While, most broadly, I identify myself with Theravāda Buddhism, different contexts prompt me to answer in any one of many possible ways, including declining to answer. Within the many sub-divisions of Theravāda Buddhism, I might explain that I am a Vipassana teacher in the lineage of the twentieth-century Burmese teacher Mahasi Sayadaw. More specifically, I might further state that I am part of the Western network of Insight Teachers associated with the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts and Spirit Rock Meditation Center in California, whose teachers have adapted Asian Theravada Vipassana teachings for a Western audience. Within this network of Insight Teachers, further distinctions sometimes become relevant. In some contexts, it might be appropriate to identify myself as belonging to the first generation of Western Insight teachers with unique social contexts and positions that influenced how we teach Buddhism. And within this first-generation group of teachers, I might distinguish myself as having teachings influenced by years of Zen training. Or I might indicate that while I have some leanings toward "Secular Buddhism," my preference is to view my Buddhist orientation as "naturalistic" and, therefore to identify it as a Theravāda form of "Naturalistic Buddhism."

I shy away from identifying myself with the designation "Secular Buddhism" because I understand the term to be oxymoronic. In ordinary English, "secular" is commonly contrasted

with what is religious or spiritual; as I view Buddhism as a religion and my involvement with Buddhism as deeply religious, I am disinclined to describe myself as a “secular Buddhist.”

Through the label "Naturalistic Buddhism," I refer to Buddhist teachings that rely on what can be observed in this very life through our natural senses. It does not require any beliefs, agency, entities, or experiences that are supernatural, that is, that fall outside of the laws of nature as we know them or outside of what we can know for ourselves through our ordinary, natural senses. By using the term naturalistic, I am associating but not equating my form of Buddhism with the fields of "philosophical naturalism" (also known as metaphysical naturalism) and "religious naturalism," both of which posit that only natural laws operate in this world.

While the idiosyncratic label "Naturalistic Buddhism" may apply only to myself, I use it because I believe it is helpful to have identifying labels for where one is situated within the context of Buddhism. It can quickly give others a general understanding of what teachings, orientation, and values a teacher is associated with. More importantly, when Buddhist teachers explicitly identify themselves with a particular tradition, school, sect, or type of Buddhism, they provide their audience a reference to which they can be held accountable; that is, teachers can then be asked how and why they may differ from or resemble the form of Buddhism they say they represent. Such accountability can prompt teachers to explain some of their assumptions, preferences, reasoning, and background for their particular formulation of Buddhism.

For example, by identifying myself as a Naturalistic Buddhist within the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, I am letting people know that, while my teachings are based on and accountable to the ancient scriptures of Theravada Buddhism, I have a naturalistic perspective, orientation, or interpretation of these scriptures, that is, the Pali suttas. When I teach, I don't represent all of

what is found in these scriptures; I don't claim to represent the actual teachings of the Buddha as presented in these texts—a task that no discerning person can confidently do given the complicated historical origin of the surviving records. Instead, by identifying my naturalistic leanings, I am indicating that I have a particular perspective for interpreting and selecting teachings from ancient texts. How accurately I am representing what the Buddha may have taught is a matter of interpretation, as is the case for anyone who bases their teachings on these scriptures. If my Buddhist teachings differ from traditional Theravada Buddhist teachings, I intend to be aware of and responsible for these differences. From the historical records I have seen, it appears that every generation of Buddhist teachers adapts and interprets Buddhism in new ways. When I studied with senior Theravada meditation teachers in Burma, I had the impression that they represented classical and orthodox Theravada Buddhist teachings; indeed, they presented themselves as definitively representing the original teachings of the Buddha. Later, I discovered that decades earlier, they had been radical reformers who had broken away from the orthodoxy of their youth. While I am not trying to reform Theravāda orthodoxy, I believe it is honest and helpful to provide my audience with an understanding of my orientation for the Buddhism I teach.

By relying on a naturalistic approach to Buddhism, I am not asserting that what could be called supernatural is not real or genuine. While someday we may have natural explanations for such phenomena, I see no need to include them in the Buddhism I practice.

Beliefs found in Buddhism that could be called supernatural are rebirth, the working of karma over multiple lifetimes, heavens and hells, devas and *Māras*, miracles, merit and merit transfer, and many of the psychic powers mentioned in Buddhist texts (for example, walking through

walls, flying, talking with gods, and stroking the moon). I also include as supernatural any ideas of a self or consciousness that exists in a permanent and uncreated fashion, views that both contradict the principle of impermanence that lies at the foundation of the Buddha's teachings and falls outside the natural laws known to science. More controversially, I also include concepts of Nirvana as a transcendent, unconditioned dimension of reality as a supernatural belief.

I have a naturalistic orientation to Buddhism partly because I have studied with Buddhist teachers in the West and Asia who did not require me to have faith in unverified beliefs. Instead, they instructed me to be deeply aware of my experience, including the beliefs I was holding. I suspect the deep questioning and skepticism of views and beliefs that they expected of me would have been inhibited by believing in anything that might be called supernatural.

Precursors to Naturalistic Buddhism

While the label “Naturalistic Buddhism” may be new, this orientation is not unique in the history of Buddhism; other forms of Buddhism share a family resemblance, e.g., what is sometimes called “Secular Buddhism”. Particularly noteworthy are the modern Chinese and Taiwanese movements known in English as “Humanistic Buddhism” and in Chinese (in English translation) as “Buddhism for Human Life” (*rénshēng fójiào*) and “Human World Buddhism” (*rénjiān fójiào*). In modern Theravada Buddhism, perhaps the most prominent teacher with a naturalistic worldview was the twentieth-century Thai monk Buddhadasa, who rejected the literal idea of rebirth and the associated karma teachings. His teachings also ignored literal concepts of hells, heavens, and deities. He did spend decades teaching outdoors, with a forest setting providing the context and backdrop for his Dharma orientation,

Perhaps the most significant precursor to Naturalistic Buddhism is in some of the central teachings associated with the Buddha in the early Pali scriptures (*suttas*). Because the earliest surviving texts of Indian Buddhism include many examples of teachings free of supernatural ideas, I believe that "Naturalistic Buddhism" can be considered as an equally valid form of Buddhism as "Supernatural Buddhism," the predominant form today. An early text supporting a naturalistic approach to Buddhism is *The Book of Eights* (*Aṭṭhakavagga*), a text some scholars consider to have been composed earlier than most of the other texts in the sutta collections (*Nikāyas*). As the fourth book of the *Sutta Nipāta* (abbreviated Sn) in the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, *The Book of Eights* provides a foundation for teachings that do not rely on ideology or supernatural beliefs. Depending on doctrines of any type is seen as problematic in this Buddhist text. For example, not only is belief in rebirth not required, but the text also discourages any concern with future lives or the wish for any future state of being. Accordingly, *The Book of Eights* has nothing to say about ending the cycles of rebirth as a goal of practice.

Because having faith is often central to having supernatural religious beliefs, it is noteworthy that the word faith (*saddhā*) appears only once in *The Book of Eights* and then only in a passage stating that someone who has attained peace is without faith, that is, the person does not need faith. While some form of faith may be implied in the teachings of *The Book of Eights*, no role for faith is mentioned. Instead, it emphasizes insight into what one can see for oneself, especially the many forms of clinging and the benefits of letting go of these clings.

In the hopes of demonstrating that the idea of a naturalistic Buddhism is plausible, I would like to present an overview of the central teachings of *The Book of Eights*.

Personal Peace Through Not Clinging

Rather than a transcendent, supernatural reality to be attained, *The Book of Eights* emphasizes a mental state accessible within a person's life. The text champions a straightforward approach to achieving peace (*santi*). The possibility of peace guides the teachings and practices the text advocates. Rather than believing a doctrine, these teachings describe means or practices for directly realizing peace.

Clinging is explained as the primary reason a person is not peaceful. Accordingly, the release of clinging is the primary means to peace. The value of these teachings is not found in philosophy, logic, or external religious authorities but rather in the results they bring to those who live by them. The goal emphasized in this text is described by the states of mind attained and by the mental activities that have been pacified or abandoned. The most common terms referring to what is attained are peace, calmness, tranquility, and equanimity. In sharp contrast, clinging, craving, entrenchment, and quarreling are the most frequently mentioned activities to be abandoned. The relationship between these two sets—the states to be attained and what is to be abandoned—is that to personally achieve peace for oneself, one must abandon the clinging that prevents it.

Three primary themes in the text elaborate on the message that peace comes from not clinging. These themes are letting go of views, the qualities of a sage, and the training to become a sage.

Letting Go of Views

In keeping with *The Book of Eights*' emphasis on peace and non-clinging, the primary teaching on views is the importance of not clinging to philosophies, religious teachings, or opinions. This includes ideas about what happens after death, the nature of the "self," or whether it is possible to

fly unassisted. The text teaches that someone should shake off every view without embracing or rejecting anything. In addition, several verses are critical of any judgment that one's own religious beliefs are the truest or best while others are inferior.

For many readers, this seeming no-view teaching is a radical message. It undermines the importance of religious doctrines on which some people base their lives. The teachings in *The Book of Eights* do not support the idea that one should believe in supernatural teachings just because they are found in other Buddhist texts.

The Book of Eights includes plenty of examples of the problems that arise if one clings to views: attachment to concepts leads to the person swinging between feeling high and low; debating others, one can become anxious for praise and bewildered when refuted; and if clinging to views brings a type of peace, it is an unstable peace. In addition, *The Book of Eights* frequently mentions that clinging to views leads to quarrels, which does not lead to peace.

Finally, the goal of practice is described in terms of letting go of views. Those who have realized the goal—the sages—are not attached to views and so avoid debates, quarrels and any conceit that their views are better than those of others.

Letting go of their attachments, sages have no need for any doctrine and so do not oppose the doctrine of anyone else. According to one of the verses,

*They are not enemies of any doctrine
seen, heard or thought out.
Not making up theories,
not closed down, not desirous,
they are sages, wise,
who have laid down their burden. (v. 914; Sn 4.13)*

The idea that a wise person would not be an enemy of any religious doctrine suggests that those who adhere to a naturalistic form of Buddhism and those who adhere to a supernatural Buddhism do not need to be opposed to each other's doctrines. They can co-exist, with each being a valid form of Buddhism, especially if they both lead to "laying down the burden," a synonym for liberation.

The Sage Described

A second theme in *The Book of Eights* is the descriptions of the sage (*muni*). The text does not refer to those who have attained the goal of practice by using common words in other, probably later, Buddhist texts. For example, the terms *arahant*, Stream-Enterer, Once Returner, and Non-Returner are absent. In that rebirth has no role in the teachings of *The Book of Eights*, it is not surprising to find no reference to accomplished practitioners who return to be reborn once more or who will no longer return to rebirth.

Due to the sage's proficiency in realizing peace, the sage is often described as *kusalo*, meaning a skilled person or expert. In that sages are wise, they are also referred to as "the wise one" (*dhiro*), "the learned one" (*pandito*), and "one of much wisdom" (*bhuri pañño*). With the shedding of attachment, this person is called "the cleansed one" (*dhono*).

The most common attribute associated with a sage is peace (*santi*). Such a person is peaceful, sees, knows, and advocates peace. The sage is tranquil, still, and unmoving, unshakable, and equanimous. Though peace is an attribute of sages, they do not depend on peace or intentionally take it up. This is because sages do not depend on or take up anything; instead, they let go.

These designations and descriptions of the adept suggest qualities discernable in oneself and directly relevant to how one lives one's life. They do not indicate the sage has psychic or supernormal powers or has attained transcendent realities removed from this world. Instead, the sage has attained experiences, such as tranquility, equanimity, and peace, that are natural enough for humans to achieve, at least in brief dosages.

What Sages Know and See

A significant attribute of skillful sages is their ability to know and see—sometimes, they are called the "ones who know." What is interesting is what they do and do not see. They do not see transcendent, otherworldly realities or supernatural events. They do not see the nature of ultimate reality or some form of ultimate consciousness.

Rather, sages know and see ways in which people struggle. They know what is not harmonious, what is dangerous, and what is dependent. They know the problems that come from pride and holding to opinions. They see how people selfishly thrash about, get elated and deflated in their disputes, speak with arrogance, and cling to teachings. By such knowing, a wise person knows not to get involved with afflicted states and knows to let go of them.

The second thing a sage knows and sees is an inner peace realized through not clinging.

According to The Book of Eights, being at peace and having overcome cravings, sages become independent in knowing the Dharma. They know the peace of non-clinging through their own direct insight and experience.

In this way, rather than seeing ultimate, transcendent realities, their past lives, heaven or hells, or miraculous occurrences, sages see peace and what needs to be abandoned to attain it.

Training

A third theme of *The Book of Eights* is training, that is, doing practices conducive to peace and becoming a sage. While all the chapters of *The Book of Eights* discuss the ideal and non-ideal behavior of someone on the path to peace, six chapters give the most attention to this theme. These chapters describe the qualities and behaviors of someone who has attained peace, the peace taught by the Buddha.

The Book of Eights focuses on fundamental, personal, and inner transformations in which individuals are responsible for themselves: Each person “must train for one's own release” (v 940) and “not seek peace from others” (v 919). The text does not assume any helping role from the gods or external forces. To some modern, secular-oriented readers, this would be less of a revolutionary message than it probably was at the time of the Buddha.

In many passages describing the goal, *The Book of Eights* emphasizes how skillful sages behave rather than an attainment distinct from how they live. For example, the text does not mention transcendent and extraordinary states of consciousness. No mention is made of psychic powers such as the divine eye or the divine ear. Instead, the text enumerates the ethical behaviors such people would or would not do and the qualities of inner virtue or character they would have. In this way, the religious goal is described in ordinary human terms rather than in mystical, transcendent, or metaphysical language.

In focusing on cultivating behaviors and virtues aligned with the goal, *The Book of Eights* has minimal mention of specific techniques or practices. Stated differently, the text not only does not emphasize religious practices that are steps toward attaining the qualities of the ideal person, but

it explicitly and provocatively says that religious observances and the practices in themselves are inadequate for becoming a person at peace. Instead, it encourages people to emulate the ideal sage's behavior.

The Book of Eights avoids sharply distinguishing between the means and the goal. That is, the personal qualities that characterize someone who has already attained the goal are the same qualities one cultivates when training for that goal.

One is to train by being what one is to become. If the goal is to be peaceful, the way there is to be peaceful. If the goal is to be released from craving, the training is "to subdue one's inner craving" (v 919). In this way, the achievement of the goal is not radically different from what led to the goal; the naturalistic goal is attained through natural means. This is in sharp contrast to the attainment of supernatural states distinct from the training that led to their achievement.

As a conclusion to this discussion of *The Book of Eights*, I would like to repeat the idea that just as the teachings of *The Book of Eights* instruct one to avoid opposing or debating religious doctrines, so too, in my understanding, Naturalistic Buddhism is not opposed to supernatural forms of Buddhism. And, as the teachings of *The Book of Eights* discourage positing any doctrine as ultimate, Naturalistic Buddhism does not need to see its approach to liberation as better than other approaches. Instead, for those not inclined to believe in the supernatural, Naturalistic Buddhism points to practice and an awakening that does not require believing in rebirth, ultimate realities, miracles, heavens, and hells but instead teaches about the value of peace and letting go. While supernatural beliefs may be helpful for some people, for those who cannot believe in them, both Naturalistic Buddhism and *The Book of Eights* teach that to be at

peace, one must let go of all clinging, including clinging to both natural and supernatural Buddhism.

*One who is attached gets into disputes over doctrines;
But how and with what would one dispute with someone unattached?*

By not embracing or rejecting anything

A person has shaken off every view, right here.

(v 787; Sn 4.3)