

# **The Contemporary Relevance of Buddhist Philosophy**

By

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# The Contemporary Relevance of Buddhist Philosophy

Let me first congratulate the Government of Ceylon and the Indian Philosophical Congress for the foresight they have displayed in creating this lectureship and thus perpetuating the close cultural ties, which bind our two countries. Let me also thank the Congress for the honour of inviting me to give the Buddha Jayanti lecture this year.

I chose to speak on the above topic for at least two reasons although in doing so I am well aware that I may provoke adverse comment and criticism from orthodox philosophers, who may have expected me to deal with some specific problem or topic of Buddhist philosophy. One of the reasons for not doing so is that the philosophy of the Buddha, perhaps, owing to the vastness of the literary sources seems to have suffered as a result of scholars failing to see the wood for the trees. The present paper, therefore, attempts a comprehensive outline and a synoptic view of different aspects of the philosophy of the Buddha insofar as this may be gleaned from what is explicit and implicit in the statements ascribed to the Buddha as well as from the legitimate later development of his thought.

The second main reason for speaking on this topic is that, in

my opinion, the philosophy of the Buddha, as presented, is particularly relevant to the contemporary scene. How and why it is relevant may become evident from the sequel. Sceptics may question whether the views of any philosopher of the ancient or mediaeval world can at all be relevant for the modern world. The sceptics would be right to the extent to which thinkers are bound and limited by the questions and concepts they have grappled with in their respective social and historical milieus and which have little significance outside them. But it may be that the questions raised have a universality and the answers suggested a depth of insight, which confers on them a validity which extends beyond the time at which they were promulgated. It is, therefore, wiser to proceed cautiously and empirically without any presumptions or preconceptions.

Our contemporary world, as we know, is one dominated by science and technology. Despite the contributions to scientific knowledge in ancient and mediaeval India and China, the predominant developments took place in the West in the last few centuries or decades. While mediaeval Western philosophy was an attempt to reconcile the conflicting claims of faith and reason culminating in the work of Aquinas, the modern period from Descartes onwards was mainly an attempt to reconcile science with what could be considered rational in the religion and ethics of Christianity. With the contemporary period starting with the reactions against Hegel and post-Hegelian idealisms, we find the full impact of secular science.

The two great philosophical movements, which stem from this, bear the imprint of this impact. The growth and productivity of science as compared with the sterility of metaphysics as well as the developments in logic, mathematics and linguistic studies resulted in. Logical Positivism and the Analytic movement, which became the dominant trend in philosophy in the English-speaking world. Following the model of factually meaningful propositions in science, Logical Positivism openly rejected the propositions of metaphysics, religion and ethics as strictly nonsensical though not lacking in emotive or poetic meaning. Later Analytic philosophy adopted a less polemical and more neutral attitude in its study of the meaning of such propositions. However, the onslaughts of Positivism and Analysis virtually ended the era of speculative metaphysics (as opposed to descriptive metaphysics) <sup>[1]</sup> or rational theology; even though the more conservative forms of analysis were prepared to tolerate metaphysical propositions grounded in experience as giving insights into the structure of reality.

The other development reacting against Hegelian metaphysics and idealism was the Marxist philosophy parading as “scientific socialism.” Here again its secularism, derived from science, gave a radically new interpretation of religion as the opium of the masses, while traditional ethical values were also undermined. A new ethic is, however, not lacking; for quite apart from the ethical overtones and the general appeal to ethical values in the writings of Marxism-

Leninism, the attainment of a classless society which most social evils are supposed to be eliminated, is considered a good in itself, while whatever is helpful in the process of establishing such a society is deemed to be instrumentally good.

These philosophies originating in the Western world have had their repercussions in other parts of the world as well, following the tide of science and technology. American Pragmatism is itself a product of the temper and techniques of science, though it is receding in the face of the Analytic movement. In China, Marxism-Leninism has become the official, philosophy of the state though it is blended somewhat with the ethical values of Mahayana Buddhism.

[2] In Japan despite the modernity, tradition persists in the new religions of Japan, Zen Buddhism and the Soka Gakkai (Value-Creation) movement stressing the need for moral commitment and group discipline in the light of the philosophy and prophetic writings of the Buddhist saint Nichiren, who predicted that in the future “the union of the state law and the Buddhist Truth shall be established ... and the moral law (*kaiho*) will be achieved in the actual life of mankind. [3] In the Southeast Asian countries, including Ceylon, Buddhist philosophy is coming into its own with the modernisation process. In countries with an Islamic tradition, Islamic philosophy is represented with modifications and a modern emphasis and so is Vedanta in India. The impact of modernism on Christian theology may be seen from the Death of God movement.

Existentialism, which developed in the European continent, reflects not so much the mood of science as the negative reaction of technology on the human person. It too is empirical to the extent of avoiding abstract metaphysical speculation and confining itself, to personal experience especially in the realm of values, with, its stress on the importance of choice, responsibility and authentic existence.

It is in this contemporary background that we have to evaluate the philosophy of the Buddha. In order to avoid prolixity I would confine my observations to noting briefly certain salient resemblances and differences in respect of Analytic Philosophy, Existentialism and Marxism, since my main intention is to indicate a new approach to philosophy which the Buddha tends to suggest in the modern context.

The philosophy of the Buddha comprehends a theory of knowledge, a theory of reality, an ethical system, a social and political philosophy as well as suggestions for a philosophy of law and international relations. A careful examination of the essentials of these aspects of its philosophy show that they are inter-related and interconnected.

I have tried to give an account of its theory of knowledge in one of my works. [4] Here I would only make a brief reference to some of the essentials.

One of the characteristic features of the philosophy of the Buddha, which distinguishes it from Upaniṣadic philosophy and the non-Vedic schools is its causal conception of the

universe. The Buddha states: “What is causation? On account of birth arises decay and death. Whether Tathāgatas arise or not, this order exists namely the fixed nature of phenomena the regular pattern of phenomena This the Tathāgata discovers and comprehends; having discovered and comprehended it, he points it out, teaches it, lays it down, establishes, reveals, analyses, clarifies it and says, ‘Look!’ (S II 25). Its importance is seen from the fact that an understanding of the Dhamma is not possible without comprehending the causal theory: “He who sees the nature of causation sees the Dhamma and he who sees the Dhamma sees the nature of causation” (M I 191). The two principles of causal determination are formally stated. There is a causal correlation between two sets of events A and B ‘if whenever A happens, B happens and whenever A does not happen, B does not happen’ (or is it, ‘whenever B does not happen, A does not happen’). These formulae are stated both in an abstract as well as a concrete form as applying to the world of dynamic reality. Causation is an objective feature of the world and not a category imposed by the mind: “Causation has the characteristics of objectivity, empirical necessity, invariability and conditionality” (S II 26).

A further analysis of the causal situation reveals the presence of different forms of relationships (*paccaya*) such as mutual dependence or reciprocity (*aññamañña-paccaya*), unilateral dependence (*nissaya-paccaya*), dominance (*adhipati-paccaya*) etc., which is denoted by the concept of

conditionality (*idappaccayatā*). The concept of a causal law or correlation (*dhammatā*) is further developed in the post-Canonical texts, which speak of physical regularities or laws (*utu-niyama*), biological laws (*bija-niyāma*), psychological laws (*citta-niyama*) as well as karmic or spiritual laws (*kamma-, dhamma-niyāma*). The Buddhist causal theory is distinguished from the Activity view of Saktivāda and other theories suggestive of entailment (e.g. *Satkāryavāda*). Apart from divesting itself of such metaphysical elements, the Buddhist theory of causation is presented as avoiding the two extremes of determinism (*niyati*), whether it be theistic (*issara-kāraṇa-vāda*) or natural, (*svabhāva-vāda*), on the one hand, and of tychism or total indeterminism (*adhicca-samuppāda*) on the other. All explanations of phenomena are, therefore, to be in terms of causal correlations understood in the light of conditioned genesis (*paṭicca-samuppāda*).

Along with this causal conception of phenomena is emphasised the importance of an impartial and objective outlook in understanding the nature of things as they are. We have to avoid prejudice for (*chanda*) or against (*dosa*) and not allow ourselves to be influenced by fear (*bhaya*) or erroneous beliefs (*moha*). We should not depend on the argument from authority, nor on defective forms of reasoning in arriving at factual truth. The Buddha instructed the Kālāmas “not to accept anything on the grounds of revelation (*anussava*), tradition, (*paramparā*) or report (*itikira*), or because it is in conformity with the scriptures (*piṭaka-sampadā*), or because it is a product of mere

reasoning (*takka-hetu*) or because of a superficial assessment of facts (*ākāra-parivītakka*), or because it is true from a standpoint (*naya-hetu*), or because it conforms with one's preconceived notions (*ditṭhi-nijjhāna-khanti*) or because it is authoritative (*bhavyarūpatā*), or because of the prestige of one's teacher (*samaṇo no garu*)" (A I 189) truth has to be verifiable (*ehi-passika*) in the light of one's own experience as well as the experiences of competent observers. Revelation is unsatisfactory because a claim to revelation is in itself no criterion of truth and alleged revelations are found to contain falsehoods, contradictions and tautologies:

Likewise, pure reasoning (*takka*) is no guide to factual truth since the reasoning may be valid (*sutakkitaṃ*) or invalid (*duttakkitaṃ*) and even if valid, may turn out to be true (*tathā*) or false, (*aññathā*).

Statements are classified as true or false, useful or useless, pleasant or unpleasant, giving eight possibilities in all. Truth corresponds with fact (*yathābhutaṃ*). Consistency is a necessary but not a sufficient criterion of factual truth since theories which are mutually contradictory may be internally consistent though they may not correspond with fact. The Buddha's statements are claimed to be true and useful, whether they be pleasant or unpleasant. Since statements could be either useful or useless, Buddhism does not subscribe to a pragmatic theory of truth although the Buddha's statements are claimed to be pragmatic because they are confined to them. It is also possible to have 'partial truths' (*pacceka-sacca*) since the correspondence with fact

could admit of degrees. There is also a distinction partly post-Canonical into relative or conventional truths (*sammuti-sacca*) and absolute truths (*paramattha-sacca*). This is because things as they are, are sometimes different from things as they appear.

Besides, language has a static structure although we have to use it to describe a dynamic world. Once we see reality for what it is and the limitations of language, we can still employ the conventional terminology without being misled by the erroneous implications of language and the assumptions we make because of our distorted view of reality. Though language is a necessary tool of thought and communication, we have to guard against the linguistic sources of error in describing and understanding the nature of reality. Referring to the limitations of ordinary language, the Buddha says, "They are expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world which the Buddha makes use of without being led astray by them" (D I 202).

While discarding authority and pure reason, the means of knowledge acknowledged by the Buddha are perception and inference. Perception is, however, used with a wider connotation to include both sensory as well as extrasensory forms of perception such as telepathy, clairvoyance and the recall of prior lives. Early Buddhism, therefore, adopts an empiricist theory of knowledge which is also evident in its treatment of the problems of soul and substance, causation, perception, meaning and metaphysics.

At the same time since experience is conditioned and limited, the truths that we arrive at may often be partial and limited and in need of revision and modification. The Buddha says in the Brahmajāla Sutta that the religious teachers and philosophers who were Eternalists (*sassata-vāda*) Semi-eternalists (*ekaccā-sassatikā*) such as the Theists (*issara-nimmāna-vāda*) who asserted that God was-eternal while his creation was not, Cosmologists (*antānantika*) who posited various theories about the extent of the universe, Sceptics (*Amarāvikkhepikā*), Indeterminists (*Adhiccāsamuppannikā*), Primordialists (*pubbanta-kappika*) who speculated about pre-existence and first-causes, Eschatologists (*uddhamāghātanikā*) who speculated about survival and final causes, Materialists (*ucchedavāda*) who claimed the annihilation of the personality at death and various Existentialist Moral Philosophers (*ditṭhadhammanibbānavāda*) who posited their various philosophies did so “on the basis of conditioned and limited personal experiences” (*chahi phassāyatanaṃ phussa phussa paṭisaṃvedenti*, D I 45).

It is significant that early Buddhism distinguishes propositions as meaningful (*sappāṭihāriya*) and meaningless. A proposition whose mode of verification we cannot specify is held to be lacking in meaning (*appāṭihīrakataṃ bhāsitaṃ sampajjati*). [5] Likewise, certain questions (Did the flame of the fire that went out go West? Is the daughter of that barren woman fair?) are to be set aside (*ṭhapanīya*) as meaningless [6] since they arise out of the misunderstanding

of the nature of concepts contained in them.

It is this Buddhist theory of knowledge, which makes a comparison with Logical Positivism and contemporary analytic philosophy significant. These modern philosophers approach philosophy with the preconceptions of science and a respect for the scientific outlook, even though they consider it their task to examine these preconceptions and assumptions. They would agree with Buddhism that a priori knowledge or pure reasoning, however useful it may be, cannot give us factual knowledge of nature, which has to be based on observation. They would also agree that some problems of metaphysics and even certain metaphysical systems arise out of a misunderstanding of the nature of concepts or linguistic usage and that the dissolution of these problems require an accurate analysis of the sources of conceptual error and linguistic confusion.

Buddhism disagrees with the Positivist in holding that not all traditional problems of metaphysics can be so dissolved. If we take the problem as to whether there is an after-life or not (in other words, whether we survive death or not), then certainly some of the sources of confusion here are in the linguistic origin and concern the use of the word 'survive,' while others revolve around the problem of personal identities (we cannot be said to survive unless we are somehow the same person). But if personal identity is not closely tied up with bodies as to make it senseless to speak of identity without our present body (as in today's law courts) there is a sense in which the question is

empirical and meaningful and evidence could not contend to confirm or disconfirm the truth of a statement claiming survival after death or not), then certainly some of the sources of confusion here are linguistic in origin and concern the use of the word 'survive', while others revolve round the problem of personal identity (we cannot be said to survive unless we are in some sense the same person). But if 'personal identity' is not so closely tied up with our bodies as to make it senseless to speak of identity without our present bodies (as in the law courts), there is a sense in which the question is empirical and meaningful and evidence could tend to confirm or disconfirm the truth of a statement claiming survival after death.

Buddhism would also not discard some of the traditional metaphysical theories as meaningless for it depends on what interpretation is to be given to the concepts, contained in them. For example, a Personal Theist who asserts that, "There is a God who is omniscient, omnipotent and infinitely good," is not necessarily making a factually meaningless or vacuous assertion even if we cannot locate such a God. It would be meaningless only if the concept of 'good' as used here bears little relation with the normal use of the word to such an extent that we do not know how 'good' here differs from 'evil.' For if the proposition admits of an implication and its truth (i.e. of the implication) is ascertainable, it would follow that if the implication is false, the original proposition would be false, but if it is true, then there would be a certain degree of probability in its truth.

Another salient difference is that unlike modern Positivism or Analysis, Buddhism presents a conception of “man and his destiny in the universe, which it claims is in principle verifiable, although the mode of verification may differ in some respects from the methods of the natural sciences.

This brings us to the Buddhist theory of reality, which I would rather not call its ‘metaphysics’ because of the verificationist claim.

Many people are interested in studying philosophy not with the idea of learning about the nuances and niceties of the English language (or any other language) but with an ardent desire to know something about the fundamental questions of life or the nature and destiny of man in the universe. They are not interested in cultivating the art of philosophical discourse as a fad or fashion but in examining what answers are possible to these questions. It may be that to some of these questions no answer is possible and that to others the answers may be very disappointing but, at least, it is the duty of the philosopher to examine both the possibility and probability of the proffered solutions to these questions. According to Kant the central issues of philosophy revolved round the question as to whether there was “God, freedom and immortality.” Kant himself found that their reality could not be proved by pure reason but that practical reason demands that it is in our interests to act on the basis of faith in their reality.

Several philosophers today consider it their task to examine

in minute detail the nature of the theories put forward by thinkers in the past in the light of their writings and relevant literature. Many also examine the meaning of what they have said and try to re-state their theories. But the intellectual exercise seems to stop there and few, indeed, seem inclined to examine the truth or falsity of theories after presenting them in a modern context and where they are relevant in the light of modern evidence. There may be several reasons for this. Some philosophies are so outmoded that no restatement of them would make them significant for modern man.

Others do not lend themselves to such examination. Yet there are at least a few theories, which deserve to be examined for their relevance and veracity and the philosophy of the Buddha seems to be one of them. I am, therefore, presenting the elements of the early Buddhist theory of reality not with the idea of establishing its truth but because such a task should fall within the purview of a modern student of philosophy for the reasons stated.

The Buddhist theory of reality is distinguished from other leading theories about the nature and destiny of man in the universe by the Buddha himself. The six leading -thinkers in, the time of the Buddha seem to represent standard types of philosophical thought met with in the history of human speculation.

Makkhalī Gosāla was a Theist (*issara-kāraṇa-vādi*) and according to him the world was created by a divine fiat and

continues to unfold itself like a ball of thread that unwinds itself when flung on the ground. Beings under the impact of evolutionary forces over which they have no control gradually evolve under varying conditions of existence until they eventually attain final salvation. In the other extreme was Ajita Kesakambali, the Materialist, according to whom fools and the wise alike are annihilated at death and there was no such thing as a 'good life,' which religious men talked about. Opposed to both these views was Sañjaya Bellatthiputta, the Sceptic or Positivist who held that beliefs about an after-life, moral responsibility and transcendent existence were beyond verification and, therefore, one could not with reason hold any firm opinion about them. The other three leading thinkers also represent certain specific types of thought. Pūraṇa Kassapa was a natural determinist holding that everything was strictly determined by natural forces, and, as a corollary to his determinism he was, like scientists who held a deterministic view of nature, an Amoralist, who believed that there was nothing good or evil as such. Pakudha Kaccāyana was, like Empedocles or Aristotle, a Categorialist who tried to explain and comprehend man and the universe by classifying reality into discrete categories. Lastly, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, the historical founder of Jainism, was a Relativist (*anekantavādi*) in his theory of knowledge holding, that there was some truth in every point of view and an Eclectic in his metaphysics, who tried to combine all these different, even contradictory standpoints.

Reasons are adduced for discarding these theories: For instance, there are two arguments in the Canonical texts against Personal Theism. One may be called the Puppet argument: “If God designs the life of the entire world - the glory and the misery, the good and the evil acts, man is but an instrument of his will (*niddesa-kāri*) and God alone is responsible” (J V 238). The other is the argument from evil. If God is the omnipotent and omniscient creator, then certain evils are inexplicable: “If God is the lord of the whole universe and the creator of the multitude of beings, then why has he ordained misfortune in the world instead of making the world happy” (J VI 208). The validity of these arguments are not generally questioned even today. An Analytic philosopher, who has recently made a careful and comprehensive study of the concept of God avers that both these arguments are valid. Personal theism implies a rigged universe in which everything including our thoughts and actions are preordained. [7] The several attempts to explain evil are also unsatisfactory. [8]

I have mentioned these various philosophical theories with which Buddhism is contrasted to indicate that such philosophies are recurrent types, while the soundness or validity of arguments do not, likewise, vary with time although we may take time to discover their soundness or validity. Truth is relevant to any age which respects the pursuit of truth.

Early Buddhism is realistic in that it held matter (*rūpa*) to be non-mental (*acetasikaṃ*) and independent of thought (*citta-*

*vippayutta*). Such Matter was classified into three categories. First, there is the category of material attributes which are visible (*sanidassana*) and can be apprehended by the senses (*sappaṭiḡha*) such as colours and shapes. Secondly, there is Matter which is not visible (*anidassana*) but is apprehensible by the other senses. Thirdly, there is Matter, which is neither visible to the naked eye nor apprehensible by the senses but whose existence can be inferred or observed by paranormal vision. There is no direct reference to an atomic theory in Canonical Buddhism but the conception of a dynamic atom in a state of flux was conceived in some of the later Buddhist schools of thought. On the other hand the idealist school (*vijñānavāda*) of Buddhism, which conceived of the natural world as a product of mind (*sarvaṃ buddhimayaṃ jagat*) seemed to have, strayed from the standpoint of early Buddhism.

The early Buddhist analysis of mind deserves to be carefully studied by modern psychologists. We get here the earliest naturalistic conceptions of the mind or mental phenomena. Here again, one has to record a history of neglect. A modern psychologist, who recently made a study of this material has remarked that the oldest Pali writings are of great interest to the psychologist not only because their analysis of mind is in many ways comparable to his own but because their teaching has been used for practical purposes with enviable success. He deplures the lack of any serious study of this material. [9] Of particular interest is its analysis of mental phenomena and its theory of motivation. Mental

phenomena are analysed into impressions, images, ideas and concepts (*saññā*), the hedonic tone or feeling element which accompanies them (*vedanā*), the conative acts (*sañkhāra*), which find expression as trains of thought (*manosañkhārā*), speech activity (*vacīsañkhārā*) and bodily behaviour (*kāyasañkhāra*) as well as the cognitive and quasi-cognitive acts (*viññāṇa*). The view that “the consciousness of a person ran along and fared on without change of identity” (*viññāṇaṃ sandhāvati saṃsarati anaññāṃ*) is held to be an erroneous view since consciousness was causally conditioned under the impact of the environment, the state of the body and the effects of prior experiences.

This accumulation of mental phenomena under the impact of conditioning is conceived of as a “stream of consciousness” (*viññāṇa-sota*), part of which, it is said, has reference to this world (*idhaloke patitṭhitam*), while the other part is located in the world beyond (*paraloke patitṭhitam*) in the living person without a sharp division into two parts (*ubhayato abbhocchinnaṃ*). This means that man’s stream of consciousness has a conscious and unconscious component. There are other references to unconscious mental processes as when it is stated that conative acts of mind may operate, while we are aware of them (*sampajāna*) or unaware of them (*asampajāna*). Similarly, intentions and desires may, be either conscious or subconscious and latent (*āsayānusaya*).

Conscious mental activity functions with a physical basis; there is a reference to “the physical basis of perceptual and conceptual activity” (*yaṃ rūpaṃ nissaya mano-dhātu ca*

*manoviññāṇa-dhātu ca vattati, Paṭṭhāna).*

While this account of the content of the mind may be fruitfully compared with modern analyses of mental phenomena, there is an interesting theory of motivation, which has certain striking resemblances with Freudian theory.

According to this theory man is motivated to act under the impetus of his needs, desires and beliefs. On the one hand there is greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*) and ignorance (*moha*) and on the other selflessness (*cāga*), compassion (*mettā*) and understanding (*paññā*): Greed constitutes the desire to gratify one's senses and sex (*kāma-rāga, kāmataṇhā*) and the desire to satisfy our egoistic drives or impulses (*bhavarāga, bhava-taṇhā*), such as the desire for possessions, for power, for fame, for personal immortality etc. Hatred constitutes our aggressive tendencies (*paṭigha*) or the desire for destruction (*vibhava-taṇhā*), i.e., the desire to get rid of or eliminate what causes dissatisfaction. Both greed and hatred are fed by ignorance (i.e. our erroneous beliefs, illusions and rationalisations) and vice-versa. Indulgence in these desires gives temporary satisfaction and constitutes the pleasure and happiness, which most people enjoy. But according to Buddhist psychology there is a law of diminishing returns, which operates in our attempt to find satisfaction through gratification. This process eventually makes us slaves of our desires as in the case of alcoholics, misers, sex-addicts, power hungry individuals, etc.

Our endeavour should be to gradually change the basis of our motivation from greed, hatred and ignorance to selflessness, compassion and understanding. This, it is suggested, could be done by a process of sublimation consisting in developing the desire to be selfless, compassionate and wise, the desire to eliminate greed, hatred and ignorance and as an aid to the elimination of erroneous beliefs or ignorance, to adopt right beliefs or the right philosophy of life (*sammā diṭṭhi*) on the basis of rational faith (*ākāravatī saddhā*) to bridge the gap between ignorance and understanding.

However, men are of different psychological types owing to their divergent conditioning in the saṃsāric and evolutionary process and different meditational methods adapted to their temperament are recommended for them to effect the transition and transform the basis of their motivation.

Buddhist psychology does not share with Freud his psychic determinism and his consequent pessimism about the possibility of transforming human nature, but the Buddhist theory of motivation outlined above shows a marked similarity with that of Freud's. The similarity, as we may observe, even extends to the classification of desires and the use of terminology. <sup>[10]</sup> In a later phase of Freud's thought there was a division of drives into *eros* (lust) or the life instinct and *thanatos* or the death instinct. <sup>[11]</sup> At this stage *eros* comprehended both libido, the sex instinct, as well as the egoistic instincts. In Buddhism we find *rāga* (*eros*)

subdivided into sex (*kāma-rāga*) and ego-instincts (*bhava-rāga*). Vibhavataṅhā is the desire for destruction or annihilation since vibhava and vināsa are synonyms, in the Pali texts (cp. ... *ucchedavādā sattassa ucchedaṃ vināsaṃ vibhavaṃ paññapenti*, i.e. annihilationists posit the annihilation, destruction and extermination of a being, D I 34). This is what Freud calls the death instinct, sometimes (mistakenly) referring to it as the Nirvana principle. In view of the close similarity of concepts the question as to whether Freud was influenced by Buddhism should be carefully examined especially since Freud had made a thorough study of Schopenhauer, who claimed to be a Buddhist deeply influenced by Buddhist and Upaniṣadic literature.

All conditioned phenomena are in a state of perpetual flux (*anicca*). It follows from this that sentient beings with a desire for security would find this state of affairs unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) and also find no permanent entity or substance (*anattā*) in it.

The central doctrines concerning man's destiny in the universe are mentioned as the objects of the liberating 'threefold wisdom' (*tisso vijjā*). Despite the lack of a persistent entity called 'the person,' there is a continuity (*santati*) of processes which constitutes becoming (*bhava*), causing the birth, decay, death and re-becoming of individuals. The early Buddhist theory of survival is another area of study in which scholarly investigation is lacking. Many scholars have naively assumed that the Buddha uncritically took the prevailing doctrine of rebirth

for granted despite the claims to the contrary the Buddhist texts. A careful study of the data would show that the Buddha put forward his own doctrine of survival or re-becoming (*punabbhava*) after examining several alternative theories regarding the question of survival such as those of the Sceptics, Materialists, Single-after-life theorists and several Rebirth-theorists when he was convinced of it on the basis of his own alleged clairvoyant capacity to recall his own past lives as well as the past lives of others. Buddhist re-becoming may involve both an after-life as a discarnate spirit or rebirth on earth.

Here again, it is the task of philosophers to examine the meaningfulness of assertions concerning an after-life. If the concept of a 'discarnate spirit' or 'rebirth' does not make sense, the question of the truth of these theories do not arise.

Although no Indian philosopher (to the best of my knowledge) has even examined this question, it is worth noting that as far as the doctrine of 'rebirth' goes, some of the leading exponents of the British empiricist tradition in philosophy such as John Locke, David Hume and A. J. Ayer have all pronounced in favour of the meaningfulness, at least, of a claim to 'rebirth.' John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* examines 'rebirth' claims and argues that identity of memory and consciousness is the criterion for personal identity, independent of the body. He concludes: "This may show us wherein personal identity consists; not in the identity of substance, but, as I have said, in the identity of consciousness; wherein if Socrates and the

present mayor of Queenborough agree; they are the same person if the Socrates waking and sleeping do not partake of the same consciousness; Socrates waking and sleeping is not the same person" (II. XXVII. 19). David Hume in his *Essays on Suicide* comes to the conclusion that "the Metempsychosis is therefore the only system of this kind (that is, the only conception of immortality) that philosophy can hearken to." [12] The contemporary analytic philosopher A. J. Ayer grants "the logical possibility of reincarnation". [13]

If 'rebirth' is meaningful, the next question would be whether it is true. This is a matter which can be decided only on the basis of the relevant empirical evidence. A leading philosopher, Professor C. J. Ducasse, thinks that the data from age-regression experiments, while not establishing the theory of rebirth, tend to give it some degree of probability. [14] A professor of psychiatry, who has examined several authentic spontaneous cases of recall of alleged prior lives mainly on the part of children from different parts of the world, thinks after trying to account for the evidence in terms of several alternate normal and paranormal hypotheses that the theory of 'rebirth' is "the most plausible hypothesis for understanding cases of this series." [15]

It is logically possible that 'rebirth' could be true without the law of karma being true. It means that its truth has to be independently attested. The Buddhist doctrine of karma merely states that there is an observable correlation between

moral acts and their personal consequences, such that morally good and evil acts tend to result in specific pleasant and unpleasant consequences, as the case may be, to the individual. According to the texts, the Buddha claimed to verify the truth of this theory by his extra-sensory powers of clairvoyant observation. This raises several questions, the question as to whether the Buddha ever made such a claim and, if so, whether there is evidence for the validity of clairvoyance etc. In this respect one may compare and study the historically attested case of Edgar Cayce of Virginia Beach, U.S.A., who just over two decades back claimed the exercise of these faculties and whose records are still available for inspection and scrutiny. [16]

To explain rebirth and karma, some Upaniṣads resorted to the conception of a perdurable soul, which was the agent of actions and the recipient of reactions. But Buddhism, which discarded the concept of the soul tries to explain all this in terms of its theory of the conditioned genesis of the individual.

According to this theory, there is a cycle of conditioning which promotes the growth and development of the individual. The stages of conditioning (which have often been misinterpreted by scholars as an evolutionary series going back to a first-cause) are as follows: Ignorance, i.e. our beliefs, true or false, about the nature and destiny of man in the universe, condition our volitional activities" (*avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā*). "The volitional activities condition the nature and tone of our consciousness" (*saṅkhārā paccayā*

*viññānaṃ*); we may note here that this is one of the central themes of the modern Existentialist. “The nature our consciousness conditions the new personality in the subsequent life (*viññānā paccayā nāmarūpa*). “Conditioned by the nature of our personality is our external world” (*nāmarūpa paccayā saḷāyatana*). “This external world (physical, social and ideological) conditions our impressions” (*saḷāyatana paccayā phassa*). “The impressions condition our hedonic tone or the pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feelings we have” (*phassa paccaya vedanā*). “These feelings condition the functioning of our desires, the pleasant sensations arousing or reinforcing the desires for sexual and sensuous gratification (*kāmatanḥā*) and the desire for egoistic pursuits (*bhava-tanḥā*) while the unpleasant sensations arouse the desire for elimination or destruction (*vibhava-tanḥā*)” (*vedanāpaccayā tanḥā*). “These desires condition our entanglements with objects or persons (*kāmupādāna*), philosophical, religious or political theories (*ditṭhupādāna*); habits, customs, rites or rituals (*sīlabbatūpādānaṃ*) as well as our beliefs in soul and substance (*attavādupādāna*)” (*tanḥā paccayā upādānaṃ*). “The kinds of things around which we have formed entanglements condition our future becoming” (*upādāna paccaya bhavo*). “This becoming conditions our birth” (*bhava paccayā jāti*). “Birth results in decay and death” (*jāti paccayā jarāmaraṇaṃ*). This is the wheel of becoming (*bhava-cakka*) that we are caught up in but the emergence from this condition is also pictured as a process of conditioning:

“Suffering is instrumental in arousing faith in moral and spiritual values, such faith results in gladness and composure of mind, giving rise to insight regarding reality and eventual salvation” (*dukkhūpanisā saddhā ... S II 31*). However, in the last resort it is the understanding of the nature of our conditioning which liberates us and makes it possible for us to attain the Unconditioned.

As we can see, we are conditioned by the environment, by our heredity (*bija-niyama*) owing to the fact that our new personality is made up of the fusion of the dynamic Unconscious coming down from a previous life as well as what is derived from our parents, our psychological past going back to prior lives and the desires and beliefs, which motivate our behaviour. Yet although we are *conditioned* we are *not determined* by these factors since we have an element of freedom from constraint, which makes it possible for us within limits to control and direct our future course of saṃsāric evolution.

According to the Buddhist theory, we have been conditioned from time immemorial, in the course of which our forms of existence have changed from one setting to another in the vast cosmos. The smallest unit in the world of space (*okāsa-loka*) is defined as “a thousandfold minor world-system” (*sahassī-cūḷānikā-lokadhātu*). This is described as follows: “As far these suns and moons revolve, shining and shedding their light in space, so far extends the thousands-fold world-system. In it are thousands of suns, thousands of moons ... thousands of Jambudīpas, thousands

of Aparagoyānas, thousands of Uttarakurūs and thousands of Pubbavidehas” (A I 227; V 59). The next unit is the middling world-system (*majjhamika-lokadhātu*) made up of two, three, four up to hundred or thousand of such minor world-systems. Each such world-system is formed of clusters of minor world-systems. The major world-system (*mahā-lokadhātu*) is formed of thousands of such middling world Systems. If we translate these conceptions into those of modern astronomy, the minor world-system, which is the unit of the cosmos, would be a galaxy. A galaxy contains thousands upon thousands of suns and moons and planets, some of which, in the opinion of modern astronomers, are likely to inhabited. A middling world-system would be a cluster of such galaxies, and the metagalaxy or the cosmos, as we know it, would consist of clusters of such clusters. This metagalaxy goes through two immense periods of time, a period of opening out (*vivaṭṭamāna-kappa*) and a period of closing in, culminating “in the destruction of the cosmos (*saṃvaṭṭamāna-kappa*). In modern terminology, this is comparable to the oscillating model of a universe, which periodically expands and contracts.

So the conception of man and his destiny in the universe, as described in the Buddhist texts, is not one which does not fit in with the conceptions of man and the universe in our present space age, however fantastic it would seem.

There is, however, one defect in the Buddhist texts when we compare the picture of man and his destiny in the universe with the modern conception of things.

Although the Buddhist accounts fits in with the new psychology and the new cosmology, there is hardly any mention of the new biology. The texts fail to mention that man, at least on earth, is at the apex of biological evolution having reached his present state by a process of slow evolutionary change from the primitive forms of life. To try and explain this away would be to indulge in apologetics, which I have no desire to do. All that can be said in favour of the philosophy of the Buddha in this respect is that, although a concept of biological, evolution is not found, life is pictured as a struggle for existence in which one species of life feeds on another “the stronger, overpowering the weaker” (*dubbala-mārika*). [17]

The above Buddhist theory of reality is an attempt to answer the question “What do we know?” According to Buddhist conceptions this has to be justified in the light of its theory of knowledge, which in turn was an attempt to answer the question “How do we know?” Our next question would be “What do we do?” in a personal or collective sense. The former part of this question takes us to the Buddhist theory of ethics and the latter to its social and political philosophy.

Ethical propositions would have no significance in a strictly deterministic or in-deterministic universe. In the former, because there would be no freedom for people to choose between alternative courses of action and in the latter because one’s decisions and voluntary actions would not contribute to or be correlated with one’s betterment or

degeneration, as the case may be.

In Buddhism, the propositions of ethics are significant but this is dependent on the truth of certain factual propositions. Kant argued that 'ought implies can' but this need not necessarily be so since our use of ought-propositions may be mistaken. What he should, have said was that ought-statements are significant only if at least some can-statements are true. In greater detail, there can be no ethics without a concept of moral responsibility. But there cannot be moral responsibility unless (i) some of our actions are free (though conditioned) and not constrained, (ii) morally good and evil actions are followed by pleasant and unpleasant consequences, as the case may be, and (iii) there is human survival after death to make this possible with justice. Now the question as to whether these conditions are fulfilled or not, is a purely factual question. If there was no free will and human actions were strictly determined, there would be no sense in our talking about moral responsibility for our actions. According to Buddhism, nature is such that all these conditions are fulfilled and, therefore, moral responsibility is a fact. The universe is such that the moral and spiritual life is both possible and desirable.

Buddhism considers human perfection or the attainment of arahatship as a good in itself and likewise the material and spiritual welfare of mankind. Whatever is good as a means in bringing about these good ends are instrumentally good and these are called right actions, defined as actions which

promote one's welfare as well as the welfare of others. It therefore propounds the doctrine of ethical universalism as opposed to ethical egoism or ethical altruism. The goal of perfection and happiness (the hedonist ideal) is also therapeutic in that only a perfect person, it is said, has a perfectly healthy mind, which enjoys supreme happiness. Hence the necessity for cleansing the mind, which consists in changing the basis of our motivation from greed, hatred and ignorance to selfless service, compassion and understanding.

The Buddhist theory of reality and ethics are summed up in the four Noble Truths.

The account of personal experience and of man's condition as portrayed in the writings of some of the Existentialists in some respects closely resembles the Buddhist analysis of man's predicament. The attention drawn to the experience of dread, anxiety, melancholy and despair on the part of the human person may be, compared with the Buddhist version of man's confrontation with the insecurity and unsatisfactoriness of existence. Existentialists also focus attention on the individual and stress the importance of choice and responsibility for the achievement of authentic existence and selfhood. So does Buddhism draw attention to the need for man to emerge from his unhappy condition. But while choice is completely free for the Existentialist, choice is conditioned though not strictly determined from the Buddhist point of view. Choice makes for authentic living but for some Existentialists morality does not come

into the picture and what is important is that one does what one wishes to do without being subject to the inhibitions and constraints of society. In such a situation both Hitler and Gandhi would equally well exemplify instances of authentic living.

It is true that Kierkegaard indirectly suggests the superiority of the ethical to the purely aesthetic life of romantic hedonism and abstract intellectualism, which lacks commitment and also of the religious to the ethical stage of life, arguing that each is transfigured in the other, which is superior. This resembles in some respects the Buddhist way of moral and spiritual progress past the stage of the aesthetic (the life of the gratification of the basic desires) to, the ethical (*sīla*), the meditational (*samādhi*) and the intuitive (*paññā*), but neither the psychology nor the *raison d'être* of such development is as clearly formulated as in Buddhism.

The social and political philosophy of Buddhism is equally relevant and enlightening. Again, the Buddha was the first thinker in history to teach the doctrine of equality. [18] Man was one species and the division into social classes and castes was not a permanent or inevitable division of society although this was given divine sanction at the time.

Historical and economic factors brought about, as the Buddha relates in the Aggañña Sutta, the division of people into occupational classes, which later became castes. All men are capable of moral and spiritual development and should be afforded the opportunity for this. The doctrine of equality does not imply that all men are physically and

psychologically alike, but that there is a sufficient degree of homogeneity amongst men in terms of their capacities and potentialities as to warrant their being treated equally and with human dignity (*samānattatā*).

Society, according to the Buddha, like every other process in nature was liable to change from time to time.

The factors that determined this change were economic and ideological, for men were led to action by their desires and beliefs. It was the duty of the state to uphold justice and promote the material and spiritual welfare of its subjects. There is a social contract theory of society and government. Ultimate power, whether it be legislative, executive or judiciary is vested with the people but delegated to the king or body of people elected to govern. If the contract of upholding law and order and promoting the material and spiritual interests of the people is seriously violated, the people have a right to revolt and overthrow such a tyrannical government (see, *Padamānavakusala Jātaka*).

Sovereignty is subject to the necessity to conform to the rule of righteousness. The rule of power has to be dependent on the rule of righteousness. Punishment has to be reformatory and only secondarily deterrent and never retributive. In international relations [19] the necessity for subjecting sovereignty to the rule of righteousness requires that no nation be a power unto itself, while in its dealings with other nations it should always have the good and happiness of mankind at heart. The ideal just society is both

democratic and socialistic and ensures human rights as well as economic equity and full employment. It is likely to come into existence after a catastrophic world war, when the remnant who are likely to escape its dire destruction would setup a new order based on a change of heart and a change of system, guaranteeing both freedom and economic security for all

This social and political philosophy could be fruitfully compared and contrasted with the Marxist. Both are realistic in granting the impact of the material environment and economic relationships in the development of society. Both emphasise the changeable nature of the forms of society. In both we get a picture of the emergence of a new ideal form of society in the future. But the differences are equally important. In Buddhism, the ideological factor is at least equally relevant and effective in bringing about social change. Hence there is no economic determinism. Finally, according to the Buddhist social contract, the government is bound to promote both freedom and economic security and the ideal form of government is both democratic and socialistic.

In conclusion, we may observe that the philosophy of the Buddha is of great relevance to modern thought and the modern world. While it endorses the programme of analytic philosophy in stressing the need for clarity and clarification (Buddhism itself was known as the philosophy of analysis—*vibhajjavāda*), it offers a positive account of man's nature and destiny in the universe, which is compatible with the

temper and findings of science. Its ethics is basically humanistic, though it gives a basis for such an ethic, lacking in mere humanism. It gives a realistic account of social and political philosophy embodying values, which are generally held in high regard in the modern world even if they are not evident in practice.

In giving an account of this philosophy it is not my primary intention to establish its truth but rather to indicate that it is worthy of serious study and consideration by the best minds of the present age, in view of the nature of the answers it gives to certain fundamental questions asked today and at all times by men who reflected on the riddle of the universe. In my opinion, the philosophy of the Buddha presents a challenge to the modern mind, and it should be a primary function and duty of modern philosophers to examine its solutions to basic questions.

# Notes

1. See, P. F. Strawson, *Individuals*, University Paperbacks, Reprint , 1969, London, pp. 9ff.
2. See, T. Ling, *Buddha, Marx and God*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1956.
3. *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan*, Ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary, The Modern Library, New York p. 354.
4. *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, George, Allen & Unwin, London,1963.
5. See, K. N. Jayatilleke, op. cit., pp. 322 ff.
6. Ibid., pp. 288 ff.; cp. *Mind*, Vol. LXXV, N.S., No. 299, July, 1966, p. 454: "Perhaps the most interesting feature of early Buddhism was the recognition that certain questions cannot be answered, not because of lack of information etc., but because of the nature of the questions themselves. Certain metaphysical problems were classified by the Buddha together with the question "Where does the flame go when it goes out?" Some commentators, both Eastern and Western, have misunderstood this point, and have attributed the Buddha's silence to a pragmatic concern that people

should not waste their time on speculation. But Professor Jayatilleke conclusively argues for a Wittgensteinian interpretation (indeed, Wittgenstein used the same example: was this a coincidence?)”

7. Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy*, Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1966, p. 44.
8. Ibid., p. 54.
9. See, Rune Johansson, *The Psychology of Nirvana*, George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., London, 1969; cp. “The original Buddhism was a psychologically sophisticated doctrine with a very rich and differentiated psychological terminology ... The psychology of Nikāya Buddhism has not yet been adequately analysed and described. An early attempt by Mrs Rhys Davids (9) is superficial and biased. The work of Jayatilleke, referred to previously, (4) is reliable but touches psychological matters only occasionally. An interesting treatment of some special questions of psychological interest is found in an article by him (5) ...” (p. 65).
10. A pupil of mine, Dr. M. W. P. de Silva of the University of Ceylon, obtained his Ph. D. from the University of Hawaii on a , thesis on “Buddha and Freud”. He found similarity in the analysis of mind and a difference in the methods adopted for the mastery of the unconscious. He did not examine the problem of influence.
11. See, Clara Thompson, M. D., *Psychoanalysis: Evolution and Development*, Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1957, pp.

50 ff.

12. *Essays and Treatises on Various Subjects*, Boston, 1881, p. 228.
13. *The Concept of a Person*, Macmillan and Co., Ltd., London, 1963, p.127; cp. A. J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge*, Penguin Books; Reprint 1957, Edinburgh, pp. 184–185,193–194.
14. *The Belief in a Life after Death*, Illinois, 1961, pp, 241–299.
15. Ian Stevenson, M.D., *The Evidence from Survival for Claimed Memories of Former Incarnations*, Essex, 1961, p. 34; cp. Ian Stevenson. *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, New York, 1966 (pp. x plus 362).
16. See, Gina Cerminara, M. A. Ph.D. *Many Mansions*, William Sloan Associates, Inc. New York, 12th Ed, 1964.
17. Professor C.D. Broad says, “Now I do not think that there need be any great difficulty in fitting religion in general; or certain of the great historical religions, such as Buddhism, into this changed biological framework” (Religion, Philosophy, and Psychical Research, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd. , London, 1953, p. 241; Chapter on “Relations of Science and Religion”)
18. For the arguments in detail see, G. P. Malalasekera and K. N. Jayatilleke, *Buddhism and the Race Question*, UNESCO Race Series, Paris, 1958. For an abridged version, see The **Wheel No. 200–201**:

19. On this topic, see my Hague lectures: *Recueil des Cours*, Vol. II, 1967, pp. 443–566

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