

# How Buddhism Looks at Philosophical Theories

**Professor Y. Karunadasa**

Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong

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# Final Goal of Buddhism

- Freedom from suffering
- From an epistemological perspective, this means:
  - freedom from all theoretical views and ideologies.
  - abandonment of all metaphysical and theological speculations.

# Buddhist Psychology of Philosophy

- How Buddhism debunks philosophical speculation:
  - Not through philosophical arguments, but by psychological analysis.
  - This may be described as the “Buddhist Psychology of Philosophy”.

# Buddhist Psychology of Philosophy

- What this means:
  - Rather than resorting to logic and argumentation, Buddhism seeks to transcend all views and ideologies.
  - This is done through diagnosis of their psychological mainsprings, the psychological factors responsible for their emergence and prevalence in the world.

# Buddhist Psychology of Philosophy

- What this really means:
  - Buddhism takes into account psychological factors serving as causes for emergence of ideological positions.
  - Underlying premise: Our desires and expectations have a direct impact on what we choose to believe in.

# Buddhist Psychology of Philosophy

- So, from Buddhist perspective:
  - All metaphysical speculations are merely externalizations of our deep-seated desires and innate anxieties.
  - Some speculative views and ideologies could appear as very lofty and profound, beautiful, and awe-inspiring.
  - Nonetheless, the Buddhist position is they are but rationalizations of our self-centered desires to satisfy our innermost yearnings and compulsive urges.

# Evidence for the Buddhist Perspective

- Found in First Buddhist Discourse in Long Collection of Pali Canon “**The All-Embracing Net of Views**”
  - Contains some 62 religious/philosophical views on nature of the “self” (*atta*) and the “world” (*loka*).
  - All have as their epistemological ground:
    - ❖ “logic and pure reasoning” (*takka-vimamsā*)
    - ❖ or experience gained in “mental concentration” (*ceto-samādhi*)
    - ❖ or combination of both.

# Grouping of the 62 Views

## Categorisation of the 62 views

1. Theism	Belief in Creator God
2. Eternalism	Spiritual view that physical body is perishable but metaphysical self is eternal/immortal.
3. Nihilism	Materialist view that self is same as physical body and therefore perishable at time of death, with no possibility of post-mortem existence.
4. Cosmogony	Whether world is eternal or non-eternal in terms of time, or whether world is finite or infinite in terms of space
5. Fortuitism	The fortuitous view that world has arisen haphazardly without rhyme or reason
6. Skepticism	The skeptical view that, with our limited faculties, we cannot fathom unlimited reality, and therefore the need to suspend categorical judgements.



# Buddhism Distinguishes Between 2 Kinds of Views

- Buddhism makes a distinction between 2 kinds of views:
  - The first: Belief in a self or soul (*atta-vāda*), considered as the essence of human beings.
  - The second: All forms of “speculative metaphysics intended to explain the nature of the self” (*atta-vāda-paṭisaṃyutta*) and the “nature of the world” (*loka-vāda-paṭisaṃyutta*)

# Buddhism on the 2 Kinds of Views

- Of these two kinds of views:
  - First is primary; second is derivative.
  - In the final analysis, the first serves as base for emergence of the second.
  - In other words, all varieties of speculative metaphysics, whatever form they assume, are finally traceable to belief in a permanent selfhood, the notion of a self-existent subject which is impervious to change.

# The Many Forms of Self

- Idea of self, as we all know, assumes many forms. It appears as:
  - “I” in ordinary discourse
  - “Soul” in religion
  - “Ego” in philosophy.
- Whatever form it assumes, from the Buddhist point of view, it is a fallacious assumption, a conception without corresponding objective counterpart. Its emergence is entirely due to psychological reasons.

# Buddhist Theory of Cognition

- This situation becomes clear from Buddhist theory of cognition - how we cognise mental and physical objects.
- According to Buddhism, what we consider to be our apparently continuous psychological experience is analyzable into series of discrete cognitive acts, or units of consciousness.
- Each cognitive act, in turn, consists of a number of cognitive events, such as sensory contact, feeling, perception, investigation, all leading up to a complex stage called “conceptual proliferation” (*papañca*).

# Buddhist Theory of Cognition

- The whole cognitive process is an entirely impersonal process.
- There is no self-entity behind the cognitive process that experiences the object. Nor is there an agent that directs the various mental activities.
- They take place naturally according to the principles of psychological order (*citta-niyāma*), where each stage in the continuum is conditioned by the immediately preceding one.

# Conceptual Proliferations

- However, in every cognitive process of unenlightened person, the latent tendency for the ego-consciousness awakens and gradually solidifies, eventually becoming fully crystallized at the final stage called conceptual proliferations (*papañca*).
- Once the ego-consciousness has arisen, it cannot exist in a vacuum; it needs ontological support; it needs concrete form and content.
- In this regard, the unenlightened person identifies the ego-consciousness in relation to the five aggregates into which Buddhism analyzes the individual being, namely, corporeality, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

# Process of Identification

- Process of identification takes the following form:
  - “This is mine” (*etaṃ mama*)
  - “This I am” (*eso ’ham asmi*)
  - “This is myself” (*eso me attā*).
- This is how the notions of “my”, “I”, and “my self” intrude into what otherwise is an impersonal and egoless congeries of mental and physical phenomena.

# Process of Identification

- Of these notions of self:
  - the first is due to “craving” (*tañhā*);
  - the second, to “conceit” (*māna*); and
  - the third to “wrong view” (*diṭṭhi*).
- What is called “self-conceit” arises at a pre-rational level, whereas the idea of self, although conditioned by craving, arises at an elementary reflective level.



# Self View or “Personality View”

- The self-view is also called “the personality-view” (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*) because it affirms the presence of an abiding self in the psycho-physical organism in one of 20 ways.
- If “consciousness” (*viññāṇa*), for instance, is to be assumed as self, such an assumption could manifest itself in 4 ways:
  - (1) consciousness is the same as self, as in case of a flame of a lamp which is identical with its visual appearance;
  - (2) self possesses consciousness, just as a tree has a shadow;
  - (3) consciousness is within the self, just as the scent is in the flower;
  - (4) the self is in consciousness, just as a gem in a casket.

# Self View or “Personality View”

- When this description is extended to other 4 aggregates as well, there are in all 20 possible relations between the five aggregates and the hypothetical self.
- This is how Buddhism explains “the origin of the erroneous belief in a self-entity” (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi-samudaya*).

# Self Entity: Basis for Countless Theories

- Once the belief in a self-entity has arisen, it becomes the base for a countless number of metaphysical, cosmological, and theological theories.
- Hence, we read in Saṃyutta-Nikāya, the Connected Discourses of the Buddha:

“Now, householder, as to those diverse views that arise in the world and as to these sixty-two views set forth in the Discourse on the All-Embracing Net of Views it is owing to the self-view that they arise and if the self-view exists not they do not exist.”
- As the above quotation clearly shows, all philosophical views which seek to explain the nature of self and the universe can be traced to belief in a permanent individualized self.

# Craving: Base for all Philosophical Views

- According to the Buddhist doctrine of Dependent Arising, there arise 4 kinds of grasping, owing to craving.
- One of them is “grasping of the self-notion” (*atta-vāda-upādāna*). Since grasping of the self-notion arises due to craving, it follows from the above quotation that all philosophical views have craving as their base.

# The Buddha and the Unanswered Questions

- The above quotation in the Saṃyutta-Nikāya is important from another aspect.
- Some modern scholars have given many interpretations as to why the Buddha deemed it necessary to observe silence on some 10 questions.
- These questions relate to the nature of the world, whether it is eternal or non-eternal in terms of time, whether it is finite or infinite in terms of space, whether the life-principle and the physical body are identical or not, and whether the postmortem status of the Tathāgata (the one who has attained enlightenment) is one of existence, or non-existence, both, or neither.

# The Buddha and the Unanswered Questions

- Some scholars maintained that if the Buddha did not answer these questions, it was because he did not know the answers to them.
- Some others maintained that the Buddha's silence was due to pragmatic reasons: That is, the Buddha knew the answers but for practical reasons he withheld them.
- And some other scholars went to the extent of saying that the ten questions belonged to a class of profound metaphysics, bordering on mysticism, that they could be answered only by what is paradoxically called a “thunderous silence”, a silence more communicative than vocal expression.

# The Buddha and the Unanswered Questions

- None of these explanations can be justified on textual evidence.
- As the above quotation clearly indicates, if the Buddha observed silence on the 10 undetermined questions, it was because they are all meaningless questions.
- They are all based on the erroneous self-view, the view that there is an abiding self-entity within the constantly changing psychophysical organism.

# Two Varieties of Self

- According to Buddhism, notion of self has two varieties:
  - Eternalism (*sassatavāda*)
  - Annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*)



# Eternalism (*sassatavāda*)

- This is the spiritualist version of the self.
- It is presented in Buddhist texts as that which makes a clear distinction between a self-entity, on the one hand, and physical body on the other.
- It thus assumes a duality between two basic principles, one spiritual and the other material; a permanent metaphysical self (soul), on the one hand, and temporary physical body, on the other.

# Eternalism (*sassatavāda*)

- Accordingly, a human being's true essence is to be found, not in the perishable physical body but in the permanent metaphysical self. Hence this theory came to be presented in the Buddhist texts as “eternalism” (*sassatavāda*), or the belief in an eternal self.
- Let us call this theory “the theory of the metaphysical self”, while noting at the same time that all religions and philosophies that subscribe to it are, from the Buddhist point of view, different versions of eternalism.

# Annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*)

- The opposite view is the materialist version of the self.
- It is a reaction against the spiritualist view of the self and is presented in Buddhist texts as that which asserts the complete identity of the self and the physical body.
- According to this theory, a human being's true essence is to be found not in an elusive metaphysical principle, but in the empirically observable physical body.

# Annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*)

- If self and physical body are identical, it follows that with breakup of body at time of death, self itself comes to naught, to complete annihilation.
- Hence, this theory came to be presented in Buddhist texts as “annihilationism” (*ucchedavāda*), or the annihilationist theory of the self.
- Let us call this theory “the theory of the physical self”, while noting at the same time that all materialist views that subscribe to it are, from the Buddhist perspective, different versions of annihilationism.

# Buddhism: Setting Itself Aloof from the Two Views

- Early Buddhism presents these 2 views as occupying a position of binary opposition, while describing its own position as one that sets itself equally aloof from both of them. It is in fact against the background of these two views that Buddhist teachings are presented.
- The conclusion suggests itself therefore that from its very beginning, Buddhism considered itself as a critical response to the mutual opposition between the spiritualist and the materialist ideologies.

# Buddhism: The Middle Position

- These two views, according to the Buddha, prevail throughout the history of humankind's intellectual thought.
- Thus, addressing Kaccana, the Buddha says:

“This world, Kaccana, for the most part depends upon a duality – upon the notion of existence and the notion of non-existence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of non-existence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to the world. ‘All exists’, Kaccana, this is one extreme. ‘All does not exist’, this is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dhamma by the Middle.”

# The Two Views of Existence

- Here, the notions of existence and nonexistence mean the spiritualist and materialist views.
- For, these two are sometimes introduced as the “view of existence” (*bhava-diṭṭhi*) and the “view of nonexistence” (*vibhava-diṭṭhi*). As Buddhism understands, these two views are two versions of the self theory.

# The Two Views of Existence

- The first is its metaphysical version, and the second its physical version - a position of mutual exclusion to which the Buddha refers thus:

“Monks, there are these two views, the view of being and the view of non-being. Any recluses or Brahmins who rely on the view of being, adopt the view of being, accept the view of being are opposed to the view of non-being. Any recluses or Brahmins who rely on the view of non-being, adopt the view of non-being, accept the view of non-being are opposed to the view of being.”



# Origins of the Two Views of Self

- According to Buddhism's diagnosis of spiritual eternalism (i.e., the belief in a permanent self-entity), its origin can be traced to what is called “the craving for eternal life” (*bhava-taṇhā*), or “the desire for the immortality of the soul”.
- It is the desire for the eternalization of the self, the desire to perpetuate individual existence into eternity.

# Origins of the Two Views of Self

- On the other hand, the psychological origin of materialism ( i.e. the belief in a temporary self-entity) can be traced to “the craving for eternal death” (*vibhava-taṇhā*), the desire for self-annihilation.
- It is the desire to see a complete annihilation of the individual existence at time of death, without any prospect of postmortem survival.
- What seems to be assumed here is that materialism resists the belief in survival because of its fear of moral retribution, for this view gives an open license to live our lives without being burdened by a sense of moral accountability.

# Mind Caught between Two Deep-seated Desires

- The mutual opposition between spiritualist eternalism and materialist annihilationism shows not only the perennial conflict between two mutually exclusive philosophical views but also the human mind's oscillation between two deep-seated desires.

# Buddhist Critique of Views

- There is another important aspect of the Buddhist critique of views and ideologies: Buddhism does not endorse dogmatic adherence to views, even if they are right.
- To be infatuated with “the rightness” of one’s own views and ideologies is called “*sandiṭṭhi-rāga*”. The dogmatic attachment to them is called “*diṭṭhi-parāmāsa*”.

# Buddhist Critique of Views

- The root cause of both is the belief that “this alone is true and all else is false” (*idaṃ eva saccaṃ, moghaṃ aññaṃ*). It is this kind of warped attitude that provides a fertile ground for bigotry and dogmatism, what Buddhism calls “*idaṃ-saccābhinivesa*”.
- Its external manifestations, as we all know, are acts of fanaticism and militant piety, indoctrination and unethical conversion, religious fundamentalism and persecution, not to speak of interpersonal conflicts and acts of terrorism often leading to internecine warfare.

# Buddhist Critique of Views

- From the Buddhist point of view, therefore, dogmatic attachment to ideologies is very much more detrimental and fraught with more danger than our inordinate attachment to material things.
- Inter-religious and intra-religious wars are a case in point. The cold war between capitalism and communism, which had nearly brought the world into the brink of nuclear disaster, is another case in point.

# Buddhist Teachings: Only a Means to an End

- If Buddhism does not encourage dogmatic attachment to views, it is because from the Buddhist way of looking at it, a view is only a guide to action.
- In his well-known Discourse on the “Parable of the Raft” (**Kullupama**), the Buddha tells us that his teaching should be understood not as a goal unto itself but as a means to the realization of the goal.

# Buddhist Teachings: Only a Means to an End

- When Vacchagotta, a wandering philosopher, asked the Buddha: “Does the Venerable Good Gotama has a view of his own?” the Buddha said:

“The Tathagata, O Vaccha, has given up all views. However, the Tathagata has viewed thus: this is materiality, this is its arising, this its cessation; this is feeling, ...; this is perception ...; these are mental formations, ...; this is consciousness, and so on.”

- (Here “arising” and “cessation” should be understood in a psychological sense. It means the “arising” and “cessation” of attachment to the five aggregates, the aggregates into which Buddhism analyzes individual existence.)



# Buddhist Teachings: Only a Means to an End

- Thus, the teaching of the Buddha, as the Buddha himself says, has only relative value, relative to the realization of the goal. It is a thing to be used and not a thing to be ritually adulated.
- What this clearly implies is that even the “right view”, like all other views, is a conceptual model serving as a guide to action. If it is called right view, it is because it leads us directly to the right goal. The right goal according to Buddhism is a “right vision” (*sammā<sup>ā</sup>dassana*) into the “nature of actuality” (*yathā<sup>ā</sup>bhūta*).

# Buddhist Teachings: Only a Means to an End

- According to Buddhism, the world of conditioned experience (*samsāra*) is a world of construction (*saṅkhāra*). Nibbana means its complete deconstruction (*visaṅkhāra*).
- Hence, immediately after his attaining Nibbana, the Buddha says: “My mind has come to a state of deconstruction (*visamkhara-gatam cittam*); I have realized the ending of all craving (*tanhanam khayam ajjhaga*).

# Cessation of Views and Deconstruction

Cessation of suffering (*dukkha-nirodha*) means cessation of craving (*taṇhā-nirodha*);



Cessation of craving means cessation of views (*diṭṭhi-nirodha*)



Cessation of views means that the mind has come, not to destruction, but to de-construction (*visamṅkhāra*).

# When Deconstruction is Achieved

- When the mind has reached de-construction, the five aggregates do remain.
- Yet they are no more constructed, in the sense the Tathagata does not impose on them any kind of craving or clinging.

That which is selfless, hard it is to see;  
Not easy is it to perceive the truth  
But who has ended craving utterly  
Has naught to cling to, he alone can see.

# When Nibbana is realised

- What takes place when Nibbana is realized is not a change in the nature of reality but a change in our perspective of the nature of reality.
- The fact of impermanence is not a problem in itself. It becomes a problem when it is wrongly perceived as permanence. This is what is called “perception of permanence in impermanence”.
- In the same way, the fact of non-self is not a problem in itself. It becomes a problem when it is wrongly perceived as self. This is what is called “perception of self in what is not the self”.

# When Nibbana is realised

- Thus for Buddhism, what actually matters is not the nature of the world per se, but the world as interpreted and constructed through the lens of our ego-centric perspectives: our views and beliefs, our speculative theories and dogmatic assertions.
- What comes to an end when Nibbana is realized is not the nature of reality; rather it is a wrong interpretation of the world.

# Conclusion

- Early Buddhism is not a philosophy. It is a meta-philosophy, a philosophy that explains the very nature of philosophy.
- Stated otherwise, the ultimate goal of Buddhism is not to have a view, but to view.