

# Buddha's Rationality

N S Siddharthan\*

*In discussions on rationalism and scientific spirit in current literature, the contributions of Buddha's thought are, largely, ignored. And yet, Buddha's emphasis on empirical verification; his attitude towards concepts and theories; his emphasis on understanding the world as it is and as it is constituted; his method of inquiry, and advocacy of radical empiricism --- had laid the foundations of scientific spirit and enquiry 2,500 years ago.*

\*Email: [nssiddharthan@gmail.com](mailto:nssiddharthan@gmail.com)

There have been several studies on Buddhist philosophy, psychology and ethics (Humphreys 1951; Kung 2002; Niwano 1976; Radhakrishnan 1923; Suzuki 1950). However, at the centre of Buddha's teachings is his emphasis on rationality and insistence on empirical verification. It is, therefore, important to examine Buddha's rationality and the methodology he used to arrive at his conclusions. I argue that his methodology is relevant even today and could contribute significantly to current research methods.

## I Buddha's Attitude to Concepts and Theories

Buddha was mainly interested in the actual and not the transcendent. The laws that he discovered and the theories that he developed deal with the concrete and are verifiable. He discouraged speculative metaphysical theories and concepts for two reasons. First, they are not verifiable and second, people tend to cling to those concepts and mere opinions and become dogmatic. As a result they do not see the world as it is and as it is constituted but see the world through false theories and ideas. Bondage to ideas and concepts stands in the way of understanding the truth. To Buddha, truth is supreme and ideas that hinder the discovery of truth should be avoided.

To Buddha, lack of evidence in favour of a theory is sufficient reason to be sceptical and he would like to suspend judgement on those issues. Uncritical acceptance of concepts could lead to undesirable consequences. To cite a common example, several persons mentally conceive God in accordance with their mental capabilities and initiate various practices of worship and appeasement. Furthermore, they also dispute other conceptions and forms of worship. In the *Tevigga Sutta*<sup>1</sup> Buddha clearly states, [T]hat Brahmanas versed in the three Vedas should be able to show the way to a state of union with that which they do not know, neither have seen – such condition of things has no existence.

They all have existence only in the minds of the persons and yet these persons hold exclusivity to their form of worship and disapprove every other form. Buddha denied the divinity of the gods and the authority of the Vedas. As observed by Radhakrishnan (1923, p.357),

It was his privilege to start a religion Independent of dogma and priesthood, sacrifice and sacrament, which would insist on an inward change of heart and a system of self-

---

<sup>1</sup> All Suttas unless otherwise mentioned are found in Sutta Nipata edited by Max Muller.

culture. He made it clear that salvation does not depend on the acceptance of doubtful dogmas or doing deeds of darkness to appease an angry God. Buddha was clear that supernatural interference should not be introduced into logical interpretation of natural phenomena.

Buddha was also acutely aware of dogmatism and the resultant disputes and conflicts as a result of clinging to imaginary theories and systems of beliefs. In the Mahaviyuhasutta Buddha states,

Their own Dhamma they say is perfect, another's Dhamma again they say is wretched; so having disagreed they dispute, they each say their own opinions are truth. If one becomes low by another's censure, then there will be no one distinguished amongst the Dhammas; for they all say another's Dhamma is low; in their own they say is something firm.

To Buddha, these disputes are childish and futile as none of the Dhammas can be verified and proved. To him these dogmatists are no leaders of purity. They all claim that they should be judged solely by their own standards. As stated by Nagarjuna by this criterion every one is right "because everyone accepts his own doctrine" (Ramanan 1975, p.130).

The way out of this problem is not to stop conceptualisation and theorising but to stop clinging to theories that are not verifiable. To Buddha, the root of suffering is clinging, the root of clinging is craving, and the root of craving is ignorance (Ramanan 1975, p.107). Thus what Buddha is opposed to is not theorising but to clinging. He allows concepts and building of systems based on concepts but expects one to be sceptical and not cling to the concepts. Ignorance cannot be got rid off unless a person enjoys full freedom. In this context, Nagarjuna states that gates of freedom will cease to be gates if people start clinging to the gates. Buddha is against his followers clinging to even his teachings. He compares his teaching to a raft meant for crossing the river and not to be clung to after crossing. In other words, Buddha does not liberate persons but he helps persons to liberate themselves as he has liberated himself. If people see things as they are then they will not pursue shadows (Radhakrishnan 1923).

Instead of pursuing metaphysical speculation, which Buddha refers to as profitless subtleties the emphasis should be on understating the world as it is and as it is constituted (*yathabhutam* or *yathatatham*). Enlightenment is no other than all knowledge (*sarvajnata*).

However, as explained by Suzuki it does not mean that the enlightened person knows every individual thing, but means that he has grasped the fundamental principle or laws that govern the universe. Buddha stressed that this huge world of life and motion, which is always becoming, always changing, growing, striving, has yet a law at the centre of it (Radhakrishnan p.374). He taught the laws that are relevant for human beings, like the law of perpetual change (*anitya*), the law of causality, and the law of non-self (*anatma*). He did not want his followers to believe in these laws just because he has taught them; instead, he wants them to analyse them and verify them before acceptance.

In the *Majjhima Sutta*, Buddha makes this point clear when he states,

Now, O monks, are you going to say we respect the master and, out of respect for him, we believe this and that? You must not say so. Is not what you will say to be true, that exactly which you have by yourselves seen, known and apprehended?

Through these laws Buddha formulated a philosophy of change where everything, including ideas and concepts, underwent change. Nothing remained constant without change. Since the change was incremental and gradual most people are not able to notice it. In *Samyutta Nikaya* he tells to Kaccana,

‘Everything is’ – this is one extreme, O Kaccana. ‘Everything is not’ is another extreme. The truth is the middle. It is a becoming without beginning or end. There is no static moment when the becoming attains the beinghood. No sooner than we conceive it by the attributes of name and form than it has changed to something else.

### III Role of Criticism and Buddha’s Logic

Buddha’s critique of existing doctrines and his tools of logic are closely interlinked. He does not criticise the doctrines in the usual sense of criticisms. While finding fault, he does not question the basic premise of the doctrines/theories. Having accepted the basic principles, he shows that the principles contradict each other or are inconsistent. Furthermore, if these theories are logically extended they result in absurd conclusions. Thus instead of attacking the theories, he goes along with them and shows that either they themselves are contradictory or if extended will result in bizarre and meaningless conclusions. At a later time, Nagarjuna used this method of criticism very successfully in dealing with the existing theories and concepts.

Buddha’s logic is best illustrated by his statement in *Majjhima Nikaya*,

I will teach you the Dharma, that being present, this becomes; from the arising of that, this arises. That being absent, this does not become; from the cessation of that, this ceases.

He uses this method in explaining his laws, in particular, the law of perpetual change.

Even before he attained enlightenment, he expressed his dissatisfaction with existing doctrines because of their logical inconsistencies or absurdities. He found the practice of penance full of pain and the fruit of penance – Heaven, where there is no pain but only pleasure and enjoyment. He was intrigued by this and commented,

If the mortification of the body here is religion, then the body’s happiness is only irreligion; but by religion a man obtains happiness in the next world, therefore religion here bears irreligion as its fruit” (Asvaghosha 1894, p.76)

– thereby bringing out the logical inconsistencies. Furthermore, he could not understand the sanctity of the deliberate choice of pain constituting merit. If choice of pleasure does not have authority, the choice of pain also does not have authority.

Likewise, he was not impressed by people sprinkling water on their body for purification, as water cannot cleanse away sin. Sin is not dirt to be cleaned by sprinkling water. Similarly, in his conversation with the royal priest who was sent by his father to convince him to return (Asvaghosha 1894. pp.101-2),

This doubt is not to be solved for me by another’s words. [I]t is not for me to accept a theory which depends on the unknown and is all controverted, and which involves a hundred prepossessions; what wise man would go by another’s belief? Mankind are like the blind directed in the darkness by the blind.

The emphasis throughout has been on verification and not to accept some authority’s word. To Buddha, there are no authorities.

After leaving home Buddha went to the hermitage of Arada but did not stay for long in the hermitage as he was not convinced with their theories of Soul (Atman) as they suffered from many inconsistencies. Arada told him that the Soul is eternal, unborn and ever free. Buddha wondered if it was originally free how it ever became bound? Moreover, if it is un-embodied, it must be either knowing or unknowing; if it is knowing, there must be some object to be known, and if there is this object, it is not liberated. If the soul is declared to be unknowing, then Buddha was not clear about the usefulness of the imagined soul. In the light of these doubts, Buddha decided to leave the hermitage and go on his own.

After his enlightenment, he continued this method of enquiry, namely, pointing out logical inconsistencies. In *Anathapindika* (Carus 1961, pp. 59-61), he points out several inconsistencies in the Vedic literature dealing with Isvara and God. In this literature Isvara has been considered a personal creator who shapes the lives of people. Buddha argued that if Isvara was the maker of all then all living things should have to submit silently to the maker's power and they would be like vessels formed by the potter's hand. In that case, he wondered, how would it be possible to practice virtue? Both pure and impure deeds must come from him. If not, there would be another cause besides him and he would not be self-existent. Furthermore, if the Absolute had created us, then that which is absolute cannot be a cause and if it pervades them, then, certainly, it does not make them. Besides, a perfect Creator cannot be the author of this imperfect world. Neither a benevolent God nor caprice, but a law which works with a fatal logic, is the truth of things.<sup>2</sup>

Buddha then goes on to build his system of cause and effect and the laws that govern. His theories emphasise conditioned origination or dependent origination (*Pratetyasamudpada*) of all things.<sup>3</sup> In other words, nothing has absolute existence and they all have only relative existence. According to this theory absolute existence and absolute non-existence both are false. Things are unreal, that is, conditioned and non-substantial, but not non-existent. According to Nagarjuna this is the truth of conditioned origination, the Middle Way. Nevertheless, one should not cling to this law (*Dhamma*) also as *Pratetyasamudpada* is also a word – a concept.

The only time Buddha used a metaphysical argument was relating to his concept of Nirvana and he considered it beyond the dualities of 'is' and 'is not', and 'existence' and 'non-existence'. Besides, Nirvana is not a thing to be clung to or grasped at. Buddha considered all things that can be expressed in words as belonging to the realm of duality. Hence, Nirvana cannot be described in words, it needs to be seen through prajna. The Mahayana school rejects the dualism between Nirvana and samsara (society) and asserts that there can be no Nirvana outside samsara. To them, Nirvana was not vanishing into a state of absolute non-existence, and that Nirvana in its ultimate significance was an affirmation – an affirmation beyond opposites of all kinds (Suzuki p.58). As stated by a Zen master: Nirvana is to be sought in the midst of samsara. [D]arkness of the cave itself turns into enlightenment when a torch of spiritual insight burns. It is not that a thing called darkness is first taken out and

---

<sup>2</sup> This sentence as translated by Radhakrishnan p. 456.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to the quotation from *Majjhima Nikaya* given at the beginning of the section III.

another thing known by the name enlightenment is carried in later, but that enlightenment and darkness are substantially one and the same thing from the very beginning; the change from the one to the other has taken place only inwardly or subjectively.

#### **IV Radical Empiricism**

In Suzuki's (1950, p.140) view if the Buddha could be said to have had any system of thought governing the whole trend of his teachings, it was what we may call radical empiricism. Buddha emphasised examining, seeing and showing and not believing. While observing one should see the world as it is and as it is constituted and not observe only things that we want to see. People with preconceived notions selectively observe only things that they want to observe and ignore the rest. In this context Nagarjuna (Ramanan, p.107) states,

We select from out of the presented only the aspects of our interest and neglect the rest; to the rest that is neglected we become first indifferent and then blind; in our blindness, we claim completeness for the aspects that we have selected. We seize them as absolute, we cling to them as the complete truth, we become dogmatic.

To Buddha, believing on incomplete evidence is not only a blunder, but a crime. In developing theories, one should have the courage to suspend judgement where evidence is partial. The main reason for this biased behaviour (that is, asserting in the absence of full evidence) is the individual's attachment to the theories and clinging to pet doctrines. Persons who are tied to theories observe only what they want to observe and fail to observe things as they are. The empiricism of Buddha requires seeing things as they are and not see things through preconceived notions. Therefore, to observe the world, one needs total freedom – freedom from preconceived notions and personal and ideological biases. Only then one can see the world as it exists. Buddhist empiricism requires extreme objectivity and freedom from all set notions. To Asvaghosa it is the freedom from clinging that gives one an insight into the true nature of things.

Buddha's emphasis on rationality and empirical methods made him oppose superstition and following livelihoods dependent on astrology and exploitation of people's weakness and superstitious beliefs for personal profit. Thus in *Tuvtakasutta* he prohibits his followers from practising the hymns of *Atharvaveda*, the interpretation of sleep and signs, astrology and interpreting the cry of birds, etc. Furthermore, in *Maha Silam (Sutta-Nipata)* he prohibits livelihood by what he calls low arts and lying practices such as, by divination from marks on the body; by auguries; by the interpretation of prognosis, of dreams, and of omens, good or bad; by sacrifices to the god of fire, offerings of Dabba grass, by bloody sacrifices, by teaching spells, determining lucky sites, by pretending knowledge of the language of beasts, fixing marriages based on horoscopes, fixing auspicious time based on astrology, etc. He bans them as they are not true and they enable profiting by exploiting the ignorance of people. He considers them, namely, those who practice them for profit as "tricksters, droners out of holy words for pay, diviners, exorcists, ever hungering to add gain to gain" (Radhakrishnan 1923. p.356).

Buddha was also against discriminations based on birth, in particular, caste and gender discriminations. He said like the rivers lose their individual identities after joining the ocean, all caste identities would cease to exist once they join his *sanga*.

He fought for equality of all human beings. In *Vinaya Culavagga* he declared that gender is not a disadvantage for enlightenment. Furthermore, in *Srimaladevisimhanada-Sutta* he asserted that there are no distinctions of sex on the path to enlightenment. Continuing in the same vein, in the *Lotus Sutra* (Niwano 1976) Buddha declared that even a daughter of the devil could become a Buddha. In the *Brahmajala Sutta* he clearly stated that Buddha is one who has attained Buddhahood and people are those who are capable of attaining Buddhahood; that is all the difference that lies between them.

## V Science, Religion and Buddhism

Issues pertaining to the relationship between science and religions were discussed in detail at the World's Parliament of Religions held at Chicago in 1893 (Barrows 1893). At Chicago the two Buddhist representatives, namely, Dharmapala of Sri Lanka and Soyen Shaku, a Zen Monk from Japan took strong positions. They argued that if any religious dogma came into conflict with scientific discoveries then the religious dogma should be given-up. Both argued that the Buddha discovered the law relating to cause and effect, impermanence and interdependence and taught them. He did not claim divinity and wanted the followers to verify what he taught. His teachings are not in conflict with science (McMahan 2004, Dharmapala 1965 and Soyen Shaku 1993). In particular, Dharmapala, took an aggressive stand declaring that the Buddha rejected the notion of 'Supreme Creator' – a notion that is crucial to Christianity and other religions born in West Asia – and replaced it with evolution and the law of cause and effect. He argued that the theory that everything emerged from causes and conditions; and the concept of dependent origination does not conflict with scientific discoveries. By stating these things in a strong language he did embarrass his Christian hosts (McMahan 2004).

The Japanese Zen priest Soyen Shaku in his presentation made similar points relating to science and religion. He argued that the Law of 'cause and effects' as taught by the Buddha is the 'Law of Nature' and the myriad phenomenon of the world are not governed by an exterior force but by this law. He ruled out supernatural interventions and ridiculed the idea of prophets performing miracles. In his view such superstitious beliefs were not conducive for practising self-improvement and good conduct. During that period (as discussed by McMahan, 2004) several other movements also took similar positions. Olcott's Theosophical Movement and Paul Carus (1892 and 1896) emphasised the scientific methodology adopted by the Buddha. Carus in particular, emphasised the positive and rationalists aspects of the Buddha's teachings. They clearly stated that they did not believe in miracles. They advocated scientific religion rather than religion based on superstitious beliefs.

In sum, Buddha's emphasis on empirical verification, his attitude towards concepts and theories --- in particular, his view that lack of evidence in favour of a theory is sufficient reason to be sceptical about the theory; his opposition to clinging to theories

that are not verifiable; his silence on the existence or non-existence of god as neither (god's existence and non-existence) can be proved; his emphasis on understanding the world as it is and as it is constituted; his method of inquiry, and advocacy of radical empiricism --- had laid the foundations of scientific spirit and enquiry 2500 years ago. In discussions on rationalism and scientific spirit in current literature, the contribution of Buddha's thought is, largely, ignored. The purpose of this essay is to bring to notice the contributions of Buddha's thought, fill the gap in literature and enrich the debate on rationality.

#### References

- Asvaghosha (1894): *The Buddha Karita*, Translated by E B Cowell, Buddhist Mahayana texts, Edited by Max Muller and reprinted by Motilal Banarasidas, 1965 New Delhi.
- Barrows, John Henry, ed (1893): *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's First Parliament of Religions*, Held in Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893. Chicago: Parliament Publishing Company.
- Carus, Paul (1892): *Homilies of Science*. Chicago: Open Court.
- Carus, Paul (1896): *The Religion of Science*. Chicago: Open Court.
- Carus, Paul (1961). *The Gospel of Buddha*, National Book Trust, India, New Delhi.
- Dharmapala, Anagarik (1965): *Return to Righteousness: A Collection of Speeches, Essays and Letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala*. Colombo: Government Press.
- Diamond Sutra, Vagrakkhedika Sutra, Muller, Max ( Ed) (1894): *Buddhist Mahayana Texts*, reprinted by Motilal Banarasidas, 1965, New Delhi.
- Humphreys, Christmas (1951): *Buddhism*, Penguin Books, London, 1-256.
- Kung, Hans (2002): *Tracing the Way: Spiritual Dimensions of the World Religions*, Continuum, London and New York, i-xv and 1-280.
- McMahan, David L. (2004): 'Modernity and the Early Discourse of Scientific Buddhism', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (Dec., 2004), pp. 897-933.
- Muller, Max (Ed) (1894): *Buddhist Mahayana Texts*, reprinted by Motilal Banarasidas, 1965, New Delhi.
- Niwano, Nikkyo (1976): *Buddhism for Today: A Modern Interpretation of the Threefold Lotus Sutra*, Kosei Publishing Co. Tokyo, i-xxvii and 1-472.
- Radhakrishnan, S. (1923): *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, Oxford University Press, Oxford, reprinted 1999, New Delhi.1-738.
- Ramanan, Venkata K. (1975): *Nagarjuna's Philosophy*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi. 1- 409.
- Singh, Iqbal (1937 and 2004): in *The Buddhism Omnibus* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1- 399.
- Soyen Shaku, (1993, c1913): *Zen for Americans: Including the Sutra of Forty - two Chapters*. New York: Barnes and Noble Books.
- Sutta-Nipata, (1881): *A Collection of Discourses*, translated from Pali by V. Fausboll and edited by F. Max Muller OUP 1881 and reprinted by Motilal Banarsidas 1965.
- Suzuki, D. T. (1950): *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, Volumes I, II and III, Anchor Brendon, Essex UK. and Samuel Weires Inc., York Beach USA.