

The Buddha as a Philosopher

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The three great contributions of the Buddha to the understanding of Human Existence

The Buddha was an extraordinary thinker who introduced three major philosophical themes:

(a) Like Confucius, the Buddha can be credited with having invented the idea of an ethics-led philosophical way of life as an alternative to the then prevailing religious and the metaphysics-led philosophical ways of life. (b) He made a very significant empirical discovery pertaining to human psychology and ethics (c) He, for the first time in intellectual history, suggested that what we refer to as the “world” is a conventional entity.

In this paper my attempt is to bring into focus these three important contributions of the Buddha. Let me begin by introducing the distinction between an ethics-led philosophical way of life and a metaphysics-led way of life. This distinction is central to my reading of the philosophy of the Buddha.

Philosophy as practiced in the ancient world

Philosophy was initially practised only in three civilisations — Chinese, Greek and Indian. In these civilisations, philosophy functioned as a way of life distinct from other ways of life that were rooted in a belief in supernatural powers. But even the philosophical ways of life practiced in those ancient times could be divided into two categories — a metaphysics-led philosophical way of life and an ethics-led philosophical way of life. The basic difference between these ways is that in ethics-led philosophy, the attempt is to transform the practitioner from his/her baser state of being into an ethically higher state of existence and in the process making him/her psychologically self-sufficient however, in the metaphysics-led philosophical way of life, instead of a higher ethical state of being, the philosopher tries to achieve a higher state of understanding (insight) as well as a communion with what is taken to be the “ultimate”. In the latter, ethics has only a secondary role to play.

Problem of human unsatisfactoriness-Dukkha

“[Dasein is] that entity which in its Being has this very Being as an issue...” (Heidegger, Being and Time, 1988, p.68). For our purpose we read this Heideggerian dictum as “[human being is] that entity which in its existence has this very existence as an issue...”

We know from the Nikayas that it was the Buddha, who prior to his enlightenment, found that for human beings, their very being/ existence was in itself a cause for a perpetually nagging angst/unsatisfactoriness. He therefore began searching for a solution that would heal them from this existential crisis. Independent of the Nikayas, if we were to look for the cause of this human predicament, we would perhaps zero in on the human ability to use language.

Language is the only human natural endowment which can become its own subject: we can talk about talking. With the emergence of language and with its reflexive capacity it is not surprising that human existence itself reflexively became a subject of human concern. As far as I can tell no thinker before the Buddha, saw this issue as being worthy of critical analysis or attempted to find a solution for the unsatisfactoriness(Dukkha)/angst that it causes in human life.

The Philosophical practice of the Buddha

In the history of humanity, the Buddha will likely stand out as, perhaps, the only thinker who found a non-religious/non-metaphysical solution for the human existential angst/unsatisfactoriness. And in this perhaps lay his greatness. But the suttas which became available as texts only in the post Ashokan period (perhaps the 2nd century BCE) , seek only to highlight the metaphysics and the meditative practices of *Jhana and Vipassana*. It was only natural therefore that metaphysics and meditative practices both acquired a pan Buddhist approval from the 2nd Century BCE, unmindful of the fact that many suttas in the Nikayas also advice the reader/listener to give up all metaphysical views. *Jhana* had been critically rejected in a very important Sutta in the Nikayas. The Satipattana sutta, which supports Vpassana, according to many scholars is a very late addition.

The Buddha's rejection of metaphysics

In the Alagaddupama Sutta (The Water-Snake Simile) and the Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta (The Greater Craving-Destruction Discourse), the Buddha advises the readers “that the Dhamma has been taught as similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping”. Similarly In Suttanipata's Duṭṭhaṭṭhaka Sutta (Discourse on malice), it is said: “Nothing is taken up or rejected by him(the Buddha); he has shaken off all views right here”.

There are other suttas also where he advises the reader to shake off all metaphysical views. So it is useful to link the “raft simile” to these suttas and see them in the context of the Buddha's discourse of the ten unfathomable issues in the Culamalunkya Sutta (The Shorter Instructions to Malunkya)

- 1. The world is eternal.**
- 2. The world is not eternal.**
- 3. The world is (spatially) infinite.**
- 4. The world is not (spatially) infinite.**
- 5. The being imbued with a life force is identical with the body.**
- 6. The being imbued with a life force is not identical with the body.**
- 7. The Tathagata (a perfectly enlightened being) exists after death.**
- 8. The Tathagata does not exist after death.**
- 9. The Tathagata both exists and does not exist after death.**
- 10. The Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist after death.**

These issues are unfathomable not because they are very profound or very difficult. They are problematic because they do not yield a universally agreeable answer even when scholars work in the same frame of reference, with the same presuppositions. So the Buddha, as the Nikayas tell us, took a middle path (the Kaccanagotta sutta). The middle path itself, as the raft simile suggests, is only an ad hoc device. In other words there are enough reasons to believe that at least parts of the Nikayas turn against its own metaphysical thesis.

If the raft simile of the Alagaddupama Sutta (The Water-Snake Simile) and The Greater Craving-Destruction Discourse (the Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta), is accepted as the position endorsed by the Nikkayas, then meditative practices automatically become redundant. This is because these practices are parasitic on the idea of a transcendent (metaphysical) reality

and the resultant need to get an insight into it. If metaphysics goes, so too will the meditative practices.

Let me, now, draw your attention to some of the relevant Suttas which problematise meditative practices. The Ariyapariyesana Sutta/ Noble search sutta tells us that the Buddha had tested the Brahmanical meditation and found it wanting as a means for healing human existential angst/ unsatisfactoriness. But later the Sappurisa Sutta/ A Person of Integrity sutta concedes that *Jhana* produces psychological conditions of a certain kind but it is still wanting as it does not make the practitioner an ethical or good person. Of course, due to biochemical changes (Dopamine's effect?) in the nervous system and the brain, meditators may end up temporarily feeling good both physically and psychologically. Hallucinations too are not uncommon (Lindahl et al (2014) at <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00973>).

In the case of Vipassana, it is capable of generating de-automatization (Anlayo, Satipattahana p 264). Here too I am willing to grant that *Vipassana* may have some medical utility. But as the Sappurisa sutta claims, these practices do not contribute to the development of the all-important psychological self-sufficiency by cultivating ethical virtues.

An important discovery of the Buddha: The relation between the cultivation of virtues and Psychological self-sufficiency

If the Buddha had rejected both metaphysical thesis and meditative practices, as devices to gain access to "Reality", what remains for serious consideration are only ethical practices.

While a significant number of suttas in the Nikayas are dedicated to the exposition of what Buddhist scholars have identified as the metaphysical thesis of the Nikayas, they are merely ad hoc devices, as I suggested above, for novices to use and discard. The same can be said about a large number of suttas dealing with meditative practices. In the final analysis metaphysics and meditation are only optional devices for temporary use, to be discarded once the practitioner's ethical behaviour gets stabilized.

I now draw your attention to a significant passage from Samannaphala Sutta (The Fruits of the Contemplative Life): "And then, Sire, that monk who is perfected in morality sees no danger from any side owing to his being restrained by morality..... on account of his morality, sees no danger anywhere. He experiences in himself the blameless bliss that comes from maintaining this Ariyan morality. In this way, Sire,

he is perfected in morality.”

Although there is no phrase in the Nikayas that can be equated with “psychological self-sufficiency” I use the term to capture the significance of this passage. The above passage tells us that the mental state of a person who is “perfected in morality” is different from the mental state of one who has not mastered morality. Morality/ Ethics here means the practice of *Ahimsa, Satya, Brahmacharya, aparigraha and karuna*.

Perfection of morality produces “blameless bliss” in which the practitioner feels that nothing can harm her. She is completely devoid of angst/fear. She therefore no longer requires external support to calm her down from existential angst. This is the state of psychological self-sufficiency – a state where one can get rid of dukkha without external aids. In the Kalama Sutta the narrator asks, “*Having done no evil action, from where will suffering touch me?*” A religious believer in God/gods on the other hand seeks help/solace from an external source through the medium of rituals like prayers, visiting religious sites etc.

Reduction of self-centeredness/ selfishness

A predominant theme in the Nikayas, which is not taken up for critical analysis by scholars, is the harm that selfishness/self-centeredness does to a human being. The third sermon the Buddha gave after his enlightenment, is called *Ādittapariyāya Sutta* or the Fire sermon.

The most startling beginning of the sutra is: “Bhikkhus, all is burning. And what, bhikkhus, is the all that is burning? The eye is burning, forms are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye-contact is burning, and whatever feeling arises with eye-contact as condition whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant-that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion.....I say”.

Here the fire of lust, hatred and delusion are synonymous with selfishness/self-centeredness. Although the fire sermon does not use the word “*Nirvana*”, it says that after hearing the sermon all the listeners became liberated immediately. Liberation here must be understood to mean “*Nirvana*”.

Although the promise of ‘immediate liberation’ should be accepted as a hyperbole this does not dilute the crux of the Buddha’s advice viz. to achieve liberation (*Nirvana*) it is essential to

extinguish (*Nirvana*) the fire of selfishness by the cultivation of ethical virtues of *Abimsa*, *Satya*, *Brahmacharya*, *aparigraha* and *karuna*.

Samvrti Satya

There is a reference in the Nikayas to the conventionality of the world. The Buddha in a famous passage in “Potthapada Sutta” says:

"Citta, these (“I”, “he”, “It”, “That” etc) are the world's designations, the world's expressions, the world's ways of speaking, the world's descriptions, with which the Tathagata expresses himself but without grasping to them."

Here, what the Buddha seems to be saying is that he has adopted the usages/depositions of his interlocutors simply for the sake of conversation with them about Dharma, and that these should not be interpreted out of context. In other words, the Buddha was claiming that the world in which he was having conversations with his disciples was conventional “reality”. He also claimed that while his interlocutors were oblivious of this fact, he was aware of the conventionality of what is taken to be as “real” by his listeners.

But what was it that drove the Buddha to the conclusion that the world in which terms like ‘I’, ‘he’, “Tathagata”, “Nirvana” etc. are used, is conventional? The Buddha himself has not given us an answer. In the Buddhist tradition conventional reality is referred to as “Samvrti Satya. Since the Buddha does not tell us the reasons for his claim that what we take to be the “real” is a product of a certain convention, it falls on us to find a justification for this claim, which has remained with us for over 2500 years.

Play of contraries

What we cannot but notice is that everything that we do or say will always be either true/false, appropriate/inappropriate, correct/incorrect significant/insignificant etc. My contention is that these contraries get formed only when everything what we do, say, think etc. are seen as taking place against a background of standards/norms. If there were no standards/norms of correctness, how could some act/situation be either appropriate or inappropriate, true/false, etc.? That indeed is a clear sign of the fact that we are situated within a convention. This still leaves us with the question - whence these norms? In the introduction of a 9thCE text the Brahma Sutra Bhasya which is attributed to Sankara, the author asks this question and comes

to the conclusion that the question is unanswerable /anirvachaniya. But why is it unanswerable? Sankara presents it as a mystery- Samvrti Satya is neither real or unreal; according to Sankara, the Reality or the Absolute, is something called 'Brahman'. And it is only after the realization of Brahman, would one be able to understand the conventionality of the world.

world/convention

This would not have been the Buddha's position; for him there was no "Absolute" to contend with. As pointed out earlier, he rejected metaphysics. I think it was the 2ndCE follower of the Buddha Nagarjuna, who described the Buddha's position most accurately when he said

"Nirvana/Absolute is Samvrti Satya/samsara, Samvrti Satya/samsara is Nirvana/Absolute".

But this still does not provide a solution to our question-whence the norms? Reading the relevant suttas of the Nikayas and the works of Nagarjuna one gets the impression that the Samvrti Satya/world while it is conventional, defines the realm of the intelligible (one's **actions are** intelligible if they are appropriate/inappropriate according to some standards; this assumes that some conventions are already in place). If the "Samvrti Satya" defines the realm of the intelligible, nothing outside of it could be intelligible. So we have to work within the Samvrti Satya to find a suggestion/hypothesis as to its' source.

At this stage it is necessary to introduce Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein made a significant distinction between "agreement in action" and "agreement in opinion" while he was discussing the idea of "rule-following".

"How am I able to obey a rule?"—if this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my following the rule in the way I do. If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do"

At the fundamental, at the rock bottom level, rule following happens, Wittgenstein argues, because one is trained to follow the rules. This is what he meant when he said: "This is simply what I do".

Hence, he argues “obeying a rule is a practice” and one learns to obey rules not by learning to interpret an explicit verbal construction and then behave in accordance with that interpretation. Interpretations would lead, Wittgenstein maintained, to infinite regress. At the rock-bottom level, therefore, rules cannot be formed by “Agreement in opinion”-since opinions are overtly articulated verbal items and because of this, the infinite regress problem will disallow such an option. So Wittgenstein introduced the idea of “Agreement in action”. What gets settled as “agreements in action” among a group of actors while acting, unintentionally/unintelligibly though, function as rules/standards. And because the actors get habituated to functioning against that background of those standards, all their actions get assessed, automatically, as correct or incorrect, appropriate or inappropriate etc. Their offsprings are socialised into this heritage by ostensive training and this leads to the perpetuation of a conventional world.

This Wittgensteinian suggestion of formation of ‘agreements in action’, is perhaps the only way to arrive at an answer to the question ‘whence the conventional world/ Samvrti Satya. This too is an ad hoc thesis - a raft as the Buddha said in The Water-Snake Simile that I have referred to earlier. Nevertheless, without such constructions we will not be able to problematise our metaphysical impulses. Once we are cleansed of metaphysics, it may help us to practice an ethics-led philosophical way of life as an alternative to either the religious or metaphysics-led philosophical ways of life.
