



A Buddhist Tract on Empiricism

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Comment and Discussion

D. J. Kalupahana A Buddhist tract on empiricism

Since the time Western scholars came to be interested in the study of Buddhism, we find various views expressed on the nature of early Buddhist thought, especially in comparison with the different trends in Western philosophy. One of the pioneers in this field, Professor T. W. Rhys Davids, whose main studies on Buddhism were confined to the Theravāda canon, especially the Pāli Nikāyas consisting of the discourses attributed to the Buddha himself, pointed out at a very early date the relationship between Buddhism and the positivistic thought of the French philosopher Auguste Comte, where the claims of science received a full recognition.¹ Following this we find many scholars making random observations on the modernistic trends in Buddhism. For example, H. H. Price, speaking on the appeal of Hīnayāna Buddhism to the Western mind, wrote: "There are indeed some passages in the early part of the *Questions of King Milinda* which have a modern ring, and might almost have been written in Cambridge in the 1920's."² Of the scholars from the Orient, we find Radhakrishnan occasionally referring to the positivistic trends in early Buddhism.³ All of these appear to be cursory glances at the nature of early Buddhism. None of these themes were worked out in full until Professor K. N. Jayatilleke made an exhaustive study of almost all the material, especially that embodied in the Pāli Nikāyas, to show that early Buddhism compares with modern Empiricism, with the exception that unlike modern Empiricism, Buddhism recognized the validity of the data of extrasensory perception and of the experiential content of mysticism.⁴ Professor Jayatilleke has examined most of the statements in the Pāli canon embodying empiricist ideas, but a very important discourse, which could have been usefully utilized to prove his point of view, appears to have eluded him. It is a discourse included in the *Samyutta Nikāya*,⁵ and is called the "Discourse on 'Everything'" (*Sabbasutta*). Its Āgama version is found in the Chinese translation, the *Tsa-a-han-ching*.⁶

PĀLI VERSION

Evaṃ me sutāṃ. Ekaṃ samayaṃ Bhagavā Sāvattihyaṃ viharati Jetavane Anāthapiṇḍikassa ārāme. Tatra kho Bhagavā bhikkhū āmantesi bhikkhave'ti.

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¹ *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as illustrated by some points in the History of Indian Buddhism*, The Hibbert Lectures, 1881 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1881), p. 31.

² "The Present Relations between Eastern and Western Philosophy," *The Hibbert Journal*, LIII (April, 1955), 229.

³ *Indian Philosophy* (New York: The Macmillan Co., London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1962), II, 472.

⁴ *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1963).

⁵ Ed. M. Leon Feer (London: Pali Text Society, 1960), IV, 15.

⁶ *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. J. Takakusu and K. Watanabe (Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyo Kankō Kwai, 1924-1929), II, 91a-b.

Bhandante'ti te bhikkhū Bhagavato paccassosum. Bhagavā etad avoca. Sabbam vo bhikkhave desissāmi, taṃ suṇātha. Kiñ ca bhikkhave sabbam. Cakkhuñ c'eva rūpā ca, sotañ ca saddā ca, ghānañ ca gandhā ca, jivhā ca rasā ca, kāyo ca phoṭṭhabbā ca, mano ca dhammā ca. Idaṃ vuccati bhikkhave sabbam. Yo bhikkhave evaṃ vadeyya, aham etaṃ sabbam paccakkhāya aññaṃ sabbam paññāpessāmi, tassa vācavatthur eva'ssa, puṭṭho ca na sampāpeyya, uttariñ ca vighātam āpajjeyya. Taṃ kissa hetu. Yathā taṃ bhikkhave avisayasmin ti.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Thus have I heard. Once the Exalted One was living at Sāvatti, in the monastery of Anāthapiṇḍika (situated) in Jeta's Grove. Then the Exalted One addressed the monks: "O monks!" They responded: "Yes, O Lord!" and the Exalted One spoke thus: "Monks, I will preach to you 'everything'. Listen to it. What, monks, is 'everything'? Eye and material form, ear and sound, nose and odour, tongue and taste, body and tangibles, mind and concepts. These are called 'everything'. Monks, he who would say, 'I will reject this *everything* and proclaim another *everything*', he may certainly have a theory (of his own). But when questioned, he would not be able to answer and would, moreover, be subject to vexation. Why? Because it would not be within the range of experience."

ĀGAMA VERSION IN ITS CHINESE TRANSLATION

如是我聞。一時佛住舍衛國祇樹給孤獨園。時有生聞婆羅門。往詣佛所共相問訊。問訊已退坐一面。白佛言。瞿曇。所謂一切者。云何名一切。佛告婆羅門。一切者謂十二入處。眼色耳聲鼻香舌味身觸意法。是名一切。若復說言此非一切。沙門瞿曇。所說一切。我今捨別立餘一切者。彼但有言說。問已不知。增其疑惑。所以者何。非其境界故。時生聞婆羅門聞佛所說。歡喜隨喜奉行。

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Thus have I heard. Once the Buddha was staying in the country of Śrāvasti, in the monastery of Anāthapiṇḍika, situated in Jeta's Grove. At that time there was a Brahmin named Sheng-wen who came to the place where the Buddha was and greeted the Buddha. Having greeted the Buddha, he sat on a side and addressed the Buddha thus: "Gautama, (people) speak of 'everything'. What is the meaning of 'everything'?" The Buddha addressed the Brahmin: "'Everything' means the twelve 'gateways' (i.e., bases of cognition): eye, material form, ear, sound, nose, odour, tongue, taste, body, tangibles, mind and concepts. These are called 'everything'. Again, there may be those who say that this is not 'everything'. (They may say) 'That which the Śramaṇa Gautama describes as *everything*, I will give up and proclaim another *everything*'. There could always be such a theory. But, if questioned, (he) would not know. It increases doubt and confusion. Why? Because it would not be within the range of experience." The Brahmin Sheng-wen listened to what the Buddha said and being pleased, went away.

The close similarity between these two versions cannot fail to impress the

reader. As far as the contents are concerned, there is hardly any difference between the two versions. The only difference is that in the Chinese version, the question as to what is meant by “everything” is put to the Buddha by a Brahmin named Sheng-wen, while in the Pāli version, the Buddha himself raises the question and provides the answer. Sheng-wen is, no doubt, the Chinese rendering of the name Jāṇussoṇi.⁷ Jāṇussoṇi is generally known to be a person who was interested in finding out the validity of some of the speculative theories current at the time. Once he is represented as questioning the Buddha regarding the two extreme views, namely, the Eternalist theory that “everything exists” (*sabbam atthi*), and the Materialist theory that “everything does not exist” (*sabbaṃ n’atthi*).⁸ It is therefore natural that this discourse, which purports to examine the basis of speculative theories, is presented as the Buddha’s reply to a question raised by an interlocutor like Jāṇussoṇi.

The importance of the above discourse as a *locus classicus* in any attempt to show the empiricist trends in early Buddhism should be very evident. It does not deal with the problem of extrasensory perception and the speculation regarding the content of such experience. It only purports to reject all the speculative theories which go beyond the data of sensory experience. It refers to the twelve “gateways”⁹ of cognition as the primary sources of our knowledge of empirical reality, and points out that any theory which goes beyond the data of sensory experience could lead to a lot of unnecessary speculation and diatribes resulting in vexation. The key word in the discourse is *avisaya*,¹⁰ which represents a direct statement of the empiricist trend in early Buddhism.

⁷ Akanuma Chizen, *Indo-Bukkyo Koyumeishi Jiten, Genshiki Hen* (Nagoya: Haijinkaku Shobo, 1930-1931), pp. 240b-241b.

⁸ *Samyutta Nikāya*, ed. M. Leon Feer (London: Pali Text Society, 1960), II, 76-77.

⁹ To use a term from modern psychology, *vide* Norman L. Munn, *Psychology: The Fundamentals of Human Adjustment* (4th ed.; London: George G. Harrap & Co., Ltd., 1961), p. 507. The Chinese phrase 入處, which literally means ‘place of entry’, is a rendering of the term *āyatana*. It has been noted that there is no English equivalent for the word *āyatana*, because *āyatana* refers to the sense organ as well as the object of sense. *Vide* Shwe Zan Aung, *Compendium of Philosophy* (London: Pali Text Society, 1963), p. 183, n. 1.

¹⁰ The Chinese rendering is 非境界. This phrase occurs in the Chinese translation of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (*vide* *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, XVI, 524a) and the Sanskrit text (ed. Bunyiu Nanjio, Kyoto: Otani University Press, 1956) reads *aviṣaya* (p. 49).