

Buddhist analysis of revelation, reason and experience P1

*** What is the one thing that sets Buddhism apart from all other religions?**

* It was a time when people who held different religious views were in the habit of engaging in disputations on controversial philosophical and religious issues on the one hand, and superstitious beliefs abound with rites and rituals on the other. The situation was such that the majority of people could not discriminate or single out what was right among the divergent opinions.

* In the **Sangarava Sutta MN 100**: The Buddha identifies 3 types of religious and philosophical teachers, according to the basis of attaining knowledge, who in turn prescribed divergent paths.

1. Revelationist (annussavika) who claimed final knowledge on the basis of revelation. Eg, the Brahmins of the Vedic tradition.
2. Rational metaphysicians (takki vinamsi) who claimed final knowledge on the basis of their faith in reason and speculation.
3. Those who claimed final knowledge based on a personal understanding derived from their extra-sensory perceptions.

* In the sutta, the Buddha classifies himself as belonging to the 3rd group. But it is also important to note the difference between the Buddha and the other members of this group.

Means of Knowledge recognized in pre-Buddhist thought

* Authoritarian thinkers and the rationalists were by no means confined to the Vedic tradition. They are to be found in the pre-Buddhistic non-Vedic tradition as well.

* The **Suttanipata (sn 529)** refers to “the Vedas of the Samanas or recluses as well as to the Vedas of the Brahmins” and there is evidence to show that some of the Ajivikas had their own authoritative religious and philosophical texts handed down by tradition.

* At the same time, the Materialist, Skeptics and many of the Ajivikas were also rationalists.

Revelationist / Traditionalist

* The authoritarian thinkers or the traditionalists took the Vedas as authoritative because of the belief that Vedas had been revealed to the seers of old, and hence authentic (suti). Thus originates the concept of revelation (anussava).

* In Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, it was believed that the whole of the Vedic tradition was the word uttered or breathed forth by the Great Being, who is the ground of existence.

Quote: “It is as from a fire laid with damp fuel, clouds of smoke separately issue forth, so, lo, verily, from this Great Being has been breathed forth that which is Rgveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda of the Atharvans and Angirases, Legend, Ancient Lore, Sciences, Upanishads, Stanzas, Sutras, explanations and commentaries. From it, indeed, are all these breathed forth (2.4.10).

* Since this Great Being (Mahad Bhutam) is conceived as the source of all knowledge and power, these scriptures were an infallible divine revelation.

* Higher reality is said to be non-dual.

* From the evidence of the Buddhist scriptures and the Vedic texts, the traditionalists consisted of the thinkers responsible for the literature from the Rg Veda downward up to about the Maitrayani Upanishad.

Reasoning/ Rational Metaphysician

* They asserted that by employing certain procedures of reason alone one could arrive at knowledge, which would not change under any circumstance.

Buddhist Criticism of Revelation and Reasoning

* Both are inadequate as means of knowledge because they are ambiguous in their application.

A) Subha Sutta MN 99

* The faith by which authority is attributed to the Vedas has been shown as baseless faith.

* The Buddha criticizes on the ground that neither the Brahmins at the time nor their teachers up to several generations nor even the original seers claimed to know the consequences of practicing the virtues referred to by verifying the fact with their paranormal perception.

* What is criticized in this context is the acceptance of certain statements merely on the ground that they are contained in an allegedly revealed text without them being verified as true.

* The point here is that Vedic knowledge is divinely revealed in contrast with the knowledge of the Buddha, which was merely human therefore of lesser worth.

* It is the same criticism that is sometimes leveled against Buddhism by some of its theistic critics. It is said that the knowledge of the Buddha was merely human, whereas the knowledge contained in their respective theistic traditions is divine, thus more liable.

B) Tevijja Sutta DN 13

* Buddhism does not question the basis of the belief in revelation except for its acceptance of a creator God. It criticized particular claims to revelation such as the attempt to regard revelation as a separate valid means of knowledge.

* Here in the Sutta, the Brahmins claim to have a diversity of paths for attaining fellowship with Brahma or God.

* The Buddha criticizes these claims. It mentioned that since not one of these Brahmins learned in the three Vedas has seen Brahma face to face, nor has one of their teachers, or teacher's teachers, nor even the ancestors seven generations back of one of their teachers, nor could one of the early sages did that, so they were: just like a file of blind man, the blind leads the blind, the 1st one sees nothing, the middle one sees nothing and the last one sees nothing too.

* Again the Buddha compares them to a man who says "I love the most beautiful woman in this country and wish to make her mine" without any knowledge of her caste, her family, her colour or city or village that she comes from.

→ Thus, the claim to revelation is without basis

C) Sandaka Sutta MN 76

* Buddhism is contrasted with four types of false religions and four types of religions which are unsatisfactory though not necessarily false, by claiming that the statements of Buddhism have been verified by the Buddha and many of his disciples and thus verifiable by anyone with the requisite competence.

* Two out of the four types of unsatisfactory religions:

1. What is well heard may be true or may be false.
2. What is not well heard may be true or may be false.
3. What is well reasoned out may be true or may be false.
4. What is not well reasoned out may be true or may be false.

* Again revelation and the soundness of reasoning should not be taken as the only criterion of truth. A statement can be reliably being accepted as true only when it is repeatedly verified and not because it is dogmatically declared.

D) Canki Sutta MN 95

* There are five things which have a twofold result in this life. What five?
Knowledge based on

1. faith
2. likes
3. revelation
4. superficial reflection
5. agreement with one's pre-conceptions.

* Here, the beliefs held on the grounds of the above five are likely to have a dual result namely to be verified as either true or false in this life itself.

* Quote: For even what I learn to be the truth on the ground of it being a profound revelation that may be empty, hollow and false, while what I do not hear to be truth on the ground of it being a profound revelation may be factual, true and not otherwise. It is not proper for an intelligent person, safeguarding the truth, to come categorically to the conclusion in this matter that this alone is true and whatever else is false.

On the contrary, if a person has heard (from revelation, tradition or report), then in saying "this is what I have heard" (from revelation, tradition or report), he safeguards the truth, so long as he does not come categorically to the conclusion that it alone is true and whatever else is false.

➔ In the absence of any guarantee of its truth or falseness, it is not proper to depend on the theory as a valid means of knowledge, or even worse, as the ONLY means of knowledge.

* The Buddha says that to attach to a certain view and to look down upon other things as inferior- this becomes a fetter.

E) Composer of Vedas

* While the Vedic tradition claimed that the composers of the Vedic hymns were in fact seers, who intuited the truth or saw the statements, which were revealed to them by their extra-sensory perception, the Buddhists not only denied any higher insight on the part of the seers but quite emphatically asserted that the hymns were in fact composed by them. The original seers are constantly described as 'the makers and the utterers of the hymns'.

* The internal evidence of the Rgvedic texts proves this in them that the Vedic poets merely claim to make, compose, produce and utter the hymns. So there is no historical justification for the claim that the original authors of the Rgveda had any extra-sensory vision.

➔ The Buddhist criticisms were, therefore, realistic and made in the light of objective facts as they saw them. What is true of the origins of the Vedic

tradition is true of other revelation traditions, when their historical origins are objectively examined.

F) Mere Human Being

* The idea that the Buddha was a ‘mere human being’ is also mistaken. For when the Buddha was asked whether he was a human being, a Brahma or Mara, he denied that he was any of them and claimed that he was Buddha, an Enlightened Being. The significance of this claim is brought out in the Brahmanimantanika Sutta MN 49 where it is shown that even a Brahma eventually passes away while the Buddha is not subjected to such vicissitudes.

* However, at the same time, the Buddhist criticism of revelation does not imply that revelations are impossible. According to the Buddhist conception of things, it is possible for beings more developed than us to exist in the cosmos and communicate their views about the nature and destiny of man in the universe through human beings.

* All that is said is that the fact that something is deemed to be a revelation is no criterion of its truth and revelation, therefore, cannot be considered an independent and valid means of knowledge.

* According to Buddhist conceptions, revelations may come from different grades of higher beings with varying degrees of goodness and intelligence. They cannot all be true, yet this does not mean that they are all necessarily false. That is why Buddhism classifies religions based on revelation as unsatisfactory though not necessarily false.

G) Contradiction

* It is a notorious fact that different revelation traditions and individual revelations contradict each other. If ‘true is one’ (ekam hi saccam) as Buddhism believes to be the case, they cannot all be true though all may be false.

* There are diverse views on crucial matters even within the same revelation tradition. The Brahmanas and the Upanishads, for instance, contain several creation-myths and divergent accounts as to how life came into existence on earth. * Eg creation myth in Brhadaranyaka Upanishad vs. the Aitareya Upanishad vs. Taittiriya Upanishad

H) Comparison

* The Materialists condemned outright the whole of the Vedic tradition and saw no good in it at all. According to them, Vedas were the work of buffoons, knaves and demons.

➔ On the other hand, the Buddhists, while holding that the original seers who were the authors of the Vedas merely lacked a special insight with

which they were later credited, in keeping with historical fact, praised them for their virtue and rectitude.

* The Materialists categorically repudiated the Vedas as false, self-contradictory and repetitive.

➔ The Buddhists, while pointing out the contradictions and falsities and repudiating the claims to revelation, did not consider all the traditional beliefs in the Vedic tradition to be wholly false.

* Among the false beliefs the Materialists would point to the belief in sacrifices, in a soul, in survival, in moral values and moral retribution.

➔ The Buddhists, however, criticized the Vedic conception of the sacrifice and denied the necessity for the concept of a soul, but agreed with the Vedas in asserting survival, moral values and moral recompense, and retribution.

* Even with regard to the sacrifice, the Materialists saw nothing but deception and fraud in it.

➔ The Buddhists, while condemning sacrifices as involving a waste of resources and the needless destruction of animals, were not averse to the simple sacrificial offerings made in good faith by the earliest Brahmins who killed no animals for the occasion.

* Similarly, just as some of the Upanishads who re-interpret sacrifice or yajna as the religious life, Buddhism conceives that the best yajna is the highest religious life as advocated in Buddhism.

* However, despite the similarities indicated, there lie some differences.

* Upanishad: it is said that one should not harm any creatures except at the sacrificial altars.

* Karmamagga ➔ Jnanamagga: The Mundaka Upanishad says that the Vedic knowledge or practice of sacrifice is lower path or aparavidya. The knowledge which was gained through meditation is paravidya or super great knowledge. Qn is: Since it is a lower form of knowledge, why was it not discarded?
➔ for them to do so would be to deny the authority of the Vedas which advocated sacrifices, and thereby undermine the belief in Vedic revelation. Thus an exception is made with regard to the sacrifice.
➔ Thus it was the belief in revelation, which is ultimately the basis for the belief in animals' sacrifices.

I) Mahasihanada Sutta MN 12

* Defects of logical reasoning have been shown in the canon.

* An eg of the Fallacy of Ignorantio Elinchi is found in regard to Sunakkhatta's accusation against the Buddha. Here the arguer tries to prove that something is the case but instead he proves something else. He accused the Buddha saying that the Buddha preaches the Dhamma hammered out by reasoning, following His own line of inquiry as it

occurred to Him and when He teaches the Dhamma to anyone, it leads one to the complete destruction of suffering when one practices it.

** Quote: “Sunakkhatta is angry and his words are spoken with anger. Thinking to discredit the Tathagata he actually praises Him by saying that when He teaches the dhamma to anyone it leads one to the complete destruction of suffering when one practices it.”*

* According to the commentary - The thrust of his criticism is that the Buddha teaches a doctrine that he has merely worked out in thought rather than one he has realized through transcendental wisdom. Apparently, Sunakkhatta believes that being led to the complete destruction of suffering is, as a goal, inferior to the acquisition of miraculous powers.

* Logic tells us whether inferences are correctly drawn from premises, not that they are true. Even though the logic may be correct, if the premise is wrong, the conclusion can be wrong.

J) Kalama Sutta AN 3.65

*** Do not rely on the following without further verification:**

1. Oral history or divine revelations
2. Tradition
3. Reports or rumours
4. Scriptures or holy books
5. Logical reasoning
6. Merely on the view that seems rational
7. Reflection on mere appearances
8. Agreement with one's own opinions
9. Authorities or experts
10. One's own teacher

* propositions 1, 2 and 3 unequivocally deal with the authority of revelation transmitted in any form whatsoever, thereby rejecting the concept of an omnipotent, omniscient and all-compassionate god.

* proposition 4 stresses the fact that being written down in the sacred texts alone is not sufficient to justify the feasibility of a view.

* proposition 5 and 6 point out the insufficiency of logic and rational reasoning.

* proposition 7 and 8 assert the frailty of being emotional and sentimental in accepting a view.

* proposition 9 and 10 emphasise that one should not be misguided by the experts and one's own teacher, and believe in, on that account alone, what he says.

Conclusion

* The Buddhist attitude to any such revelation or reasoning would be that of accepting what is true, good and sound and rejecting what is false, evil and unsound after a dispassionate analysis of its contents without giving way to prejudice, hatred, fear and ignorance.

* They could not be deemed to be valid means of knowledge and the requirement of safeguarding the truth demands that beliefs held on such a basis are admitted or verified as such instead of dogmatically claiming them to be true. Such dogmatism leads to undesirable consequences for oneself and society – to intolerance, conflict and violence and is a departure from sincerity and truth.

Avoid intolerance and dogmatism
Be tolerant and open-minded!

Avoid blind faith
Question and investigate!

→ Kalama Sutta is also known as the Buddhist “**Charter of Free Enquiry**”.