

From the desk of the Editor

1

THE MEANING OF 'VISION' IN BUDDHISM

- Chandra B Varma

*Cakkhu rūpaṃ na passati, acittakattā.
Cittaṃ na passati, acakkhukattā.
Dvārārammaṇasaṅghaṭṭe pana
cakkhupasādavatthukena cittena passati.*

- Visuddhimagga

It is not the eye (*cakkhu*) that sees a material object (*rūpa*) as it lacks the characteristic of consciousness [*acittakattā* - the cognitive characteristic (*viñāna-lakkhaṇa*)]; nor does the mind see an object as that lacks the characteristic of the visual sensitivity (*acakkhukattā*). It is only due to the impingement between the visual object (*ārammaṇa*) and visual sensitivity as the physical basis (*pasāda vatthu*) due to the eye-door that the consciousness constitutes the visual awareness.¹

The Brahmajāla Sutta, which is the first discourse of the *Dīghanikāya* belonging to the Sutta Piṭaka is often treated as the world's first comprehensive survey of all kinds of philosophies by way of its discussions on the sixty-two types of philosophy prevalent in the days of the Buddha.

Unfortunately, most Indian books, dealing with the history of Indian Philosophies, hardly go beyond the description of the six orthodox (Āstika) and three heterodox (Nāstika) schools of the Indian

¹ See Varma, C.B. *Facets of Buddhism*. Sinereu International Publications: Delhi-NCR p.265 for the reference.

Philosophy. The schools of Indian Philosophy, which acknowledge the authority or supremacy of the Vedas are called the Āstika; otherwise designated as the Nāstika.

As the discussion on the sixty-two systems of Indian Philosophies may be a departure from the current topic, hence the brief exposition of the two extreme philosophies to expound the middle path shown by the Buddha are to be discussed herein.

THE TWO EXTREME VIEWS OR PHILOSOPHIES OF LIFE

Our philosophy of life is largely dependent on our understanding of *happiness*, which defines and shapes our views and attitude towards life to interpret *what is good and bad; right or wrong; desirable or undesirable* to determine the course of our actions and life. Such an understanding is largely determined by our hermeneutical exercises underlying our definition of the meaning of life; an ongoing quest to make our life *really* meaningful. Often we identify the experience of the pleasant feelings due to the fulfilment of our basic instincts or drives that result in instantaneous satiety or pleasure.

But happiness is not to be restricted to the world of basic instincts or drives as we also look for greater pleasure underlying our quest for a more meaningful life which we discover to be unbounded, unfathomable and infinite. The quest is thus unending. The Buddha discovers this unbounded and infinitude of blissfulness in Nibbāna or Nirvāṇa, which we shall discuss later.

Happiness is infact the experience of fulfilment; which cannot be circumscribed just to the fulfilment of the basic instincts or drives of the material world; or the experience of instantaneous happiness in pieces upon achieving some material gains; or the satisfaction due to fulfilment of some of our dreams underlying the *freedom of choice* and so on. Notwithstanding such experience of "fulfilments" we still look beyond. For example, we look for aesthetic and other intellectual pleasures that we realise through the expressions of our ideas and thoughts to experience some kind of satisfaction or

fulfilments; for which we often readily sacrifice many of our material gains to achieve greater fulfilment that we reckon to be a step toward perfection of life; readily and willingly with full awareness. Any appreciation of our expressions of ideas and thoughts by others further infuses a sense of our becoming that takes us closer to the idealised perfection to rejoice in greater happiness. Such descriptions can be ongoing through myriad idealisations to be understood in terms of happiness.

The philosophy, that evolves out of the consideration for instantaneous happiness often leads to Gross Hedonism underlying the following motto:

‘Life is here; not hereafter;
Pleasant mirth hath pleasant laughter’.

Extreme 1:
PHILOSOPHY OF SENSUOUS INDULGENCES



*Vijay Mallaya an Indian Parliamentarian may be reckoned as the modern champion of Cārvāka Philosophy, as he borrowed over 8000 million rupees from the Indian banks and has now ‘happily’ settled in Europe exemplifying **kāmesu kāma-sukhallikānuyogo** or the **Path of Extreme Sensuous Indulgences**. Can he be really happy ?*

Cārvāka in the ancient days had affirmed the justification for a life style for the fullest sensuous happiness even by discounting the

rationale for the repayment of the loans by way of the oft repeated statement:

‘*Yāvat jīvet sukhaṃ jīvet, ṛṇaṃ kṛtvā gṛtaṃ pibet*’.

In the modern age, Vijay Mallaya, who was the aviation kingpin of India and a Member of the Indian Parliament can be regarded as a practising exponent of such an extreme philosophy. Needless to state that he had borrowed about 8000 million rupees from the Indian banks to settle down happily in Europe.

**'Yo have iṇam ādāya, cujjamāno palāyati;
Na hi te iṇam atthīti, ta jaññā vasalo iti.'**

-Suttanipāta 1.6.120.

One, who runs away with debts;

And when approached for repayments would say,

"I owe ye nothing".

Thus is the definition of a 'Vasala'; or a lowly character.

The other extreme view of life, however, is that - 'Life is hereafter'- underlying the belief that there is another world, which is absolutely spiritual; which promises real happiness at the price of self-mortification or self-abnegation upon sacrificing the worldly happiness.

Indian history has many such records to corroborate to the other assertions as well by testifying the extreme philosophical stances like self-mortification since the ancient age. The examples from past and present can well be corroborated by the practice of Sutee in Bengal as mirrored in the saga of Ram Mohun Roy's days reflecting the extreme view underlying self-mortification in the name of better spiritual prospects in the next life.

According to such system the women were ideologically motivated and physically forced to jump into the funeral pyre of the deceased husbands for 'greater gains' in the 'other world'. Thanks to Governor General William Bentick (1828-35) for having abolished such an

evil system that persisted even in the modern age, and could have persisted in the post-independent India ((like the incubation of the

Extreme 2:
PHILOSOPHY OF SELF-MORTIFICATION



Practice of Sutee: a Brahmanical practice underlying the belief that a widow is assured of a pleasant life 'hereafter', i.e., in the heavenly abode upon jumping into the funeral pyre with her husband's dead body. Such a practice is a Path of Self-Mortification underlying micchā diṭṭhi or delusive understanding.

caste system) by the enforcement of effective enactments.

BUDDHISM: A MIDDLE PATH

When we delve deep into the history of Buddhism we note that Buddha had denounced the two extreme views, namely, the Path of extreme sensuous indulgences for material gains and the Path of extreme Self-Abnegation for spiritual gains.

The Buddha condemned the superfluity of both the extremes, namely, the **Path of Extreme Sensuous Indulgences** (*kāmesu kāma-sukhallikānuyogo*) and the **Path of Extreme Self-Mortification** (*attakilamathānuyogo*) for any gainful goal of life.¹ His spiritual discovery is well pronounced in the advocacy of his **Middle Path** or **Majjhimā Paṭipadā** to achieve the goal of life by circumventing the aforementioned two extreme philosophies of life.

The first view evolves into the hedonistic philosophy with watch word “that life is here, not here after; or “eat, drink and be merry”. Such acclamations tend to make room for all kinds of permissiveness and promiscuities by denouncing all moral considerations or a virtuous life-style. As such the insatiable craving for more and more is unleashed upon justifying criminalities and corruptions. Life is then transforms into a mirage chase for the sensuous pleasure guided by the perverse perception (*vipallāsa*) with the the lustful eyes for more and more to own, possess, rule and enjoy The watch word of one’s life is thus contained in “me”, “mine”; and “I” ! This philosophy in turn develops the criminal tendencies which have the full bloom in colonisations and imperialistic designs underlying lust (*lobha*); genocides underlying hatred (*dosa*); and perverse understanding (*moha*) responsible for all our evil actions.

For example, when the western settlers ruled the colonies of America, Australia and even Asia they threw all their scruples to the wind in their lustful zeal to squeeze the wealth from their colonies. Millions perished. In the context, could we ever forget the plights of Indian indigo labourers and indentured transplantation of the

¹ “Dve me, bhikkhave, antā pabbajitena na sevitabbā. Katame dve ? Yo cāyaṃ kāmesu kāmasukhallikānuyogo hīno gammo pothujaniko anariyo anattasamphito, yo cāyaṃ attakilamathānuyogo dukkho anariyo anattasamphito. Ete kho, bhikkhave, ubho ante anupagamma, majjhimā paṭipadā tathāgatena bhisambuddhā, cakkhukaraṇi ñāṇakaraṇi upasamāya abhiññāya sambodhāya nibbānāya samvattati. See *ibid* p.270.

workers forced to move to Mauritius and Fiji! Could we ever forget the thumb amputation of the weavers of Dacca because the British textiles had to make inroads in the Indian markets? Could we ever forget the plights of the African slaves being branded like cattle to be sold in the American markets ! Could we ever forget the genocides of the native Americans and Australians in the process of colonisation ! All such crimes against the humanity are rooted in but the extreme hedonist philosophies of life embedded in greed, hatred and perverse understanding.

Furthermore, there exists another extreme philosophy of life underlying the belief in the “world hereafter” - a world, which is “more real” than this world with the affirmation that the real blissful state can be achieved only by the abnegation of our corporeal existence and dismissal of the sensuous world. Belief in “the other world” - spiritual or metaphysical - is not uncommon in the history of civilisations. Even the people in the most modern age are prone to such beliefs. Furthermore, all religions, too, including Buddhism approve of the existence of transcendental world Yet, Buddhism does not approve the Path of Self-Abnegation (Attakilamathānuyogo) or penances to achieve the goals of life. This may also not be out of place to affirm that some extreme philosophies are also liable to the exploitation of the people and socially under-privileged class down the ages for the justifications and denials of basic amenities - like food, clothing, housing and education in the name of ‘divine will’ or the ‘philosophy for contentment’ to some sections of the society, which a philosopher like Nietzsche would also endorse by stating, "Do not be Christian".

The Buddhism avoids the two extremes, hence it is called the Philosophy of Middle Path affirming that one must not lead an extremely loose life guided by the basic instincts; nor a very austere life by denying the fruits of the worldly boons underlying their theory of cognition which neither dismisses the importance of the worldly objects as being the foundation of the natural science in its

capacity of sending forth the raw sense datum (viññāna) to our mind, which applies understanding (paññā) to comprehend the object.

When Abhidhamma is called 'Vibhajjavāda', i.e., Analytical Philosophy by its methodologies on the analyses of cause (*hetu-dhamma* or *dhamma-paṭisambhidā*); effect (*attha* or *hetu-phala*); Concept building process (*desanā* or *paññati*) and definite understanding (*paṭivedha* or *adhisamaya*).¹

As 'pure happiness' is central to the Buddhist epistemology, and the *summum bonum* of the life, hence the Buddhists discuss their epistemology with the postulation of happiness, which is essentially mental. Hence, the exposition of their philosophy begins with the approach to understand mind and its cognitive modes vis-a-vis its cognitive relationship with the object. They are realists so far they believe in the existence of the real world despite their assertion for its unknowable character, which Immanuel Kant's 'Copernican Revolution' would also affirm:

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Cittaṃ na passati, acakkhukattā.
Dvārārammaṇasaṅghaṭṭe pana cakkhupasādavatthukena cittaena
passati*²

which means,

It is not the eye (cakkhu) that perceives a material object (rūpa) as it lacks the characteristic of consciousness (acittakattā) [i.e., vijānana-lakkhaṇa or cognitive characteristic]; nor does the mind see an object as it lacks the visual characteristic of the eye, i.e., seeing (dassana). It is only when there is impingement between the object stimulating the visual sensitivity as a physical basis to coalesce with the consciousness that one has the vestigial visual awareness.

This may be noted that in the original Buddhism, namely, the Theravāda tradition eye is explained in terms of matter or a mode of

¹ For references see Varma, C.B. *Facets of Buddhism*.

² *Ibid.*, p.270.

materiality (called the 'pasāda rūpa') which has the characteristic of visual sensitivity . Further, upon impingement (*sarīghaṭṭana*) due to contact between the two, the eye (as visual-door; *dvāra*) and object (*ārammaṇa*): one may have a visual perception due to the joint acts of consciousness and the eye, where the latter is the *material basis for the visual sensitivity* (*cakkhupasādavatthukena*).¹

"The eye does not see the object in the absence of the mind. The mind does not see the object in the absence of the eye. But one sees by the mind with the sentient eye as basis, when an impact takes place between the door (of the eye) and the object." Nevertheless, such a discourse as the present one really refers to the constituent parts of sight in the same sense as when one says, "He pierces with a bow," and so forth. Therefore the meaning here is, "when he sees an object by visual cognition."

"Is not entranced by the general appearance," does not seize the general appearance as furnishing a basis for corruption, such as the general appearance of a woman, a man, or of any desirable form, and so on. He stops at what is actually seen."

- *Visuddhimagga*

[Tr. by Pe Maung Tin in *The Path of Purity*]

So, both the physical sensitivity and mind have equally important role to play in the process of cognition of a sensible object – a view which Immanuel Kant upheld when rejecting the stances of Platonic Idealism and Rationalism on the one hand, and Lockean - Humean Empiricism on the other, in the nineteenth century by making assertion that "***without sensibility no object would be given to us; and without understanding no object would be thought by***

1; Ñāṇamoli, Path of Purification 1.53 p.22.

us. Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind."¹

Buddhism is thus a middle path even epistemologically because it admits the external reality despite its unknowable character; and also accepts the role of mind for the understanding of the sensuous experiences with the postulation of the 50 active mental templates designated as the *cetasikas* (psychic factors) belonging to the aggregation of the *saṅkhāras* for their characteristics of *abhisaṅkharāṇa*, which shall be discussed in the next issue, along with the concept of *manasikāra* for its functionality for object-referentiality (*ālamāna-pratipādana*); *viññāna-pratipādana* (referentiality to sense datum) and *javana-pratipādana* (referentiality to cognitive path or apperception).²

1 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. F. Maxmueller (tr) (rv, second edition) The Macmillan Co. NY & London: 1922 p.41.

2 For details see the author's *Buddhist Analysis of Mind*; and *Facets of Buddhism* ch.5.