

Buddhism and Empiricism



Traditionally the study of the problem of knowledge has belonged to the province of philosophy. Some regard philosophy as something intermediate between religion and science. Like religion it deals with matters such as the ten questions that were 'left aside, unanswered and rejected' by the Buddha.

by Carlo Fonseka

[Text of a lecture delivered at the Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Sri Jayewardenepura]

(August 17, Colombo, Sri Lanka Guardian) The aim of this paper is to explore the question of whether the central doctrines of Buddhism can be understood as constituting part of empirical human knowledge. In contrast to rationalists, empiricists claim that everything human beings have valid knowledge of has been acquired through the senses, that is to say, from sensory experience. The classic formulation of empiricism came from Aristotle (384 - 322 BC). Declaring that profitable inquiry has to confine itself solely to the world of actual or possible experience he said that: "There is nothing in the mind except what was first in the senses". Aristotle's assertion was made to counter his teacher Plato (c.427 - 347 BC) who taught that human beings are born with knowledge of ideas such as justice and beauty and courage independently of and prior to their experience of the real empirical world in which they live, that is to say, with a set of 'innate' cognitive ideas. In the 17th century the British empiricist John Locke (1632 - 1704) repeated Aristotle's words to counter the rationalist Rene Descartes (1596 - 1650) who declared that reason is the only path to knowledge. In contrast to empiricists, rationalists contend that exercise of pure reason is capable of generating knowledge independent of sense perception.

Empirical Method

Self-evidently the knowledge on which the whole apparatus of modern civilization consisting of computers, the internet, television, radio, telephone, the printing press, motor vehicles, ships, airplanes, microwave ovens, fertilizers, antibiotics, kidney machines, cardiac pace-makers, weapons of mass destruction - the list is endless - is built, has been acquired by the empirical method or scientific method. Whether or not it has been consciously applied systematically in a given case, this method essentially involves observing events pertaining to a given natural phenomenon, hypothesizing about possible causal relationships between the relevant observations and experimenting to test the validity of the hypotheses. In summary, the empirical method involves: observation, hypothesis and experiment. Thus both the first step and the final step in the empirical or scientific method involve observation i.e. sense perception. Sense perception is therefore the beginning and the end of the empirical approach to knowledge. Empiricists contend that sense perception, if not indeed the sole legitimate source of knowledge, is certainly the final court of appeal concerning the validity of any given belief about the external world. And given the power to change the world that scientific knowledge has conferred on humankind, empiricism has emerged as the reigning theory of knowledge.

Context

It is in this context that the question arises whether the central doctrines of Buddhism too form part of empirical human knowledge. Implicitly, to people who swear by science, the credibility of Buddhism will increase in proportion to the extent that its central doctrines are empirically authenticated. But it must be borne in mind that for all its cognitive power, empiricism as a theory of knowledge does not and in truth cannot guarantee absolute certainty. This is because empiricism depends on inductive reasoning and mathematics (the language in which, as Galileo said, the book of nature is written) demonstrates that the probability of a universal generalization being absolutely certain is zero irrespective of the number of observations on which it is based. The stock example used to illustrate the limitation of induction is the generalization based on millions of observations that 'all swans are white'. Europeans had for centuries believed it almost as a 'natural law' that all swans are white. When they discovered the existence of black swans in Australia, however, they realized that even a generalization based on millions of observations could be invalidated by the next empirical observation. Thus no finite number of observations however large can logically entail a universal generalization. When we successfully infer the future, we do so, on the basis of tentative generalizations suggested by (necessarily incomplete) empirical data and not on the basis of principles which are logically necessary. It is with this limitation of empiricism in mind that we must explore the relationship, if any, between Buddhism and empiricism.

Buddhism

Preached by the Buddha (c. 563 - 483 BC) Buddhism is one of the great religions of the world. As Karl Marx perceptively judged, among other things, "religion is the generalized theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form ...". Theories about the world, whether they are religious, philosophical, scientific or just fanciful in origin, all seek to account for the incredible diversity and intricate complexity of the phenomenon of life on earth. Historically, convention has privileged religious theories against critical evaluation but increasingly and irreverently all theories about the world including the God-hypothesis have become subject to critical empirical scrutiny. As Richard Dawkins says in his book *The God Delusion*, "notwithstanding the polite abstinence of Huxley, Gould and many others, the God question is not in principle and forever outside the remit of science".

Religion, Philosophy and Science

6 Religion, Philosophy and Science are aspects of humankind's ceaseless attempt to solve existential problems. Their concerted, dedicated objective is knowledge of the world we find ourselves in, not knowing whence we came nor why nor whither we shall go. The most useful knowledge would provide us with an understanding of the world as it really is. According to the Buddha too, the senses should be cultivated to see the truth, to see things as they really are. Such knowledge is necessary for human beings to pursue with any hope of success the goals of survival of themselves and their kind in this world, avoidance of suffering and attainment of happiness.

Perspective

The starting point of this inquiry is the universally observable fact that human beings struggle to survive in this world, suffering to a greater or lesser degree in the process, but seeking to attain happiness. In order to survive and to avoid suffering and to attain happiness, appropriate knowledge is a sine qua non because it provides the basis for understanding our condition in a constantly changing environment. The brain is the organ that mediates our continuous internal adjustment to the continuously changing external world. The brain scans the environment continuously and computes the answer to a recurrent question: What is the best thing to do in the given circumstances to survive and thrive in this world? The brain is equipped to perceive what happens around us as matters of cause and effect however inexact and inaccurate our perceptions might be. In practice we have no alternative but to act on the basis of what we regard as the most trustworthy beliefs we can muster, however imperfect or inadequate they might be. It is from such a condition of uncertainty based on 'naïve realism' that we struggle "to grasp this sorry scheme of things entire". The problem of knowledge is how it comes about that human beings equipped as they are with notoriously fallible senses can ever acquire trustworthy knowledge about the world.

Problem of Knowledge

Traditionally the study of the problem of knowledge has belonged to the province of philosophy. Some regard philosophy as something intermediate between religion and science. Like religion it deals with matters such as the ten questions that were 'left aside, unanswered and rejected' by the Buddha. However, like science, philosophy attempts to answer such questions by recourse to intellectual analysis rather than to faith-based authority of one kind or another. According to Bertrand Russell, "all definite knowledge ... belongs to science; all dogma as to what surpasses definite knowledge belongs to theology. But between theology and science there is a No Man's Land, exposed to attack by both sides; This No Man's Land is philosophy". But there are philosophers like W. V. Quine who think of philosophy as being continuous with science; indeed as being part of science. He says that "philosophy lies at the abstract and theoretical end of science".

Buddhism's Uniqueness as a Religion

As a religion, Buddhism is unique because it does not share the typical characteristics of classical historical religions. Huston Smith has identified six features which almost all major religions share.⁹ They are: authority, ritual, speculation, tradition, concept of divine saving grace and mystery. The Buddha preached a religion devoid of authority, ritual, speculation, tradition and mystery that was based on intense self-effort. An intellectual approach to the human predicament which is devoid of authority, ritual, speculation, tradition, concept of divine saving grace and mystery is virtually indistinguishable from philosophy. According to the Buddha, the principle of dependent arising - a central doctrine of Buddhism - is something that the "Tathagatha comes to know and realize and having known and realized, he describes it, sets it forth, makes it known, establishes it, discloses it, analyzes it, clarifies it, saying: 'Look' ".¹⁰ That is precisely what a modern empirical scientist does too. Therefore, the question whether, and if so to what extent, the central doctrines of Buddhism comprise part of empirical human knowledge is a meaningful and answerable question. In Buddhist terms it belongs to the category of vibhajja vyakaraniya. In the western world, the pervasive influence of empirical knowledge embodied in science on all aspects of human life brought it into conflict with religion. If traditional religion was to retain its hold on the imagination of educated minds it had to come to terms with empirical science. Of all great religions, Buddhism has been the least vulnerable to the intellectual onslaught of science. In these circumstances some Buddhist scholars have dared to look and see how far Buddhism's central doctrines are in accordance with empirical science.

Emergence of Pragmatism

Many of the spectacular triumphs of science came in the 19th and 20th centuries. Philosophers saw that it was in science that humankind had acquired the most

trustworthy and useful knowledge. An inevitable question posed itself: What is the basis of the phenomenal success of science? Three American philosophers who were born in the 19th century and died in the 20th addressed that question. They are collectively known as pragmatists. They were: C. S. Peirce (1839 - 1914), William James (1842 - 1910) and John Dewey (1859 - 1952). Peirce was the pioneer pragmatist in western philosophy. His signal contribution was the formulation of a theory of meaning which has had wide applicability in science and philosophy. He was concerned with conditional statements i.e. statements which assert that if such and such antecedent conditions prevail, then such and such observable results would ensue. The essential point in his theory of meaning is that meaning must always relate to something observable that happens as a result of something we do; hence the term 'pragmatism' which derives from the Greek word for deed or action. The practical value of this approach is that if the invariant conditions are recognized then future experience can be predicted in the light of past experience. In the context of the present paper, the virtual identity of the pragmatic theory of meaning and the Buddha's concept of dependent arising (paticca samuppada) commands attention:

"When this is, that is,

This arising, that arises,

When this is not, that is not,

This ceasing, that ceases' - Pragmatism of William James

The pragmatism of William James often assumed the form of a theory of truth. For him an idea is 'true' so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives and if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily it is true. Thus for James what 'works' is 'true'. In fairness to pragmatism it must be pointed out that Peirce had serious objections to James's theory of truth. In the scientific approach to reality human happiness does not provide the motivation to understand the true nature of the world. Because experience shows that some of our beliefs are of doubtful reliability, Peirce set out to devise a technique for dealing with doubt. Dewey refined and elaborated it. The technique is the method of revising our beliefs by inquiry because of no belief can we be absolutely certain. Thus Peirce was challenging the traditional view that real knowledge is based on certainty. He coined the term 'fallibilism' to characterize the very foundations of science. For Peirce to say that a belief is true is to say that it is destined to be accepted if inquiry continues. He has been credited as the forerunner of Karl Popper. To talk of Karl Popper is to think of the Vienna Circle of Logical Positivists and Ludwig Wittgenstein who, though they did not themselves belong to the Vienna Circle, nevertheless, profoundly influenced it.

Influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein

Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) became the gospel of the Logical Positivists. And positivism has been regarded as a philosophical defense of science and mathematics, which are regarded as the supreme ways of exercising human rationality and gaining knowledge. In later life, however, Wittgenstein judged that his *Tractatus* was fundamentally in error. But the definitive statement of his repudiation of it came only in his posthumous publication called *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). From 1939 until 1947 Wittgenstein was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge. During this period he published almost nothing. His second philosophy was disseminated only to and through his students. As it happened, one of his students during that period was K. N. Jayatilleke who seems to have imbibed the best of both early and later Wittgenstein.

Work of K. N. Jayatilleke

K. N. Jayatilleke's monumental work *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (1963) embodies a thorough examination of the epistemological foundations of Early Buddhism. Noting that "the origins of the Indian empiricist tradition and its early development in Early Buddhism are largely unknown to Western scholarship," Jayatilleke remarks that Radhakrishnan "went so far as to say that Early Buddhism was positivistic in its outlook and confined its attention to what we perceive".¹⁴ He focuses on Aldous Huxley's observation that "Early Buddhism for the most part respected the principle of verification and confined its statements to verifiable propositions".¹⁵ Then he quotes Huxley who said, "The Buddha ... seems to have applied to the problems of religion that 'operational philosophy' which contemporary scientific thinkers have begun to apply in the natural sciences... [but] Buddha was not a consistent operationalist; for he seems to have taken for granted, to have accepted as something given and self-evident, a variant of the locally current theory of metempsychosis"¹⁶. Jayatilleke comments that Huxley has been misled into thinking that the Buddha had dogmatically accepted the doctrine of rebirth from the prevalent tradition.¹⁷

Rebirth and Karma

Jayatilleke argues that the Buddha accepted the reality of rebirth and karma on methodological grounds after critical reasoning. He asserts that the inductive inferences in Buddhism are made on data of perception, normal and paranormal. He claims that the doctrines of karma and rebirth are inductive inferences based on the data of extra-sensory perceptions.¹⁸ According to Jayatilleke, with one exception, all the knowledge claimed by the Buddha is based on data of perception and is therefore empirical. The exception is the nirvanic experience. Based on his understanding of verse 1076 of the *Suttanipata*, Jayatilleke judges that the nirvanic experience is transempirical; it can be realized and attained, but it cannot be empirically described. Jayatilleke explains that this is so because according to the Buddha the person who has attained the goal ... does not have that with which one can speak of him - "whereof

one can speak of him, that he does not have".¹⁹ So one has to be silent. At this point, as if to clinch the issue he quotes the celebrated conclusion of his philosophical guru's magnum opus *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent".²⁰ No doubt because he was aware that modern science never has recourse to extra-sensory perception, Jayatilleke endeavored to present rebirth as a hypothesis testable by the canons of modern science. He set to work to prove rebirth on the basis of empirical evidence. Sadly his early demise left the matter as inconclusive as ever. Jayatilleke cites several convincing examples to illustrate the proposition that many Buddhist teachings are based on the data of normal perception. Then he poses the question whether the putative extra-sensory experiences such as telepathy and clairvoyance on which the central Buddhist doctrines of karma and rebirth are based are veridical or delusive. Regrettably on the ground that the question falls outside the scope of his study he does not examine it.²¹

Enter Kalupahana

At the University of Peradeniya, D. J. Kalupahana was K. N. Jayatilleke's pupil and later colleague. In due course having moved to the University of Hawaii, Kalupahana took up from where Jayatilleke left off the intellectual project of trying to incorporate Buddhism into empirical human knowledge. By his own submission, Kalupahana is a pragmatist in the mould of William James. As to empiricism, he says that he has continually struggled to explain the Early Buddhist tradition as one based upon an extremely sophisticated empiricist foundation, not in the Humean version of British empiricism but in the Jamesean version of American pragmatism. Kalupahana avers that "it is not easy to find a passage where the Buddha claims that he has realized a truth that transcends linguistic expression. ²² He adds that "the Buddha's knowledge is confined to what is empirically verifiable and morally significant". ²³ He implies that KN Jayatilleke's claim that the nirvanic experience is trans-empirical is based on an epistemological premise the Buddha would not have subscribed to. ²⁴

Tilakaratne's Thesis

It fell to the lot of Kalupahana's doctoral pupil Asanga Tilakaratne to attempt a definitive scholarly demolition of Jayatilleke's statement about the trans-empirical nature of the nirvanic experience. He does so by a comprehensive, detailed and critical analysis of theories of transcendence and ineffability including Jayatilleke's version in Early Buddhism.²⁵

Criticism of the work of Tilakaratne

Paradoxically the sternest and most cogent critic of Tilakaratne's thesis is Bhikkhu Bodhi, a distinguished and extraordinarily learned Buddhist scholar with solid ethnic and academic roots in the Anglo-American cultural tradition. In an article titled

Nibbana, Transcendence and Language published in 1996 Bhikkhu Bodhi avers that Tillakaratne attempts to validate his thesis concerning the empirical nature of the nirvanic experience, on the basis of an 'acutely narrow selection' of texts. He points out that other texts give alternative expositions of the nirvanic experience which are difficult to accommodate within a purely naturalistic interpretation of nirvana. He emphasizes the fact that Tilakaratne himself concedes that the Nibbana Suttas of the Udana support the view of nirvana which Tilakaratne rejects. According to Bhikkhu Bodhi it is by "considerable bending and stretching of their manifest meaning" that Tilakaratne squares the Udana Suttas with a naturalistic view of nirvana. He declares that the Pali Nikaya texts on Nibbana "are straightforward enough to leave little doubt that Nibbana is a transcendent reality...". Then comes the censorious judgment that: "... it is only by a wilful denial of their explicit intent that one can get them to say something other than what they appear to be saying".²⁶

Final Appraisal

On the whole Bhikkhu Bodhi does not appear to endorse the tradition of Sri Lankan Buddhist philosophical analysis represented by K. N. Jayatilleke, D. J. Kalupahana and Asanga Tilakaratne, which he contends is seeking to assimilate Buddhism into Anglo-American empiricism and positivism. He expresses his fear that the net result of their project might be the reduction of Buddhism to "little more than a system of ethical culture and mental training based on an especially insightful psychology".²⁷ But in an article titled Two Paths to Knowledge published in 1999, Bhikkhu Bodhi categorically declares: "In contrast to the classical western antithesis of religion and science, Buddhism shares with science a common commitment to uncover the truth about the world. Both Buddhism and science draw a sharp distinction between the way things appear and the way they really are, and both offer to open our minds to insights into the real nature of things, normally hidden from us by false ideas based on sense perception and 'common sense'. ... Buddhism includes within its domain the entire spectrum of qualities described by personal experience. This means that Buddhism gives prime consideration to values. But even more, values for Buddhism are not merely projections of subjective judgments which we fashion according to our personal whims, social needs or cultural conditioning; to the contrary, they are written into the texture of reality just as firmly as the laws of motion and thermodynamics..."²⁸ If Bhikkhu Bodhi's analysis is correct, there seems to be no escape route: the Buddhist approach to reality necessarily has to be the methodology which led to the discovery of the laws of motion and thermodynamics. And that is the empirical approach. If such an approach reduces Buddhism to what he (disapprovingly) calls "a system of ethical culture and mental training based on an especially insightful psychology" then the logical response necessarily has to be: So be it! For, if nothing else, it is eminently acceptable and entirely consonant with the modern scientific outlook. Nor must it be forgotten that empiricism is not exclusively Anglo-American. As already noted above,

Radhakrishnan "went so far as to say that early Buddhism was positivistic in its outlook and confined its attention to what we perceive". That early Indian thought had an empiricist tradition is well known. Whether - as Bhikkhu Bodhi seems to imply - Anglo-American empiricism and positivism had specific characteristics which made them uniquely different from other forms of empiricism is debatable. In any case, the relevant question for us today is whether the central doctrines of Buddhism are consistent with the modern empirical theory of knowledge. For all its admitted problematic epistemological shortcomings including an inherent and permanent state of yielding inferences whose degree of reliability is less than absolute certainty, the empirical approach to reality has proved to be a highly reliable and extremely fruitful one for the conduct of human life on earth. What the Sri Lankan empirical tradition of Buddhist scholarship has sought to do is to validate the central doctrines of Buddhism in terms of modern empiricism, which has proved to be a surer guide to knowledge than philosophical speculation.

For his part, K. N. Jayatilleke endeavoring to interpret Buddhism in empirical terms, judged that knowledge of nirvana could not be validated in empirical terms. His judgment was that knowledge of nirvana necessarily had to be trans-empirical and therefore ineffable. Kalupahana rejected this view partly on the ground that if the ultimate reality envisaged in Buddhism is 'ineffable' Buddhism would lose its passport to the sacred domains of both modern psychology and philosophy. In his K. N. Jayatilleke Memorial Lecture titled K. N. Jayatilleke's Interpretation of Nirvana Revisited delivered in 1998, Asanga Tilakaratne systematically reaffirmed his view that the experience of nirvana can indeed be understood as part of conventional empirical human knowledge. 29

When all is said and done, the final question is: Can the central doctrines of Buddhism be exhibited as a system of causal relations where effects follow from causes, even as the conclusion of a valid argument follows from its premises. The project Jayatilleka, Kalupahana and Tilakaratne in their separate ways had set for themselves aimed at such a demonstration. Whether they succeeded and if so to what extent, has to be a matter of judgment. Though ironclad proof of such an achievement cannot be validly claimed by them, their work has collectively made a very plausible case for regarding the central doctrines of Buddhism as constituting part of empirical human knowledge. Those who believe that the sublime doctrines of Buddhism transcend profane knowledge and that Buddhism is concerned, not with objective factual knowledge but with an inner spiritual transformation, could still rejoice in the fact that by its intrinsic epistemological nature, an empirical project cannot yield absolute certainty.

[Tell a Friend](#)