

Discerning the Buddhist Voidness (*Śūnyatā*) —a Procedure of «Remaking of Man»

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Introduction

The conception of non-self in the Buddhist philosophy is interpreted in several ways by Buddhists and non-Buddhists. It is considered, by some, as a statement towards a kind of nihilism, that Buddhist philosophy always uses extreme methods to confute with the eternity of the human soul and the existence of Brahman promoted by the Brāhmanical schools of Indian philosophy. On the other hand, some other schools that vehemently refute the positions of Brāhmanical schools on this issue consider Buddhist position on non-self is not giving a real critique but an implicit recognition of the position held by the Brāhmanical schools. Both these views can have ample positions of support to prove their arguments. But, in the case of Buddhist philosophy, they neither out rightly reject nor completely accept the idea of self, a position really deviated characteristically on the issue of non-self in the Indian philosophical discourses. I wish to look at this issue differently from both the positions of the Brāhmanical schools and the dialectically opposite views of the non-Brāhmanical schools, especially the materialists. From the discourses of the Buddha and the later philosophical works of Nāgārjuna, we can clearly discern that the Buddha was seriously concerned about the human existence in the world as it is evident from his most important meditative finding, the four truths (*āryasatyas*) (*Majjima Nikāya* 64- verse 10).¹ This revelation is the foundation of his discourses

¹ The four noble truths (*catvāri āryasatyāni*): suffering exists (*dukkha*); suffering accrues (*dukkha samudaya*); suffering can be stopped (*dukkha nirodha*); the ways to stop suffering (*dukkha nirodha*)

and philosophical understandings with regard to life world, and clearly shows direction in dealing with the phenomenal world. He revealed that human beings have the inherent tendency to fall into sorrow (*dhukha*) when interacting with the phenomenal world, and there is always a chance that the sorrow accrues and multiplies in the mind in a distinctive manner. The sorrow would lead to self destruction. However he was not professing doom, or not taken a proactive stand, like many other contemporary thinkers of his time, for he taught that it is possible to stop the sorrowing process and there are ways to achieve that. I wish to view the idea of non-self, as a conceptual frame work, offered by Buddhist philosophy to 'remake man' from his inherent tendency to fall into the depth of self destruction in various ways. Following structured theories are one of the impediments in understanding the phenomenal world clearly.

By introducing the idea non-self (*nairātmya*) Buddha in fact wanted the human beings to understand the essencelessness of the phenomenal appearances and of the self that interact with the phenomenal appearances; so that they can deal with the phenomenal world successfully without being drawn into clutches of metaphysical views. In the later works of Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna we can see that there is a strong emphasis on to the philosophical conception of voidness (*śūnyatā*) as method to explain the phenomenal world. I think the implications of non-self (*nairātmya*) and voidness (*śūnyatā*) are essentially the same: both are introduced to advance a procedure for 'remaking of man'.

The problems of dealing with phenomenal world are, in fact, the reasons for introducing the concepts of non-self (*nairātmya*) and voidness (*śūnyatā*). This aspect is evident in the long history of the Buddhist philosophy that helped human beings to deal successfully with the uncertain and indescribable phenomenal world and notably it helped humans to redeem from the shackles theoretical philosophy and their doctrinal dictums. We can see that the philosophical method introduced by the Mādhyamika Buddhist philosophy of Nāgārjuna has a timeless, because of the idea of voidness

mārga) (Dasgupta 1922; 111).

(*śūnyatā*) where all phenomenal experiences are delineated based on the selflessness of the phenomenal world (*dharmānairātmya*) and of the subjective self (*pudgalanairātmya*). It is also argued here that the conception of self is understandable only contextually where a notional subjective self is in contact with the phenomenal world, but a proper understanding of either of the entities would reveal the conception of selflessness and the notional self. There should be a concomitant relationship between subject and object for each to express itself. The procedure of 'remaking of man' is explained as the proper discernment of the essencelessness of subjective self. The notion of a real self (*pudgala*) is clearly understood by reconstructing the psychophysical personality of man which is normally taken as the eternal self by philosophers. The construction of the self is revealed by inputting the concept of non-self (*nairātmya*) or voidness (*śūnyatā*) and by explaining how the aspects of human personality such as dispositions, feelings and ignorance functions together to manifest an eternal soul which normally disadvantage the human beings to deal actively with the phenomenal world.

The Limitations of the Knowing Process

Our knowledge about the world of existence is conditionally based on our experience with phenomenal world of existence, especially the part that forms the object of our experience. This knowledge seeks for clarity when it is substantiated and reflected with other's experience. The world we know is formulated with a process like this. At the same time, the knowing process in humans is largely governed by an internal urge that guides one to acquire knowledge (*jñāna*). Most of those experiences which turn out to be knowledge are again conditioned by dispositions (*saṃskāra*) and feelings (*vedanā*) which are normally guided by our choices, preferences and contextual compulsions. We discriminately accept and reject knowledge based on such internal mechanisms. Others experiences are at times acts as the sources of information or premises on which we formulate new viewpoints. Human life and thinking are in several ways conditioned by metaphysical viewpoints formulated out

of others viewpoints which again are conditioned by certain epistemological positions conditioned by a particular logical system chosen for it. Eventually the same phenomenal experiences fall into the grip of different metaphysical positions. There are numerous conditioned viewpoint and theories around us. In a way by following such dispositionally conditioned viewpoints that are substantiated with other's experiences again make us to formulate our thoughts based on the metaphysical positions are in fact not helping us to attain freedom, but, on the contrary, binds us to certain doctrinal positions; though the purpose of those theories are to liberate man from all his problems. The metaphysical viewpoints turn out to be part of the dispositions and volitions, such selective choices would really driving human personality into a point of difficult return.

The teachings of Buddha and the works of Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna always objected to such notions of permanence of theories or accepting other's experiences as sources of knowledge, or they even questioned the validity of knowledge and the knowledge sources. Buddhism always taught about the necessity of keenly looking into the premises of those theories and viewpoints because those are conditioned by several insubstantial conceptions and fragmented evidences (Varghese 2008; 55). The idea of an eternally existing self is one of such conception in Indian philosophy. With such a conception it is warranted that there should be an eternally existing reality that controls the phenomenal world. This conception again demands us to find suitable knowledge sources that substantiate this reality. The knowledge sources and the analytical procedure to evaluate them are again determined by the requirement of proving the existence of such an entity. The consistent emphasis on these aspects, actually pushes the human life to be a conditioned products of metaphysical doctrines.

In fact Buddha directly criticised the view of permanent self and an eternal entity that controls the phenomenal existence, most notably, in the discussion in Tevijja Sutta. The answers to the questions originated out of Brahmin Bhāratvāja's and Brahmin Vāsetṭha's confusions which are meant to direct their attention to those metaphysical positions held by the Brāhminical schools of philosophy as the reasons for their confusions because those are not substantia-

ted with any sorts of evidences but accepted as the foundations of their epistemology. The unqualified submissions to the knowledge sources such as the beliefs of their forefathers and the teachings of Vedas had been criticised by the Buddha. Buddha aptly invoked the thoughts of the Brāhmins in these words:

So, Vāseṭṭha, not one of these Brāhmins learned in the Three Vedas has seen *Brahmā*² face to face, nor has one of their teacher's teachers, nor even the ancestor seven generations back one of their teachers. Nor could any of the early sages say: «We know and see when, how and where *Brahmā* appears». So what these Brahmins learned in the Three Vedas are saying is: «We teach this path to union with *Brahmā* that we do not know or see, this is the only straight path [...] leading to union with *Brahmā*». [...] 'Well Vāseṭṭha, when these Brahmins learned in the Three Vedas teach a path that they do not know or see saying : "This is the only straight path [...]"', this cannot possibly be right, just as a file of blind men go on, clinging to each other, and the first one sees nothing, the middle one sees nothing, and the last one sees nothing [...] The talk of these Brahmins learned in the Three Vedas turns out to be laughable mere words, empty and vain (*Digha Nikaya*, sutta-13-verse.18, 19.d).

In this case the two Brahmins' confusion and thoughts are originated from their complete submission to the views of their ancestors without being verified for its validity. Buddha is categorical in questioning those viewpoints because such inherited and untested metaphysical positions could lead to confusions and sufferings. In this case he was clearly looking at the problem of the two Brahmins, Bhāratvāja and Vāseṭṭha that they are originated out of being strongly in hold of the metaphysical views of the Vedic knowledge and the conception of the Brahman and the eternal soul.

² *Brahmā* is a Vedic god but Brahman is the transcendent entity, inexplicable, non-dual, and reasons the basis of the apparent phenomenal world. Brahman transforms into both subjective and objective entities. Individual soul is a the pure Brahman in each individual which is in actuality concealed by illusions (*Māya*).

Speculative views on the existent world criticised

The above discourse of the Buddha shows that even when criticising the metaphysical views of other schools of philosophy, he never implicitly agreed or approved the views of the opposing schools of philosophy as valid positions. He understood about the moral dangers occurring in adhering to such viewpoints. It can push human consciousness into a trap. We have direct evidence on this distinctiveness in the discourse of *Brahmajāla sutta* where the Buddha criticised sixty two views of the rival confronting philosophical schools but he was very careful for not introducing a sixty third view to substantiate his position, not even implicitly agreeing that he has no doctrine to introduce.

The views of Buddha is clearly explained in this verse:

Whatever ascetics and Brahmins who are speculators about the past or the future or both, having fixed views on the matter and put forth speculative views about it, these are all trapped in the net with its sixty-two divisions, and wherever they emerge and try to get out, they are caught and held in this net, just as a skilled fisherman or his apprentice might cover a small piece of water with a fine-meshed net, thinking: "Whatever larger creatures there may be in this water, they are all trapped in the net, caught, and held in the net", so it is with all these: they are trapped and caught in this net (*Digha Nikaya, sutta-1, verse, 3-72*).

This important discourse of the Buddha clearly expresses his unwillingness to publish a theory, on the contrary he proclaimed the theories as a well meshed net that could catch the beholder and trap him into a small area of active speculative thinking, and that itself would form a cyclic rational space without giving a chance to think differently. The Buddha always wanted to help support the growth of human free will and the ability to think independently as the prime aim of the teachings, because he know that human consciousness always has a tendency to fall into a net of speculative thought, and which is a prime source of suffering and worry.

In this connection, the Buddha gave a clear explanation to what

he meant in all his criticisms to the other schools of thought of his time in the Aggivachagotta sutta:

Vaccha, the speculative view that the world is eternal [...] The speculative view that the world is not eternal [...] that the world is finite [...] that the world is infinite [...] that the soul and the body are the same [...] that the soul is one thing and the body another [...] that after death a Tathāgata exists [...] that after death a Tathāgata does not exist [...] that after death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist [...] that after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist is a thicket of views, a wilderness of views. A contortion of views, vacillation of views, fetter of views. It is beset by suffering, by vexation, by despair, and by fever, and it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana. Seeing this danger, I do not take up any of those speculative views (*Majjima Nikāya*, 72, 14).

Buddha felt that it is the weakness of human mind to get attached to views and doctrines. On the contrary, he refused with the view that it is possible to control such basic instincts by publishing opposing views of scepticism, nihilism, etc., because here too the same human weakness is active that push him to hold on to the opposing viewpoints. Both these processes, in the Buddhist perspective, can leave the human conscious to deep disillusionment leading to moral debasement. It is meant here that when we formulate theories the theories themselves turned out to be the reason for our worries. The magnanimity of the phenomenal existence doesn't offer such good reasons for making theoretical paradigms which are consistent and could give an idea about the complete state of things in the world. In this case the Buddha was very clear in his proclamation that human mind is not in a position to understand the complete state of everything, but he encouraged all human effort to understand and account the phenomenal experience. But in his view an effort to that end should not end in making theoretical conclusions, or it should not end in refuting all such views by promoting a kind of nihilism. This again could leave one onto a stage of scepticism

like in the case of Sañjaya Bellatthiputta.³ Like eternalism, nihilism and scepticism also would lead to moral danger and can damage the personality. Buddha understood that one of the main problems for such opposing viewpoints originates from the basic human attitude to identify something within him as permanent, and the changes in the external world of experience is accounted in relation to that permanent substance, the self. The human personality that interacts with the phenomenal world manifest itself as a permanent entity. On the other hand the doctrines that promote the eternity of the experiential world conclude that the changes in the phenomenal experience can not be validated because of the unpredictability of the human personality. He clearly understood that the real problem is with our understanding of the phenomenal world and it is due to our attachment to certain basic understanding about the nature of human personality. He felt that this aspect is not given enough credence by scholars of his time, that they accepted the views of their predecessors or even the views on this problem based on convictions around them. He also found that the objective world that is the main area of our understanding of the phenomenal world is largely depended on analysing the products or results rather than the material constitution of those products where we fail to understand their dependence on various causes and conditions. The analysis often follows conventional understanding of the knowledge sources which is based on certain constants that are unassailable. One of those constants is the acceptance of perception as the valid source of knowledge by not looking carefully into the construction of it. We presume implicitly that the human perception is the most valid

³ Sañjaya Bellatthiputta was a contemporary of Buddha's time who also criticised the speculative thought in a unique format, which is very worthwhile to note here. His answers are typical. In the case of fourteen questions, asked by Ajātasattu (a follower of Buddha) to Sañjaya in the dialogue between them, reveals that the answers are beyond any dialectical trap set by the King. To the questions relating to the fruits of homeless life, which was the theme of discussion in the dialogue, Sañjaya answered: «If you ask me: 'Is there an other world?' if I thought so, I would say so. But I don't think so. I don't say it is so, and I don't say otherwise. I don't say it is not, and I don't not say it is not. If you ask: 'isn't there an other world?' [...] 'Both?' [...] 'Neither?' [...] 'is there fruit and result of good and bad deeds?' 'Isn't there?' [...] 'Both?' [...] 'Neither?' 'Does the Thatagata exist after death?' 'Does he not?' [...] 'Both?' [...] 'neither?' [...] I don't say it is not.» (Varghese 2007; 57-71)

source of knowledge and from there we can draw conclusions or judgments about the phenomenal world and understand the complete state of things. Buddha was not in agreement with this idea. He was of the opinion that the human personality is constituted of various other cognizable entities which is needed to be validated before making any judgments.

Why Speculative Thought Rejected

As we have seen in the discussion here, the original Buddhist thought rejected the speculative thought in various ways, such as the validity of its sources, and the problems that can create in the mind of an ordinary person on answering questions such as the eternity of the phenomenal world, the individual soul, the Tathāgata's (liberated person's) existence after his death etc. These problems arise because the ordinary simplistic mind of human beings always seek for clear and certain answers, like one of his disciples, Mālunkyāputta who were confused with the uncertain Buddhist views on speculative thought and decided to stop following the Buddha as he was not sure whether he had been following the right path. He approached the Buddha and expressed his concerns and his decision to return to ordinary layman's life. Buddha explained the reasons of rejecting speculative views to Mālunkyāputta:

Therefore, Mālunkyāputta, remember what I have left undeclared as undeclared, and remember what I have declared as declared. And what I have I left undeclared? 'The world is eternal'—I have left undeclared. 'The world is not eternal'—I have left undeclared. —I have left undeclared. 'The soul is the same as the body'—I have left undeclared. 'The soul is one thing and the body is another'—I have left undeclared. 'After the death a Tathāgata exists— I have left undeclared. 'After death a Tathāgata does not exist—I have left undeclared. 'After death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist'—I have left undeclared. 'After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist'—I have left undeclared. [...] Why have I left that undeclared? Because it is unbeneficial, it does not belong to the fundamental of the holy life, it does not

lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna (*Nirvāṇa*). That is why I have left it undeclared.

And what have I declared? ‘This is suffering’ —I have declared. ‘This is the origin of suffering’ —I have declared. ‘This is the cessation of suffering’ —I have declared. ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering’ —I have declared (*Majjima Nikāya* 64- verse 7, 8, 9, 10).

The view of Buddha is very clear with the question of suffering in human life that all other questions are less important and he also finds that it is the endeavour of each person to find ways to solve the problem of accruing suffering from various instances of life. So it is important to ‘remake man’ from the situations that leads to suffering for almost each and every instance of his life. Buddha understood that the speculative thought based on theoretical positions never could help man to achieve that. Therefore he approached this issue differently in a characteristic manner. The problem of suffering and accruing suffering would create severe moral danger, since human beings normally would speculate on the phenomenal world according to the dictums of such situations.

Instead of attacking directly the views that accept the eternity of human personality or rejecting them out rightly, Buddha showed the courage to criticise the views that supports the eternity of the psychophysical personality of a person.⁴ This is one of his impelling teachings on the conception of the self. He questioned and showed that the conception of an eternal self is a misnomer that could lead to severe complications with a person’s understanding about the phenomenal world. From his various discourses, we can unders-

⁴ Kaccāyanagotta sutta, Everything exists: «—this is one extreme. Nothing exists: —this is the other extreme. Not approaching either extreme the Tathāgata teachers you a doctrine by the middle {way}: —Conditioned by ignorance activities come to pass, conditioned by activities consciousness; thus conditioned {arises} name and shape; and sense arises, contact, feeling, craving, grasping, becoming, birth, decay-and-death,grief, suffering [...] even such is the uprising of this entire mass of ill. But from the utter fading away and ceasing of ignorance {arises} ceasing of activities, and thus comes ceasing of this entire mass of ill» (Samyutta Nikāya 1922; 2, 15).

tand that the reasons for metaphysical positions on the phenomenal world are there because of the problem of bluntly accepting the conception of an eternal self, and bluntly rejecting such a conception. At the same time, he doesn't want the reasoning process to dominate which might lead to the problem of scepticism and nihilism, leading to severe moral danger to the human personality. He used a very different method of analysis for understanding the human personality and the phenomenal world.

Analysis of the Human Personality

The Buddha very carefully analysed the constitution of the human personality and brought out a unique understanding to what is normally considered as soul or self. Buddha called human personality as psychophysical personality (see *Kalupahana* 1984). The conception of five aggregates (*pañcaskandha*) (see 1984) is meant to question the validity of an atman as the foundation of human personality. This conception by and large explained the human behaviour in a conclusive way; however Buddha kept this idea open for discussion. He explained the constitution of soul as a collection of five aggregates (*pañcaskandha*), a formulation of psychic elements such as feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), disposition (*saṅkhāra*), consciousness (*viññāna*), and form (*rūpa*) (see 1984; 69). The person has the ability to know and understand form (*rūpa*) in its appearance but that is not the ultimate form of objects that comes into contact with one's perception (*saññā*). Both perception and form can change dependent on a person's consciousness (*viññāna*) and knowledge which again is conditioned by his dispositions (*saṅkhāra*) and feelings (*vedanā*). In this way the function of human personality is dependent on various psychic stages which cannot have any cognizable certainty.

In the case of understanding an object Buddhism categorise it in two forms that is the objects known and objects of knowledge (1984; 70) that is cognisable by the humans. In general they are put into a formation of four elements (*bhūtas*) such as: earth, fire, water, and air (*Majjima Nikāya*, 10.12) which constitute the experiential objects of the world that is the basis of all forms which one can perceive as

objects. As far as the objects of the world are concerned, Buddhism do not accept an ultimate object as the basis of the form (*rūpa*), but recognize the human ability of the psychophysical personality to interact with the dependent form of an object. The Buddha rejected the materialists' view on the ultimate object as the basis of phenomenal world which changes its constitution based on the basic form, the four elements. Nāgārjuna gives an explanation to the Buddhist conception of the objects in this verse: «The elements (*bhūtas*) cannot be perceived with the eyes, so how could one perceive an object that are formed of them through the eyes. When you spoke about rūpa rejected the perception of rūpa» (*Lokatitastava*, verse, 5). We can see a similar instance in the contemporary world that the effort to find the ultimate object of the phenomenal world using scientific methods has not been successful, and therefore it accepted the uncertainty principle as the property of the world (see Varghese 2008, 68; Hawking 1988, 59).

To account this problem Buddha introduced the conception of dhātus or the elements that are perceivable by a psychophysical personality they are put into six elements (*cha-dhātu*): earth (*prathvidhātu*), water (*apo-dhātu*), fire (*tejo-dhātu*), air (*vāyu-dhātu*), space (*ākāśa-dhātu*), consciousness (*viññāṇa-dhātu*) (see *Majjima Nikāya*, 112, 7). But these elements are the constituent part of the object known and objects of knowledge of the psychophysical personality which interact with the phenomenal world of objects. In this way Buddhism rejected the conception of an eternal self or an ultimate object as the foundation of the phenomenal world.

As far as the conception of the self is concerned it is understandable that the human personality with the influence of the dispositional tendencies and feelings works together with ignorance creates the idea of an ātman and the object, or the ātman and an object. The conception of ignorance can be understood as the lack of knowledge (*viññāṇa*) a property of the human personality. Because of the presence of ignorance and extreme dispositional tendencies the unenlightened person develops cravings for pleasurable objects and ideas. The mind configures these things into real entities developing strong attachment. But the real nature of the cognised phenomena is dependent on causes and conditions, just as a lamp

depends on various causes and situations. The dependent nature of things can be explained that the lamp as an independent entity cannot be understood without its constituent parts such as the wick, oil, fire, plate that hold it etc. «It is not in oil or in wick, or anything in itself, the lamp exists. The phenomena are like the lamp. They are nothing in themselves. All things are unreal; they are deceptions, Nibbāna (*Nirvāṇa*) is the only truth» (T.R.V. Murti, p.50. quoted from *Majjima Nikaya* III).

At the same time any of those individual things never have property of a lamp. When these individual things (like wick, oil, etc.) are properly put together, in a situation with sufficient oxygen, the lamp burns; therefore the existence of a lamp is dependent on its constituent elements and several other conditions. The phenomenal world of experience is similar to the example of the lamp, dependent and conditioned. In our understanding of the phenomenal world of experience, we configure the dependently arisen things like the lamp which would cease to exist at any moment when the dependent conditions are moved away. But human nature is such that we use the resultant produced effect of lamp as the basic constituent of our understanding of the world. Most of our understandings and judgments are based on such entities like lamp. We cannot state that the situation such as lamp is the basis of all the phenomena, but similar situation exists almost certainly in each and every phenomenal happening in the world.

The Problem of thesis and antithesis: Declining Value of Man

The problem with the theoretical philosophy is that it is conditioned by the internal cravings of man that are essentially required to be substantiated with the views originated out either of an eternal subjectivity or of an objectivity. In the case of Brāhmanical thought the worldly life is a search for an eternal life of the individual soul that ultimately merges with the Brahman. Therefore they consider the life in the world very differently that of a preparatory phase, and the sufferings are an opportunity to prepare the soul of a person, more perfectly, to realize its true nature, for they consider the

teachings of the three Vedas and the teachings of their ancestors are unassailable truths which no one could transgress or dispute. These aspects as in the case of Vāseṭṭhā and Brarātdvāja became a cause for their confusion. These confusions can be serious causes for worry and sufferings. In that case it is prudent to verify the validity of Vedic teachings for its validity. By questioning the validity of such thoughts Buddha imparted courage into the mind of those Brāhmin thinkers such that they could also find way to remove their worries. The problem of accepting a theoretical view that strive for an ultimate subjectivity according to Buddha leave severe confusion into the mind of the people and he questions their ignorant disregard towards worldly life as an instance of the causes of suffering. Without actually going into the fundamental details of such worries some followers of the materialistic schools of philosophy consider the life in this world is a constant quest for making greater advances in material prosperity and search for greater wealth for acquiring greater happiness. Here the materialist as an opposing view to the questions generated about the existence of soul, Brahman etc., conceptualise that this worldly life is an end in itself. This quest we can see in the world today more profoundly than any other time that all most all of the human thoughts are diverted to acquiring happiness from material wealth but this quest for material wealth brings serious moral danger to the practitioners and they strive under severe instances of sufferings.

The dependence and commitment on philosophical and ethical views basically demanded by various schools of philosophy in the modern and contemporary world in a way hampered the progress of human life. We see human life is losing its meaning especially in ethical values. Man become a tool in the hand of rival philosophers' thoughts or worldly convictions. As we have discussed, these theoretical based thoughts demand one to accept knowledge sources that support those theoretical views while reject those are not agreeable. These aspects are evident in the cold war period with the progress of capitalism in one part of the world and communism in the other part of the then bipolar world, where human life were determined hugely by conditioned views of the philosophical viewpoints that supported those systems. With the end of such bi-

polarity, the world today moves to a uni-polar situation. For instance in the contemporary times we are madly following to amass as much wealth as possible to capitalize power and control; in fact the focus of the world's attention whether it is individual or collective, is activated for achieving that. In Buddhist context these are instances that can cause sufferings

In later Buddhist philosophy of Nāgārjuna, the views expressed in the Buddha's teachings have been introduced with philosophically accepted methods, in that sense, the non-self (*nairātmya*) view is interpreted as the essencelessness of the phenomenal world (*dhramanairātmya*) and the essenlessness of the human self (*pudgalanairātmya*) which is the again deduced as the exact conception of voidness (*śūnyatā*) (see Varghese 2008; 215). This philosophical idea of voidness helps us to understand the implicit essencelessness of each and every phenomenon that is apparent for human perception and understanding. The critics views on the views of Buddha relating to interpreting the phenomenal experience and his famous reluctance to answer questions directly into a state of limbo where it had earned severe criticism from the opponents. The later Buddhist view on the phenomenal experience and the consequent theoretical formulations can be explained as an extension of the Agni Vacchagotta sutta (see *Majjima Nikaya-sutta-72*, verse-14), where the Buddha explains the problems of theories such that theories can drag one's life into severe confusions and self destruction. Removing such a confusing state of indeterminism Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna has shown great courage to explain the phenomenal world using the analytical tool of voidness (*śūnyatā*).

Nāgārjuna's Disputations on the Validity of Reason

One of the profound thinkers in the Indian philosophical traditions, belonging to the Madhayamika Buddhist tradition is Nāgārjuna who clearly expounded the Buddhist teaching in the philosophical methodology, or a universally applicable method. In one of his well acclaimed works he explains the conception of self as the reflection of the five aggregates and cautioned his readers that one needs have

courage to understand that human personality is devoid of any essence.⁵ In fact Nāgārjuna had taken the idea directly from Buddha's teaching on this issue where he agreed with the Buddha that the idea of soul as a formation of the five aggregates (*skandhā*) with is the basis of human personality. In a discussion which progressed from various conceptions on the insubstantiality of the self and the reason that support such a self he questions the ability of human reasoning to adduce truth about the phenomenal world because the reasoning process is not able to answer even simple question like the relationship of the seed and a plant. With certain valid arguments, he criticises the notion that a plant originates from the seed.⁶

We may explore logically, one of the simplest forms of origination theory which holds the view that the procedure of the origination is like that of a sprout from the seed. Here Nāgārjuna argues that the cause of the sprout's origination is not from the destroyed causes, the seed from which it comes forth; it is also not prudent to conclude that the seed is not the cause of the sprout. This dichotomy of identifying the reason as seed or no seed is evident in almost all theories on origination and destruction. If the cause is not destroyed then the consequent effect is not from that cause; if the cause is not destroyed then the consequent effect is like a dream. Therefore, Nāgārjuna compared it to a dream or a magical illusion (see *Lokāitastava*, verse 17, 18). If we are to conclude that the phenomenal world is originated from an illusion (*parikalpita*), it is well known that what is un-originated and non-existent cannot be destroyed (see *Lokāitastava*, verse 19). We have to arrive at a conclusion that it is not possible to create anything from permanence or from impermanence. The idea of creation and destruction could be

⁵ In your opinion everything is liberated from the *skandhās* and the conception of the permanent being (soul) is not true. For the benefit of the living being, you great sage (*Mahāmuni*) succumbed to great sufferings. You intelligently introduced the concept of five aggregates (*skandhās*) to enlighten the one who have competent intelligence that the soul and even (*skandhas*) resemble to an illusion, a mirage, a celestial city or a dream, see *Lokathitastava* verse-2, 3.

⁶ How a thing is born? Either from existent thing or non-existent thing, or both existent and non-existent thing, a thing is originated. Similarly a thing is not born from itself or from other things nor both from itself and from other things, see *Lokāitastava* verse -13.

compared to something that is happening from a dream (*svapnavat*□
samsṛtiḥ) (see *Lokāṭīastava*, verse 20). The difficulties in understanding the phenomenal world with the help of the information and the common sense logic applied to understand it conclusively direct us to severe epistemological and logical confusions. In one case, the logical system helps us to view the apparent world; on the other hand, when we try to discern it perfectly we find that the information and logic are not working in support of the other as in the case of all the examples explained here. It is not clear whether the seed is the reason for the sprout; at the same time, we cannot conclude that the destroyed seed is the cause of the sprout. If it is to conclude that the destroyed causes are the reason for sprout then the notion of cause and effect has no meaning. In the case of word and meaning the same problem arises; we cannot say that the significant and the signified has no relation; on the other hand, if that relation is mutual as the way it is expected then the mouth should burn when we utter the word fire. When we try to discern the real nature of the phenomenal world in conclusive terms, we need to have an analytical tool like *śūnyatā* as it reveals the dependent nature of all entities that is apparent in the existent world.

In another argument in the text *Vigrahavyāvartini*, he disputes the argument that sound has intrinsic nature, and then according to him the sound should stop another sound being produced: the uttered word 'don't make a sound' cannot have the inherent power to stop another sound being produced (see *Vigrahavyāvartini* of Nagarjuna verse 2, 1978; 97). If make an utterance like 'don't make a sound' doesn't stop that particular sound he wanted to stop doesn't stop, but it may continuously and repeatedly produced again and again, because the utterance 'don't make a sound' carry any inherent quality to stop another sound with some kind of force.

Śūnyatā the Analytical tool

This opposition to the nature of phenomenal experience doesn't

mean that Nāgārjuna was in support of the opposing view of nihilism or total negation. On the other hand, here, a new way of looking at the phenomenal realities is being introduced. By declining the intrinsic nature of fire to burn the mouth it has been uttered, Nāgārjuna won't reject the idea that the word 'fire' doesn't signify the flaming aspect of fire to burn things, or the word 'don't make a sound' doesn't have the power to stop another word from being produced. It also doesn't mean that the seed is not the cause of plant or seedling. The word fire always signifies the fire and its burning properties. When an object is burning, one needs to use fire as the word to signify it. It is not possible to specify that by saying any other expression. Similarly, the word 'don't make a sound' needs to be used if one wants another person to stop producing a sound.

But our normal conception of the world is conditioned by views such that each and every phenomenal happening in the world has a conceivable and explainable intrinsic nature which is real and certain. Why we view the world in such and such a way is not that the phenomenal happenings are different but our internal urges instigate us to view it as real. Nāgārjuna explains this aspect from the example of the appearance of mirage to a desert traveller. The mirage is real to a person who stands in the middle of a desert because he craves for water and a place to rest. But if he is not in a desert or not in want of water and a place to rest, he may not see an oasis in a mirage. Nāgārjuna says our interactions with the phenomenal world are conditioned by our cravings and therefore we fail to look into the conditioned nature of those phenomenal happenings. Once this craving and thirst of the desert traveller is removed from his mind, he would be able to see the real nature of the phenomenal happenings.⁷

In the case of the seed it is quite natural to think that seed is the cause of tree but it is not possible to include the realities of existence of the seed and the tree at the same time; similarly it is not possible to say that the destroyed causes are the real reason for the tree; it is also not possible to conclude that the seed disappears and the tree

⁷ The fear of getting into the problem of apprehension of substance is removed as profound as the no-water-mirage. This wonderful news has been told you with the roaring of the lion with the doctrine of *nairatmya*, see *Acyntyastava* verse 54.

occurs, because every disappearance of seed doesn't give way for a tree to occur.⁸ If we individually try to conclude on the existence of seed and tree we may have to accept that they are similar to a magical illusion. The transition from seed to tree is a conditioned phenomena and that conditioned nature can be understood only by understanding the real nature of the phenomenal happenings. Nāgārjuna again says that the conception of *śūnyatā* is the right way to understand the nature of the phenomenal world as it leads us to clear from all our conceptual formulations. In Nāgārjuna own words: «The direction given by *śūnyatā* is immortal (*amṛta*) as it removes all illusory imaginations. One the other hand, if one to get hold of the concept of *śūnyatā* would sink by this concept. (One would destroy himself if he views the world as voidness, *śūnyatā*)» (*Lokatitastava* verse 23). The idea of *śūnyatā* can show us why we view the phenomenal world as the way it appears. What makes a person to see an oasis in the mirage or why a sound 'stop' can and cannot stop another sound being produced; or why the word 'fire' won't burn the mouth but can signify fire. The proper conception of *śūnyatā* could answers these aspects about the phenomenal world clearly to us. Nāgārjuna clarifies his views are based on the original Buddhist conception on dependent origination and *śūnyatā* are the same. He acknowledges the Buddha's concern on this issue: «In your opinion dependent origination is voidness (*śūnyatā*). You said unequivocally like a lion's roar that what is existent cannot be independent» (*Lokatitastava* verse 22).

Remaking of Man and the Current Difficulties

We live in a world where such phenomenal happenings are understood with the method of equating it as the reality or at least of perceiving it as with certain level of truth value. On the other hand we don't give enough space for understanding our limitations as be-

⁸ The birth of a sprout is not from a destroyed seed or from a non-destroyed seed (the confusion persists). You said (as a solution to this problem) that everything is originated from a manifested magical illusion, see *Lokatitastava* verse 18.

ing a human being. With the advent of science, it has become almost clear that we could use systematic analytical method, its method of reasoning and the mathematical calculations as a tool to arrive at the truth of all our phenomenal experience or even the human self. The mathematical method is based on evaluating the phenomenal happenings. If the phenomenal happenings are uncertain, unpredictable and dependent on insubstantial factors, then how can the calculations made out of them can be certain? It can have a functional value as the way we assess the origin of tree from the seed but not in absolute terms. Would each of the seed produce a tree? In the modern world most of the scientists and analytical thinkers go into jittery when the scientific calculations fail them (see Varghese 2008; 82). In our quest for understanding the perfect truth about everything we fail to look at the obvious that are almost certain for us to perceive and understand. The Buddha understood the real weakness of human beings' quest for knowledge and if the perfect knowledge is not available for perception then it would hold on to the available knowledge and try to manifest it as the truth leading to severe instances of sufferings. The confusions of a nuclear scientist of today and that of the Brarātvāja and Vāseṭṭa are same they are not able to account for the apparent phenomenal world with the Vedic knowledge in the case of Brahmins and the mathematical knowledge in the case of scientists. And the Buddhist answers to both are same that you need to understand by questioning the validity of those premises from which such conclusions are made. Instead, we are questioning the validity of theories made out of such inconclusive premises.

The message from the Buddha's teachings and the philosophical exposition of the same by Nāgārjuna is that we need to change our attitude to the phenomenal experience. It is necessary that we need to understand what a human being is and what position he can claim in this world? Is the man, the knower of all and controller of all? Or more specifically, whether he is equipped to construct certain viewpoints and theories based on his phenomenal experience. We can see today that the human life in this world is facing innumerable problems from which no one can suggest any real solutions. We face threatening environmental problems, just because we adopted

method of living that is unsuitable for the world to survive. We use the earth's resources in an alarming proportion that many are getting extinct. We use political methods that keep millions of people under domination and oppression. We are servicing an economic system that is no longer people centred, but it is system centred that we work hard to run a system that no longer take care of our lives (see Varghese 2007b). The theories and counter theories that are formulated out of sound scientific and logical reasoning substantiated with mathematical models are simply failing us repeatedly in the modern times. The advice of Buddha to Mālunkyāputta is true with all these magnanimity of views and theories the suffering exists.

Why we need a redefinition for the concept of man? Why it is necessary at this point of time? The answers to these questions are in fact the main discussion of the Buddhist philosophy. It teaches us to look in to the factors involved in the process of the making of a tree from the seed that it is not proper to jump into the conclusion that the theories formulated based on the seed and the tree are valid only if this relationship is valid. In the face of such multitudes of theories that is similar to the difference between two cola companies which sell same product with different labels. The theories today are in spirit like the gas in the cola bottle trying to burst out but when one tastes each of it he feels the same dry taste, so he experiences a difference only on the labels not on the content. The agenda for 'remaking of man' is to release his dependence to innumerable number of theories that are determining his day to day activities. In that effort philosophers should show courage to explain the nature of man and how he can remake his existence in this world that is suitable and sustainable, not just focussed on to formulate theories based on minor differences. The problem with the multitude of theories is that it limits the expanse of human thinking and his ability to achieve freedom (*nirvāṇa*) from the worldly life and the instances of sufferings. The Buddha, when he introduced the idea of non-self (*nairātmya*) he wanted to show the world that what we conceive as self and our phenomenal experiences are insubstantial for formulating theories. Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna with the introduction to śūnyatā introduced a unique method to analyse the phenomenal realities and their substantiality with this analytical

tool. The concept of man needs to be redefined in the contemporary world. Human life is in a way conditioned by such views which are products of speculative thinking and the metaphysical conclusions. The concept of man is hugely reduced to act as mere activists of certain philosophical or religious doctrines. The problem that worries a Buddhist scholar is about the reduction of human being to the most degraded level that from the day of birth to death one's life is a torture with innumerable instances of sufferings. The philosophical systems that are meant to support him with bearable solutions are further complicating him with ever increasing number of theories. But the conception of *śūnyatā* properly helps the men to understand the phenomenal world clearly by revealing the insubstantial and conditioned nature of phenomenal world and help him to remake himself to live a life with its fullest meaning.

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RESUMEN

Las ideas budistas del no-yo y de la nihilidad han ocasionado muchas críticas a la filosofía budista. A pesar de ellas, tanto la filosofía como la religión budista han sobrevivido muchos siglos por mostrar un camino prudente para que los humanos se enfrenten al mundo fenoménico de la existencia. Intento mostrar las concepciones de nihilidad y de no-yo como partes de una estructura conceptual con vistas a una 'reforma del hombre'. Los hombres enfrentan innumerables confusiones que los conducen a sufrimientos en su mundo vital, pero antes que temerlas o evitarlas, deben estar atentos a ellas. Normalmente las personas están atrapadas en posiciones teóricas o creencias que las determinan. Aquí, mediante una atenta mirada a la naturaleza del mundo de los fenómenos, uno puede percatarse de que carece de un fundamento real y que depende antes bien de condiciones y causas banales. Esta vigilia puede redimirlo a uno de las formulaciones teóricas y de las ideologías. Quiero introducir estas dos concepciones como herramientas de análisis que se nos ofrecen en los discursos de Buda y más tarde en los trabajos del filósofo budista Nāgārjuna, para una 'reforma del hombre' que permitiría afrontar exitosamente la vida mundana.

Palabras claves: no-yo; nihilidad; reforma del hombre; Budismo.

ABSTRACT

The Buddhist idea of non-self (*nairātmya*) and voidness (*śūnyatā*) are two terms that have influenced a lot of critiques on Buddhist philosophy for centuries. Despite those criticisms, the Buddhist philosophy and religion survived for several centuries, because it has shown a prudent way for human beings to deal with the phenomenal world of existence. Here I attempt to reveal the conception of *śūnyatā* and *nairātmya* as a conceptual framework for 'remaking of man' because a human being confront innumerable instances of confusions leading to sufferings in his life world and he must be vigilant against such instances rather than fearing or avoiding them. Normally human mind is of the habit that it falls into the trap of

various conceptual formulations and theories and consequently a person would force to become a creation of such theoretical positions or beliefs. But here by carefully looking at the nature of the world of phenomena that is a part of experience with the life in the world; one can understand that the phenomenal world is essenceless or not supported by any real and certain foundations but are dependent on several unsubstantiated conditions and causes. This awareness and vigil can redeem one from the clutches of theoretical formulations and ideologies. In this regard, I wish to introduce these two conceptions as tools of analysis that is offered in the Buddha's discourses and later in the philosophical works of Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna for 'remaking of man' to confront worldly life successfully.

Keywords: non-self; voidness; remaking of man; Buddhism.

