

THE SRI LANKAN EXPERIENCE IN PHILOSOPHY: A PERSONAL ANECDOTE

R. D. GUNARATNE

Life and activity of living beings are conditioned by the environment. Human beings are no exception. In addition to the physical environment, human beings are also born into a culture. Physically, Sri Lanka is a pearl in the ocean at the tip of the Indian sub-continent. The dominant culture in Sri Lanka through millennia has been Buddhist. However, in addition to this, in the immediate past we were a British colony. We have not yet outgrown that legacy. True, globalization is trickling in but globalization results only in the continuing domination of Western culture, its science and technology, in marriage with mega-capitalism.

Like any other activity, contemporary Sri Lankan philosophical activity would have the above factors as propellants and determinants. Having said this, let me at once restrict myself here to a discussion of the activity of some Sri Lankan academic or professional philosophers - or rather to the activity of some serious students of philosophy - during the last half a century or so. This account is mostly based on my personal experiences and assessments. In the limited time allotted for this presentation no comprehensive account is possible, and were it possible, I do not consider it to be of interest.

Let me add as a preamble that there is a dearth of talent in the field of philosophy in this country today. A good student of philosophy needs breadth, depth, insight and sharpness. Perhaps the dearth is seen in other parts of the world, but I am sure, not so pathetically. Indeed, if you consider the world situation, even in the last century, some of the best-brains took to philosophy. Take Cambridge for example; F. P. Ramsey took to Mathematical Logic and Philosophy, when he could have excelled in a field like Economics. The outstanding economist of the Keynesian Revolution in Economics fame, J. M. Keynes, wrote of Ramsey in the notice in *The Economic Journal* (March, 1930).

The death at the age of 26 of Frank Ramsey is a heavy loss—though his primary interests were in Philosophy and Mathematical Logic—to the pure theory of Economics... his precocious mind was intensely interested in economic problems. Economists living in Cambridge have been accustomed from his undergraduate days to try their theories on the keen edge of his critical and logical faculties. If he had followed the easier path of mere inclination, I am not sure that he would not have exchanged the tormenting exercises of foundations of thought and of psychology, where the mind tries to catch its own tail, for the delightful paths of our own most agreeable branch of the moral sciences, in which theory and fact, initiative imagination and practical judgment are blended in a manner comfortable to the human intellect (Ramsey, 1965).

Bertrand Russell records in his autobiography the following episode about Wittgenstein.

I knew Wittgenstein first at Cambridge before the war. He was an Austrian and his father was enormously rich. Wittgenstein had intended to become an engineer... .

At the end of the first term at Trinity (Cambridge) he came to me and said. “Do you think I am an absolute idiot? I said “Why do you want to know? He replied: “If I am, I shall become an aeronaut (engineer), but if I am not, I shall become a philosopher.” I said to him, “my dear fellow, I do not know whether you are an absolute idiot or not, but if you will write me an essay... on any philosophical topic that interests you, I will read it and tell you.” He did so, and brought it to me... . As soon as I read the first sentence, I became persuaded that he was a man of genius, and assured him that he should on no account become an aeronaut (Russell, 1969).

Although we had in the last century Lenin, Radhakrishnan, Gandhi and Nehru, nobody wants philosopher kings any more. Power and money have conquered the world. There is no money, no jobs in philosophy. No longer can we aspire to attract the cream, particularly in countries like ours.

The University of Ceylon had a Philosophy Department and I think T. R. V. Murti, the author of *Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, was one of its first professors. However, since we are speaking about the Sri Lankan experience, let me begin with the first Sri Lankan who held the Chair of Philosophy at the University of Ceylon, which was by then shifted to Peradeniya, Prof. K. N. Jayatilleke. Prof. Jayatilleke was an outstanding scholar, teacher and disseminator of knowledge. A First Class graduate of the Ceylon University in Indo-Aryan languages, he did the moral sciences Tripos in Cambridge, and a Western Philosophy Honours degree in London. He joined the University of Ceylon as an assistant lecturer in 1951 and was appointed to the Chair of Philosophy there in 1963, which post he held until his untimely death in 1970.

His doctoral dissertation, submitted to the University of London, was published as the “*Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*” (Jayatilleke, 1963) and it was hailed as a masterpiece by any standards by many, including Prof. Richard Robinson, who said that it was almost a fine poem (De Silva, 1971). It dealt with the background to the epistemology of Buddhism and discussed the problems of authority, reason, analysis and meaning, logic and truth, means and limits of knowledge in Pali Canonical Buddhism.

Prof. Jayatilleke's book changed the whole approach to early Buddhism, as the following passage by George Chatalian, a harsh critic and a great admirer of this work, indicates:

Among Western students of Buddhism, there was unanimity that Early Indian Buddhism of the Pali Canon was a religion. Among the most prominent of the Western students who had come to this conclusion were the following: Bertrand Russell, Alfred North Whitehead, C. D. Broad, H.H. Price, W.T. Stace, George Santayana, John Dewey, Arnold Toynbee, Ninian Smart, E. A. Burt and others - philosophers, theologians and scientists of all kinds, too numerous to mention. But... after it had happened, another curious development took place; for in 1963, K. N. Jayatilleke, who is unquestionably the foremost of the twentieth century students of Pali Buddhism, both a professional philosopher and a massively equipped student of Pali and Sanskrit forms of Early Indian Buddhism – published his *Early Buddhist*

Theory of Knowledge, and Buddhist studies took a new turn; for he clearly interpreted the Early Indian Buddhism of the Pali Canon as a system of Philosophy.... (Chatalian,1983).

The rational empiricism of British Philosophy somehow seemed to correspond to the rational empiricist strand in Early Buddhism. But consider an alternative; supposing we had been a French colony and not a British one and our academics went to Sorbonne and not to Cambridge for their training. In such a set up wouldn't it have been more likely that most of our philosophers would have built on the existentialist strand in early Buddhism? In any case, Professor Jayatilleke was not only interested in the empiricist tract in early Buddhism (which again we see emphasized by Prof. Ediriweera Sarachchandra in his work done under the spell of Positivist A. J. Ayer in London) but he coupled it with scientific thinking. He repeatedly mentioned the scientific nature and approach of Buddhism.

He writes: "in fact Early Buddhism can be stated in the form of a scientific theory which each individual who wishes to test it out is to verify for himself" (Malalasekera and Jayatilleke,1958).

Professor Jayatilleke's writing, particularly in his magnum opus *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, was scientific, rational, highly structured. This book has a smooth, rhythmic, unforced flow like the movement of an elephant and no wonder that Robinson called it "almost a fine poem." However, it was also a torrent, and like the waters of a beautiful but powerful waterfall, it left no stone unturned in its path. Hardly any contemporary scholar of Indian and Buddhist Philosophy stood uncorrected by Prof. Jayatilleke. Whether it was Radhakrishnan or Murti, Mrs. Rhys Davids or Barriedale Keith, or dozens of others, the well substantiated and incisive analyses of Jayatilleke touched them all. Here are a few examples.

Radhakrishnan concluded from examining this Sutta (Tevijja Sutta) that, the Buddha does not like the idea of basing the reality of Brahman on Vedic authority... This conclusion appears to be strictly unwarranted by the context ... (183).

Much later in the work,

...nor (do) the views of Mrs. Rhys Davids and Barua that they are laws of thought, bear critical examination ...(334).

And again, on Mrs. Rhys Davids,

Her whole theory has to be dismissed on methodological grounds. She starts with certain *a priori* assumptions as to what Original Buddhism ought to have taught;... such speculations are of little value for scholarship...(456-7).

Sir Karl Popper said that criticism is what leads to growth of knowledge in science. This is even more so in philosophy. You will soon find that David Kalupahana, the *godaya* who prepared the index of *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, was very critical of Jayatilleke's notion of two valued truth in Buddhism, and his transcendentalism. George Chatalian, from whom I quoted at length, and who rates Jayatilleke as unquestionably the foremost scholar of Pali Buddhism in the twentieth century, wrote a little later in the same paper:

I have argued... that in any sense of “logic” recognized among contemporary logicians, or for that matter all logicians from Aristotle to Quine, there is no such thing as a logic in the Pali Canon... Jayatilleke has misinterpreted the data that he has extracted from the Canon: Passages principally about the *catuṣkoṭi*..., The world is finite; the world is infinite; the world is both finite and infinite; the world is neither finite nor infinite... he repeatedly refers (to) as “the Buddhist logic”, “the fourfold Buddhist logic” and “the Buddhist logic of four alternatives...(but) there is no logic in the Pali Canon...

And I myself criticize some of Professor Jayatilleke's formulations of the *catuṣkoṭi* arguments and his formulation of the *Kathāwatthu* argument very severely in my papers on these topics, although he was undoubtedly one of my mentors. Professor Jayatilleke produced other work, which were practically relevant to the society of the times. His *Buddhism and the Race Question*, written in collaboration with Prof. G. P. Malalasekara for the UNESCO, underlines the relevance of the Buddhist approach to the contemporary world.

In concluding that monograph the authors say:

In the foregoing pages we have tried to show that Buddhism stands for the oneness of human species, the equality of man,

and the spiritual unity of mankind. The differences among the so called races...are negligible. The differences in cultural attainments are due to historical circumstances... (69).

Jayatilleke's *The Principles of International Law in Buddhist Doctrine* again says:

One of the most important Buddhist concepts relevant to international law and international relations is that of the world-ruler or world-statesman, (*rājācakkavatti*)...and just as much as the Buddha secures primarily the spiritual welfare of mankind, the world-ruler was to work primarily for the material welfare of mankind (54-5).

Prof. Jayatilleke was very hardworking. For example, he used to give lectures at Peradeniya in the morning, go for the recording of a radio talk in Colombo in the afternoon, and ask me and Kasy (now expatriate Dr. S. V. Kasynathan, living in Australia) to come to his place after dinner to jointly mark examination scripts. This exercise was probably a part of our training(!); and it went on till the early hours of the next morning, with Mrs. Pat Jayatilleke having to prepare tea or coffee a number of times. Some of his innumerable popular papers, a considerable number of them radio talks, have been posthumously edited by Professor Ninian Smart under the title the *Message of the Buddha*.

I cannot leave Prof. Jayatilleke without mentioning what I consider to be one of his other contributions ,viz., awakening an interest in ESP and Rebirth research. Jayatilleke had extended Buddhist empiricism to include *abhiññā* in his “Theory of Knowledge.” I do not know whether *abhiññā* has any relationship to what is called ESP today, but he promoted interest and actively participated in research in these areas, particularly rebirth. I remember Professor Jayatilleke getting down an Indian Professor, I believe his name was Bannerjee, and making me translate into Sinhala a talk on rebirth research given by him to a large audience assembled at the Hilda Obeysekara Hall one night. When I was reading for my Masters degree at the University of California, at Los Angeles, I happened to buy an American book on rebirth at a second hand book shop. The book was titled *The Search for the Girl with the Blue Eyes*, by Jess Stearn,(1968) and when I turned to its fifth page, what

do I read? The writer says, “Here I was on Virginia Beach, finishing up a book on the amazing Edgar Cayce,... Only the week before I had watched a dark, handsome Professor of Philosophy from the University of Ceylon skillfully regress a middle aged subject, successively, to young adulthood, childhood, the womb, and before. Marveling, I watched as the woman scratched her name in response to his command—the handwriting reflecting the determined flourish of youth and the undisciplined scrawl of childhood and then, further regressed in time, to a presumed previous life, revealing not only a different script, but lo and behold, an entirely different name.” Professor K. N. Jayatilleke had seen nothing unusual in the performance. He had regressed, many people and felt they were reliving some phase of a previous life.

The interests of Prof. Padmasiri De Silva, who succeeded Prof. Jayatilleke to the Chair of Philosophy at Peradeniya in 1981, were in Buddhist Psychology. His doctoral dissertation (De Silva, 1978) which was a comparative study of Buddhist and Freudian psychology was submitted to the University of Hawaii and later published. Commissioned by the Macmillan Company, London, he wrote the *Introduction to Buddhist Psychology* (1979). He researched and wrote mostly in this area and his work had relevance to therapy. Thus, his inaugural lecture given on his appointment to the Chair in 1981 was on “Emotions and Therapy, Three paradigmatic zones”. Let me quote an interesting paragraph from that lecture:

The experience of vacuity, boredom and loneliness has been graphically presented in contemporary literature. Prototypes of this experience have been common in clinical situations. Emptiness in the negative sense has two manifestations; there is emptiness with a simple ‘e’ and Emptiness with a capital ‘E’. In one form a person can be bored with a talk, a book, a play etc... This is a superficial kind of boredom. One can also be bored not with any specific object, but with oneself... it is the sort of feeling a person has when he loses any sense of meaning in life (35).

Prof. De Silva was a Fellow of the Institute of Fundamental Studies, where he carried out surveys on suicide among other things. He also inaugurated the Sri Lanka Philosophical Association which had very well attended and a fruitful annual sessions. He later joined the University of Singapore and now he lives in Australia.

Meanwhile, Departments of Philosophy and Chairs were established in the other Universities in Sri Lanka. An alumni of Peradeniya, Dr. Krishnarajah holds the Chair at Jaffna. Prof. Weerasinghe held and Prof. Edirisinghe holds now the Kelaniya Chair.

Due to the groundwork done by Prof. De Silva, I was able to begin a special degree course in Psychology run by the Philosophy Department, within an year of my succeeding Prof. De Silva as its head in 1989. I succeeded him to the Chair of Philosophy in 1998. My own specializations were in Mathematical Logic which I studied for my Masters at UCLA and Philosophy of Science, in which I did my doctoral dissertation at Cambridge in 1974. My thesis, which was on the then raging Relativism of Kuhn and Feyerabend, examines Feyerabend's position closely. It was published by the Ministry of Higher Education in Colombo in 1980 under the title *Science Understanding and Truth*. We revised the curricula in Logic and Scientific Method at the school level and a number of courses in Philosophy of Science, History of Science and Science and Society have been initiated at the undergraduate and post-graduate levels both in the Arts and Science Faculties at Peradeniya.

However, my own recent research and publications have increasingly moved towards the logic and epistemology, both of early Buddhism and Mahayana. In a sense that research springs from Prof. Jayatilleke's work. I found the attempted solutions of the problem of *catuskoti* alternatives by Prof. Jayatilleke and others unsatisfactory, leading me to my paper "Logical form of *catuskoti*: A new solution" published in the Hawaii University journal *Philosophy East and West*, in April 1980. I tried to extend my formulations to cover Nagarjuna's *catuskoti* in an article 'Understanding Nagarjuna's *catuskoti*' in the same journal in its 1986 July issue. More recently, with my teaching of a postgraduate course in Buddhist Logic, I was made to look at the structures of the arguments in the *Kathāwatthu* more closely. Today, it is increasingly recognized that the *Kathāwatthu* anticipates some inference rules in the modern propositional calculus. It is difficult to present anything of these logical and symbolical formulations or discussions in a brief lecture like the present one, partly due to their technical nature but I give below the concluding paragraph of my paper *Kathāwatthu: The Logic and its Form* (2003):

All the writers that I have referred to in this paper, Aung (and Mrs. Rhys Davids), Schayer, Bochenski, Jayatilleke, Matilal and

Ganeri agree that elements of logic are employed in the *Kathāwatthu* argumentation, although they differ in their opinions as to the form of the arguments and the levels of logical principles involved. I have drawn from some of them, but I have also argued that none of their formulations give a satisfactory account of the logical form of the argument. I have presented in this paper a new formulation of the *Kathāwatthu* argument using a term logical base together with an overarching propositional formulation and I have argued that argument of each discussion is seen to be valid-valid from the position of the questioner in each discussion - on the basis of my symbolization and interpretations.

Before I proceed I must now mention some scholars whose work has been highly valued and would certainly form part of the Sri Lankan experience in Philosophy. They are Professors Gunapala Dharmasiri, Ediriweera Sarachchandra, David Kalupahana and Ven. Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda.

Prof. Dharmasiri, again, is a member of the Philosophy Department, at Peradeniya. His doctoral dissertation, *Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God*, which has gone into many editions in many countries has been acclaimed as a pioneering work by authorities like Ninian Smart and Trevor Ling. He has also published another book, *Buddhist Ethics*, which is equally in demand, internationally. Recently he has been putting out massive volumes of Sinhala translations of Mahayana Sutras, at an unbelievable pace. My own work has little relationship to his salutary contribution, so I leave it here.

The other three, Professors Sarachchandra and Kalupahana and Ven. Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda are of continuing interest to my studies. Prof. Sarachchandra did a Masters in Western Philosophy in London, listening to Professors like A. J. Ayer and Karl Popper, and a paper based on his M. A. thesis has been published in the *Indian Journal of Philosophy* (1979). His doctoral dissertation has been published as *Buddhist Psychology of Perception* (1958). In the process of this exposition his examination of concepts like *papañca* and *viññāna* are of interest. I am happy to have put out a booklet *Sarachchandra: Philosopher and the Artist* introducing some of this work and commenting on their possible impact on his creative work, plays and novels.

Ven. Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought* is an outstanding monograph studying the concept of *papañca* and his *Magic of the Mind*, which is an exposition of the Kālakārama Sutta is another deeply penetrative study. I have been dependent on these studies in my recent work. Professor Kalupahana has probably over ten books to his credit. I consider his *Nāgārjuna* an outstanding contribution to the study of Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamaka.

As I said, my recent work has been in Buddhist Logic and the allied problems of language and epistemology. I presented a paper entitled, "Predication, Negation and Cognition: A Comparative Study" to the sixth East and West Philosophers' a Conference in Hawaii in 1989. The comparison was twofold, one between Indian systems, the other between some Indian systems and quantum mechanics. The central area of concern was the limitations of language in the expression of reality and the attempts to overcome this limitation by the use of negation. The rough idea is seen when you try to indicate what is *anirvacanīya* by negation, *neti, neti* or the nature of *nirvāna* by *ajara, amara* etc. Prof. Hejime Nakamura devotes a chapter to discuss Indian predilection for negation (1964). Again, my focus was on Buddhism, going from *catuṣkoṭi*, Kaccāyanagotta Sutta, Nāgārjuna down to Dinnāga. I was asked to revise that paper for publication then, but I hesitated. I have now revised it, limiting it to the Indian case, and taking out quantum mechanics. I have been heavily dependent on Ven. Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's *Concept and Reality* and Prof. Kalupahana's *Nāgārjuna* in writing the conference paper as well as its recent revision.

Some of us meet again. Prof. Kalupahana has taken Prof. Jayatilleke to task for misinterpreting the Kālakārama Suta *catuṣkoṭi*. Jayatilleke considers the Buddha's exposition of this *catuṣkoṭi*, i.e., "supposing I know what has been seen, heard, said. Then it would be false for me to say I do not know etc", as indicating Buddha's acceptance of two valued truth as well as illustrating that when one *catuṣkoṭi* alternative is true the other three were taken to be false.

Kalupahana thinks that this *catuṣkoṭi* indicated that the Buddha used three truth values. I presented a short paper, at the ICAS held in Shanghai last year, criticizing Prof. Kalupahana's view that the Buddha used three truth values. I have now completed a comprehensive paper on this problem for publication. I have drawn from leading logicians for this paper, but the insight for my view really

springs from Ven. Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's analysis of the Kalākāraṃa Sutta. In addition to Prof. Kalupahana's position, I also take up Prof. Asanga Tilakaratne's observations on this problem. Prof. Tilakaratne, in the introduction to his Sinhala translation and commentary on the *Mūlamadhyamika Kārika* of Nāgārjuna, gives high rating of my 1980 *catuṣkoṭi* article, for which I am thankful. He then presents Prof. Kalupahana's view of three-valued truth used by the Buddha, and although he has some reservations about it, he thinks it could be correct when it comes to the statements about reality. In my paper I discuss the difficulties that I see in Prof. Tilakaratne's ideas. I also discuss what I consider to be misinterpretations by two Western writers of the Buddha's logical position.

This brings me to one of my current interests which I wish to mention. On this final problem I put two of our current players on one side and two others on the opposite side. To be more accurate, it is not that I have put them there, but they have placed themselves in such positions. We have, on the one side, Professor Jayatilleke and Ven. Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda and on the opposite side Professor Kalupahana and his former student, Professor Asanga Tilakaratne. The Problem: whether Buddhist *Nibbāna* is transcendental or not. Associated problem: whether any truth or reality in Buddhism is beyond linguistic expression or not. The first two philosophers seem to say yes in answer to these questions, the second two, no. I am an onlooker doing my own study of the game. I am led to this situation by my interest in Buddhist logic; particularly my current interest in Nāgārjuna and Dinnāga. I have been attracted by a lot of logical problems surrounding Nāgārjuna and the Mādhyamika. Is Nāgārjuna logically consistent? In what sense is Nāgārjuna rejecting logic? What relevance is there in the distinction between *prasajya pratiṣedha* and *pariyudāsa* negations? Are *prāsangika* and *svātantrika* interpretations of any relevance to Nāgārjuna? How does all this relate to Dinnāga and his concept of *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna*? I am sure these are not new questions, but one feels like looking at them again when one finds them engaging.

References

Chatalian, G. (1983). *Buddhism and the Nature of Philosophy*, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Vol.No.21, pp.167-222,p.181.

De Silva, M.W.P. (1971). Memorial Tribute to the late Professor K.N. Jayatilleke, *Philosophy East & West*, Vol.21, No.2, April.

De Silva, M.W. P. (1978) . *Buddhist and Freudian Psychology*, Colombo : Lake House.

De Silva, M.W. P. (1979). *An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology*. London; Macmillan.

Gunaratne, R. D. (2003). “Kathavaththu: The Logic and its Form” *Symposium on Buddhist Studies*, London : Thames Meditation Society.

Jayatileke, K.N. (1963). *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, London: Goerge Allen & Unwin.

Jayatileke, K.N. (1975). *Message of the Buddha* Edited by Smart, Ninian. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Malalasekera, G.P. and Jayatileke, K.N. (1958). *Buddhism and the Race Question*. Paris: UNESCO. pp.11-12.

Nakamura, H. (1964). *Ways of Thinking of Eastern People:India, China, Tibet, Japan* Honolulu: East-West Center Press.

Ramsey, F.P. (1965). *The foundation of Mathematics* Edited by R.B. Braithwaite, New Jersey: Little Adams & Co.

Russell, B. (1969). *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russel* - New York: Bantam Books, pp.132.

Sarachchandra, E.R. (1976). From Vasubandhu to Santaraksita: A critical examination of some Buddhist theories of the external world, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol 4, No. 1-2 pp.69-107.

Sarachchandra, E.R. (1958). *Buddhist Psychology of Perception* , Colombo: TheCeylon University Press Jess Stearn, 1968. NewYork: Doubleday.

Tilakaratne, A. (1993). *Nirvana and Ineffability*, Post Graduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist studies, Kelaniya .