Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences 2006/2007 ***29/30*** *(1&2): 13-41*

THE RELEVANCE OF PHILOSOPHY TO LIFE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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While we all join together on a day like this, can we say with any degree of confidence that there exists already or whether there can be a global philosophy? Socrates and Plato, Hegel and Kant are philosophers who are known around the globe. Can we, because of this, say that their philosophies have a worldwide relevance? What about Nagarjuna and Samkara and numerous other philosophers of the East? Do they have relevance in the West? In which sense then, if at all, can we really have a philosophy of universal relevance? Considering the increasing globalization on varied fronts and the prevalence of international media networks, these are not idle questions, but are highly demanding matters of obvious relevance. In this presentation, I wish to explore the possibility of conceptualizing global philosophies, shared values and inclusive identities in a shrinking world.

Perhaps, there could be a perennial philosophy in some sacred sense. However, in real life and practice, I believe, philosophy, like most other disciplines, is contextual. Philosophies, in my view, are characteristic ways of reacting to the problems of the world confronting and agitating the human mind. "Universal philosophy", whatever that might mean, cannot be contained in a common intellectual capsule in as much as philosophy can hardly be studied out of its social and cultural contexts.

Therefore, the focus of philosophical attention may not be on the consideration of concepts and categories, dialectics and dialogues in a cultural vacuum, and clearly not on trivial discussion of imaginary issues. Rather, the fulcrum of our pursuits and the centrality of our themes are such that they revolve round the practical problems and actual operations, the existential predicament of inexorable longings of people divided in numerous ways, and ubiquitous suffering, and the unending search for remedies. *The perennial problem of philosophy is its relevance to life and not its isolation from it*.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Conference to celebrate the `World Philosophy Day' organized by the NSF Research Committee on Social Sciences on 21st to 22nd November 2006 at the SLF, Colombo.

I am persuaded that eastern philosophies from the early beginnings have espoused this motion.

Recall how the different strands of Buddhism *Samkhya-Yoga,* and *Advaita Vedanta* have all dealt with the human predicament of ignorance and consequent suffering. Situated in a sea of suffering, we are told, human beings endeavor to swim to the shores of bliss. Caught in a cocoon of our own creation, conditioned and contained, we humans fortunately have a resource in the agency of mind to be free. The existential challenge can be met, we are exhorted by the Buddha and other sages of wisdom concerned with the existential predicament of humans. We are told that we can overcome congenital ignorance, break the simmering *samskaras* in the unconscious and act free to know the truth and conquer suffering. *We are not born free; but we can grow to be free.* The resource is the mind; the road map is the philosophy of life, which appeared to at least some of the thinkers as the deconstruction of the ego for personal growth, transformation of the selfish gene into altruism, ego-transcendence, and celestial love. In our tradition, yours and mine, such is the centrality of philosophy in life.

The Context

It is increasingly felt that our societies are becoming divided, fragmented and polarized with growing alienation between groups, and that regional, caste and linguistic identities are gaining salience at the cost of national identity. National identity concerns and other matters of alienation among our citizens are issues that pose not merely immense intellectual challenges but are matters of great policy concerns. These concerns are not local or confined to one country like India or Sri Lanka. Even in nation states like Britain, national identity is greatly strained under the pressure of the supra-national identity of being a part of the European Union, on the one hand, and the increasing social tensions precipitated by multi-culturalism, resulting from a large scale influx of immigrants, on the other.

It has been frequently suggested that several countries are going through a national identity crisis. The identity crisis at present is one where what should be normally super-ordinate identities are becoming less and less salient vis-à-vis subordinate identities. If this tendency is allowed to continue, there would not only be role confusion at various levels but also debilitating social dysfunction of significant proportion that would hinder and hamper economic growth and all round

development, especially in the developing world. It could even lead to war and great turmoil. I need not belabor this point in relation to Sri Lanka.

Identity and alienation are highly related concepts, and in an important sense they are two sides of the same coin. Talcott Parsons (1970), for instance, refers to alienation arising from an identity crisis. Rapid social changes and consequent value confusions cloud the perception of self and blur one's identity. The problem of alienation is multi-dimensional. Alienation may result from economic as well as political and socio-cultural factors. Sometimes psychological aspects become foundational for alienation to arise. Also, alienation often has ontological roots. Indeed, thinkers such as Hegel and Marx (1954), Heidegger and Sartre (1982), discuss the problem of alienation at some length.

Indian society as well as Sri Lanka represent a complex amalgam of tradition and modernity, an interesting mosaic of different religious, linguistic, caste, and regional groups. At the same time, the social features manifest a curious and confusing mix of feudalism, socialism and capitalism. The alienation experienced is (a) poverty driven as well as (b) psychological isolation resulting in loneliness, (c) axiological aberrations arising from the collapse of ethical norms, (d) identity crises and role confusion, (e) dehumanization and impersonation resulting from corporatization of business and globalization of economies, and (f) the manifest obsessive selfishness among the people with the reigns of power.

There is an urgent need to analyze and understand the cultural, historical and ontological roots of identity and alienation on the one hand and to explore on the other, the psycho-social, economic, cultural, and value related factors that are associated with identity formation and the experience of alienation and divisiveness. This is indeed an interdisciplinary task. There is a need to bring together leading scholars and intellectuals belonging to all the related disciplines to reflect on and brainstorm so as to underscore the underlying issues and suggest possible ways of addressing them, provide policy guidelines, and suggest programs of action at various levels. Theoretical models generate social theories that can be foundational for public policies, political discussion and administrative action. I am persuaded that philosophers have a powerful role to play because what are needed in the present context are philosophies of inclusiveness and not politics of divisiveness.

Problem Areas

Interplay Between Individual and Society:

Just as each individual is unique and recognizably different in physical appearance from others, so are they unique and different in numerous other ways. Thus, the differences between people are built in existential realities. They cannot be undermined or undone without interfering with human nature itself. At the same time, no person is a lone inhabitant on this planet. They live in communities, sharing and interacting. They manifest a variety of commonalities, foster a multitude of associations and behave as members of groups. Hence, each person has an inherent identity of his or her own and at the same time assumes a number of other identities in virtue of shared similarities and by her involvement in and association with others. Therefore each of us has multiple identities. Some of the identities are salient and are in focus at a given time while others are less prominent and more dormant. Thus the person is the seat of multiple identities and life is the play field of these identities. Success in the game is a function of how the individual is able to negotiate smoothly, switching identities and playing her roles. Identity conflicts cause role confusion and subject the person, in extreme cases, to paralysis and make her dysfunctional. Identity aberrations may lead to pathological states.

What is said of the individual also applies to the society, not merely as an instructive analog but also as a causative undercurrent. There is a significant amount of research in social psychology that suggests the bidirectional interplay between internal states and external relationships of individuals and how self-processes influence interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships (Vohs 2006).

The Self:

A person's self-concept has profound implications for her behavior and how she experiences the world and participates in it. It has equally far reaching implications for society, culture and all kinds of interpersonal relationships. It may be said that the sense of the self is at the center of each person in as much as the goals one seeks to pursue are dependent in many ways on (1) one's self perceptions (2) what she or he would like to be, and (3) what is within one's reach. The Self is a subject of extensive research not only in psychology but also across other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and cognitive science. There is an urgent need

for integrating the basic processes studied from different disciplinary perspectives to generate theoretical models for pursuing, for example, investigations in India in the context of national integration and for overcoming the effects of divisiveness in various forms.

Identity:

Identity is what makes one a discrete individual, a distinctive person. At the psychological level it is *personal identity*, one's self-image (Erikson 1959). At the social and political levels it is *social identity,* which consists in the categorization of individuals as belonging to particular groups-such as caste, gender, religion, region, employment, nationality and so on. Social identity is often taken as an element of pride and serves as a motivating force to unite members of a group and strengthen their cause and influence. Often identities degenerate into demagogy and may even result in communal clashes and social conflicts targeting the out-groups.

Identity is not the same as character, personality, attitudes or philosophy, even though all of them have a bearing on identification in a given context. Broadly there are two notions concerning identity. One is the notion associated with Erik H. Erikson (1959,1968) and developed in the clinical context, and the other is related to self-concept and elaborated in the social identity theory formulated by social psychologists like Henri Tajfel (1981). According to Erikson, individual identity development involves a synthesis of prior identifications in the process of socialization. Identity resulting from such a synthesis is more than the sum of prior identifications. Identity is seen here as emerging from personal development as well as the influence of the social group in which that development takes place. The identity of an individual consists of that "sense of self-*sameness* and *continuity* in time and space". The "search for identity" and "identity crisis", phrases made popular by the writings of Erikson, are said to apply to individuals as well as groups and even nations. It is suggested that individuals and groups seek identities; and problems in individual development and social cohesiveness, role, or value conflicts, for example, may trigger an identity crisis that calls for significant re-evaluation of one self and a search for a new identity. It follows from this approach that individuals' identities, whether personal or group, are relatively stable and that in a normal and healthy situation there is just one identity. When that identity is blurred or becomes dysfunctional because of conflicts or changed circumstances, a search for a new

identity begins and a new identity may eventually emerge.

There, are of course, many variations on this theme. The several attempts to define Indian identity from psychoanalytic and anthropological perspectives, for example, fall broadly into this category of seeking a stable and enduring identity, generalizable across the Indian population. Such an identity need not be completely conscious and may or may not be present concretely in social reality, and yet it provides a positive model to be imitated and emulated. The notion of one stable, unified identity is, however, problematic in the context of the inescapable plurality of human identity.

The second notion of identity is the one discussed by social identity theorists such as Henri Tajfel (1981). In this tradition, identity is not regarded as a fixed characteristic. Instead, it is socially situated and changes in different contexts (Blumer 1969). Some theorists have suggested that the concept of self is the product of a hierarchical organization of the multiplicity of identities in terms of their salience (Stryker 1979).

The Politics of Identity:

Manifest divides in a society tend to lead to identity politics. Identity politics go beyond self-identification based on religion, language or ethnicity. It is a concerted political effort to push the social identity forward. It often tends to provide a body of thought, which forms the base to unite people and forge them as a political force. Identity politics are precipitated by and thrive on felt and perceived divides. They may be built around race (e.g. Irish nationalism and Black nationalism), religion (e.g. Jewish nationalism, Muslim and Christian fundamentalism), gender (e.g. radical feminism and gay rights) and disability based (e.g. autism rights and other disability groups). Very often such identity based groups serve some useful social functions, but they can also have devastating disruptive effects.

Identity politics are practiced not only by minority groups but also by the majority. For example, Mike Marquisee writes of "the most powerful form of identity politics at work in Britain today, the identity politics of the white majority, inextricable from long-nourished assumptions of western power" (*Hindu*, October 1, 2006). In India we find on the one hand identity politics of the majority in the slogan of

Hindutva and the identity politics of a minority in the so-called Dalit nationalism (Illaiah, 2004). I need not describe to you the politics of identity in Sri Lanka.

National Identity:

The Identity of a nation is characterised by the way its citizens differentiate and distinguish themselves from others. This is not merely an intellectually apprehended cognitive affair but it also involves emotionally loaded attachment and "a sense of belonging of a semi-sacred kind" (Rex:1996). The notion of citizenship in a nation state covers only the cognitive component. Then, there is emotional binding, the bonding sense of belonging that often erupts in cases of national emergency such as war. How do members acquire that sense of binding and belonging? There are yet no clear answers. It is suggested that the belonging arises from some kind of moral identification with a cultural, political or ideological distinctiveness and attribution of superiority to one's own way of life. Such a notion is based on the presumption that there is a single distinctive "way of life" characterizing a given nation. This is often not the case, given the diversity of groups prevalent in many countries.

If the ways of life are those of the majority group, then problems arise in accommodating the values and life styles of the minority groups. A nation state with significant minority groups attempts to deal with them either by *assimilating* the groups by some kind of amalgamation, *subordinating* them by assigning a lower class status or *accepting diversity* as real and providing an appropriate place for their expression. Examples of these forms of dealing with minority groups include France where *assimilation* is the chosen policy, which discourages minorities from political organization and excludes minority cultures from the schools. The German *gastarbeider* system is cited by some as an example of *subordination*. We find the *multi-cultural alternative* in Sweden where a special effort goes into ensuring that social rights are accorded to minorities and that they are fairly treated. However, each of these alternatives has its own problems and each nation state must find its own unique way to deal with minority groups. In the case of India and Sri Lanka with their widespread cultural diversities, multi-culturalism is a natural choice but, then, there are a variety of multi-cultural forms as we may find in the case of the Netherlands and their well-known "pillarization" policy and Britain's measures to combat racial and color discrimination.

The attempts to foster multi-culturalism take the form of not only legal recognition of the multiplicity of cultures within the nation state but also involve active promotion of equality between them. In practice, as Rath (1991) points out, multi-cultural promotion involves a policy of "minorization," which may result in inferior treatment of those marked as minorities.

It is generally recognized that the promotion of minority cultures has a variety of beneficial effects. First and foremost, "they provide for the minority communities a psychological and moral home between the family and the state" and at the same time enable "the members to act collectively, and not merely individually, to fight for their rights…." (Rex 1996).

Multiple Identities and National Integration:

The existence and recognition of multiple identities based on minority ways of life are necessary pre-conditions for national solidarity and integration. In social-identity theory, a part of the self-concept is defined in terms of one's social identification and group affiliations. All of us have multiple group affiliations and therefore multiple social identities. Some of these are ascribed and involuntary; others are acquired. One may identify herself as an Indian, an Andhra, a Hindu, a psychologist, and a female. Often these multiple identities are non problematic and a person may shift identities constantly with ease and without conflict. For example, one may experience no dissonance in being a citizen of Sri Lanka, a Buddhist, being a father and a husband.

While a Hindu may not experience dissonance between being an Indian and yet have a Hindu identity, another person who is an Indian *and* a Muslim may experience dissonance between the two identities, if that person perceives India as a Hindu state. When a low caste Hindu perceives that her caste is denigrated in Hindu society, she will experience identity conflict between her Hindu identity and her caste identity. When such conflicts arise, groups of individuals resort to a variety of ways to resolve the identity conflict. Some of them could be very disruptive. No doubt, an analogous situation prevails in Sri Lanka.

Social identities are double-edged (Brewer & Schineider 1990). On the one hand, they facilitate group formations and promote intra-group coherence and solidarity. On the other hand, they also contribute to inter-group dissension and

tensions, negative stereotyping, and prejudice against the out-groups. For example, my Hindu identity enables me to see similarities with other Hindus and minimize other differences that exist between me and other Hindus so that my being a Hindu enhances my self-esteem. At the same time, it accentuates the perception of differences with other religious groups, with negative consequences for inter-religious relationships. The perception of similarities contributes to in-group attraction; and the awareness of differences leads to prejudice against the out-group.

One's identification as a Dalit, for example, rests on the shared sense of Dalits that they are a socially exploited class. Such sharing is the basis for attraction between the members of the group and the reason for minimizing the other differences that may exist between them, such as various sub-classes among Dalits. At the same time, Dalit identity accentuates and maximizes the perception of differences with those considered to be non-Dalits, and the negative stereotypes of them as exploiters. Dalit is a super-ordinate group consisting of a number of subordinate groups. A Dalit may also belong to the caste of a washerman, barber, potter, or toddy tapper. Daliths' may experience no conflict in shifting their identity to their caste groups. A women and her social identity as a *rajak*, for example, would not only focus on the similarities she shares with other *rajaks* and accentuate her perception of the differences with the non-*rajak* Dalits, but would also weaken Dalit solidarity to that extent. The cohesiveness of Dalits requires that the Dalit social identity be salient and strong relative to subordinate identities represented by the sub-castes. The same may be said of national identity and the identities subordinate to it.

In pluralistic societies, countries like Sri Lanka and India, where people form groups based on a variety of categories such as religion, language, caste, and so on, there is the potential for inter-group prejudice and tensions that tend to weaken national solidarity. In the case of India, there are two other factors that could further compound the problem. First, many of the salient identities in Indian society are inherited or ascribed rather than acquired; and there is little possibility for permeability between such groups. For example, one is born into one's linguistic group. There is no choice; the membership is involuntary. Second, following Marriott's distinction between "dividual" and "individual", the dominant behavioral patterns among Indians may be described as more transactional and relational than what one finds in Western societies where the individual is regarded more as an

indivisible, bounded person. *The Indian conception of selfhood is more social; and the self-meaning among Indians is enhanced more in relation to the family and clan than is the case in the West.* Therefore, it would seem that Indians experience relatively more group identity conflicts than their Western counterparts because their social identities tend to be strong. I belive that this is true to some extent in the case of Sri Lanka as well.

Identity Crisis:

Psychologists such as Erikson have written extensively on crisis in personal identity. It is now generally recognized that societies and nations also go through similar crises which can be equally disruptive. Identity crisis arises from identity confusion and conflict. When identities compete for salience and dominance and when individuals are unable to shift identities smoothly as they play different roles, there is then room for identity conflicts to manifest themselves. Unsuccessful resolution of such conflicts may result in an identity crisis.

Whether India and Sri Lanka are going through a national identity crisis is arguable. However, there are clear signs of identity conflict that need to be addressed for the unity and integrity of the nation state. Considering the intricate and vast labyrinth of multi-culturalism, this task is highly complex, but it is one that needs urgent attention not only from the perspective of economics but also from other social disciplines and thought systems. Social identity conflicts arise when one's internalized image of the group is seen as dissonant with the external image of the group or when one categorizes herself as belonging to distinct groups that have conflicting evaluations. It is important to realize that multiple identities are not necessarily detrimental. For example, dual ethnicity and raising children as members of more than one cultural group may be actually beneficial in that the children so raised demonstrate greater flexibility, adaptability and creativity (Rotheram & Phinney 1987). Problems arise when individuals tend to reduce their multiple identities into one dominant identification.

Identity Reduction:

In his recent book *Identity and Violence* Amartya Sen (2006) draws attention to the extreme dangers of reducing the naturally multiple identities into a single identity. Such a collapse of multiple identities creates what Sen calls the “solitarist illusion”.

Such an illusion "can be invoked for the purpose of dividing people into uniquely hardened categories". They can be further "exploited in support of fomenting intergroup strife". Sen calls attention to "the single-minded advocacy of a belligerently religious identity, with devastating effects" promoted by theories of Islamic exclusiveness. There is good reason for identities to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Inclusiveness is not the same as absorption or assimilation but a coexisting mosaic of identities, each with its own distinctiveness but contributing to a gestalt configuration.

Global Identity:

What is the limit of inclusiveness? Does it stop with the nation state? Is the national identity the ultimate identity? Today, we live in a global society caught in the web of multinational economic structures and international media networks. Economics as well as politics are influenced by macro level events of world wide scope. We already see an identity crisis in nation states in both Europe and North America. The European Union is a fine example of the emergence of supra-national entities. The wide spread immigration to Britain, for example, has raised the question whether the British people have a distinctive national identity any more than we have in India and Sri Lanka. The forces of globalization and migration of people across continents, with its cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity calls for a re-assessment of the sociology of nationalism.

Value Line:

Is it possible to have an overarching human identity at the global level without interfering with national and other identities? If we accept the notion that human identity is necessarily plural, it follows that it is mandatory for a mechanism to exist to bring about unity in plurality. If that unity cannot be relegated to nationalism or religious, regional or ethnic loyalties, then the obvious avenue is the value dimension, common ethics and morality. Again, is it possible to have universally shared ethics? Ethics itself may permit of plurality; but that plurality should withstand rigorous rational discussion. In fact, such free debate itself may be the ultimate value, as Amartya Sen advocates in his book *Argumentative Indian*. There may be more to this. Ethical pluralism is not the same as relativism in ethics. A good case can be made for a common, universal value line and shared ethics. This is an area of perennial interest that was regrettably pushed to the periphery in the recent past.

Again, to quote Amartya Sen (2006) :

> There is a compelling need in the contemporary world to ask questions not only about the economic and politics of globalization, but also about the values, ethics, and sense of belonging that shape our conception of the global world. In a nonsolitarist understanding of human identity, involvement with such issues need not demand that our national allegiances and local loyalties be altogether *replaced* by a global sense of belonging, to be reflected in the working of a colossal "world state." In fact, global identity can begin to receive its due without eliminating our other loyalties (185).

Among the values that could be investigated as universally relevant, as a binding influence on our collective being is "love" in its celestial sense. Love is central in the Christian tradition. Compassion is the core concept in Buddhist ethics. *Bhakti* as celestial love is a powerful value tool in the Hindu tradition. Gandhian *satyagraha*, nonviolent political action, turns on the fulcrum of love. Mother Theresa's life is an epitome of love. Thus, love is universal in its scope and applicability. Love is a multidimensional and multi-tiered concept. It enjoys cross-cultural nuances and significance. Its meaning is often context related; and yet there is a general sense of sameness in its multiple forms. This is so because, as Robin Allott (1992) writes, "the capacity for love is the resultant of a number of other evolving capacities — language, empathy, self-awareness, consciousness." In a sense love is an "affiliative" emotion, which leads one to seek out others for some purpose (Shweder 1994). Such an affiliation can be towards a fellow human being, towards natural objects, and towards God, believed to be their creator and sustainer.

Thus, love is intentional; it is directed, even though the object or person to which it is addressed may vary from the mundane to the sublime, from the worldly to celestial and from the physical to the spiritual. That love has survival value has been well established through the numerous studies on abandoned animals and humans, at risk children, hospice centers, and in our daily lives. The glory of love has been a subject of interest for philosophers, poets, and ordinary people. Ironically, it is an emotion that has not received as much social attention and acceptance as its opposite hate/violence has. Cultures have suppressed the expression of this truly

life giving emotion, and, as social scientists, we have failed to look at it with the same enthusiasm and candor as we have looked at fear and violence. Although most of us experience and express love, there has been little attempt to understand and accept its vital role in personal growth and transformation and more importantly as a binding value in the search for global human identity. There is of course no dearth of theories on love. There are some that have a developmental and evolutionary perspective (Bowlby 1969,1973, 1980). Freud in his influential writings dealt with love from the perspective of sex drive. Aron and Aron (1986) espouse the motivational perspective by dealing with love as an expansion of self. There are other more inclusive discussions such as the triangular theory of Sternberg (1986), Koveecse's (1988 1990, 1991) bimodal perspective and Jean Vanier's (1988) multi-feature description of love. Obviously, the basic fountain of much contemporary discussion of love is Sorokin's (2002) five dimensional theory of love.

In the Indian tradition, love has a special place and significance as a way of life. It has come to be regarded not merely as an expressive emotion that binds people, but also as a means of spiritual up-liftment and personal transformation. In discussions of love the emphasis has been on the celestial aspects rather than on the mundane and physical gratifications. With a strong celestial focus, the notion of love takes on an altruistic and transpersonal perspective, which extends the self beyond the limiting confines of the individual.

In the Indian sub-continent there has been a long and continuous tradition of *bhakti*, devotion and love, as a legitimate means of salvation and spiritual development. We find it all the way from ancient *Alwar* poetry in Tamil through the *Srimad Bhagavatam,* the *Narada* and *Shandilya Sutras* and the *Gaudiya Vaishnava* scholars. Beyond these Tamil and Sanskrit sources, there is a huge amount of work in various other Indian languages during the past several centuries bearing on the *bhakti* movement. For example, in Maharashtra there are a succession of saints from Sant Jnaneswar through Tukaram, Namdev, and numerous other saints of the religious community called the *Varkari Sampradaya*. In Andhra Pradesh, the devotional life of Ramadas is all too well known. In contemporary India, Mahatma Gandhi exemplifies the power of celestial love in pursuit of common good. So are the service-centered love of Mother Teresa and the spiritually focused practices of the Dalai Lama. There is thus abundant scope for historical, theoretical and empirical research on love in the context of human identity.

Possible Ways of Resolving the Problems

How may we deal with the identity issues raised above? How can we develop inclusive identities that do not divide but bind people? What are the essential ingredients of inclusiveness and unity? What are the factors underlying social divisions, economic classes and religious differences that precipitate the perception of separation and cause disharmony and bring a break down of communication? These questions need answers based on supportive research.

There is no such thing as uniformity and sameness across all human beings. Differences between people and among groups are natural and inevitable. These can never be glossed over, ignored or erased. They should be seen as distinctive features of a society, giving it colour, diversity and richness and not be allowed to generate and manifest in the form of social divides, identity conflicts and role confusion. Only when the differences become a source of a perception of separation and victimization and precipitate a sense of alienation, that they become destructively divisive and counter productive. What then are the factors that precipitate the perception of separation and engender a sense of alienation? Where does one's national identity lay? For example, what does it mean to be an Indian?

I am an Indian because "Indianness" is an aspect of my self concept. My national identity is rooted in the common history of the Indian people. It is bonded by my shared identities with other Indians. It is strengthened by the perception of our distinctiveness as well as by the experience of unity in diversity. The analogy of "the melting pot" would be misleading to describe national identity because national identity is not a synthesis or amalgamation of diverse identities. A more appropriate description of my national identity is that it is a mosaic of separate identities that are bonded together in a common history to constitute a pattern. Parallel identities do not merge to form a new identity; but they all keep their distinctiveness. Without losing colour, shape or texture, they portray together a grand pattern. It follows, then, that the multiple identities of caste, religion, region, language, etc., that are prevalent in our societies need not be a cause for weakening unity and integrity. National integrity does not require that all other identities should lose their distinctiveness. I can be a worthy Indian and a good Hindu just as I can be a caring parent and a devoted husband.

The attempts to find an Indian identity in the Hindu ethos or a Sri Lankan identity in Buddhist thought would be counter productive. To reduce a super ordinate identity to a subordinate identity is divisive. Similarly, attempts to define national identity in terms of metaphysical theories or political ideologies or to describe it in terms of behavioral stereotypes are inadequate in our search for national identity as a means of strengthening the unity and integrity of the country.

Social identity theory provides some interesting insights for an understanding of national identity formation and the means of promoting it. It also points to possible sources of intergroup prejudice and consequent tensions that disturb national unity and solidarity. In the context of multiculturalism that is at the heart of societies, manifesting diversities of religion, language, and caste-based groups, systematic studies of intergroup behavior are needed. It is suggested that social-identity theory predicts group tensions in so far as groups are formed and sustained, not only by the similarities of the members within a group, but also by the exaggerated perception of the differences with the out-groups. The problem is compounded by the fact that there is an inherent tendency to accord negative attributions to out-groups. This "double-edged" aspect of group identity should be a focus of research in real groups in order to understand how group cohesiveness may be sustained without out-group scapegoating.

Prejudices are formed in childhood. Therefore, the institutions in which children develop — the family and the school – are the places where deliberate intervention mechanisms to prevent the development of prejudice should be put in place. These should include strategies for the development of multicultural competence at an early stage.

In as much as national identity is rooted in the common history of its people, the history that is taught should focus on the commonalities among the people, emphasizing the organic unity of the manifest groups, always highlighting human identity as the salient category.

Meaning and self-knowledge, in addition to self-enhancement, are important motivating factors for maintaining group coherence. Knowledge of our history and culture may provide the necessary meaning for identity.

It is also important to recognize that while the existence of multiple groups in a society is a source of possible friction, multiple social identities of individual persons are fertile grounds for sowing seeds of inter-group integration. Crossed categories obtained in multiple group affiliations are the best resource for reducing inter-group prejudices and conflicts. Crossed categorization diffuses and weakens the "we-they" perception. The larger the opportunities for crossed categorization, the larger are the number of diversely composed groups that are available to individuals to affiliate with.

In some ways history can be a guide. We may benefit by learning how and in what manner successful regimes were able to enhance inclusiveness and successfully bridged the divides that afflicted their people. We have the examples of Ashoka and Akbar to name two. The lives of those who united people without precipitating divisions, who brought love among people divided without promoting hatred between them and who valued truth and altruism in public life without sacrificing success can teach us a great deal. Contemporary examples that come to mind include Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa and President Mandela.

Much of the preceding discussion on identity is, admittedly, psycho-social. Where does philosophy come in? When philosophy began as a wisdom discipline some three thousand years ago as self-reflection, all knowledge, whether it is now called physics or physiology, sociology or law, was all part of philosophy itself. Now the situation is enormously more complex and the outcome of our reason and reflection become divided, depending on the area of focus. So we have a variety of seemingly independent disciplines, whose origins can however be traced to philosophical reflections in the past. Today, in some useful sense, philosophy remains without a substantive content, limiting itself to methodological and conceptual issues. Without disputing the merits of this approach, we can readily see that the ground condition, the subject matter of philosophy, in this view is the knowledge accumulated in other disciplines. Philosophy feasts on the facts garnered by other so-called sciences and subject areas. If one takes a diametrically opposite approach and argues that all knowledge in its ultimate sense comes under the scope of philosophy, then it also stands to reason to think that philosophy is necessarily an interdisciplinary endeavor feeding on the facts of other disciplinary outcomes.

We cannot meaningfully pursue philosophy in a cultural or factual vacuum. From the cultural perspective, philosophy may be seen as the running thread that

binds the various facets of a tradition; and in a significant sense it is that which gives identity and distinctiveness to a tradition. Cultural relevance is an inherent aspect of philosophical excellence. From the factual perspective, philosophy is the binding discipline that weaves facts together and brings out a meaningful pattern, order and understanding. In the present context of our discussion, identity issues should be ultimately addressed at the level of philosophy and they cannot be completely resolved at a narrowly circumscribed disciplinary level. Indeed, they were addressed in the past in exceedingly interesting ways by philosophers. I may refer here to the enormous contributions made by Buddhist thinkers.

Buddhism on Personal Identity

According to Buddhism, with its theory of momentariness (*kshanikavada*), reality is in a state of continuous flux with no permanent entities over and above the constantly changing events in our experience. Consequently, there can be no substantive mind or enduring self. The self is no other than the "aggregate" or "bundle" of ever-changing bodily and mental states, which include the five *skandhas – rupa, vinnana* (*vijnana* in Sanskrit), *vedana, sanna* (*samjna* in Sanskrit) and *sankara* (*samskara*). When one refers to the selfs, s/he means one or more *skandhas*.

Interestingly, while the existence of substantive, changeless and enduring self is summarily rejected by Buddhist thinkers, the "self" as "person" and what it stands for, as we will see, are variously conceived in the major schools of Indian Buddhism. There are at least three major strands represented by the theories prominently championed by Vasubandhu (4th century A.D.), Chandrakirti (7th century A.D.) and by the early school of Pudgalavadins. The "no-self" theory (*anatmavada*) is adapted, modified and amended based on their axiological concerns and metaphysical assumptions.

There are two relevant and over riding aspects in Buddha's teachings to the concept of "self." The first is the basic metaphysics of impermanence. For Buddhists change is real, unlike the Upanishadic thinkers who argued that what changes is not real. Whereas Advaita thinkers like Sankara contend that changing events in the world are illusory and unreal, Buddhists looked at the changeless self as a non-existent, imaginary entity. The second aspect involves the axiological concerns relating to the postulation of the pervasive predicament of the human condition as

ubiquitous suffering and the goal of overcoming it. The two are linked together in Buddhist no-soul theory (*anatmavada*). There can be no permanent, enduring and eternal self in a world of change and impermanence. Suffering is caused by attachment, clinging and grasping to the dictates of the mind and body due to ignorance. The mistaken view of a changeless, enduring and permanent self is the ground condition and primary source of attachment and clinging. Therefore, the realization/ understanding that no enduring, changeless self resides in us is a necessary condition in the process of eradicating suffering which is the stated goal of Buddhist striving.

The Buddha's teachings are simple, straightforward and down to earth. In some significant ways they are appealing doctrines to preach. Problems arise, however, when one proceeds from mere preaching to provide a cogent logical argument and credible philosophical justification of the no-self theory. What about personal identity, the self-sameness? If there is no enduring agent of action, how can we attribute merit and demerit and account for their consequential influence and effects on one's being and behavior, as Buddhists believe? How is cognitive activity, such as recall and recognition, possible if there is no abiding cognizing agent, one and the same person across different points of time? How can we explain the unity and coherence of manifest thought and action if there is no self to organize and synthesize the inputs from various sense modalities? What would be the real sense and meaning of pain and pleasure if there is none to own them?

Though all Buddhists accept the Buddha's teaching on the non-existence of the soul, as Buddhist thought advanced to address the criticisms of competing orthodox conceptions of the self, it has become increasingly necessary to account for personal identity and the self-sameness of individuals. This challenge had become more pronounced in the context of the Buddhist belief in rebirth. Therefore, the puzzle of the self and its denial takes different forms and finds different solutions in the hands of prominent Buddhist thinkers. At one end is the thesis of the Pudgalavadins that there is something ultimately real and existing that refers to the person. At the other end is the Madhyamika denial of ultimate reality to the notion of the self or the person. In the middle we find Vasubandhu's theory of the person. In the accounts of these thinkers, the meanings of “real” and “existence” vary with different identifying criteria.

Pudgalavada Account of the Self / Person:

Pudgalavada is a less known Buddhist school, somewhat closer to the Vaibhasika system in as much as there are no significant differences between them except in their theory of the self/ person. The Pudgalavada view of the person is found in the *Sammitiyanikaya* and the *Tridharmakhandaka* (which are available only in Chinese translations) and the later writings of the Buddhist thinkers who attempted to refute them. *Pudgala* is generally translated as "the individual" (Stcherbatsky 1976). Therefore, Pudgalavada means the theory of the individual or person. It should be kept in mind at the outset that the Pudgalavadins make a distinction between "self" and "person." The self in their view does not exist but the person does. The self that is denied here is what is called *atman* or *purusha* in Hindu thought. As mentioned before, Buddhists in general reject the self in the sense of a permanent and changeless entity. Pudgalavadins are no exception. The person in their view is a changing and yet continuous entity, which is real but without an independent and distinctive identity. The person is conceived on the basis of changing physical and mental states (*skandhas*) like fire is conceived in reference to burning fuel. However, the person is neither the same nor different from the aggregate *skhandas* which are the basis of the conception we have of the person.

In the realistic tradition of Buddhism represented by the Vaibhasika as well as Sautrantika schools, ultimate reality is conceived as belonging to two distinct categories – substantive reality and conventional reality. Substantive reality is the one that is attributed to substances. Conventional reality is more like conceptual reality. It refers to an entity whose reality is established as dependent on substances on which its conception depends. In other words, conventionally real objects do not possess an identity of their own, unlike the ultimately real objects. A jar is an item in the category of conventional reality, which loses its identity when broken or when it is analyzed into the elements that constitute it. An object that is considered to be ultimately real does not lose its identity when it is broken or subjected to a complete analysis. If the former is conceived as substantive reality, the latter may be seen as substantially established reality (Duerlinger 2003). According to Pudgalavadins, there is another kind of conventional reality in addition to the substantially established reality. Unlike substantially established reality, objects in this new category are inexplicable in that they cannot be expressed as the same or different from the substances on which their conception is based. To give the

example from Vasubandhu, milk is substantially established conventional reality in so far as its reality depends on the elements constituting milk. Milk loses it identity when it becomes curd or when it is chemically analyzed into its constituent elements, but it can be expressed in terms of the elements constituting it.

Fire is an example of inexplicable reality in that it cannot be expressed in terms of the fuel from which it arises in the same manner that milk can be explained by the elements constituting it. Fire is neither the same nor different from the fuel. In a burning object, if the fire were other than fuel, fuel would not be hot; and if fire were not other than fuel, what is burned is the same as what burns it. Thus, fire from one perspective is not other than fuel and from another perspective it is not the same as fuel.

According to Pudgalavadins, the reality of the person is like the reality of fire; it is of the nature of inexplicable conventional reality. The ultimate existence of persons is inexplicable in that they are neither the same nor different from the five aggregates that constitute their bodies and minds. Persons are entities that have no identities of their own or can be expressed in terms of their constituent elements in as much as they are neither the same nor different from the five *skandhas*. Even though persons are inexplicable phenomena, they are ultimately real. Even though there are differences in the various versions of Pudgalavada theories of the persons as presented in the different accounts we have of them, Priestley (1999) suggests that *pudgala* (persons) are substantially real entities. This is so in spite of their being inexpressible in terms of the five aggregates. This raises the question, how can a conventional entity be at the same time a substantive entity? The Pudgalavadins would argue that in so far as persons are conceived, their reality is dependent on the *skandhas*. However, they are ultimately real because they exist independently of the aggregate *skandhas*, albeit without separate identities (Duerlinger 2003). Central to the Pudgalavada theory of the person is the notion that persons have self-perceptions of themselves even though they do not have separate identities. The question remains whether one could have self-perception without self-identity.

The above view is criticized in *Katha-Vatthu* as untenable on the ground that inexpressible entities cannot ultimately exist. However, persons are ultimately real in the view of the Theravadins, except that their existence is no different from that of the aggregate *skandhas* constituting them.

Vasubandhu's Theory of the Person:

The author of *Abhidharamakosabhasyam*, a composition consisting of about six hundred verses, Vasubandhu is one of the most respected Buddhist writers. It is difficult to classify him as belonging to a specific school. Not withstanding the fact that *Abhidharmakosabhasyam* refers to itself as being written from the perspective of Vaibhasikas of Kashmir, as Poussin (1988) points out, Vasubandhu had sympathies for Sautrantikas and was greatly influenced by Yogacaras, especially his brother Asanga. Pousssin regards *Abhidharmakosabhasyam* as "perhaps the most instructive book of early Buddhism" (1988:4) and describes Vasubandhu as "an excellent professor of Buddhism, of Buddhism without epithet of sect or school …"(6).

The central thesis of Vasubandhu concerning self in his own words is this: "It is known that the expression, `self,' refers to a continuum of aggregates and to nothing else because there is no direct perception or sound inference" (section 1.2). As Duerlinger points out in his commentary, this statement refers to two separate things. First, it implies the refutation of the existence of self as a separately identifiable entity because we have no direct perception or valid inference attesting its existence. Second, the conception of self refers to a continuum of aggregates, and when we conceive of `self' , we refer to one or more of the aggregates. In other words, the aggregates are the causal basis of the conception of the self. On examining any of these aggregates individually or in association with each other we find no self. Therefore, Vasubandhu argues, we must conclude that the self does not exist.

Vasubandhu accepts the Pudgalavadins' thesis, viz., what ultimately exist are persons and not selves. Their existence is the same as the existence of the aggregate *skandhas* giving rise to them. However, he rejects the latter's view that persons are inexpressible phenomena. According to Vasubandhu, there are only two kinds of entities that exist. Some things have substantial existence while others are conceptually real. The latter belong to the category of substantially established reality, as Duerlinger puts it. Nothing exists unless it belongs to one of the two categories. When an entity is considered conventionally real, its reality is conceived as dependent on the substances constituting it. Thus according to Vasubandhu, persons ultimately exist and yet their reality is only conceptual. However, persons are ultimately real because their conception is based on the collections of their bodily and mental states (*skandhas*), which exist by themselves and have their own

identities. The reality of persons is thus a reflected reality. At a conceptual level, the reality of persons is intrinsic and first-person based. However, in as much as persons are conceived and their identities are construed in-dependence on externally real events and entities, persons can be considered from a third-person extrinsic perspective as objectively real.

Thus, Vasubandhu's thesis has two related assertions : (1) We possess no such thing called `self' ; (2) We are, however, real and ultimately exist (Duerlinger 2003). The first statement is justified on the ground that we find no direct perception or valid inference to support the existence of the self. In support of the second conclusion, it is pointed out that we have a conception of the self that is real because the causal bases of that conception is the collection of aggregates which are known to exist by direct perception and valid inference. It is clear that what Vasubandhu is objecting to is the self as a substantive and changeless entity as conceived by Hindu thinkers like the Nyaya-Vaisesikas and not the self in the sense of person. In fact, he claims that his theory is the middle way between the transcendental conception of a permanent self and nihilism.

Chandrakirti on the Self:

Chandrakirti of the seventh century A.D belongs to the Madhyamika tradition of Buddhism. The originator of the Madhyamika school is Nagarjuna, who lived in the first or second century A.D. His book *Madhyamika-karika* is the basic source of Madhyamika philosophy. Nagarjuna, along with Sankara of the Advaita school, is considered to be one of the most profound thinkers of classical India. Chandrakirti's *Madhyamikavatara* is meant to be a general introduction to Nagarjuna's philosophy. In fact, it is more than that. Coming almost five hundred years after Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti provides a much wider view of Madhyamika philosophy as it developed over the five centuries after Nagarjuna. In Chandrakirti we find the most explicit exposition of the Madhyamika theory of self/person.

Like the other Buddhist thinkers, Chandrakirti argues that it is the belief in the existence of permanent and unchanging self that is responsible for the human tendency to cling and become ego involved. The feeling of `I' and `mine' distorts one's knowledge, perpetuates ignorance and causes suffering. Therefore, proper knowledge as to the nonexistence of the self is a necessary condition for the cessation of suffering. Chandrakirti asserts that the conception of the self as posited

by other Buddhist schools does not really contribute to the negation of the self and the cessation of suffering. If one believes that the self/person is ultimately real, whether that reality is substantial or substantially established or conceptual, he is still caught in the cocoon of his thoughts that bind him to the ego, the notion of me, and mine. He suffers consequently. The only way one can be freed from suffering is by realizing that the conception of self has no ultimate existence.

Chandrakirti asserts that the notion of the self as a concrete entity, an independently existing substance, that is not caused by another substance, which is eternal and changeless, as held by Samkhya philosophers, is false and self-contradicting. Such a self "is utterly unreal;" it is "unborn like the barren woman's child" (6.122). If the self has no existence, the characteristics that are attributed to it also have no real existence. Thus the self is a "conceptual figment."

Chandrakirti proceeds to argue that the notion of the self as the aggregate of *skandhas* or mind is equally untenable. If the self is equal to the aggregates, Chandrakirti argues, then like aggregates, there would be a multiplicity of selves in the person and that they should be substantial and visible like the aggregates (6.127). Further, the aggregates are continually changing, and they totally disappear in the state of Nirvana. Then, what is the self in that state? Again, if the self is momentary and changing like the aggregates, who is the agent to whom the karmic fruits relate? For these reasons, it is clear that the "self is not the aggregates or the mind" (6.130).

Having thus disposed of the Theravadin notion of the self as an aggregate of *skandhas* and Vasubandhu's theory of the person, Chandrakirti argues that the view of the self as an indescribable entity, that it is neither the same nor different from the aggregates but a substantial person, is also false. According to Chandrakirti, nothing exists that does not have its own distinctive identity. "A thing that is existent cannot be regarded as beyond expression. If one could show that self is an existent thing, it would be real, like mind, and not at all ineffable" (6.147).

In Madhyamika metaphysics, phenomena have no intrinsic reality. The aggregates, whether they refer to inner mental states or to the outer forms, are all inherently empty. Nirvana itself is "*voidness of the ultimate*" (6. 189). Objects that have no independent reality do not for that reason have ultimate existence. Chandrakirti does not dispute that self/person is conventionally real, but argues

that conventionally real self is empty of reality in the sense of ultimate existence. He accepts that the conception of the self depends on the aggregates; but he rejects the notion that the aggregates are substances. He agrees with Pudgalavadins that persons are neither the same nor different from the aggregates. However, he argues that entities such as the self that have no identity are vacuous and therefore cannot be ultimately existent. Here he seems to agree with Vasubandhu.

To sum up, all Buddhists more or less agree that self as a permanent, changeless entity is nonexistent. They all trace the conception of the self to the mind and bodily states (*skandhas*). However, there are a variety of interpretations of Buddha's teachings on the matter of what the person is. The orthodox Theravada view is that the self is no other than a continuum of collections of aggregates (*skandhas*). The Pudgalavadins consider that the self is simply indescribable in that, though its conception is dependent on the aggregates, it is neither the same nor different from the aggregates. However, self enjoys ultimate existence like fire does, as distinguished from fuel. Vasubandhu argues that self does not have substantive existence, but its existence is substantially established in as much as the conception of the self is dependent on the aggregates, which are substances. In this sense persons have ultimate existence. Chandrakirti denies ultimate existence to persons by asserting that those phenomena or entities that lack identity are non-existent and that anything that is caused and conditioned cannot have ultimate existence.

In the context of Buddhist refutation of the notion of substantial self, it is not difficult to see that the focus of the Buddha is on the empirical self, seen as the binding ego and not so much the metaphysical self the Buddhist thinkers preferred to reject. In actuality, the Buddha had little interest in finding ultimate answers to vexatious metaphysical issues relating to God and soul. We find the Buddha saying in *Majjima-Nikaya*, "it is not the time to discuss about fire for those who are actually caught in the burning fire, but it is time to escape from it." The Buddha's concerns were existential and his solutions are empirical. Consequently, what the Buddha was rejecting is not so much a metaphysical self but the psychological self with the primary functions of the ego. It is the ego, which harbors desires and is the instrument of craving and clinging and thus the cause of suffering. So what Buddhism aims at in its discourse on the self is a deconstruction of the ego through its own analysis of the self.

The situation does not appear very different in the case of Hindu thinkers. The major difference between Hindu and Buddhist thinkers consists in the focus of the former on the metaphysical self as against the Buddha's concern with the empirical self. Hindu thinkers are obsessed with finding the permanent and unchanging whereas the Buddha confined himself to explaining the change that seems to characterize existence. However, the self at the psychological level appears quite similar for both Buddhists and Hindu thinkers. What Buddhists have rejected is in actuality the psychological self, the ego that binds us to things. In Hindu thought, the ego is not the self; it is an aspect of the mind. Clinging, craving, desires, attachment and so on do not belong to the self but to the ego. The Hindu thinkers share with their Buddhist counterparts the notion that alleviation and removal of human suffering consists essentially in the realization that the ego or the I-ness is not the self. The deconstruction of the ego is the recommended path for liberation from suffering and human bondage. The Buddhists as well as Hindu thinkers agree that meditation and a state of *samadhi* are conducive conditions for the deconstruction of the ego. Whereas the Buddha appears to be content with such a deconstruction, Hindu thinkers find it necessary to find a place for self in the overall architecture of the universe.

In Advaita Vedanta, we find the identification of the self of the individual (*atman*) with the supreme self (*Brahman*). In other words, the individual identity merges not only with the human identity but with the most super ordinate identity of all, being itself in its widest and pristine best. The statement in *Chadogya Upanishad*, "*tattvamasi*", referred to as the great saying (*mahavakya*) sums up the relationship between the person and the supreme reality. The individual person (*jiva*) in Advaita is neither a part of, different from, nor a modification of the supreme consciousness. Here I find, not withstanding the routine interpretation of Advaita as a monist and absolutist system, an exemplary form of pluralism and an extra-ordinary way of relating individual identities with more inclusive identities. At an ontological level, Advaita may uphold monism and absolutism. At the empirical level, however, pluralism is not merely real but consistent with the notion of unity in diversity. Again in Buddhism, the human identity aspect over and above personal identity is asserted not only in the denial of the self, but also in the celebrated saying "*sangham saranam gaschami*".

To conclude this long and somewhat winding discourse, humankind is going through a difficult but a critically important period. Among several urgent issues

that need to be addressed is the matter of identity. Who are we? What do we want to be? Where do we want to go? These questions attempt to address related factors in the make up of the person. These are essentially questions of identity. There are no simple answers to them. However, their complexity should not deter us from addressing them. Failure to deal with them adequately, I am persuaded to think, can have catastrophic consequences as serious as losing control over the nuclear arsenal. The nation state identities are fast losing their relevance. In some cases identities are being reduced to religion and language with disastrous consequences such as unabated terrorism of all kinds. There is an urgent need, not merely to recognize the inescapable plurality of identities but also to reinforce the salient identities such as human identity as supreme and super ordinate. In order to effectively reinforce such an identity at the level of humanity we need shared positive values of love and compassion and inclusive philosophical pluralism that accords primacy and distinctiveness to all shades of thought but finds meaningful unity and cohesion in them. Buddhism in rejecting the essential reality of personal identity and Advaita thinkers by equating the personal self with the supreme self have shown some possible ways of dealing with some major issues of identity.

Economic growth by itself is insufficient to help our countries. We need development on different fronts. Above all, *we need philosophies of inclusiveness and not the politics of divisiveness.* Philosophy and those who are involved in pursuing it have much to contribute. Never in the history of humankind has the relevance of philosophy to life, been more transparent than now. In the final count, the most important success stories of the 21st century will not be the developments in computer science and communication media, but what we do to realize human identity as the light that illuminates all our other identities.

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