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Implications of Buddhist Perspectives on the Notions of Identity and Difference in Social Relationships

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A characteristic that was common to the early Buddhist philosophy and religion and almost all other philosophical and religious systems of India with the exception of materialism was the affirmation of a liberation doctrine. Most liberation doctrines that transcended ritual and polytheistic veneration involving the worship of anthropomorphic deities turned towards a search for the inner reality of the individual self and its predicament in a world characterized by change and mutability. This became the most pronounced characteristic of the philosophies and religions of India around the sixth and fifth centuries before the Christian era, the period to which the career of the Buddha as a great teacher of mankind belonged. Out of the non-materialistic systems of thought that developed in India, only early Buddhism denied the notion of an immortal self. For this reason the Buddhist concept of liberation did not entail the freeing of an immortal self from its association with a mortal body or an aspiration for a noumenal existence transcending the world of empirical phenomena. The identity of a person was not accounted for in Buddhism on the basis of the affirmation of a metaphysical essence called the *atman* (self or soul) that resided imperceptibly in the individual organism constituted of mind and matter. It was the insight into three characteristics of existence, impermanence *(anicca),*

unsatisfactoriness *(dukkha)* and the absence of any abiding substance *(anatta),* but not the insight into any eternal essence which was conceived as one's real self, that was considered in Buddhism as the knowledge leading to liberation. However, Buddhism affirmed the doctrine of a cyclic process of rebecoming, which along with many other schools of Indian religion and philosophy was conceived as *sarhsiira.* The liberation doctrine of the Buddha differed in this respect from the materialist view that considered the death of an individual as a total annihilation. If Buddhism were to admit this latter view of the nature of life, the kind of rigorous moral discipline and mental culture that it recommended for the liberation of the individual would have been unnecessary. The whole endeavor in the Buddhist practice was directed towards overcoming the process involving birth, old age, decay, death, and other forms of disappointment and distress due to the non-fulfillment of the individual's desires, cravings and aspirations in a cyclic process of re-becoming. The Buddha, claiming to have attained insight into the causal conditions that produced this round of suffering with an inconceivable beginning, declared that he, in his own case, put a final end to it. He embarked on a forty five year career as a teacher of mankind with the firm conviction that the liberation he attained by his own effort was possible for all other human beings who understood and followed his path.

According to the Buddha, suffering would not come to an end until the continuity of what it considered as the five aggregates of grasping *(paficupiidiinakkhandhii)* ceased.

Ever since the time of his enlightenment into what was conceived as the four noble truths (suffering, its cause, its cessation and the path to its cessation), the Buddha considered the understanding of these truths as what was conducive to the greatest benefit and happiness of all rational beings. In the absence of a notion of individual identity based on the notion of an immortal and enduring self, the Buddhist concept of

liberation seemed to the metaphysician to be unintelligible. Nevertheless, Buddhism consistently maintained that the affirmation of an identity in the sense of an immortal, enduring and self-existent entity was a hindrance to liberation. Such a concept was also believed to raise metaphysical questions that could not be resolved. The objective of the present inquiry is to show that in the Buddhist view, both in the case of the individual and in the case of social institutions, a theory of absolute identity is neither epistemologically defensible nor practically useful. However, this view about the nature of identity was not considered in Buddhism to involve a renunciation of moral responsibility. Most of the practical teachings of Buddhism were concerned with self-improvement and self-development, and the improvement of the social institutions within which an individual is a significant element. Notions of identity that created strong craving and clinging were considered as the source of conflicts both within the. individual self and in the larger society in which the individual was an essential component. Early Buddhism did not reject all notions of identity and affirm absolute difference involving the total denial of individual moral responsibility. This aspect of the Buddha's teaching has significant implications on how Buddhism views identity issues in connection with the inner mental life of the individual as well as social relationships.

The Buddha classified all world views prevalent during his time as falling into two extremes called eternalism *(sassataviida)* and annihilationism *(ucchedaviida)*. To hold a right view about the nature of existence was to avoid on the one hand, the view that everything had eternal existence and self-identity *(sabbamatthi),* and on the other, the view that nothing had existence in the sense of being continuous in existence and having a continued identity *(sabbamnatthi)*. Both views were traced by the Buddha to certain latent tendencies in the human mind and an attempt on the part of the individual to rationalize those tendencies by

affirming the dogmatic positions describable as eternalism and annihilationism.1 Phenomena of the empirical world have the nature of arising and ceasing. This arising and ceasing process of empirical phenomena could be seen in accordance with the manner in which it occurred with proper insight *(yathtibhiltam sammappaiiiitiyapassati)*.Such insight, according to the Buddha, put an end to the common tendency in the human mind to conceive reality in eternalist or annihilationist terms. The distinctive character of the teaching of the Buddha rested entirely on this emphasis, and all attempts to deviate from this central philosophical position of the Buddha can be seen as distortions and heresies that crept into the Buddhist tradition due to the irresistible tendency of the human mind to fall into the very extremes that the Buddha wanted his disciples to avoid.

Vedic philosophy reached its highest development in the

Upani$adic doctrine that affirmed the reality of the *titman* and its identity with the cosmic essence conceived as the absolute realitv of *Brahman.2*It was this view of the nature of man and the world that was at the background of the new vision of the Buddha that rejected the essentialist dogmas. At a later period in the development of the metaphysical ideal of the Upani$ads in the form of Sankara's non-dualistic Vedanta philosophy, *atman* was considered as the unchanging essence within the, individual and its identity with the eternal principle of *Brahman* was affirmed implying the unreality of all empirical phenomena. The empirical self, constituted of mind and matter was conceived as mere illusion in relation to the absolute reality of *Brahman* which was. thought to be not different from the unchanging witness of all the illusory processes of change and mutation applicable to the former. Even in the qualified nondualism of Ramanuja, and the dualistic philosophy of Madhava, the self was considered to be eternal and entirely distinct from all other phenomena of transient existence. Strictly dualistic

philosophies like that of the Sankhya and Yoga, which were also traceable to some lines of Upanif?adic thinking on the nature of reality, accepted two fundamental ontological principles called matter and spirit. In the metaphysics of the Sankhya, mind and matter represented the transient aspect of reality consisting of the evolution of the primordial physical substance called *prakrti,* whereas spirit, the real person *(puru$a)* was considered as the eternal witness of the mutations of the primordial material substance. In Jainism too, which lay outside the orthodox systems of Indian philosophy, souls were recognized as special entities which found themselves embodied in matter, both gross and subtle, and liberation was conceived as the release of the soul from all association with matter, ensuring its eternal blissful existence. The Nyaya, VaiSesika and Mimarnsa systems, which also were later developments out of what was conceived by all of these orthodox systems of Vedic philosophy as alternative interpretations of the authoritative body of revealed Vedic teachings, affirmed the immutability of the soul substance on the basis of which their concepts of liberation were derived. A metaphysical position that was common to all these forms of doctrine was the affirmation of the absolute value of the immortal self, relegating all other things in the empirical world as having merely a secondary status.

In all systems of orthodox Indian philosophy the authority of the Vedas was considered as absolute and unassailable. The Buddha rejected Vedic authority and considered only what was confirmed in human experience as the ultimate basis of all our knowledge. In accordance with this epistemological outlook, the Buddha pointed out that the analysis of the constituents of what was conceived as the person did not reveal any enduring entity in terms of which, his continuing identity could be established. This can be seen to be in utter contrast with the Upanif?adic attempt to postulate an eternal essence, which was

characterized as permanent *(nityahL* not subject to sorrow *(visokah)* and immortal or indestructible *(vimrtyuh).3*

All empirical reality was analyzed by the Buddha into five aggregates of personality *(khandha),* to twelve spheres of sense contact *(iiyatana),* and to eighteen elements *(dhiitu)* consisting of the senses, the corresponding objects and the consciousness produced through interaction between the senses and the stimuli of the objective world.4 The person referred to as the

self *(atta)* was not conceived as a duality consisting of an eternal self and a destructible body, as affirmed by some metaphysicians who believed that the life principle in '-an individual was utterly different from matter that constituted the physical body *(annmnjivam annamsariram).* Instead, the Buddha analyzed the person into a complex whole constituted of five components the first of which is material and the rest mental. These five components are (1) material form *(nApa)* which is further analyzable into the four material elements solidity, liquidity, gaseousness and heat, (2) feelings *(vedanii),* which is the continuous flow of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral sensations, (3) perceptions, concepts or ideas *(sannii),* the basic elements of which are derived from the data of the senses such as visual form, sound etc., (4) the dispositions or volitional tendencies *(sankhiira)* and (5) consciousness *(vinniina),* which consists of the stream of conscious experience manifesting in the form of visual consciousness, auditory consciousness, olfactory consciousness, gustatory consciousness, tactile consciousness and mental consciousness. This analysis of the person also differed froq1 that of the materialists who considered an individual to be identical with the physical body which was merely a collection of material elements.

Taking the individual in the context of the objective environment, the Buddha analyzed empirical reality into twelve spheres of sense contact *(dviidasiiyataniini)* consisting of

the six internal spheres, eye, ear, nos~, tongue, body, and mind and the respective stimuli, visual form, sound, smell, taste, tactile things, and thoughts or ideas. In the analysis into eighteen elements the six respective forms of consciousness described as visual consciousness, auditory consciousness, etc., arising due to the causal interaction between the senses and the stimuli of the objective world were included in the list in addition to the twelve spheres mentioned above. Having the Upani$adic postulate of the soul essence in the background, the Buddha pointed out that in the case of each of these components of the empirical world, the observable reality was that it was transient, unsatisfactory and lacking in an eternal soul essence. With this part of the Buddha's analysis, the soul theorists were fully in agreement. However, they were not in agreement with the Buddha's conclusion that there is no other hidden essence in the individual apart from these constituents, a conclusion which was based entirely on empirical observation. For, in their case the immortal soul was a fundamental postulate of the metaphysical belief system, a transcendental metaphysical truth which had to be taken as an assumption that could be justified in terms of revelation, a priori reason or mystical intuition, all of which were rejected as being insufficient grounds in Buddhism for the truth of a proposition.

The alternative view of reality presented by the Buddha was expressed in terms of the central philosophical concept of his teaching that came to be known as 'Dependent Arising' *(paticcasamupptida).* It was presented as the philosophical Middle Way that explained reality without falling into the extremes of absolute identity or absolute difference. From the Buddhist point of view a notion of absolute identity concerning the nature of the individual was considered as the source of all ego-clinging, craving for becoming, and greedy, miserly and egocentric attitudes to life. A notion of absolute difference

concerning the nature of the individual was considered as a

source of irresponsible and sensualist behavior.

Eternalist doctrines took two classical forms in Indian philosophy. One form was expressed in the Vedantic monism or non-dualism according to which the empirical world was merely an appearance and reality consisted of a non-dual metaphysical principle called *Brahman.*According to this view there could not, in reality, be a plurality of objects, and what really existed, existed only as an undifferentiated whole. Seeing reality as consisting of a plurality of objects was a result of delusion comparable to seeing a snake where there was only a rope. The second form of eternalist doctrine was expounded by the orthodox Indian philosophies like the Nyaya-Vaisesika and the Mimamsa that interpreted the revealed doctrines of the Vedas in terms of a pluralistic realism according to which a real difference was admitted between permanent souls and other entities. According to both forms of eternalism, the real person was an indestructible essence. The main objection of such systems that affirmed the notion of a metaphysical self as the foundation for all meaningful action was that the denial of such a self in Buddhism led to a nihilistic position making the goal of liberation itself unintelligible. According to their view, for liberation to be meaningful, there must be a person in the form of an unchanging entity to be liberated. Also for anyone to be morally responsible for actions there must be such an entity. This entity was considered by these doctrines to be in bondage to the changing processes of phenomenal existence, or suffering under a delusion. Whatever suffering from which one was to be liberated was considered as a consequence of such bondage or delusion.

This account of personal identity and liberation was considered in Buddhism to be based on unverifiable metaphysical assumptions. Buddhism did not deny the fact that there was a

notion of 'I' as well as a concept of a person in terms of which a distinction could be made between oneself *(atta)* and another *(para).* In fact, the Buddha made use of these terms meaningfully in his teachings. What he objected to. was the attempt to explain our notion of personal identity in terms of some mysterious static essence. The consequence of the postulation of such an essence was, from the point of view of the Buddha's teaching, to relegate everything that really mattered to the person here and now, as belonging to a world of illusion or to focus attention on an unknown transcendental sphere of existence in which the ultimate end of the person was to be realized after escaping from the empirical world. According to the Buddha, whatever a person could attain had to be attained in this empirical world.

The Buddha taught quite emphatically on what conduces to one's own well-being *(attattha)* or the well-being of another *(parattha),* and the possibility of cultivating the self and becoming a person of cultivated self *(bhavitatta).* He also maintained that a person who acted in evil ways defiled himself, and a person who refrained from such acts, purified himself. 5A self which was eternally pure and separate from the changing things of the world could neither be purified nor defiled. For, if the self were to be an unchanging entity, it must be eternally pure or eternally defiled. This static view of the self was expressly affirmed in the *Bhagavadgita* when Krishna attempted to persuade Arjuna to engage in a destructive war.

"The self is unborn, permanent, eternal and ancient; when the body is slain the self is not slain."6 On such grounds the Gita approved of killing in a 'just war' as part of a person's social duty, and the relevant social duties were also to be derived from a transcendental metaphysical source rather than from the consideration of the pains and pleasures of people of the phenomenal world.7 According to the Buddha, a person would morally progress or regress in the cyclic process of becoming

and such progression or regression would depend on how one conducted oneself. Thereby the person was brought in direct relation to the social world in which he or she existed. The perfectibility of the person applied to this world but not to a transcendental metaphysical realm.

Buddhism admitted, as has been already pointed out, rebirth and *ki1mma,* but insisted that these processes need not be explained in terms of a transmigrating eternal unchanging entity. They were explained without resorting to a doctrine of absolute identity or one of absolute difference. This was evident in contexts in which the Buddha discussed the nature of dependent arising. With a view to rejecting the doctrine of absolute identity, the Buddha said that if one were to affirm 'He acts *(so ki1roti)* and he reaps its consequence *(so patisamvedeti)'* one takes an erroneous view. The term 'he' was taken here to designate a fixed, self-existent entity as opposed to a dependently arisen phenomenon. At the same time, with a view to rejecting the doctrine of absolute difference, the Buddha pointed out that if one were to affirm 'He acts, and another reaps its consequences *(so karoti aiiiio patisamvedeti)'* that too would be an erroneous view.8 For, it would involve the notion that there was no connection or continuity between the person who performed an act and the person who experienced its consequence. They would be two entirely different persons.

It is possible to distinguish between two senses of the term *atta* as it was used in early Buddhism. According to one use of the term it signified the self, as understood in ordinary language, that is, oneself as distinguished from another. The personal pronoun **'I'** was also used in a similar manner to refer to the self. This self of common usage did not refer to any simply static entity observable by the senses or by some extra-empirical means. It was that which was analyzable into the five components referred to by the Buddha as the aggregates of

personality *(khandhas).* The other sens~ of the term *atta* signified a particular metaphysical usage that had come into existence by the time of the emergence of Buddhism. This use of the term was found in the Upani::;ads where it was defined as an unchanging, eternal substance which formed the essence of the individual as well as the essence of everything else in the empirical universe. This second sense of the term *atta* was used by the Buddha to show the futility of expecting to find any stable security and happiness in any single component of personality or any other phenomenon of the empirical world outside oneself. For in none of them could be discovered the characteristics of a stable and substantial self as defined by the metaphysician. The Buddha's position was that if there is such an essence it should be in one or the other of the observable components of personality. There was evidently nothing observable satisfying the definition given to such a self in the components of personality or in those of the physical world.

The Buddha pointed out that attachment to things was determined by the mistaken notion that they were permanent and that they could be a source of stable happiness. To conceive

of an eternal life in the absence of the five aggregates of personality to which one would cling was, according to the Buddha, futile. For, in order to exist one had to be in the realm of becoming. The realm of becoming was considered to be coextensive with the realm of the five aggregates. Therefore, any craving or desire to continue to exist was viewed as a craving or desire to cling to the aggregates of existence. As long as such clinging existed the cyclic process of suffering would not cease. To crave for eternal existence was to crave for an eternal round of suffering. There could be no realm of existence in the abstract called mere 'Being' *(sat)* that transcended the realm of the five aggregates. A notion of personal identity was applicable only as long as there was a continuity of the five aggregates of personality. Where this continuity ceased, all questions relating to personal identity would become meaningless. This explains

why the Buddha refused to answer questions about the destiny of the person who attained liberation. He left all questions about the liberated person's destiny as undetermined *(avyiikata),* maintaining that a liberated person was comparable to the flame of a fire that had extinguished when all the fuel had been consumed. That which can be talked about regarding the liberated person, was no longer found for him.9

One way in which early Buddhism attempted to avoid the notion of an underlying substance in all empirical things in terms of which they retained their identity was by showing that words in our language did not denote static essences in the real world. Terms like the 'self' have a use in our language depending upon the established conventions of language. The words 'individual' *(puggala),*'self' *(atta),* personality *(attabhiiva)* or 'living being' *(satta)*are not different from a word like chariot *(ratha)*which is a product of a number of parts put together and organized as a whole for the performance of a particular function. It is as senseless to look for a person or a self apart from the body, sensations, etc., as it is to look for a substantial chariot apart from the parts such as the wheels, the lynch pin, axle etc.1°Neither the person nor the chariot can be identified with anyone of the parts that constitute it or with anything apart from any of those parts. This need not lead to the conclusion that the person or the chariot does not exist or that the terms 'person' and 'chariot' are meaningless. For persons and chariots do exist and we do talk meaningfully about them. A chariot, like a person may become subject to change from time to time, performing its task well or ill, with its component parts being replaced when they are worn out, retaining its identity as the same chariot. There is a sense in which, if all the parts of the chariot have eventually been replaced, one may say that it is neither the same chariot nor a different one. Similarly with the person, the same person may undergo change even in this very life where he or she is identifiable primarily, though

not necessarily, through a spatio-terpporally continuous body which goes through the stages of growth, maturity and decay. There are, however, fundamental differences between a chariot and a person. When a particular chariot is destroyed its identity comes to an end. Also a chariot is not conscious of itself. A person is conscious of oneself. A chariot is identified by others as the same chariot, but it cannot identify itself. A person can identify oneself as the same person. A person has a notion of a self. Buddhism did not deny the reality of this, and also granted that it was quite appropriate to look upon oneself as having

been in the past, as existing in the present and also as having the possibility of existing in the future. In the *Potthaptida Sutta,* where the Buddha's disagreement with metaphysical notions of the self became one of the major topics of discussion, he showed in his dialogue with Citta that it was quite reasonable for a person to have a notion of self-identity. But did this require the notion of an indwelling immutable entity apart from the transient components of personality?ll

In the above context the Buddha made some significantly pertinent remarks on the notion of personality. He drew attention to the changeability of personality characteristics using the term *attapatiltibha* (acquisition of personality). Considering the psychic structure of personality revealed by meditative experience, the Buddha pointed out that one's consciousness of oneself could alter depending on the particular mode. of consciousness that prevailed at a particular time in a person's existence. Different acquisitions of personality were distinguished in this instance, such as the acquisition of a gross personality composed of the four material elements *(oltiriko attapatiltibho),* the acquisition of a mind made personality *(manomayo attaptiltibho)* in which there was still consciousness of form, and a formless personality *(ariipo attapatilabho),* where consciousness of form was absent, implying that even in the

present life or across different lives in an individuated series it was possible for one's consciousness of oneself to undergo radical change. When such new acquisitions took place the current acquisition appeared to be true and real to the person, because that was the personality of which the person was currently conscious. From the point of view of the current acquisition the past and future ones appeared to be unreal. The Buddha pointed out that in this continued flow of personality with new acquisitions of personality qualities there was nothing that remained static although there was a stream-like continuity. He used the simile of the continuous series of the milk taken from the cow, changing into curd, ghee, butter, etc.I2 This idea was also expressed in one of the commentarial verses in the Theravada teachings which says that what is called *samsiira,* cyclic continuity of the individual series, is the unbroken succession of the aggregates, elements and spheres of sense.13This same continuity was referred to in the canonical scriptures as the continuity of the stream of consciousness which preserved the identity of the individual across different lives.I4

In the *PotthapiidaSutta* it was pointed out that the term *atta* was part of worldly usages and conventions that had been agreed upon in the use of language for the practical purpose of communication. To deal with those conventions as if there were static entities apart from the observable processes was, according to the Buddha, to misuse those conventions. The

Buddha pointed out that he used such linguistic conventions without clinging to them. IS Much of the philosophical puzzlement and meaningless metaphysics leading to pointless questions about reality as expressed in the list of undetermined questions, according to the Buddha, was a result of such misuse of language. It is not the case that when I speak of 'my body,' 'my sensations,' etc., the possessive pronoun signifies something that has a separate reality apart from such physical

and mental attributes. This clearly is the philosophical problem of the substance-attribute distinction in terms of which

language is used to speak about reality. Although in language there is such a distinction for the purpose of communicating information about the world through principles of individuation and classification, those distinctions are not absolute distinctions in the real world. To find absolutely existent entities that corresponded to these worldly conventions was, according to the Buddha, philosophically misleading. A similar approach to the metaphysical concept of substance was taken by the empiricist philosopher David Hume. Hume rejected the long-standing notion of a self entity that was believed to exist as a substratum that supported the qualities attributed to a person.16

Buddhism did not reject the conventional notion of personal identity. What Buddhism rejected ~as the metaphysical notion of an immutable entity or substance in terms of which personal identity was explained. Buddhism did not agree with the assumption that change and identity were incompatible in our conventional attribution of identity to persons or any other form of individuated objects. In the everyday world of social intercourse these conventions have a useful and meaningful application.

According to the concept of a person in Buddhism, a person may change for the better or for the worse, may become pure or impure, defiled or undefiled, experience the good or bad consequences of one's actions or eventually be liberated. If the person is a pure spirit, it becomes difficult to explain or understand any of these events that a person goes through in life. The admission of a pure and immaculate spirit as the essence of the person makes the whole attempt to purify oneself or liberate oneself redundant. For, what is there to purify in something that has been eternally pure? The Buddha did not

consider the objection that if one did not recognize the existence of a soul substance as defined by the metaphysicians there could not be any experience of the consequences of action done by any particular person, and consequently any basis for personal moral responsibility for actions committed, as a valid one.17

The aspect that is most relevant to the present discussion is the social consequences of unhealthy notions of identity, whether their source concerns metaphysical speculations or psychological dispositions. The Buddha's treatment of it focused attention on both of these sources. Let us first consider the latter source of unhealthy notions of identity, because that was what the Buddha's teachings seemed to have dealt with in pointing out the undesirable consequences of such notions. **In** this respect, it may be said that there was hardly any dispute with the metaphysician. **In** numerous instances where the Buddha dealt with the self notion, it was pointed out that it was the attempt on the part of the person to identify himself with empirical phenomena that created all the unwholesome behavioral responses in that person's interaction with the world. The notion of an ego functioned as a latent tendency *(anusaya)* in the person, and was constantly productive of activity that expressed itself in the form of 'I-making' *(ahamktira),*'mine-making' *(mamamkara)*and 'measuring' *(mana)* expressed in the form of ideas of superiority *(visesi),* equality *(samo)* or inferiority *(nihino).* These were, according to the Buddha, mere imaginings *(mafifiitam etam)18* and

psychopathological expressions of obsession with the ego. Whoever became a victim to such psychological dispositions acquired the tendency to come into conflict with others *(yo mafifiatisovivadetha tena).l9*

The thought 'I am' was considered by the Buddha as an intense form of ego-grasping. It was recognized among the four forms of clinging that led to the process of becoming *(bhava),* and was

called *attavada-upadana.* It was consid~red as the root cause of all obsessive proliferation of thought *(miilarh papaficasankhaya)* and therefore, had to be completely destroyed.2O A person who was liberated in this life itself was described as one who had attained the complete destruction of the conceit that **'I** am.'2l

The term *sakkayaditthi* was also used to characterize the strong belief that there was a self entity which had a special status apart from everything else that was not part of the self. It was recognized as the first of the fetters that had to be broken by the person who was progressing towards the liberation of mind from unwholesome tendencies.

The empirical self, according to the Buddha, was neither a selfexistent entity which had eternal being *(nayidarh attakatarh),* nor was it something that had been created by some external agency *(nayidarh parakatarh).* It was something that had come into being due to causes *(hcturhm paticca sambhiitarh).22* No component of the self was seen as self-existent. The self was related to other things that functioned as conditions. The recognition of this interdependence of the self on other conditions made it impossible for the self to isolate itself from everything else. A self could exist only in relationship with other things including other living beings that had a consciousness of self. The deluded person, who was prone to cling to a self-existent self, was an egocentric and selfish person or an absolute individualist *(puthujjana),* as opposed to the person who saw oneself in relation to others. The tendency of the human mind, however, is to create an absolute dichotomy of self and not-self, resulting in extremely acquisitive tendencies expressed as an intense urge to expand as much as possible the domain of what belongs to the self. It generates greed, craving, miserliness, and insensitivity to the needs and desires of others. Persons propelled by such an egocentric approach to life are unable to overcome the narrow and petty boundaries that they draw around them on the basis of their notion of self and what belonged to the self.

The interdependence of the self and other, in the sense in which the Buddha used the term self, was clearly affirmed in his statement that one who cared for oneself cared for others and one who cared for others cared for oneself *(attiinam rakkhanto param rakkhati, param rakkhanto attiinam rakkhat'* 'Golden Rule' of morality. According to available evidence, the Buddha was the first in the history of human thought to have affirmed this as the basis of all morality as opposed to pure self-interest or prudential concern. The principles of ethical conduct *(kusaliini slliini)* were to be established on the consideration that, in general, each individual desired happiness and disliked suffering *(attiinam sukhiikamam dukkhapatikkulam),* was keen to protect one's own life, and feared death *(fivitukiimam amaritukamam).23* Egocentric action turned out to be morally evil action because of one's obsession with oneself, and the moral incapacity to see the interests of others as similar and commensurable with one's own. All forms of self-identity that tended to generate a sense of absolute difference from the other, could be considered as psychopathological in form, and Buddhism traced most of the unwholesome psychological

tendencies to such a notion of self-identity.24

Such psychopathological notions of self-identity did not seem to be confined to interaction between individuals. They were clearly seen to manifest in the form of group identities as well. Buddhism sought to diffuse the intense urge for selfaggrandizement and self-preservation at the cost of the other by showing that neither oneself nor the other was in possession of an absolute selfhood, The self is not an immutable self-existent entity but a conditioned process consisting of mental and material components. What was experientially evident, and what r'equired the most attention concerning this process was that it was liable to produce increased or decreased levels of suffering. The greater a person's obsession with the self, the greater the intensity of suffering produced. The analytical

understanding of the nature of the sel~ produced the insight that the term 'self' is merely a convention *(sammuti)* but not an absolute reality.

The Buddha was aware that human beings lacking in insight were prone to conceive of social entities in the same way in which they conceived the self. According to the Buddha, social identities such as caste, class, race, ethnic group, religion, etc., were a product of dependent arising. The Buddha pointed out that there were no absolute distinctions among human beings and that whatever divisions human beings made among themselves were based on convention *(samaiiiiam,vohiiro).25*It is important to note here the Buddha's use of the same terms that he used in connection with the notion of the individual self notions *(attapatiliibha),* in the *Potthapiida Sutta,* in connection with the conventional social groupings as well. This was in direct opposition to the metaphysical doctrine of the Vedic tradition that conceived of social divisions as static and having a transcendental origin. Here we can see how the metaphysics of the self influenced certain modes of thinking about the nature of society and social relationships. According to Vedic doctrine, the caste groups represented the body of the cosmic Self *(Puru$a),* thereby introducing a rigid metaphysical foundation for social interaction. This became a source of caste difference in Brahmanical society. In the *Aggaiiiia Sutta,* the Buddha rejected by introducing a Buddhist myth, the earlier Brahmanical alternative, which explained the world and social classes as an emanation from the supreme Self. The Buddha's view about social identities was presented here in the context of the well known Brahmanical discriminative attitudes towards other social groups expressed on the basis of their metaphysics of the Sel£.26The social philosophy of the Buddha that was expressed in the Buddhist story of the origin of the world and social institutions was an attempt to show that just as in the case of the individual self, social institutions were also a product of

dependent arising. There was no static essence in any institutional structure. They evolved depending upon conditions, and it was possible to structure them using understanding and insight in such a way that they promoted general well-being and happiness.

The Buddha treated questions of social identity in the same way as he treated personal identity. Just as in the case of the identity of the individual person, the Buddha maintained that social identities also were established depending upon human needs and certain social contingencies. Social identities could serve a useful purpose as long as such identities also remained within the confines of a healthy sense of identity. The Buddha himself formed a community called the *sangha* which had a particular

identity. Attempts were made by the Buddha to give this institution, through disciplinary rules that regulated the individual and social conduct within the institution, a healthy sense of identity. In the same way as an individual sense of identity could become psychopathological, it was possible for social identities also to take a psychopathological form. When this happened, discriminatory attitudes, or prejudices on the basis of ethnic, religious, racial, caste or other kinds of petty differences could be witnessed. They would, in turn, lead to recurrent conflicts in society. Concrete examples from the time of the Buddha of the expression of these psychopathological tendencies due to unhealthy notions of identity in the form of collectivized discriminatory and prejudicial group attitudes could be seen in the *Aggaiiiia Sutta, Viisettha Sutta* and the *Assaliiyana Sutta.* In the *Ambattha Sutta,* the Buddha pointed out that a person whose thoughts were pre-occupied with ideas of race and clan superiority involving discriminatory attitudes against other social groups was far removed from the attainment of the highest understanding and moral perfection taught in BuddhismP

According to the *Aggaiiiia Sutta,* ~he Brahmins abused in extremely contemptuous language some kinsmen of theirs who, having left their association with the Brahmin community, had become disciples of the Buddha through strong conviction of the merits of the Buddha's path of liberation. In the *Vtisettha Sutta,* the orthodox Brahmanical idea that one became a Brahmin by birth was held by one of two Brahmin contenders on the question of what determines a person's identity with the Brahmana community, the community which was supposed to hold an exclusive status. The claim of the Brahmins was that purely on grounds of heredity, the Brahmana community represented the noblest of men. The Buddha insisted in the *Aggaiiiia Sutta* and the *Vtisettha Sutta* that human beings are one species, and that differences among them are conventional and contingent. If identity with the Brahmana community implies identity with the noblest group of human beings, the Buddha maintained that such identity was not determined by some kind of inherited essence that was transmitted from birth, but by the cultivation of nobility of character. In the *Assaltiyana Sutta,* the Brahmanical claim for their absolute identity with a privileged and superior social group specially created by the divine being according to his divine plan that is unchangeable was criticized by the Buddha. In this *sutta* too, as in the *Aggaiiiia Sutta* and the *Vtisettha Sutta,* the Buddha pointed out that social groupings could not be considered as sacrosanct and absolute entities traceable to a divine origin, but are contingent social phenomena. As empirical evidence for this he pointed out the sociological fact that among the people of Yonakamboja, there are no such absolute caste identities. Those regions had two classes called masters and slaves. A master, due to changes of fortune, could become a slave and similarly a slave a master.28

The Buddha pointed out that due to an unhealthy sense of personal identity and a false sense of self-esteem, individuals often exalted themselves and disparaged others *(atttinam ukkamseti, param vambheti).* These attitudes could easily become

collectivized due to a strong sense of group identities. Such collectivization of socially discriminatory attitudes could be seen in ancient India of the Buddha's time among the Brahmin community. Brahmins are sometimes represented in the Buddhist literature as a social class who considered themselves to belong to a superior and exclusive group and treated other social groups with contempt. On numerous occasions the

Buddha appealed to their good reason and moral sense to deliver themselves from such a false and morally damaging sense of identity by pointing out that the superiority of a human being depended not on class, caste, or race identity, but instead on the degree to which a person had developed character and insight. It was on one such occasion that the Buddha maintained that the greatest among gods and men was the person who was endowed with insight and good conduct *(vijjiicaranasampannososettho devamiinuse).29*

If all social identities that come into existence among human beings are looked upon as contingent phenomena, it should be possible to overcome the obsessive tendency that generates inter-group hatred and animosity. From the Buddhist point of view, inter-group hatred and animosity is an expression at the collective social level, of the basic unwholesome states of mind. They can be traced to deep rooted psychological cankers *(iisava)* and latent tendencies *(anusaya)*to which human beings become victims due to deficiency of insight and understanding. Such lack of insight and understanding is expressed in social behavior in the form of collectivized tendencies towards aggression against social groups considered as different from one's own due to feelings of envy *(issii)* and miserliness *(macchariya).* The consequence of this is war and violence between social groups on the basis of diverse forms of social identity. In this context, self-interest takes the form of groupinterest, and the possibility of resolving conflicts that arise due to the clash of interests becomes remote because all parties

engaged in such conflicts are governed by prolific obsessive thoughts totally lacking in understanding and insight. This is a clear parallel to the plight of the individual who suffers intense psychological turmoil due to wrong reflection *(ayoniso manasiktira).*Whole nations, social groups and communities can easily come under the grip of wrong reflection fuelled further by individuals who enthusiastically assume leadership by morally misdirecting people with ulterior motives until such conflicts finally end up in catastrophic social disasters.

A healthy sense of identity involves an effort to promote the maintenance of a social identity for the purpose of sustaining the wholesomebody of values that a particular organized social group cherishes. The Buddha, as an insightful and compassionate teacher of mankind had set the finest example for such a sense of identity in the disciplinary rules and organizational and administrative procedures that he promulgated to preserve the identity of the *Sangful*organization that he established. His extremely tolerant attitude towards people who sometimes reacted even with envy and hostility towards his movement which was entirely based on good will and righteousness is reflected in several of his encounters reported in the early Buddhist literature. In one instance a wandering recluse *(paribbtijaka)* named Suppiya is reported to have followed the Buddha as he was journeying from Rijagaha to Nalanda with a large following of monks, hurling abuse and making diverse wild allegations against the Buddha, his teaching and his community.30 When the Buddha was informed about this, his advice to the disciples was not to resort to aggressive behavior under such circumstances. The Buddha pointed out that if others were to abuse, revile and find fault with the Buddha, his teaching or the community, one should not react with anger or any aggressive behavior against such critics. They should wisely consider the validity or invalidity of those criticisms, and if they were groundless, reject them with

equanimity. If the criticisms were valid they should correct themselves. On the other hand if someone were to praise them, they should not be unduly elated by it. They should consider wisely if they had those praiseworthy qualities, and if so, with equanimity, acknowledge their praise. A similar instance is recorded in the scriptures concerning the Buddha's policy of peaceful co-existence with religious communities that held different religious views. NiganthamUaputta, the leader of the Jain sect, sent one of his disciples, a person named Upali who was a skilled debater to debate with the Buddha on some doctrinal issue and defeat him in debate. However, after the encounter with the Buddha, Upali was convinced of the correctness of the Buddha's teaching on the matter and decided to give up his connections with the Jain community. In this instance the Buddha requested him to inquire further into the matter without rushing to any conclusion. Upali, being firmly convinced of the Buddha's teaching, decided to stop his patronage of the Jain community and to extend patronage to the Buddhist community. In this instance the Buddha advised Upali and persuaded him to continue his support to them at least in a limited way.31This clearly is an extension at the social level of a principle of individual ethical conduct to which attention was previously drawn, that is, the principle that one who takes care of oneself, takes care of others and one who takes care of others, takes care of oneself. This Buddhist principle appears to have been adopted by the emperor Asoka, who adopted the Buddhist principles of rule by righteousness, when he stated in his edicts that a person who reviled other religious sects did damage to one's own, and a person who respected other religious sects respected one's own.32

Our survey of the teachings of Buddhism points towards the conclusion that the origi~al message of the Buddha leaves no room for either obsession with a pathological sense of identity or with an attitude of irresponsible nihilism that denies the

possibility of a healthy sense of identity. **In** the contemporary world, which is torn apart by numerous forms of factionalism, both internationally and intra-nationally, looking reflectively at the early Buddhist teachings can have an immensely ameliorative effect. The Buddha never approved of solutions to any social problem by submitting oneself to the dictates of impulses and emotions. Unwholesome emotions were seen as a I consequence of latent and deep-rooted negative psychological tendencies *(anusaya) or cankers (tisava)* of the mind. They had to \ be uprooted and destroyed in order to disentangle both the inner tangles *(anto jatti)* of the human mind that produced suffering, distress and moral depravity, of the individual and the outer tangles *(bahi jatti)* that expressed themselves in diverse 11 forms of social disharmony, conflict and suffering. The Buddha! made the observation that human beings are exposed to the influxes or cankers due to the fact that they did not know and see clearly *(jtinato aham bhikkhave passato tisavtinam khayam vadtimi, no ajtinato apassato).33*Wrong ways of thinking and reflection *(ayoniso**manasiktira)*are the source of moral depravity. The implication of all this is that sound principles of education for peaceful co-existence and harmonious living is the key to the alleviation of human suffering that result from delusive notions of identity and difference.

Notes

Samyuttaniktiya, VoL 3, P 134.

2 *Source Book in Indian Philosophy,* S Radhakrishnan and Charles A Moore (eds), London, Oxford University Press, 1957, pp 64-70.

Chtindogya Upani~ad 8.7.1.

4 Three of the main sections of the *Samyuttaniktiya* called *Khandha-Samyutta, Saliiyatana-SarilYlltta* and *Dhiitu-SamYlltta* are set aside for this analysis of empirical reality.

Dhammapada, 165.

6 *Bhagavadgita* 2.20.

7 Ibid., 2.31.

8 *SamYllttanikaya,* Vol. 2, P 20.

9
Atthangatassa na pamanamatthi
yena nam vajjll tam tassa natthi
sabbesll dhammesll samuhatesll
samllhata viidapathapi sabbe (Suttanipata 1076.)

10 *Yathalzi angasamblzara hoti saddo ratlzo iti*
evam khandhesu santesllzoti satto ti sammuti (Samyuttanikaya, Vol. 1, P 135.)

11 *Dighanikaya,* Vol. I, London, Pali Text Society (PTS), 1949, P 200.

12 Ibid., 201.

13 *Khandhanam patipati dlzatuayatanani ca abbocchinnam vattamanam samsaroti pavuccati* (Commentary to the *Nidanaslltta* in the *Samyuttanikaya-atthakatlza).*

14 *Purisassa vifiiianasotaii pajanati llbhayato abbocchinnam idhaloke patitthitafi ca paraloke patthitafi ca (Dighanikaya,* Vol. 1, London, PTS, 1949, P 202.)

15 *Itima Citta lokasamafifia lokaniruttiyo lokavolzara lokapafifiattiyo yahi tathagato voharati aparamasmh* (Ibid., p 201).

16 *Treatise,* L A Selby-Bigge (ed.), London, Oxford University Press, 1951, p 11.

17 *Rupam anatta vedanam anatta safifiam...sankhara...vififianam anatta. Anattakatani k~mmani kam attanam phusantiti (Majjhimanikaya,* Vol. 3, London, PTS, 1960, P 19.)

18 Ibid., P 246.

19 *Samo visesi llda vii nihino yo maniiati so viviidetha tena. (Sllttanipiita,* p 842.)

20 *Millmn papaneasmzkhiiya mantii asmiti sabbam uparundhe.* (Ibid., p 916.)

21 *Asmimiinasamugghiitam piipuniiti dittheva dlzamme nibbiina11l (Anglltaranikiiya,* Vol. 4, London, PTS (Reprint), 1958, p 353.)

22 *Samyuttanikiiya,* Vol. 1, London, PTS, 1884, P 134.

23 Ibid., P 353.

24 This is what Buddhism refers to as *sakkiiyadittlzi,* one of the foremost fetters to be eliminated. It is pointed out that without eliminating *sakkiiyaditthi* it is not possible to eliminate lust, hatred and delusion. *Sakkiiyadittlziyiiappahiiya abhabbo riigam... dosam... moham pahiitum (Anguttaranikiiya,* Vol. 5, London, PTS, 1900, P 144.)

25 The Buddha points out that differences among human beings are based on convention *(vokiiranea manussesu sa11laiiiiiiya pavlleeati [Suttanipiita* 611]) and that the established social groupings in terms of name and clan are mere conventions. *Samaniiii esa lokasmim niimagottam pakappitmh.* (Ibid., p 648.)

26 *Dighanikiiya,* Vol. 3, London, PTS (Reprint), 1947, p 81.

27 *Ye Izikeci Ambattha jiitiviidavinibandhii vii gottaviidavinibandhii vii miinaviidavinibandhii vii... iirakii te anuttariiya vijjiiearanasa11lpadiiya. (Dighanikiiya,* Vol. 1, London, PTS, 1949, P 99.)

28 Y*onakambojesu annesu ea paeeanti11lesu janapadesll dveva vaiinii ayyo eeva diiso ca. Ayyo hutvii diiso hoti, diiso Illltvii ayyo hoti.*

(Majjhi11anikiiya, Vol. 2, London, PTS, 1951, P 149.)
258 Prernasiri
29 *Dighanikiiya,* Vol. 1, London, PTS, 1949, P 99.
30 Ibid., P 2.
31 *Majjhimanikiiya,* Vol. 1, London, PTS, 1888, P 378.
32 R Mookerji, *Asoka,* Delhi, Motilal Banarsidas, 1962, pp 158-59.
33 *Jiinato ahmh bhikklzave passato iisaviinmh khaymh vadiimi no ajiinatoapassato. (Majjhimanikiiya,* Vol. 1, London, PTS, 1888, P 7.)